

Nature Conservancy keeps Abita beautiful

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By **Bryan Gowland**

On a typical Saturday morning, our group of usual suspects sat at our morning haunt for coffee and breakfast. It is one of those places where a congregation of regulars sits and often shares conversations across the room in order to keep up with all of the news about events and goings-on about common friends and acquaintances in Abita.

A group of young people wearing AmeriCorps shirts wandered in. Of course, the usual queries ensued: "Where y'all from? What are you working on around Abita?"

Those nice young people from different locations around the country were in Abita to stop and grab some breakfast on their way to the Abita Creek Flatwoods preserve to plant trees. Across the street, Donata Henry and her two kids were awaiting the arrival of vans loaded with her students from Tulane University. The AmeriCorps workers and the Tulane students were on their way to join students from St. Paul's School, earning community service points and other volunteers to plant longleaf pine tree seedlings.

The planting is part of the ongoing development of efforts by the Nature Conservancy to preserve a portion of what has become an endangered ecosystem that once covered large portions of St. Tammany Parish, the longleaf pine savanna. A trip to the Nature Conservancy office in Money Hill proved to be an education. Debra Mogg, the administrative assistant of the north shore field office for the conservancy, graciously took the time to offer information regarding the efforts to reestablish the flatwoods preserve plus a lot of other Nature Conservancy efforts in St. Tammany.

By the early 20th century, the native longleaf pine trees that covered St. Tammany were cut down to meet the needs of a rapidly growing country. Lumber companies like Great Southern in Bogalusa and the Poitevent and Favre firm in the Abita area were busily supplying the need for lumber.

The longleaf pines were replaced by the faster-growing species common to our area today. That process, however, changed the ecosystems that nurtured the longleaf pines to the point of endangerment. Along with the trees, the habitat for rare plant and animal species was also disturbed. In recent years, some concerned citizens recognized the value of redeveloping and preserving the original natural environment in our parish.

Environmentally conscientious people like the late Olga Clifton and her husband Walter of Abita Springs, David Goodyear, the late owner of Money Hill, and others drove efforts to assist the Nature Conservancy in procuring land for natural preservation in our parish. Today, the Nature Conservancy field office at Money Hill is the largest in the state.

The conservancy owns 5,000 acres and assists in managing 28,000 acres of property throughout the parish. The 900-acre Abita Creek Flatwoods Preserve is available for visitors who can hike the 1-mile boardwalk and nature walk to view the insect-eating picture plants, and very rare plants like the Catesby (pine) lily and the original pine tree species that

proliferated in St. Tammany at one time. The preserve is located off Louisiana 435 (the Talisheek-Abita highway) about three miles past Abita.

We are fortunate to have organizations like the Nature Conservancy and the folks who work for them and those people like the groups of volunteers who spent a Saturday offering their time and efforts to help preserve our natural environment.

If you are interested in finding out more about their efforts, they are located along the main drive into Money Hill. Their phone number is 809.1414.

You can also meet and visit them at the Abita Springs Earth Day Festival, set for March 20 at the Abita Springs trailhead.