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# Shrimp and Petroleum: The Social Ecology of Louisiana's Offshore Industries

## Abstract

This essay examines the intimate historical relationship between two of south Louisiana's most important industries, shrimping and offshore oil. Analyzing the social, cultural, and labor dimensions of environmental change, the essay argues that petroleum did not undermine the environmental sustainability of shrimping, as many scholars assert, but rather evolved in an intimate and complementary relationship to it. The organization of labor, transportation, and physical space by shrimp and petroleum were mutually reinforcing, the products of a similar social ecology of waterborne extraction and commerce. The essay also explains how the close bond between shrimp and petroleum found cultural expression in the Louisiana Shrimp & Petroleum Festival, long held each Labor Day weekend in Morgan City, Louisiana. Ultimately, the threat to the local survival of these industries came not from oil-driven environmental degradation and resource depletion, as often implied, but from global competition and industry migration.

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You and I ought to be friends, Dominique. We both have the same kind of job. You look for one thing in the Gulf. I'm looking for something else. That's the only difference.

—Oilman Steve Martin (Jimmy Stewart) to shrimper Dominique Rigaud (Antonio Moreno), *Thunder Bay* (1953)

## INTRODUCTION

On the Sunday before Labor Day in September 1936, the Gulf Coast Seafood Producers & Trappers Association of Morgan City, Louisiana, held a “friendly labor demonstration” featuring a parade of alligator hunters, crab fishers, dockworkers, oystermen, and shrimpers. What began as a show of labor solidarity morphed into an annual celebration highlighted by the Blessing of the Fleet, in which a local priest asked for God’s graces to be bestowed on the community’s fishing craft. The celebration eventually billed itself as the Louisiana Shrimp Festival, and residents turned out to “pay tribute to an industry which has grown to be the greatest single factor in the economic welfare of Morgan City.”<sup>1</sup>

In 1967 city leaders expanded the celebration to include the petroleum industry, adopting its present-day name, the Louisiana Shrimp & Petroleum Festival. Built along a course of the Atchafalaya River’s final stretch into the Gulf of Mexico (figure 1), Morgan City had by that time emerged as one of the central hubs for offshore oil operators working in the Gulf. The Blessing of the Fleet then included crew and supply boats for offshore operations, as well as shrimp trawlers. Although outside observers have found the festival’s marriage of shrimp and petroleum to be unnatural or perverse, the pairing has historical validity for residents of the Atchafalaya Basin, where one of the world’s most productive shrimp fisheries and one of its most prolific oil-producing regions grew and prospered together for decades.<sup>2</sup>

Scholars often assume that the coexistence between shrimp and petroleum has been an uneasy one, fraught with tension between tradition and modernity, stability and change, and subsistence and profit. Together, these tensions amounted to a conflict between nature (shrimp) and the industrial machine (petroleum). Some argue that the offshore oil industry became the “vehicle whereby the modern world breaches the walls that surround the parochial village,” one that was long sustained by shrimping.<sup>3</sup> When outside oil interests invaded south Louisiana communities, according to this narrative, they introduced new competition for resources, labor, and physical space. Ultimately, this competition undermined both the cultural and environmental sustainability of the traditional shrimping community.<sup>4</sup> Petrodollars, in short, displaced seafood dollars.<sup>5</sup>



Figure 1. Map of Morgan City, Louisiana. Credit: Diane Austin, 2013.

Such a narrative withers under historical scrutiny. Although not immune to conflict, shrimping and oil evolved in an intimate and complementary relationship. For many residents of Louisiana's so-called Cajun Coast, long accustomed to harvesting their surroundings, whether trees, sugarcane, fish, oysters, alligators, or muskrats, extracting oil from the sea was another kind of harvest, no less "natural" than trawling for shrimp. As Jimmy Stewart's character, Steve Martin, insists in the 1953 Hollywood feature, *Thunder Bay*, filmed in Morgan City, the search for shrimp and oil were kindred pursuits. Morgan City shrimpers and oilmen (almost always men), equally shaped by the vagaries of the open water and the capricious bounty of nature, experienced the marine environment of the Gulf of Mexico in similar ways. Even more, they did not merely profit side by side from the Gulf's abundance. Rather, their success was a joint effort. The organization of labor, transportation, and physical space by shrimp and petroleum were mutually reinforcing, the products of a similar social ecology of waterborne extraction and commerce.

Although that twin success lasted decades, it eventually waned. Shrimp and petroleum are still important industries in the Gulf, but their prominence in Morgan City/St. Mary's Parish today is a silhouette of what it once was. Oil development has contributed to other environmental problems along the Gulf Coast, namely coastal erosion and contamination from the BP oil spill of 2010, but the changing

fortunes of shrimp and petroleum in this particular region do not adhere to a convenient story about environmental decline. The threat to the local survival of these industries came not from oil-driven environmental degradation and resource depletion, as often implied, but from global competition and industry migration.

The story is mainly about the sclerosis of a community too deeply tied to the extraction of two conjoined natural resources to adapt to changing circumstances. Like many extractive economies, the Morgan City shrimp and petroleum industries were characterized by high fixed costs in specialized infrastructure and geographic constraints that made them especially vulnerable to the vicissitudes of commodity prices and outside competition. The development of shrimp and petroleum also produced social inertia. The designation of “offshore” as a zone of white male privilege hardened racial and gender lines, weakened the community’s resiliency, and inhibited its capacity for diversification.

