The Preacher By The River

By J. E. Bourgoyne

The old Negro, his white gown flowing in the breeze, holds his cross aloft and shouts from the water's edge to the parked cars whose occupants are waiting to travel across the river on one of two ferryboats.

"Come down into the water and be saved!" he cries. "The Lord said that man must be born again of water in order to be saved."

This is the greeting frequently received by motorists using the ferryboats at Baton Rouge. Recalling the days of Mark Twain, the smokestacked boats and the old Negro present one of the most picturesque scenes remaining on Old Man River. But it will not remain much longer.

The two boats, the City of Baton Rouge and the Louisiana, have been transporting vehicles and passengers across the Mississippi between Port Allen and Baton Rouge since 1916. In spite of the opening of the bridge in 1940, the ferries have remained necessary to transportation. But with a new bridge being built at Baton Rouge, they may soon be removed to another locality.

When this occurs, "the Preacher by the River," as he is referred to by many Baton Rougeans, will probably move away too.

Although widely known by the above title, he calls himself the Messiah of Jesus. Eighty years old, he has traveled the Mississippi between St. Louis and New Orleans, baptizing in the Father of Waters since 1941. He has also baptized in the Gulf of Mexico, the Atlantic Ocean and even in prison bathtubs.

"You have to be baptized in the water, not with it," the Preacher by the River maintains.

This is his creed. He does not represent an organized religion or cult. In spite of his bent-over condition he daily goes to the ferry landing and prays with his feet submerged in the Mississippi. Throughout the day he calls upon parked motorists to come down and be baptized.

What number actually leave their cars to be baptized?

"A few, not many," the Preacher by the River says.