DAWN goes to: Lousiana World Exposition

'I've Known Rivers...'

By P. Ann Tatum

NEW ORLEANS—On the muddy banks of the slow moving Mississippi River stands the 1984 Louisiana World Exposition (the world's fair). Inside the fair stands the Afro-American Pavilion: I've Known Rivers, Inc.

Inside this pavilion stands the people of New Orleans and beyond, far beyond. Inside their hearts and minds stands maybe awe and wonder, maybe memories of days and years past.

The pavilion is a sometimes delight and a sometimes sobering event. Fairgoers stand in lines waiting to enter, waiting for their tour into the past.

Suddenly you find yourself, crowded into a small, dark narrow vessel. It is the bottom of a slave ship on its way to America. you learn, through a series of lighted vocal panels, of the 12 million Africans who perished on the journey and of the several million who survived.

The tour continues. It makes a slow way to the present. You pass in time, the auction block. You catch a glimpse of an announcement proclaiming a sale of prime negroes. Bondage then freedom, the ensuing struggle for a place in the sun.

I've known Rivers
I've known rivers:
I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.
My soul as grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I've seen it muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.
"The Negro Speaks of Rivers"
by Langston Hughes

It is a dramatic exhibit in terms of size and sights, The young tour guides, dressed simply in black and white, provide a dramatic presentation. They speak to the fairgoers and the walls speak also.

The walls have television monitors. With a whisk, a wave of the hand the monitors sputter to life telling their tales.

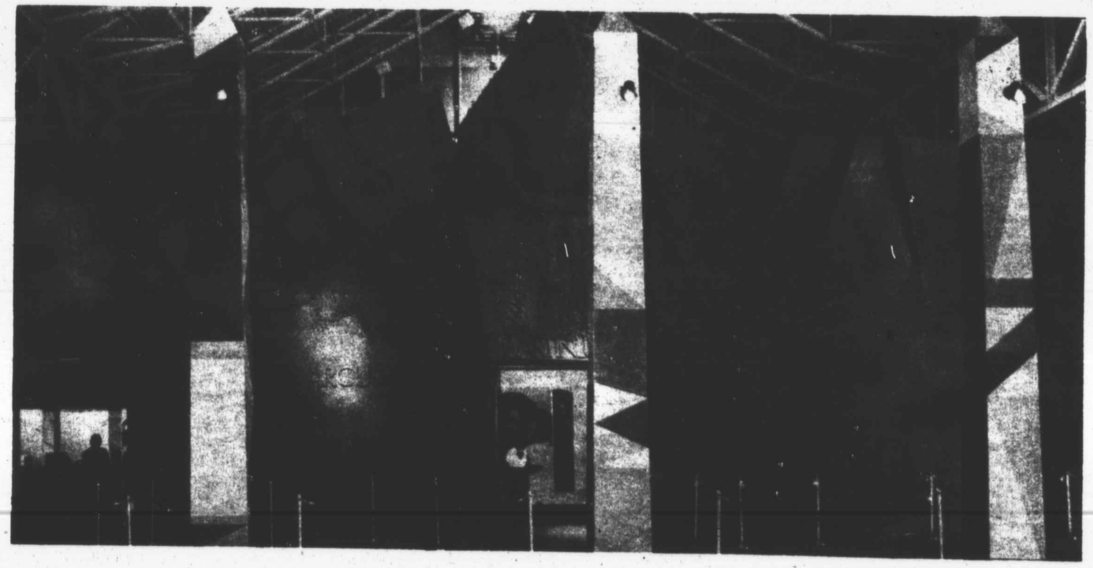
The Afro-American Pavilion has giant photographs and murals. It is larger than life. To be learned is a history rich in science and technology, business and commerce, arts and culture, politics and law, history, social institutions, religion and education.

More than two years in the making, the pavilion was completed at a cost of about $3.2 million. It is part of the greater fair which is housed on the shores of the Mississippi covering 82 acres.

The World's Fair ends Nov. 11, but the Afro-American Pavilion — I've Known Rivers, Inc. will not end. The Pavilion will be dismantled piece by piece and will be transported to a permanent site.

It will be a living museum about black Americans. It also will be a first in Louisiana.

While the Afro-American pavilion tells of the past, it also is a living exhibit. The Pavilion hosts three live performances daily. The greats and the near greats of black performing America have graced its stages.



Photos by Kubwa M.

TOUR GUIDE — Stacy Sherry, a former pavilion guide, stands in front of the pavilion inviting all to come inside.

A crowd gathers in the science and technology section of the pavilion.

Quite a few people are responsible for its creation. The Pavilion's national advisory committee is a who's who almost of black America:

Dolly DeSelle, Adams, Arthur Ashe, Lerone Bennett, Tony Brown, Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, The Hon. Julian C. Dixon, David Driskell, Dr. Norman Francis, Earl Graves, Rev. Benjamin Hooks, Rev. Jesse Jackson, Quincy Jones, Vernon Jordan, Dr. Richard A. Long, Dr. Shirley Malcom, Dr. Samuel L. Myers, Lou Rawls, Hale Smith, Percy Sutton, and Billy Taylor.

A principal guiding light of the Pavilion is Mrs. Sybil Morial, wife of New Orleans Mayor Ernest "Dutch" Morial. As president of "I've Known Rivers, Inc.," the non-profit organization sponsoring the pavilion, Mrs. Morial said "this is the most exciting project I've ever been involved in."

She became involved in the project when artist and chairman of Xavier University's art department, John Scott, approached her with the concept and design for a black cultural center.

They began discussing the world's fair and "we realized the type of statement we could make. Many artists and community people wanted a museum - cultural center and the world's fair was a way to make it happen."

The world's fair theme is "The World of Rivers — Fresh Water as the Source of Life." The Afro - American Pavilion's theme is in keeping with the world's fair theme and more.

New Orleans native jazz trumpeter Wynton Marsalis stops to sign a few autographs for Afro-American Pavilion employees.

Scott said the pavilion's theme is more in keeping with Afro - American history, than with the general fair theme.

"Blacks have always existed near water . . . near all the great rivers in the world. We're a delta people. We exist symbolically between two rivers, the Nile and the Mississippi," Scott said speaking of disapora; the journey blacks made from Africa.

His vision, his presentation of black culture is intense. It is moving and visual. It is a three - dimensional experience. Scott and other artists involved in the pavilion's creation have arrived at some stunning images.

Come walk among giants.

The Pavilion is covered with "historic grafitti."The sculptured facade - the pavilion's entrance is tinted red and symbolizes red Mississippi clay and mud Africans once decorated their bodies with. The entrance is shaped also in the form of the pyramids of Africa.

I've Known Rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.

(Travel arrangements provided, in part, by Eastern Airlines. Hotel accommodations by the Hilton Hotel chain.)