



Boat Maker

Raymond Sedotol is a boat builder from Pierre Part, Assumption Parish, a community largely populated with people of Cajun heritage. He is accomplished at making the wooden boats traditional to southeast Louisiana, such as pirogues and rowing skiffs.

Raymond was a young boy when his mother died. He lived in the Atchafalaya Basin with his father, a timber cutter in the swamp. As a young man, Raymond also worked as a timber-cutter for about thirty years. He lived in a floating logging camp, and went home to Pierre Part perhaps once a month.

He learned to build boats from his grandfather, but says that most men in the Basin knew how to build boats out of necessity. They were the loggers' only mode of transportation in the swamp. The men often used a rowing skiff, in which the person rowing stood and faced forward, because as Mr. Sedotol jokes, "A Cajun doesn't want to row backwards. He wants to know where he's going, not where he's been." The men also used working pirogues for cutting timber, using an iron chain-dog before they had chain saws.

Mr. Sedotol remarks that in his youth, the Atchafalaya Basin was very different than it is today. He remembers the Basin being "like Paradise--you didn't need money to live in there, you were free. You could catch turtles, many kinds of fish, rabbits, and deer."

When he eventually left the timber industry, he returned to Pierre Part where he began carpentry work and making boats. The greatest demand is for the pirogue, which remains an ideal boat for hunting, trapping, and fishing in shallow bayous. Its flat bottom and sharply tapered bow and stern allow it to be easily navigated where other boats can't go. Fishermen use pirogues early in the crawfish season, and pirogues are also popular for duck hunting and frogging. His pirogues range from 6 feet to 16 feet in length. He also makes paddles and toy pirogues.

The earliest pirogues were narrow dugouts made from whole cypress logs. Although Mr. Sedotol can make a dugout pirogue, it is very difficult today to find good cypress logs of adequate size. For this reason, boat builders began making plank pirogues of cypress planks. As it became increasingly difficult to find good cypress, they began building the pirogues with marine plywood and stripping the boats with cypress.

Mr. Sedotol has also occasionally built aluminum boats, which are more durable but generally less comfortable than marine plywood.

At the age of 65, Raymond Sedotol began carving ducks from wood. He originally made decoys, but now crafts decorative pieces. He is also an excellent storyteller and is knowledgeable about many aspects of Cajun culture, like folk healing.

Mr. Sedotol is serving as a master boat builder for the Louisiana Folklife Apprenticeship Program. With his uncle, Alex Giroir, he has demonstrated boat building at festivals throughout Louisiana and other states, including the Smithsonian's Festival of American Folklife, the Natchitoches-NSU Folk Festival, the Louisiana Folklife Festival, and the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival.