Fast-Disappearing Art

Littleton Builds Cypress Boats

By Bea Nathanson
Feature Writer

There are still people in this metal and plastic age who use cypress boats, and one of the few men who continue to build them is E. L. Littleton of Jonesville.

You can find Littleton working away in his spare time in the yard of his home on Front Street. By trade he's a commercial fisherman, but he always liked to do carpentry, and from that field he more or less drifted into the boat building business. About 30 years ago, Littleton needed a boat and decided to construct one himself. He laid out his plans and got to work. "The first one I built was a pretty bad-looking boat, I'll tell you for sure," he said.

In the early days of his boat building, Littleton said he made mistakes and had to correct them. Sometimes he'd have to take out a piece or re-do something. But over the years, Littleton has become an expert. He was working on a bateau when we interviewed him. A bateau is blunt on both ends, while a skiff is blunt on the back end and sharp on the front. Littleton says that skiffs preceded bateaux.

A hundred years ago, he explained, the river men built skiffs and dugouts of cypress. They began to make the bateaux later.

"Wood Boat More Sturdy"
"Commercial fishermen would rather have cypress boats," he added. "A wood boat is more sturdy and it won't jump out from under you. It won't turn over as fast."

The bateau Littleton was working on was four by 14 feet. He estimated that it could carry 2,000 pounds and, if necessary, could hold as many as 18 people.

The boat sides are made of cypress, but cypress is getting harder and harder to find. The bottom is of marine plywood, an improvement over the old days when logs were used. This earlier method caused leaking. Littleton uses a special glue to seal the sides to the bottom and for other seams.

Once in a while people use cypress, he continued, but nowadays most of the time mo-

LITTLETON ALSO makes hoop nets, trammel nets, gill nets and tied down hobble gill. His main occupation, however, is commercial fishing for catfish and buffalo. In the above picture he is working on a hoop net.

fitted itself, his boat, he said, was about 12 years old. He pointed to where a part of the side had rotted. "Back in the days when this boat was built we didn't have any no-rot," he said.

Cypress Disappearing

But back in those days there was plenty of cypress, which is today disappearing fast. That's of concern to Littleton, although he says California redwood is being used to some extent in boat building.

In addition to boats, he also makes fishing tackle, such as trammel nets, hoop nets, gill nets and tied down hobble gill. His main occupation is fishing for catfish and buffalo, which he reports, aren't too plentiful right now. His boat building is a sideline that has turned into a business. In last year's and this year's high water he delivered about 75 cypress boats. Normally it takes him about two days to build one, although he once completed one boat and was halfway through with another in that time.

His boats are sturdy and constructed to survive in the water because Littleton, who is in his fifties, draws his knowledge from long years on the river. He knows what the river demands.

Newer discoveries of waterproofing and preservatives have made the wooden boat's lifetime longer, although it hasn't been many years since the boats had to be caulked or left in the water to prevent shrinking and leaking.

Basically, however, the wooden boat is still the same vessel that rivermen have used on the Mississippi, the Black and the Red for a couple of hundred years.