Scratching to Survive

Stories by Milford Fryer/Photos by Gary Hunter

Jobs. That’s one of the biggest stumbling blocks.

James Robert Michael, director of business research at Louisiana Tech University, is familiar with the statistics of the area. More than that, he understands the misery and hopelessness his figures represent.

"There’s no industry in America that can be recruited into Northeast Louisiana," he says. "Here in north Louisiana, it’s even more desperate."

Carroll Parish is the poorest of the ten parishes, according to figures and civic leaders in all Northeast Louisiana. For most it remains an unfilled lake.

"I understand why folks from elsewhere say, ‘Well, I can come down here and make a living, if I have a job,’ " said Smith. "But when someone comes down here and says, ‘I live in an unfilled lake, and I can’t make a living here,’ well that’s not the United States they’re talking about.

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Michael said. "What we are trying to recruit is declining. Nobody is going to shut down a plant in Michigan and move to Louisiana."

That may be an exaggeration—a major textile mill is being planned for Oak Grove in West Carroll Parish—but what few manufacturing plants have located in the area offer low wages and do little to boost the economy.

The area is caught in a tenacious cycle of poverty. It is primarily agricultural, and agriculture has seen some tough years lately.

Even in good years, the area sees little economic activity. Most of those who can leave. "The ones who don't move away are tied to a poor economy," Michael said. "There just aren't enough jobs for people over there."

Among those who stay, there is a lot of welfare, a lot of farming, and a lot of commuting outside the area for work.

Many from the area said 1987 was a good year for farmers, yet numerous signs announce public auctions for sale of land, buildings and equipment of farmers and businessmen who didn't survive.

This year is already looking bad for farmers, according to George Hart, a farmer and a deputy sheriff in East Carroll Parish. He said near-drought conditions this spring have all but doomed this year's crops.

"We had a good cotton crop last year, and that helped a whole lot," he said. "Unless soybeans turn out OK, this year looks bad."

"We've lost a lot of them (farms) in foreclosures," he said.

That may be an understatement, according to Carroll Regan, publisher of the Madison Journal newspaper in Tallulah. The Federal Land Bank is probably the largest landowner in Madison Parish," he said.

Local Farmers Home Administration manager Buddy Hendrix said that was likely true earlier this year, but much of land repossessed by the Federal Land Bank was auctioned off a month or so ago.

But the farm crisis has been so bad, it has forced the FmHA to revise the way it does business, Hendrix said. He said the FmHA has changed from providing insured loans to guaranteeing bank loans.

"Madison Parish has been declared a disaster just about every year since 1990 except for last year," Hendrix said. "You're not going to get out of trouble with one good year when it took you several years to get there."

He said 15 to 20 businesses in Tallulah have closed in recent years, including two banks.

In an agricultural economy, bad farm years have a way of hurting every segment of the community.

The plight of Northeast Louisiana banks attests to the problems that exist in the area. Four of the area's banks were closed in less than two years, beginning with the Bank of Dixie in Lake Providence on Jan. 10, 1986.

Tallulah State Bank and Trust, the oldest bank in Madison Parish, a bank that survived the Great Depression, collapsed and was closed March 27, 1987. Both were bought by nearby Madison Bank and Trust, which was closed Dec. 3, 1987. Both were bought by

The Rev. Freddie L. Allen Sr.: "I live off my sweat."

Mary Hamilton: "The economy is bad, that's for sure. Another restaurant in town closed about a month ago."

Donnie Smith: "When a senior graduate from college he can't come back here. There's nothing to come back here for." (Also pictured, from left, are Brenda Smith and Paul Thornhill."

George Hart: "This year looks bad."

Carroll Regan: "You're not going to get out of trouble with one good year when it took you several years to get there."

Buddy Hendrix: "You're not going to get out of trouble with one good year when it took you several years to get there."
port, he said, but work had hardly begun when the project was canceled and a scaled-down version was built in South Carolina. The project would have employed more than 1,200 construction workers and would have provided roughly 1,000 jobs, he said. The company said it was leaving because of foundation problems. "What really happened was ... a group of blacks went up there and said they were going to unionize Brown & Root (the contractor). Then this little group went to the city council and claimed discrimination by Brown & Root. At that time they had only a little over 100 people out there, mainly supervisors," Regan said. "There were a lot of greedy white people, too," Regan said, including those who began raising property prices in an effort to get rich off the people moving in.

Tallulah sends other signals that it's a place to be avoided. In September 1986, the state attorney general said there was a state of emergency resulting from mismanagement of city finances and sued to take control of the city's fiscal affairs. A fiscal administrator has controlled the city's finances since then.

