Steps to preserve Cajun prairie made

Professors make film of vanishing prairie

By BOBBY ARDOIN
Advocate correspondent

EUNICE — The Cajun prairie settlers of the 19th century once called it "paille jaune," or yellow straw.

A century later this seemingly endless, botanical ocean of multicolored flowers and grasses that once covered southwest Louisiana has been reduced to fewer than 200 acres.

Two LSU-Eunice professors have taken quick and decisive steps to preserve the remnants of what was once a prolific Cajun prairie habitat, and they have made a film depicting their findings.

With the help of an independent Eunice filmmaker — Patrick Mire and the city of Eunice — Allen and Vidrine have chronicled the plight of the Cajun prairie in a 28-minute, documentary-style television program.

In the presentation the two science professors along with Bill Fontenot, the curator of natural science at the Louisiana Natural History Museum in Lafayette, present scenes from the existing Cajun prairie.

Mire said the film's production took nearly three and half months. He said the film is non-profit and a labor of love.

Allen said that in 1870, a geologist, Samuel Lockett, was traveling through southwestern Louisiana and he noted the vast amounts of prairie wildflowers and wildlife and in his journals.

By using Lockett's maps of the region which covered all of southwest Louisiana and westward to the Sabine River, Allen estimated there were approximately 3.5 million acres of prairie flowers.

Nearly 70 years prior to Lockett's narrative, a French native, C.C. Robin, also visited the area of Louisiana from the Atchafalaya Basin westward.

Writing in a journal, Robin noted that the Atakapas area, west of the Basin, was a flat blanket of prairie grasses, flowers, vegetation and wildlife ecosystem of butterflies and insects.

"Crossing the wide prairies, grasses rise almost as tall as a horse," Robin wrote in his journal.

Shortly after Lockett mapped the area, the railroads were built, and then farmers from the Midwest settled the areas near Eunice, Crowley, Iota, Jennings and Bayne.

Prairies disappeared and became agricultural fields instead.

"We estimate approximately 15-20 remnant strips of original Cajun prairie remain," Allen said.

"The longest of these strips are 120 feet wide and perhaps a half mile in length."

Most of the remnant strips are along railroad right of ways in Acadia and the western fringe of St. Landry Parish between Eunice and Iota.

"The Cajun Prairie is the most threatened habitat in the state," added Vidrine.

In their research during the past two years, Vidrine and Allen have also discovered two remnant prairie patches along highway areas between Kinder and Iota and along U.S. 90 between Crowley and Jennings.

"I have an interest in ethnography and the historical background of the subject matter and the environmental impact interested me," said Allen.

"We would like to hope the plants will give us an insight as to what the prairie here was like 100 to 1,000 years ago."

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"Roots could not penetrate the clay layers. The prairies were dissected by forests growing along the waterways."

Vidrine said the film was financed by small donations and Mire added his expertise along with the cinematography of Jerry Devillier.

Eunice Mayor Curtis Joubert also became involved during the project last summer when Allen and Vidrine walked into his office one afternoon.

"When we told him (Joubert) what we were doing, he nearly jumped out of his chair," Allen recalled.

With Joubert's political clout, the city leased 10 acres of land from Union Pacific railroad on the northeast side of the town. Allen and Vidrine, along with the help of LSU-E students, have redeveloped a Cajun prairie.

On the 10-acre plot the scientists and students have planted with modest success, Midwest prairie blue stem grass, along with little blue stem and Eastern gamma grass.

"You had basically a flat terrain here with 50 inches of rainfall averaged annually. This produced a dense, hardpacked clay eight to 15 inches under the surface," explained Allen.

"People on the prairies didn't have fences so they plowed to all edges of the land," Allen said.

Clear farming was devastating since the prairie root system was internal, Allen added.

"The prairie remained along the railroad rights-of-way because those areas were never tilled once the railway companies obtained the land," Allen said.

Vidrine said the project began when he and Allen were mosquito hunting for other research purposes.

"As a team we searched about 1,000 miles and soon we noted 500 plus different kinds of plants. We realized they were all pieces of a larger habitat, where there was once a vast ecosystem of plant and animal species.

"We also discovered there was a large diversity. Soon we became astonished at the diversity and the vastness of it all."

"We would like to hope the plants will give us an insight as to what the prairie here was like 100 to 1,000 years ago."

"Unless you walk backward through time, you don't have a handle. You can't walk forward."