WINDROWS OF FROGS leaped out of our way, and the ground periodically dissolved into fluid muck. Sometimes we sank to our thighs, desperately clutching cypress knees. Fat brown cottonmouths slithered away from us into gardens of lavender-flowering water hyacinths. Cypress oil burst into iridescent constellations around the green seedpods soaking in the amber water, and as the morning sun rose higher, the chorus of whistles and chirps became louder.

But our goal, an egret rookery in southern Louisiana’s Atchafalaya swamp, was worth every mosquito bite. Before us were hundreds of dazzling white egrets. Every few minutes adult birds alighted to regurgitate catches of crawfish and minnows into the mouths of their excited young, which seemed to swallow their parents’ heads.

We continued deep into the forest, where golden rays of sunlight Shafted through the leafy dim light. C. C. Lockwood, photographer and staunch defender of the controversial Atchafalaya swamp, spotted a line of festive red ribbons trailing into the bushes. “Probably bullfrog hunters,” he said,
grinning. "They use the ribbons to mark their way into the swamp. The old-timers didn't need them—but they're gone. It's easy to get lost; somehow the swamp always looks different."

Most people see the Atchafalaya (uh-chaff-uh-L1E-uh) as they drive over the four-lane Interstate 10 bridge that stretches for 18 miles between Lafayette and Baton Rouge (map, page 385). Yet the vast swamp engulfs and dwarfs the highway with all its roaring trucks and speeding cars. Hardwood forests, pastures, and soybean fields in the better-drained northern end of the Atchafalaya Basin give way to cypress-tupelo swamps and willow-covered, newly formed lands. South of Morgan City, freshwater marshlands extend for miles toward the Gulf of Mexico.

North America's largest river-basin swamp is nourished by the Atchafalaya River after it breaks away from the Mississippi north of Baton Rouge to wind for 135 miles to the Gulf. The U. S. Army Corps of Engineers enclosed the central part of the basin for use as a floodway. Under normal conditions a gigantic water-control structure near Simmesport funnels water from the Mississippi into the Atchafalaya River. During serious floods the Morganza facility also can be utilized. The corps is prepared to dynamite the fuse-plug levee west of Simmesport in an extreme case. The three control points together can divert into the basin half of the biggest Mississippi flood anticipated.

Rich Swamp Breeds Discord

But the Atchafalaya Basin Floodway—the lower floodway—remains awash with controversy. Fielding Lewis, a member of the Louisiana Landowners Association, says it was “built to destroy itself by silting.” Environmentalists see it as a productive wetlands, possibly the last refuge for the ivory-billed woodpecker. To New Orleans, Baton Rouge, Lafayette, and Morgan City the watery wilderness serves as a refuge from the asphalt and neon.

“This place is like no other,” declared Adron Ebarb, a Lafayette resident and ardent bass fisherman as he proudly displayed his day’s catch of largemouth. “Just look at what the Atchafalaya produces! I come out here to get away from the city, to revive my mind. Everywhere else you go it’s crowded, but it’s not crowded here.”

Yet POSTED—NO TRESPASSING! signs are nailed to cypress trees, warning visitors to stay in their boats. Virginia Kyle Hine, whose family owns substantial acreage in the lower floodway, sees increasing public access as a threat. “These newcomers are going to wreck this basin with their garbage. We have nurtured the land, preserved it all these years, and now we’re the ones wearing the black hats!”

In Mrs. Hine’s home in New Iberia a servant brought us lemonade as she told us how her grandfather lumbered the swamp’s magnificent forests of virgin cypress.

Long before the last prime cypress was taken, oil and gas wells were drilled, and landowners grew wealthier. Some wells bring hundreds of dollars a day in royalties.

Oil and gas development, with the wide canals dredged for crew boats, drilling rigs, and pipelines, poses a long-term threat to the swamp’s fishing industry.

For the moment, however, the fishermen are doing fine. During crawfish season, which runs from late January to June, crawfishing is so lucrative that many men leave their jobs in the oil fields, pile their traps into boats, and head for the swamp. “Back during the 1973 flood I was taking in more than $500 a day,” one fisherman in Henderson boasted to us, and seeing our tape recorder added hastily, “but don’t quote me, I don’t want Internal Revenue after me.”

