From Johnsons Bayou to Holly Beach, the Gulf of Mexico laps away at the edges of La. 82 with a voracious appetite. Here land and roadway are giving way to the sea at an incredible rate. On one side of the car you view the great, gray Gulf. Turn your head, and stretching out in the other direction is the majestic beauty of Louisiana’s wetlands.

Head for Cameron and you line up at Cameron Pass for the state-run ferry that operates 24 hours a day. This is the lifeline of Cameron Parish. The only way in and out during hurricane season. (Just ask, and anyone in Southwest Louisiana will tell you about the devastation of Hurricane Audrey 31 years ago).

Capt. Philip Brown sits in the wheelhouse of the Cameron II where he has a heron’s eye view of both land and water traffic. As captain of this very busy ferry, he’s literally captain of all he surveys.

“I’ve been with the ferries about 2½ years,” said Brown. “I originally came here from Denver, Colo. I decided to go into the shrimp business, but things didn’t work out, so I got my license to operate ferries.”

Brown and his wife Patricia built their own fiberglass shrimp boat. Now they are refurbishing it for its new owner, and much of his off-time from work is spent on the project.

When on duty, Brown works from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. “We work seven days on and seven days off,” he said. “I like it because it gives me time to work on my boat. You understand, this schedule is not typical of ferries in the state. We have four crews working here altogether.”

He explained that his boat has a four-man crew, and it carries about 40 vehicles each trip. It takes about 15 minutes to load the ferry and cross the pass. Brown carefully watches each loading and logs the number of vehicles carried on each trip.

He operated a smaller ferry to Monkey Island during some hurricane threats. “I haven’t been through any major hurricane on this job,” he said. “Actually, we tie up after we evacuate the people. The state has made arrangements to take the ferries up 20 miles to a shipyard if necessary, but it’s been at least 12 years since that was necessary.

Brown’s wheelhouse is a miniature operations center outfitted with two VHF radios, a state radio and a radio to the operations center.
sheriff’s department. In addition to switches and guages needed to operate the ferry, there’s an engine alarm system. And to help identify the boats and ships coming through the pass, he has a pair of high-powered binoculars.

“I moved here from Texas, and I already knew about the food and the climate,” said Brown. “But I’ve never been so cold in my life as I’ve been since I’ve moved South. It’s colder here at 30 degrees than it is in Denver at 5 below.”

Regarding the economy of Cameron Parish, Brown said: “Sitting here on the ferry I see more oil-related activity than I have in the past. A lot of the parish was supported by oil money, and the same thing happened here that happened to the rest of the state.”