The old man and the river

Robert Hymel enjoys a simple life on the banks of the Atchafalaya

Robert Hymel leaves his camp where he lives for a one-mile boat ride across the swamp to bait his trotlines, above, and at right he pulls up a shrimp trap. The shrimp will be used as bait for the trotlines.

If anyone tried, Hymel says, you could see them coming and shoot at them until they went away.

"I keep my rifle loaded in the bed in there," he says, gesturing toward his camp. "Sometimes they try to sneak up on you."

Hymel is a quiet man, with a sly sense of humor and a heavy Cajun accent. His home is isolated, and it's probably what tourists imagine when they think about how Cajuns live.

The journey to the house starts with a drive to the levee along the Atchafalaya River. A short hike up the levee, over a rickety fence and down the other side takes you to the end of the boardwalk that leads to his back door.

The wobbly boardwalk, made of old
He built the camp himself, he says, pedaling away and pleased with his purchase. He washes his clothes in a bucket at the front porch, and after a day of fishing he likes to kick off his white rubber boots and sit down by the window in the camp and look out at the river. He also likes to sit around under the shed, when the breeze is coming in off the river and the rain is plopping holes in the doorway.

Hymel has never owned a TV or a refrigerator he keeps balanced on the boat shed, Hymel points to an island on the river a few miles away. "That's Drew's Island. But no one goes there," he says, "That was in the good old days. You could catch fish then, and they had some fish in those days." Hymel says he likes to hunt at times for food. He's got some hogs, a mounted nine-point buck, and he keeps a mounted nine-point buck, and a clock. He also just picked up an exercise bike that he likes to pedal while he watches TV. "Cost me five dollars," he says, pedaling away and pleased with his purchase.

"Some Hollywood women don't want fur on their back," he says, "That was in the good old days. You could catch fish then, and they had some fish in those days." Hymel says he likes to hunt at times for food. He's got some hogs, a mounted nine-point buck, and a clock. He also just picked up an exercise bike that he likes to pedal while he watches TV. "Cost me five dollars," he says, pedaling away and pleased with his purchase.

"That's Drew's Island. But no one goes there," he says, "That was in the good old days. You could catch fish then, and they had some fish in those days." Hymel says he likes to hunt at times for food. He's got some hogs, a mounted nine-point buck, and a clock. He also just picked up an exercise bike that he likes to pedal while he watches TV. "Cost me five dollars," he says, pedaling away and pleased with his purchase.

"That's Drew's Island. But no one goes there," he says, "That was in the good old days. You could catch fish then, and they had some fish in those days." Hymel says he likes to hunt at times for food. He's got some hogs, a mounted nine-point buck, and a clock. He also just picked up an exercise bike that he likes to pedal while he watches TV. "Cost me five dollars," he says, pedaling away and pleased with his purchase.

"That's Drew's Island. But no one goes there," he says, "That was in the good old days. You could catch fish then, and they had some fish in those days." Hymel says he likes to hunt at times for food. He's got some hogs, a mounted nine-point buck, and a clock. He also just picked up an exercise bike that he likes to pedal while he watches TV. "Cost me five dollars," he says, pedaling away and pleased with his purchase.

"That's Drew's Island. But no one goes there," he says, "That was in the good old days. You could catch fish then, and they had some fish in those days." Hymel says he likes to hunt at times for food. He's got some hogs, a mounted nine-point buck, and a clock. He also just picked up an exercise bike that he likes to pedal while he watches TV. "Cost me five dollars," he says, pedaling away and pleased with his purchase.

"That's Drew's Island. But no one goes there," he says, "That was in the good old days. You could catch fish then, and they had some fish in those days." Hymel says he likes to hunt at times for food. He's got some hogs, a mounted nine-point buck, and a clock. He also just picked up an exercise bike that he likes to pedal while he watches TV. "Cost me five dollars," he says, pedaling away and pleased with his purchase.

"That's Drew's Island. But no one goes there," he says, "That was in the good old days. You could catch fish then, and they had some fish in those days." Hymel says he likes to hunt at times for food. He's got some hogs, a mounted nine-point buck, and a clock. He also just picked up an exercise bike that he likes to pedal while he watches TV. "Cost me five dollars," he says, pedaling away and pleased with his purchase. Hymel moves out to his camp about nine years ago, after his wife died. He makes occasional trips to the store, pedaling the bike he keeps chained to the fence. If he sees someone, he waves and says, "I'm Melvin, back-ground, visits often."

Hymel says he's mostly satisfied with the way he lives. Even winning the lottery wouldn't change much. "Some bald-headed fella from New Orleans came out here," he says, "But that man lied to me. If he comes back, I'll catch him." Hymel's life is simple, maybe too simple by the standards some people hold today, but he's happy with it, and says he wouldn't change a thing.