Central Louisiana, with Alexandria as its hub, is a many-faceted area. Here the rolling hill country to the north and west merges with the flat delta land to the east and south, each area retaining its own distinctive history and traditions.

The Red River, in its casual, meandering way, carves a diagonal dividing line through the Louisiana heartland. Alexandria and Pineville, sister-cities in the geographical center of the state, are separated only by the river. They provide a commercial center for a predominantly agricultural area.

Taking its name from the tint of its waters, due to iron ore deposits along its course in Texas and Oklahoma, the Red River has played a significant role in the development of Alexandria-Pineville. In the 18th century, near what is now Alexandria, the French located a military post near the river which was referred to as Post de Rapide, from which the name of Rapides Parish was later evolved. Comprehensive studies are now being conducted in regards to developing the vast economic and recreational potential of the river.

Hotel Bentley is a landmark in Alexandria, erected more than half a century ago by Joe Bentley, financier and one of the most colorful lumber barons produced by the South. Legend has it he was refused admission to a leading hotel in the city and decided then and there to build his own hotel and make it the finest the area had seen.

City Hall square in Alexandria is one of the plots dedicated to public use when the city was laid out in 1806 by Alexander Fulton after he received a land grant from Spain. Fulton's store and trading post, established in the late 1700's, was situated on the riverfront near the present Murray Street bridge over Red River.

Alexandria's City Zoo is only a few blocks west of the business district, off Masonic Drive in Brinthurst Park. Children take particular delight in the zoo, with its inhabitants ranging from peacock to buffalo, baboon to coyote, and coti mondis to lions. It is the only fullscale municipal zoo in the state outside New Orleans. The sprawling park also contains an amusement park, a nine-hole golf course, tennis courts, playgrounds and picnic sites, baseball diamonds and a model airplane field.
Fort Buhlow, on the Pineville side of Red River near the O. K. Allen bridge, was built during the Civil War to repel an anticipated third invasion by Union troops, but was never used. It has become a favorite picnic area. Adjacent Lake Buhlow, established in recent years by an earthen dam on Rocky Bayou, is a popular spot for boating, swimming, water skiing and fishing.

Louisiana State University had its beginning just north of Lake Buhlow at the site of the old Louisiana State Seminary of Learning. The seminary opened January 2, 1860, with William Tecumseh Sherman as its first president.

Central Louisiana State Hospital, in the same vicinity south of the highway, was established in 1904 as a hospital for the mentally ill. With some 3,000 patients, it is now considered one of the most outstanding state hospitals in the nation.

The Veterans Administration Hospital, in the same general area, was constructed in its present form in the 1920's. The rolling, tree-studded grounds of the hospital, which is a city in itself, are among the most beautiful in the area.

The National Cemetery, located in downtown Pineville just off Main Street, is one of four national cemeteries in Louisiana. It was established in 1867 and the military dead here include veterans from the Indian, Mexican, Civil and Spanish-American Wars and from both World Wars and Korea.

Louisiana College, at the end of College Boulevard in Pineville, is a Baptist-sponsored institution. It is estimated that more than half the state's Baptist ministers received their education here.

Louisiana State University at Alexandria is located a few miles from Alexandria at Chambers. The two-year commuter college, only recently established, is already being expanded.

Twenty miles to the north of Alexandria-Pineville is
In Central Louisiana is some of the finest hunting and fishing in the state. Lakes dot the area, ranging in size from sprawling Catahoula Lake, which is 30 miles long and 5 to 10 miles wide. A labyrinth of bayous and streams form a watery lacework across the area, with fishing and water sports enhanced by a mild climate year-round.

The Newllano Cooperation Colony, west of Alexandria just south of Leesville, was one of the nation's most interesting experiments in communal living.

Hodges Gardens, a spectacular 4,300-acre floral wonderland and wildlife refuge, has, in a few short years, become one of the state's most popular attractions. It is located about 15 miles south of Many in Sabine Parish.

The State Prehistoric Indian Park, site of ancient Indian mounds and a prehistoric Indian village, is located in Marksville on a 40-acre site overlooking Old River in adjoining Avoyelles Parish. Archeologists say the mounds in the park date back to between 300 and 600 A.D. and describe them as one of the most important archeological finds on the continent. A museum established in the park by the Smithsonian Institute, exhibits many of the Indian artifacts removed from the mounds and special displays have been arranged to give the visitor an idea of how the early Indians lived.

Chicot State Park, between Alexandria and Ville Platte, offers beautiful camping and fishing areas with well-equipped cabins and lodges.

Directly below Alexandria lie Lecompte, Cheneyville, Meeker and Bunkie. In the area are Wytchwood Plantation, with hand-hewn cypress beams held in place by wooden pins, and Lloyd's Hall.

To the northwest of Alexandria at Melrose Plantation are three of the state's most distinctive homes: Melrose, Yucca and the "African House". The hutlike African House has been named one of the 13 most distinctive buildings in the South.

Also within easy reach is historic Natchitoches, where residents keep alive the best aspects of a heritage dating back to 1714.