Volunteer firemen in St. James Parish haul willow logs up the levee; the Mississippi is just beyond the rise.

By Mary Ann Sternberg

Putting up the Christmas lights, Louisiana-style

On December weekends, all the action is up on the levee, where once again everyone pitches in to prepare for bonfire night.

As dusk falls on Christmas Eve, Nolan Oubre gives the signal to light the string of wooden pyres that seems to stretch to infinity along the spine of the Mississippi River levee. Over his car's PA system, he speaks the long-anticipated words: “It is now 7 P.M.; you may light your bonfires.” It is ironic that the leathery, walrus-mustached Oubre would be among those charged with the setting of fires, causing a hundred curtains of purple and orange flame to rise into the black velvet night, crackling and popping and sparking showers of gold along the green flank of the man-made ridge. Ordinarily—as chief of the volunteer fire department in Gramercy, Louisiana (pop. maybe 3,500)—he is in charge of putting them out.

But the fire chief's role reversal is symptomatic of the fever that pervades rural St. James Parish each December. Between Halloween and Christmas, a host of locals devote thousands of hours to the construction of intricate log masterpieces. Most are 25-foot-high, tightly wrought pyramids. Some, like those of industrial maintenance worker Ronald St. Pierre, are detailed reproductions of familiar local subjects, such as a log
At the top of the levee, a bonfire takes shape as logs are dragged into place to be tied to center pole. Almost a hundred pyramidal pyres will be built, their height and shape governed by local ordinance.

cabin, an oil rig with derrick, a two-story plantation house with double-curved stairway, or a turn-of-the-century locomotive complete with cowcatcher and smokestack (p. 149). A few whimsical constructions—PeeWee’s Playhouse or the roughly cut digits of a graduation year—round out the field. But at the fire chief’s signal, all of the structures—regardless of artistry or size—are uniformly torched.

Christmas Eve is the only time of year when River Road, once the only highway between New Orleans and Baton Rouge, becomes a curvy, two-lane gridlock from the Mt. Airy town line west to Convent. Nightfall brings thousands of pedestrians, who swarm back and forth among the cars inching along to get a close-up view of the blazing sentinels. The light radiating from within the geometric skeletons makes them look eerily akin to the chemical plants and refineries that dominate the flat landscape.

From the river waft the rollicking soprano notes of calliopes on paddle wheelers up from New Orleans, the hoarse bass of freighter horns and the insistent buzzing of small craft. The bounce of swamp pop and chank-a-chank Cajun music mixes with the blare of jam boxes, car horns and firecrackers, while smells of kerosene, sweet smoke, burned powder, beer and gumbo permeate the air.

Lighting bonfires on Christmas Eve in St. James Parish has been a holiday ritual since the 1880s, though its origin is still debated. The most popular explanation is that the bonfires were started to light the way for Papa Noël, the Cajun version of Santa Claus, as he paddled his pirogue to deliver gifts to good Cajun children—but traditionally Papa arrives on New Year’s Eve.

Others say the fires were functional, begun as navigational signals to help guide steamboats through the dense December fog; or religious, to light the way to midnight mass. Or the fires may have celebrated Epiphany, the Twelfth Night, when Christmas trees were taken down and burned, and chestnuts and potatoes roasted over the blaze. Most likely, the bonfires were introduced into the area by French Marist

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Photographs by Philip Gould
An early step in construction involves climbing center support and wiring hoisted-up poles into position.

Final stage of building the pyramid requires pitching the precisely sawed logs to a partner stationed above.

A shrimp boat of the kind used today on the Gulf of Mexico was Gramercy Volunteer Fire Department's offering for last year's bonfire night. Vessel took five weeks to build, three and a half hours to burn.
Sunday before Christmas 1988, cars choked River Road, as thousands of people came from New Orleans and Baton Rouge to check out the final preparations. On the big night, traffic was backed up for 18 miles.

An elated 8-year-old does a little time-traveling aboard Ronald St. Pierre's 19th-century locomotive.

Built by the Class of '89 in Lutcher, PeeWee's Playhouse served as hangout for the high school kids.
priests who, in 1864, took over Jefferson College (now Manresa House of Retreats) in nearby Convent. The Brothers built their fires on the batture next to the river and entertained their students. The practice caught on, but why it was moved from the traditional New Year’s Eve to Christmas Eve remains a mystery.

Whatever its origins, the German-Acadian Coast Historical and Genealogical Society attributes the first Christmas Eve levee bonfire to merchant George Bourgeois in the town of Mt. Airy in 1884. He is said to have collected boxes and packing material in which merchandise for his New Camelia Plantation store arrived, massing them into a flaming heap on the levee across from his business. The flames were so large and salutary that riverboats pulled right up to his landing to join the Christmas Eve celebration. Bourgeois had also built a game room behind his store where local men played poker and ate gumbo. Sometimes, when they arrived with their sons in tow, the entrepreneur gave the boys fireworks and sent them off to the levee to entertain themselves around a bonfire.

By the turn of the century, says Leonce Haydel, the area’s acknowledged unofficial historian, scattered, private bonfires were built on Christmas Eve. Trash wood, scrap lumber, old boxes, cardboard, tires and anything else that fathers and sons could scavenge made a good bonfire in those early days.

Whether social pressure eventually demanded a grander style than that of a trash heap, or whether safety demanded more careful construction, the configuration of levee bonfires evolved from amorphous piles into a conical tepee shape. After World War II the bonfire tradition began to strengthen; and the individual bonfires began to reach higher with the introduction of the pyramid shape: the neat, articulated superstructure imposed over a tepee.

Gathering the wood (willow, which is abundant and fast-growing, is the material of choice) is still largely a father-and-son affair. Today a boy’s rite of passage is likely to be the first time he uses a chain saw or the day he’s allowed to drive the pickup truck, swaying with a bed of ragtag willow poles, back to the levee.

There, on December weekends, the entire community congregates, either to build bonfires or to offer moral support to those who do. The big night itself has evolved into a typical southern Louisiana festival, with souvenir hunters in search of logoed sweatshirts, and long lines of people waiting for a fresh batch of cracklings. But at its heart, Bonfires on the Levee is still a family-style celebration.

Coal-car wheel of masterbuilder Ronald St. Pierre’s train shows meticulous work, but all of it will burn.

Welcomed by the bonfires, Papa Noël greets the good Cajun children of St. James Parish along the levee.

Both young and old watch in awe as the levee bonfires finally are set ablaze, sending sparks heavenward.