



## Soundstage will be built in old mill

By **ROY PITCHFORD**

Westside bureau

**NEW ROADS** -- The first motion picture production of Emerald Bayou Studios was completed in about 15 minutes in a historic, old cotton oil mill scheduled for conversion into a movie soundstage by April.

Wednesday's production was a two-minute silent movie drama about a man buying a football ticket. It was shot and edited on the spot by Scott Thomas, president of the Louisiana Film Center, as a demonstration for news reporters and area business and political leaders.

The sets were an old ticket booth left in the building by its former owner, the city of New Roads, and a wall hastily built by students from the Jumonville Memorial Campus of Louisiana Technical College.

On Wednesday, the old mill looked like an old mill.

By April, Emerald Bayou Studios owners Marquetta Cheeks and Linda Thurman plan to have installed a floating floor, a soundproof ceiling and enough improvements to use it in eight-time Academy Award nominee Digital Domain's production of the motion picture, "Instant Karma.

By the end of 2006, the building should have offices, screening rooms and a commissary.

Cheeks and Thomas see the company training and employing 40 workers by spring and reaching 100 by year's end. They will partner with the local campus of the technical college to prepare local people for on-the-job mentoring in movie production work.

The new production company is assisted by the Louisiana Capital Area Economic Development Allies Film Commission, and will coordinate with independent film companies seeking to work within tax incentives provided by the state.

The company said it will concentrate on working with independent companies, since they tend to hire more local talent for production jobs.

Thurman said the building is ideal for a soundstage. Such buildings need at least 20,000 square feet of floor space; the old mill has twice that. It needs a roof 35 feet high; the mill's roof is 85 feet. It needs free spans.

"You don't see an interior post in this building," Thurman said.

Both Thurman, who is the production company's president for business development, and Cheeks, president of production, are Louisiana natives who moved away to work in the entertainment business and have come home.

They said there are many other Louisiana natives in New York and California who long to do movie work in their home state.

Cheeks, a Pointe Coupee Parish native, has a 25-year career in motion picture and television production, mostly in Los Angeles.

Thurman, a Hammond native, also has a 25-year career in New York and other locations.

Among those present Wednesday was Amy Gauthier, dean of the Louisiana Technical College Jumonville Campus, who announced a 12-week intensive course to prepare local members of film crews.

The school also hopes to link other programs to the work of Emerald Bayou Studios. As an example, she said carpentry classes will be taught how to build movie sets and encouraged to work with film crews.

Gauthier said she also hopes movie companies will provide make-up work for cosmetology graduates and even fiscal work for new accountants.

The company and campus also announced an internship program.

Larry Thomas, who chairs the LaCAEDA Film Commission, said "Instant Karma" should be the first of many movies to be shot in the region.

He said commission representatives spent 12 days at the American Film Market in Los Angeles and "visited every independent film company at least three times."

"We were the belle of the ball," Thomas said of the group's recruiting efforts.

Thomas said part of his group's work in talking with people in the region is to inform them that movie-making is an industry that hires workers, buys supplies, rents lodging, purchases meals, and stimulates the economy in many ways.

Thomas said that the nine parishes in the region offer a variety of vistas for movie background shots.

New Roads Mayor Sylvester Muckelroy called the announcement "exciting and a great day for New Roads," and said he had often wondered about the future of the big, old building.

State Rep. Don Cazayoux Jr., D-New Roads, said his grandfather was a manager at the old mill, and said he first visited it as a 2-year-old. He said it is nostalgic to remember the sounds and smells associated with the building, and called its future role "glamorous."