THE HEART
OF A DREAM

By IRENE M. BIENVENUE

When the small group of men and women met at the Jeanerette City Hall in late 1972, after the Governor and the President of these United States had issued proclamations declaring the four years until the two hundredth anniversary of this country the Bicentennial Era, and asking that we plan, develop and commemorate this time, no one was quite sure how we would answer this challenge. But one thing was certain. We meant to answer it, to meet it head on, to forge a dream into reality; one as big as we could and as lasting as human hands could make it.

Ideas were exchanged at this meeting. Various projects were suggested. Some directions were kicked around. To add some cohesion to the group, the late Ronald Lemaire was chosen chairman and this scribe was asked to serve as secretary. A living, working dream was taking shape, even if no one knew what the final outcome would entail.

When, on February 14, 1973, the city of Jeanerette officially created the Bicentennial Commission by resolution of the Mayor and City Council, Ronald Lemaire was officially named Chairman and I was named secretary. The group had a board who served on various committees and agreed to develop, screen, and set priorities that would be submitted for federal funding under the National Bicentennial guidelines.

We thought, in those days, that generous federal funding would be available to all cities participating in the bicentennial program and following prescribed federal guidelines. As time went by, we realized that these funds would be hard to come by, and were by and large almost non-existent.

It was not going to be easy. But we had begun to function as a group, and an ambitious dream had taken shape. We envisioned a museum and park to be completed and dedicated on July 4, 1976, in a brilliant Bi-Centennial celebration. This was the ultimate goal, the ultimate dream.

On December 20, 1974, three phases of a master plan was mapped out by the committee. Phase One would be acquisition of the old Monnot Home on Main Street and the land directly behind it up to Bayou Teche. This would cost approximately $110,000. Phase Two would entail restoration of the home, and landscaping of the home and park costing another $135,000. Phase Three involved renovating the old Coca Cola Building near the bayou, as a children's museum. This cost about $25,000. Total cost of the entire project was $270,000.

It did not take the committee long to realize that all this might be an impossible dream. Money was not easy to come by. True, some funding was available through tourist related groups, but many required matching funds. For a long time this committee did not have money enough for postage stamps. For a time things looked bleak indeed.

Slowly, through donations from private citizens and clubs in the community, we built up the princely sum of $625.00.

But the committee was not giving up. They sat down and revamped the plans. The dream was not lost yet. It would have to be modified, whittled down to a more realistic size, but we persisted in its basic premise of a museum and park.

After some delay, the city of Jeanerette dedicated $3,000 to the project. The Louisiana Tourist Association, through the Economic Development District, promised a grant of $6,000. We now had a grand total of $9,000.

Ronald Lemaire scoured every avenue he could find for grants and matching funds, and worked endlessly to keep the project going. He met with state and local officials. He made many trips to Baton Rouge, Lafayette, Lake Charles and Mamou. The paperwork was unbelievable.

We had formulated a new plan, one a lot more practical, as economics decreed, but the essential basic concept remained unchanged. We would find a less costly property and proceed from there.

On June 13, 1975 a Buy and Sell agreement was signed between Antoine J. Moresi and the City of Jeanerette for a plot of land 121.2 feet front on the north, depth 550 feet, bounded on the north by Bayou Teche and South by Main Street.

This is an Artist's rendering of the Jeanerette Museum located on East Main Street. The "Le Beau Petit Musee" as it is described, is a sampling of life in Jeanerette and along Bayou Teche.

Many old timers referred to this parcel of land as the old pecan grove. Historically, this was a most propitious agreement, for the grave of Nicholas Provost, one of the founding fathers of Jeanerette was located on the property. Cost of the property was $14,632.50.

The old Guibert House, a few hundred feet away from the site on Main Street (owned at the time by George Derise) was moved to the site for $3,500. The city filed the proper certificates of insurance and the title of property was effected June 18, 1975.

Now the physical work began. The house needed renovating and refurbishing. Clubs and individuals pitched in. Four clubs agreed to renovate or pay for the renovation of one room each. Today a bronze marker above each doorway bears the inscription of each club. The Clio Club, the Book & Hobby Club, American Legion Auxiliary Harry Eugene Unit 549 and American Legion Auxiliary.
Lee Gautreaux Post No. 26. Ronald Lemaire did much of the stripping of old paint and varnish in the hallway and kitchen and other areas. It was a slow, painful process but things got done. People offered time and money. Mr. and Mrs. Larry Lampo donated the flag pole. It was what was needed. Other donations followed.

On July 4, 1976, a Bi-Centennial Day Celebration and dedication was held at the museum and park. We had realized the heart of a dream!

It has not been easy going since. In 1982 the Chamber of Commerce, which occupies an office in the building, gave $2,500 for a new roof. A new air conditioning unit was installed in 1981. In 1984, the museum was repainted by volunteers. In 1985, the committee began putting in artifacts and craft items. Morel Foundry donated cypress patterns for the museum to sell, the income of which would be contributed towards the upkeep of the museum.

Today a fifteen member board conducts the affairs of the museum and park, through the city. Kaye Fortier is the one paid director. Her salary is paid from money realized through donations, admissions to the museum, friends of the museum, and partially by a Treasure Chest Market that is held annually. These funds also help defray the costs of operation and maintenance.

The history of Jeanerette permeates all of its rooms. Le Beau Petit Musee' (The Pretty Little Museum), as it is called today, is a testament to the faith of many Jeanerette people. It isn't only money that creates a dream. People are at the heart of it. Although the money was important, and still is, for the realization of this dream; the people involved in it from start to finish (and those who have continued on with it) give it scope, and meaning and definition. They give it life.*