Examining the development of intersecting extractive technologies in a marine environment, an example of what Helen Rozwadowski and David van Keuren call the “machine in Neptune’s Garden,” this essay contributes to the project of “historicizing the ocean” by bringing a new subject, that of oil, to a field dominated by work on fisheries.<sup>6</sup> It also builds on insights from envirotech historians who explore the “illusory boundary” between technology and nature, where “the machine has become entwined not just with the garden but with entire ecologies, social and natural, and it is not always clear where the machine ends and nature begins.”<sup>7</sup>

This essay foregrounds the social and labor dimensions of environmental and technological change, especially race, gender, and the organization of work, which envirotech and fisheries historians hesitate to analyze explicitly.<sup>8</sup> Accounting for the rise and fall of Morgan City as the self-proclaimed capital of shrimping and offshore oil requires close attention to the work of shrimpers and oilers. As Richard White wrote in *The Organic Machine*, “it is our work that ultimately links us, for better or worse, to nature.”<sup>9</sup> That link was also important to forging a community identity based on the union of these two forms of extraction that has outlived the local prosperity of both.

## THE BUSINESS OF SHRIMP

The notion that shrimpers had lived cloistered in parochial communities, “guided by values outside the marketplace” before oilmen introduced market forces and competition, is erroneous.<sup>10</sup> The image of the subsistence shrimper working in rhythm with the natural cycle of the shrimp run belies the technologies, regulatory controls, and

long-distance supply chains that have shaped shrimp harvesting for nearly a century.

Compared to other kinds of marine harvesting, commercial shrimping in the United States is not that old. Cajuns and others in south Louisiana had long fished for small brown shrimp in shallow lakes, bays, and estuaries along the coast. They used seine nets dragged from lugger-style fishing boats or they waded on foot with nets into the mud. Until the late nineteenth century, shrimp was harvested not for human consumption, but largely as fish bait sold in local markets. When humans developed a taste for shrimp, Louisianans began selling their catch in distant markets. In the early 1900s, they learned drying techniques from Chinese immigrants and experimented with selling dried shrimp packed in barrels. Drying platforms, however, were susceptible to damage from floods and hurricanes. Americans, meanwhile, never took to eating dried shrimp.<sup>11</sup>

Canned and fresh-frozen shrimp overtook dried shrimp as a marketable commodity. By the 1920s, the expanded use of ice for preserving and transporting seafood, improved methods of canning, and consumer acceptance of canned foods led to a boom in the sale of canned Louisiana shrimp in East Coast markets. Canneries and processors owned boats and hired large crews to run seines while a few fishermen owned their own operations. To prevent overharvesting and depletion, the Louisiana Department of Conservation in 1930 established closed seasons on shrimp fishing and a minimum marketable shrimp size. Commercial shrimping thus relied from the beginning on sales to a national market, wage labor, and state-enforced conservation.<sup>12</sup>

By the mid-1930s, three developments had transformed shrimping into big business and elevated “the shrimper” into a cultural icon in Morgan City and the neighboring towns of Berwick, Patterson, and Amelia. The first was the adoption of the otter trawl, a large cone-shaped net with weights and skids that was pulled along the sea bottom to collect large volumes of shrimp. Otter trawls required relatively large investments, such as the modification of luggers with gasoline engines, but the benefits far outweighed the costs. Trawlers required less manpower, extended the range of shrimping, and enlarged the size of catches.<sup>13</sup>

Otter trawls enabled many shrimpers to leave the employ of canneries and work their own boats with one or two deckhands, often members of their own family. By 1930 fourteen hundred trawls plied the waters off Louisiana’s coast, harvesting an astounding 35 million pounds of shrimp annually—mostly “white shrimp,” a species with a white translucent color and green tail fins.<sup>14</sup> This was double Louisiana’s take ten years earlier, more than three times the haul of any other Gulf Coast or South Atlantic state. Across the state, twenty-eight large canning plants packed and crated the shrimp for rail transport to eastern markets.<sup>15</sup>

The second key development was the discovery in 1933 of a larger kind of “succulent sea shrimp” in waters far beyond the Louisiana shore that created a new harvest opportunity for the sleepy inland port of Morgan City, whose commercial mainstays up to that point had been oystering, crabbing, and cypress lumbering. These white shrimp, having grown beyond one or two spawning seasons, were “so big they were aptly termed ‘jumbo.’”<sup>16</sup> In 1934 packing plants began deheading and icing shrimp fresh, which both decreased their weight and minimized the chance of spoilage. Another new export market arose outside the state that eventually came to dominate the shrimp business in Louisiana.<sup>17</sup>

The third development was the reorganization of work among shrimpers and seafood processors that bolstered their combined market power but also strengthened racial and gender hierarchies in the community. The Great Depression had slashed the earnings of both Gulf Coast shrimpers and the canneries. In 1934 local fishermen and seafood workers, upset with their lack of power in setting prices and wages, organized the Seafoods Workers Association (SWA) of Morgan City. The association enlisted a membership of eighteen hundred that initially included white fishermen as well as white plant workers of both sexes who were typically employed as crab pickers or wage laborers in the plants.<sup>18</sup>

African Americans were excluded from the association. Racial segregation remained the law throughout the Deep South including Morgan City.<sup>19</sup> Photo evidence and oral testimony suggest that African Americans participated in shrimping the same way they did in Georgia’s Atlantic Coast shrimp industry. African American men worked as laborers, or “strickers,” emptying the nets, sorting the catch, and deheading (“heading”) the shrimp while African American women worked in the plants, cleaning and boxing the catch for shipment (figure 2).<sup>20</sup> The ascendance of the gasoline-powered trawlers foreclosed chances for African Americans, who had little access to capital, to become owner-operators of shrimp boats. In addition to the lack of capital to buy trawlers, the industry’s move into the open waters of the Gulf prompted white fishermen to enforce segregation by designating offshore territory “whites only.” Bob Long, an African American born and raised in Morgan City, remembered, “We wasn’t allowed out there. We wasn’t allowed in the Gulf, period. Doing anything. Shrimping, they’d shoot at us.”<sup>21</sup> In the seafood industry, African Americans had to settle for wage labor and economic dependence on the seafood processors.

