Tropical garden tourist attraction will also aid retarded children

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Acadiana has a unique opportunity to show America how two problems can interact in a manner which provides at least partial solutions to both when community leaders and citizens serve as catalysts. The Around-the-World Tropical Gardens, a project initiated by the Lafayette Association for Retarded Children, is intended to be a major tourist attraction for an area which has yet to exploit its tourism potential, while at the same time providing employment for approximately 100 handicapped young men and women. And by demonstrating the capability of the retarded in horticultural work, the project may establish a precedent which could be used elsewhere to open the doors to a useful life for thousands of persons whose present outlook is lifetime dependency.

The name of the gardens was chosen to signify that a visitor will take a trip around the world in tropical latitudes, the habitat of the most exotic trees, shrubs and flowers seen in any region on earth.

Distinctive areas will display exotic plants from Asia, Africa, the Pacific Islands, Latin America, Louisiana and the Gulf Coast. Plants will be labeled to show names and origins, and artifacts of the areas will be placed beside walkways to add interest to viewing. A series of waterways, spanning by bridges of bamboo, will wind through eight acres of palms, tropical fruit trees and flowering plants from many lands.

A highlight of the gardens will be an authentic re-creation of an Eighteenth Century Acadian village. Directed by Glenn R. Conrad, USL archaeologist and historian, the village will include a museum and an assortment of craft shops in which handicapped young people, under the supervision of retired senior citizens, will manufacture articles in the manner of their forefathers who came to Acadiana two centuries ago.

The opportunity to establish the gardens arose as the result of a gift by Mr. and Mrs. E.J. Allman to the Lafayette Association for Retarded Children of 30 acres of land just south of Lafayette near the Ridge Road. The donors want the land to be used for the training and employment of retarded persons. Plans are under way to develop a comprehensive facility encompassing day care services, an activity center, vocational training, a sheltered workshop and residential care. Most of the services provided at the New Hope Center near the Lafayette Airport will be moved to the new Allman Center and the program will be expanded to serve twice as many clients. A federal grant of $73,300 with which to construct vocational training facilities at the site was announced by Louis Michot, State Superintendent of Education.

As the emphasis at Allman Center will be upon agricultural training it was decided that a public garden, manned by the handicapped, would be an appropriate adjunct. Trainees with the potential for employment in the community will develop horticultural skills in the gardens under supervision of counselors provided by the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation in the State Department of Education.

Handicapped persons in the sheltered workshop will manufacture plant labels, stakes and clay pots for the garden as well as bamboo lawn furniture, hanging baskets and other handicraft items for sale to visitors.

Substantial progress was made toward realization of this vision in the first half of 1973. An advisory committee of community leaders and authorities in the fields of horticulture and rehabilitation was appointed. The project was endorsed by the Lafayette Chamber of Commerce, the National Association for Retarded Children, Gov. Edwin Edwards and several other top state officials. Civic organizations and citizens came forward with contributions which provided matching funds for a federal grant, resulting in an award of $26,600 by the Council on Developmental Disabilities. Dr. James A. Foret, head of USL's Horticulture Department, and several of his colleagues are developing a planting plan. The Civic Club of Lafayette has pledged to provide a building for the collection of admissions fees and the sale of handicrafts. Plants have been planted by the garden clubs, the Orchid Society, the Louisiana Iris Society, Jungle Gardens of Avery Island and others. The Army Corps of Engineers has volunteered to do the site preparation.

In a development that could mean future financial support at the local, state and federal levels, the gardens have been selected as one of Lafayette's bicentennial projects. Planting was scheduled to begin in the fall of 1973, and promoters of the project were hoping the gardens would be developed sufficiently for public showing by the time of the bicentennial celebrations in 1976.

Establishment of the Around-the-World Tropical Gardens will result in many important dividends to Acadiana in addition to the obvious economic importance to the tourist industry. The gardens will provide an excellent nature studies laboratory for the schools and universities of the area. Experimentation with cold-hardiness of tropical plants will lead to broadening of horticultural horizons for nurserymen and home-owners. The facility will provide an ideal site for relaxing and therapeutic excursions by patients in hospitals and nursing homes. Best of all, perhaps, visitors to the gardens will be twice rewarded, for not only will they see some of the world's most beautiful plants, but they will have the satisfaction of knowing that they have helped the handicapped to make a place for themselves in society.

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Germany was still under Allied occupation, and liable for all the costs of supporting HICOG. The West German government, therefore, had provided us with a villa on Zielmannstrasse, halfway between the city of Bonn and the suburb of Mehlem, where HICOG was building its new headquarters, also at German expense. In this house, known as the "liaison house," Charlie Thayer and his staff, and I as public affairs representative had our offices.

In July 1954 I took charge of the American Consulate in Colon, Republic of Panama, and remained in charge until 1955, when I was transferred to Yokohama, Japan. Colon is the Panamanian twin of the Panama Canal Zone city known as Cristobal. A look at the map will show that Colon is actually an enclave in the Canal Zone. It was nonetheless the second largest city of the Republic of Panama in 1954, with a population of about 60,000. Cristobal had the docks and the railroad station, it was the port of entry at the eastern or Atlantic end of the Panama Canal, and the terminus of the Panama Railroad. Colon had the shops. Before there was a Panama Canal there had been a Panama Railroad. The railroad was built by Americans in 1852 across the isthmus to avoid the long detour around Cape Horn for passengers and cargo bound from New York to San Francisco. Our consulate dated back to 1854 as well.

