Smallest state-operated ferry connects two parts of Catahoula Parish, turning a 50-mile journey into a 400-yard hop.

The Duty/Enterprise Ferry makes its way across the Ouachita River.

By MILFORD FRYER
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The diesel engines of the motor vessel W. Prescott Foster rumble softly as Capt. Donald Griffin and deckhand Doyle Wayne Butler find refuge from the swelter inside the tiny wheelhouse.

The scenic Ouachita River surges beneath and behind the pushboat that provides the power for the smallest ferry operated by the state. Except for a small group of weekend water enthusiasts upstream, the area is serene.

The tranquility is interrupted by the blast of a car horn on the opposite shore. Butler quickly prepares the attached barge, while Griffin powers up the main engine for a trip the boat makes as often as 100 times a day.

The Duty/Enterprise Ferry is located at the end of La. 559 and connects the thinly populated northeastern portion of Catahoula Parish with the primary portion of the parish. Without the ferry, the 400-yard trip across the Ouachita would become 50 miles at the closest; a trip to the parish courthouse in Harrisonburg would push 70 miles.

Schools, parish government and police protection all are located on the western side of the river.

The small barge and pushboat hauls farm equipment, school buses, garbage trucks and automobiles across the river. The three captains and three deckhands keep the...
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Connecting link operating 16 hours a day during the week, eight hours on Saturday and Sunday — longer if the farmers are harvesting.

Griffin doesn't know how long the ferry has served its function — the state Office of Highways says since 1955 — but it's been plying the river more than 30 years, he said.

"I was crossing this ferry on a school bus when I was a kid. It was here when I was 6 years old, and I'm 35," Griffin said.

Griffin has been a captain on the W.Prescott Foster for eight years. Before he was skipper, he was a deckhand; before that, he was a carpenter.

"There isn't much work around here," he said. "Mostly just farming."

Butler agrees; he was a farmhand before he went to work on the ferry. Now he fishes commercially "on the side" to augment his state salary.

The Ouachita provides fishermen with ample supplies of catfish ranging from 1 1/2 to 50 pounds each, he said.

Many people in the area work in oilfields or with offshore drilling.

Griffin said living near the ferry was helpful to him in getting the job. Although he lived east of the river and used the ferry most of his life, he never had a burning desire to operate the boat. But when a job opened up, he jumped at it.

The ferry has no departure schedule. Captains can see both sides of the river, and it's no big deal to cross over to pick up a vehicle.

"We put them across as soon as they come up. Yesterday we averaged a trip every five minutes,"

Ferry Capt. Donald Griffin.

Griffin said on the Sunday before Memorial Day.

A swivel apparatus allows the boat to switch directions without ever turning the barge. The towboat remains downstream from the barge on both legs of the trip by turning on the swivel connecting the bow of the boat to the side of the barge about midway its length.

Despite its longevity, operations of the ferry have been subject to whim, and even now it has outlasted several recent threats to stop its operation.

It once operated 24 hours a day, every day. At another time it was reduced to operating eight hours a day on weekdays and not at all on weekends.

"We just about had everybody weaned off of it," Griffin said, but "that didn't last very long."

The last four years have been edgy for employees as well as users of the ferry. More than one state budget has envisioned either charging tolls or discontinuing the service. Although neither happened, the plans came close enough to cause workers serious anxiety about job security.

"One time they put a sign up that they would start tolls; they even put a sign up that the ferry would close," Griffin said. "They didn't stay there a week."

The latest edicts from the state call for a $1 toll, for one direction only, to be charged beginning July 1.

Butler thinks the ferry should be open longer than it is. The ferry is never unattended, and the engine that operates its power plant runs continuously even when the boat isn't operating.

"All they save when they shut this thing down is his salary," Butler said, nodding toward the captain.

Butler and Griffin said their brief run lacks the danger of ferries on more commercial waterways. Neither could remember any close calls with other vessels or anything worthy of labeling as excitement.

"Sometimes we'll go a week without any towboats," Butler said. "Sometimes we'll see three or four a week."

Griffin said there is little he can do to prepare for the possibility he could be out of a job.

"I guess I would collect unemployment and go on food stamps or maybe get on some of the other programs other people around here have had to get on," he said.

But he said discontinuing the ferry service would be a severe blow to people isolated by the river.

“What will happen to the school buses?” he asked.

“Do you believe a garbage truck is going to drive 50 miles out of the way to pick up garbage?”