Once luxurious oaks are deteriorating

Old age and neglect are two factors contributing to the deterioration of the 150-year-old De La Ronde Oaks at Chalmette, near the battleground of the Battle of New Orleans. One of the stately trees which has suffered is pictured here with bare limbs. Several of the trees in the double row called Pakenham Oaks appear to be dying.

Oaks Are Dying in Chalmette

The De La Ronde Oaks in Chalmette are dying from neglect. Some of them already have died.

But area preservationists have begun a movement to save the trees. The St. Bernard Parish Police Jury, for instance, has asked that the De La Ronde Oak grove be declared a national historic landmark and that the state Parks and Recreation Commission create a state park there.

Harnett Kane, chairman of the Historic Markers Program of the Louisiana Tourism Development Commission, issued a statement Saturday urging historical, cultural, patriotic and civic groups to take steps to save the trees.

"When the Tourist Commission meets next Wednesday in Abbeville," said Kane, "I intend to bring up this threatened blow to tourism in Louisiana and urge that the commission join other groups, historical, cultural, patriotic and civic groups to take steps to prevent such a disaster.

"Whether the matter is one of pollution or bad drainage, action to save this great tourist attraction seems urgent in the public interest.

An effort five years ago to rally interest in rescuing the oaks from death failed to arrest the trees' decline.

The trees are about 150 years old. They are located near the Pakenham Ruins (they are often incorrectly called the Pakenham Oaks adjacent to Tennessee Oil Refinery on St. Bernard Hwy. The Battle of New Orleans in 1815 was fought in the area.

The land on which they stand is owned by New Orleans Terminal Co., a subsidiary of Southern Railways which has been confusion over who is responsible for the land for a playground and picnic area.

Because of this arrangement, there appears to have been confusion over who is responsible for the upkeep of the trees with each party thinking the other was to care for the oak. John Metzler sponsored the St. Bernard Parish Police Jury resolution to save the oaks.

Metzler said his aim was partly to get someone, perhaps in a state university, to make a scientific study to determine exactly what is causing the trees' deterioration.

James F. Fondren, resident landscape architect at Tulane University, was among those persons five years ago who tried to spark a drive to save the trees. He gives five reasons why they are in decline.

1. Lack of proper care, such as feeding them fertilizer and trimming off defective parts.
2. Lack of proper drainage. There is too much water in the grove for the oaks, which are dry-land plants.
3. Spillage from the nearby oil refinery.
4. Large equipment being driven over the root system.
5. Air pollution. Fondren says, "Air pollution of any type is detrimental to plant growth anywhere."

Fondren also said the trees were weakened by delayed plant diseases.

A spokesman for Tennessee denied that pollution from the refinery was the reason for the trees' ill health. He blamed bad drainage for most of the damage.

"There is a negotiation in process," the railroad official said. But he declined to say with whom.