Inequalities in the shrimp industry widened further when the labor union was transformed, twice. In 1935 the SWA affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL), at which point the union reorganized to represent men only, in addition to excluding African Americans. The union members then struck for higher prices for their



Figure 2. Processing shrimp for packing and market in Morgan City, Louisiana. Courtesy Morgan City Archives.

seafood. Operations were idled at Morgan City processing plants that aligned together under an organization called the Gulf Coast Shrimpers and Oystermen's Association (GCSOA).<sup>22</sup> In June 1936, the GCSOA and SWA agreed to a lower price than initially demanded by the fishermen, but they also united into an organization that would bargain nationally for better prices. The SWA dropped its affiliation with the AFL and reformed as a local branch of the GCSOA, with a membership of 250. The focus of the organization narrowed from advocating economic relief for all seafood workers to obtaining better prices for the seafood caught by white shrimpers, oystermen, and fishermen who had achieved greater independence and bargaining power vis-à-vis the dealers. The previously mentioned "friendly labor demonstration" in September 1936 celebrated the newfound strength of the fishermen.<sup>23</sup>

The association, reorganized yet again after the demonstration as the Gulf Coast Seafoods Producers and Trappers Association, continued to work with the dealers to stabilize prices. The introduction of refrigerated trucks and freezing facilities in the mid-1930s gave this new alliance commercial leverage. Local dealers now could freeze shrimp in Louisiana and hold their supply until eastern buyers had run down their inventory. The new technology was introduced as

shrimpers hauled in larger harvests of jumbo shrimp farther off the coast. The combined effects of these welcome blessings of technology and nature created new demand for Louisiana shrimp and fueled a booming industry.<sup>24</sup>

## RITUALIZED COMMUNITY IDENTITY

Encouraged by the newfound prosperity in shrimping, the association turned its friendly labor demonstration of 1936 into an annual event where the local Catholic priest offered religious blessings on top of those bestowed by nature and technology. In 1937 the festival committee incorporated a Blessing of the Fleet ceremony on Berwick Bay, where the Atchafalaya River widened at Morgan City (figure 3).

The Blessing-of-the-Fleet tradition dated back to early modern Catholic coastal communities in Europe, and it had taken hold in the nearby Terrebonne Parish community of Chauvin, whose Acadian forefathers came from Normandy. As these shrimpers, who tended to be Catholics of French or Italian ancestry, ventured out further into the dangerous, less familiar waters of the central Gulf, they developed a new group identity and sense of togetherness as a “fleet.”<sup>25</sup> The Blessing of the Fleet consecrated this altered group and communal identity, establishing the ritual as a crucial bond between the major local industry and the dominant religious institution, uniting them in the face of unpredictable environmental forces, but also elevating the status of fleet captains above other seafood workers who were



Figure 3. The First Blessing of the Fleet ceremony in Berwick Bay, Louisiana, 1937. Courtesy Morgan City Archives.



barred from fishing in the Gulf due to their race, gender, or lack of capital.

The Blessing-of-the-Fleet ceremonies in Chauvin and Morgan City evolved into annual festivals resembling the Mardi Gras Carnival celebration in New Orleans that preceded the penitential season of Lent. They incorporated “fantasy themes” acted out in parades and pageants that expressed communal fears of loss—land, income, religious roots, and cultural identity—and attributed cultural traits of individualism, hard work, and bravery to shrimpers.<sup>26</sup> They also licensed indulgences of feasting, drinking, and revelry before the new shrimping season, as Carnival did before Lent. Morgan City’s Blessing of the Fleet and Shrimp Festival, then known as “Fishermen’s Day,” incorporated the Mardi Gras tradition of the royal charade culminating in a coronation pageant and ball. In 1942 the festival crowned its first queen, a young woman of appropriate character and beauty to be a goodwill ambassador for the shrimp industry. In 1943 the pageant began crowning a king, at first the son of a prominent local businessman and later the fisherman who boasted the previous season’s largest shrimp harvest.<sup>27</sup>

The ritual performances of the Fishermen’s Day fostered a sense of community, but they could still not disguise the social fault lines of religion, gender, and race. Festival rituals shored up gendered occupational identities that had been destabilized during the Depression by the unemployment of male breadwinners and by labor activism that included women. Although quite a few women worked with their families on shrimp boats or kept the books for a family-owned commercial fishing business, the “shrimper” was defined in strictly masculine terms as a rugged sailor or family patriarch who risked his life against the natural elements to provide for the community. The highest achievement for women was to be elected festival queen (or a member of her court)—a virginal supporter of the communal identity defined by men’s work. The queen, then and now, has consistently been a white woman of Anglo or European descent. Indeed, Morgan City’s African American or Creoles of color population were not welcome at the festival, at least until the late 1970s.<sup>28</sup> From their inception in the late 1930s, Morgan City’s festival rites aptly reflected the marginalization of women and African American workers in the region’s changing seafood industry.

## OIL IN THE GULF

Even as Morgan City was crowning shrimp kings in the 1930s, the oil industry was expanding its presence there. The community was no stranger to oil. In 1901, the year of the great oil discovery at Spindletop, Texas, oil fever spread to Morgan City, where a few oil

companies were formed. In the 1920s, companies such as Louisiana Land & Exploration, Shell Oil, and Sun Oil discovered oil across south Louisiana. In 1933 Texaco developed a floating drilling barge that facilitated drilling in coastal bays, marshes, and swamps. By 1938, 3,300 wells had been drilled in the coastal parishes. That same year, Pure Oil and Superior Oil constructed the world's first freestanding drilling platform in the ocean, off the coast of Cameron, Louisiana. Oil became big business in south Louisiana at exactly the same time as the shrimper was rising to iconic status in Morgan City.<sup>29</sup>

From lumber to sugarcane to fishing and shrimping, Morgan City had long been tied economically to resource extraction. Laboring classes were accustomed to making a living off the land by various means, whether by farming, trapping, hunting, or fishing, and coping with environmental and economic forces beyond their control. For many, if not most, residents in this area, oil was just another form of extraction.<sup>30</sup>

