Getting to know you

Gueydan retains French heritage

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GUEYDAN - Mayor Rene' Breaux chats en Francais with a visitor in Gueydan City Hall's front foyer.

"It's that sort of personal touch combined with a history steeped in heritage that makes Gueydan's residents consistent hosts for CODIFIL exchange groups and French students. French is still widely spoken around the area, and Breaux says one can hear sentences beginning in English and ending in French. And it's not only older folks who speak the Cajun native tongue - younger citizens keep pace too.

Unlike other areas, Gueydan isn't losing its younger generation. "People stay around here because they like the atmosphere," Breaux comments in an interview from his City Hall office. The mayor is a former insurance agent and Department of Education official. "Unless someone has to, they don't leave."

The small Vermilion Parish town was founded by Jean Pierre Gueydan in 1896, and modern residents plan to celebrate the centennial in 1996.

Gueydan came to America from the French Alps in 1845 and started a business with his brother in New Orleans. After New Orleans was captured during the Civil War, he transferred his cotton and cattle activities to Louisiana.

The business was then transferred to Texas, but Gueydan longed for Louisiana. Hereturned, this time opening a wholesale establishment on New Orleans' Decatur Street - but business was slow until Reconstruction.

In 1864, he bought 40,000 of the marsh acres he used to hunt for 12.5 cents an acre. The rumor in Texas - why else would someone pay so much for that worthless land? - was that the land was where the lost mind in Texas - why else would someone pay so much for that worthless land?

But the land came to be known as Gueydan with its neatly plotted grid and a Southern Pacific Railroad station carrying trainloads of valuable cattle.

"The big freight trains used to run through here all the time," Breaux remembers. "Now, there's no railroad. Trucks carry most of the commerce today."

Cattle is still a mainstay industry in the area, but Gueydan also lies in the shadow of numerous sawmills. In addition, it's an agricultural center in the region for soybeans and crawfish.

Yet another economic boost to Gueydan is hunting. The town lies on the edge of Vermilion's rich marshes and attracts 3 million ducks annually.

Sportsmen from all over the country flock to take their chances on mallards, pintails, greenwing and bluewing teal, canvasback, gray and redhead and the local mottled and woodducks.

On Labor Day weekend, Gueydan's 1,700 population swells to many times its normal size with tourists coming in for the annual Duck Festival. Gueydan isn't known as the Duck Capital of America for nothing.

"Oh yeah, it's been progressing. It draws a lot of people out here," Breaux says.

And even though the town is "off the beaten track," it gets tourists year-round. He adds, "Some come just to see the marsh."

In the near future, tourists will have another reason to drive down Highway 91 from Crowley. The Museum and Cultural Art Association is buying the old bank building, circa 1902, to preserve the Romanesque-Gothic architecture.

The association just completed raising funds and will begin work shortly, Breaux said. After renovations, the building will house a tourist information center, artifacts from local industry and history and works of local artists.

The center, however, will not be any type of Cajun life museum.

"That's been run into the ground," Breaux comments.

Breaux hopes the center and a new nursing home under construction will help revive the economy of the area. He says, "Business growth has been slow, with a few companies locating and not as many closing."

To push forward the goal of growth, Gueydan actively takes part in Gulf States Utilities' Team City program. The program provides a community profile and available sites to new companies working through GSU's economic development department.

But Breaux likes to take care of the smaller details, too. Gueydan has won six State Cleanest City awards in its category and is shooting for its seventh this year. The mayor wants to keep it that way by maintaining the town's trademark palm trees lining the Main Street boulevard.

"They suffered during the winter freeze. Notice how the tops are all gone?" he points out. "But we're keeping our fingers crossed. They've been there as long as I can remember."