Pair recall some grand times building bonfires

Tradition was started prior to '29

By PAMELA FOLSE

PAULINA — Saturday seemed much like any other day to Raymond "T-Black" Milet. He already had dug a half-bucket of potatoes from his garden.

Hosting the thick, roasted meal from his onions, black rubber boots, almost as difficult as harvesting his winter vegetables.

The conversation beneath the shelter of his work stood cordial, yet Milet’s frequent glances toward the leves were a window to his thoughts.

There was anticipation in his voice when Milet explained to his nieces, nephews, grandchildren and their friends how they would be building bonfires on the levees in preparation for Christmas for years and years.

Milet had yet to complain that he was certain the River Road bonfire tradition started earlier than 1929, when a friend arrived, Nolin "Skiff" Douthit. Mathersen had just returned from Milet’s sheep, which he had transported.

However, he quickly joined the conversation about the grand blazing traditions that have turned into Christmas Eve for generations.

Milet was known by the 1860s by all the people at what then was Jefferson College. The college now is the Mississippi Museum of Natural History and the bonfires have evolved from simple torches to elaborate structures.

Milet returned to his conversation to say that his 69-year-old mother remembers the men in his family building bonfires together to cool down the earth before the earth was moved and rebuilt to accommodate the new eroding levees of the Mississippi.

Milet said he could remember workers from the Sugar Mill, who would stand over the levees to help build the levees.

"Men would cross the river from Vacherie by skiff to come work at the levees," Milet said. "As a boy, I used to watch them work on the levee and have been in the river."

Milet said his mother, who had two sets of twins in a month, was moved along with his house to provide a sound base for the newly built levee and relocated River Road.

Milet, who remains active at 65, said he built bonfires as a young boy. "I would take it about three weeks," said Milet. "But we would play a lot."

"We used to use big hand saws, pass-painters they used to call em," Milet said.

Milet interrupted, "We need to play on the levees, have a good time. We would get wet and go home, Mamma would run in and tell us we couldn’t go back because we’d get sick. But we’d be back on the levee the very next day."

Both men said they remembered the piling of the newly cut wood from the swamp or drifted from the river for home or sale.

"It wasn’t easy to get a mile or a horse. That was all we had to work on the levee. They were a little bit of a horse," Milet said. "And after the Korean War, we had tractors to use, so we called the word to the levee with a tractor."

Now Milet said the men in his family used to cut wood. "But you’d have to catch fire and one horse burned in the fire," Milet said.

Milet said he has known about building bonfires since he was a child and he's been in the business all his life.

"You can build one with six poles, four poles, or eight poles," Milet explained. "But on this side the river we built one like the Big Christmas trees.

Sometimes the people on the other side of the river build square ones. "Cane reed is the best thing," Milet said.

Both men said they felt they had done their part to carry on the tradition and leave the bonfire building to younger generations.

Both men also agreed with local officials when they adopted regulations governing the size of the giant inferno.

"Like everything else, things just got out of hand," Milet explained. "People wanted to outdo one another. Those things can be dangerous."

Milet and Milet have called some of the accidents and fatalities which occurred while the bonfires were being built or burned.

"When asked if they knew why bonfires were built, each of the men took time remembering some of the reasons they had heard or adopted as their own.

"When I was a kid, we would build 'em after midnight on Christmas Eve," Milet said. "It’s a good way to do some time with the family and friends. You can have a good time, especially because it’s Christmas."

Milet said, remembering and adding Milet for an extra heap of cabbages for cooking.

Along with the bonfire tradition, people leave around the levee boats, sailboats and sailboats, a 3K race, a fun run, antique car show, food, drink, hay rides, beauty pageant, holiday decorating contest and much more.

The craft booths will be open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Saturday and Sunday, while the craft booths in the park will be open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. The Lenox-Gramercy, Downtown Christmas Parade will be at 3 p.m. Sunday.