

DRIFTS OF THE DELTA

DESTINATIONS
by Riley Love, MD.

Islands in a dream,
composed solely of oyster
shells, come and go with
storms like visions in the
night.



Photo: Will Finkley, and Bill Young for Gafflife.com

Shuffling the feet to scratch up the gravel hasn't changed since I was young. The little road atop the levee, like so many others from childhood past was beleaguered by the grass on each side wanton to reclaim the last of the hill. I send out a shower of chat with the toe of my sandal disgruntling a grasshopper to helicopter up and away from his dandelion perch.

Left, only a few footsteps alongside, flows the mighty Mississippi River, almost there, almost to its wedding with the sea. The Louisiana delta is its home stretch and then... *fete de complete*.

Strolling by a river, metaphor for time, stream of consciousness, and the lives of men is also a powerful key for the halls of memories past. Remembering the words which begin *Look Homeward Angel*, by Thomas Wolfe, "...a stone, a leaf, an un-found door; of a stone, a leaf, a door. And of all the forgotten faces."

So again the boy can walk along the

river, just as he had over half a century ago. This is the greatest of the rivers of our continent. Its water the soul, the very soil beneath my tread the corpus of our nation, all traveled far. Particles carried from the east where the Alleghany and Monongahela join together to form the Ohio River at Pittsburg. More from the Missouri River's headwaters where the Jefferson, Madison, and Gallatin Rivers mate west of Yellowstone. Some is distant from the north, coming from the Mississippi's source at Lake Itasca in Minnesota. Moreover, the river carries the dreams of all those contemplating its life along the way, but especially those of children and fishermen.

For all fishermen are dreamers. Even as you read these words you know they strike true. In childhood it begins brilliantly, with visions of limitless creatures within a realm unbounded from the physics of reality. As adults, revelations of far-away waters haunt our days and nights.

Working, driving, in quiet moments, this melancholy comes to us. Some would say that the child still lives inside our hearts. Like a fisherman, my eyes search for dark shapes rising beneath the surface as I walk along the river. They always have, they always will.

A stone's throw behind the levee, rises the white antebellum Saltgrass Lodge. At the level of the second story, the outdoor patio becomes busy with anglers just arrived for the fishing tournament. They were amassing great pyramids of empty beer cans, symbols of appeasement to the fishing gods sent skyward with increasingly loud rock music. The lodge sits much lower than the Mississippi's waterline. It was just about the patio level that the flood waters reached when Hurricane Katrina struck in August of 2005. The multi-billion dollar levee system failed in as many as fifty places, as for a while the river reclaimed this part of the delta. This Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet Canal

channeled Katrina's fury right up into the heart of Greater New Orleans.

"One who knows the Mississippi will promptly aver...that ten thousand River Commissions, with the mines of the world at their backs, cannot tame the lawless stream, cannot confine it, cannot say to it Go here or Go there, and make it obey; cannot save a shore it has sentenced."

Mark Twain, father of Tom Sawyer, and Huckleberry Finn, proved prophetic in his *Life on the Mississippi*. But the green colors along the river are fading as the sun sets behind the trees. The lodge patio has transformed into our situation room, as in another grand white house on the distant shore of the Potomac. In a handful of hours Helios' steeds will bring new light to the sky in the east; and this fishing tournament will be on like a pot o' boilin' gumbo.

Buras Louisiana, 93 miles down from New Orleans and son, there is a world of fishing to

"THE SEASON IS OPEN 365 DAYS PER YEAR. FIVE REDS, FROM 16 TO 27 INCHES ARE ALLOWED EACH DAY WITH ONE LARGER FISH PERMITTED."

do here. Oil rigs off the coast form artificial reefs which hold fish like magnets. Further are hotspots for tuna and billfish. Our quarry was swimming inshore, redbfish and spotted sea trout, here called "speckled trout."

