by Carolyn Ramsey

Cajun
Cruise

Here's a fascinating look at the Cajuns of South Louisiana from the deck of the fish boat, Elaine.

The Great Basin of the Atchafalaya River (green area on map above) is a primeval wilderness of shifting waters and islands, still unexplored in many sections, and sparsely peopled by a wary, industrious folk who take their living from its waters. At right, the Elaine steers a knowing course among giant cypress trees.

- There is no better way to get to know the Cajun swamp dwellers of South Louisiana, and to see the great watery wilderness in which they live, than to explore the Great Basin of the Atchafalaya as a guest aboard the fish boat, Elaine. You will see the houseboats on which the Cajuns live, the “plank boats” or pirogues from which they fish, the long gas boats that serve as school buses—and, if you are lucky, you may be invited to a delicious Cajun meal of stewed chicken and catfish court bouillon.

The Great Basin of the Atchafalaya lies between New Iberia on the west and Baton Rouge on the east, and is a sprawling question mark—seventy miles long and forty miles wide—of waters and shifting islands. No roads penetrate the labyrinth of jungle and stream. A railroad that once traversed the area was abandoned long ago, and the swirling waters of the great river wash at piers that once supported a bridge.

Its Indian name, Atchafalaya, means “Long River,” but it is actually short as American rivers go. It flows through a primeval wilderness, much of it still unexplored. Bayou Monoulis, the Bayou of the Little Bears, Whiskey Bay, Dead Man’s Slough and the Eleven Mouths of the Atchafalaya which empty into Grand Lake are still spoken of with awe by rivermen from Pittsburgh to New Orleans.

It is a region of haunting beauty, of tropical terrifying silences and it is sparsely peopled by strange, wary, suspicious folk—long-bearded Scandinavian giants aboard houseboats harbored up some bayou; beady-eyed Chitimacha Indians, paddling pirogues loaded with Spanish moss; sensuous half-breed girls called “bougalis,” running their fishlines along the willows, and dark-skinned French Cajuns, quieter and more reserved than their gay cousins on the “outside.”

Capt. Dew Robert Vuillemont takes the Elaine into this weird, wild region on two three-day trips each week. She is primarily a fish boat, a gallant little thirty-foot half-cabin Louisiana lugger, a design brought from Brittany by French émigrés generations ago. Her tiny cabin is jammed with miscellanea, but cozy and comfortable. Her decks are broad, her holds wide and roomy to carry the swamp’s rich harvest. To hundreds of families the Elaine serves as general store and mailman, a main connecting link with the world beyond the bayous.

On a sun-drenched day in April, I stood in the pilothouse as the Elaine left her moorings at Morgan City and cut a glistening path upstream, washing her wake against the hulls of a hundred-odd shanty boats.

Running a hand through his red hair, Captain Vuillemont described his watery homeland in flavosome Cajun dialect:

“Morgan City shrimpers tell me the sea she like a woman. I t’ink the Basin like that too. She a wench though, dat’s for darrr’-sure, a cheatin’ changeable hard-to-handle wench. Can’t make up ‘er mind if she a river or lake! Or maybe a mess of bayous and sloughs. I t’ink she really one awful big lake, by dam’. She Grand Lake, you know, and dozen, maybe two dozen, littler lakes. God knows how many islands.”

“Maybe when you see the Basin for yourself,” he added, “you tell me if she angel or devil.”

Captain Dew Robert was in high spirits. Standing at the wheel in his crowded pilothouse, clad
in khakis and bright plaid jacket, he was a jaunty figure. He wore his battered hunting cap as if it were an admiral's headgear. This red-haired riverman and his cheery little vessel had a lilting manner that was pure Louisiana-Cajun-French. Both fit to perfection the life they led in the treacherous river swamps where a boat and a man needed strength and cleverness, initiative and imagination—to meet the challenge of the swamp.

As we passed the houseboats floating peacefully in the Borrow Pit, just over the levee at Morgan City, Captain Dew Robert produced a pair of fine German field glasses. Training them on one of the houseboats, he waved to his wife. She, like himself, had grown up in the Atchafalaya Basin, but she preferred living in town to keep their children in school.

“My youngest boy love the swamps like I do,” said the captain. “Pore lil’ thing. His maman she dead set for him finish school in Morgan City, and many time he cry and cry, he want to go wit’ me so bad.”

As he spoke, he pointed the Elaine’s bow straight into the broad waters ahead. There was a change of tempo. Tremors ran through the lugger’s timbers. We were now well on our way, into the river’s Great Basin.

To Captain Dew Robert each voyage promises a new adventure.

“Le Bon Dieu himself is the onliest one who know what we bring in this trip,” he said. “Me, I hope it’s two thousand pounds of blue cat, and not so much gouton. Ah, and plenty of guepergo, and not so many li’l’ crayfish, by dam’. A good trip, I betcha!”

