Photo essay captures life along the coast

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CHENIERE AU TIGRE — Life along the Gulf Coast of southwest Louisiana is different from that just a short 40 or 50 miles inland at Abbeville or Kaplan.

Amanda Sagrera Hanks, a 73-year-old native of Cheniere au Tigre and now resident of Kaplan, helps depict the different lifestyle on the “chenieres” in a photographic documentary now on display at USL.

The photographs range from those of oilfield workers to ranchers, fishermen to farmers.

“Mrs. Hanks' photographic essay is on display now at the Center for Louisiana Studies, which is on the third floor of Dupre Library,” said Glenn Conrad, director of the Center for Louisiana Studies.

“We will probably keep it open through the fall semester; it is open to the public,” he added.

“Her photographs are a well-rounded statement of the folkways of the chenieres,” Conrad said.

Conrad said the center is cooperating with Hanks in publishing a book dealing with life on the chenieres; the book will have many more of her photographs.

“I have spent a lifetime collecting my photographs of the region where I grew up; I have over 7,000 prints,” Hanks said.

“I spent several months choosing the photographs that would best show life on the chenieres; Donna Schisler, a graduate of USL, helped me put it all together,” she added.

Hanks explained that the word “cheniere” derived its meaning from chene meaning “oak.”

The chenieres, or ridges of high land, she said, were formed over thousands of years by movement of the sea and wind.

Her homeplace, Cheniere au Tigre, is located on the Gulf of Mexico east of Freshwater Bayou Locks.

Hard work was the way of survival in the early 1900s, according to Hanks.

“A living was made from the land — fur trapping, alligator hunting and cattle,” she said.

One thing that made life at Cheniere au Tigre different was the Sagrera Resort Hotel, Hanks said.

“People came to my family’s hotel during the summer for health reasons; their doctors had told them that bathing in the salty Gulf waters might help their condition,” Hanks explained.

Some of the ailments of the hotel guests, she said, were arthritis, skin diseases, and heart problems.

“One man that we called Uncle Putt had a heart condition and was told by his doctors that he didn’t have long to live. He came to stay for a visit, hoping to improve,” she said.

Uncle Putt improved and lived there for 10 years until the resort closed, she said. He moved to another area to the west.

Each summer from June through September, guests stayed at the resort for $3.50 per adult for one week of bed and board with all the food you could eat, Hanks said.

“We usually served about 100 people three meals a day,” she said.

“Still have the hand bell we rang to call everyone to meals; you had to come to meals on time — we couldn’t serve all day long,” she said.

“We employed 10 to 12 people in addition to my brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, who helped run the hotel,” Hanks said.

“We started the day around 4 or 4:30 each morning. We’d work all day, then some evenings have a party,” she continued.

“We played records on a Victrola or someone played a violin or accordion,” she added.

“Sometimes in the middle of a party at 10:30 at night, we had to stop to cook food for people who arrived by boat,” Hanks said.

There were no roads to Cheniere au Tigre, so everyone came by boat from Abbeville or Milton, she said.

“We had guests from Church Point, Scott, Breaux Bridge, Lafayette, New Orleans, and as far away as Beaumont, Texas, Denver, Colorado, and Chicago, Illinois,” she said.

Hanks, a teacher by profession, left “the island,” as it was called, to attend Northwestern College at Natchitoches and USL.

She said she returned to Cheniere au Tigre as the principal of the two-room schoolhouse.

“It was difficult to get educators on the island, because it was so isolated and confining; sometimes, we had three or four teachers within one year,” Hanks said.

She later moved to Abbeville, where she “set up housekeeping for my family,” she said.

“I had open house for any of my family, who needed to come inland for medical attention or business reasons,” she said.

Eventually, the younger people moved away from Cheniere au Tigre, because there was no industry on the island to make a living, Hanks explained.

Many of the Sagreras, she said, still own the property there and maintain camps that are used during trapping season and cattle drives. But no one lives there year round.

Hanks said that the things that have changed the most since her childhood days are the values held by people and the erosion along the coast.

“There is not enough attention to things that really matter, like religion and education,” she said.

“It was hard to get an education, and we did everything to get one; nowadays, I hear children complaining about how they hate school,” she continued.

A recent event that drastically changed the face of the beach at Cheniere au Tigre, Hanks said, was Hurricane Danny in August of 1985.

The wave action of the very high water washed three feet of the beach inland into the tree line, she said.

“Erosion has devastated the island,” Hanks said.