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THE INDOCHINESE IN BAYOU LA BATRE, ALABAMA: A PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT OF SOCIAL IMPACTS

by

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PREFACE

Sea Grant Advisory Service staff in most Gulf Coast States have been exposed to many of the ideas and situations that are described in this publication. The potential for confrontation between established local fishermen and relatively recent immigrants from Southeast Asia, who may be or may not be U.S. citizens, has varied in intensity over time and with geographical location.

Except for a few articles that have appeared in the popular press and a limited number of sociological studies, little analytical data exists on Southeast Asian fishermen or the relationship between them and the existing fishing community. Dr. Thomas willingly shared his findings with the Alabama Sea Grant Advisory Service and we decided to publish his results so that other Sea Grant Advisory Programs might use the information he obtained.

The study on which this publication is based was not funded or otherwise supported by Sea Grant. The Alabama Sea Grant Advisory Service does not endorse or dispute the findings of the investigator. This publication has been made available for distribution to the Sea Grant Network to help close the "information gap" that exists on the topics covered by this report and to help provide a better understanding of the situation.

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INTRODUCTION

During the past ten years, a number of Indochinese refugees have settled in Gulf coast fishing communities. Since 1978, the Alabama fishing community of Bayou La Batre has experienced a steady increase in the number of Cambodian, Laotian and Vietnamese refugees. Only in the past few years, however, has Indochinese involvement in various aspects of the local fishing industry diversified. This preliminary paper documents the Indochinese entrance into Bayou La Batre, brings to light some of the more salient reactions to their presence in the community, and describes adjustments the Vietnamese have made to commercial fishing in this area. It is important to understand that ethnic relations in Bayou La Batre are complex and that this study attempts to understand the issues involved in the process of assimilation and adjustment.

While there is a growing body of research on refugee resettlement in the United States (Starr and Roberts, 1981), information on the adjustments made by Indochinese in American fishing communities is scant. Much of what has been written has appeared in the popular press (Arden, 1981; Bloom, 1979; Klein, 1985; and Lyons, 1976). Efforts by social scientists include descriptions of reactions by established local fishing interests to Vietnamese in the Florida Panhandle (Starr, 1981); and a description of the relationship between established local policies which govern fishing practices and Indochinese adaptations in Monterey, California (Orbach and Beckwith, 1981).

These two studies focus on Anglo reactions to Vietnamese presence. We still lack detailed information about: (1) long-term Indochinese goals in this labor sector; (2) Vietnamese reasons for entering various segments of the industry; (3) an idea of the particular problems the Vietnamese have encountered in their new land; and (4) the solutions they have generated to solve them. There is,

therefore, a particular need for social research to understand the involvement of Indochinese refugees in U.S. fisheries and their impact on small fishing communities in particular.

THE COMMUNITY

Bayou La Batre, located 25 miles southwest of the city of Mobile, is listed in the 1980 U.S. census as having a population of approximately 2000. Despite its size, it is Alabama's most important fishing community and consistently ranks among the top 15 ports in the nation based on value of landings. The value of the 1984 Bayou La Batre shrimp landings was \$41 million. For every shrimp landed in port, four are trucked in from other landing sites along the coast for processing. A total of \$205 million worth of shrimp were processed in the Bayou La Batre last year. When the value of crab, oysters, and finfish are added, the figures become even more impressive.

Ship building is another significant sector of the local economy, and related revenue figures are staggering given the size of the community. The revenue generated from all boats built for export and domestic use in the community last year totals more than \$21 million. Labeling this community as a small Alabama fishing village is, at best, an understatement.

As one might expect, the fleet fishing out of Bayou La Batre is complex. Boats range from small wood craft, which work mostly the inland water of Mississippi Sound, adjacent bays, and the Mobile Ship Channel, to highly sophisticated steel hulled "slabs" greater than 90 feet in length. These consistently fish the deeper Gulf waters and work year round. While the total number of boats harbored in the bayou is variable, best estimates place the figure between 300 and 350.