Everywhere in southern Louisiana, restaurants and markets feature crawfish. As much as 36 million pounds of the succulent crustaceans are trapped out of the Atchafalaya backswamps each year. The success of crawfishing is directly tied to the water level in the swamp. (Continued on page 382)
Misty bayou morning greets Gwen at the “shotgun on a barge” (top) she built with Calvin Voisin. After a flood destroyed their former home in 1973, they paid $450 for the remains of an old plantation house and reassembled it as a shotgun—a dwelling with all the rooms in a row—on a barge they bought for $900.

They get by very happily on very little. Crawfishing brings a modest income. Catfish from Calvin’s hoop nets (above) add a few dollars more, if the catch doesn’t end up fried on the table (left) with crab gumbo, corn, squash, beans, tomatoes, and a jalapeño-cayenne hot sauce—all homegrown or fresh-caught.
As the water rises during the winter and spring months, young crawfish spawned the previous fall seek shelter and food in the shallows. They grow rapidly, and fishermen have a good season. But in a dry year, when the water stays low, the crawfish are few and small.

Wilton Hebert, Jr., a stocky young man from Pierre Part, agreed to show us his favorite crawfishing spot even though the season was over and he hadn't been there for several months. We drove to nearby Belle River, launched his aluminum boat, and sped to Bayou Long, one of the few places we traveled where the watercourse had not been straightened and channelized by the Corps of Engineers. It was wild and twisted as a bayou should be. When we stopped to explore, pugnacious red crawfish, six-inch giants of the mud, reared up, their claws outstretched.

We sped on, with mullet and shad leaping before our boat. Big sluggish alligator gars gulped air. Everywhere there was life; even the mud was cobbled with freshwater clams and mussels. Biologists had told us that the Atchafalaya is more productive than the Everglades. Here before us was the impressive evidence.

As our boat slowly churned through floating mats of hyacinths, we were amazed at the abundance of freshwater shrimp, insects, and fingernail-size baby crawfish hanging to the clumped roots. This aquatic life supports an incredible amount of terrestrial wildlife—mink, otter, egrets, ibises, and great flocks of overwintering ducks.

**Annual Cycle Nourishes Life**

All this productivity is the gift of the annual flooding and draining cycle of the basin. Every year rain and melting snow from far up the Mississippi, Ohio, Red, and Missouri Rivers flow down into the big swamp, bringing nutrients that help feed the system. Throughout the cycle, leaf litter breaks down, pumping more food into the swamp.

"This is my home away from home during crawfish season," said Wilton happily as we traveled through the cathedral of moss-draped cypress trees. Then we came to one of the many canals slashed through the trees. OIL AND GAS PIPELINE. DO NOT ANCHOR OR DREDGE said a sign. The basin is crisscrossed by hundreds of canals. Many were dug to float out the virgin cypress trees, others for wells, pipelines, and navigation.

"Sometimes these canals do good and make the fishing better," Wilton said, "but what hurts so bad is when these oil companies come in here, dig their canals, throw up dirt banks, and keep the water from spreading out over the swamp. With low water it gets sour back there. When it rains, the water comes flushing out, and it stinks like a septic tank. I've seen it so bad the crawfish crawl out on the cypress knees to breathe and sometimes they'll die right in the traps."

The problem is being tackled by requiring drainage openings in the banks.

Moving around the winding watercourse, we were suddenly confronted by a hundred-foot-wide, half-mile-long, freshly dredged canal. Two immense oil-drilling barges and a flotilla of barges and crew boats contrasted sharply with the peaceful surroundings. Wilton was shocked.

He stared dumbfounded at the mounds of roots, the fresh black earth thrown up in unbroken spoil banks. The cypresses were cut down and scattered like matchsticks. "I've never seen this before," he stammered. "None of this was here three months ago when I took my traps. They ruined my best crawfishing place." His voice was weary. "I know the country needs oil, but this don't make no sense to mess up the swamp so."

Wilton's roots go far down into the Atchafalaya. Although few of his people—known as Cajuns—still live deep in the swamp, many descendants of the early swamp dwellers live around the margin of the floodway, next to the levees, and trailer their boats to the launching ramps. The outboard motor changed their lives, making it possible to enjoy the comforts of town and to commute to their fishing grounds. Like their parents before them, they live by fishing and trapping, bringing out nutria, mink, raccoon, and otter pelts. Huge stacks of wire crawfish traps, gill nets, and hoop nets lie in nearly every yard in communities such as Belle River and Henderson.

