# THE AMAZING CRAWFISH BOAT

JOHN LAUDUN

*Folklore Studies in a Multicultural World*

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University Press of Mississippi Jackson

www.upress.state.ms.us

The University Press of Mississippi is a member of the Association of American University Presses.

All illustrations are by the author unless otherwise noted.

Publication of this book is supported by a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.


Manufactured in the United States of America

First printing 2016
∞
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data to come

British Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

FOR MY PARENTS—
who, through an endless parade of gadgets,
each with its own fierce optimism for a better world,
made me into the curious optimist that I am.

“How do I know? Experience, sir, experience.”—Dale Olinger

# CONTENTS

# INTRODUCTION

This is the story of the crawfish boat, a very particular machine that seems to have emerged on a particular landscape at a particular point in time. Because of these particularities, it might be tempting to see the story as confined, constrained in meaning and relevancy, but in order to understand how the boat came to be, we have to understand the landscape out of which it emerged. In order to understand the landscape, we have to see it as the people who live and work on it see it. In order to understand them, we need to listen to what they say and watch what they do, and that is never as easy as it sounds. But if there is science in this, it is in the particularities, the exact facts that are to be found both in the things that we can see and touch as well as the things that we can hear if we linger long enough in doorways as people tell us about the world as they understand it.

And so this is really the story about the people who brought the crawfish boat into existence, almost whole-cloth, like Athena springing from Zeus's brow. In telling this story, I am both reaching back into the past as well as recounting events that happened only yesterday and will happen again tomorrow. The men who invented the crawfish boat were and are farmers and fabricators. They are ordinary men: they get up in the morning and walk or drive to their shops or equipment sheds, which in many instances are next door to their homes.

If they are farmers, they survey fields full of rice or soybeans or full of water for crawfish. They worry about the weather. Will it rain in time so that they do not need to start up their well pumps or has it rained so much that they need to pull drains and let things dry? Will the predicted severe storms lay their rice crop, tan and heavy with full kernels, down on the ground, making it impossible to harvest, or will they have the chance to run their combines, harvest their rice, and take their chances with what the mills are paying this year? How they answer those questions will determine what tractor they climb into, what tool they attach to it, and how they will proceed throughout their day. They will work mostly alone, on

no one's clock but their own in consultation with Mother Nature, whose indulgence they court and whose scorn they consider their fitful burden.

If they are fabricators, they are already thinking about the jobs queued up for the day, fully knowing that at least one major and several minor emergencies will come barging into the shop to break up any neatly planned schedule. A farmer will need something tacked back together well enough to work for the time being and they will need it now. Someone else will come in with a job and they will want to discuss it in detail now. Some piece of inventory that they thought they had in stock and is required for a job will need to be ordered now, and it will require cleaning hands and going into the office where they will be chilled by the lovely air-conditioning and comforted by a soft desk chair only to have to rise again to crawl back under a tractor or grain cart or crawfish boat, reaching past crusted mud or rotting rice or crawfish or hanging wasp nests, in order to get back to work.

They are ordinary men. They are, as the historian Francis Andrews observed about makers from another time and place, men who are "doing ordinary work as they know it . . . [without] any idea of doing a great and notable thing or one privately inspired by any name to be made in the success of it."[1] What we know about the predecessors of our modern fabricators, the medieval stonemasons who built the great Gothic cathedrals, we have gleaned from occasional mentions in the historical record. The architect John James lamented about these medieval artisans that "little is known about the builders. A name crops up here and there, and a few comments assure us that they were no more anonymous than we are. We read of [them] sitting at the high table with their clients." The mentions are few, however, and we are faced with the fact that very little is known about the actual men who created Gothic architecture: "One of the world's great art styles would seem to have come into being without leaving a trace of the people who made it."[2]

One response is not to care, to write history as if ages produce buildings or cultures invent jokes. It is not a terrible shorthand. It is not a whole-cloth obfuscation of any underlying actualities. But such abstractions, sometimes idealizations, do shorten and obscure a much more complex reality that deserves our full attention, if only for a short time; a reality that is complex because it is made up of people, people with different attitudes and different experiences.

