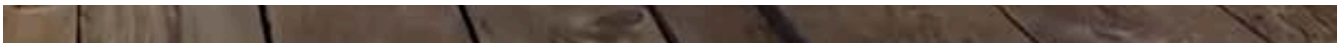
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Seeking Tales and Sipping Whiskey in a Shack Floating Down the Bayou

The shanty boat was bound for New Orleans, but the destination mattered less than the challenges, chance encounters and lessons learned along the way.

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By
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Rick Rojas reported from aboard a shanty boat cruising the Intracoastal Waterway in southern Louisiana.

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The voyage in the little wooden houseboat started in June on the Red River, shifting over to the Atchafalaya and then down into the bayous that cut through southern Louisiana. A few weeks in, the days melted into a blur of sweat, bug bites and chance encounters with strangers.

One of them caught, killed and cooked an alligator when he heard that the boat's crew had never tried it before. Another saw the vessel pulling up to his property and called the police. Now, Wes Modes, its owner and captain, had it moored at a marina wedged between two bridges in Houma, La., a city of 31,000 set on Bayou Terrebonne. It was Saturday morning, and a steady stream of residents approached. It was a strange sight, after all — a floating shack, rising and falling with the tides.

"Where did you put in?" someone asked.

"Where are you going?" added another.

But the captain — who had started the trip near Alexandria, in the central part of the state, and would end it in New Orleans — had a pressing question for them, too: What role have the rivers, bayous, swamps and marshes that helped define Louisiana played in their lives and livelihoods?

For more than a decade, the boat has crisscrossed the country — traveling over portions of the Mississippi, Ohio and Tennessee Rivers, among others — as part of a quixotic pursuit of knowledge and escape that the captain calls "A Secret History of American River People."

"We always kind of say, 'Come for the shanty boat, but stay for the deeper stories,'" said Mx. Modes, who uses they/them pronouns and tells just about everyone to call them Wes.



Wes is a multidisciplinary artist and college professor specializing in digital visualization. Annie Flanagan for The New York Times



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A multidisciplinary artist and college professor specializing in digital visualization, Wes has recorded interviews with about 175 people, touching on art, music, food, wildlife, work and the role of all those things in family histories. They intend for the project to stretch over as many years and river systems as possible.

The vessel is called a shanty boat, which is precisely what the name suggests: a simple dwelling perched on a wooden hull, powered by an outboard motor. Wes built it with friends at home in Felton, Calif., just north of Santa Cruz. A chicken coop made of redwood was refashioned into the shanty.

I'd kept tabs on the latest trek in Louisiana throughout the summer, exchanging phone calls and text messages, before joining Wes for a couple of days on the boat, meeting in Houma and then cruising a segment of the Intracoastal Waterway, the 3,000-mile inland channel connecting Massachusetts to Brownsville, Texas.

As far as research goes, the project is highly informal, unattached to any institution and paid for with limited grants, crowdsourcing and personal savings. The findings have been shared so far by way of videos, blog entries and a detailed catalog of interviews posted on the project's website.

Conversations with those who approached the boat in Houma often started with memories and rollicking tales. But just as often, they gradually shifted to reveal a simmering angst felt by people watching the place they knew best ebb away.

The environment is changing in rapid and disorienting ways, and so is a kind of existence that had survived for generations. Land is disappearing as sea levels rise and water constantly encroaches. The population is, too. Repeat storms have driven the cost of insurance so high that many feel they have no choice but to leave.

Hugh Paul Fanguy, 90, stepped gingerly aboard with his daughter. The land loss was impossible to miss, he said. In his lifetime, Louisiana had relinquished an amount of land roughly the size of Delaware to the water. When he goes out on his own boat, he remembers where missing islands and bayous once were.

"It still shows up on the GPS," Mr. Fanguy said.

"It degrades that quickly," his daughter, Angie Dominique, said.

Andrus Hebert, 69, walked up in a sleeveless T-shirt imprinted with a raccoon brandishing a pair of semiautomatic rifles. He had spent some five decades working on the water, including as a tugboat captain.

He initially eyed the shanty boat with skepticism, especially when he heard it would be out on the Intracoastal Waterway, where he expected it would encounter choppy conditions. "Have a life jacket on," he warned.

Yet something in him came alive as he explored the boat, inside and out. He asked for a photograph of himself in front of it.

"This is like Huckleberry Finn," he told Wes. "You're living it out."

He gave them his phone number.

"I don't care if it's 2 o'clock in the morning," Mr. Hebert added. "If you need something, give me a call!"