The oil industry expanded in south Louisiana by fitting into established work structures and adapting to the local environment. At first, oil firms imported crews from Texas, Oklahoma, and northern Louisiana, but as their size and labor needs grew, they also employed locals. Early exploration in the woods, swamps, and marshes depended on trappers, lumber workers, and fishermen who knew the native terrain. Oil companies recruited locals to guide seismic crews, haul equipment, lay roads, dredge canals, cut rights-of-way, and determine lease lines.<sup>31</sup>

Although some residents were initially suspicious of outsiders, commonly regarded as Texiens or *les maudits Texiens* ("damn Texans"), many of them hired on for higher pay. "You go work in the oyster business all month for 15 dollars," remembered Loulan Pitre. "Sell 200 pounds of shrimp for four dollars . . . Well, the income wasn't much more than 2,400 dollars a year, annual income and that's for the fisherman. Here come these people in this oil company started giving six, seven, eight dollars a day. That's a fortune!"<sup>32</sup> Plus, people like Pitre could often incorporate oil-industry work into their seasonal occupational patterns. Some companies allowed men to take off during fishing and trapping seasons, usually from November to February.

Near the end of World War II, oil exploration around Morgan City migrated into the marshes and open water, side by side with shrimping. In 1944 Magnolia Oil Company (Mobil Oil's Texas affiliate) launched the first dedicated offshore seismograph survey by loading equipment on a group of shrimp trawlers leased in Morgan City. Soon, many other shrimpers eagerly rented out their boats during the off-season, an example of the economic synergies between these two forms of waterborne commerce. A few parlayed such work into small fortunes. Victor Guarisco, owner of the Riverside Packing Company

and operator of a fleet of shrimp trawlers, expanded into towing vessels, self-propelled drilling barges, and oil field service vessels. In 1956 he opened the Offshore Oil Center, which became the Morgan City administrative headquarters for many oil and service companies.<sup>33</sup>

At first, relations between seismograph operators and shrimpers were not entirely cordial. The dynamite charges set off as a sound source by seismograph boats in the heart of the shrimping grounds created serious concerns (figure 4). Crews used 50 to 200 pounds of explosives per blast, killing fish and frightening fishermen. Shrimp trawls would get stuck in the sea-bottom craters caused by the blasts, and nets would tear.<sup>34</sup> Tests by the Louisiana Fish and Wildlife Department (LFWD) in 1944 and 1947, however, found that seismic operations rarely harmed nearby shrimp.<sup>35</sup>

As a result of these tests, the state of Louisiana devised regulatory solutions that satisfied most of the interested parties, brokering an accommodation between shrimp and petroleum. Seismic permits required a LFWD agent on every shooting boat, limited the size of dynamite charges, and restricted where and when they could be detonated. In response to hundreds of complaints about snarled trawl nets in seabed craters, the LFWD stipulated that all dynamite charges be suspended in the water, rather than exploded on the bottom.<sup>36</sup> Occasional conflicts continued to surface over the use of dynamite by

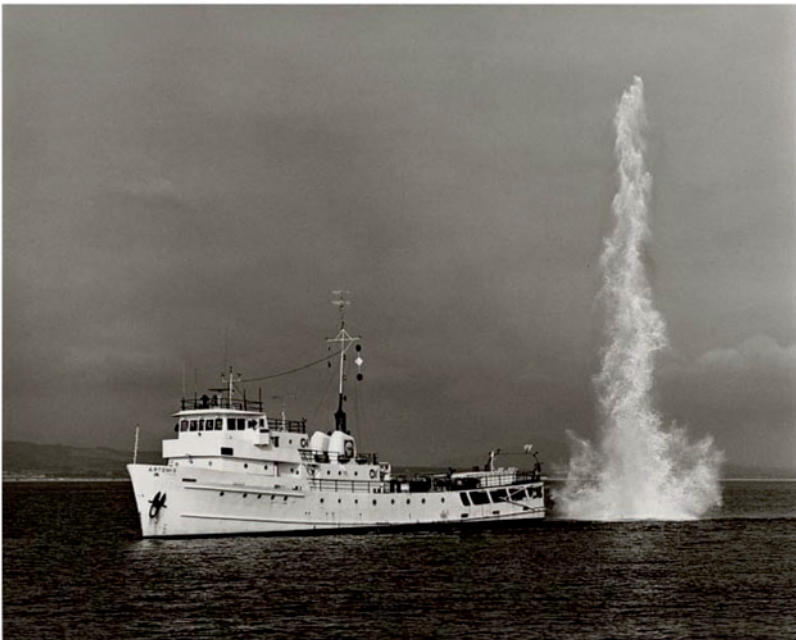


Figure 4. Shell Oil's *Artemis* seismic surveying vessel, 1950s. Courtesy Morgan City Archives.

seismograph crews and the proliferation of submerged debris associated with drilling and production platforms and pipelines. In most cases, according to the state's chief marine biologist in 1960, an amicable settlement was reached or the damage reported was not evident.<sup>37</sup> Shrimpers, fishermen, and offshore oil operators became accustomed to sharing the same waters.

