SMALL TOWN MAKES GOOD

WITH THE LIBERTY THEATER AS ITS STARTING POINT, EUNICE HAS ATTRACTED OTHER TOURISM-ORIENTED PROJECTS AND A TON OF PUBLICITY.

□ THE 1988 REPUBLICAN NATIONAL Convention may go down as a milestone in the history of Eunice, though the reason is not political and the convention took place in New Orleans.

In the space of a couple of weeks, Eunice received a priceless amount of national publicity, as well as television networks in search of the Cajun culture and a feature story pegged to the convention found their way to the town that late has taken to promoting itself as Louisiana's Prairie Cajun Capital. The main draw was the Liberty Theater and its hugely successful live radio show, helped along by a colorful small-town mayor with a good grasp of public relations. If visitors to New Orleans weren't watching television, they probably saw the Times-Picayune story on rural Cajun politicians. Where Mayor Curtis Joubert was prominently featured, "I would say that, after New Orleans, the city of Eunice had more publicity than any other city," says Joubert.

Since the City Council bought the dilapidated Eunice Liberty Theater, renovated, and reopened it less than 14 months ago in conjunction with the Jean Lafitte National Historical Park, the city has played host to the following: an Australian film crew, the British Broadcasting Co., Charles Kuralt of CBS, The CBS Morning News, West 57th, NBC's Today show, ABC, The Times-Picayune and other in-state newspapers, a few travel writers, and USA Today. Nor is the publicity waning. The West 57th piece has yet to air (maybe October), and Joubert thinks Eunice may turn up on the premiere of USA Today's TV news show Sept. 12.

Some of the people for Eunice, says Joubert, "This probably was the great awakening." If they once thought he and the City Council were crazy, the mayor says, they don't any more.

"EUNICE IS IN AN AREA GEOGRAPHICALLY where we had best be promoting ourselves," says Tom Voicne Jr., owner of KJJB radio. The town is more or less on the corner of three parishes and straddles St. Landry and Acadia. It's about 45 miles from Lafayette, well off the interstate and close to nothing in particular. As Voicne notes, Eunice is not a parish seat, and there is no courthouse with the accompanying economic benefit of government employees and law offices.

Over the years, the town has made fencing for itself a point of honor. Politics have seldom been harmonious, but there is a tradition of not letting infighting get in the way of cooperative effort for progress. Eunice has managed to land some major manufacturing industry in Dresser Industries and Jantzen Swim Wear. Voicne says it's also the trade hub of the area, and because of that regional draw, is something of "a melting pot." But like everyone else in Louisiana, Eunice is suffering hard times. Joubert can talk about solid waste disposal and EPA sewage treatment orders and budget cuts caused by declining revenues. The City Council, Joubert says, stuck its collective neck out in buying the Liberty Theater, but saw the chance to both preserve the history and culture of the area, and bring in some tourism.

Joubert recalls the first brochure put out by the tourism promotion people in St. Landry Parish. It talked about the historical attractions of Washington and Opelousas, and about the communities along the upper rim of the Atchafalaya Basin. About Eunice it said: "Home of LSU-Eunice." Today, Eunice has its own collection of printed promotional material, suitable for handing out to visitors and mailing off to news media types, tourism offices or anyone else who might be interested.

"What we're doing here in Eunice is probably what everybody else is. We're working very hard to keep our heads above the proverbial water," says Joubert.

The Liberty Theater show incorporates a couple of bands, perhaps a Cajun humorist and a few recipes from a unique two-hour live radio show—smoothly integrated by master of ceremonies Barry Ancelot, a USL professor who is an expert in area folklore. Despite the increasing popularity of the Saturday night shows, more French is spoken than English, admission is still a buck, showcase is 6 p.m., and no reserv-

A West 57th crew is only one of the media to make its way to the Liberty Theater. At right, Mayor Curtis Joubert.

FOOTNOTES

THEY SHOULD HAVE STUCK TO FOOTBALL. A piece on LSU quarterback Tommy Hodson in Sports Illustrated's College Football Preview issue contained some, all, unique observations about Louisiana. SI gets points for providing the correct spellings and pronunciations of Bayou Lafourche and boucherie (though the latter was misused). But SI blew the game in less than one boggling sentence: "... in anticipation of LSU football, Cajuns gather to listen to zither music and zydeco bands at food festivals." Just what was meant by zither music is uncertain; perhaps the writer mistook the frottoire for a zither. There's then the apparent ignorance of the distinction between Cajun and zydeco music, not to mention the fact that the fans of USL, Tulane and a couple of other schools might take issue with idea that food festivals are held to celebrate the Tigers, even in Hodson's home of Assumption Parish.

Hodson did manage to clarify his part-Cajun heritage, saying, "We were not wrestling alligators or anything."
the back end of block are being donated, and the building will be gutted inside and renovated for use as an exhibition hall and demonstration area. As in the "Let the Bon Temps Rouler" show, authenticity will be the priority.

"We don't have to fabricate eating boudin," says Joubert. "You can go to the barbershop and they will be talking French."

OFFICIALS HOPE THE PARK WILL BE up and running in 1990, but more immediate benefits in addition to national publicity are being felt. "Hopefully, our restaurants are benefiting, and they are, [and] our gas stations are benefiting, and they are," says Voinche. The city reports that sales tax collections are up 8 percent in July and 13 percent in August over the same months a year ago.

Voinche says some Cajun music spots have geared their schedules to attract people leaving the Liberty shows. Often the bands playing the Liberty will move to a local location and bring the crowds with them, he says.

Restaurant L'Acadien, which served traditional Cajun food, shut down for four months because of a change of owners and extensive renovation. It reopened last month as a more upscale nouveau Cajun restaurant, and Ronnie Ardoin, the owner and manager, says business has been good. Tourists from France, the national media and people from Lafayette have been by, he says. "It's basically due to the Liberty Theater."

An additional coup for the city has been the relocation of the Louisiana Folklife Festival from Baton Rouge. The festival began as part of the 1984 World's Fair, then moved to Baton Rouge for the last few years. Joubert says Lt. Gov. Paul Hardy brought him the proposal to move to Eunice, and the mayor took a good two or three seconds to accept. The festival will be held Oct. 21, 22, and 23, and will include a New Orleans style jazz parade, a street dance, food and crafts demonstrations, lots of music and storytelling.

Joubert says the new projects and attention are all an outgrowth of the ideas and hard work of the citizens in Eunice, of using the Liberty Theater to show that Eunice is the logical place to preserve and show off the culture of the region. "Too many people wait for handouts. [They say] 'What are you going to do for me today?' We don't work that way."

—JANE NICHOLES