Bayou Chene, a Basin community lost, almost forgotten ...

An ebbing tide

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BAYOU CHENE —
In its heyday before the great flood of 1927, some 500 people lived in the community of Bayou Chene, sitting high on ridges deep in the heart of the Atchafalaya Basin, scratching out a living by fishing, hunting, trapping, farming and raising cattle, according to old men in the swamp and history books.

Until the early 1950s, the basin community had a school, a general store, a post office and Methodist and Catholic churches, accessible only by boat through the intricate network of bayous and canals. The family names included Carlin, Verret, Case, McCauley, Seneca, Theriot and Stockstill.

Today, though the community is still designated on some paper maps, Bayou Chene has vanished, as if it never existed, except for a few hard-to-find grave sites deep in the woods and a few old abandoned Chevrolet and Ford trucks overgrown with brush.

"They had a lot of people that lived there at one time," said Earl Carlin at his camp on Bayou Crook Chene. He lives there alone, except for his 13 dogs, about a mile from Bayou Chene, surviving off the land like his ancestors did generations before him.

"They got so many graveyards, more than they have people," Carlin said about remnants of Bayou Chene. "They had a big grocery store. They had a mailman and everything out here. Yeah, I think about the 1950s every day I live."

In the 32-page paperback book "Bayou Chene, The Life Story of an Atchafalaya Basin Community," published by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in 1999, authors Benjamin D. Maygar-den and Jill-Karen Yakubik wrote that the golden age of Bayou Chene was between 1907 and 1927, when cypress lumbering was still...
A site of Bayou Chene can be seen recently in the Buffalo Cove region of the Atchafalaya Basin.

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going strong, and the new internal combustion boat motors made fishing and logging much easier.

“Fish-boats from railheads came to the community several times a week, collecting mostly catfish (blue and yellow), buffalo fish and gaspergou from local fishermen,” the authors wrote. “They also purchased turtles, alligator skins and furs. The fishermen kept their daily catch in live-boxes of cypress, which were kept submerged. The fish-boats also sold grocery staples, coal oil and tar, kerosene and gasoline to the basin residents. The fish were brought to a dock by the fish-boats and then shipped by rail to urban markets.”

Sidney “Junior” Horton, 72, owner of Lou’s Bait Shop & Grocery in Coteau Holmes with his wife, Louise, said he remembers well the fish-boats coming to the community to buy fish and drop off supplies. He still runs catfish lines in the oil and gas canals around Bayou Chene.

“The groceries came in from Catahoula,” Horton said. “They were brought in on a fish-boat. When the man came to unload the supplies, he took the fish.”

Horton, who grew up in Lake Rond and Bayou Benoit inside the basin levee, said as a teenager, he often went to Bayou Chene, where he and his friends sat around playing music. He also has fond memories of playing on a baseball team that played against a team from Bayou Chene, of orange and tangerine trees in the community that gave off a sweet aroma, of tar pits to tar hoop nets, and of people keeping their grass cut.

“Oh, it was pretty out there,” Horton said. “It was the biggest community in the basin. I knew everybody, the Verrets, the Theriots. I lay in bed and I think about that, when I was young.”

Daniel Edgar, a seafood processor in Franklin, said he would like to see the state make an effort to put a marker at the site of Bayou Chene and to preserve the history of other basin communities that now are lost.

“Some of these things are very important to a lot of people,” Edgar said. “When we lose this next generation of people, that’s it. These people know some valuable information.”

Earl Carlin is one of those last surviving people who still lives as his ancestors in Bayou Chene once lived. He says he won’t ever move back to civilization. He said he particularly didn’t like getting bills while living in Bayou Benoit.

“That’s the main reason I moved here,” Carlin said, while packing a pipe with tobacco. “I don’t get none anymore. You know, I almost got one. I told the man I’d like to get one to see what they look like.”