Then, in February 1987, former city clerk Moses Jackson was indicted on 91 counts of malfeasance in office, while his assistant was indicted on 11 counts of payroll check fraud. The charges have not been prosecuted.

Edwards agreed that a massive cooperative effort is needed in order to attract jobs to the parish. He said there was economic growth across the river at Vicksburg, where many local people went for jobs. Edwards said his work included helping employers find workers and helping find jobs for people who need them, not just processing claims for unemployment insurance.

Not that he's looking for more work, he said, "but I've been manager here since 1974. Nobody has ever asked me or any member of my staff to serve on any boards."

If Madison Parish has a lot to offer potential industrial development, some other parishes in the area are not so lucky.

North-south railroad tracks through Catahoula, Franklin, Richland and West Carroll parishes were torn up a few years back. Most of the parishes lack what could be considered really adequate transportation infrastructure. West Carroll Parish has no federal highway and no state highway that could be considered of any consequence.

Still, Regan said, good roads can work against a local economy as well as for it. He said I-20 makes it too easy for Tallulah residents to zip over to Vicksburg or even Monroe to shop, leaving local stores with even less business.

No one is certain of the effect, but a federal commission is being established to institute and supervise programs to infuse money into the entire lower Mississippi River delta area, beginning in southern Illinois and running all the way to the Gulf of Mexico. The idea is to lift the area out of poverty by bettering the education and transportation infrastructure as well as providing jobs.

Newspapers across the country have hailed the initiative as long overdue. Gov. Buddy Roemer met with the governors of Mississippi and Arkansas recently to exchange greetings and platitudes and sign papers. The meeting took place on a barge in the middle of the Mississippi River, a media event to call attention to the problems and to prove that something is being done.

But solutions, if any, will be a long time coming, since the problems have been there so long.

Michael summed it all up. "Louisiana has never recovered from the Civil War."
NORTHEAST LOUISIANA

UNEMPLOYMENT RATE

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PER CAPITA INCOME

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Figures from 1984 (latest available) Source: Congressional Research Service

POVERTY

(Percent of population living at or below the poverty level)

- 40-49%: East Carroll, Madison, Tensas
- 30-39%: West Carroll, Richland, Franklin, Catahoula
- 20-29%: Concordia

Source: Congressional Research Service

PARISH FACTS

Catahoula — Parish seat, Harrisonburg; 739 sq. miles; created in 1808; Population: 1900 — 16,560; 1980 — 12,287

Concordia — Parish seat, Vidalia; 747 sq. miles; created in 1810; Population: 1900 — 13,559; 1980 — 12,922

East Carroll — Parish seat, Lake Providence; 452 sq. miles; created in 1877; Population: 1900 — 11,373; 1980 — 11,772

West Carroll — Parish seat, Oak Grove; 334 sq. miles; created in 1858; Population: 1900 — 3,685; 1980 — 3,802

Franklin — Parish seat, Winniboro; 686 sq. miles; created in 1845; Population: 1900 — 8,590; 1980 — 9,210

Richland — Parish seat, Tallulah; 647 sq. miles; created in 1836; Population: 1900 — 12,322; 1980 — 14,733

Tensas — Parish seat, St. Joseph; 640 sq. miles; created in 1843; Population: 1900 — 19,070; 1980 — 5,225


Michael agreed:
“Even the banks that haven’t failed have been hurt severely.”

Charles Edwards has at his fingertips the figures that show the chronic and recurring unemployment. As manager of the Tallulah area employment security office, he also sees the people those figures represent.

“People don’t like to live in poverty... Their hopes have been dashed. They’re just waiting for the next big thing to happen...”

Charles Edwards said those jobs are with Fordice Construction Co., which builds concrete mats for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The Corps uses the mats to prevent erosion along river banks.

Fordice is one of the largest private employers in the area, hiring up to 170 people when it is working. But the work is seasonal and lasts only three to four months a year, Edwards said.

The second largest private employer in Madison Parish is a truck stop on Interstate 20.

Regan said that all of Northeast Louisiana, Tallulah has the best chance for economic growth, yet it lags far behind the nation in unemployment and income. He said the attitudes of the residents and the politicians are the only thing blocking progress for Madison Parish.

The parish has I-20 running east and west, and a U.S. highway running north and south. There is a deep-water port, and the only railroad crossing the Mississippi River is by Baton Rouge and Memphis runs through Tallulah.

A major chemical manufacturer started to build a plant on the river near the

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