Lumber is a hot commodity since it’s no longer readily available

Jim Bradshaw
jbradshaw@theadvertiser.com

LAFAYETTE — The weathered, gray cypress barns that once dotted the landscape of Acadiana are disappearing. It’s not that they weren’t built to last; it’s that the lumber in them has become so valuable that some people will go to great lengths to get it.

Geographer Malcolm Comeaux found that out when he made a study of Cajun barns several years ago.

“I remember once, when doing my work, I talked to a farmer who went to Mass on Sunday morning, to come home and find the front of his barn missing, stolen by someone,” Comeaux said.

The reason the lumber is so valuable is that Mother Nature’s not supplying any more, according to UL Lafayette architecture professor Edward Cazayoux. “That’s all old-growth wood — some of it cut from trees that were 1,000 years old,” he said. “None of those trees are left.”

Cazayoux said, however, that some of that sunken timber yields something called “blue board,” because the acids in the mud turn the cypress to a bluish-green.

“That’s really good stuff,” he said. “The heart of that stuff turns out some of the most beautiful wood you’ll ever see.”

When they sell the valuable lumber.

It’s usually the other way around, according to Ray Perkins of St. Landry Lumber Company in Opelousas.

“If you’re looking for cypress, you usually ride around the country looking for an old barn and then ask if you can tear it down,” he said. “Sometimes, you can work out a deal where you tear down the barn just for the lumber, but sometimes, you have to pay to haul it away.”

Perkins says that the value of the 1-inch-by-12-inch barn siding depends upon its condition, but “it is generally more expensive than new wood — when you can get it.”

“It’s more expensive, but it’s better wood,” Cazayoux said.

“People do buy old barns for the wood. My grandfather’s barn blew down in a hurricane back in the 1960s, and rather than rebuild, the wood was sold to someone who came and hauled it off.”

Barns and other structures damaged by Hurricane Lili are getting the same attention from cypress-seekers, some of whom are being paid to tear down the barn and who make still more profit from the resulting boards.

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