Adapting To Nature’s Changes

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The much-maligned people, sometimes called squatters or levee rats, whose houses line the Atchafalaya Basin’s west guide levee road, have roots in the Basin that date back to the earliest settlement of Louisiana by white men.

USL anthropology professor Jon Gibson says the people living on the levee today may constitute a true subculture, which means that they are a group of people whose characteristics are distinctive enough to distinguish them from others in the surrounding area.

Gibson speculates that the French-speaking levee people, with their closeness to nature and their adherence to old customs, may be close culturally to the original Acadians, who settled in Louisiana in the late 1700's.


The original white settlers in Southwest Louisiana were subsistence farmers, living on what they raised and a small cash crop, usually cotton.

The earliest settlers, the Acadians, settled on the best farmland, yet were gradually pushed out in the 1840's by richer Americans moving into the area. According to Comeaux, the Cajuns sold their good land and moved to the east side of the Basin, establishing their subsistence farms there. This was especially true for Acadians on the east side of the Atchafalaya Basin, establishing their subsistence farms there. This was especially true for Acadians on the east side of the Atchafalaya Basin. To the west, many Acadians were able to purchase new farmland in western Louisiana prairie land.

Because most of the Cajuns moving into the Basin were poor, few took slaves into the Basin with them. After the Civil War, the few blacks in the Basin left, leaving the area almost exclusively white, which it remains to this day.

Bayou Chene was settled in 1840 by French and English-speaking settlers. It was mostly an agricultural town. In the 1850's and 60's, floods in the Basin destroyed crops. Then, during the Civil War, farms ceased operating after the men went to war.

Floods in the Basin became more serious after debris was cleared out of the upper Atchafalaya that had previously blocked water flow. The annual floods became so severe that engineers began fearing that the Mississippi would change its course and flow into the Atchafalaya Basin.

By the 1860's, agriculture was confined to the upper Atchafalaya and people in the lower Atchafalaya area began looking around for other ways of making a living.

In the 1860's, logging became big business in the Basin. Cypress logs and tupelo gum trees were cut down and hauled out of the Basin. Also, subsistence farmers turned to subsistence hunting and fishing for a living.

As fishing became an increasingly important means of making a living, small Basin communities were dispersed. Fishermen moved to areas near their fishing grounds, many moving deep into the swamp. The introduction of houseboats facilitated this, enabling fishermen to follow fish into remote areas.

The 1927 flood brought a beginning of the end of the deep swamp living. The building of a levee following the disastrous flood, to protect surrounding agricultural land and communities, resulted in higher water inside the basin. Even the residents of Bayou Chene were eventually forced out in the 1940's by high flood waters. From then on, settlements near the Basin were restricted to houses and communities on the outer side of the levee. Only Butte La Rose remained as a community within the Atchafalaya Basin.

The development of the outboard motor and the boat trailer also enabled fishermen to travel to a distance from the Basin and commute to their fishing areas each day.

Comeaux says that the folk culture of the Basin is dying and that the Basin is dying as well. He says that the resources of the Basin are being depleted and that a fisherman has a progressively harder time making a go of it from the Basin.

Ben Hayes, a Basin fisherman who has lived on the levee for 31 years, maintains that it is harder to make a living now than it once was, but that a living can be made.

Hayes says the water is bad and that there are not as many fish. He also says the Basin is shallower than it once was because of siltation deposited by flood waters each year. Hayes has his problems. He says people steal his buffalo fish nets. In fact, he lost $3,000 worth of nets in the past three years. He says, however, that he makes most of his money by crawfishing and that a young man can still make a good living as a fisherman in the Basin. His son, Larry - who is also a fisherman, agrees.

So, while Comeaux may maintain that the Basin and the folk culture that goes with it are dying, the history he traces shows that the people who settled in or near the Basin and refused to leave it are independent, hardy and adaptable, and that a young man can still make a good living as a fisherman in the Basin.