Push on to salvage landmark RR depot

By Mario Mamalakis

Will the City of Lafayette be able to preserve one of its most significant historical buildings? That is the question.

For some months now there has been the fear that the Southern Pacific Railroad station would be demolished. The City has been looking into the possibility of making use of the building so that it would not be destroyed.

It has now been revealed that a permit for demolishing the building has been issued to the Southern Pacific.

One of the suggestions for preserving the building was that it be used as a terminal for the City of Lafayette Transportation System, but to date no formal action in that regard has been taken.

The present railroad depot is the most significant landmark structure in Lafayette in continuous use for the purpose for which it was constructed.

Men of vision in the early days of Vermilionville fought valiantly to have the railroad come through Lafayette, when a railroad from New Orleans to Texas was being proposed with later plans to reach the Pacific Coast. They succeeded.

Now, will today's leaders find a way to preserve the railroad station?

It is to the credit of Alexandre Mouton, U.S. Senator and first Democratic governor of Louisiana, and others that the railroad came through Lafayette rather than through another proposed route.

It is generally conceded that three factors were responsible for Lafayette becoming the leading city in this region. These were: the coming of the railroad through Lafayette; the establishment of the educational institution in Lafayette, now known as the University of Southwestern Louisiana, and the selection of Lafayette as the district headquarters of the oil industry.

It was first the railroad that put Vermilionville (now Lafayette) on the map. There is no doubt that the coming of the railroad to Vermilionville marked the beginning of its urbanization from a village to the Hub City that Lafayette has become.

It took men of vision, men of courage and men capable of overcoming what seemed like insurmountable odds to succeed in establishing a railroad from New Orleans through Lafayette to Texas and finally to connect with railroad lines to the Pacific Coast.

Although in the talking stage for some time, it was not until March 11, 1851 that a group of New Orleans bankers, merchants and business men met in a room around a table lighted by oil lamps to make organizational plans. It was not until March, 1855, however, that the first passenger train came into Lafayette pulled by the Sabine locomotive, and it was not until May, 1883 that Lafayette became the eastern terminal for two Southern Pacific transcontinental trains, the Atlantic Express and Pacific Express.

Plans for constructing the present Lafayette railroad station were first revealed at a City Council meeting held on June 21, 1910. In the years that followed the coming of the railroad to Lafayette in March, 1880, lines were built penetrating deeper into the Attakapas District.

When a branch line between Lafayette and Baton Rouge was under construction, it was felt that a new and larger railroad depot would be needed in Lafayette. With the bending completion of the branch line, it was anticipated that there would be an increase in traffic and that a larger passenger depot would be needed.

Although this branch line continued in use until 1927, the disastrous Mississippi River flood that year destroyed the railroad bridge. The line was never put back into use.

The Lafayette depot, built in anticipation of the increased traffic from that branch line, continued in use until just recently on its present site.

The depot was built by a local carpenter and was completed and occupied on April 1, 1911. The building thus has the integrity of its original site plans intact for almost 74 years.

The site is part of the plantation of Charles Mouton, son of Jean Mouton, founder of Lafayette, and brother of Gov. Alexandre Mouton. James Godfrey Parkerson Jr., the right-of-way agent for the railroad, was successful in arranging for the purchase of a portion of Charles Mouton's plantation and home site (then on the edge of the Village of Vermilionville) for the needed railroad facilities, including offices and the depot.

The Lafayette railroad passenger depot reflects the railroad style of architecture of the mid-Victorian era in America.

The low pitched roof, overhanging eaves and semi-ornate supports are hallmarks of the Railroad Style. The slate roof is believed to have been laid in the World War II years. Two chimneys pierce the roof at the ridge.

The depot has a simple floor plan. It was divided into three segments with a bay at the front. The segment on the left was the baggage room. Later it served as the railroad's electric shop. The middle segment, a suspended ceiling was provided, but the original plaster beam ceilings of the room are at 16-foot heights. Each of the rooms at the front and back of the building have frame wooden doors with glass in the upper part. The interior walls are still in good condition, having been replastered over the years.

The old ticket counter and decorative grill part of the South wall of the office in the Black waiting room was replaced with a half wall and shelf atop it. It then served as the ticket counter.

One-inch white tiles with a Greek key border design in black and white tiles are on the floors. The wooden office floor has been replaced with linoleum tile.

The building is on an elevated platform, which was originally gravelled and was black topped.

The 390-foot umbrella walkway with its low pitched roof supported by decorative wooden brackets spreading out from vertical cast iron pillars or posts is believed to have been added at a later date. None of the alterations have been structural so that the integrity of the building on its original site remains intact.

Other railroad buildings were also built in proximity to the depot. At one time there were as many as 40 buildings for the railroad operation. One of the buildings with special memories for Lafayette's older citizens was the combination office, commissary and restaurant in the building know first as the Crescent News and later as the Brown News.

It was a popular meeting place famous for its pancakes and biscuits. Following dances at the Elks Club (which was where the Old Guaranty Bank Building is on the corner of Jefferson and Congress), it was "the thing" for couples to go there for a snack. Others remember the white clad figure that came out of the gallery of the building, striking an iron triangle to sound meal time. Passengers enroute on the train with enough time before departure often left the train to eat there.

Little by little, facilities built near the passenger depot have been razed. Lafayette's train station on its original site is symbolic. It provides nostalgic memories of one-day trips to New Orleans for shopping, concerts or plays, connecting trips to New York City and other large cities or just making contact with the outside world, as the train came in or departed. Most important to recall was its significance to Lafayette...the early key to its economic development.