Andrews tried his best to chronicle and understand medieval builders, men he could not know because of the great gulf that is time. We are fortunate with the crawfish boat. Its history is relatively recent, and most of the men who had a hand in its development are very much alive. We can talk with them and ask them what they did. They may not remember very much—one day twenty or thirty years ago often blurs into another day twenty or thirty years ago—or very well, but if we talk to enough people, we can begin to puzzle together where the idea seems to have originated and how it developed.

Some may wonder, why bother with the crawfish boat at all? It's no Gothic cathedral.[3] It is a smallish object with a small impact. Its geography is focused mostly in southwest Louisiana and those parts of Texas and Arkansas where rice is also grown. Its invention would seem a happy historical happenstance, and its continued production locally a function of a market too small to be noticed by bigger firms, firms who employ proper engineers and research scientists who work with CAD/CAM systems and elaborate workflow systems that produce reams of documentation that facilitate those historians who sometimes traipse after them to record the innovations they make and thus to certify their ingenuity.

The boat makers themselves wonder much the same thing: what's the big deal? They saw a problem, and they came up with a solution. They did it in collaboration with family, friends, and acquaintances. They did it through observing what worked and offering their own version of the steadily evolving adaptation that was the boat itself. Some of their adaptations were taken up by others, some not. They are simply businessmen or farmers trying to make a living: the boat offered them a way to make money. By and large, they do not consider themselves inventors; rather, among themselves, they are repairmen, fabricators, welders, and/or farmers, with each man possessing some or all of the skills of these roles to varying degrees. Again, from their point of view, any abstraction that describes their work reaches no further than this.

What they imagine they have done is figured out how to profitably get crawfish out of shallow fields flooded for the purpose and into the backs of pickup trucks that shuttle the thirty-pound sacks of living creatures to processing plants or restaurants in such a timely fashion and on such a scale that everyone involved can make some money.

In answering that economic riddle, however, they have managed to

make a kind of aquaculture arise on a landscape where once there was only agriculture. It's amazing, really. Two centuries ago, this was a pastoral landscape, filled with herds of cattle that were moved to regional processing centers and then shipped off to cities. A century ago, rice began to displace cattle on the Louisiana prairies, and now rice fields are regularly turned into ponds with neat lines of crawfish traps serpentining through them.

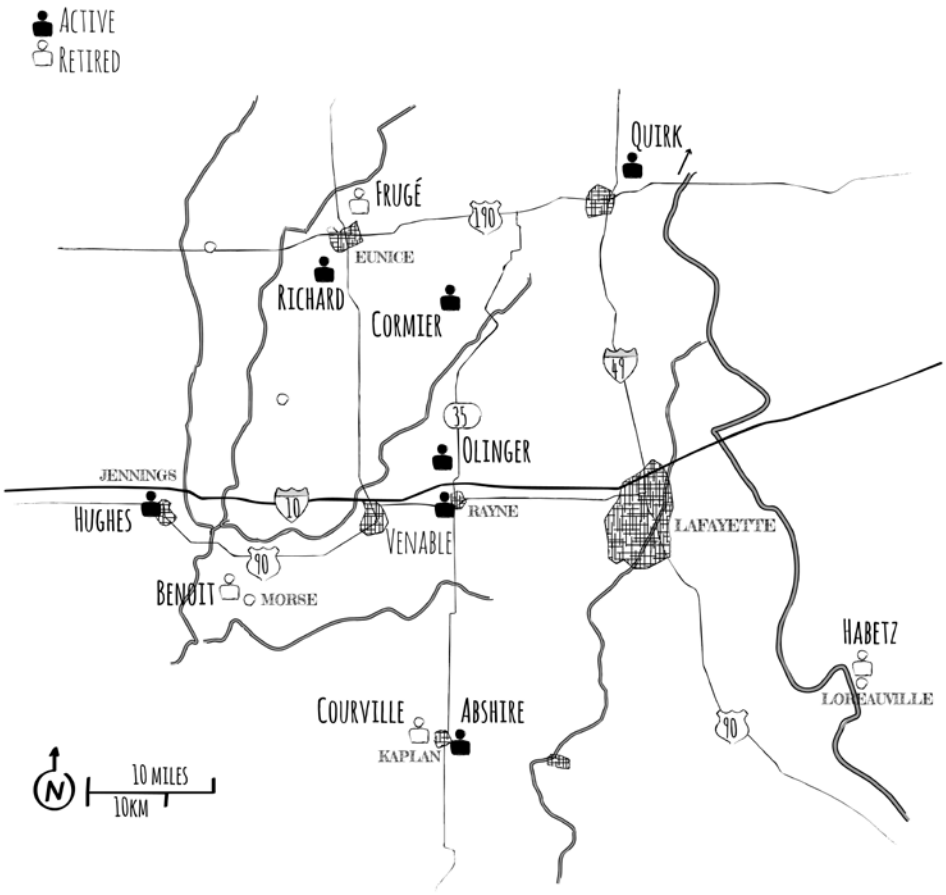
In a scant century or so, this prairie landscape has changed from pasture to agriculture to aquaculture, with all three now coexisting side by side. Perhaps history is inured to the individuals, and their discrete actions, that made that change possible, but the magnitude of the change, seen readily even in satellite imagery, can hardly be ignored: the boats leave telltale signs of their paths in most fields. **<0-1>**