POPULATION ESTIMATES

In 1981, Starr observed that refugee resettlement programs in Florida, Louisiana, and Mississippi left only Alabama "among" the Gulf states without a highly visible community of Vietnamese fisher folk and their fleet (1981: 227). Since then, the number of Indochinese in Bayou La Batre has grown to between 450 and 800, a significant increase over the 2000 inhabitants estimated by the 1980 census.

Determining the Indochinese population in Bayou La Batre is confounded by a number of factors. First, approximately 300 Vietnamese work in local fish processing plants but live in nearby Mobile. Second, interviews with Vietnamese shrimpers reveal that, while many of them fish out of Bayou La Batre, some live in the neighboring coastal communities of Pensacola, Biloxi, and Pascagoula. Fishermen migrate here for the shrimp season (May to December) from up-state Alabama, Louisiana, and a few from as far away as California. Without taking a complete census of the community, it is difficult to estimate the total Indochinese presence in Bayou La Batre.

Based on interviews, school enrollment figures and observations made during the course of this investigation, it is not unreasonable to suggest a Vietnamese population of between 300 and 500. Further, local estimates place the Cambodian population at nearly 200, and the Laotians at about 100. Obviously, a considerable change in the social and economic character of the community has occurred since 1980.

MIGRATION HISTORY

Community residents suggest that the first Southeast Asians to enter the community in any number were from Thailand. More likely, this original group was ethnic Tai, an indigenous group distributed

throughout Indochina. There were also a few Vietnamese in this first group. Both Tai and Vietnamese were employed in the fish processing houses either as crab pickers or oyster shuckers: work considered laborious and only marginally profitable by other segments of the community. The first wave of immigrants began arriving prior to Hurricane Frederick in 1979.

During the following two years (1979/80), a second group of refugees, primarily Vietnamese, came to live and work in Bayou la Batre. Many came from Louisiana while others came from California and Washington. At about the same time, a number of Cambodians also began working in the community, and in the following year (1981), a small number of Laotians were employed. Of the three ethnic groups, the Vietnamese were the largest, followed by Cambodians and then Laotians. The majority of Indochinese currently are employed processing crab and oysters.

Since their initial involvement in local processing plants, the Vietnamese, in particular, have been quick to take advantage of other economic opportunities in the community. In the last two years, a grocery and two Vietnamese restaurants have opened. One restaurant has a small general store and billiard hall attached to it. The Vietnamese have also started shrimp fishing, and in 1984 a Vietnamese fish processing plant was opened. It is in the area of shrimp fishing that the Vietnamese have gained the greatest attention along the Gulf coast.

CURRENT VIETNAMESE INVOLVEMENT

Beginning in early 1982, a number of Vietnamese began buying small boats and shrimping the shallow inshore waters of Mississippi Sound. Since then, the Vietnamese fleet has grown to 40 boats, 10 of which are either working the Gulf or can be classified as

inshore/offshore vessels. When the Vietnamese were asked why they decided to fish in the U.S., their answers were much like fishermen everywhere. The most common responses include a desire for independence and freedom, being one's own boss, and good money. They also pointed out that fishing is one of the few professions one could enter without having to speak English. Further, a number of researchers have noted that the majority of Vietnamese involved in fishing here also fished in Vietnam. (Arden, 1981; Lyons, 1976; Starr, 1981).

To assume, however, that the Vietnamese are fishing here only because that is what they did in Vietnam is simplistic. They have had to adjust to a number of new physical and social environmental challenges, as well as significant technological changes in fishing equipment in their new setting (Donoghue, 1963).

