Farmer lured out of retirement to get feet wet in crawfishing

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LEWISBURG — When Emeroy Sonnier decided to retire at age 69 after a lifetime of farming, he intended to sit back and get some rest.

“I got tired, and at that age, you get where you can’t pass the rocker without wanting to sit down,” he says. He had farmed all his life, raising livestock and harvesting cotton, corn and sweet potatoes, and he had decided to take it easy for a change. But about five years after he retired, his son John called from Saudi Arabia where he lives and told him he wanted to get into the crawfish business.

The only problem was, John’s property was in Lewisburg in St. Landry Parish, and John was in Arabia. But his father was in Lewisburg, and his father got drafted.

“He decided he wanted to try it,” Sonnier says. “I went along with it, but I was just there.”

At 75, Emeroy Sonnier was back in the farming business, this time with 17 acres of crawfish ponds. A year later, he is a local success story.

Dwight Landreneau, aquaculture agent for the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service, says Sonnier’s 1,500-pound-per-acre average is outstanding considering the parish average is 650 pounds.

And Sonnier attributes that success to the extension service, because he called it when he got started.

“I didn’t know nothing about it,” he says, his speech thickened with a Cajun accent. “I had no experience, I hadn’t had any ponds before, nothing. I went along with everything they told me.”

Sonnier says he did everything by the extension service book. He got suggestions on pond sizes, levee dimensions, and water levels. After the soil work was done, the extension service helped him set up a network of pipes to keep the water moving and full of oxygen.

Landreneau helped Sonnier plant the ponds with rice, then supervised the flooding of the ponds and the stocking, Sonnier said.

“And it come out very good, they tell me, for a first pond,” says Sonnier, as he surveys his farm from under a safari hat. “If we can keep fishing most of next month, we’ll go over 1,500 per acre. They claim that’s very good.”

Sonnier drives his truck along the levees of his ponds once or twice a day, he says, to keep the birds moving. As he’s talking, a beautiful white egret eases slowly along the edge of a pond.

“Boy, him, that’s a son-of-a-gun,” Sonnier says, pointing to the bird. “He can eat some crawfish.”

Sonnier also checks his levees, and turns on the pump in case the water needs moving around. He fishes the pond five days a week, then sells the crustaceans up the road at a local store.

“That never come in my mind, raising crawfish, not in all my years of farming,” says Sonnier, “I wouldn’t be in the business if it wasn’t for my son.”