Along the way, Wes, 58, had been offered oranges, showers, access to washing machines, strips of bamboo to repair the awning over the shanty's front porch and golf cart rides to a bar. They had met people like Mr. Hebert who had spent their lives working on tugboats; fishermen; teachers and musicians. It took a little prodding sometimes, but more than a few agreed to be interviewed on video.

They included the descendants of Cajuns who settled in the bayous after having been run out of other places. Others had found themselves there because of the promise of a working coastline, where the jobs in the maritime and oil and gas industries were physically demanding but plentiful, and came with good pay.



The Intracoastal Waterway is a 3,000-mile inland channel connecting Massachusetts to Brownsville, Texas.



Cigars and whiskey on the shanty boat.

Wes recognized that some voices were conspicuously absent: Descendants of enslaved people who had been brought against their will, and of the native people who were the first to establish communities along these southern Louisiana waterways.

Waterways can offer a porthole into the soul of a place — its history, its industry, its priorities and values, its imbalances, its struggles with a changing climate. The people Wes interviews always say some variation of "the river is life," whether in Ohio, Tennessee, California or Louisiana. It was true.

But those who have been displaced — by force, by gentrification, by the environment — are not there to tell their story.

"We're experiencing how the river is now," Wes said.

This summer, the schedule stayed loose. The only firm thing on the calendar was a new job for Wes in the fall, as an assistant professor at the University of Cincinnati. In many ways, it is an example of the journey mattering more than the destination, as the old saw goes.

"We're going with the flow of the river," said Adrian Nankivell, 54, who befriended Wes years ago at Burning Man and has joined several of the journeys. "The pace of it is dictated by the adventures along the way."

A shanty boat is not built to hurry; it moves at less than 10 miles per hour. But such a languid clip can be an advantage. There was plenty of time, for example, to notice the shift from the farmland and pine forests of Central Louisiana to the canopied bayous farther south.

Setting off from Houma, the boat eased onto the Intracoastal Waterway, which was crowded with barges carrying petrochemical products and lined by a galvanized horizon of the pipes and flares of nearby plants.

The heat and humidity grew more torturous as the day wore on. Shirts came off. By the middle of the afternoon, Wes was relaxing on the shanty's front porch, sipping whiskey and smoking a cigar as a Taylor Swift song blared from a speaker.

Sometimes, Adrian conceded, traveling by shanty boat can be "an exercise in sleep deprivation." The night before, the electricity on the dock in Houma where they were tied up wasn't working, and the only fan was in Wes's bunk. The two of them had also gone to a bar and met new friends who took them on a late-night tour that only natives could offer.

For Wes, the river journeys helped sate a wanderlust unlocked by a book they read in fifth grade about the Kon-Tiki rafting expedition across the Pacific Ocean, and by Mark Twain's descriptions of sunrises on the river in "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn." As an adult, they hopped trains until knee injuries interfered.

Toward the end of the day, a man they had been trying to find and interview finally called back: R.J. Molinere, who has ancestral ties to the native Houma people. Come meet him, he said.



Adrian Nankivell, left, befriended Wes years ago at Burning Man and has joined several of the journeys.



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Wes guided the boat into a canal choked with water hyacinths. Adrian wielded a machete to beat back the waxy leaves that swarmed the hull and clumped underneath it.

After some twists and turns, there was Mr. Molinere, waiting on the bank.

He was 63, with a thin, braided ponytail and muscles shaped by competitive arm wrestling and tangling with alligators. He said he remembered the first alligator he had hunted, in 1979. His mother taught him how.

Eventually, the alligators led him to an unlikely fame. He and his son were cast on “Swamp People,” a show that became a reality TV juggernaut.

Still, he said, he would never play up the drama for the cameras.

“You lose your respect for that alligator,” he said, “you’re going to lose both your hands, or your life.”

The show and all that came with it took Mr. Molinere in bewildering and unexpected directions, he told his interviewers. He gets recognized frequently. TMZ wrote about it when he and his son were involved in a brawl outside a convenience store.

But while the landscape around him may be changing, his connection to it is not.

“This right here is us,” Mr. Molinere said. “That’s what we love. This is where we’re from.”

He said he had time for one more question.

“I’m going to ask you to close your eyes,” Wes said, instructing him to imagine himself alone on the water. “Tell me what you see, hear and smell.”

“Right now, I smell money,” Mr. Molinere replied. “I hear the crickets, and I smell the good air that the bayou has to give you.”

Afterward, as Wes and Adrian untied the boat and started pushing off, Mr. Molinere apologized. He worried he had not been helpful.

Wes swatted that down.

The conversation might have been brief. But after all these weeks and miles, they were chugging toward New Orleans, with some of what they had been searching for.

Rick Rojas is the Atlanta bureau chief for The Times, leading coverage of the South.

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