



Let's Go Crawfishing with Uncle Cheese

My *uncle*, Dudley Theriot, known to family and friends as Cheese, has been catching crawfish one way or another since 1938. As a young boy he would tie pieces of string to corn cobs and let them sink into Catahoula Lake. "I'd throw fifteen lines in the water and go back with a dip net," he said. "In an hour I could fill a number three tub."



He's made some changes to his technique over the years—better bait, better nets—but in one important way, he hasn't strayed far from those corn cobs and pieces of string. Because for him, it's never been about getting the most crawfish, and it's never been about making a lot of money. It's always been about having a good time, something to do during his time off from work. And now in his retirement, months away from turning 93, it's still something he looks forward to every spring. In February, March and April of this year, I tagged along with Uncle Cheese as he went crawfishing in the Atchafalaya Basin, and I photographed the entire process from bait to boil.

The Bait

In crawfishing, bait is usually the biggest expense—especially if you use pre-made commercial pellets—but if you know how to use a hoop net, you can get your bait for free, and that will go a long way to keeping your costs down. Uncle Cheese has never been in it to make a lot of money, but he also says he isn't going to do something if he's "going to go backward" either. Fortunately, crawfish aren't picky eaters; any fish will make for good bait. Uncle Cheese prefers buffalo fish, a large fish that's plentiful in southern Louisiana. As crawfish bait, it's ideal.

Although buffalo fish are technically edible, they have a lot of bones, they're bloodier than other fish, and they can be a chore to prepare. They aren't easy to catch with a hook and line, but with a hoop net, there's plenty for the taking.



A hoop net, as you can guess from the name, is a long tubular net, sometimes twelve feet or longer, constructed around a series of large hoops. A flue runs down the center of it, funneling fish of a certain size into the blind end of the net. Uncle Cheese remembers Papop (my grandfather) going out into the lake with large hoop nets to catch fish, but he didn't learn how to make them until many years later. In the 70s, when he needed a pastime in between periods of work offshore, he learned how to make hoop nets from Tutu Wiltz and his wife, residents of Butte La Rose.

The secret to a good hoop net is the size of the flue through which fish enter the net—wide enough to allow big fish through but narrow enough to keep them from swimming back out. He told me the first hoop net he made on his own was pretty crooked. The second one was a little bit better. "But by the third one," he said. "That was it. I had it." He's been using the same pattern ever since. When word got around that he was making hoop nets, everybody wanted one. He made dozens of hoop nets for others. He'd tell them the materials they needed to buy, and he would take it from there. At one point he personally had thirty-five hoop nets. In his lifetime he's made easily over a hundred.

It's not enough to know how to make a hoop net, you also have to know when to put them in the water. Uncle Cheese put his hoop net in Catahoula Lake after a four-inch rain in February, when the water in the lake seemed to go up a foot or two overnight. He knew that's when the fish would be running, and sure enough, he pulled up a lot of fish in his hoop net. He kept the catfish, garfish and gaspergou for eating, and the buffalo fish went into his freezers—he keeps up to four or five hundred pounds at a time. When April came around, he was ready to roll, slicing the frozen fish with a meat saw into bait-sized chunks.



The Trap

Once you have the bait, you need a trap to put the bait in. “Old-time” crawfish traps, those in use in the 40s and 50s, were made from two separate parts—a barrel and a flue. (The flue is the funnel the crawfish swim through; the barrel is where the bait is placed, and where the crawfish are caught.) The two parts, each constructed of wire mesh, were clamped together to form what was called a “single flue” trap. In the 60s, Catahoula native Bernard Blanchard made an innovation to that “single flue” design. Instead of constructing the barrel and the flue separately, he designed a trap that could be made from a single length of wire mesh.

In the so-called “double flue” design, a length of mesh is formed into a barrel shape then clamped closed at one end. (Imagine a pillow case with one end left open.) The two corners of the clamped end are cut off to create crawfish-sized holes, and the corners are pushed into the barrel—hence the double flue. The other end of the trap—the end you put the bait in and take the crawfish out of—is closed by rolling it in on itself and pinning it with what looks like a giant wooden clothespin.

This “double flue” design, also known as the “pillow-type” crawfish trap, quickly became the new standard. It improved on the old design in two important ways. It saved material—you could get more traps from a spool of wire mesh—and it trapped crawfish better too. The pillow-type traps could be laid on their sides in shallow water, of, if needed, they could be stood on one end with part of the trap sticking out of the water. This more vertical orientation of the trap can give trapped crawfish the ability to climb the walls to access oxygenated water lying closer to the surface.

