Erlis Carline
Plaquemine fisherman retreats to the basin
when city life gets the best of him

FOR FIVE YEARS, Joe Boutin has tried to exterminate bass, bassen, and any fish left in the Atchafalaya. A legend by trade, the 37-year-old, full-beaked Cajun is a fisherman at heart. He will fish year-round,25 years ago or in a deep Helled hick and rig to toe the water daily.
Boutin is not more "coullion" than any other confirmed fisherman. He just prefers running through the basin in a custom bass boat with live graphite rods equipped with modern reels. He handles the aluminum, twin-boat bass boat with confidence, not uncertainty when his passengers grab the garfish as the rig bounces over a submerged tree stump.

Ironically, the basin has a calming effect on Boutin. "It's a great place to be," he says. And it isn't long before Boutin has found a lonely stretch of water and dwindling resources—typified by Joe Boutin and fisherman Erlis Carline—giving way to a new stretch of rural America.

One passenger, making his debut as a fisherman, manages to book a garfish. But Boutin exceeds on leaving the fish behind. He'd rather bet attempt to remove the fish from its estuarine realm.

"Let me show you how a Cajun lets it out of a garfish," he says, picking up a bonnet from the floor of the boat. After these two with the sea across the back of its head, the fish falls off the back and into the basin's black water. "Now it's your turn," says Boutin.

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD FOR THE BASIN?

Besides the sweeping effects of nature, reclamations efforts by the Corp of Engineers are converting the basin from an unusual form of wilderness to a new stretch of rural America.

At one time, there was a swamp society. Between 1875 and 1956, many of the basins were drained, farms were planted, and hunters lived in the basin. Today, their descendants—driven from Atchafalaya by rising water and dwindling resources—farm and raise cattle on its banks. As Atchafalaya changed physically, so did its cultural landscape. One-man industries, typified by fisherman Erlis Carline, gave way to new swamp activities symbolized by Joe Boutin and his high-speed bass boat.

Is there room for everyone? Carline and Boutin think so. But, in the end, they agree, nature will have the final say.

Buffalo Cove
Stains on cypress trees testify to the spring flood

Atchafalaya Basin: Changing panorama

By JEFF E. SCHAPIRO
American Press/Staff Writer
FROM THE CAUSEWAY that links Ramah Landing with Henderson, the Atchafalaya Basin opens to be more than a vast expanse of water dotted by oil platforms and the lush banks of cypress trees. The 13-mile-long bridge itself is a marvel—has reduced the hours it takes to drive through the basin to less than a minute.

For a closer look, visitors can cross over Interstate 10 at Henderson and drive south along a levee into the basin. In Cataboula, the local French dialect is a far cry from the American accent.

Each spring, melting northern snow forces millions of fish to move into the basin. With the flow, Atchafalaya's waters may rise 10 to 20 feet, on the rise of bits and cypress trees. Nature still dominates in Atchafalaya, as do the efforts of man, as the petrochemical industry has tapped the basin's vast oil and gas reserves.

As the season changes, so do the basins. When the rig bounces over a submerged tree stump, you can juggle a cigarette and drive through the streets of Lafayette. Here, the armed man left the crackle of an old radio and the mewing of two cats.

The current also brings bass of all sizes to the basin's waters. Fine particles of soil accumulate rapidly, changing the face of the basin year to year. Channels and cuts disappear, while islands swell in size with each delivery of the river's gift. It is the ultimate anesthetic for a man, too, has altered the character of the basin. Trees that once served as windbreaks are now washed away. Modern technology.

Using the Corps of Engineers as a barrier, Boutin can take you where the bass hit like champs, he says. "There's no more "coullion" than any other confirmed fisherman. He just prefers running through the basin on a custom bass boat with live graphite rods equipped with modern reels. He handles the aluminum, twin-boat bass boat with confidence, not uncertainty when his passengers grab the garfish as the rig bounces over a submerged tree stump.

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