Guirard's latest work chronicles basin people

'Ways and Words' released in 2 weeks

By Marie Boone
Acadiana Feature Writer

Greg Guirard's roots in the Atchafalaya Basin are as firmly set as those of the cypress trees lining Bayou Amy near his home in Catahoula.

It has been six years since Guirard produced the well-known study "Seasons of Light in the Atchafalaya Basin," or as he refers to it, "Seasons." That work focused on the dreamlike scenery of the great swamp, juxtaposed with William Faulkner's prose.

Ever since his study, Guirard has been compiling documentation of the people who live and make their living from the basin. "Cajun Families of the Atchafalaya: Their Words and Ways," which Guirard photographs people of the basin. "These are my people," he says.

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will be released in two weeks, partially chronicles Guirard's labor of the last five years.

"Some of the photos in the new book I actually took before 'Seasons' was published," Guirard said. "I saved them for this book about the people.

As a crawfisherman and consultant to film crews working in the basin, Guirard derives most of his income from the swamp, since nearly all of his camera work is also done there or in nearby communities.

Guirard majored in forestry at LSU in the mid-50s, then transferred to USL where he received his bachelor's degree in agronomy and his master's in American Literature and English.

He was also manager of the Fightin' Tigers' 1958 national champion football team.

After nine years of teaching English at USL, he and his wife, "Bubbles," moved to Belize to tutor the children of Americans living there. They followed that with a stint in Costa Rica, where they learned how to craft furniture. Guirard still makes furniture, from the cypress of the basin in his spare time.

"But my photography is what defines me," Guirard says. "I feel like I'm chronicling a way of life that is disappearing, not to mention the swamp itself."

Siltation is filling areas of the basin that once was open to fishermen, he explained.

There is also the problem of increasingly large segments being declared off limits by hunting clubs, oil companies and others.

"It used to be a man could fish wherever his boat could float, but more and more is being cordoned off and forbidden," said Guirard.

"Beyond that, the diversion of the Mississippi into the Atchafalaya is slowly filling the basin with silt. In 10 years, a lot of these people won't be able to make a living here anymore," he said.

Guirard also spoke to the Advertiser while readying his crawfish nets for the upcoming season. Along with his other pursuits, he is spokesman for the local crawfishermen's association.

"These are my people. I'm one of them," said Guirard, the maternal grandson of the late Wade O. Martin Sr., past sheriff of St. Martin Parish and chairman of the Public Service Commission.

"When I first started photographing them, the fishermen and trappers asked why. They didn't consider themselves anything worth recording," he said. "After a while, they got used to the fact that their way of life was very special, and worth recording."

Besides the nearly 150 black and white duotone prints in "Families," the 88 pages are filled with the words of the people who are documented. Guirard culled 100,000 words down to 25,000 for the book, and is planning to offer cassettes of some of the interviews — and perhaps the full text of all interviews as a separate item.

Some are in French, and Guirard said he may offer a French version of the book and have it marketed in France and Canada.

"Families" will retail for $15, with 6,000 copies planned for the first printing. The books will be 9 inches by 11.

Guirard also hopes to offer 900 copies in hardcover collectors' editions.

He has other projects in the works. In two years, Guirard will publish "Living in the Land of Dead Giants."

"Giants will be the big, glossy color book I've been planning since 'Seasons,' but I had to do 'Families' first to sort of relieve the pressure that's been building up," he grinned.