



Atchafalaya Houseboat: My Years in the Louisiana Swamp

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In the early 1970s, two idealistic young people -- Gwen Carpenter Roland and Calvin Voisin -- decided to leave civilization and re-create the vanished simple life of their great-grandparents in the heart of Louisiana's million-acre Atchafalaya River Basin Swamp. Armed with a box of crayons and a book called *How to Build Your Home in the Woods*, they drew up plans to recycle a slave-built structure into a houseboat. Without power tools or building experience they constructed a floating dwelling complete with a brick fireplace. Towed deep into the sleepy waters of Bloody Bayou, it was their home for eight years. This is the tale of the not-so-simple life they made together -- days spent fishing, trading, making wine, growing food, and growing up -- told by Gwen with grace, economy, and eloquence.

Not long after they took up swamp living, Gwen and Calvin met a young photographer named C. C. Lockwood, who shared their "back to the earth" values. His photographs of the couple going about their daily routine were published in *National Geographic* magazine, bringing them unexpected fame. More than a quarter of a century later, after Gwen and Calvin had long since parted, one of Lockwood's photos of them appeared in a *National Geographic* collector's edition entitled *100 Best Pictures Unpublished* -- and kindled the interest of a new generation.

With quiet wisdom, Gwen recounts her eight-year voyage of discovery -- about swamp life, wildlife, and herself. A keen observer of both the natural world and the ways of human beings, she transports readers to an unfamiliar and exotic place.

Atchafalaya Houseboat: My Years in the Louisiana Swamp Details

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From Reader Review Atchafalaya Houseboat: My Years in the Louisiana Swamp for online ebook

John says

I loved the first part of the book describing life on a houseboat in the Atchafalaya Basin. However, the story went downstream after the author left the Basin. It's not easy to compete with the Atchafalaya River.

Kklingon says

I caught most of the Atchafalaya Houseboat documentary on PBS and was enchanted. I wanted more, more, more! But though I enjoyed Gwen Roland's book, it wasn't much more; as one reviewer noted here, it was thin. I couldn't help feeling as though there were places--interior ones--that Gwen Roland didn't want to visit again. I really missed the emotional component of life in the Atchafalaya swamp, which surely must have been as important as the physical one. I learned much about what Gwen (and her companion, Calvin) did in the swamp, but little about how she felt. While I found her account of daily, and seasonal, activities fascinating (I grew up in an apartment in Manhattan), I was hoping for more reflection. Still, I'd recommend the book to those who'd enjoy reading about a life lived as close to nature, and as far from modern society, as it's possible to get in the U.S.

Stephen says

A bit thin. Sadly. Disappointingly thin. Wonderful story, just thin. This book spins from a haunting photograph of the author taken in the early 1970s by a National Geographic photographer. During the time, she was living a back-to-basics life on a houseboat in the Louisiana swamps with her boyfriend. Like Thoreau, they had built the amazing home themselves, although their's wasn't as austere as Henry David's.

Again, it's a great story; I wish there were more of it. I don't really blame the author. If someone asked me to write about my life in the early '70s, my story would be skimpy too. Who remembers that era other than that it was wrapped in a protective, pleasing fog. Luckily, Roland published a few articles in local papers at the time about their life in the swamp and that is where this book gets its texture. I wish she had written more back then, kept a diary, so that we could relive it now.

And another thing. The one vivid reminder of the author's life in the Atchafalaya are the photographs taken by C.C. Lockwood. Yet, the publisher decided to print them in black and white on uncoated paper. Most of them are so dark, they look like they were taken at night. I'm sure Lockwood is still moaning about this injustice.

Deborah says

I loved this book. I find it fascinating to read about how others live. Hope to find the documentary she talks

about towards the end of the book 'Atchafalya: Americas Largest River Basin Swamp'

Rachael Brady (Gilliland) says

Yes, the book is short, but that didn't stop me from visualizing the incredible detail written in this book. To be fair, I watched the documentary before reading the book. I am mesmerized by life on the swamp. Her incredible apt for living self sustainably was inspiring. I would recommend this book if you're looking for a biographical adventure about rural life in the bayou of Louisiana. I really enjoyed this.

Missy Ivey says

A little jewel I happened upon at our local Goodwill store. What a fascinating memoir! Gwen Roland sure has a gift for writing in a way that you can actually visualize living on the bayou yourself. Her writing style is very unique. I love how she see's and expresses normal everyday things in life. This little book, with it's beautiful black and white photos by C.C. Lockwood, will remain part of my personal book collection for my Louisiana room for guests.

There is also a documentary of her life, that she directed herself, on YouTube. Just type in Atchafayala Houseboat. She presents more early photos and returns to the area with Calvin and C.C.Lockwood in later years to reminisce.

Gwen has since written another book, " Postmark Bayou Chene: A Novel" (2015), which I most definitely will look into reading soon.

Michelle Jones says

This memoir tells a story about the kind of people I dream about knowing and becoming like. People who live by choice in near complete isolation in a swamp where they live and make their living on the water and the land. They tend gardens and chickens, collect rain water to drink, bathe in the river, nap in the sun, swim naked in the intense Southern heat. They trade and barter fish and vegetables and labor for other goods instead of only surviving in a currency economy. They listen to Robert Frost tell stories on a tape while they construct their houseboat from recycled materials. They write poetry about the seasons and the stars. They read books and stories for their own deep pleasure and aloud for entertainment. They welcome artists and writers to their home and the serenity of the swamp. They live alone without loneliness and commune with friends without being bound within a community of homes.

