They're known by many names. Des ecrivisse. Crawfish. To the uninitiated, they're called mudbugs or worse, crayfish.

Whatever they're called, the freshwater crustaceans are a delicacy talked about from Dallas to Delcambre, from Paris to Pecan Island.

In a relatively few short years, the shrimp-sized animals have gained popularity not only in this country but abroad, where they are shipped out live to tantalize the foreign palate.

Of course, Cajuns knew about crawfish for a long time. They were caught in nets or traps, washed and boiled, with lots of salt and seasonings added to the water. This is still the favorite way to prepare crawfish, although the true crawfish aficionados will now add potatoes, corn on the cob, whole onions, and garlic cloves.

Crawfish bisque, crawfish etouffee, crawfish cocktails, crawfish fried, crawfish gumboed - are all variations in preparing and eating one of south Louisiana's favorite dishes.

In Vermilion Parish, harvesting of wild crawfish still goes on. But the raising of domestic crawfish has become a profitable business for many a farmer.

This year, however, the harvest is light. A drought last year killed off many of the crawfish. Harvey Stelly, a crawfish farmer from Forked Island, says that the animals just aren't as plentiful.

And, Stelly points out, crawfish are generally smaller than they have been in the past.

Drought, salt water, and other factors have caused the light harvest. And this, of course, has affected the consumer price.

Even in Vermilion, where crawfish are being raised commercially, and where the price per pound is generally lower purchased at the point of catch, prices have soared.

At the beginning of the season, crawfish prices rose to $1.15 per pound. Now, because of slightly increased supply, the price has dropped to $1 per pound.

What will next year bring? Sufficient rainfall may change the outlook, and encourage breeding and development of the animals. But another dry year and crawfish prices may rise again.

Whatever happens, they'll still be eating crawfish in south Louisiana. And chances are, Harvey Stelly will still be catching them.