So it was a boat that changed farming in the region—I have heard some men jokingly refer to themselves as *crawfish farmers*—and everyone calls them boats. They have hulls. They float. But beyond these simple facts, they don't look like any boat most of us have ever seen or will ever see. The entire craft runs off what appears to be an oversized lawn-mower engine. The engine drives a pump, and the pump drives a hydraulic motor, or set of motors, that powers a great steel wheel that hangs off the back of the boat. The wheel itself looks like something out of a bygone era: its size and shape and its cleats, as they are called, are reminiscent of steamboat paddle wheels. But the cleats aren't paddles pushing water: they are treads designed to give the wheel traction as it rolls along the bottom of a flooded field. The advantage this offers over paddles or propellers is that the craft stops instantly and turns quickly, unlike the gliding halt and slower turns of a fully aquatic boat. The other advantage of the great wheel is what still turns heads: the sight of a boat driving down a road—in fact, this is such an important part of a crawfish boat that one maker puts extra cleats on his wheels so they roll smoothly.

How did this happen? Who brought this machine into existence? Who continues to contribute to its production and refinement?

There is little doubt that right now the dominant maker, by sheer force of numbers, is Kurt Venable of Rayne, who has focused a good part of his fabrication shop's business on the crawfish boat. Next, in terms of volume, is Mike Richard, who operates a one-man aluminum welding business just south of Eunice. Making fewer boats than he once did but still a significant

Crawfish boat routes through a collection of rice fields that lie along Interstate 10 west of Rayne. Courtesy of the Aerial Photography Field Office, USDA Farm Service Agency.




Map of Louisiana showing all the makers who have contributed, or continue to contribute, to the development of the crawfish boat.

part of the network is Gerard Olinger, who runs an agricultural-equipment repair shop north of Rayne in the German settlement of Roberts Cove. **<0-2>**

In addition to these makers, there is Dale Hughes, who runs a fabrication business in Jennings; Michael Quirk in Lebeau; and Mike Cormier, a farmer outside Church Point who occasionally builds an extra boat or two. In Kaplan, there was Clayton Courville, and there remains Jimmy Abshire and his brother Robert, who operate a repair shop and equipment-supply store. And in the past, there was Tedmon Habetz, the man widely credited with creating the first hydraulic crawfish boat, and Maurice Benoit, who helped organize the first crawfish field day at which Habetz's boat premiered, and who had also built a hydraulically powered boat but had not yet figured out how to slow it down enough to make it workable. Finally, there was Greg Frugé, the man who seems to have made the crawfish boat popular and is affectionately known among many of the makers and farmers of his generation as "Momma Greg." Working in Eunice, far from Habetz in Loreauville and Benoit in Morse, Frugé developed a rather interesting drive unit that was in fact based on the mechanical transfer of power, but he eventually built hydraulic boats as well.