For nearly a decade the writer and her then companion lived in the swamp and lived totally on their own terms. They survived and prospered by the work of their hands and minds. They grew their own food, nurtured culture and knowledge within themselves and put nothing but goodness into the world. I envy them.

I loved this book and the fact that these two lived this kind of life. Even though their relationship ended and they left their swamp utopia it heartens me to know that at least it existed for a while. It also makes me want to buy my grandmother's farm from my father and build a farmhouse of my dreams there. I'll milk my cows, make my own cheese, grow organic vegetables in the rich Kentucky soil, watch the sun set over my back

pond and let the breeze blow through my long hair as I sit in the porch swing. I'll grow into an old, fat happy Southern woman and it will be good. If only that could be my world even for a little while.

It is my custom to read this book and few others every single year. I'm sure eventually I'm going to enjoy this book less but I've been reading it at least once a year since 2006 and the pleasure has yet to diminish. It's the story of two people living life in the most deliberate of ways, in almost complete seclusion, living off the land and water, basking in a life of their own design and making. They fish and garden, raise chickens, write poetry and take walks, watch the stars and make homemade wine, can and preserve, read and listen. I don't know that I could ever commit to living in such seclusion but the principles and values they live by are incredibly inspiring to me. And I could definitely see myself someday splitting my time between a small house back home on the farm and Louisville.

I need to just order like 10 copies of this book from Amazon because so frequently I want to give it as a gift but it's a tiny little book from a university imprint so bookstores never stock it.

Anne Marsh says

I picked this up while doing research on the Louisiana bayous for a writing project. While the book wasn't helpful for me in terms of the local color I was looking for, it's an absolutely glorious, lyrical, haunting description of a woman who lives in a swamp for ten years. It's very short and includes photographs from National Geographic that apparently made this woman a bit of a national sensation (if you run in National Geographic circles and this reminds me why I need to renew my subscription to that magazine), but there's something so compelling about reading about Gwen Roland's attempts to carve a living out of the swamp... especially since she is a graduate student and not a swamp native. The book really feeds into my fantasies about leaving everything behind and discovering an exciting, romantic, natural life elsewhere. Granted, I'd be looking for a beach rather than a swamp, but that sense of romance and derring-do was magical.

Elizabeth says

I enjoyed it very much. Reading about a life so different than mine was informative. I felt like Roland introduced me to a cultural experience that was as exotic as any I have encountered. I was disappointed in the quality of the pictures in this book but that may have been the idea to cloak the life of these two people in mist and mystery.

Sue Danskin says

Why would anyone think this houseboat Living is a good idea I don't know and didn't find out in this book

Phyllis says

Gwen Roland became sort of famous when C.C. Lockwood's beautiful and evocative photographs of the houseboat she shared with her then partner were featured in National Geographic. Many years later, this

collection of essays she wrote for a back to nature swamp hippie (my current aesthetic, by the way) newsletter was published. Since these essays were written for a newsletter they're not super deep and introspective, but they're very charming, like a handwritten note from your friend who lives in a Louisiana swamp and watches constellations instead of TV and bakes her own bread and has tea with eccentric elderly Cajun men. I'm too lazy and domestically incompetent to live this life, but it's fun to dream of this becoming one with the bayou lifestyle. The only bummer is the photo section of C.C. Lockwood's pictures are in really cruddy, dark, smeary black and white. I wish the publisher had sprung for a color photo section.

Loretta Swafford says

Really like this one....live close by the basin.

Denver Public Library says

Atchafalaya houseboat is the story of a young woman's life path that brought her to live in the Atchafalaya Bayou in the early 1970's. The book is composed of some of her notebook writings while living in the bayou, including the process of building the houseboat with reclaimed materials from a slave-built house and living sustainably off of the bayou. The writing has a journalistic style, but is at the same time personable through the characters that live in the area. It was a refreshing read and gave me a dose of the wilderness and isolation I miss by living in a city. It was also nice learning about Roland's life; I enjoyed her independence and self-determination. My critique of the book is that it was too short and left me wishing for more details about the swamp and the people.

Get Atchafalaya Houseboat: My Years in the Louisiana Swamp from the Denver Public Library

- Porscha

Renee says

A charming book about two idealistic young people who left all of their personal belongings behind, built a house boat and proceeded to live on it solely for the next decade in the 1970's. Their goal was to re-create the vanished simple life of their great-grandparents in the heart of Louisiana's million-acre Atchafalaya River Basin Swamp.

Bob says

Roland's observations are enjoyable because they are so grounded in the immediate present that the vignettes for the local paper written in the 1970's read like poetry. She is less successful in knitting her experiences into a coherent whole, a task she sets herself when she wonders if she is really the girl in C.C. Lockwood's photographs. Her partner on the houseboat, whom she consulted on the draft of the book, sums it up perfectly: "It's pretty good, kind of short, though" (p. 155)
The individual stories burst with faith, hope, and charity -- humor, too. "When he lost his second wife, Dot,

to cancer, Alcide consoled himself with whiskey as men have done for centuries. Being a person who never does anything halfway, Alcide stayed drunk for ten years. Eventually he realized he was drinking a fifth of whiskey each day without even getting tipsy. He poured out the last bottle and has not touched liquor since. 'I was afraid I might become an alcoholic.'"

(p. 54)

A review supplies color to the text's black and white images and an article from Mother Earth News has current pictures of the author and links to recent pieces.
