Is the Sun Setting on Cock Fighting?

Animal rights advocates want to put an end to the sport in Louisiana

BY FRANCES FRANK MARCUS

Sunset, La.

THIS IS A TOWN of survivors. In 1863, people here survived the siege of Yankee troops and the Battle of Bayou Bourbeaux. They survived boll weevils and watched the cotton gins disappear. They lived through the decline of the sweet-potato shipping business.

Now the town is trying to survive an assault by animal rights advocates, who want to make rooster fighting a crime in Louisiana.

The fate of cockfights is a matter of no small import in this state, one of only four where such events are still legal. (The others are Arizona, New Mexico and Oklahoma.) And here in the town that some people call the cockfighting capital of America, what is at stake is more than a Cajun country tradition.

"Let me put it this way," said Mayor John Olivier. "Cockfighting is the last industry in Sunset."

Fine-feathered roosters are tethered and toughened throughout this town, some in small backyards along green-edged country roads and hundreds at one big farm where each bird lives in its own sleek little house, breezy in the sun and dry under the rain.

Olivier, who has been mayor for 31 years, can talk about what cockfights have meant in history, saying: "The kings of Persia used them to settle wars. Iran and Iraq could have done that with a couple of roosters."

But he prefers to talk about what the fights mean to his town today.

"When I came here 34 years ago, we had 26 sweet-potato shippers," he said. "Now we have two. The primary reason, of course, was gas and oil. That took all our labor. You can make a fortune on the platforms. The Carolinas had cheap labor, and they got the sweet-potato business." Then oil prices collapsed, unemployment soared and Sunset's population fell from 3,000 to 2,800.

Olivier and others say cockfights mean $2 million a year to the Louisiana economy — in feed sales, trainer fees, motel room rentals and other benefits.

Keeping a share of that money is important to Sunset, where the roosters fight in a tan metal building with a sign outside that says "Sunset Recreation Club, Private Club."

The club was started by men of influence: prominent Texans and a Louisiana politician. The cars and campers outside come from all over the South and Texas.

Cockfights are held throughout a long weekend once a month from winter till late spring in the club, which seats close to 600 people.

"During the Sunset meet weekends," a cock fancier wrote recently in the letters column of The Opelousas Daily World, "people come from all over the world to see these fights."

Reporters are barred from the Sunset Recreation Club, a policy enforced with particular care now during the cockfighting debate.

But the cockfight at a gritty bar down the road in Cankton one recent Saturday night was open to anyone with the $5 price of admission. Two hundred fans sat patiently, although the fights started 90 minutes late and skunk odor got into the ventilators.

In a wire-enclosed ring, two roosters wearing razor-sharp steel spurs, called gaffs, flailed at each other like feather dusters in a whirlwind. If one of the roosters did not win a clear and quick victory, the birds were taken out to the "drag" pit, where they fought till one rooster died or was counted out. Meanwhile, another match began.

"They say this is barbaric," a fan in seat number 50 said to his neighbor among flying feathers, cigarette smoke and dust, "but to me it's no worse than boxing." Many people here agree.

But others disagree. "This is about a whole lot more than cruelty to animals," said Nita Hemeter, a New Orleans animal rights advocate. "It's about violence and disrespect for life."

Hemeter is especially upset about the fights' accessibility to children, who were plentiful at the pit in Cankton.

Animal rights groups have collected more than 5,000 signatures on petitions.

Garey Forster, the state legislator who led the fight in 1985 for a bill that made dog fighting a felony, is leading the fight to pass legislation outlawing the cockfights this year. Last year, an anti-cockfighting bill failed as legislators clucked and crowed in the background.

One of those who wants to preserve legal cockfighting is Representative Raymond (LaLa) LaLonde of Sunset. "It's part of our culture," he said, but he argues mainly for the "fundamental freedom" to fight.

He says if cockfights become illegal, the beautiful fighting cock will become extinct. "They're not the type you would put in a gumbo," he said. "They're very lean. You'd have to boil them for a good while."