Busy Highway 71 cuts through the center of Bunkie, city on the northern perimeter of Cajun Country.

'My Heart Belongs To Bunkie'

By Lynn Franklin

The little city of Bunkie lies on the northern perimeter of Louisiana's bayou country. To the south of this unassuming agricultural center, the waterways—which once carried most of the region's products to market—lace through flat alluvial fields. Fat beef cattle graze under moss-bearded oaks. Herons stalk in the marshy grass.

Around the city (population approximately 6,000) a variety of industries process the region's natural resources. An electric generating station, a carbon black plant and a wood processing mill utilize abundant timber and natural gas. One of these mills provides a constant market for hardwood timber from the swamps. This mill, which once manufactured barrel hoops, now cuts to order for furniture manufacturers throughout the South.

Grain storage towers, a cotton seed mill and a sugar mill stand between north-south Highway 71 and the Texas and Pacific Railroad.

Much of this industry is closely related to agriculture, and its activity follows the cycle of planting and harvesting.

The farmers of Avoyelles Parish, of which Bunkie is the seat, formed a cooperative of about 600 members. They built tall silos to which they now bring grain and beans to be processed, stored and shipped. There are approximately 3,000 farms in the parish.

Bunkie supplies many of these farms with highly mechanized equipment. A number of department stores, a new shopping center, banking and minimal medical facilities provide essential services to the farmers and their families.

Bunkie's schools also serve nearby farm children. Enrollment exceeds 2,500, and the town is planning to build additional school buildings as needed.

The little city, like others in Louisiana, is wrestling with the problem of having to keep up with the fast-changing space age. Although Mayor Warren L. Constant has proposed a bond issue to build a 40-bed, $1 million hospital, a large group of citizens do not favor the proposal—and the tax that goes with it.

Instead of organizing and assessing themselves to support the mayor's program, 50 or 60 constituents—the Bunkie Business and Professional Men's Asso-

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Near Bunkie, in Evergreen—once bustling bayou port—woman in sunbonnet tends flat, alluvial fields.
In Evergreen, where many Bunkie families originated, charming Bayou Rouge Baptist Church remains as a monument.

Mayor of Bunkie, Warren L. Constant, is thumping for civic improvements that are met with more resistance than support.

Dr. Donald E. Hines is chairman of mayor's committee for much-needed hospital and for increased sales tax.
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Franklin's hUSky police' chief, Leon Chief Franklin seems to know... the farmers need all the labor... of the crops are shipped via rail... Gulf of Mexico and to world ports. By the turbulence of steam driven paddles wheels, silted in. Trees fell over... center shifted from Evergreen to Bunkie. That's why Evergreen, historic and charming, has remained much... The name of the town.

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Clarendon, on the old stage road between Evergreen and Bunkie, was built in mid-19th Century.
Miss Minnie Johnson, for example, lives in a long-verandaed house shaded by luxuriant magnolias. When her trees bloom, their blossoms are as big around as a wide-brimmed planter’s hat. Her house is furnished with carefully polished antiques, many of them bought in Natchitoches and New Orleans. Miss Johnson makes her own dyes, and colors quilts and bedspreads she sews and weaves herself. “We live a very peaceful life here in Bunkie,” she says. About her dyes, she added, “I use milkweed and walnut, goldenrod and butternut for my shades of brown.” Her main concern was not for the mayor’s proposal to attract modern industry, but for “a bright young high school student who for some obstinate reason refuses to come to my Sunday school class.”

Miss Johnson is representative of much that is fine and traditional in Bunkie. Dr. Donald E. Hines is representative of a younger generation. He was born and reared on his family’s large plantation, Oak Acres, near Bunkle. He went to Bunkle High School and from there to L.S.U., where he became a physician. After a tour of duty in the Navy—during which he received the Navy’s commendation medal—he returned to Bunkie to practice. Now, Dr. Hines is one of the leading spokesmen in favor of an increased sales tax. “We need a hospital,” he says, “and the only way to get it is to tax ourselves and pay for it.”

Another resident, Fred Feeney, an accountant, is chairman of the Bunkie Industrial Development Corporation (BIDCO), the city’s spearhead for industrial growth. “There is limitless opportunity for industry,” he said optimistically, “an excellent railroad and highway, many employable women, abundant water, electricity, natural gas, fire protection, an airport.”

Feeney, who was born and reared in Woodside, N.Y., played top-notch football for Northeast Louisiana State College in Monroe. There he met his future wife, who is from Bunkie. After fighting with the Marines in Korea, he married and settled in his husband’s hometown.

Feeney likes the quietness of Bunkle. He likes to hunt and fish from his nearby camp, a haven to which he takes his wife and family for holidays. “Some of the finest people in the world live here,” he said emotionally, “I like the pace of life . . . in fact, I love it. My heart belongs here.”

Bunkle’s husky police chief, Leon Franklin, convinces on sight that he means business. He deals with the occasional transient vagrant by simply sending him on his way, unless, as he says, “I’ve got a report that the fellow may need a little watching.”

Chief Franklin seems to know everybody in town. He takes it upon himself to remind those not working where they can hire out. He has even been known to ride them to the job in a police car. “. . . no need for unemployment around here,” he says. “There’s plenty of demand for labor.”

Most of this demand comes from the farmers who raise corn, sugarcane, cotton, rice and beans, one bumper crop after another on the rich land. By early May, corn is often six feet high. Many of the crops are shipped via railroad to New Orleans. According to Chief Franklin, the farmers need all the labor they can get almost all year round.

A few miles to the east of Bunkie on Bayou des Glaises lies Evergreen. Even the most cursory description of Bunkle would be incomplete without mention of it because that’s where many of Bunkie’s families originated. Evergreen (population approximately 350) is even more remote than Bunkie. It seems to be a 19th Century town. Sunbonneted women tend long rows of vegetables. Dignified plantation houses face the bayou, their walkways gravelled, their columns freshly painted white or pink, their ironwork blacked. Here, one is told, most people live to over 90, and nearly everybody works in the cotton fields. Such work seems to be healthful.

Evergreen was a bustling trading town when the steamboats landed there. Bayou des Glaises connected with Bayou Boeuf and Bayou Rouge to form a waterway south to the Atchafalaya River, Grand Lake and Morgan City. From there, freight could be shipped out into the Gulf of Mexico and to world ports.

When the railroad came to Bunkie in 1882, the waterways, once kept clear by the turbulence of steam driven paddlewheels, silted in. Trees fell over them. The landings rotted away, roads to them eroded into ditches. The trading center shifted from Evergreen to Bunkie. That’s why Evergreen, historic and charming, has remained much as it was in the late 1800s.

When the first train passed over the track through Bunkie, it was a grand event; people came from the surrounding steamboat towns of Cheneyville, Cottonport and, of course, Evergreen. The station was given an amusing distinction. Col. A. M. Haas was chosen to dedicate the terminal. When his youngest daughter, Macie, was just learning to talk, a friend gave her a mechanical monkey that would climb a string. In her childish pronunciation she called it “Bunkie.” This became her nickname and Col. Haas affectionately named the station for her. In turn, Bunkie became the name of the town.

**Clarendon, on the old stage road between Evergreen and Bunkie, was built in mid-19th Century.**

Shirley Road shopping center, a new commercial venture, stands on edge of Bunkie where cattle once grazed.