These people are predominantly French-speaking Acadians. Driven from Nova Scotia by the British in 1755, the Acadians began to arrive in the Atchafalaya in the early 1800's. They settled in already established...
towns such as Plaquemine and St. Martinville, where, some say, Evangeline really ended her long quest for her lover, Gabriel.

Longfellow's epic embellished the facts. Gary Hebert, editor of the Plaquemine Post, told us another story. "Their real names were Emmeline Labiche and Louis Arceneaux. They were betrothed but separated during their exile from Acadia. Evangeline didn't meet Gabriel on his deathbed at an almshouse in Philadelphia, as Longfellow wrote. When she finally arrived in St. Martinville after crossing the Atchafalaya by boat, she found that he had married someone else, and she died, as the story goes, of grief." Today "Evangeline" lies buried in the St. Martinville churchyard near the massive live oak that bears her name.

He Overcomes Chicken-head Hexes

As English-speaking settlers, mainly from Virginia and the Carolinas, bought up fertile high ground around the edges of the basin for sugar plantations, the Acadians tuned their lives to the swamp: trapping, fishing, subsistence farming. Some lived in settlements like the now nearly abandoned town of Bayou Chene, while others stayed on camp boats deep in the bayous. Merchant boats came to buy pelts and sell or trade what couldn't be had from the swamp. The sick were healed by traiteurs, or folk doctors, who treated snakebite, illness, and spells with herbal and occult remedies.

At Red's Levee Bar near Catahoula Lake we found Lloyd D. "Red" Higginbotham shelling pecans. A member of the Police Jury, or county commission, of St. Martin Parish, he is also one of several traiteurs who still practice. We sat in the cool darkness of his barnlike bar. Kittens and chickens wandered in as he described his profession.

"People that has visited me . . . they find a snake skin or chicken head in their pillow, crossed nails or crossed matches. I have certain prayers I say for their success to overcome the evil that follows them. I overshad-ow whatever that person walked in . . . that's what I am—a traiteur."

Across the basin, Pierre Part, a bastion of Acadian culture, is a colorful collection of wooden houses scattered along a boat-cluttered bayou. There we met Claude Metrejean, a dignified man with a fine pointed mustache, running a busy fish house. A steady stream of fishermen arrived at his dock to sell catches and to buy bait. Claude, speaking interchangeably in English and French, hurried about, buying snapping turtles, supervising workers skinning gar and boiling crawfish bright red in great steaming vats.

"In business you can hardly be small any more," Claude observed. "Even though you're small, you've got to act big. We had a real good crawfish season in 1977; I bought as much as 38,000 pounds in one day."

Catfish fillets are among his biggest sellers. Load after load of blue cats were brought in, and after weighing them, Claude counted out dollars from his bulging billfold to pay his fishermen. A prominent sign next to the scales read: IF YOU SELL YOUR FISH HERE . . . YOU BUY YOUR CHEESE HERE. Spoiled cheese and cottonseed cake are stuffed into the hoop nets for catfish bait.

As we watched Claude's men scooping wriggling fish into vats of crushed ice, two boys tied a pirogue to the dock and unloaded their catch: a tightly tied burlap sack filled with pulsing, hopping bullfrogs. Claude tracked the needle on his hanging scale and handed them $15. "Those are not for food," he told us. "A man comes from a laboratory twice a week to buy them live for a study."

No sooner were the frogs in Claude's cooler than a blue pickup truck with the name EAGLE lettered on its hood backed up to the icehouse. Robert Hebert, Wilton's brother, jumped out and began to shovel crushed ice into washtubs filled with yellow-tailed shad, much too small to eat.

"It's for our turtles," Robert explained. "It makes them grow better and lay more eggs."

Several houses away his father had a turtle farm, raising red-eared sliders, the little turtles of the pet industry. We asked to see the operation, but Robert was hesitant. "You can't see the turtles before 11 a.m. Come back when the sun is high in the sky. They're busy laying now."

After lunch we returned and toured two large fenced ponds that literally boiled with 15,000 adult turtles greedily eating the shad. Wilton Sr. and his four sons, daughter, and two small grandchildren scrutinized the hard-packed mud, digging out dozens of inch-long, (Continued on page 389)
Adrift in a ghost forest, anglers cast for bass in the shadows of huge cypress stumps (above). By the early 1930's, loggers had cleared the swamp of virtually all its first-growth bald cypresses, behemoths that often towered above a hundred feet. Called the "wood eternal," cypress heartwood infused durability into everything from cabins to coffins.