One of the biggest problems any fisherman faces is the weather. Gulf waters can become heavy in a relatively short time. The Vietnamese say that the weather changes here much faster than in Vietnam and that they have not as yet developed the folk knowledge necessary to read and understand signs accompanying changing weather conditions. They lack an understanding of how rough the Gulf can become and the toll that can be taken on a fully loaded shrimp boat. The Vietnamese also view fishing here as more dangerous because Gulf waters get cold. It is easier to drown from exposure than in Vietnam where waters remain fairly warm year round.

The Vietnamese lack a general understanding of the physical countour of the bottoms they work. Submerged wrecks, capped oil rigs, and other bottom obstructions can cost an owner thousands of dollars in lost nets, doors, and cable. Language skills and lack of electronic locating devices preclude the Vietnamese from taking advantage of available "hang books" which alert fishermen to these hazards.

Technologically, the Vietnamese fishing fleet is less sophisticated than that of their Anglo counterparts. Their boats are smaller, older, and carry less electronic gear. Many boats lack such complex and expensive items as radar, Loran-C, and Loran-C plotters; items Anglo fishermen claim have significantly reduced risks associated with fishing.

Finally, fishing has a social dimension to which the Vietnamese must adjust. Not only do legal restrictions govern shrimping inshore, but a host of tacit agreements exist between traditional fishermen about what constitutes appropriate fishing behavior. To succeed, new entrants to the fishery must quickly become aware of and sensitive to both sets of constraints.

In fact, some of the most anxious statements about Vietnamese involvement come from Anglo fishermen and center on Vietnamese violations of fishing norms. Anglo fishermen argue that the Vietnamese "don't know the rules," and "just don't fish like we do." Some complain the Vietnamese have disrupted their drags by crossing in front of them and that "they drag any way and where they want." One Anglo fisherman reported being fired upon by Vietnamese.

Almost every Vietnamese shrimper has had at least one negative encounter with an Anglo. These incidents range from minor affronts to more serious physical threats. Vietnamese boats have been edged out of fishing areas by larger Anglo boats, net cables have been cut, and nets destroyed. At dock-side, there have been serious arguments over berthing space, and guns were drawn on Vietnamese fishermen in at least two cases.

VIETNAMESE ADJUSTMENTS

To reiterate, the argument that Vietnamese fishermen are fishing here because they fished in Vietnam is to belie the effect of two sets of differing social and physical environmental forces. The Vietnamese have had to adjust to problems here for which they were not prepared. While the range of adjustments at the individual level have been undoubtedly wide, the Vietnamese have developed a more limited, yet efficacious, set of mechanisms at the group level to resolve many of these problems.

When fishermen leave the dock to fish, they leave boat by boat. It is easy to assume that fishing is a lone endeavor involving a boat, the captain, and his crew. For the vast majority of shrimp fishermen, this is not true. Many captains in Bayou La Batre tend to fish in well-defined groups where members share information about the availability of shrimp (See Gatewood, 1984; and Maril, 1983). The Vietnamese have found that fishing in groups has a number of distinct advantages. A good deal of information about who is catching shrimp and where is passed from boat to boat via CB radio. Also, fishing in groups minimizes the risk to individuals by alerting them to obstructions upon which others have run. Often extra nets are carried on board, and these can be shared between group members. Individuals can also take advantage of the differential language skills of group members and of the electronic equipment held in common by the group. English-speaking captains, for example, may share information received over VHF radio with group members having only CB units. They may also serve as interpreters for members should they be stopped for fishing violations.

Another advantage of fishing in groups is that it reduces the risk of being stranded at sea in the event of a breakdown. Again, expertise about how to fix the problem can be readily shared and, failing that, one can be towed to port. Group fishing may

reduce the potential risk of individual harassment that many Vietnamese fishermen have experienced.

Finally, almost all Vietnamese fishing from Bayou La Batre sell their catch to a single Vietnamese buyer who serves as a coordinating link between groups. Information about dangerous weather conditions is broadcast from shore to ship as is information about spots where shrimp are likely to be found. Further, advice is given on the areas that are open or closed to shrimping and the markers used to delimit these areas.