In the late 1940s, Morgan City was in the midst of an oil boom that would reshape the city. In 1947 Kerr-McGee Oil Industries completed a major discovery well from a tender-supported fixed platform, the KerrMac 16, the first ever built "out-of-sight-of-land," 43 miles south of Morgan City in the Ship Shoal area.<sup>38</sup> During the next two years, companies scrambled for state leases, relocated teams of managers and crews to Morgan City, launched seismic fleets, and constructed drilling platforms in shallow waters. In 1949 the "tidelands" dispute between the states and the federal government over ownership of submerged lands cooled activity for several years as companies waited for a legal resolution. The resolution came in 1953, after two US Supreme Court decisions and congressional legislation, the Submerged Lands Act and Outer Continental Shelf Lands Act, apportioned jurisdiction. The boom was on again in Morgan City.<sup>39</sup>

## **THUNDER BAY, MORGAN CITY**

In late July 1953, a week before President Dwight Eisenhower signed legislation authorizing federal offshore leasing, Universal Pictures premiered a feature film, *Thunder Bay*, that depicts the social strains created when the oilmen come to Port Felicity, Louisiana, a fictionalized Morgan City. Dramatizing the conflict surrounding seismic operations from a few years earlier, the film stars Jimmy Stewart, as the oilman Steve Martin, and his roughneck partner, Johnny Gambi, played by Dan Duryea, who have designs not only on the oil beneath the offshore shrimping waters but also on the beautiful daughters of Port Felicity's shrimping patriarch, Dominique Rigaud (Antonio Moreno). Although critics considered it one of director Anthony Mann's weaker films, burdened by an awkward love story and implausible plot, and notable mainly for the introduction of the wide-screen format and stereophonic sound, it contains an element of truth about the affinity between the two industries. Many Morgan City residents have long embraced it as an expression of the community's identity.

The forced conclusion of *Thunder Bay* is that shrimpers and oilmen, after brawling over offshore territory and Rigaud's daughters, are united by a common interest, outlook, and sense of adventure. In the movie's climactic scene, after the offshore oil well starts to gush, the characters learn that the fabled "golden" shrimp, which had long



Figure 5. Oilman Steve Martin (Jimmy Stewart) reconciles with shrimping patriarch Dominique Rigaud (Antonio Moreno), whose daughter Francesca (Marcia Henderson), betrothed to Martin's partner Johnny Gambi (Dan Duryea), is by his side. Frame capture from *Thunder Bay*, directed by Anthony Mann, 1953.

eluded the Port Felicity shrimpers, are somehow attracted to Martin's drilling platform. This leads to a happy but contrived environmental resolution to the story, which comes off as a piece of oil-industry propaganda. Jimmy Stewart, after all, had joined other movie stars in sheltering his high earnings in tax-deductible oil investments, and he took a personal interest in the script. According to producer Aaron Rosenberg, Stewart "wanted to deliver a message that oil exploration and production did not affect the environment."<sup>40</sup> After years of political controversy, the wide-screen feature provided a visually arresting validation of the power and promise of offshore oil to national audiences. "The complex off-shore drilling apparatus, wrote the *New York Times*, "is the most distinctive aspect of *Thunder Bay*, more interesting, say, than its operators or their machinations."<sup>41</sup>

Besides the melodramatic story, *Thunder Bay* remained a source of pride and authenticity for many longtime white residents of Morgan City, who remembered the making of the film more than the film itself. Many locals participated in its production, which took place in Morgan City and neighboring Berwick and Patterson. Kerr-McGee's marine base, the pioneering KerrMac 16 platform highlighted by the *New York Times*, and a drilling barge at Magnolia Oil Company's base in Amelia were used as set locations. Shrimpers rented out and piloted their vessels for the filming and were cast as extras. The producers relied on local shrimpers and officials for their knowledge of the local terrain, people, and infrastructure in the same way that the oil industry did in exploring for oil.<sup>42</sup>

The making of the film and its characters also accurately portrays the offshore environment of the time as a space restricted to white men. There were no African Americans in the script or cast as extras. Released just months before the US Supreme Court's landmark decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, *Thunder Bay* is a story about white people resolving their conflicts without black people in the picture. More importantly to the plot, offshore is no place for women, whether on a shrimp boat or an oil platform. In the end, the pairing off of the oilmen with the shrimper's daughters signifies the marriage of shrimp and petroleum, presaging their future union in the Louisiana Shrimp and Petroleum Festival.

## SHRIMP AND PETROLEUM

After World War II, oil blended easily into the extractive landscape and community identity of Morgan City. Industrial and environmental synergies fueled the mutual expansion of both industries. The organization of work on offshore oil platforms allowed workers to keep a hand in shrimping and subsistence fishing. Oil also did not challenge the prescribed gender and racial spheres established offshore in shrimping during the 1930s.

Both offshore oil and shrimping built on the industrial base established during the war. Oil and oil service companies moved in to lease land formerly used to build navy vessels and floating dry docks. While larger shrimping operations acquired cheap war-surplus boats to extend their trawling range into deeper water, companies like Magnolia and Kerr-McGee purchased similarly inexpensive war-surplus vessels to support costly offshore operations. Navy yard freighters served as drilling tenders, air-sea rescue boats became crew boats, and Landing Craft Tanks were converted to supply boats. Oil firms also hired out wooden trawlers for seismic vessels and tugboats to tow platforms into the Gulf. As companies discovered oil and moved into deeper water further offshore, they required larger equipment and bigger, faster, and more durable boats.

In the Morgan City area after the war, several shipyards emerged or changed hands, some to support shrimping and fishing, some to support offshore oil, and some to support both. In 1948 Morgan City seafood broker J. Parker Conrad (who, as noted, also had worked on seismograph crews) sold off his processing houses and used the proceeds to purchase the Klonaris Shipyard, a builder of shrimp trawlers, on the east bank of the Atchafalaya River. Conrad opened the yard mainly to build wooden shrimp boats, but he also leased vessels for seismograph work. He gradually moved into repairing ships and eventually specialized exclusively in building barges for the petroleum industry. In addition, support equipment and facilities for

offshore oil in Morgan City also aided shrimpers and fishermen. Noted one sociological study of the community from the 1970s, "It is easier to have a diesel engine replaced or repaired, get a new propeller, or get bearings and shafting in the Morgan City area than in most other small port cities due to the greater demand for this type of service."<sup>43</sup>

