Becky Ledet helps an alligator escape from his eggshell.

The Ledet family, from left, Cinda, 4, Francesca, 3, Becky, Lou, Dawn, Dane 'Peanut' Jr. and Jeanne-Claire surround some of the products made from alligators.

The days and weeks are long at Daneco. Each day the gators are fed dry alligator chow and large loaves of ground chicken. The new construction is ongoing, repair work is constant and bookwork is never ending.

By C. RICHARD COTTON
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OUMA — Becky Ledet busted open alligator eggs and squeezed the slimy, snapping baby gators out into the world. Her gray plastic tub was soon filled to the brim with black and yellow striped alligators, most still attached to the yolk sack in the spent, white shells.

The infant reptiles didn't look too happy, trying to escape as they nipped at the air, at each other and at Ledet.

"I bring them into the world and they come out hating me," the 77-year-old, part-time interior designer joked. Ledet earned her interior design degree from LSU and worked for a while at a shop where she was paid $4.30 an hour.

"You can't make money in interior design so Dad suggested I come to work here on the farm," said Ledet. She still decorates for several occasional clients but spends much of the late summer hatching 30,000 alligator eggs.

That's right, 30,000 alligators.

"Needless to say, I don't eat eggs," she said. "I opened eggs for 13 hours one day."

Ledet made a round through one of the hot, steamy incubator rooms, where the eggs from hundreds of alligator nests rest in the pans, covered with the same compost-like material a mother alligator builds her nest mound with. She shook each pan and listened for the grunt, squeaking cries of baby gators — still in the shells — that are ready to hatch out.

She pulled out a couple of the pans that responded to her shaking and began breaking open the eggs. Each pan, she explained, holds approximately two hundred worth of eggs. Usually that averages 35 eggs per nest but has ranged as high as 60.

"This is gross, I'm serious," said 12-year-old Kara Leboeuf, Ledet's distant cousin, as she watched the egg-breaking ritual. Ledet offered her an egg to hatch but Leboeuf just couldn't do it.

Armed with Department of Wildlife and Fisheries permits and contracts with the landowners, the eggs are collected from nests in the wilds of the surrounding swamp just west of Houma by Becky's father, Dane Ledet Sr., who founded the alligator-raising enterprise in 1963. Daneco Inc., as it's called, is a family operation.

Becky works alongside Dane Sr., her brother Dane "Peanut" Jr. and her mother Louisé. Becky loves the closeness of the family business.

"Whatever my dad does, I do. These are my best years," said Becky. "I work with my family every day and we have to make a business run."

Dane Sr. explained that alligator farming is "just like any other farming" in many ways and originally attracted him because it was new and different.

"It's got it's ups and downs, like crops," he said. "Fashion has its ups and downs."

Grinning, Dane Sr. added, "It's mostly up this year."

In response to a good gator market, the Ledets are expanding the farm that sits on what Becky estimates to be about 160 acres of former cattle pasture between U.S. 90 and swampland.

Twenty buildings, each 1,500 square feet, hold more than 30,000 alligators being grown to at least three feet in length.

"We're doubling the square-footage of the grow-out sheds we have," said Peanut. "We're doing non-stop expansion that should have been finished a month ago."

Once the gators mature, they are slaughtered and skinned. Becky grades the skins on a scale of one to three: No. 3 skins have cuts in prime areas. No. 2 skins are damaged in secondary areas and No. 1 skins are perfect.

Most Daneco skins are "wet-salted," rolled in salt and shipped damp to processors in France and Florida.

They're dried there and made into boots, wallets, belts, watch bands, shoes, briefcases, luggage and other items.

Dane Sr. said it takes two years from egg to finished product.

The meat is sold under the label "fed to the Ledet's 21 large, breeding-stock gators, held in an 1,800-square-foot, fenced-in pond on the farm. Becky admitted that portion of the operation is yet to get off the ground.

"We just have to teach them how to breed," she confided.

The days and weeks are long at Daneco. Each day the gators are fed dry alligator chow and large loaves of ground chicken. The new construction is ongoing, repair work is constant and bookwork is never ending.

But, Becky and her family will stick with it.

"We can do it because we've already done it," Becky said. "If the richest man in the world wanted to marry me, he'd have to move out here."

"I urge people to buy as much alligator as possible," added Peanut.