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## Our Atchafalaya: A basin kind of life

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The Choctaw called it Long River.

Basinkeeper Dean Wilson calls it River of Trees.

But for the many who live along this 140-mile length of winding waterway and the nearly 1 million acres of swamps, forests and marshes surrounding it, it's our playground, our fishing hole, our source of income, our home.

Our Atchafalaya.

This is the latest installment in an occasional series of stories, photographs and online videos exploring the expansive, rich basin created by the Atchafalaya River and the people who live and work here.

HENDERSON - When Pat Huval was a boy trekking through the swamps and marshes between Grand Anse (Cecilia) and Henderson in the Atchafalaya Basin, he dreamed of some day owning a restaurant and nightclub.

He started making that dream come true in 1952 when he bought a little grocery store on Bayou Amy, selling hamburgers and crawfish by the sack.

Today, at 79 years old, he owns Pat's Fisherman's Wharf restaurant, The Atchafalaya Club bar and dance hall, the Edgewater Inn Hotel, a crawfish processing plant, and he cans and distributes his own brand of gumbo roux and barbecue sauce.

Huval will turn 80 in August and while his children handle much of the day-to-day operations, he still hangs around to supervise.

"Retire? That's for old people," he says with a straight face.

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Huval settled in what would become Henderson in 1952. During the next 20 years, more and more people moved from the Atchafalaya Basin and swamps to the little community.

"It was hard to get lights and hard to make a living in the swamps," Huval said. "It was hard to go to school."

He remembers when there wasn't a bridge to cross the bayou. Residents crossed on a wooden push-pole barge.

He remembers the bay being so "chock-a-block" with water lilies that residents laid plywood across the lilies and walked across.

By 1971, Henderson was officially a town and Huval its mayor, a position he would hold for the next 17 years.

He watched the town grow and helped it grow as mayor.

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At the same time, Huval grew his business. He moved the business across the bayou to its present location and expanded.

The restaurant is designed around a fireplace, the tables decorated with red and white checkered cloths. Windows provide diners with a view of the bayou and, on cooler days, dining is available outside, where tourists can occasionally watch alligators basking in the sun. He'll soon add a 25-foot by 45-foot enclosure where tourists can see 'gators up close.

Huval, who likes to draw, designed the adjoining 10,000-square-foot Atchafalaya Club himself, modeling it after a bar he saw once in Mexico. Bands play Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights. Meals are served "and the mamas can bring the kids with them," he said. "And there's never no trouble here."

He later added the roux and barbecue sauce facility, the crawfish production plant, a red lighthouse attraction, and a year ago added a 28-room hotel overlooking the bayou.

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But food remains the central attraction.

"That old-time cooking, I'm the champ," he said. "Learned that from my Mama."

Indeed, Huval said he was relegated to kitchen duty as a youngster because he was too slow picking cotton. His widowed mother was faster, so she picked the cotton while Huval fed the family and perfected the cooking skills he applied as a restaurateur.

"I'm the little bit of this, the little bit of that and a taste. Need a little more, put a little more," he said.

His youngest son, Jude Huval, attended culinary school and is the executive chef. He still uses some of Dad's recipes for traditional dishes like crawfish and shrimp etouffee and seafood gumbo and mixes them with some of his own.

"He still gets in there once in a while," the younger Huval said. "He likes to do a little fish courtbouillon."

"And it's all fresh," the elder Huval said. "It's not Chinese crawfish. It's American crawfish. And our catfish is not imported. It comes from the Delta in Mississippi. Everything you eat over here is fresh."

"That's the key to our success," Jude Huval added.

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The business is a family affair. Besides Jude as executive chef, son Harvey is general manager, daughter Cynthia Domingue is restaurant manager, and son-in-law Wade Domingue runs the crawfish processing operation.

The elder Huval, the patriarch of the family, lives on the premises, so he still oversees how the next generation is running his operations.

"We have our little team," Jude Huval said. "We have our differences, but we work things out."

"This is where the buck stops," the elder Huval added, thumb to his chest.

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#### Abstract (Document Summary)

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