Crawfish
Trapper runs his routes with rhyme and rhythm

Photos and text by Leo Bashinsky

It is just after 6 a.m. and the sun is starting to rise over the Atchafalaya Basin. James "T-Gree" Vicknair is steering his aluminum fishing boat through a flooded grove of hardwood trees.

As Vicknair nears a nylon cord marked with a red plastic flag tied to one of the trees, he stops his boat, grabs the line with both hands and rapidly hauls in a wire mesh trap filled with crawfish.

"This is better than working with those iron pipes," says Vicknair, as he quickly opens one end of the trap, tips it over and shakes the wriggling crustaceans into a bucket lined with a blue crawfish sack.

Next, he grabs three small "pogy" fish and a pellet of crawfish bait out of a box on the floor of the boat, shoves them into the trap and pinches the wire mesh together to close the trap.

Then he reaches for the throttle handle and moves the outboard motor, and guns his craft toward the next red flag hanging from a tree 30 feet ahead of him.

"I like it here. It's quiet, and nobody bothers you."

— James "T-Gree" Vicknair

With more than 300 traps out here, Vicknair learned fast that speed is one of the skills crawfishing in the Basin requires. As he approaches the flag, he says, "I bump the trees to slow me down so I wouldn't have to use reverse on the engine and wear the gear out," says Vicknair while repeating the cycle of emptying and re-baiting his trap. "I got this motor in 1981 and it still runs good."

Vicknair starts his days at 4 a.m. with his wife Rosy and a breakfast of biscuits and sausage patties in their Catahoula home.

Before daybreak, he leaves for the "office." He's been working Brown Bayou, an area near the Whiskey Bay boat landing at I-10. He waits until the water reaches a certain level in the Buffalo Cove area of the basin before coming here to fish.

"The water has to get to a certain point, high enough to flush the old, black water out. When the water starts to flow south it (crawfishing) turns around," he explains.

The land dries out in summer months but October and November rains flood it again. In the fall deer season, a hunting club has a lease to the property, and Vicknair is following one of their three-wheeler trails now to reach the traps.

"They're good people and don't mind if I fish here," he says.

The trapper believes it's going to be a good season. Last year, the river crested between 16 to 17 feet and the crawfishing was good. This year, the river is supposed to crest at 19 feet on March 8, he says. The higher the water in the Basin, the better the crawfishing will be, he says.

Each of the traps Vicknair lifts out of the water contains two to three pounds of crawfish. It takes about 20 traps to fill one of the blue hemp sacks.

He ties each sack with a double bow-knot, describing the day's take as "fair."

"There's a good price for big crawfish but it won't get full blown for another month or so," he says. "You won't believe it if I tell you this, but sometimes, when the fishing is good, you can fill a sack with crawfish from one trap."

"I like it here. It's quiet and nobody bothers you," says Vicknair, looking out into the swamp. The groves are just starting to take on spring colors with green buds on the willow trees and the tops of yellow "Easter" flowers rising above the dark, still waters.

Hour after hour, every day, he pulls in the lines, empties, baits and tosses the traps back into the water, gives a quick twist on the motor's throttle to move on to the next flag. There's a certain rhythm in the way he moves that's been honed over many years.

"I remember, I guess I was about six-years-old, the first time I got in a pirogue and just took off into the lake which was behind our house," says Vicknair.

He taught himself his trade by going fishing every afternoon after school and by listening to the "old people" talk about crawfishing.

"I was doing good until the seventh or eighth grade. I was fishing every day. But when I got to high school, I didn't finish the ninth grade 'cause I knew I wanted to be a fisherman," he says.

Vicknair, who is 50, married Rosy when he was 19 and she was 15. One year after the Catahoula natives were married, he started building the house they live in today.

"I first built a 12-foot by 24-foot house using a hand saw, a hammer, a level and a square. My father was a carpenter, but he was too sick at the time to help," he says. "He sat and watched and told me what to do."

Through the years, he just kept adding on to the house and the family. He and his wife have raised six children, two boys and four girls, in their home.

Vicknair veers into a tree opening he calls a "coon slough."

Several raccoons have been bothering the traps he placed here, and he pulls up a trap with several crawfish missing their tails.

He set four steel traps in the

James "T-Gree" Vicknair shakes the crawfish out of one of his traps into a bucket lined with a sack while fishing in Brown Bayou in the Atchafalaya Basin. (See Crawfish, page 10)
The trapper guides his boat down a flooded three-wheeler trail toward his crawfish fishing area to catch the raccoons. But something else may have gotten to his crawfish. A little further down the slough, he pulls in a trap in which none of the crawfish appear to be alive. As he dumps the contents over the side of the boat back into the water, he says, "They're all dead, that surprised me."

The next trap also contains nothing but dead crawfish and Vicknair mutters to himself, "Very discouraging, very disappointing."

As he continues down the slough, nearly every one of the traps contains dead crawfish. Vicknair speculates about the cause. There was a south wind a couple of days ago, and he thinks it caused some black water, water without oxygen, to flow into the slough and kill the crawfish.

After he moves to another spot not 50 feet away, he brings up a trap filled with live crawfish. "I've been fishing since I was 15 and I'm 50 now, that's a long time. But, you never understand everything about crawfish."

He continues hauling in his traps, emptying and re-baiting them until he runs out of bait shortly after 3 p.m.

Nineteen sacks of crawfish lie neatly stacked in his boat as he guides his boat out of the swamp back toward the Whiskey Bay landing. The total haul comes to about 800 pounds.

"Crawfish are selling for 45 cents a pound. That's about $360 today," he figures. Vicknair says he may clear about $260 after the cost of the bait fish, the crawfish pellets, and his gas are taken out.

"Money never meant that much to me; as long as you have enough to get along. "If you make $500 a day and are unhappy what good is it?"