Bare-handing a more offbeat swamp resource, Kelly Falcon prepares to bag a nonpoisonous water snake (left). He sells such reptiles to both a roadside tourist zoo and to a laboratory for study. A part-time electrician as well as a filmmaker, Kelly shares the many-hatted life-style that is typical of the Atchafalaya's sizable community of Cajuns. They are the descendants of French settlers who were ousted from British Canada in 1755 and trickled into what is now southern Louisiana.
More than 60,000 acres of trees have been cleared for farmland in the West Atchafalaya Floodway, course for an emergency discharge from the Mississippi and Red Rivers.

Agriculture thrives, but permanent dwellings are banned, in the Morganza Floodway, another major route for floodwaters.

Sedimentation is raising the land inside protection levees, and the levees themselves are subsiding. Thus they must be continually heightened.

Serious flooding threatens Morgan City and other communities on the southeast edge of the Floodway, where normal drainage patterns are often blocked.

Safety valve for doomsday, the Atchafalaya Basin Floodway System, enclosed by levees in the center of the natural basin, is designed to receive half of the worst flood that could sweep down the Mississippi.
Where the water still flows, life teems. King of the Atchafalaya swamp is the crawfish (above), a delicious freshwater cousin of the lobster. Last year commercial crawfishermen trapped a record crop: 36 million pounds. Another delicacy, crappie (below), locally called sacalait, may be caught only as a game fish. In season, hunters stalk wild turkey, woodcock, squirrel, rabbit, and especially the large population of white-tailed deer (left). Trappers report earnings totaling more than $300,000 a year from the pelts of mink, nutria, and raccoon (lower left).

(Continued from page 383) Pinkish white eggs. The day's harvest was taken to the warm hatchery building on the bayou, where the eggs were washed and neatly stacked in trays to await hatching. The Herberts produce about a hundred thousand turtles annually.

Since their product was banned from U. S. markets in 1975 following an outbreak of salmonella, turtle farmers in Louisiana have been legally exporting turtles to pet wholesalers overseas. However, scientists at Louisiana State University (LSU) have recently developed a process to ensure that pet turtles are free of salmonella, and turtle farmers are gearing up to possible reopening of the more lucrative domestic market.

Outside the hatchery was a ten-foot mound of Spanish moss. “Some of this moss we use to catch the shad,” Robert said. “Early in the morning when the sun comes up, we drop the moss in the water and fish come to spawn in it. Then I catch them up in my net. The rest of the moss we sell to a buyer in Labadieville,” 25 miles east of Pierre Part.

Spanish-moss gathering was an Atchafalaya industry for generations of swamp dwellers, but Lawrence Duet, the last buyer in the area, had only a few piles in his yard when we visited him.

“I pretty much retired two months ago,” he said. “There’s not enough moss now. There used to be a lot of it in the Atchafalaya Basin; it was about the best producing area in the state.” He lifted some in his big work-worn hands. “This little bit comes from northern Louisiana.”

Although moss was once a major source of furniture stuffing, its use is now limited. “The minnow hatcheries, they use moss for shiners to spawn in. They’ll be in trouble next season,” Duet said sadly. “I don’t see where I can get any more. I often wonder what has destroyed the moss. As far as I can tell, it’s from the air; the air is polluted.”

Whether the Spanish moss died of air pollution or a fungus, only wisps of the greenish gray air plant now drape the cypress branches, not enough to warrant a commercial harvest.

“It was a different swamp fifty years ago,” reminisced Max Greig, owner of the little restaurant La Maison Cadien in St. Martinville. “When I was a boy, we had all the
quail, all the deer we wanted, all kinds of game. Our streams weren't polluted, weren't sanded up. They didn't have no—what you call those guys that plug up every stream? Corps of Engineers.”

Alcide Verret agreed. One of the few who never left the swamp, at 78 he lives on Bayou Sorrel catching catfish and shooting squirrels for breakfast. “Lord, how this swamp has changed! Years back I could stand on the shore of Grand Lake and barely see across to the other shore. Just open water. Why that lake was so big they had to have lights to guide the boats. Now it ain’t nothing but willer bars and silt. All these young people are crying, ‘Save the Atchafalaya.’ Hell, ain’t nothing left to save!”