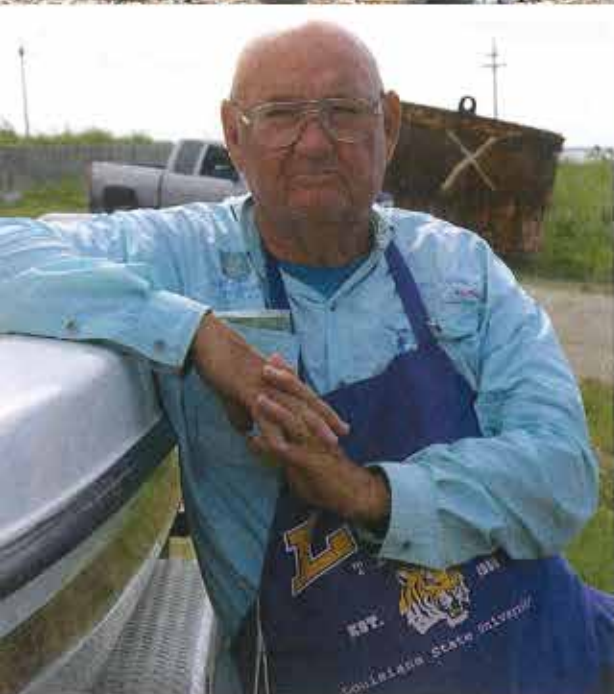
Almost busting my knob against the center console as we loaded into the boat at first light, I caught an eyeful of a big "LSU" decal. It gave me the squint. Captain Lewis Schmitt, elder brother of Raymond, the lodge proprietor, slowly tied on a Louisiana State University apron, his work uniform, to go with the LSU towels and other purple and yellow paraphernalia about the craft. NCAA football can get beneath the skin as deeply as even fishing. As deep as the 4/0 Kahle hook I would pull from his pachyderm hide the next morning. He's grilled many a redbfish at tail gate parties. Captain Lewis shared some insight, speaking in his slow-as-molasses, lyrical, deep-southern accent:

"Each morning I receive the Baton Rouge newspaper to my home so that I might read the obituaries. I hope to find the name of [LSU football coach] Les Miles there... because I hate that





Wild life on these delicate islands is breathtaking before the backdrop of natural gas rigs.



There is no pain in releasing the little ones.

son of a bitch. His name was not there today. I will look forward to receiving the paper tomorrow morning."

He had everything a guy could want to throw at red fish: MirrOlures, Rapalas, top water, plastics, and jigs. I asked him,

"When you have a day off, what do you do?"

"Go fishin'."

"What do you use on those days?"

"Poppin' corks and shrimp works the best."

"Let's go."

Talk about return to childhood. Popping a sound wave through the water to either attract or irritate big reds and then watching and waiting for your bobber to go down still sends an electrical thrill through the spinal cord. The captains liked a string of beads, reminding me of *Mardi Gras*, above the bait to also produce a clicking sound. The redfish cruise the shoreline of this low-visibility mix of salt and fresh water, keying on vibration.

Running along canals and cuts through a world of marsh grass, this is beautiful country. There are no trees, only an occasional stand of cane grows above average height. The extreme white of egrets and ibis appeared dramatic against the sunlit green undulating in the wind. I was watching the flight of roseate spoonbills overhead when a squad of red winged blackbirds, came out of hiding just off my shoulder, exactly like a detail in a really good dream. It's a wonderland for fishing.

We would pull up at points and holes in the grassy banks, all of which seemed about like the rest of the periphery but were proven spots. Every little point, no matter how unseemly, had a name. The captains kept tab on each other's location and where the bite was on. They would rotate onto hotspots as prior boats would meet their limits of reds.

This inner realm of grasslands had sufficient protection from the wind that fishing for reds was possible on days too

tough for moving outside. We were tossing our baits right into the grass line.

Redfish move out to spawn in 60- to 100-foot depths in mid-August to mid-October when the water temperature hits 65 degrees. Warm water tides then bring the larval-stage reds inshore for metamorphosis. Post spawn, the adults ascend to the surface en masse providing an incredible sight for the fisherman lucky enough to be there at the right time.

The season is open 365 days per year. Five reds, from 16 to 27 inches are allowed each day with one larger fish permitted. We would also fill our guide's limit each day. At 27 inches, the fish are around four years old and are sexually mature. Twenty-five trout are allowed each day when over 12 inches. At that size about 75% are mature to spawn.