Together, these makers are part of a dynamic, diffuse network. Each man works (or worked) alone, separate from the other builders. At the same time, he is also working in dialogue with them. They see each other's boats. They know what their customers think of the strengths and weaknesses of each design. They recognize imagination in each other, and, in that way, share their creativity. It's not unlike a guitar player hearing a run or riff, liking it, and including a version of it in his or her next performance. Listening, even indirectly, is what creates an artistic field. Out of that field comes creativity, as artists and craftsmen spur each other on.

Such an idea is terribly important, of course, given current concerns about the state of creativity, especially in relation to industry, in the United States, but perhaps it can be said quite clearly up front, allowing time then for the unpacking across the rest of this exploration: Although I began my journey with the intent of discovering how residents of Louisiana understand the landscape on which they live and work, what I found was a creative engine that seems always to have been present on that landscape and that, I think, throws into stark relief the nature of the relationship between tradition and creativity, two terms we too often place at opposite

ends of a spectrum of activity. Such a discovery is not new, of course. Others have come before me in this regard, but it bears repeating that what is revealed here is a cultural background more varied than most imagine that underlies a network of makers—of craftsmen—who are quite varied in their own natures.[4]

Currently, the study of creativity is a vast enterprise. Within it, there must be a place for individuals whose eminence is bounded by locale, either by preference or by providence. Such individuals give us a glimpse of the nature of the creative act in an immediate and intimate fashion. That is, confined to a definable horizon, the creative act reveals the competence of the individual in the very moment of performance. Folklorists have long studied creativity, even if we were sometimes discerning its shape by its shadow, alongside other humanists, but in the past few decades we have been joined by an increasing number of scientists who, whether interested in the mechanics of the brain or in the way markets respond to novelty, work under the collective umbrella of creativity studies. A few initial forays into embedded, or contextual, studies of creativity—labeled *case studies*—within the larger field have been assayed, but it is early in their development, and I believe folklore studies stands to make a ready contribution to their efforts, offering as we can our decades-long refinement of the ethnographic study of creative moments.[5]

The trick, of course, is to study human beings as they are, always caught between being "free and stuck in the world," as Henry Glassie noted.[6] Absolute freedom is where the humanities have tended to focus their attention: on artists who, alone in their studios or garrets, are able to explore the furthest reaches of what is possible to imagine and then realize it in some fashion without concern for audiences or markets. At the other end of the spectrum are those who, we imagine, are so stuck within the confines of everyday existence that they cannot see anything else, let alone accept any novelty, whether it be intentional or random.

What Glassie found among the farmers of Ballymenone in Ireland is what Charles Zug found among the potters of North Carolina, and what Janet Gilmore found among the boatbuilders of Coos Bay, Oregon: there is always a diversity of players within a scene, some of which is due to talent—itself really a function of drive and inclination more than anything else—and some of which is due to what the local ecology can bear: there is room only for so many of a certain kind of specialist within a local econ-

omy.[7] It was this kind of dense network of people and ideas that beckoned me when I began my own study of creativity on a different landscape, one filled with water and thus requiring a special machine to traverse it. I knew, too, that I wanted to address directly the antipodal anchors of creativity studies, the starry-eyed dreamer or the bloody-eyed laborer, and so I found myself drawn to an extraordinary artifact whose very realization screamed creativity and yet whose natal scene was grimy, noisy, and as modern as one could imagine it.

