



Crocodile Bayou

*This autumn I'll be releasing a book called *Crocodile Bayou*, a tribute to the Crocodile Bayou Pontoon Bridge. This one-of-a-kind bridge—a cross between a drawbridge and a barge—provided entry into Butte La Rose from the levee for almost seventy years before it was dismantled and replaced by a sleek new concrete one.*

The day before it closed to traffic in February of 2022, I loaded my kayak in the bed of my truck and drove to Butte La Rose, and all morning long I kayaked back and forth under the soon-to-disappear drawbridge, examining it up close and photographing it from every angle.



I thought that I would be documenting the drawbridge, and that would be the end of the story. Turns out, it was only the beginning, because that morning I learned that the old drawbridge had a name. I'd known it for fifty years, driven over it hundreds of times, and not once did I consider the possibility that it might have a name. We always called it the pontoon bridge or the Butte La Rose bridge.

But no, there was a sign screwed into the bridge—you can't see it if you're driving across it, although it's obvious when you're down in the water—and the old drawbridge's name was spelled out in black and white on the sign—*Crocodile Bayou Pontoon Bridge*.

Which struck me as absurd. I had never heard of Crocodile Bayou. And why on earth would anything in Louisiana be named Crocodile anything anyway? Crocodiles don't even live here.

Even more surprising than the unusual name was the fact that the official historic record for the bridge, was also puzzled by the name. On the entry for the bridge, which I tracked down online, there's an asterisk near the name at the top, and when you look down at the bottom of the page to find the asterisk, the footnote says, "No Crocodile Bayou was identified anywhere near the bridge and the reason for that name is unknown." I would spend the next three years figuring it out.

What started out as a morning-long project turned into a three-hundred-plus page book documenting and exploring the "neck of the woods" I call home.



The area from Henderson Lake down past Butte La Rose to Catahoula Lake and beyond—at first glance, this part of the parish might seem unremarkable, a kind of no-man’s land at the edge of the Atchafalaya Basin. But as a border zone between what remains of North America’s Great Swamp on one side of the levee and the relentless march of modernity on the other side of the levee, it’s a fascinating landscape that’s simmering with history, a history that has never really been told.

I explored the area by foot and by kayak, and I had fun studying old maps of the Atchafalaya going back to 1799 to see how much the area had changed. One particularly helpful document was a first-hand written account of the Catahoula Swamp—a place that no longer exists—written by Reverend Monsignor R. J. Gobeil, the so-called boat priest of the Atchafalaya, in the late 1930s. My grandparents moved to Catahoula Lake in the 1920s, so I was able to form a continuous story between these historical documents and my personal family history.



To promote the book's release I wrote a short video trailer, and on two Fridays in November, with filmmaker John Melancon, we filmed it in Catahoula and Butte La Rose. I put out a call for an old truck to drive in the film, and Phil Leger of Breaux Bridge offered his 1969 Ford pickup—with the original yellow paint and period-correct tires. One of the reasons I chose this truck was because it's close to Papop's old truck, a two-tone Ford F-100 of similar vintage.

Stepping into the driver seat of the old truck was like traveling back in time. Nothing digital anywhere. Orange needle on the speedometer. Orange needle on the fuel gauge. The smell. The stick shift. The knobs. The handles. Those small triangular windows that pivot open when you push them. The way you bounce on the seat when you drive over a bump in the road. How hard it is to steer. How humid the wind through those rolled-down windows. It reminded me of a time when we were all much closer to the elements, even inside our vehicles.



We loaded the kayak in the bed of the truck and drove from Catahoula to Butte La Rose, recreating that morning three Februarys ago when I photographed the old drawbridge. Then we drove up to Henderson for a burger, and back down to Butte La Rose, crossing over the levee at least a dozen times until we got the shots we needed.

We also took the drone out into the Atchafalaya Basin to see how things looked from three hundred feet in the air. It was shocking to see how dry things were. The few native bayous that have not been swallowed up yet by silt and vegetation offered only flashes of quicksilver in the otherwise dense greenery of the once-quite-swampy landscape.

Seeing the landscape through the eyes of the drone drove the message home. Not only are the old bridges of my childhood disappearing, the bayous of my childhood are disappearing, too.

It's only a matter of time.