Oil, shipbuilding, and shrimp interests joined forces after the war to call for public investments that would turn Morgan City into a major seaport. In 1948 Kerr-McGee led an alliance of oil and marine companies in bringing political pressure to bear on the US Army Corps of Engineers to redredge the Atchafalaya Bay Ship Channel, an 18-mile waterway that extends from the Lower Atchafalaya River around Morgan City and into the Gulf. The ramping up of offshore oil activity also helped command a larger US Coast Guard presence to coordinate greater marine traffic, benefiting offshore oil companies and shrimpers alike. In another example of the environmental synergies between the two industries, offshore platforms served as navigational aids and informal sources of information for shrimpers about weather, wave, and current conditions on the open water.<sup>44</sup>

Civic and business leaders from Morgan City and its sister across the river, Berwick, seized on their cities' potential as a hub for the emerging offshore industry. In 1952 they successfully lobbied for the legislative creation of the Morgan City and Terminal district that gave the district taxing authority over 140 square miles of land and control over waterfront acreage along the Atchafalaya River, Bayou Boeuf, and the Intracoastal Canal. The first major tenant of the district, J. Ray McDermott, created the largest and most successful business in Morgan City from the growth of the offshore industry. Founded to build wooden derricks for oil wells in East Texas, J. Ray McDermott began contracting for wood-piled platforms in 1947 and expanded into a major platform, pipeline, and barge fabricator with a massive yard opened in 1955 at nearby Amelia.<sup>45</sup>

For the growing number of men who found jobs on platforms for drilling vessels offshore, the particular structure of work in these occupations, dictated by the environmental constraints of offshore operations, allowed for a degree of residential and occupational flexibility. Because of the long and difficult commute to get to an offshore platform, whether by open-water vessel or helicopter, companies adopted concentrated work schedules, hiring people to work seven or fourteen days at a time with an equal number of days off. Such schedules shaped the demographic composition of the workforce in several ways. Unlike onshore oil field workers, who moved transiently from field to field, offshore workers lived in one community and commuted to different fields. Thus concentrated work schedules permitted a more settled workforce and diffusion of worker residences. With one to two weeks off at a time, laborers from south

Louisiana could more easily continue shrimping, fishing, or trapping to supplement their incomes—another aspect of the mutuality between shrimp and petroleum. A settled and dispersed workforce also eased, but by no means adequately addressed, housing pressures in land-scarce and water-bound places like Morgan City and other on-shore support centers during the industrial boom generated by offshore oil development.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, labor relations in shrimp and petroleum were congruent. Oil did not introduce any sudden departure from local tradition. The arrival of oilmen and oil operations in Morgan City buttressed, rather than undermined, the prevailing social structure of the community. Oil firms and offshore service companies hired nonunionized white men exclusively for higher status positions. African Americans worked in menial labor jobs that offered little opportunity for advancement, hauling and unloading mud or equipment, for example.<sup>47</sup> Offshore oil preserved the waters of the Gulf as a privileged space for white men, as previously established by the shrimping industry. Women were not considered for offshore jobs until the 1970s, although they provided critical support for the industry by staffing clerical positions and performing the reproductive labor for men who worked offshore.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, a dispersed labor force, compelled by the environmental characteristics of work and housing arrangements, and a vigilant antiunion stance by operators and service companies, prevented any kind of working-class solidarity that might challenge the power of local business elites. The stratified organization of work, in other words, was an integral component of the social ecology of shrimp and petroleum.

## LOUISIANA SHRIMP & PETROLEUM FESTIVAL

During the 1950s, the environmental factors that blended shrimp and petroleum together along coastal Louisiana also forged a social and cultural bond between them. Given the sheer size of oil and gas operations and the multiple ways in which the oil industry complemented shrimping, friction between shrimpers and petroleum was relatively slight, and it lessened in the 1960s after seismic surveys moved from dynamite to air guns as a sound source and after the passage of state and federal regulations prohibiting the dumping of debris from the burial of pipelines in shallower parts of the continental shelf. Consequently, shrimp trawlers were able to operate regularly close to offshore facilities.<sup>49</sup>

As oil companies' presence in Morgan City grew, so did their participation in "Fisherman's Day," renamed in 1948 the Louisiana Shrimp Festival, the first to be officially chartered by the state of Louisiana. Almost immediately after the Kerr-McGee discovery, oil companies



became supporters of the festival. Humble Oil (today's Exxon) provided free advertising for the organizers, and for years Kerr-McGee lent a large equipment boat, the *Robert S. Kerr*, as a site for judging the decoration contest for shrimp boats. Oil executives and senior managers took up residence in Morgan City or nearby and became active participants in the business, social, and cultural life of the community.<sup>50</sup>

As oil money underwrote the expansion of the Louisiana Shrimp Festival, oil became a more visible part of the festivities. In 1949 the festival allowed Kerr-McGee to showcase oil equipment in the display space, formerly reserved for agricultural products. In 1950 a "non-trawler" category was introduced into the boat decorating competition, which oil companies entered and often dominated. In 1956 the festival adopted a "Water Is Wealth" theme to celebrate the ultimate source of the great oil and seafood harvests. In 1959 the event expanded to an entire week and combined with the centennial celebration of oil production in the United States.<sup>51</sup> The next year, which was the centennial year of Morgan City's founding, the city erected a scaled-down 36-foot-high offshore platform and derrick, with an "Eternal Flame" lighted at its top, on Brashear Avenue, the city's main thoroughfare, as a monument dedicated to the local offshore industry. The Eternal Flame joined the *Spirit of Morgan City* shrimp trawler and a statue of the Virgin Mary, "Our Lady, Star of the Sea," both located on Brashear a block to the west, as the cultural symbols of Morgan City.<sup>52</sup> In 1961, to celebrate the festival's twenty-fifth anniversary, the organizers produced a Mardi Gras doubloon inscribed with the proud declaration, "Floating on Oil, Harvesting the Sea," a succinct expression of the bond between shrimp and petroleum.

