

One of Barataria Bay's four shrimp settlements. In season, platforms are home to 200 men, their origins often unknown, and never questioned

VILLAGE on STILTS

By BEN LUCIEN BURMAN

In the lush marshlands of Louisiana dwells a colorful band of shrimp fishermen
—a many-tongued, roughhewn Foreign Legion of the remote bayou country

THEIR names are Gee Dip, Ping Wing, George Lum and Ah Hee. They live in strange wooden villages built on stilts far out at sea. The voyager in a boat, looking at these queer structures with their Oriental occupants, might think for a moment he was passing some exotic settlement near Shanghai or Hong Kong or Singapore. Actually, he would be in Barataria Bay, that ragged arm of the Gulf of Mexico which reaches up into Louisiana, only a few scant miles from New Orleans. The Chinese would be the owners of the shrimp platforms near Manila Village, in the great marshes at the mouth of the Mississippi.

It is a place of mystery, this region of the marshes, a half-world that is neither land nor water, of giant reeds and green floating islands that dissolve into the sea. Overhead the great man-of-war birds fly in their stately circles, and the porpoise, which the fisherfolk say are really men, dance and play in the sunlight. The fleecy clouds that drift across the sky become camels and graceful sailing ships and all the shapes of fantasy. It is a land like the Sahara, where the horizon seems to enclose only a world of mirages, and all life seems to be moving in a dream.

It is a background appropriate to the shrimp platforms, for even as the traveler comes closer to inspect them in detail the sense of illusion continues, the feeling that these tiny buildings and the figures moving about them are something conjured out of the sleeve of an Oriental magician.

For they are a perfect stage set, with their netted shrimp boats moored alongside, like a trading post in some Pacific archipelago. They are a stage set populated by actors of extraordinary variety, men who come from every quarter of the globe with no questions asked as to their history, a Foreign Legion of the Mississippi. They are one more manifestation of that amazing phenomenon that is America.

The platforms are, in effect, large wooden islands, several acres of buildings and boardwalks, with a store and sheds and numerous tiny dwellings to house the motley inhabitants. Their trade is a considerable part of the vast Louisiana commerce in shrimp, which has totaled half the shrimp commerce of the nation. Yet the whole industry of the platforms has sprung from an oddity of appetite—a peculiarity of the Oriental palate. The Westerner, in eating shrimp, likes them either

canned or fresh; the Oriental is not satisfied unless his shrimp are dried.

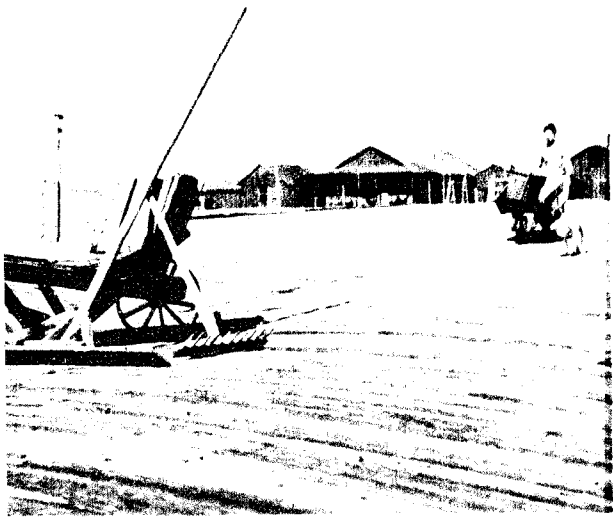
The most prominent feature of these structures, therefore, is the row of drying platforms, long narrow elevations built in waves, like roller coasters. Workers take the shrimp from huge kettles of boiling brine nearby, and place them at the top of the wooden hills so that the water will drain quickly away.

For days the shrimp lie in the burning sun, protected, if it rains, by wide tarpaulins. When the last drop of moisture has vanished, they go off to the shelling machines, revolving drums with long spikes inside, like medieval instruments of torture. Soon the shells are broken away, and crushed into powder. The shrimp are packed into barrels and made ready for a long journey.

