Boaters celebrate Longfellow

‘Putt-putt’ remember heritage

BY SAMUEL IRWIN
Special to The Advocate

ST. MARTINVILLE — “Putt-putt” boat enthusiasts cruised up and down Bayou Teche on Saturday in their 20 bateau as the Acadian Memorial Foundation commemorated the 200th birthday of poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

Longfellow forever immortalized Acadian in his epic poem, “Evangeline,” that recounts the tragic lives of Evangeline and Gabriel, two lovers forcibly separated when the British deported the Acadians from their Canadian homes in 1755.

As usual, the “putt-putt” boats stole the show. “Putt putt” boats, sometimes referred to as the “boats that tamed the Atchafalaya Basin,” are hand-made cypress wood skiffs. The 20-foot and longer bateau are powered by antique 8-horsepower Lockwood-Ash two-cycle engines. In 1926, Nadler Foundry bought the Lockwood-Ash patents and began to manufacture the sturdy engines in Plaquemine.

“These were the first mechanized boats in the Atchafalaya Basin,” said University of Louisiana at Lafayette cultural anthropologist Ray Brassieur. “The boats are significant because their emergence coincided with the rise of refrigeration and availability of ice in the remote swampy areas.”

While most of the boats in action Saturday were built recently by master boat builders such as Tony Latiolais of Henderson and Orie Mendoza of Bayou Sorrel, at least two of the boats were built nearly 100 years old.

Latiolais’ attraction to the classic cypress boats is derived from his carpentry skills. He is one of the few boatbuilders who knows how to construct a curved, pirogue-like bow called a round head block.

Others, like Jamie Hurry of Donaldsonville, said he and others like him love the boats because of the antique engines.

The unique combination of reliable engines and large flat-bottomed hulls allowed Atchafalaya Basin dwellers to collect Spanish moss and use hoop nets to trap large quantities of commercial fish species like catfish, buffalo and gaspereau.

Brassieur said the introduction of the faster and more powerful outboard motor in the 1950s replaced the bulky putt-putts, and by 1984 there was only one putt-putt boat still in operation. “The form was no longer visible,” Brassieur said. “But the knowledge (of the boats) was still there.”

Putt-putt boat building demonstrations at the 1984 New Orleans World’s Fair and a similar event at the Smithsonian Institute Folklife Festival in 1985 sparked a renewed interest in the historic boat form. Today, south Louisiana wooden boat lovers have built or restored more than 25 of the boats.

“These boats represent the livelihood of the Atchafalaya Basin,” Brassieur said. “They represent the fishing life and people will be attracted to them and the knowledge will be passed on.”

Tony Latiolais guides his 20-foot putt-putt bateau along the bank of Bayou Teche at the Acadian Memorial Foundation’s celebration of poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s 200th birthday in St. Martinville.

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