Uncle Cheese has been using some of these traps for thirty years. The life span of a trap depends mostly on the wire it’s made from. He said you’d be lucky to get four years use out of a trap made from black-coated wire; green coated wire lasts a lot longer. Of course, traps can be bought pre-made too, but paying twice as much for a trap that could be made with only a little bit of effort is perhaps a bigger sin around here than eating meat on a Friday during Lent. He comes from a generation committed to the principle that if you can make something yourself, you make it yourself.

The Location

Uncle Cheese has been crawfishing in the Atchafalaya Basin since the early 70s. He's moved his traps around some—he has about seventy-five in use at the moment—but he has been sticking to the same general area. I can tell you it's around Cocodrie and Bay Toni, but I can't be more specific than that. If you don't know where they are, good luck trying to find them. In fact, good luck trying to find them even if you do know where they are. It's not so much that the landscape offers no landmarks. It's just that the landmarks are always changing. The trees are always growing, and water levels can fluctuate up to fifteen feet.



Uncle Cheese knows Cocodrie like the back of his hand, and on that April morning when he showed me his spot, he nosed his aluminum skiff without hesitation right through a wall of vegetation and cypress knees, into the open pockets of that secretly shaded bayou.

The Catch

Uncle Cheese's crawfish traps, baited days earlier, hung from the trunks of bald cypresses and dangled unseen beneath the surface of the water, their presence betrayed only by short lengths of plastic orange ribbon marking their location.



As he maneuvered through the labyrinth, moving from tree to tree with ease, now forward, now backward, now rolling over logs lurking just beneath the surface, he paused so that my dad could pull up each trap, remove the large wooden clothespin from the open end, and dump its contents into a large plastic tub built into a wooden frame such that it tilts at a slight angle.

Remnants of the bait fish, mostly bones, were removed from the tub and tossed back into the bayou. In one of the traps, there was a four-foot snake, and that had to be tossed back too. The debris was removed, and my dad swept the crawfish down the slight incline with his hands, through the hole at the end of the tub, funneling them into the open sack that was waiting to receive them.

How long do you have to wait after baiting a crawfish trap? Uncle Cheese told me that there were times in the past when he would bait his traps one day and pull them up the next day. Used to be, he said, you could go five or six days a week and pull crawfish up every day like that. Some days, even, he would circle back to his first trap after raising his last one, and the trap would have started to fill with crawfish again just in the time it took him to raise all his traps. Longtime crawfishermen agree that, without drastic policy changes to the management of the Atchafalaya, those days are truly gone. Today, it's possible to bait your traps and even after four or five days, you might barely catch any crawfish.

Uncle Cheese has a commercial license, so he isn't limited in how many traps he can use. At one point, he was running two hundred traps. Now he's down to seventy-five or eighty. To really make a business out of it, he said, you would need about four hundred traps.



Almost all of the crawfish produced in the country, around ninety percent, comes from Louisiana, and most of it is farmed. According to Louisiana Farm Bureau, “In a typical year, 88% of all crawfish produced in Louisiana come from aquaculture ponds and 12% come from the wild.” There has always been a tension between crawfishermen who crawfish in the basin and crawfishermen who operate crawfish farms, although the seasons don’t overlap much. Pond-farmed crawfish come into season in late autumn and continue into early spring. Wild crawfish will start running in the basin as early as February and peak between April and June.

Do wild crawfish taste better than pond crawfish? Depends on who you ask. Pond crawfish—typically only the red swamp crawfish species—tend to be more uniform. For that reason, wild crawfish can be hard to sell. People like the idea of eating wild crawfish, but will often find fault with them, complaining that they're too small, or too irregular, "or too this, or too that," Uncle Cheese told me with a smirk. During the peak of the season, wild crawfish do become more uniform in size, and that is a sure sign that they will be tasty as well. He's knows when the season is over, because the crawfish will start tasting like mud. You can still catch some, but they won't be as tasty.