Turning to his “chart,” glued to the side of the crowded pilot cabin, he pointed out our course. The chart by which he navigated the Atchafalaya’s intricate water system was a weather-beaten Louisiana highway map.

“Nothing but emptiness,” he said, “from the source of the river to Morgan City. That’s lengthwise. And crosswises they’re just as much emptiness. Grand Lake she is colored blue on the map. The res’ she just green emptiness with bayous running through like snakes. Ah, that is Great Basin, all right, and a by-dam’ lot of it, if anyone asks you.”

Like sailors everywhere, Captain Dew Robert loves and hates the waters he navigates. He told me many things about this strange waterway. Some river scientists, he said, thought the Atchafalaya was the Mississippi’s old channel to the sea. What would happen, he asked, if some super-flood on the Red and on the Mississippi at the Gut and at Morganza Floodway Gates combined to pour millions of tons of water through the Atchafalaya Basin? Would the Mississippi someday change its course, bypass New Orleans completely and flow to the Gulf of Mexico through this short 134-mile channel?

The Atchafalaya has always been a peculiar river, more unpredictable than the Mississippi. Its source is 218 river miles above New Orleans where the Mississippi forks to the west to form a short channel known as Old River or the Gut, which carries a fourth of the Mississippi’s water into the Atchafalaya Basin. This channel, just six miles long, meets the Red River of the South, flowing down out of Oklahoma and North Louisiana, and the two merge to form the beginning of the Atchafalaya. In the fall, the Red sends long copper-colored streaks curling through the swamps. In the spring the Mississippi sends a great flood down the Upper Atchafalaya, forming a swift deep river that flows for thirty miles between well-contained banks, then bursts into the myriad bayous, cuts and bays of the Lower Atchafalaya Basin.

Now the Elaine moved into the first of the two large lakes of the Great Basin. “This one she called Six Mile Lake,” the captain said, “Grand Lake beyond the cut ahead.”

Rising out of the flat shallow waters were white sand bars, the beginning, said the captain, of “new land” constantly forming in the two lakes. Built up by silt that pours in with the floods each spring, they soon grow into islands. The floods gouge channels through the older islands and mud flats. Thus Six Mile and Grand Lake are always changing and a new channel has to be found every six months or so.

Abruptly, as we approached Grand Lake’s northern exit, the captain clamped my hands over the Elaine’s wheel. Bounding out of the cabin, he grabbed a long grapple iron and hauled aboard a five-gallon gasoline tin. He stashed the can away on the crowded deck and, grinning sheepishly, returned to take the wheel.

“My old’ boy, when he used to make trips wit’ me, say he had the coocoo-iest dad that ever ran a fish boat, the way I was all time latching onto funniest things that floated by.”

“But me, I say I’ll sell this driftin’ can to some swamper for enough to buy the wife a pair of fancy stockings. Many time when we well up into the littler bayous, I look at drifting water and tell
Continued from Page 85

who's visitin' camp ahead of us, by the kind of empty tobacco can I see drift by, and whose wife she want to buy coffee, by the empty coffee tin. We come to the first camp soon and you see what I mean. Bet you two can of beer that, me, I can sell that gas can—and that Mrs. Alcide Boudreaux buy a can of coffee."

From Grand Lake's choppy waters the Elaine entered Bayou Boutte, first of several tree-bordered bayous where she pried her trade. We were now deep in the interior swamps of the Great Basin. Around a bend we came in sight of Bayou Boutte Landing.

The Elaine slowed as we neared several houseboats lying alongside each other, tied to giant cypress trees. There were people everywhere, working, laughing and shouting to each other in gumbo French. Everyone seemed to have his own water craft and to be completely at home in his gas boat, row boat, "plank boat" or pirogue, and even on the bouncing logs that made up the walks and pathways.

To us, coming out of the stillness of the bayou's mouth, the activity seemed feverish. Fishermen and their families were tarring their nets, knitting new ones, repairing boat motors, building pirogues.

One group of men was busy "tarring up"—dipping huge hoop nets in coal tar to make them withstand the rigors of underwater service. The black nets hung from the limbs of cypress trees. Smoke and fumes rose from fifty-gallon drums of tar, that floated on platforms among the tree trunks. Young men are best for this job. It takes strong muscles to pull the heavy nets into the air so they can dry.

This was the camp of a single family, whose three branches lived on five separate flatboats and worked together at the task of fishing. At the sound of the Elaine's pert horn, all work stopped, and everyone hailed the approaching fish boat. Almost before we docked, swimmers poured over the Elaine's decks, causing her to lurch giddily. Those who couldn't get a footing on deck tied their pirogues alongside. Everyone was shouting to the captain.

"Comme-ca, old alligator face, you gotta nerve keepin' me waitin' for dat new twine, ahn? How you t'ink dis pore Cajun goin' to win dat bet wid my new brudder-'n-law if I can't get my nets in them catfish holes?"