A consul is traditionally a magistrate delegated by the home government to look after the interests of his fellow citizens abroad. A diplomat originally was the representative of one sovereign residing at the court of another. Consuls are supposed to deal with local officials and defend private interests, while diplomats address themselves to central governments and represent national interest. In practice there is no hard and fast division between diplomatic and consular roles. The smaller the country of assignment the more the two blend. While serving as American Consul at Colon I attended the Ambassador's staff conferences in Panama City every week, and reported to him on political and economic developments on the Atlantic side. Local officials, such as the governor and the mayor, who had become family friends of ours, were also intimate with the ruling circles in the capital.

When Vice-President Richard M. Nixon visited Colon in 1955, I accompanied him on a tour of the city which I had arranged. When the newly elected President of Panama, Ricardo Arias, came to Colon shortly after his inauguration I had the honor of meeting him, and he was kind enough to autograph for me a picture of the occasion.

From 1955 to 1958 I served as executive officer at the American Consulate General in Yokohama. Yokohama was the largest port in Japan. It had grown up on the site of a fishing village which Townsend Harris' treaty with the Shogun in 1858 had opened to Western commerce and Western residence. Together with Kobe it was the most international city in Japan. The foreigners lived on the bluff overlooking the harbor, and relaxed at their clubs from which the Japanese were generally excluded. Before World War II Western businessmen shunned Tokyo. Yokohama, twenty miles away, was the center of Japanese foreign trade and international banking. All this changed after World War II. Tokyo grew until it merged with Yokohama. The foreign merchants gravitated to the capital.

The newly-arrived American Ambassador Douglas MacArthur II attended and toasted "His Majesty the Emperor!" That was the first time I had heard the toast in Japan. The Japanese don't make toasts in the Western style, and Westerners were not much given to honoring the Emperor. But the post-war period of reconstruction had ended, a new relationship with Japan was beginning, and that probably what Ambassador MacArthur meant to indicate by his toast.

Until about 1958 when the gold drain began, the United States was still fostering Japanese economic recovery and trying to promote Japanese exports. At the Consulate in Yokohama we welcomed one U.S. trade mission after the other who came with the slogan "orderly marketing." Their message to the Japanese was not to reduce exports but rather to increase them by quality control and well-planned advertising, instead of the helterskelter dumping in which old-fashioned Japanese trading companies still indulged from time to time.

The lesson was evidently not wasted; names like SONY and Toyota have become household words in the United States. When I was in Yokohama the Embassy in Tokyo still administered a program of economic aid to Japan. Minister Ben H. Thibodeaux of Opelousas, who was Director of the U.S. Operations Mission to Japan as well as Counselor of Embassy for Economic Affairs, occasionally came down to Yokohama to make contacts and observe conditions. On one such occasion the Consul General and I took him to visit a small textile factory in the area. This sort of activity was routine at the Consulate and at the Embassy.

In 1961, after a three-year tour of duty in Washington, I was assigned to the American Consulate in Nagoya as principal officer. There we remained four years, our longest stay at any post in the Foreign Service, and in many ways the most rewarding. Nagoya has been called the "Chicago of Japan." It is in its own way "middle-western." Tokyo is in the East and Osaka in the West, as the Japanese themselves define their geography. They are Japan's two largest cities, but they are not "pure" Japanese. Each a century ago received a tincture of internationalism from an adjoining "treaty" port, Tokyo from Yokohama, and Osaka from Kobe. Nagoya did not develop its port until recently. During the formative years of modern Japan it was the landlocked fortress of the Tokugawa dynasty of Shoguns. In 1961 Nagoya's population had already reached 1.5 million, but the city was definitely "middle Japanese."

There were essentially two foreign communities, one of the missionaries and another of the Lockheed engineers, under the contract to Mitsubishi. The American Consulate was the only full-time consulate in the area. Together with the missionaries and the engineers we made up Nagoya's international set. And together with the missionaries and the engineers we built some durable "bridges of understanding" between Americans and Japanese, of which the most visible were the Nagoya International School and the "Library of Love."

The "Library of Love" was my wife's idea. Acting through the International Ladies' Club which grouped the wives of American missionaries, of American businessmen, of American consular officials and many prominent Japanese businessmen, my wife organized a leading library for the patients at the Nagoya City Hospital under the name of "Library of Love."

We left Nagoya in 1965. Our leave-taking was more poignant than ever, for we had spent four years and struck roots in the community. Lyon had been our most intimate post; Nagoya was probably our most productive. Before we left the city, Mayor Kiyoshi Sugito, a dexterous painter as well as a popular politician, awarded both my wife and me certificates of appreciation for services rendered the community. Governor Mikine Kuwahara of Hichi Prefecture, in which Nagoya lies, was similarly friendly. The sentiment was mutual, for we, as usually happens in human relations, gained all the more for giving a little.