By BRUCE SCHULTZ
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LAFAYETTE — For Edgar “Sonny” Mouton of Lafayette, life without an occasional laugh would be like Louisiana without politics: Things just wouldn’t be nearly as interesting.

Mouton’s humor fires in all directions, even at himself occasionally, to break the ice during tense moments.

“If you can inject enough wit into logic and debate, you can normally win,” the former state representative said recently, reflecting on his years in state government.

Mouton became something of a court jester and practical joker during his 16 years in the Legislature.

Once he amended a bill making former state Sen. Claude Duval of Houma the state fossil. The bill got far enough that Duval had to go to the House side to get the proposed dubious title removed.

Although he and Duval were on opposite sides of the political fence — Mouton on the left, Duval on the right — Mouton still reveres the late Duval as “one of the finest men I’ve met.”

Mouton was once asked at the last minute by former Gov. John McKeithen to address a group of cosmetologists in Lafayette. McKeithen couldn’t make it. Mouton told the women that he realized they had been expecting the handsome governor from northern Louisiana and instead they got a short, balding legislator from Lafayette. “I told them, ‘If I were you I wouldn’t be happy either.’”

At a dedication of a stretch of I-10 in 1973, Mouton told legislators in the audience, who weren’t on the speaking platform, “The reason you are not up here is because we didn’t want you up here. Seriously, the road doesn’t go through your district. You get your road, and I’ll stand in your audience.”

Mouton has high praise for his former colleagues. He says during his time in the Legislature, from 1964 until 1980, he didn’t meet more than five legislators who tried to illegally take advantage of their positions.

Mouton remembers one legislator determined to sell his vote on a controversial trucking bill.

“It was a standing joke that he couldn’t find anyone to buy his vote.”

Mouton said the legislator cozied up to a lobbyist seeking passage of the bill, and eventually the lobbyist fanned an envelope in front of the legislator. The deal was cut, and the legislator voted for the bill.

After the vote, the legislator thought he’d pulled a fast one, Mouton recalled.

“After the vote, he said, ‘Boy, did I feel that SOB. I was going to vote for it anyway.’” The legislator opened the envelope to find that the promised $10,000 in cash would be accepted only in a game of Monopoly.

In 1979, Mouton misread the political winds and his popularity when he decided to run for governor.

State law prohibited then-Gov. Edwin Edwards from seeking a third consecutive term, leaving the Democrats with a cast of thousands seeking the nomination. The Republicans were pushing then-U.S. Rep. Dave Treen, a less-than-charismatic politician, for governor.

“All of a sudden, here is probably the best chance, and probably the last chance, to be governor,” Mouton said.

Mouton thought his rapport with senators and representatives would provide leverage to propel him into the Governor’s Mansion. He was convinced that he could put together a coalition of legislators to implement lofty ideals from “utopian sessions” with other legislators.

As it turned out, Mouton was trounced in the election.

But, the campaign still provided some shining moments for Mouton.

One involved a television advertisement born of desperation after Mouton’s statewide campaign manager, Charles Roemer II, father of Gov. Buddy Roemer, implored Mouton to come up with a catchy ad to draw attention. The polls showed Mouton was in the cellar with about 6-7 percent of the voters. Mouton couldn’t get his opponents into a debate.

Staff photo by Brad Bigley
The ad featured the bull, chewing away, and the voice-off was that of a candidate reciting their campaign themes.

"We rented the bull for a hundred and a quarter. The bull’s name was Bubba. They hadn’t fed the bull for about four days, so when the bull finally started chewing in that yard, it looked like he was talking," he said.

Viewers heard the voice of Paul Hardy saying "I’m nobody’s man but yours," and it looked as though the words were generated by the bull. Same for Jimmy Fitzmerrit (who promised "I'm not running"), E. L. Bubba Henry, Louis Lambert and Treen.

After each candidate had his say, via Bubba the bull, the camera turned to Mouton sitting on a stool. "Are you tired of the same old bull?" Mouton deadpanned.

To commemorate that media coup, state GOP Spacer Bill Fontanel later gave Mouton a porcelain Hereford bull, which has a life-size replica of a yo-yo of Mouton’s Lafayette law office.