There are also disadvantages to group fishing. Information sharing certainly reduces the amount of shrimp an individual could catch if the information was not shared. Also, someone must tow a group member should a breakdown occur, and both lose fishing time. The benefits, however, ostensibly outweigh the disadvantages.

The Vietnamese are not unique with regards to group fishing. However, the degree to which groups are integrated by a single coordinator may be a structural component lacking among Anglo fishermen. It is interesting to speculate on the degree to which Vietnamese shrimpers are coming to resemble their Anglo counterparts because both must exploit the same environment. One could suggest that, over time, Vietnamese and Anglo fishermen may come to resemble one another more than either group resembles its respective land-based counterpart.

EXPLAINING ANGLO REACTIONS

It would be naive to think one could pinpoint all causes of problems in ethnic relations or of social problems associated with something as complex as the shrimp fishery of the Gulf coast. Starr's recent work has been useful in classifying Anglo reaction to the Vietnamese (1981, 234-235). Reaction falls into three

general types: remedial-integrative, vindictive, and legalistic. Remedial-integrative reactions are community responses which seek to inform and educate the Indochinese to American ways. Vindictive responses include harrassment and mischievous methods to blame, threaten, or hamper Indochinese activities. Legalistic reactions involve legal moves to restrict the pursuit of economic goals.

Remedial-integrative efforts are perhaps the least developed in Bayou La Batre. Some attempts have been made by social agencies to set up and offer English classes, but fishermen offer a special scheduling challenge because of their occupation. For the most part, few have taken advantage of what has been offered. Under remedial-integrative responses, one also must include those of a number of Anglo shrimpers who, on a face-to-face basis, have freely shared information and given advice to Vietnamese fishermen. Of the three response patterns, the remedial-integrative is the least developed in Bayou La Batre.

The hostile acts described previously can be labeled as punitive. As the gap between Anglo and Vietnamese shrimpers continues to exist, it is reasonable to expect such acts will continue.

Legalistic responses related to shrimping have been few. One attempt reportedly underway is to ban bow-fishing or "chopstick" fishing, as it has come to be called. Critics argue such methods allow fishing too close to shore, that it quickly depletes the resource, and that it is detrimental to the environment because it destroys the marshy areas which provide protection for shrimp as they mature. Proponents argue the method is a delicate operation and that no evidence exists to support that it is environmentally degrading. Other legalistic and policy action aimed at the Vietnamese are current in the community, but are not related to shrimping and need not be covered here. Given the severity of the

reaction to Vietnamese entry into the shrimp fishery and the potential for hostile confrontation, what factors help explain the sentiments of Anglo shrimpers?

While no single statement could explain this complex situation, a number of contributing problems and issues stand out. The first involves the structure of the harvest sector of the fishery. Shrimpers are not a homogeneous group. A number of classifications are possible based on boat or vessel size, number of crew, number of trawls and so on. One useful classification is based on the areas of the Gulf within which shrimpers fish. Tentatively, there are three types: inshore fishermen, inshore/offshore fishermen, and offshore fishermen (White, 1978). Inshore fishermen work the bays and the inshore waters of Mississippi Sound. Inshore/offshore fishermen exploit the bays and the waters immediately outside the barrier islands in calm weather. Offshore fishermen, as a rule, work deep Gulf waters well off the barrier islands. As one moves from inshore fishing to offshore, boats get bigger and more expensive, trips become longer and the risks increase. The rewards however, increase as well.

Of the three segments, inshore shrimping is the most regulated. It has a season with a set opening and closing periods, and the type and number of trawls one may drag is strictly regulated. Mobile Bay is a crowded segment of the fishery and any addition here is bound to be viewed negatively by full-time Anglo commercial shrimpers. When the Vietnamese entered the fishery, they did so at this level for a number of reasons.