After the 1927 flood that took more than two hundred lives and left thousands homeless in the Mississippi Valley, the Corps of Engineers took the swamp in hand. Colossal dredges moved down the Atchafalaya River, deepening it. Midway down the basin, where the main channel fragmented, they created one, deep and relatively straight, to carry more water to the Gulf. In the process they pumped sand into the backswamps, blocking drainage into 22 bayous. Today much of the swamp is contained by massive levees built by the corps that run north and south through the center of the basin.

As the mud-laden river water inundates the swamp year after year and then drains off, it leaves behind silt and soils eroded from the farmlands of middle America. The floor of the swamp becomes a little higher each year.

As we drove along the top of the levee near Catahoula, the problem was obvious. To

**Cyclic flood** is the swamp’s lifeblood. Fall brings low water to a slough (top), when crawfish burrow to hatch their young and vegetation withers. In winter and spring (middle) the slough overflows. Billions of young crawfish and other fry emerge to feed on detritus. They, in turn, nourish larger fish like bass and catfish, water birds, and mammals that follow them into the shallows as the water retreats in summer (bottom). Weeds and grasses flourish to begin the cycle anew. Here, pioneering willows have replaced cypress and tupelo trees killed by sediment onslaught.
Neither rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night can keep Lubin Jewel (above), postmaster of Maringouin, from enjoying the swamp. Lubin belongs to a hunting club that leases 12,000 acres near Little Alabama Bayou. Though he fears the encroaching soybean fields, he also fears the proposal to buy private land for public use. “Amateur hunters will wipe out our game. It’s happened before,” he avows. In a deer-hunting camp near his own, the Torres family labels their hounds (left), which often stray during the chase.

Years ago when the Corps of Engineers began the basin flood-control project, the drying up of the backswamps from channelization was not seen as an ecological disaster. However, some arable land in the lower floodway was lost when the water level was raised, although the prime farmland of the northern floodway didn’t suffer.

We flew over large sections of magnificent hardwoods that were being bulldozed for soybean fields. Carroll Olivier, who lives near Opelousas and farms 1,300 acres inside the floodway, boasted: “This is some of the best, if not the best, land in the state. This silt everybody’s crying about brings the topsoil of America. We do very little fertilizing. You’ve got a lot of people who want to retain the basin exactly as it was. I can’t go along with that! No matter what you do, it’s going to change on its own.”

As we traveled far out in the Atchafalaya Bay with Joey Dykes, a corps planner, the effects of the siltation were everywhere. Huge landmasses choked with willow scrub rose from the open water.

“None of that land was here before the 1973 flood,” Joey explained. “Probably no geologic change has taken place as fast as the building of this delta, except maybe earthquakes and volcanoes. The Center for Wetland Resources at LSU agrees with the

the west lay swamp that had not been encompassed by the corps’ levees. It was much lower and swampier than the willow-covered dry lands inside the floodway. Alcide’s words came back to us, “If the levee ever breaks, head for the floodway. It’s the highest ground around.”

Russell Ruiz, 67, who once ran a merchant boat and later built a store at the edge of the levee, was bitter: “Us—they have ruined our way of life as fishermen in the basin. My grandchildren won’t see it. The corps moved in here in the 1930’s and began work. It was very easy to do anything they wanted because people were frightened. They didn’t want a repetition of the flood.” His voice rose with indignation. “No one at the time could visualize the destruction that was going to come of it. I’m almost ashamed to be a part of a society that would allow this to happen.”

Corps’ Early Efforts Hailed

Trouble in Bayou Country
corps' prediction that by the year 2020 this entire bay will be filled in.

“But the Mississippi is the real problem,” Joey continued, smashing a mosquito on his arm. “It changes channels every thousand years or so, cutting new riverbeds and abandoning old ones. Because the Atchafalaya provides a shorter route to the sea, the entire Mississippi is trying to divert and come through the basin. That's why we had to build the control structure near Simmesport, to try and hold it back.”

Because of rapid sedimentation and sinking levees, the lower floodway is fast losing its control capacity. Natural swamps tend to absorb water like giant green sponges, but not when they are altered extensively by dredging and are filled in by each year's silt-laden flood. The floodway is now able to move 900,000 cubic feet of water per second. Floods carrying almost twice that much are likely about every hundred years.

