



## SHRIMP BOAT PROJECTS

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All is Revealed: Shrimp Boat Anatomy, Part 1

### Mixed Blessings

BY ERIC, ON JUNE 23RD, 2013



Although historically a rite of passage for commercial fishing boats only, the annual Blessing of the Fleet on Clear Lake channel now includes both work boats and pleasure boats alike.

"The Blessing of the Fleet is an annual event that is practiced in fishing communities world-wide. As a genre, these blessings share several common traits: one or more priests perform the actual blessing; fishermen gather in their newly outfitted boats to receive the blessing; and family members unite in making whatever preparations are dictated by local tradition."

- Betsy Gordon from her essay "Decorating for the Shrimp Fleet Blessing: Chauvin, Louisiana" in the 1991 issue of *Louisiana Folklife Miscellany*

Over a year ago, as we planned Shrimp Boat Projects, we anticipated the launch of our boat to coincide with the start of the Texas bay shrimping season and the annual Blessing of the Fleet on Clear Lake channel, a traditional ceremony marking the beginning of the season on the east side of Galveston Bay. Well, the bay shrimping season is now about a month underway in Texas and unfortunately we are still getting our boat ready for prime-time. Fortunately, our disappointment has been tempered by a growing eagerness to start shrimping as soon as possible. The boat is definitely looking better and better each day, so we should be shifting gears soon.

The Blessing of the Fleet happened on May 1st and although we couldn't participate in this consummate public spectacle, we could watch it among the many folks leaning on the railings at the Kemah Boardwalk. Oddly enough, and we can only admit this in hindsight, our inability to participate may have actually been a blessing *in disguise*. As casual bystanders to the event, we gained the critical distance to consider how dramatically this event has changed in its history and whether its cultural value is even still relevant to the bay shrimping profession.

We considered the evolution of the event as it relates to the towns of Kemah and Seabrook which flank the channel where the blessing happens. In many ways, the evolution of this event mirrors the evolution of this place, from working waterfront to leisure waterfront, and from a varied assemblage of waterfront businesses owned by multiple individuals, to a singular destination owned by a single corporation. The event is still organized by the City of Kemah, but the event is staged on the privately owned Kemah Boardwalk, a mammoth-sized theme park owned and managed by Landry's Restaurants, Inc., a Houston-based company. Although this public-private partnership has its benefits (the boardwalk makes for easy and accessible viewing of the event), it also insures that the Blessing of Fleet is competing with several other events happening in close proximity. This year, the actual blessing was drowned out by the sounds of a party band playing Top 40 tunes for another audience nearby. Other signs of the event's evolution are a dramatic shift in the participation of the shrimp boats, the fleet around which the event was initially conceived. Today, the *Fleet* that gets blessed is a varied group of work boats and pleasure boats, implying that the blessing itself has less to do with risks and perils of commercial fishing and more to do with the everyday hazards of boating in general.



The evolution of a place: the city of Kemah as a sleepy waterfront town, as a bustling working waterfront, and as popular family theme park (left to right). Photo credits: University of North Texas (left photo); Hooked Up on 2008fishing.com forum (middle photo); Greater Houston CVB (right photo).

From our perspective, it's impossible to not see the evolution of the event as also a reflection of the bay shrimping profession itself. The small number of bay shrimp boats participating in the event are now not only getting paid to participate (authenticity is apparently not cheap) but also representing a profession on Galveston Bay that has diminished in size dramatically over the history of the event. For better or worse, the parade of boats that signified this year's Blessing of the Fleet was actually one of the most graphic signs of the demise of an industry, the shifting of cultures and economies in this region, and a reminder of the reciprocal relationship between place and culture.

In the end, we feel ok to have not participated in this year's Blessing of the Fleet. While we could certainly use all of the blessing we can get, we'll hold out for a Blessing of the Fleet that renews the original significance of the event as a response to the fleet of working shrimp boats on Galveston Bay. What would this event look like? It's simple: culture and consequence. This future event would restore the Blessing's original cultural value by giving form to a fleet of working shrimpers on Galveston Bay that are diverse and not a monolithic community. It would also reaffirm the consequence of the event by better acknowledging the real risks and sacrifices made by working shrimpers and other fishermen alike. Could this type of event be re-realized? We think it could, but to do so, it will probably need to forsake the Kemah Boardwalk and embrace one of the few remaining places on Galveston Bay that still maintain a connection to the bay shrimping profession.

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