PUTT-PUTTS

Vintage boat exhibit celebrates the Cajun way during Festivals Acadiens

Story by Judy Stanford

They once chugged up and down the waterways of south Louisiana, hauling logs or loads of moss for stuffing mattresses. Their top speed is said to approach 9 miles an hour. Since the turn of the century, the wooden boats known as "putt-putts," for the sound they made, were part of the commerce of the bayous and the swamps, but in the latter half of the 20th century, they began to fade from sight.

But there are those who are trying to preserve that bit of local history. Some build full-scale, working replicas of the boats. A privileged few, like Shane Doucet, own the real thing.

The Catalhoua resident owns a 21-foot cypress boat built in the 1940s. His father used the boat for fishing and for hauling logs and moss.

The boat is powered by a single-cylinder, 4 horsepower Navier engine patented in 1942. "It was still in the boat," Doucet said. "I restored it."

Doucet's boat, along with about 20 other wooden boats, will take part in the Traditional Wooden Boat Festival Sept. 18, an event sponsored by the Bayou Vermilion District, a municipal agency that, among other things, runs Vermilionville. Bayou Vermilion District executive director Jo Dunham said there will be at least one wooden bateau, the next generation of motorized working boats and a few cypress pirogues, but most of the boats at the event will be putt-putts.

There are fewer than 20 fully operational putt-puts in the state, but that's more than there were a decade and a half ago.

"In 1985, there was one boat left in Louisiana that was running," said putt-putt owner Tony Latiolais. "It belonged to an old man down toward Morgan City."

That same year, Latiolais, and his brother, second-generation boat builders, were invited to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., to build a putt-putt. The Smithsonian's cameras documented every step of the process as the brothers built the long, narrow flat-bottomed boat, which measures about 3 feet on the bottom. And Latiolais got to keep the boat. He now has three.

"I built one last year and I've got one that's been around for 40 years. My friends dug it up and I'm in the process of restoring it right now."

Latiolais isn't alone in his efforts. "The boats have made a comeback," he said. "Now, there are 18 or 19 in Louisiana." Building and restoring them is not an easy task, Latiolais said. Even the wood is hard to get.

"We have to find a (cypress) log that's sunk in the basin," he said, "using it to mill, have it cut, dry it for two years and then, it's ready to use to build."

Getting parts for the engines is another challenge. "You can't buy parts for the engine," Latiolais said. "We have to machine that. We have to make the shaft, the rudder—all custom-fit."

The boat owners get together in an informal club of sorts. "We swap stories, and the knowledge we've gained working on the engines," Latiolais said.

For some, the whole process is a labor of love. "It was my own boat," Doucet said, and I just wanted to restore it for him.

And the nostalgia is not lost on longtime residents of the area. "I see a few tears that come down with the old people when they see it run or when you let them drive it."

The Traditional Wooden Boat Festival will be held from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Sept. 18 in Beaver Park on Surrey Street across from Lafayette Regional Airport. The boats will be on display in the morning and will be taken out on the water after lunch. For information, call 237-8360.