"Atchafalaya Swamp Life," by Malcolm L. Comeaux, pub. by School of Geoscience, LSU, 111 pp., large folio

Reviewed by
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The most prized term in Louisiana's richest inheritance is the "Atchafalaya Swamp." Hence, it becomes a delightful experience to benefit by the scholarship of Malcolm L. Comeaux and his colleagues in the School of Geoscience at LSU in this down-to-earth story of the "Life" in the "Atchafalaya Swamp."

To sportsmen and conservationists, the foreword by Leslie L. Glasgow sets the tone of this book. He comments that "few historical records are available for two of Louisiana's largest natural areas — the coastal marsh, and the Atchafalaya Basin. While a marsh is grassed, a basin is wooded and that accounts for the lure for the early settlers.

These "rugged individuals...loved freedom and independence of fishing, hunting, trapping, and lumbering. They care little for the outside world. Few became rich." But their riches was based on their love and intoxication with the natural resources of the Atchafalaya.

"This book recaptures some of the grandeur of the area. It provides an insight not only into the difficulties encountered in settling the swampy terrain but also into the swapper's life and livelihood." The Atchafalaya is the greatest of all swamps.

Author Comeaux portrays 22 plates showing 78 scenes and 32 text-figures to illustrate his knowledge and love for the Atchafalaya Basin. The location in south-central Louisiana made it accessible to the hardy. The settlement forces and folk occupations are superbly narrated.

The early settlement with the development of hunting, fishing and lumbering led to the abandonment of the heart of the swamp. The folk living there made their living by fishing, crawfishing, crapping, frogging, moss gathering, and those incidental economic outcroppings that afforded revenue.

Of course, all the swamp folk do the same thing; there is a detailed cycle of events in the author's analysis of "A Year of Swamp Life." Many factors come into play hence there is a versatility in the activities of the swamp people, and knowing the swamp they have proved a tremendous capacity for responding to nature's whims.

The Basin today is not what it used to be. For instance "folk culture in the Atchafalaya Basin is rapidly dying. Few persons live today isolated in the center of the Basin; the vast majority have moved to bordering villages. The old ways have been unable to cope with declining wildlife resources...also there is an understandable desire on the part of former swamp people adapted to the rigors of life. They fused their knowledge of cookery with what the Atchafalaya offered. The crawfish delicacies Louisiana boasts of received impetus from these people. "Necessity being the mother of invention," they developed ways and means to remove cypress logs from the swamp and the curing of moss.

With none of the heavy equipment common to today's logging operations, these ingenious people, long neglected, devised their own workable technology. What they did to fish, trap, and live is an exciting saga — thanks to author Malcolm L. Comeaux's researches.

"Atchafalaya Swamp Life" is living testimony of "how and why people moved into the swamp; who they were, how they earned their living, what their homes were like, and the evolution of a new way of life as increasingly severe floods forced economic changes."

The story of the white man coming into an area inhabited by the Chitimacha Indians. History reveals when in "1706 some Chitimacha murdered the French missionary Saint Cosme, which act led to a disastrous war with the French," there were other early travelers into the swamp. These vignettes the author cites with due credit to the influence of the Chitimacha. Early visitors wrote about the Atchafalaya Basin and the "dead silence and awful lonesomeness."

If the reader seeks a concise insight into this remarkable area, its background, present status and future offerings, the settlement process and what these intrepid pioneers went thru, then this book, "Atchafalaya Swamp Life" is the answer. Kudos to the School of Geoscience at LSU for publishing this excellent study.

And that insight is spiced with baby green turtles, alligators, bees, pirogues, racoons, nutria, eels, frogs, mink, muskrat, crabs, crawfish, and all the paraphernalia that goes with existing a living from the mysterious Atchafalaya Basin — nature's grandes Louisiana swamp.