The south Louisiana landscape is dotted with shops where metal is either bent to serve new purposes or unbent to serve a familiar purpose again. Some of the shops serve tasks familiar to modernity everywhere: the thin galvanized sheets that are folded into air-conditioning ductwork or the curved panels of our automobiles that need to be sleek again after a mishap. Common to rural landscapes are the shops that repair or fabricate agricultural equipment. Common to industrial landscapes are shops that build heavy-duty structures for factories or, in south Louisiana, drilling rigs. Some of those shops line the waterways of the region, giving themselves easy access to a transportation network that can carry heavy, wide loads out to the Gulf of Mexico. Those shops are joined by others that specialize in making a variety of watercraft that serve the oil industry, among others.

The result is a dense network of shops where those men, and some women, who think best in three-dimensional shapes, in mathematical ratios, and in stress factors find an outlet for their imagination. There is room, as there always is, for individuals who simply want to be told what to do, but there is also room for individuals who want to excel. And if there isn't in one shop, there will be another, or if there is none to be had in the present moment, then some will open shops of their own. That's how Kurt Venable and Mike Richard got their starts.[8]

Most of these men work alone or with a small collection of trusted others. Often this group is composed of members of their family: brothers, wives, sons. Each man works on that combination of things that interests him and also pays the bills. Venable likes to design workflows. Richard likes anything aluminum. Olinger likes difficult repair jobs. So a landscape filled with a seemingly repetitive series of shops, each possessed of various congregations of men with grease under their fingernails, is actually quite varied.

There are only a few manufacturing secrets here and there that each man possesses because everything there is to know is in a boat. Every hard-won idea must manifest itself in steel or aluminum where it is available for all to see, analyze, and judge. And there is almost no end to the discussion of who makes a better boat or whose boat is best suited for which soil or terrain type. The makers themselves are judged for the quality of their boats, their willingness to customize a boat, and their willingness to repair or modify a boat made by someone else.

# A BRIEF NOTE

A quick word about the terms and methods used in the research and writing of this text. The interviews and observations that inform the writing took place over the course of six years. When it was possible to take careful notes, I took them, but quite often I was standing in the middle of a metal shop or riding on a jump seat of a tractor or standing at the edge of a hot field on a summer day in Louisiana, and taking notes in those moments was quite difficult, as the many pages in my notebooks smeared with grease and mud or wrinkled from dripping sweat can attest. I am fairly confident that in every case the words attributed to individuals represented herein are as exact as my note-taking or memory could make them. Any slippage is entirely my responsibility.

Where conversations were recorded and their results transcribed, I have hewn to a more novelistic way of representing speech. In other contexts, I have engaged in more elaborate forms of transcription, for the sake of understanding the nature of discourse and the flow of discursive interaction. Such was not my goal here, and invoking that kind of involved typographic apparatus here seemed inappropriate. For those interested more particularly in the how of speaking of the individuals represented here, I plan to deposit the recordings, both audio and the thousands upon thousands of images, with an appropriate archive, much as I have made some video recordings available through the EVIA (Ethnographic Video for Instruction and Analysis) Digital Archive.

As I repeatedly remind institutional boards that worry about the destruction of sensitive data, as a folklorist it is my job to work with the people whom I study to create a historical record. The last thing we, they and I, want is to destroy records. In many cases, some of the individuals, or their acts chronicled here, will too soon be lost to history. If for no one else but their children, grandchildren, neighbors, and friends, my hope is that a text like this can not only preserve a memory or two but also act

as a powerful reminder that each of us, just like the individuals in these pages, has the ability to make something no one has seen before. And even once it is fully formed, we can, using our own particular collection of experiences and expertise—and dare I add obsessions?—innovate within that form and add value, a phrase that has become something of a cliché in our contemporary landscape. We can reclaim the cliché, however, by insisting on the place of people in all of this and for the value to be not only economic but also social.