The women, impatient to trade with the fish-boat captain, piled aboard, to bargain for groceries or pick up the mail-order clothes he had brought. Although the tiny cabin held only one shopper at a time and the stock was limited to what could be crammed into half a dozen five-foot shelves, these wives seemed to get the same thrill from their shopping as their city cousins do in a department store.

As a wizened old lady searched through the shelves of canned goods, Captain Dew Robert said, "Ah, Mrs. Alcide, you lookin' for your special coffee, yes? I got it right here for you." She counted out her change and the captain added, "Mrs. Alcide, she know a good coffee when she see it, ahn?"

He winked at me and mumbled, "One can of beer for me!"

Finally, when the women and children had left the deck, the captain began his real work—buying fish from the swimmers. The men and boys of the camp opened their floating fish cars, which were tied to stakes in shallow water, and dipped up nets bulging with fish. One car held blue cat, some weighing up to 150 pounds. Another held "goujon," the yellow or mud cat that sometimes is bigger than the blue. In another fish car there was a great splashing and thrashing that the captain said was gaspergou, or drum, or buffalo. A couple of teenage boys with toothy grins, brought aboard two loads of frogs they had gigged. And a man brought aboard three snapping turtles that were as big as washtubs.

A tall bearded fellow pulled his pirogue alongside and unloaded three 100-pound sacks of monstrously big crayfish. Almost as large as California lobsters, these red crayfish, known as "crawfish" to the natives, would go to New Orleans' swank restaurants.

Captain Dew Robert weighed all the catches on scales that hung over the forward deck, then he turned the heavy baskets into the Elaine's ice- up hold. Catfish, scalefish, crayfish, frogs, hundreds of pounds of them, slid in a silvery mass onto the ice. As each man's catch was weighed, Captain Dew Robert paid him off in cash. Finally, he shoveled layers of crushed ice over the fish, battened down the hatch, and paused for a moment's conversation with his customers.

The men wore a wide assortment of costumes, all with a strong marine flavor—blue jeans, olive-green hip boots, neatly patched khakis, heavy black oilcloth overalls. The long hip boots, whether tied to their belts or crumpled below their knees, gave them a swashbuckling look. The women, especially the young ones whose dark French beauty had not faded with the difficult swamp life, wore bright-colored cottons. Most
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Continued from Page 88

with no floors and wide splits in the wall boards that let the winds surge through. Some swampers live in almost unbelievable filth and their children know nothing about baths.

"Some swampers live in almost unbelievable filth and their children know nothing about baths."

Rooms. A few families enjoy comparative prosperity, with well-furnished cabins, many conveniences of town life, a fleet of cabin boats, gas boats and outboard motorboats.

The swamper’s investment represents considerable cash for one whose income is so variable. A flatboat home may cost from $600 to $3000, a gas boat (most families have two or three) may cost from $500 to $3500, plank boats or pirogues average $50 each. Fishing is expensive too. A fisherman usually works from twenty-five to 100 big hoop nets at a time, at $15 each, and they must be replaced often. New nylon-twine hoop nets cost $50 to $60 each, but last ten times longer. These are widely used. A crayfish rig, for the one-month springtime season, costs $300.

Good swamp fishermen may clear about $150 a week during the best seasons, but are content to earn $40 a week on an average. They are inclined to blow in their cash with extravagant living in good seasons, and scrimp to the point of starvation in bad.

In the spring, with fish running thick “in the woods,” the air sings with the good life. Swampers feel a sort of fishing fever, similar to that trappers feel with the first frosty days of winter. They talk of lines and nets they are preparing, look long at the pale skies and shiver a little in the spring wind.

“Me, I gonna snag more cat out o’them woods than ever rode for free in the Elaine’s forward hold.”

But often their hopes are lost—for sometimes the spring floods do not come, and there are no fish to seek.

Watching the life of the great swamp unfold, from my seat on the Elaine’s forward deck, I began to understand the perplexity of Captain Dew Robert. It was the third day out, and I still could not say if the Atchafalaya were angel or devil.

Now the Elaine glided by shores that were not shores, by woods that were not woods. It was a world of water, willows and cottonwoods, of white cranes standing silently, of bullfrogs and crickets singing their swelling chorus while far back in the forests a screech owl uttered its ghoulish “who-o-o-o.”

The captain was happy with the cargo in the hold—1500 pounds of blue channel catfish, half a dozen alligator hides, 400 pounds of gasperou and buffalo, enough big crayfish to supply a New Orleans restaurant for a month, ten sacks of long-legged frogs—all the exotic harvest of the great Atchafalaya Swamp. He would collect about $70 commission on the fish, crayfish, frogs and alligators, and would make about the same on the grocer-

ies and clothes.

“In a couple days,” he told me, “peoples all over the country will be settin’ down to eat these cat. And fancy, folks in New’Awlins will be asgin’ over them ugly crayfish.”

Hunched over the wheel, steering his Elaine through the bayous, Captain Dew Robert was content.