See, Taste and Hear more about Cajun Culture

By Katie Todoroff

Whether you spell it L'Acadien, L'Acadien, Acadian, Cadean, or Cajun, you perk up when you hear it, because it brings to mind happy people, good food and good music.

If you would like to see, taste and learn more about the Cajun culture, which evolved on this continent over a period of more than 350 years, and in Louisiana in particular, for more than 200 years, you will be able to do so, free of charge, seven days a week, when the new Acadian Prairie Culture Center opens its doors in Eunice next month.

The new center, a cooperative effort of the City of Eunice and the National Park Service/Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve, is the first of its kind in the state.

"After visiting many areas in Acadiana, the National Park Service selected Eunice, Thibodaux and Lafayette as sites for three units of Acadian Culture Interpretive Centers which would literally cover some 20 acres," said Mary Hazell, project engineer.

Hazell said the Eunice unit will depict the life of the Cajuns who lived in the treelined prairies of Louisiana, the Thibodaux unit (scheduled to open later this year) will present the bayou style of life of Cajuns, and the Lafayette unit, scheduled to open in 1992, will deal with the general history of the people.

Working on the project with Hazell — a self-described "gypsy engineer" who will move on to Johnson City, Texas when the work in Eunice is complete — are Park Rangers Mike Strock and Hank Illenberger.

Illenberger, who has been with the National Park Service for 15 years, has also worked in parks in Virginia, Utah, Pennsylvania, and California.

Strock, who is located in the state offices on Kaliste Saloom in Lafayette, said the local rangers will be trained to work with Illenberger once the center opens.

The 12,000 square foot museum is located in the renovated remains of an 88-year-old farm implement store next to the old Liberty Theater on the corner of South Third Street and Park Avenue. It will include larger-than-life photo murals, and hundreds of pictures and artifacts covering every phase of Cajun family life from the years 1864 to 1984.

"All of the artifacts have either been donated by or purchased from people in the area," said Strock, who has helped compile three volumes of museum design resources.

Although the seeds for the Center were initially planted at the World's Fair in New Orleans in 1984, it was the renovation of the old Liberty Theater that started the ball rolling in Eunice, said Hazell.

The theater, built in the 1920s, was the temporary site of the cultural center, until park officials entered into a cooperative agreement with the City of Eunice in 1988 to create a per-
Cajun culture

The Performing Arts, the theater is listed in the National Register of Historical Places and has been included in the Great American Movie Theaters Preservation Guide published by the Smithsonian.

Joubert said he feels Étincie was chosen as a national exhibit center for Cajun culture because it is a centrally located city of the Louisiana prairie, and because many prominent Cajun musicians, craftsmen and cooks live in the city.

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