The corps controls the flow of the Mississippi into the swamp; the water level, in turn, controls land use. Environmentalists want the corps to keep the swamp seasonally wet to ensure an abundance of fish and wildlife. Landowners want a short wet season to boost timber growth.

A long-range water-management plan is now being developed, amid controversy, through the efforts of federal and state agencies. Its goal is to provide improved flood control while ensuring that enough water flows into the backswamps for biological productivity. Engineering technology will be used to try to control the silt, but oil and gas development and other current uses of the basin will not be restricted. Among the alternatives envisioned by the plan: permanent control of the land by the corps, either through ownership or easements.

Landowners generally oppose the plan, conservationists favor it. Charles Fryling,

Swamp casualties: Cypresses and live oaks fell to clear a bayou so that a section of the world's tallest offshore-drilling platform could be floated from Morgan City to the Gulf. Canals that have been dredged through fifty producing oil and gas fields often improve fishing, but may block water flow to backswamps.
a professor of landscape architecture at LSU who serves on an advisory committee to the corps, commented: "To do nothing would play into the hands of the farmers and developers. The floodway would silt in, the wetlands would dry up and be converted to soybeans. The old plan was to dredge a channel through the swamp to speed the water to the Gulf. The new plan will be better. And it may mark the first time environmentalists work to get a corps project approved. It's going to take the same tools that ruined the swamp in the first place—dredges and bulldozers—to restore it."

"It may take years to solve these problems," said Joey Dykes. "Trying to control the water in the Atchafalaya is like punching a marshmallow. You push it at one place, and it breaks out somewhere else."

Thriving Swamp Species: Scientists

In an effort to develop a plan that encompasses all the conflicting interests, dozens of scientists have invaded the basin to study the dynamics of the changing swamp.

"The only way to manage the swamp for fish and wildlife is to keep the water moving," Dr. Fred Bryan of the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service said emphatically, as we traveled the swamp. "If you impound it, the swamp gets a sour belly; less oxygen gets into the water and you have fish kills."

"Studies!" cried Morgan City Mayor Russell "Doc" Brownell. "All they do is studies. We need to get on with the dredging and get the water out into the Gulf."

Near the southern end of the basin, Morgan City lies in the path of the floodwaters that are diverted by the corps from the Mississippi River down the Atchafalaya floodway to the Gulf of Mexico. The town is protected by ring levees, but just barely.

During the 1973 flood, volunteers worked desperately, laying sandbags and plugging leaks as the dikes were nearly overcome. "You could look up and see tugboats passing above your head." Bob Cox, a bearded LSU student recalled. "Every day levees became softer. I moved my family out to higher ground."

"These environmentalists care more about wildlife than they do about the safety of people," Fielding Lewis, an opponent of the water-management plan, complained in Franklin. "We landowners will do anything for flood control, but we do not intend to give up our property to satisfy the whims of environmental elitists and pinhead bureaucrats. This is nothing but a land grab!"

Retorts Dr. Bryan: "Environmentalists are against taxpayers subsidizing flood protection for people who build in floodplains, where they have no business being in the first place."

Obviously, the hand of man lies heavy upon this vast swampland. But, for all the abuses, the pipeline corridors, canals, wells, and levees, the Atchafalaya is still productive. Old-timers say there isn't the wildlife there used to be, but it's hard to see how there could be more. Saving the swamp will clearly require all the biological and engineering skills we possess, a resolution of the political controversies, years of effort, and perhaps hundreds of millions of dollars.

Mighty Mississippi Holds Swamp's Fate

But even then the Mississippi may ultimately decide the fate of the Atchafalaya. The corps has long recognized that the Mississippi is trying to change course. They projected that, unless something was done, the Atchafalaya would capture the flow of the Mississippi by 1975, leaving Baton Rouge and New Orleans as backwaters. Now, by congressional mandate, only 30 percent of the waters from the Mississippi and Red Rivers are normally permitted to flow into the Atchafalaya River.

But in 1973, floodwaters roaring down the Mississippi scoured away the concrete floor of the floodgates and nearly destroyed the entire structure. Had it been lost, the Atchafalaya would probably have captured the Mississippi.

Another big flood and it may succeed.

Anthem to day's end, the silhouette of a great egret rises above a rookery. The floodway harbors more than 300 species of birds. Some ornithologists believe that the ivory-billed woodpecker, widely considered extinct, may yet survive in a hidden pocket of the Atchafalaya—thus underscoring how rare and valuable a swamp can be.