The importance of people as people is something on which my discipline, folklore studies, prides itself. Not people as aggregated into numbers. Not people as broken into traits. People as people, as individuals who are both collections of traits and pieces of a larger whole at the same time. My good friend Henry Glassie once noted that folklore studies is indeed a science, but a science that treats humans as humans and not as monkeys.[9] Let me be clear, I am not opposed to science. Far from it. The objectification of complex realities is often the first step in understanding them. But, and here is where the art lies in science, deciding upon the nature of the object, what it is, is not something that should be rushed. The annals of applied science and social science are awash in stories of well-intentioned studies or efforts gone astray because they failed to take time to understand the larger ecosystem. The current study is but one small step toward understanding the nature of creativity within a complex system of ideas, actors, and events. There is so much more work to be done in this regard.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not mention that readers may very well note the overwhelming use of the masculine pronoun, even when in reference to abstract entities. The truth is, all of the makers surveyed here are men. There are a number of women who play a variety of roles, including operators of the boats, wives who most assuredly had some input at various moments, and, most especially in the case of Sheryl Venable, actual managers of the businesses. But the people who make these boats in the present, and those remembered in the past, are all men. It made the most sense, then, simply to revert to the use of masculine pronouns in the narration and discussion of the men involved. The larger role of women in the everyday working of farms and shops, as well as the role of African Americans and Mexican farm laborers, will have to await a more comprehensive ethnographic study. This text is not that, although I have

certainly begun to understand all the things scholars of Louisiana culture and history have yet to document, analyze, and understand. More on that at the end of this book.

# THE AMAZING CRAWFISH BOAT

Randy Gossen swinging a crawfish trap above his boat's sorting table.

# FORWARDS

The wind that blew lightly over the freshly plowed rice fields was just cold enough to chill exposed fingers and cheeks and just strong enough to rustle nearby trees. Perched somewhere unseen in the trees, a few birds whistled their wakefulness. Moving across a narrow blacktop road, the wind picked at the surface of a flooded field, transforming its smooth surface into thousands of fractals, each reflecting the sun, still low in the sky, differently.

It was, for all the world, a quiet country morning until a small engine clattered to life. Its owner ran it up for a moment, and then let it settle down to an idle that would warm it to the day's work. The sound of the motor was high, almost nasal when compared to the throatier roar of the big diesel engines that typically make their way across these fields powering tractors. This sound was more like something you would hear on a suburban lawn than an agricultural field. And that was about right, since this motor could only offer up twenty-five horsepower.

The motor continued its fierce vibrato while Randy Gossen finished loading his boat with bait for the morning's run. The plastic tubs were full of frozen fish chopped, depending upon their original size, in halves and thirds. The fish were chub, trash fish to most fishermen and a bycatch of the menhaden fishery. The tubs were the same ones seen in any retail store when shelves are being restocked. The chopped chub were packed tightly in the tub, but they still managed to shift a bit as Gossen slid them off the lowered tailgate of his truck and onto the floor of the boat. He countered the shift using his tall frame to his advantage, and the chopped fish settled into place with a squelch.

The boat's engine rumbled low and steady while Gossen continued to prepare for the morning's work. The gas tank was already filled, the oil already checked, the boat already given a good once-over before anything else got done. With everything taken care of, he glanced over the water sparkling in the morning sun as he prepared to climb into the boat. It was another great morning.

An investigator the rest of the year, Randy Gossen lives for crawfish season. It is his time. A time to be outside. A time to think. A time to watch the slow turn and change of the world. Two nearby television antennas that tower over him went up as he watched from the seat of his boat. The land from which they rise is not being farmed now, but somewhere in Gossen's eyes there was a long view of things that saw a tractor, or some other machine not yet imagined, one day turning the soil in order to coax rice or soybeans from the land. If that future machine materializes to do that, perhaps there will be a chance to coax crawfish out of the land too.

Randy Gossen himself does not farm. He works in collaboration with his cousin Dwayne Gossen. Dwayne farms more than a thousand acres each year. Some of it is family land; some of it belongs to others, who have placed in him their trust to make the best crop possible. Some fields he will plant with rice, and others soybeans. Some of those fields will rotate between those two crops in years to come, but others he will rotate between rice and crawfish, and in those fields he places his trust in his cousin.

