RESEARCH

Innovation at Work

Folklorist documents the crawfish boat and its creators

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Top: Crawfish farmer Randy Gossen lifts a trap from the water, working in a boat designed and built by Gerard Olinger. *Right:* Dr. John Laudun makes notes as he conducts field research.

AT LEAST ONCE A WEEK, DR. JOHN Laudun leaves the classroom and heads out to the coastal prairie.

A folklorist and assistant professor of English at UL Lafayette, he is interviewing farmers and fabricators there for a book he's writing about the crawfish boat in Louisiana.

Almost every crawfish pond on the prairie harbors such a boat: a flat-bottomed, aluminum craft topped with a canopy and driven by hydraulics. "As a folklorist, I'm interested in the boat and the people who developed it. But I'm also interested in the crawfish boat as an example of creativity in cultural context — how creativity bubbles up out of the ordinary," said Laudun in a recent interview.

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"When you can identify actual individuals who have participated in the creation or development of an idea or artifact, it presents a double opportunity: to understand the idea better, and also to gain a better understanding of the way the culture works."

The crawfish farming industry is driven by these boats and the people who build them, Laudun said. "Over the past 30 years, a dozen or so men have played a vital role in the development the crawfish industry."

Laudun stands at the edge of a crawfish pond near Roberts Cove in Acadia Parish. He gestures across the water, his hand tracing the gentle curve of a clover-green levee. He points to the next pond, and the next, then to the horizon.

"This is a subtle, manmade landscape. From the highway, it doesn't look like much — just so many flooded fields. But you can't understand it from that perspective. You have to be in the environment, feet on the ground — or perhaps in the mud — to appreciate its complexity. If you look closely, you can see that each of these ponds sits at a slightly different elevation. This terracing is incredibly beautiful."

The rich, dark soil of the prairie region, west of the Atchafalaya Basin, is a remnant of the Pleistocene delta. The bayous that now feed the Mermentau River were once channels of the Mississippi River. Bison grazed the tall grass prairie, the homeland of Native American tribes.

In the late 1700s, some of the Acadians who were exiled from Nova Scotia

settled on the prairie and began replacing the bison with cattle. The following century brought an agricultural revolution, when German and Midwestern American settlers realized the land was suitable for growing rice. A layer of clay lies a foot or two below the delta soil, which makes the area ideal for holding water. The former Midwesterners adapted equipment designed for wheat production; the development of rail transportation in South Louisiana in the 1800s helped make rice a commercial commodity.

By the 1960s, farmers had established the now-common practice of reflooding rice fields after the fall harvest to produce an additional crop: crawfish. Before the creation of prairie ponds, the freshwater crustaceans were caught in the Atchafalaya Basin. In the '70s and '80s, the crawfish farming industry had a major growth spurt. According to the Louisiana Department of Agriculture, statewide pond acreage jumped from about 20,000 acres in the early 1970s to 132,000 acres in 1988. Last year, 173,000 acres were devoted to crawfish farming.

The price of crawfish has remained in a fairly stable range over the last 30 years, noted Laudun. "That's because large amounts of crawfish are being raised in managed ponds. That would not be possible without these boats."

Before the modern-day boat emerged, a crawfish farmer might walk through a shallow pond, emptying traps into a floating washtub. Others used flat-bottomed jon boats, pushing and pulling them through the fields. Although relatively lightweight, the aluminum fishing boats were cumbersome, making the work difficult and tedious. "Every time you needed to cross a levee, you had to put down a stake, winch the boat over it, then unhook it," he explained. "These Cajun and German farmers knew there had to be a better way."

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Top: Randy Gossen and Gerard Olinger discuss boat design in the field. *Above:* Olinger welds a steel channel to create a custom tractor attachment, a powertrain-operator ditcher.

Laudun credits farmers Tedmon "Ted" Habetz of Loreauville and Harold Benoit of Morse with "the simultaneous invention of the crawfish boat." Although Habetz and Benoit had arrived at their inventions independently, their boats were similar. Both were modified jon boats, fitted with a cleated steel wheel that rode on the bottom of the pond, pulling the boat through the water. Notably, both boats were powered by a hydraulic system, which uses pressurized oil within a series of sealed hoses.

"Hydraulics, quite literally, are what drive this industry," Laudun said. "Grit — in particular rice hulls — can cause havoc with chain drives and pulleys. A hydraulic system makes a lot more sense because it's better suited to the environment."

Farmers quickly realized they could increase their productivity with such a boat — and it seemed every farmer wanted one, said Laudun.

Neither Habetz nor Benoit considered himself a boat builder, but both were pressed into service by their fellow farmers. Within 10 years, Habetz built 300 boats. Others got into the business, including Gerard Olinger of Roberts Cove and Greg Frugé of Eunice. Mike Richard of Richie and Kurt Venable of Rayne would later become the primary manufacturers of crawfish boats.

"They were not only building custom drive units, but were also building custom hulls. Each maker was experimenting with enhancements based on what his customers were telling him, as well as his own sense of what might work better," Laudun said.

In 1985, Olinger made a major change to the original design that future makers would adopt. Instead of connecting the wheel drive at the front of the boat, he attached it to the rear, so that it could move more easily over levees. But by improving the design, he soon encountered a problem. A steady stream of customers was bringing in their boats for hull repair. Because the boats handled better with the rear wheel, farmers were driving them from pond to pond on gravel roads, instead of moving them by trailer. Olinger's solution was to add tires to the front of the boats, an innovation that made the vessels fully amphibious.

Venable contributed another improvement by welding steel rods at the ends of the driving-wheel cleats to keep them from quickly wearing out. That innovation provided an additional benefit, Laudun said. "The wheels ride more smoothly on the bottom of the ponds, rutting them less."

He points out that none of the builders has patented their products. "Instead, they contribute and draw from a common pool of ideas. They value their reputations more than a copyright portfolio."

While visiting farms, fabrication and welding shops, and farmers' equipment sheds, Laudun said he's also learning more about the Cajun and German cultures still present in south Louisiana.

"I think a lot of people drive by these places and never realize just how smart and creative these guys are. In many cases, these men are working entirely from designs that exist only in their minds.

"The blue spark of the welding torch is not just a physical phenomenon — it's an idea being manifested in the world." ▮