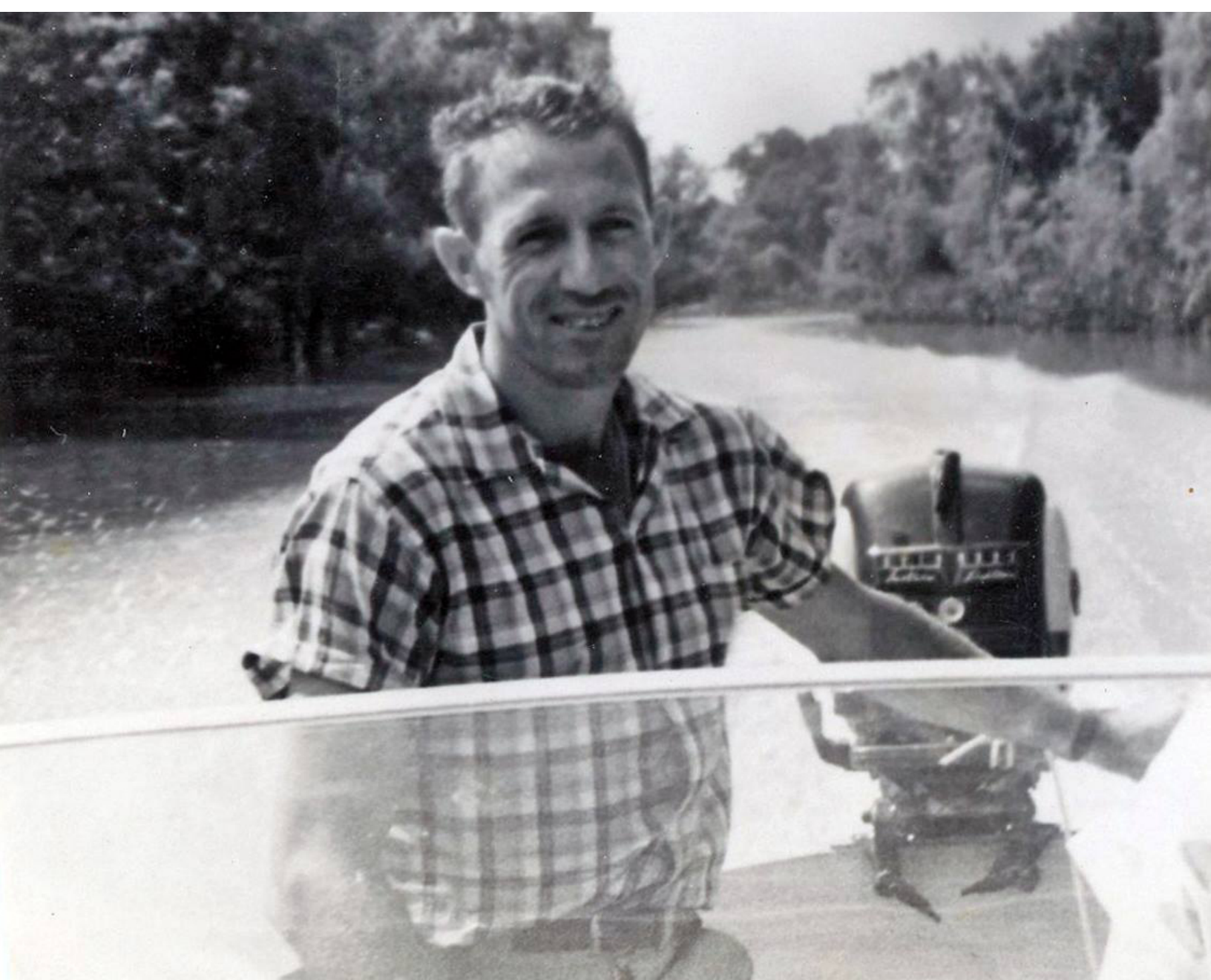


The Boil

Uncle Cheese prefers to keep it simple when it comes to the boil. After he brings the water to a boil, he throws the crawfish in, and when the water returns to a boil, he waits between five and seven minutes and turns the fire off. Then he leaves them in the pot for another minute before taking them out. If he's boiling some just for him and his wife, my aunt Anna Lee, he uses very little seasoning—just the crawfish and no vegetables. If he's cooking for a larger group, he might add potatoes, corn or sausage. There are many variations on this basic technique, and ask ten different people in St. Martin Parish how to boil crawfish, and you will get ten different answers.



Sitting down to eat a meal of boiled wild crawfish, you don't see all the effort that has gone into it. You don't see how the hoop nets were made, how the hoop nets were put out, how the bait fish was caught, how the bait fish was frozen. You don't see the early mornings piloting the skiff down the long access canal into the heart of the Atchafalaya to add bait to the traps. You don't see the early mornings piloting the skiff down the long access canal into the heart of the Atchafalaya to raise the traps days later. You also don't see all the crawfish that haven't been caught, the years when a crawfisherman barely recoups the expenses they put in—the fuel, the license, the bait, etc. And you don't see all the time spent.



If that sounds like a lot of work, you'd be right and you'd be wrong, and therein lies the secret of it all. Because there's something about the whole process that is a way of life itself. Not a metaphor for life, but life as it is truly lived, guided by the recognition that with some effort, some cleverness, a little bit of patience, and a lot of persistence, you can take what Mother Nature gives you and turn into a steaming pile of crawfish, not unlike gold that has been spun from common straw.

"It's not a lot of work," Uncle Cheese said matter-of-factly, "but it sure is a lot of pastime."