Crawfish are not a crop like rice or soybeans, and they have largely, as we will see later, resisted easy understanding. Wresting them from the ground successfully comes from years of patient observation as well as individual trial and error. Anyone who crawfishes can tell you that, even with considerable hard-won know-how, getting the crawfish reliably out of a field and into a sack is nothing to be taken for granted.

Randy Gossen stooped under the boat's canopy and stepped in. He slid the tubs into place, wedged his tall frame into the driver's seat, and put the sorting table back on its rails so that it was within easy reach. With everything in place, he throttled up the engine and slid the boat backward off the land and into the water. With a practiced sense of timing, he flipped the lever that switched the boat into forward motion and began his first run of the day. Ahead of him lay a string of crawfish traps, spaced approximately forty feet apart.

With the boat itself setting a slow, deliberate pace, Gossen began his day by picking up an empty trap he had left near the beginning of his run and baiting it. The trap is made out of nylon-coated steel mesh and looks like a four-sided pyramid, a tetrahedron, with a large, cylindrical chimney coming out of its top. At each bottom corner of the pyramid, the mesh has been pushed back in on itself, forming a funnel that opens into the body of the trap.

Properly placed, usually anchored with a steel rod but sometimes only carefully set down, a trap sits on the bottom with the funnels offering an easy entrance to its interior. The bait is the welcome sign to the crawfish, who, having made their way in, cannot get back out. Their exit comes as Randy plucks a trap from the water, empties it from the top, rebaits it, and then places the trap not where it was but where the next trap is, as it itself is plucked from the water to be emptied, rebaited, and then replaced. The boat never stops. Its engine's roar changes rarely.

Gossen proceeded along his first line of traps, his body quickly remembering the rhythm and tempo of the work. The light breeze occasionally pushed at the boat, sliding sideways over the water, and he responded with a deft tap of his feet on the steering pedals beneath the sorting tray. At the end of the first line, a steady push of his left foot on its pedal turned the boat leftward, where more traps lay waiting. This morning, Randy began by working the line of traps at the perimeter of the cut—as the small, leveed-off sections of rice fields are known. As he approached his starting point, he turned in and started working the next line of traps in the forty-acre cut, following what amounted to a large, oblong spiral.

Trap upon trap, the work is steady. At each trap, Gossen leans a bit out of the boat and reaches down with his right hand to snare the rim of the trap. He switches the rim to his left hand as he picks the trap up and uses his right hand to dump its contents into the sorting table in front of him. He switches hands again and digs for a piece of slowly thawing, and increasingly stronger smelling, fish and drops it into the trap before placing the trap back into the water. That done, he has time to regard the contents of his catch, surveying the crawfish—Are they getting bigger? Have they molted recently? What price will this lot fetch?—to determine what changes he needs to make, if any, to his operation and to pluck out weeds and any other detritus that have come up in the trap. Today, the catch was reasonable and Gossen was enjoying the steady, if also a little slow, accumulation of crawfish on the table. Every few traps, he opened the doors to the chutes that guide the crawfish into the waiting sacks hanging off the table and then he cleaned the table of any remaining bits with a deft swirling motion of his hand that caught everything in it.

After about a half hour or so of steady work, Gossen had a sack of crawfish already tied up and lying on the bow deck of the boat, and he had two

more sacks that were close to full hanging off the sorting table. This part of the field was done and it was time to move on to the next.

Gossen continued on in this way, adding thirty acres to forty acres to twenty-five acres, slowly working his way across the entire field. The work is always the same, but the views change as the boat moves around and the sun rises. With luck, the cool breeze and the warm sun combine to make for a pleasant day. On other days, the wind blows cold and hard and picks up an impressive bite as it crosses the water and slams into the boat's slab hull, pushing it about. Toward the end of the season, the breezes die away and there is only the heat growing heavier as the day wears on. And then there's the rain.

