Can the shrimping industry return?

By Betsy Cook

The shrimping industry in Morgan City began its slow death during the 1973 flood.

High water again in 1974 added to the problem. Floodwaters made the Atchafalaya River hard to navigate, sending many area shrimpers into bankruptcy or fleeing to other areas, such as Delcambre.

This began a chain reaction, with banks foreclosing on the shrimpers, who had no money to bounce back.

At one time the city had 300 boats, and three ice houses. Now there are 10 to 12 boats, and one ice house in Patterson. But to get to Patterson, fishermen must pass through the Berwick locks, and as Sterling Fryou pointed out, those locks are closed when the water is high.

Fryou, a resident of Amelia and a shrimper for many years, would like to see the industry come back. "A man can still make a living from that, and it is better than not having a job," he said.

Fryou, like many others, said the industry suffers from a bad case of neglect. "In Morgan City, you had an alternative—oil. People forgot about the fishing industry. Some of the fishermen themselves went into the oil industry, hiring their boats out to the oil companies."

Richard Hardee of Sea Shrimp Co., Inc. pointed out that fuel companies catered to the oil industry, and the oil industry paid the higher price for fuel.

"The price of shrimp went down, and the price of fuel went up," he said.

Fryou said there were a couple of bad years for shrimp prices in the 1970's, adding to the damage already done by the two flood years.

Talk of reviving the shrimping industry has surfaced in the political speeches and platforms of the two candidates for mayor of Morgan City in the recent mayoral election.

Cedric LaFleur said the industry can be brought back if several things happen: More ice for fishermen, docking space, and competitive fuel prices. LaFleur said he believes fuel prices are competitive with other shrimping areas, such as Delcambre, but it is hard to shake that reputation of higher prices.

Concerning the availability of ice for area fishermen, Patterson Shrimp Co. is presently the only ice house in the area. However, according to Joe Billiot of Joe's Riverside Seafood in Berwick, that situation may soon change.

He said his brother, Curtis Billiot, is in the process of purchasing the Basin Ice House in Berwick, which closed down several weeks ago.

Billiot also stresses that his business can adequately meet the needs of area shrimpers. He purchases head-on shrimp, one of the few wholesale dealers in the area that does so. He just built a new dock to service the boats. All he needs are the shrimpers.

"I'm spending a lot of money to help build this industry back up," he said.

Dock space is not a problem, according to Mayor "Doc" Brownell of Morgan City. "I would never go along with that. The oil industry did take over a lot of it, but there is still plenty of dock space."

LaFleur said there was available to shrimpers about 100 spaces along the Front Street dock.

To get the shrimp industry back to the area, Morgan City must compete with Delcambre. According to many fishermen, many shrimpers fled to that small Vermilion Parish town, and were greeted with open arms.

The town is geared towards the shrimping industry, with an abundance of facilities, and a short run of 30 minutes to shrimping waters.

But as Fryou pointed out, many of those shrimpers eventually make their way to the Atchafalaya Bay and Four-Leaf-Clover Bay for shrimping. "It takes one and one half hours to run the Atchafalaya River for shrimping waters, and that is not too much longer than what it takes shrimpers in Delcambre to get to the rich shrimping grounds off of the St. Mary Parish coast," Fryou said.

Delcambre shrimpers such as T-John Mialjevich, president of the Concerned Shrimpers of Louisiana, said the Atchafalaya River run is not a pleasant one. "I just don't like that river," he said.

Yet area officials and shrimpers maintain the river is adequately dredged and marked and easy to navigate.

Getting the shrimp industry back to the Morgan City area will not be easy, but with the decline of the oil industry, it is an idea whose time has come, many say.