Despite the ad, Mouton got barely 9 percent of the vote, even as Lambert winning the party nomination.

Mouton, along with Henry, also a fellow Democrat, ran against Treen, who ended up defeating Lambert.

"I don’t regret it," Mouton said of his decision to be part of the tribute.

Mouton later became executive coun to Treen, an appointment Democrat colleagues said was for political endorsement. The state Democratic Party connected with Mouton and Treen. Edwards cried foul, claiming a deal had been cut.

"Edwine’s wrong on that, and I’ll be happy to testify to that oath on that if he will answer a few questions I’d like to ask him," Mouton said.

"Treen would be a strong candidate today if he runs for governor," Mouton said. "That’s what Roemer recently switched to the GOP, to take away strength from Treen."

Mouton also wanted to work for Treen for only a year to help establish a working relationship with the Senate, by which time he would be up for re-election.

Edwards derided Mouton’s expertise in 1985 to serve as liaison between the governor’s office and the Legislature.

Mouton says that Treen was a good governor, even though he became known for his long deliberations over detail.

Treen’s two biggest mistakes were providing an income tax rebate to Louisiana residents and proposing an unpopular tax on oil companies, known as the Coastal Islands Environmental Levy, which failed in the Legislature.

Treen would not delegate matters to his staff, Mouton said, including reading every bill before deciding whether legislation would receive his signature.

He said he eventually started joking about Treen’s deliberations. The governor asked Treen’s whereabouts, and Mouton responded: "He’s been in the elevator for two days. Somebody put a ‘maybe’ button in it."

Mouton said as much as he enjoys public service, he wants to return to the political arena.

He attempted in 1983 to regain his District 11 seat in Congress, but failed, getting only 49 percent of the vote.

Mouton says he’s not only quit running for office, he also quit drinking year last fall when he got married.

"I swallowed my share in my time," he said.

Mouton said the thought of campaigning boils no attraction, and he’s not looking to work in a political office-holding to duck hunting.

"You like being in the blind, but you don’t like being at the hell the walk to get there," he said.

Mouton said representing the public package into separate, much different from the ‘60s and ‘70s.

For one thing, concern for environmental awareness even something that most legislators didn’t even consider.

"We couldn’t even spell environment in the late ‘60s," Mouton said.

Mouton said that, when he was first elected to the Senate in 1946, (Democratic elector) in 1946 he and two other senators represented all of DeRosa, St. Martin and Lafayette parishes. Reapportionment changed that, however, with each senator representing two parishes.

Mouton’s not sure that was a good change. He argues that the previous system of representation required a senator to represent all segments of population, from agrarian to urban.

But he said the Legislature has improved because of an expanded staff and facilities, which helped the lawmaker become independent of the governor’s office.

Mouton said when he first started as a legislator "you had your mind, your mouth and your talent."

But a staff and office facilities made it possible for the Legislature to become a true check and balance of the executive branch. Mouton credited Edwards for that accomplishment. "It made us a functional arm of government," he said.

Mouton said Gov. Roemer has had trouble getting his legislation through the Legislature and the governor has been unable to establish a good relationship with the Legislature. He said Roemer’s earlier administrative staff probably didn’t have a good fix on how lawmakers should be approached.

Too many times, Mouton said, the governor has been unwilling to compromise, getting nothing in return.

As an example, Mouton said, Roemer’s refusal to divide a fiscal reform package into separate measures led to its rejection by voters.

"You have to be flexible," Mouton said. "You have to listen and listen and listen."

Mouton said he doesn’t expect to endorse anyone in this year’s gubernatorial election.

"I’m backing my friends, and they’re all with State Rep. David Duke, R-Metairie. "He’s the only one I don’t know and I don’t want to know."

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**NAME:** Edgar Mouton

**AGE:** 61

**BIRTHPLACE:** Lafayette. Louisiana

**Parental:** Married to Patricia Dauphin for 39 years. Four children, 13 grandchildren

**Political Affiliation:** Democrat

**Career:** State representative, 1965-84; state senator, District 25, 1964-86; Senate president pro-tem, 1976-1980; executive counsel to Gov. Dave Treen, 1940-1983; currently an attorney.