Basin Cypress-Hunter Makes
Furniture From Driftwood

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ATCHAFALAYA BASIN
Greg Guirard lives most of his days stalking the unnamed Catahoula swamps.

Unlike other hunters, he doesn't carry a gun or traps. Neither does he chase ducks, crawfish or fur-bearing animals.

When Guirard sets out for the wild Atchafalaya Basin, he chucks a chainsaw and a pair of over-sized ice tongs into his boat — threatening weapons to drifting Cypress logs. Few escape his grip.

"I always think of it as a treasure hunt," says Guirard, a rustling-looking Catahoula native. "I see a log floating by that looks ugly and slimy and rotten.

Then I pull it up and cut it, and it's a beautiful piece of red Cypress."

If treasures bring riches.

Drying Cypress branches and logs are stockpiled on his lawns. Wing-stretched seagulls, Seahorses, An African elephant, A twisted corkscrew, Yellow, red and grayish-green lumber dangles from his barn roof, like sides of beef in a slaughterhouse.

Most of the wood eventually will end up in a masterpiece of coffee table and someone's living room. But Guirard never will release his prize treasures to him. They're like original pieces of masterful art, priceless in their sturdy, natural beauty.

The treasures are no less beautiful than the brown waters from which they emerge. Surviving Cypress, left unbothered by Guirard, puts up from the swamp, each towering tree taking its own shape.

In such a scene, Guirard searches for junk Cypress, but he says he finds much more — solitude, tranquility.

"Between crawfish and hunting season, when the weather is cool, I can go out all day and not see one person," Guirard says. "There are not very many places where you can do that.

Guirard's respect for the Basin — its character and its life — is apparent in his photographs. They tell of the Basin's calm splendor and power.

"I enjoy being in the Basin and collecting the wood so much that I was not making anything for a while," said Guirard.

"The Basin's call will have to wait for the moment, the craftsman says, while he and his wife, Mary, make Cypress furniture to exhibit in their first public showing this week at Acadia Mall in Lafayette.

In their outdoor workshop, the couple crafts rustic furniture. The pieces take their form and function from the natural shape of the wood.

"It's so exciting for me because we've been dealing with Cypress wood in for so long," Mrs. Guirard says. "It's great to see the finished products!"

The husband-wife team collects Cypress together. Guirard saws the wood into lumber and smaller logs, and his wife's job is sanding it. They started making furniture while living in Costa Rica.

"We had no furniture after we got there and we needed a bed to sleep on that night," said Guirard. "A friend of ours had a workshop, so we started making furniture.

"We had gone to Costa Rica with the idea of buying a small farm," he added. "But I guess an educator successful, and he enjoyed interaction with students.

But he left the United States because he was "looking for something better," he says. "For a long time I was upset about the political situation here," says Guirard. "I wanted to get away. I don't know if it's changed much, but maybe I just don't let it upset me."

Guirard came back to his homeland and found a life he relishes.

"I've always tried to find something to do I can enjoy, and I love this," says the 4-year-old. "It's really exciting to me to come out of the Basin with a boat load of Cypress."

Unburied treasure: Greg Guirard, foreground, saws a "pecky" Cypress log into sections to carry from the Atchafalaya Basin swamps to his Catahoula workshop. There, it will be sanded, treated with tung oil and transformed into household furniture. Mary "Bubbles" Guirard, Greg's wife and reworkder, rests on another log in the background.

FROM SWAMP TO LIVING ROOM — Driftwood found by Mary Guirard, foreground, and Greg Guirard in the Atchafalaya swamp's dark waters eventually will end up in someone's living room. Here the husband-wife team is finishing the rough wood for table legs and trivets. Mary is sanding, and Greg, sawing. It's not an easy way to make a living — hauling heavy, water-soaked logs from the Basin and crafting them into practical products — but it's a life in which the couple delights. (Staff photo by P.C. Piazza.)

RUNAWAY LOG — This log is not getting away from Greg Guirard, silhouetted here by the sun in the Atchafalaya Basin. He is tying the huge log, found drifting in the swamps, to a standing tree until he has time to drag it out of the Basin. Guirard resides off the levee in Catahoula when he is not in the swamp hunting Cypress from which he crafts furniture. (Staff photo by P.C. Piazza.)