

The Gulf Harvest

The first Native American inhabitants of the Atchafalaya Basin depended upon the seafood provided by the river, basin, bayous, and Gulf. Archaeological sites throughout South Louisiana are defined by shell middens, the heaped discarded remains of oyster feasts. Later settlers were also dependent upon the bounty of the waterways for survival.

Commercial fishing for profit was not prominent in the area until the development of a device called a tow car enabled the transport of seafood from the remote bayou reaches to the railhead at Morgan City. By the 1880s, the packing and shipping of oysters and shrimp had become a principal business. The seafood industry bloomed over the next few decades as technology such as fast freezing allowed for better storage and long range shipping.

The fleet of ocean-going shrimp trawlers and seafood vessels that make port in Morgan City is a vital part of the culture. Generation after generation, local men have learned the special skills associated with harvesting the Gulf's bounty and become accustomed to days of back-breaking labor out of sight of land. The shrimpers have weathered the fiercest storms of the Gulf, and rescued many unlucky individuals from the sometimes treacherous waters. These veterans of the fishing industry, such as "Butch" Felterman, are excellent storytellers and passionate about their work.

Every Labor Day weekend since 1936, the fleet has gathered in Morgan City to participate in the Blessing of the Fleet. The owners decorate their vessels and parade in the Atchafalaya following the Blessing. The tradition is at the center of the Louisiana Shrimp & Petroleum Festival, the state's oldest chartered harvest festival. Since the advent of the offshore oil industry, the crew boats and petroleum industry vessels also participate. The seafood and oil industries coexist harmoniously along the Cajun Coast, and many men have worked in both Gulf-based industries.
