Oyster Boats
Bring in Rich, Harvest
By BOB DARDENNE

Oyster-Boats
Bring in Rich Harvest

Bayou Lafourche was not filled with activity this weekday morning. Most of the oyster boats were in the Gulf, at work. Some shrimp boats clung to the sides of the bayou, their nets hanging high, their decks empty. "Dat boat dere, she's da biggest on da bayou."

"But today, she will carry the queen. You won't recognize her come festival time."
The "festival" is the celebration of the oyster — Galliano's Oyster Fest set July 21, 22 and 23. The man is Bill Guidry, an oysterman (really an executive) who happens to be the festival's king.

All along the way he and the boat's pilot, Earl Federine, pointed out this boat and that one. Guidry knew all the owners and all their names. He knew which boat was going where and what each would be doing. He pointed out businesses on the banks — where to buy what and where to eat what.

On To Barataria Pass

The wind rushed through the boat, the motor was loud, and sometimes, the pair forgot themselves and spoke French. Nonetheless, the informal jargon of Galliano, Golden Meadow and points south continued — all the way to Barataria Pass, more than an hour later.

Galliano almost looks like a picture-book fishing village — shrimp nets reaching toward the skies, boats being constructed and repaired, and all the smells you would expect a picture-book fishing village to have.

Before long, the boat passed the outskirts of the last town. The "tour guide" settled back. The openness was awesome. Marsh and water and marsh and water and more marsh — only one thick curl of black smoke keeping the horizon in perspective.

"Probably chipping away on some oil waste," Federine said.

The boat went on, running through passages and canals cut by the oil companies. Oil drilling equipment and a few scattered camps were the only signs of man, except for the roar of the boat's motor.

Finally, Grand Isle was off in the distance. "There, it's that one." A speck in the distance. It grew larger. It looked like a large, flat banana with a top. Four men were aboard — one at the wheel and three others scooping up tremendous piles of oyster and shells.

Grand Isle was still seen in the distance. The oyster boat made wide, lazy circles, looking as though it was barely moving at all.

Poles sticking up from the water defined the oyster bed. The beds are man-made. Oysters from other areas of the state are brought in and planted in the bay, where conditions are favorable for rapid growth.

Several boats were making their trips; dredging small box-like nets along the bottom, scooping up several hundred oysters at a time.

Once aboard, one could hardly tell the boat was moving. There were two nets, one on each side of the boat. These huge stacks — oyster-ones in one, and various culls (rocks, clams and shells) in the other two — were on the deck.

One man, Mike Eymard, operated the motors that raised and dropped the box nets. Three others bent over two smaller piles of oysters, shells and clams just poured onto the deck from the nets.

Clams Discarded

With small hatches they were chipping shells away from the oysters. Once chipped away, the shells were swept into the two piles of debris, and the oysters tossed into the stack in the middle. Clams, not marketable in Louisiana, went with the debris.

Almost all the oysters are connected to some shell. It's the way they grow. When small, they attach themselves to some shell, or hull, or even rock; then they grow, drawing food and oxygen from some 50 gallons of water pumped through their shells each day.

When scooped up in the dredge nets, shell and all are poured onto the deck. By hand, they must be separated.

When the pile in the middle becomes too large, the crew stops dredging and puts the oysters into sacks which are stored until day's end under the canopy covering the boat.

The whole process is slow, and backbreaking.

But, it has its rewards. Guidry set a beer down next to me. A fresh batch of oysters had just been dumped aboard. He reached down and picked one up. Using an oyster knife (like a regular knife with a 6-in. flat, unsharpened blade), he opened the tough shell in seconds.

He separated the oyster from the shell (by slipping the knife between the shell and the meat) and handed it to me. The crew stopped working and watched. I looked at it. Then, plop. It was gone.

Guidry smiled. "Good, huh."

Salty and Tangy

It was. Delicious, in fact. And a couple of dozen oysters later, they were still good. They were fat and cool. And salty. Perfectly salty and tangy.

"Best oysters in the world. These right here. Good, huh."

It was Guidry again. He was busy eating them this time.

"And right now," said Eymard, still at the wheel, "is the best time to eat 'em (It was July)."

The boat continued to make its slow circles, now dredging up several hundred oysters at a time. The three men continued their chipping away (culling) at the shells, and Eymard kept the boat steady and the dredge motor operating.

The little boat left the oystermen to their work. Oystermen from that vessel would be sold to wholesalers and retailers in Galliano and other Gulf and bayou communities.

Guidry explained all this on the way back. Wind and waves in the bay tossed the little boat about as he talked.

Oystermen sold to restaurants and by the sack to customers had to be culled — the buyer did not want half a sack full of shells. Those sold to canneries were not culled — they were steam opened, and extra shells didn't matter too much.

Back on Bayou Lafourche wondering about the rain, we again waited as the awkward bridges swung open. Guidry pointed out the canneries and retailers, saying the oyster and shrimp industries were important to these small communities.

It's a strange little creature to dominate the economy of Louisiana's oyster-producing areas. Known as a food for centuries, it is probably the only animal eaten alive by man. It has no arms, legs or head, practically no defense at all. And, it has two sexes — the oyster switches back and forth, male to female, during its lifetime.

No matter whether you like them, or even have the courage to try them on the half shell, their nutrition can't be denied. Vitamins A, B, C, D and G, Phosphates, Chlorides, magnesium salts and glyc erophosphoric compounds. Carbohydrates, protein in large quantity and in easily digested from. Copper, iron. They are all there.

And all that is fact. Some other tales associated with the oyster are not.

Contrary to popular superstition, the oyster does not enrich itself by absorbing poisons on those who eat them. It can be eaten with alcohol and it can even be eaten with milk.

Also, as the oystermen point out, any month is a good month for oysters — it doesn't, as many, have to have an "R" in it.

But for those of you who still aren't believers — September is only 42 days away.