Swamp Dwellers And The Atchafalaya Basin

By SUE BLANCHARD Environmental Editor

What was swamp life in the Atchafalaya Basin like 150 years ago and how did people live in it?

After 11 months of extensive research, landscape architect Buck Abbey will present his findings to answer that question in Atchafalaya Swamp Life, the seven-month exhibit that opens Sept. 10 at the Lafayette Natural History Museum.

The Atchafalaya Basin that covers a vast area from Simmesport to Morgan City provides a classic example of the relationship between man and his natural environment and how each affects the other over a long period of time. Abbey chose to limit his three-dimensional exhibit to the 57-year span between 1870 and 1927 because it represents the most rapid physical and cultural changes in the basin.

The Atchafalaya Swamp landscape experience has been a relatively fast, short-lived phenomenon as cultural trends go, the good years being 1870-1927 in the Atchafalaya Swamp," Abbey said.

This is partly due to the rapidity of the physical landscape changes because of the technology that forced a change in the swamp culture.

Abbey, who teaches landscape architecture at Louisiana State University, was commissioned to research and unveil his findings on the distinctive culture of the swamp dwellers and their effect on the physical landscape of the basin with full authority.

About 70 percent of my life is libraries and about 30 percent of the time is in the basin talking with people that still live there and I can truly see both sides of the issue of how man's technology has changed the physical landscape of the basin," Abbey said.

Abbey will document the changes the basin and its inhabitants have experienced through photographs, drawings, maps, accouterments essential to swamp life and written essays for a historical account of the time passage.

The Anglo and French men and women who settled on territory that was already inhabited by Indians were geared toward the agricultural life but had to hunt, fish and trap.

The swamp dwellers are often referred to as levee dwellers because they live on small plots of land called "brules." Navigation through the densely vegetated swamp became possible through the bayous, the seemingly limitless channels of easy travel.

The difference between land and water is only a matter of degree. Scattered over the surface of this beautiful landscape is a series of basins formed between each major river or bayou occurring on the higher land," Abbey said.

The cultural changes throughout the 1800's were gradual, Abbey said, as the agriculturalists found that the wet, floodable swamp was not conducive to farming and forced them to become trappers, hunters and fishermen.

By 1880, the channels were enlarged to allow for the harvest of the virgin cypress and this began the Industrial Cypress Era that created one of the first physical changes in the basin's landscape. Today, aerial photos show the massive scars left by cutting of the cypress that took hundreds of years to grow.

The building of the railroad made it possible for swamp dwellers in the east to meet those in the west and this union spelled the beginning of a new era of development. But there were stricter controls put on the cutting of irreplaceable hardwoods. Another swamp occupation facing inevitable extinction is picking and ginning the remaining remnants of the moss that once draped swamp trees.

The commercial fishing and hunting culture outside of being hard on wildlife left no permanent traces in the landscape. This cultural activity was practiced by individuals and small family groups and to a large extent was a nomadic swamp culture. Of all the cultural activities, the most effective to the swamp environment," Abbey said.

Aside from the early lumbering of irreplaceable cypress, Abbey said he has been able to find no evidence that man has had adverse affects on the physical landscape of the basin. Time has healed man's attempts to exploit the basin's resources.

"The fishing, trapping, hunting and modern conveniences of living near schools and electricity Agriculture is coming back into the swamp in man-induced dry areas."

"Life in the swamp today consists mainly of recreation, limited commercial farming, agriculture, oil and gas activity with some production of timber," Abbey said.