

Down on the Bayou

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Author's Note

Bayous are the stuff of legends, songs, and ghost stories. They are also a crucial part of Louisiana's identity and ecosystem, along with other wetlands, such as swamps and marshes.

Louisiana is home to over four hundred named bayous, the longest being Bayou Bartholomew at 359 miles long. These shallow waterways can be stagnant or slow-moving with opaque or clear water. Their irregular shorelines are populated with oak and cypress trees laden with Spanish moss.

They are a native habitat for many unique species of plants and animals. Bayous serve as natural barriers that protect inland areas from water surges resulting from tropical storms and hurricanes. Besides being tourist destinations, bayous provide a livelihood for hunters, fishers, and trappers.

Down on the Bayou is set in Vacherie, where Bayou Chevreuil is located. However, Bayou Chevreuil is "everybayou" in my story. The description of flora and fauna can apply to most of the bayous in Louisiana. Types of bridges vary from bayou to bayou. Decaying structures are sprinkled throughout Bayou Country, although such ruins will not be seen near every bayou.

The characters in this story are fictional, but they are based on real family members. Grandpa Gus is based on not only my maternal grandfather but also my maternal grandmother, who kept journals for many years, using twenty-five-cent spiral notebooks (some of which I have inherited), and on my father, a wonderful writer and storyteller, who told us children many stories about the bayou.

Although I grew up in Los Angeles, I have visited my birth state of Louisiana many times. I have gone fishing in a swamp with my uncle Joe and recently went on a bayou boat tour, where I saw an alligator eat hot dogs and a spider catch a fish!

But my most reliable information came from my cousins, Joseph (Al) Steib and Wallace Foucher. They grew up "down on the bayou" and generously shared their memories with me. Al said that I couldn't write about the bayou without mentioning pirogues. He also gave me a clear understanding of the difference between a swamp and a bayou.

At one time, alligators in Louisiana were hunted to such an extent that they almost disappeared. This period of near-extinction coincided with my cousins' childhood. They don't remember seeing alligators when they were boys. Due to conservation efforts, the alligator population has rebounded. And despite their reputation, alligators tend to be nonaggressive toward humans.

The bayou is timeless and magical, eerie and peaceful. If you go—when you go—leave your fears behind. Call on your sense of wonder and beauty.

And bring your imagination.

Glenda Armand