First, inshore fishing is the least expensive, and, as a result, is the largest component of the harvest sector. Second, the Vietnamese have entered the inshore segment not only because of lower costs and fewer risks, but because only U.S. citizens may own and operate vessels capable of working offshore

waters. This means that those Vietnamese who are not as yet citizens can only work inshore waters or serve as crew on offshore boats. In addition to full-time commercial fishermen, others in this sector include part-time workers who hold jobs on land, and sportsmen who shrimp recreationally. Inshore shrimpers believe that offshore shrimpers, seeking to protect the number and size of shrimp, are responsible for inshore regulations. In fact, the Alabama Fishermen Association (now virtually defunct) was formed by inshore fishermen in an effort to establish a counter-balancing political force.

Another problem is that the shrimp fishery is an open access-common property. The annual stock of shrimp is open to anyone willing to fish them, and at present there are no restrictions on entry. The primary problem of an open access fishery is that without an economic incentive to stop fishing at some level where profits in the industry are maximized, fishermen will continue to perceive an economic profit and will be attracted into the fishery. But, because of the open access nature of the fishery, there is not necessarily a positive relationship between effort and yield over all levels of effort. Effort may respond to perceived opportunity for economic gain, while production may not (Swartz and McIntosh, 1979).

Before the arrival of the Vietnamese, a number of factors may have operated to push the effort level closer to where costs equal revenues. One significant factor was the closure of Mexican territorial waters to North American shrimpers in the late 1970s. Those who had exclusively fished Mexican waters were either forced out of the industry or joined the ranks of those fishing U.S. territorial waters. Given the structure of the harvest sector and certain assumptions about current industry effort, the Vietnamese could not have entered the industry at a worse possible level nor at a more inopportune time.

Finally, since the pricing structure for shrimp is not generally understood by most shrimpers, there will be a tendency to attribute downward price fluctuations to common sense causes. In this regard, the Vietnamese are likely to be viewed as the reason for declining dockside prices. In actuality, the factors which influence the price of shrimp are far removed from the local level; in the end, both Vietnamese and Anglo shrimpers will be indiscriminately affected by those distant economic forces.

CONCLUSIONS AND AVENUES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

In summary, the Indochinese have been in Bayou La Batre since 1978. Only recently have they begun to diversify and expand into a number of local economic sectors. Their initial reception was and continues to be positive, but only by certain segments of the community. Fish processors see them as a much needed labor force in their industry. Anglo shrimpers in the community are less enthusiastic about Vietnamese entry into the shrimp harvesting sector. Anglos, themselves, perceive the industry to be already crowded and are experiencing declining profits. They feel that the Vietnamese effort in this sector will cut further into the meager resources that remain.

The Vietnamese, in particular, have taken advantage of available economic opportunities. They have been quick to make a number of adjustments which facilitate their fishing efforts. Many of these resemble similar adjustments by Anglo fishermen. In fact, a number of avenues for further research hinge on this observation and can be summarized as follows.

First, to what extent is fishing in Vietnam isomorphic with fishing in the Gulf of Mexico? Little evidence currently exists which would indicate that the group fishing strategies demonstrated here also occur in Vietnam (see Donoghue, 1963). If both

Vietnamese and American shrimpers are making similar adjustments to similar environmental pressures, to what degree does this mean Vietnamese shrimpers will come to resemble Anglo fishermen more than their land-based counter parts.

Further, to what extent do Vietnamese and Anglo shrimpers share the same values and goals? The status boundaries in Vietnam are certainly much more rigid than here. Given increased educational and occupational opportunities here, will sons of Vietnamese fishermen be expected to become fishermen as well? If not, Vietnamese involvement in the harvest sector and the conflict between the various groups may prove to be ephemeral.

Without a doubt, the situation in Bayou La Batre provides a unique opportunity for social scientists to study the processes involved in assimilation and adjustment of immigrant populations. Further research can provide needed information to those who manage fisheries and advise commercial fishermen, as well as answers to broader social science issues.

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