Old Cajun Is Crawfish King

By GEORGE GURTNER
States-Item Staff Writer
BREAUX BRIDGE, La.
——Flip open the menu from any restaurant in Southwest Louisiana and one word is all over the page: CRAWFISH.

Tourists passing through nudge each other and look quizzically, but the native knows what etouffee, bisque, and boulettes are. He knows that the Cajuns of this area have transformed what is considered a pest in other countries into a multimillion dollar business for Louisiana.

But he'll also tell you that the little mudbug is in serious trouble and that unless more people like Edwin "Mulat" Guidry take an interest the only talk of crawfish will be in the past tense.

Guidry owns a craggy, sun darkened face, a pair of raspy, hardened hands, a fourth grade education and a lifetime of practical experience.

OVER THE years, Guidry has bucked the odds and defied the experts to parlay his meager assets into becoming "Crawfish King" in this the crawfish capital of the world.

"Me, I got 1,300 acre of crawfish farm ... I guess you could say I'm the biggest crawfish farmer in the state" Guidry says in a heavy Cajun accent.

But, while his mammoth farm produces upwards of 6,000 pounds of mudbugs a day for his processing plant on the outskirts of Breaux Bridge, Guidry is quick to admit that he isn't a farmer by choice and that in just a few years the only crawfish available will be farm grown.

"YOU JUST can't find crawfish in the open swamp waters anymore," he says. "The crawfish like what we call 'Black Jack.' That's hard black bottom that they lay their eggs on. But you look at here in the Atchafalaya basin, the way the government regulates the water throughout the year. It goes up and down, up and down and this is bad for the crawfish. I turned down some of these crawfish already. They're so bad I wouldn't have them in my processing plant."

Guidry has spent a lifetime dealing with crawfish and the knowledge he's gained puts him on a par with any college trained mudbugologist.

"We're going through climate cycles," he says. "We haven't had any real cold winters in a long time and this has a big effect on the crawfish. You take sun. That's the key to crawfish farming. When the sun is hot and its rays can penetrate through to the bottom you're going to have good crawfish. I'll tell you somethin' else that'd give you big crawfish is to keep the water moving. I could do that in my ponds with gas and electric pumps, but the cost would be just too doggone much."

AS A PIONEER of seminars on crawfishing at LSU and USL, Guidry was instrumental in laying much of the groundwork that governs the industry today. And in laying that groundwork he hasn't been afraid to butt heads with the experts.

"We had a meeting several year back and I asked that we place a season on crawfish. Well, one of the big shots there said I was all wrong. So I stood up and ask him 'you gotta season on shrimp, don'tcha?' He say 'Yes.' So I say 'den how come you can take an area 25 miles wide like the basin and compare it with the Gulf of Mexico?' Now everybody's for the season."

Oxygenated, moving water. Proper drainage. Harvest time. All of these play a big part in the rearing of the tasty little red crawler.

IT'S SOMETHING you can't really learn in a book then apply. You have to live and learn.