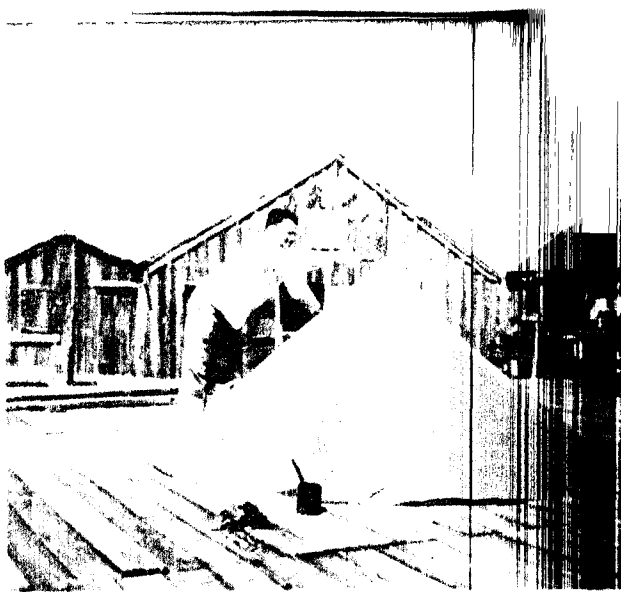
Weeks later, they will appear in a Chinese restaurant in New York or South America or far-off Honolulu. The casual Broadwayite, as he bends over his steaming chow mein or Hawaiian shrimp flavored with pineapple, will eat and have no slightest thought of his meal's strange origin.

A walk about one of the platforms is a tour around the world; the (Continued on page 68)

PHOTOGRAPHS FOR COLLIER'S BY ALLAN GOULD



Fresh-caught shrimp are piled on the peaks of these rolling platforms, so water can drain



Shrimpers take excellent care of the metal cisterns that catch the rain, only source of drinking water



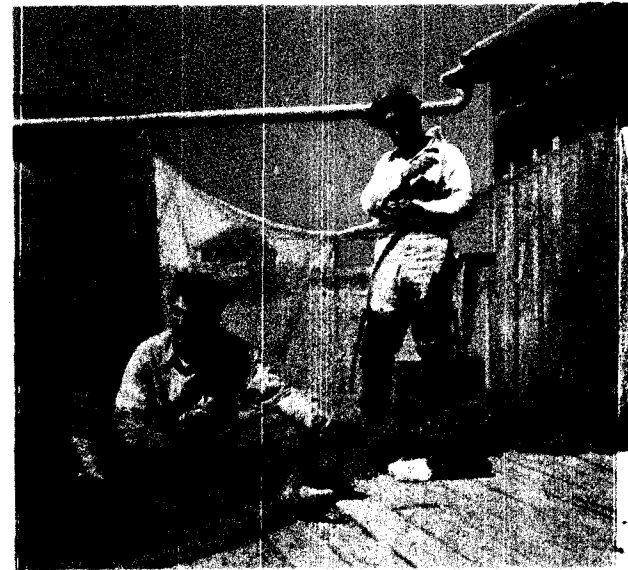
Bayou Rigaud, peaceful on Sunday, is a center of activity during the working week



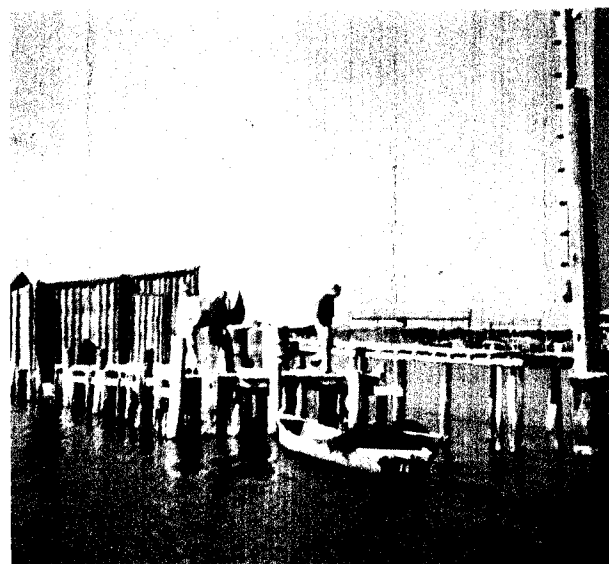
Richard de Monye, one of many foreign-born shrimpers, came to the U.S. from Holland



Gee Lin Dip, Jr., is a practiced hand with a crab net. His father owns one of the shrimp platforms



James Timonet, left, and Philip Alexie mend nets. Shrimp seines cost about \$150 apiece



Shrimp season is limited by law. Here, game wardens conduct a routine check of platform



Minter Hawkins has been a shrimper for 12 years. Fishermen value cats highly as weather forecasters



Though few women live in shrimp villages, wife of Gee Lin Dip is a year-round resident

Luke Adam once served as policeman, but prefers shrimping. Note pirogue, lower left



Fisherman Elmer Chin is one of the many Chinese who work on platforms. He doesn't speak English



Dederim Damtin (r.) with Perry (center) and Hilray Chermie, descendants of pirates



