It’s a big year for crawfish

If you like 'em boiled or any other way, happy days are here again.

When Nelson Blanchard started talking to me about the Ohio River, I guess I shouldn’t have been any more surprised than when Steve Afeman started talking about the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York. The Ohio River is, after all, less physically remote than Saudi Arabia’s oil fields, whose activity Louisianians follow with a trained eye, and much closer than that set of tiny islands with two names that have dominated our attention of late. It’s just that most of the time, I don’t think much about the Ohio River.

Over in Pierre Part, though, where Nelson Blanchard operates Blanchard Seafood, the Ohio River is a legitimate topic of conversation. “We expect quite a bit of rise from the Ohio River Valley this year in the basin,” he says. “We expect a large crawfish crop—maybe like 1973.”

Remember 1973? That was the year of the Arab oil embargo. It was also the year of an incredible bumper crop of crawfish; crustacean fanciers still recall those halcyon days in apocryphal tones. “That was a big year,” Blanchard says. “We had some crawfish then.”

What Blanchard and other crawfish experts are looking for is a repeat of 1973’s well-timed and abundant flood waters. The life cycle of the crawfish is adapted to the cyclical water levels in south Louisiana. Crawfish bury themselves in mud in the heat of the summer, spend the fall and winter eating just about anything they can find (including each other), and come out in big numbers during the spring mating season when the water is high. A large number of crawfish are actually farmed in crawfish ponds that look much like rice paddies, and by controlling the flow of water the pond season can be artificially lengthened over several months before the wild crawfish season begins; because of Louisiana’s temperate climate, it is hoped that crawfish ponds can ultimately be made into year-round producers.

But wild crawfish—often referred to

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Remember 1973? That's when there was an Arab oil embargo. It was also a bumper year for crawfish. Oil prices are dropping—but the crawfish are coming in big!

as “Basin crawfish” because most of them we eat are caught in the Atchafalaya flood basin—will vary in size and activity according to the flow of water from, among other places, the Ohio River Valley. Remember all that snow this winter? Crawfish dealers are thinking that it just might translate into a huge crawfish crop.

“Those crawfish from the spillway are getting more plentiful,” Blanchard says, “and prettier. The shells are hardening, and more sunlight will make them harder. When the water subsides a little bit, they'll start spreading out more, and then we'll get some big hauls.”

Blanchard says that the price for live crawfish, now at about 90¢ a pound, will start dropping this week, possibly going as low as 75¢ next month.

Steve Afeman of Bayouland Ecrevisse in Baldwin, says the price could eventually go as low as 55¢ a pound at the season's peak. “It's a late season,” Afeman says, “and it hasn't even really started yet. It will be big.”

Isn't it Bayouland Ecrevisse, I asked Afeman, that sells crawfish to the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York? “That's right,” he said. “They'll buy as much as 4,000 or 5,000 pounds in a year. They didn't buy as much last year because of the price, but this year they should be plentiful and the lower price should help everybody's marketing effort.”

Since Afeman mostly sells frozen, peeled crawfish meat mechanically extracted from the shell, he has been able to consistently serve his market and thereby develop it.

“I've had some of the crawfish dishes they serve up there,” he says. “Sometimes they'll sauté them, or serve them in a white sauce, and they use them in a few Cajun recipes. It's good, but, well, not as good as what we're used to down here.”

Don't fault the Waldorf—or San Francisco's Clift Hotel, another Bayouland Ecrevisse customer—for that; what we're used to down here is being able to eat boiled live crawfish at will. “They'll use a few boiled live crawfish as garnish on a seafood plate,” Afeman says, “but they're paying two dollars a pound live. They sell them by the crawfish. I was cooking some up for a tasting once, and when I poured them out on the table, their eyes got huge. They couldn't believe we eat 40 pounds at a time.”

Believe it. Crawfish boils, those leading events of the Cajun social calendar, have already started happening and should start happening in a really big way in the next few weeks. Thanks to the Ohio River and wherever else the water comes from, it looks like its going to be a big season and all over south Louisiana, it's what folks are talking and thinking about and what they're preparing for. It just might be a repeat of 1973.

—JAMES EDMUNDS