Bâteaux keep history afloat

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LAFAYETTE — Faren Serrette’s grandfather floated the bayous in a wooden bateau, bringing families ice and groceries that he traded for fish.

Serrette’s father rode in a similar boat as a child — an Atchafalaya Basin school bus of sorts that carried kids to a schoolhouse in Butte La Rose.

By the time Serrette was coming of age in the 1960s, the traditional wooden boats once so common in south Louisiana were steadily being replaced by newer aluminum and fiberglass models.

Serrette, now 47, has been trying to keep the old tradition alive.

Working from knowledge gleaned from relatives and elders, Serrette is in the middle of a yearlong project at the Vermilionville living history museum to build a traditional 24-foot bateau — a kind of general-purpose boat that was once a necessity for swamp life.

He grew up helping build boats with his father and uncle but said that he didn’t get serious until after his father was asked to build a boat as part of a folkways presentation at the 1984 World’s Fair in New Orleans.

“At the time, my dad was one of the few who remembered how they were built,” Serrette said. “That invitation to the World’s Fair kind of sparked my interest in wooden boats, realizing how close they had come to disappearing.”

Serrette worked with his father on the World’s Fair project. Since then, he has spent time learning what he can from older builders, studying old boats and trying to divine what he can from faded photographs.

The boat taking shape at Vermilionville, which is funded by state grants and will be used to give guided tours along the Vermilion River, is loosely based on a model built by an old boat builder from Henderson.

Serrette said. Serrette is one of a small group of enthusiasts in the state working to keep traditional boat building alive, said Ray Brassieur, an anthropology professor at UL Lafayette who studies traditional boats and boat builders.

“There has been something of muted revival,” Brassieur said.

Several things work against the tradition.

For one, Brassieur said, wooden boats are generally more expensive and traditional materials, such as cypress wood, are hard to find.

And once the old boat builders die off, their skills go with them.

“The skills have to be sustained and passed down,” Brassieur said. “It’s not written down, you can’t learn them from a book very easily.”

In the Northeast, maritime heritage is well documented and always has been a drawing card for tourists. In Louisiana, the Cajun musician when not building boats.

“Want to go? The traditional boat building project will take place every Thursday through April at Vermilionville, 300 Fisher Road. The public is invited to come watch and ask questions. Call (337) 239-4077.

revival has been slowly gaining momentum for the last 20 years.

A Center for Traditional Boat Building was established at Nicholls State University in Thibodaux in 1979. The center documents traditional boats and offers classes in construction. In 1990, the town of Madisonville, just above Lake Pontchartrain, began hosting the annual Louisiana Wooden Boat Festival, and a maritime museum was recently started in the town.

“There seems to have been a resurgence all over state,” said Serrette, who works as a carpenter and Cajun musician when not building boats.

The interest, he said, is mainly nostalgic.

“Boats keep history afloat.” Serrette said, “and it’s fun.”

ON THE NET www.vermilionville.org www.nicholls.edu/boatb pb/maritimemuseum.org