But today was a perfect day. Trap after trap. Line after line. Cut after cut. Each rhythm combined to make the time pass quickly until the moment came to move from one field to another, and that was when something amazing happened. Not so amazing for Randy Gossen, who does it many times a morning when crawfishing, but amazing for anyone else who might happen to be standing nearby and watching: Gossen pointed the boat at a corner of the field that led to the road where his truck sat. The boat dutifully took his directions and quickly ran its bow up onto the dirt at the field's edge, pushing water in front of it, slicking the dirt into mud. Most boats would have stopped there and awaited the pull of an arm or a winch to beach it thoroughly, but Gossen drove the boat further and further onto land, with only a slight pause to give the engine a bit more gas and to operate a hydraulic ram.

And then the boat heaved itself onto the land, exposing for the first time the wheels just behind its bow and demonstrating quite forcefully the power of its drive unit, which was not a propeller, but rather a large, cleated steel wheel that rolled the boat down the road, where Gossen turned and dropped into the next field.

If you asked anyone around here what kind of boat that was that you just passed on the highway—which can sometimes happen when fields are close—the answer would be a simple one: it was a crawfish boat. Crawfish boats were named after the job they make possible: they allow their operators to crawl into fields flooded with water and work at a human pace catching and bagging crawfish. Seen from a distance making their way through a field, they look like almost every other small fishing boat in Louisiana. Blunt bows give way to open, flat-bottomed hulls with a drive unit

Randy Gossen looking over his sorting table to make sure he is on target to pick up the next trap. Note the baited trap in his right hand ready to replace the one he will pick up.

Randy Gossen picking up a trap.

hanging off the back. If they watched them working their way through fields, a lot of people would hardly notice that the standard outboard is missing and that there is something else propelling the hull through the water. Most eyes do not linger long enough to see these boats slip out of the water and onto dry land, let alone ask how they got to be there.

And how they came to be there is an interesting question. The boats are not turned out in large quantities on assembly lines. They are not available at any boat dealer and cannot be found on any showroom floor. They cannot be found in any boat show. Anywhere. At any time.

Instead, they are made in small numbers in a handful of shops scattered across the south Louisiana landscape. And that is how it has been for the past thirty years. Some of the men who first brought the crawfish boat into being have retired from the work, but they were replaced by others who decided to try their hands at the task. Each has brought his own experience and his own particular way of looking at the world, which can be glimpsed in the way he conceives and assembles each boat he makes.

Their shops are littered about, sometimes on the edge of a town, sometimes along a well-traveled road, and sometimes at the end of a gravel lane that makes you wonder if you are in the right place. But in every instance, once you arrive, get out of your truck, and cross into the interiors of the large, often dark shops where men work on craft that stretch over twenty feet in length and sometimes eight feet in width, you find yourself welcomed with a ready handshake and a smile.

Those open hands and faces reflect a deeper reality: you are also face to face with individuals who have open minds and, not to get too sentimental, quite open hearts. These are men who are deeply in love with what they do, and are happiest when they are faced with a problem that only a piece of well-crafted metal can solve. And this speaks to one last point I want to make as we move forward into the history of the crawfish boat: the blue spark that you glimpse deep in these large metal buildings must really be understood as something created by the human mind, not simply the result of an unthinking hand pulling the trigger on a welding gun. The buildings that dot the landscape should not be dismissed as bastions of unthinking men bashing out bits of metal, but rather imagined as being akin to nurseries, places where the blue arc of creativity is protected, nurtured.

In reality, the arc of a weld is not so robust that it can withstand sus-

Randy Gossen placing a baited trap ahead of the trap he is going to pick up.

Randy Gossen exiting one field/pond to drive down a field road into another.

tained winds. And it is dangerous when let loose in the rain. It leaves behind metal hot enough to do permanent damage should human flesh come into contact with it, and injuries from working with so many sharp edges and powerful tools sometimes means that men work while dripping blood or biting their lips while a foot, finger, or head throbs from a slipped grip. Thanks to metal's thermal conductivity, the work is hotter than the heat of summer and colder than the frost of winter. And yet the work itself is so compelling that these men keep doing it. It makes them a living. It makes them happy. It makes them who they are. What follows is an attempt to understand the braided existence of minds, metal, and machines.