

# Mr. Crayfish Goes Commercial

BY MATT THOMAS

PIONEERS toiling across the hot, dry prairies of the Midwest often became desperate in their need for water. That which they came to generally lay in scum-covered puddles in the tall, brown grass and was unfit for drinking.

Then one day an enterprising pioneer dropped a long, hollow stem down a crayfish "well" and sucked up refreshing, cool water from its depths. The pioneers moved on, plying this new-found art and giving to Illinois — so the story goes — the nickname of the "Sucker State."

As a country, we've taken great strides since those hardship days of the pioneers. But Mr. Crayfish has come along every step of the way. Nowadays his principal claim to fame comes from his appeal to certain epicureans, both human and fish.

Country folks long ago recognized crayfish as a now-and-then mealtime treat. They would seine a bucketful of them from a nearby creek, strip off their tails, and then pinch out the inner white meat. They fried these tails like shrimp.

Or they boiled the crayfish whole, treating them like little lobsters, which, of course, they closely resembled.

Recently a Seattle restaurateur began capitalizing on the gourmet appeal of the fresh-water crayfish by creating a "specialty" dish and giving it a good advertising send-off. Boiled in water, marinated in wine and spices, and served whole and cold, Mr. Crayfish began drawing crowds. It stirred up a genuine "crayfish craze," attracting those who wanted to try something new and different, yet the fresh-water crayfish has a reputation centuries old among the cuisines of Europe — France, in particular — where they are specially bred for restaurant use.

In this country, too, Mr. Crayfish goes commercial on a really large scale in Louisiana. A traveler in the bayou country may be a bit baffled at first when he sees Negro boys standing along the highway dangling crayfish tied to sticks by a string. A fisherman traveler is convinced, of course, that these crayfish are for fish bait, and he's



likely to stop and buy some to use in exactly that way. But later he'll be surprised to discover crayfish iced with the lobsters, the crabs, and the fish in the market places and featured on the menus in the restaurants. Then he'll learn, if he's inquisitive, that the crayfish is big business in Louisiana. The annual harvest is more than 1,500,000 pounds, amounting to 80 per cent of the total commercial catch for the entire country.

In the restaurants, they are sold as *crayfish marinierre*, or *crayfish creole*. In the market places, they can be bought fresh, frozen, or canned — and under such names as *langosta*, *spiny lobster*, or *rock lobster*.

But Mr. Crayfish makes his biggest bid for popularity as a bait for black bass. With more than 17,000,000 licensed fishermen — most of them fishing fresh water and a large percentage of them after black bass — Mr. Crayfish is in heavy demand every fishable month of the year. And if a bass fisherman isn't after him, a bullhead fisherman is — or a perch, channel catfish, or bluegill fisherman. Mr. Crayfish, you see, suits the cravings of a long list of fish.

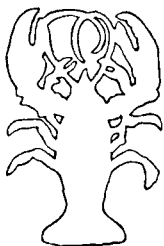
LIKE lobsters and other crustaceans, a crayfish carries its carcass on the outside of its body. To grow, it must shed this old armor occasionally for a new and better fitting suit. These times are especially trying,

too. First of all, the exertion of undressing sometimes costs the crayfish its life. It can easily become one of the ten per centers which, biologists say, never survive the ordeal. And if it succeeds, it is for several days a completely soft and tempting morsel, energetically sought after by many natural enemies. During these times — once or twice a year — the crayfish hides in the most inaccessible corners of its underwater home. Fishermen seek it out there, too, for at this stage it will be most attractive to a bass, even to a not-so-hungry one.

In addition to living in the water, crayfish — and there are a number of different species — live as burrowers on dry land. These are the “well” diggers which furnished water for the pioneers. Crayfish still dig their “wells,” too.

And if you drop a stone down a crayfish “well,” you can hear it go “kerplunk” in the water in the dark depths below. Country kids seldom pass one by. There's some sort of boyish satisfaction that goes with hearing the stones rattle against the wall on the way down.

By and large, the crayfish has an enviable and well-deserved reputation. Ask any bait fisherman — he'll defend Mr. Crayfish as vigorously as he uses him for bait. Ask a connoisseur of fine foods — he'll convert you quickly to crayfish cocktails.





# *The American Cottontail Goes to France*



BY MILDRED J. ERICSON

A DOZEN cottontail rabbits from Missouri were recently captured from their briar-patch home and made a trip Americans would envy — an airplane journey to Paris, France. Why?

They are being considered as a new animal for France to replace the hare of Europe which was drastically decimated by a deadly virus in 1952-53, as related in the AMERICAN MERCURY recently.

Myxomatosis spread through the European hare population by the selfishness of a doctor who infected the rabbits with this deadly and rapidly spreading disease because the mammals were eating some of his herbs and shrubs.

Four bucks and two females were air-expressed to France on March 4, 1954, and a half dozen more on May 12, 1954, from Jefferson City, Missouri. All arrived in good condition. Knowing rabbits, there are probably more than this number now.

Events shaped up this way: "Will you send us some American rabbits for testing for restocking?" Mr. J. Barthelemy, Conseil Superieur de la

Chasse, of the French Ministry of Agriculture wrote the Missouri Conservation Commission.

"We'll be glad to, if you will run some tests for us," Mr. Melvin O. Steen, Chief of the Missouri Commission's Fish and Game Division answered.

"Agreed," replied the Ministry of Agriculture.

So the experiment has taken on a two-way relationship with France benefiting by the possibility of gaining a valuable game species and the United States acquiring some new knowledge of myxomatosis.

Among other scientific experiments, France wishes to try to produce some hybrid rabbits as the result of mating the European hare with the American cottontail.

The cottontail rabbit holds a good possibility of a successful introduction to France. It is believed (but not definitely known) that the animal is immune to myxomatosis. At any rate, it is the same genus (kissing kin to you) as rabbits in South America where myxomatosis persisted for years without wiping out the rabbit population.