In neighboring Texas, only 10 trout over 15 inches and three reds at 20 to 28 inches per day are permitted. In Mississippi it's 13 and three. Florida has di-

vided the state into three zones for redfish allowing two per day in the northwest and northeast, and just one in the south. The sunshine state divides into four zones for trout, Okaying five in the northwest, six in the northeast, then just four in the southwest and southeast. Better keep your compass handy and some meclizine for dizziness.

Thus, Louisiana has the most liberal limits for its fishery and every day is a fishing day. There is a lot of territory in the delta. There are no lingering scars along its shore from the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in April of 2010.

The typical day would start in the grasslands trying for a full bag of reds early. In the local parlance there were three sorts of these. The 16 to 27 inchers were "reds." Fish below 16 inches were "rat-reds," then the big boys were "bull-reds." These fish undergo a dramatic transformation after getting handed their bull diplomas. They become friggin' locomotives with fins, who wake up in the morning fully teed off. Hooking a 30-inch red will put the question to your spinning gear of whether it would like to climb back in its box and retreat to Japan.

After the bag was full it was time to target bulls or run outside past small barrier islands where from April through June, the sea trout would make their cycle.


Natural gas rigs and pipelines sprout from the ocean here like a post-apocalyptic movie set. I kept an eye out for zombies whenever we neared one. I couldn't see them but I knew they were watching. I can still feel their eyes. There are over 1,700 of these things in Louisiana. The tiny natural barrier islands, comprised of oyster shells and covered with American white and brown pelicans, terns, black skimmers, laughing gulls, and waders of every sort, were delicate, almost ethereal. Their geography is always changing, as dictated by the great storms from the sea. The islands made by man and those created by nature could not have been more contrasting.

There were plenty of trout holes around the islands. Some flounder, gafftopsail and hardhead catfish, and the occasional ray would also come aboard. Diving birds, being for fishermen what canine pointers provide for the upland bird hunter, would lead us to a school of feeding trout. Pulling up on a bunch this way would mean 50 to 100 fish in mere moments.

One cannot help but be struck by the vitality of this fishery. These waters are rife with oysters, shrimp and crabs; miles and miles of it. Day after day it produces bags of very good reds and an abundance of trout. The tuna are just 20 minutes out from the marina. After 50 years of destination fishing, I choose these words carefully... it is world class.

The recorded history of sport fishing is sparse. Few papyrus and sheepskin scrolls survived the humidity and ravages of time. The first historical evidence of its heritage is a carving of a figure holding a rod and line engraved in the wall of a pyramid in Egypt from 4,000 years ago. There are a few words from Homer and Plato but then from the shores of the Aegean, a masterpiece was written in the third century BCE. This was within the *Idylls* of Theocritus and entitled "The Fisherman's Dream."

"...for at night we dream of things we wish. Dogs dream of bear and men of fish."

He was just like me. Beneath the water's surface is the stuff of dreams. 



the lodge

Researching a great number of local guides and lodges, we settled on the Salgrass lodge. Previously a private mansion, it was more attractive but competitively priced when compared to others. During the oil spill disaster, it was residence for a major network news team for several months. It will sleep about 20 people.

The food was excellent. There was always a bowl of etouffée, gumbo, or some boudin hot and ready when we pulled in after fishing. Breakfast was made to order and the dinners were multiple courses served with wine. A favorite was "Redfish on the Grill Shell." That's a red fillet seasoned, then grilled with extra skin, side down to the flame causing it to curl slightly. Our experience with this will send you packing a cooler for the trip home.

All the captains were experienced and had good boats and equipment. Proprietor Raymond Schmitt was also a captain and a real gentleman to deal with. But there was another add to the experience (you wouldn't want to miss). This goes down like the sun at the big shed where Ray and his set up his fish cleaning station.

Man and boy has been around fishermen of all ages, shapes, colors and nationalities. But I've never hit upon any that could hold up next to these Louisiana boys for reeking, lying, and swearing. When they got together in the evening to peel the day's catch, the stings and arrows of outrageous verbiage that were let fly would melt metal. It got lower than a snake's belly in there. Water moccasins and rattlers would equim away from the building like earth worms and a family of skunks walked off down the lane carrying their suit cases. Old Mark Twain, amidst all that swearing and storytelling, would have been proud of these lads. They won a special place in my heart.



Raymond Schmitt (right) and the boys will peel the fillets from the fish and the paint from the walls.