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FOR: The Great River Road
Louisiana-Mississippi Section

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LOUISIANA AND MISSISSIPPI TO END CENTURY OLD SILENCE OF PLANTATION BELLS

Rosedown Plantation, St. Francisville, La.--(Special)--The hundreds of plantation bells which have been mute since the War Between the States will ring out in Louisiana and Mississippi again on March 4th to celebrate the coming of spring and thousands of callers to the Great River Road from regions still in the grip of ice and snow.

The gala bell-ringing is a symbol of the new role that plantations and their magnificent gardens along the lower reaches of the Mississippi are playing in the tourism field. During the half century before the Civil War, this region enjoyed the only Golden Age the United States has ever had. Cotton, sugar cane and tobacco and indigo were staple crops which were in demand all over the world. They grew well on the Louisiana-Mississippi soil and created fortunes overnight. Of the seventeen men in the United States who qualified as millionaires at this time, twelve lived in the St. Francisville, Louisiana-Natchez, Mississippi area.

With the great fortunes came great houses and magnificent gardens. Planters vied to build the biggest and finest. These mansions, many of them facing the Mississippi and the riverboat traffic, were lined up one after the other from New Orleans to Memphis.

The plantations that remain today are still receiving thousands of callers each year. Those that have gone public have a few visitors from the steam packet, "Delta Queen," but most of their callers arrive in a steady stream by automobiles traveling the Great River Road.

The greatest concentration of plantation homes and gardens along the Mississippi are found in Natchez, Mississippi. The annual Natchez Pilgrimage which is staged by owners of these mansions each spring will open this year on March 4th. Twenty-nine homes will be included on this year's program, which includes two tours a day and evening entertainment involving an elaborate Confederate Pageant and a comic

play called "Southern Exposure" in which Natchezians poke a little subtle "tongue in cheek" humor at themselves. The bell-ringing ceremony at Stanton Hall in Natchez will be conducted by Mrs. Balfour Miller, the originator of the Natchez Pilgrimage.

Just south of Natchez on the Great River Road is Rosedown Plantation and Gardens, one of America's newest restorations and most unique horticultural collections. Rosedown House is considered one of the country's most authentic restorations. Its gardens have been the showplace of the Mississippi since the mid-1800's. Both Rosedown House and the magnificent grounds, which contain fabulous camellia forests now grown to enormous size as well as century old plantations of azaleas, attract thousands of visitors to the Great River Road. Its original plantation bell which announced to as many as 500 slaves the arrival of a steamer, the time to begin duties in the house and fields, or the time to assemble in emergency, will join the many pealing tones echoing across the Mississippi. Rosedown is open as a living museum for students of history and lovers of beauty.

Other plantations which have switched from cotton to tourists include Asphodel in Jackson, Louisiana, which is now a unique tea room and plantation village to accommodate visitors; Fairview, on the Great River Road just south of St. Francisville, an 1845 vintage plantation home which has become a restaurant; Oak Alley, Franklin, Louisiana, a private residence which graciously receives thousands of callers each year; San Francisco, between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, another restoration which is open to the public; and Elmwood Plantation just north of New Orleans, which is the oldest plantation in the Mississippi valley. Elmwood features beautifully landscaped grounds and lighted walkways leading to the levee. It, like Tchoupitoulas, a neighboring plantation, offers a restaurant featuring Creole cuisine.

The most unusual adaptation of plantation life to tourism is that of E. R. McDonald in Newellton, Louisiana, who turned his Durossett Plantation into a charming Dutch Village. Here he has established Louisiana Dutch Gardens and the McDonald Tulip Farm. While thousands enjoy his plantations of tulips in March and April, his

motive is deeper than the entertainment of tourists. McDonald is a pioneer in the growing of tulips in the South, a region which has always been considered unsuited to tulip culture. With the aid of researchists at Louisiana State University, McDonald has created a new industry in his state. A book on tulip culture in the South and the growing techniques he uses is available at no charge at Louisiana Dutch Gardens in Newellton, La.

McDonald also has joined the plantation parade with his restoration of Winter Quarters which will be open to the public for the first time March 4th. On Lake St. Joseph in Newellton, Winter Quarters was the only plantation which escaped the fire brand of General Ulysses Grant on his march and amphibious invasion of Vicksburg. He used it as an overnight camp site for troops during the winter before the invasion. Its handsome bell will join other plantations in the gala bell ringing up and down the Mississippi.

In the days of grandeur and romance before the war, pouring metal for a new plantation bell was a significant event. Wealthy planters vied to possess the plantation bell that could be heard the greatest distance. Only silver could give these great bells the clear timbre necessary to carry over vast acreage. Therefore, the creation of each new plantation bell was cause for community gatherings, at which neighboring planters would watch silver dollars poured into molten metal. Many planters declared they could tell how many silver dollars their neighbors had invested in their bells by the notes that rang out every day. Certainly they could identify their plantation neighbors by the familiar ring of their bells, a knowledge which often saved lives and property.

Mrs. Balfour Miller of Natchez, Mississippi, mentions with much enthusiasm the famous bell of the Mississippi stern-wheeler "Betsy Ann" which has been hung at Stanton Hall since the final voyage of the historic river boat. According to Mrs. Miller, the ship's bell has always had the reputation of having the purest tone of

any bell that rang along the shores of the Mississippi. "When this bell, and the many plantation bells of Natchez join in this spring's salute, there will be many who treasure remembering the past generations of families that enjoyed listening to the same tones more than a century ago," Mrs. Miller said.

Information on the gala plantation bell-ringing along the Great River Road in Louisiana and Mississippi is available by writing Rosedown Plantation and Gardens, Drawer "M", St. Francisville, La.