By this time, shrimping in Morgan City was recovering from a painful downturn. In the late 1950s, a doubling of shrimp imports (to 43 percent of US domestic supply by 1960) and adverse environmental factors spelled trouble for the trawlers. These factors included warmer than usual winter weather that caused shrimp to spawn early and die during the return of colder temperatures and heavy rains that reduced the salinity of inland nursing grounds. Bad harvests and over-shrimping had driven many larger trawlers to migrate to ports along south Texas. Tighter seasonal and size regulations resulting from a 1958 Louisiana conservation law, however, improved the annual catch for shrimpers who elected to stay. Louisiana shrimp landings recovered from a low of less than 40 million pounds in 1962 to an average of around 70 million pounds during the rest of the decade.<sup>53</sup>

Meanwhile, the offshore industry in Morgan City and along the Gulf Coast boomed due to feverish development of an unusually large number of federal leases auctioned in 1962. During the 1960s, the area's offshore industries and infrastructure—fabrication yards,

shipyards, support bases, terminals, and district offices—continued to expand steadily. By the late 1960s, oil had overtaken shrimping as the dominant industry in the region. Higher earnings and stable employment in the offshore oil industry began to draw workers away from shrimping, which remained a cyclical feast-or-famine enterprise. Oil-related companies' purchase of coveted waterfront property in Morgan City indicated the newly elevated position of petroleum in relation to shrimp.<sup>54</sup>

Greater oil extraction in the Gulf of Mexico increased the risks of accidents and water contamination. Blowouts, routine leaks, and discharges of brine and drilling muds were common sources of pollution from oil wells, both onshore and offshore. The disposal of oil field waste in unlined earthen pits during the early phase of oil development in Louisiana contaminated many properties across the state—the subject of dozens of “legacy site” lawsuits in recent years.<sup>55</sup> Drilling wastes generated on offshore platforms were generally dumped into the ocean that operators viewed as a limitless sink. In the absence of aquatic toxicology testing prior to 1970, the impact of such pollution on shrimp populations is difficult to ascertain, but it did not slow the growth in harvests during the 1960s. Beginning in the 1970s, after the tightening of federal environmental regulations and improved operating practices, a series of National Academy of Science studies determined that oil extraction accounted for a small and declining share of petroleum inputs into the Gulf—compared to natural seeps, onshore wastes and runoff, atmospheric deposition, and losses and spills from vessels—even as offshore drilling expanded.<sup>56</sup> Offshore oil operations, historically, did not have obvious environmental consequences for shrimping.

The socioeconomic effects of an expanding offshore oil industry in Louisiana, from one perspective, were positive. During the 1960s and 1970s, St. Mary's Parish experienced tremendous economic growth. The population nearly doubled in size from approximately 31,000 residents in 1940 to 61,000 in 1977, much of that increase coming in the 1960s. Employment growth there outpaced Louisiana and the nation, and parish income increased twice as rapidly as that of Louisiana as a whole. Job opportunities were broader based than in the 1940s and 1950s. Women found clerical positions, and a higher percentage of African Americans by this time had broken into skilled occupations, especially in steel fabrication.<sup>57</sup>

Like other communities affected by a sudden resource-driven boom, however, Morgan City also experienced problems with poverty, crime, public health, road infrastructure, and housing. Although Morgan City's median income was higher and its distribution of income more equitable than in the rest of the state, poverty rates in 1970 (family incomes below \$6,000 per year) were still significantly higher than the national average. A net in-migration of whites and

out-migration of nonwhites in St. Mary's Parish during this period reflected the racial disparities of growth.<sup>58</sup> Housing shortages exacerbated the problem. Such shortages resulted from limited physical space to expand in the watery Atchafalaya environment, but also from banker and builder unwillingness to construct new residential dwellings. Mobile home parks sprouted up to accommodate lower-income residents while Morgan City, Berwick, and Patterson eventually promoted a new middle-class housing development in nearby Bayou Vista that accommodated more than five thousand residents by 1970.<sup>59</sup>

Despite the difficulties associated with fast growth, older residents remember this period as one of excitement and prosperity for both the white elite and working classes. New commercial and nightlife establishments revitalized the once sleepy little town and its surroundings. The rebranding of the city's festival in 1967 affirmed the twin sources of the community's vitality. To celebrate the rebranding, festival organizers commissioned a new logo featuring a jumbo shrimp entangled around an oil derrick on top of an offshore platform (figure 6). The logo became the iconic image for Morgan City and remains so today. The city had a giant rendering of the image etched into the concrete floodwall built along the port after the devastating 1983 Atchafalaya River flood. While some people might interpret the drawing as a shrimp hung up high and dry on oil equipment, for others it represents a conjugal embrace between shrimp and petroleum.

## THE LEGACY OF SHRIMP AND PETROLEUM

Critics who view petroleum as a disruptive intruder into the shrimping lifestyle fail to recognize the long-standing interdependence between the two industries. The oil industry did not introduce capital, technology, and environmental pressures to a previously egalitarian shrimping community isolated from market forces and harmoniously in tune with nature. Instead, oil fit rather easily into the social ecology of extraction already shaped by a commercial shrimping industry connected to markets far beyond Louisiana. The two industries then expanded after World War II through complementary and environmentally conditioned forms of organizing work and transportation. Together they deepened a notion of community that was delimited, as it was throughout the Deep South, by white male privilege. The extension of civil rights to equal employment beginning in the late 1960s created new openings for racial minorities and women, but the higher status and higher paying positions offshore, whether on a shrimp trawler or offshore platform, remained largely the province of Anglo and white-ethnic men.<sup>60</sup>



Figure 6. The 1967 official Shrimp and Petroleum Festival logo. Courtesy Bob Greenwood, Shrimp & Petroleum Collection, Morgan City Archives.

