

Ellender Memorial Library
at
NICHOLLS
STATE UNIVERSITY

presents the

11th
Annual **CAJUN/ZYDECO**
Music and Dance Exhibit

Wednesday, March 21, 2007

Louisiana Swamp Culture

by Dr. Quenton Fontenot

Swamps have often been thought of as wastelands. They have been drained, deforested, and converted into agricultural and urban land throughout the United States. However, swamps are viewed differently in south Louisiana. They have provided an abundant source of fish and game. They have provided the lumber we have built our homes and boats with. They have provided a source for many of our historical stories and songs. They have provided a source for some of the most breathtaking images ever seen. No, swamps are not wastelands. They are among the most important, productive, and beautiful ecosystems in the world.

To understand why south Louisiana swamps are so productive, we must first take a look at the Mississippi River and the annual spring time floods. The Mississippi River collects its water from a basin that covers nearly two-thirds of the United States and even a small portion of Canada. A lot of ice and snow accumulates in the northern portion of the Mississippi River drainage basin during the winter. As the ice and snow melts in the early spring, all of that water flows downstream causing the river to rise. On an average year, the Mississippi River reaches its highest water level in April and its lowest water level in September. This predictable rise and fall of the river is called the annual flood pulse. It is the heartbeat that drives the life of the swamps and marshes of south Louisiana.

Before we built the levees and closed off distributaries (small waterways that flow away from big rivers) like Bayou Lafourche, springtime high water from the Mississippi River would flow through the bayous and flood the low-lying swamps bringing fresh water, nutrients, and sediment. The pulse of fresh water rejuvenated the swamps. Many fish that live in the swamps, such as choupique and bream, rely on spring-time high water levels so they can make a nest and spawn in the flooded swamp. In fact, if the water level in the swamp is too low, many fish will not spawn because they have no place to make a nest. Fish that do not need to make a nest on the flooded swamp floor rely on springtime high water levels for feeding. They will move into the swamp and feast on the emerging crawfish and other animals. After surviving a long winter, many animals need a bounty of food in the spring. If the swamp is not flooded, animals like wading birds, raccoons, otters, and fish have a very limited food supply.

Fall-time low water levels are as important as spring-time high water levels. During low water times in the late sum-

mer and early fall, the dry swamp floor becomes covered with vegetation. As winter approaches, many of the trees in the swamp drop their leaves to the swamp floor. Although this may not seem too important at first glance, the accumulation of vegetation on the swamp floor is essential for a productive swamp. When the early spring-time rising water levels inundate the vegetation, emerging crawfish have a veritable buffet! However, even more important to the swamp ecosystem is the decomposition of that vegetation. When the vegetation is flooded it dies and begins to decompose. As the vegetation decomposes nutrients are released into the water column. During high water levels the nutrients in the water column are not very concentrated; however, when the water levels drop the nutrients become more concentrated and act as fertilizer for the single-celled plants (phytoplankton) floating in the water column. The water can virtually turn green from an over abundance of phytoplankton.

The microscopic phytoplankton are the food source for microscopic animals called zooplankton, which are the food source for small fish. Small fish are the food source for medium fish, which are the food source for big fish, which are the food source for Cajuns. Simply put: *more phytoplankton = more zooplankton = more small fish = more medium fish = more big fish = Happy Cajuns!* For this chain reaction to work properly, the timing of the flood pulse is critical. Without the high water in the spring and the low water in the fall, the correct sequence of events doesn't happen.

Every day life in south Louisiana is strongly tied to our swamps, as generations have depended on the swamps natural resources. We have used cypress from the swamp to build our houses. Even today, cypress cabinets are in huge demand. Cypress has been used to build our shrimp boats, our oyster boats, and our pirogues. Many of our local wood carvers say the best wood to use is Tupelo, which grows right alongside cypress in the swamp. We use cypress wood to make crawfish paddles and the best roux spoons. Even the best Cajun dance hall floors are made of cypress! Unfortunately, many of our beautiful cypress trees are currently harvested for the sole purpose of producing cypress mulch. What a waste of a resource that is so important to our culture.

Speaking of culture, what would south Louisiana culture be without the music? People around the world celebrate their culture through song. In south Louisiana, so much of our culture is associated with our swamps. It seems that every Hollywood movie that depicts Cajuns living in the swamp show them playing music. We even have a whole genre of south Louisiana music called Swamp Pop! There are countless songs that refer to swamps and the things that live there. There are songs that celebrate crawfish, choupique, the bayou, the Loup Garou, the 'barefoot boudin-eatin' Cajun boogiemán', and even one about 'that Mexican bird they call the Grosbec.' One of my favorite images of Louisiana culture is a fiddle and accordion player serenading the local wildlife from the front porch of a cypress camp in the middle of a swamp. Without swamps, Louisiana music culture would not be as rich and colorful as it is today.

Cajuns like to eat. But we probably like to cook even more. What would the south Louisiana diet be without the swamps? Boiled crawfish, fried frog legs, gar balls, pot-roasted wood ducks, oyster mushrooms, fried sac-au-lait, catfish court bouillon, alligator sauce piquant, and even smoked choupique gumbo are a few of the dishes that come from our swamps. Don't forget that cypress spoon used to stir the roux! An elderly man from Chackbay recently told me that if it wasn't for choupique in the swamp, many people would have gone to bed hungry during the depression. Indeed, the swamps have always provided us sustenance when most needed. Many people have falling in love with fishing after catching bream along a cypress lined bayou. There is something special about the look on a kids face as they share their tales of the days fishing stories, while everyone enjoys the fresh catch of the day. Our swamps give us those moments. That is Louisiana culture at its finest.

When we talk about Louisiana's culture and its ties to the swamp, we must remember that the swamps are part of a larger estuary. In just a few hours, we can travel by boat from cypress swamp to freshwater marsh to intermediate marsh