

BAYOU FIGHT

Gary Hebert, editor of the Plaquemine POST in 1973, fought a long and hard battle to save the Plaquemine Lock. Following the four-laning of the Plaquemine-Port Allen Highway in 1960, monumental traffic jams had developed at the bottleneck of the two-lane Bayou Plaquemine bridge. The problem escalated through the 60's. The state Highway Department studied the problem, and engineers came up with a plan to fill in 1500 feet of Bayou Plaquemine, beginning just west of the two-lane bridge, running to the Plaquemine Lock; and tearing down the Lock building and structure. On this foundation a four-lane extension of La. 1 was to be constructed to connect with Eden and Church Streets.

The area was in such dire need of help to move the highway expansion forward that citizens would accept any proposal in the name of progress. The Chamber of Commerce, the Iberville Parish Police Jury, officials of the City of Plaquemine, the Jaycees and other civic organizations, our state senator and state representative, and civic and business leaders, were all in favor of any solution to the problem because people were constantly complaining of being tied up in traffic for long periods of time.

However, Gary was a preservationist and a visionary, and could not go along with the proposed plans. He wanted a four-lane highway and bridge, but not at the cost of losing a portion of Bayou Plaquemine and the tearing down of the magnificent and historical Lockhouse and Lock structure. He formed the "Citizens Committee for Bayou Plaquemine," and began a fight that would last some three years. He wrote letters to his congressmen, and to anyone he thought could help him. He wrote editorials almost weekly, pointing out the value of the Plaquemine Lock and the many historic buildings and sites in the Plaquemine area. He enlisted the help of Gerald McLindon, Dean of the School of Environmental Design at Louisiana State University. He also wrote editorials criticizing the highway department's proposal, and giving an alternate solution drawn up by Dean McLindon. He next began a publicity campaign, calling on newspapers throughout the state to bring the matter to the attention of the public. Finally, he received help from the Louisiana Department of of Culture, Recreation and Tourism to compile the necessary information, and applied to have the Lockhouse and Lock structure placed on the National Register of Historic Places. This designation was attained in May, 1972, and it stopped the efforts to have the Lockhouse torn down; but the Highway Department engineers, now more furious than ever, pushed even harder for the fill-in of the Bayou for the roadway, by-passing the Lockhouse and Lock structure.

Gary was not yet through with his fight. He wanted to preserve Bayou Plaquemine as well as the Lock facilities. He cited the Rivers and Harbors Act of 1899, and the 1966

Environmental Policy Act, in keeping with the U.S. Army Engineers' regulation stipulating regulatory action prior to issuing permits affecting navigable waterways. The issue ended up on the agenda of the President's Advisory Council on Historic Preservation in Washington, D.C., for a final recommendation. Finally, in December, 1973, the decision not to fill in the Bayou was announced by the presidential council. The Department of Highways could not proceed with their plans. The Lock facilities and Bayou Plaquemine had been saved.

The Highway Department quickly came up with plans for a raised highway and bridge, and the project proceeded and was completed in 1979.

Gary's fight to save the Lock and Bayou won first place in the National Newspaper Association Community Service competition in 1973. He not only saved the Lock and the Bayou, he wrote about Iberville's historical heritage throughout his 38 years as editor of the local newspaper. His vision and foresight in saving this magnificent structure, now 23 years later, has been embraced by this community, with his goal of the restoration and revitalization of downtown Plaquemine now underway.