INTRODUCTION

One approach that can be used to determine the beliefs and practices of a group of people is to examine the manner in which they use the landscape, interact with it, or change it. If one can look closely at the man-environment relationship, he will come to a better understanding of the inhabitant’s culture.

The attitudes, values, and beliefs of 19th century swamp dwellers are clearly evident when one traces the history of cultural development in the Atchafalaya Swamp. Swamp dwellers interacting with the Atchafalaya Swamp demonstrated, through their activities, a classic example of man’s relationship to the land. This interaction reached its peak during the latter part of the last century. This relationship between swamp and swamp dweller produced a culture and a cultural landscape unique to Louisiana, while at the same time leaving Louisiana with a most interesting heritage. This travelling exhibition ATCHAFALAYA SWAMP LIFE presents a brief description of the 19th century Atchafalaya Swamp landscape and of the forgotten swamp dweller who made his living by reaping the benefits of soil, cypress, fish, game, and moss.

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Excerpts from Life in the Atchafalaya Swamp by
D. Gail Abbey

Map of South Louisiana indicating the limits of the Atchafalaya Basin and its cultural landscapes.

Diagram: Buck Abbey after U.S. Corps of Engineers and Malcolm Comeaux
Collection: Lafayette Natural History Museum
The 19th century Atchafalaya Basin was a low-lying interdistribu-
tary landscape formed between the Mississippi River and Bayous Teche, Lafourche, and Des Glaises. In approximately 900 A.D., the ancient Mississippi River abandoned its easternmost channel to create the present course of Bayou Lafourche and then deserted it. The great natural levees built by Bayou Lafourche entrapped the overflow from the annual flooding of the Mississippi, creating the Atchafalaya Swamp. During the 19th century, the swamp contained large amounts of standing water, with beautiful lakes, bayous, and a variety of moss-shrouded trees.

The yearly overflow of the Basin interior and the abundance of good agricultural lands near the Mississippi River levees deterred most people from settling in the swamp until approximately 1800.

The physical landscape of the swamp has changed greatly during the course of the last 100 years. The demands of man's increasingly industrialized culture largely account for the change. Lumbering, agriculture, petroleum, navigational improvement, flood control measures, and general exploitation of the swamp have transformed a once virgin wilderness into the physical landscape present today.

Settlement of the primeval swamp occurred comparatively late in Louisiana history. Indians had exploited the swamp's rich resources to a limited extent. The first Europeans arrived in the late 1700's to follow some of the Indian ways in adjusting to the alien swamp environment.

Following the signing of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, numbers of Anglo-Americans invaded the swamp's margins. There was some replacement of French-speaking farmers, some of whom retreated to the heart of the swamp, there learning to make a living from the unusual landscape.

The last major influx of immigrants occurred after the Civil War. It was at this time that industrialized lumbering was introduced to the Basin area. Northern woodsmen joined natives to ply their skills, but were, for the most part, not interested in making the swamp their permanent home.

The ever-increasing flooding, culminating in the high water of 1927, combined with increasing attraction of urban ways and economic opportunities, led to the exodus of large segments of the swamp population. Those who remained found increasing difficulty in following the old life style.