In the long run, neither shrimp nor petroleum provided a solid economic foundation for the Morgan City/St. Mary's Parish area. During the 1970s, both industries boomed. The 1973 oil shock and the quadrupling of crude oil prices spurred on another rush for offshore leases, generating more petroleum-related activity for Morgan City. Orders for offshore services and drilling vessels soared. Fabrication yards, such as McDermott's in Amelia, could not keep up with demands for platforms and equipment. The sharp rise in fuel prices, in contrast, contributed to a doubling of operating costs for the average Gulf

shrimping vessel.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, record shrimp prices, which followed the general increase in commodity prices, invited many shrimpers to take on heavy debts to participate in the boom. The extension of federal loan guarantees through Title XI of the Merchant Marine Act, moreover, attracted speculative capital into the construction of fishing vessels, creating excess capacity in the shrimping and fishing fleets (as well as offshore service vessels) along the Gulf Coast. A lack of restrictions on new fishing effort in most federally managed fisheries also contributed to overcapacity. The number of shrimp boats in Louisiana during the late 1970s increased from 10,500 to more than 15,000.<sup>62</sup>

The collapse in oil and commodity prices in the mid-1980s dealt Morgan City and other communities along the Gulf Coast a blow from which they have yet to fully recover. Onshore support activity for offshore oil in the Gulf of Mexico virtually halted. By 1985 an estimated eight thousand Louisiana shipyard workers had lost their jobs. These losses rippled through the economy; every job lost in the oil field meant two additional jobs lost outside of the industry.<sup>63</sup> Once flourishing coastal communities entered a period of economic decline as tax revenues from companies serving the oil industry evaporated. Unemployed oil field workers either transitioned into new trades or they left southern Louisiana for better opportunities. In the 1990s, the consolidation of the oil and oil services industries shuttered district offices and increasingly centralized managers and staff in Houston, thus prompting an exodus of jobs from south Louisiana. The development of deepwater oil fields (more than 1,500 feet deep) in the late 1990s, moreover, relied on service companies, shipbuilders, and fabricators that were based elsewhere, often overseas.

Shrimping in south Louisiana also experienced a sharp decline in the 1980s and 1990s, but this was not caused by the environmental impacts or crowding effects of oil, as often suggested.<sup>64</sup> A slump in shrimp prices in the early 1980s exposed the highly indebted and overcapitalized shrimping industry. Still, during the rest of the decade, the number of commercial shrimpers increased as employees laid off by the petroleum sector returned to shrimping as an income of last resort. The influx of Vietnamese shrimpers, refugees from the war in Southeast Asia, and Mexico's prohibition of US shrimpers in Mexican waters added to the overcapacity in Gulf Coast shrimping. Caught in a squeeze between escalating costs and declining catch prices, and facing new federal regulations mandating the use of turtle excluder devices, thousands of Louisiana shrimpers gave up trawling in the 1990s. In the early 2000s, an increase in imported farm-raised shrimp, resurgent fuel prices, and the consolidation of the food service industry made shrimping a very precarious occupation.<sup>65</sup>

This was the situation even before the BP-Macondo oil spill in 2010. The disaster harmed shrimpers and oyster fishermen, but much of the harm was indirect and a result of the response. The federal and

state closure of large portions of the Gulf of Mexico to commercial and recreational fishing (up to a third of the US portion of the Gulf, or 88,522 square miles) exacerbated the economic hardship shrimpers were already facing.<sup>66</sup> The direct ecological impact of the spill itself on Gulf Coast fisheries has, so far, has been surprisingly small.<sup>67</sup> The Gulf oil spill has not helped shrimpers, but their struggles are chiefly attributable to factors unrelated to it.

The golden age of Morgan City and its neighboring towns has passed. The St. Mary's Parish population peaked in 1980 at 64,000, declining to 53,000 in 2013. Buildings are shuttered and worn. The days when shrimp boats were docked in gridlock along the waterfront are gone. Oil and marine services still support the local economy but mainly as supply hubs for labor, equipment, and services, no longer centers of high value-added economic activity. In August 2013, McDermott announced the closure of its Amelia fabrication yard and its relocation to Altamira, Mexico, bringing an end to an era that had been fading for some time.<sup>68</sup>

Shrimp and petroleum are forms of resource extraction susceptible not only to environmental change, but cyclical price swings and global competition as well. The booster-oriented city economic elite, the principal beneficiaries of shrimp- and oil-fueled growth, never made a long-range commitment to diversifying the area's economic base so that it could endure the impermanence of such industries. Morgan City is physically constrained by water (figure 1). But it has long been constrained socially as well. A few large families that earned their fortunes prior to oil's discovery continue to own most of the land around the city. They neglected to nurture the kind of public institutions and amenities (housing, education, infrastructure, etc.) needed to create greater social and economic diversity and resiliency for the community.<sup>69</sup>

Yet the annual Louisiana Shrimp & Petroleum Festival remains as popular as ever. Tons of shrimp and an almost equal amount of beer are consumed each celebration. The Blessing of the Fleet and grand procession of shrimp boats, pleasure craft, and the "biggest 'muscle boats' of the oil patch" still headline the event. The crowning of the king (a prominent businessman) and queen (an upstanding young high school or college student)—always white—carries on the Morgan City Mardi Gras tradition. Live music, arts and crafts, children's events, and tours of the decommissioned *Mr. Charlie*, the first mobile drilling vessel, round out the festivities.

Where the festival once paid tribute to the white male fishermen and oil workers who risked the elements to harvest riches from the sea for the benefit of the local economy, it now endures as a memorial to lost ways of life. This, in part, explains the determination of local organizers, in the face of national criticism, to carry on in the summer of 2010 as Macondo oil blew into the Gulf and the shrimping

season was canceled. There was also another important reason for holding the event. Drawing close to a hundred thousand people each Labor Day weekend to a town with a population of twelve thousand, the festival itself has become an economic engine for the community. Instead of harvesting shrimp and petroleum, Morgan City now relies on a much smaller harvest of tourist dollars.

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## Notes

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