

Fishing for Gold: The Story of Alabama's Catfish Industry. *By Karni R. Perez.* Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006. xv + 263 pp. Maps, illustrations, appendix, bibliography, index. Paper, \$22.95. ISBN: 0-817-35344-5.

Reviewed by Robert S. Davis

Aquaculture, or fish farming, has a history going back thousands of years in Asia, but it is a relatively new phenomenon in America. Before the arrival of dams, pollution, and commercial fishing on an industrial scale, individual fishermen could supply most of the market in the United States for freshwater fish and seafood. Preservation technology, industrial food processing, and better transportation created a fish-farming industry around 1900 that failed to achieve widespread success in this country. Federally supported experiments in the catfish industry began in Kansas and continued throughout the Midwest from 1881 to modern times. The idea of fish production for direct human consumption had a revival after World War II, chiefly in the form of a few large operations in the Mississippi Delta.

Alabama's catfish-farming industry did not begin until around 1960, when, according to Karni R. Perez, it "succeeded beyond many people's wildest dreams" (p. xi). From 1982 to 2003, state land devoted to this product grew from 8,200 acres to some 25,000 acres, causing catfish to increase in value as part of the fish sold in the United States from 11 percent to 21 percent (p. 222). Thousands of small operations have sprung up all across the state, but the industry hub remains where it began, in the central-west "Black Belt" counties of Greene, Hale, Perry, and Sumter.

Perez attributes this egalitarian agricultural success to many factors. Contrary to popular misconceptions, Alabama's Black Belt farmers had long sought alternatives to the area's famous cotton economy. Most of their ventures failed to achieve anything but temporary profitability. The farmers' persistence was finally rewarded when their catfish venture took off. Alabama's Auburn University, starting as early as 1931, experimented with constructing ponds for bait production under the direction of Homer Swingle of the Department of Zoology and Entomology. Swingle also initially explored water-resources

development, sport fishing, and methods of raising bass as food. In the 1950s, his disciples worked with ponds designed for game fish to try to replicate the success achieved with farming trout in the Northeast. When the bait industry collapsed from overproduction, Auburn turned to catfish, using the same ponds. By 1959, the university had fifty-seven research ponds and had sold its first fingerlings (baby catfish).

Much of *Fishing for Gold* consists of interviews, chiefly with the individual catfish farmers who pioneered—and gambled—on this latest fad. The road to success had plenty of pitfalls. As Perez explains, “The catfish industry in Alabama began as a do-it-yourself and figure-it-out-yourself kind of enterprise” (p. 131). It succeeded not only because it filled the need to replace dwindling supplies of wild fish, but also because of the scientists’ persistence with hit-or-miss experimentation and the critical cooperation of small farmers.

The farmers recount their experiences in these pages as a form of folk history. Despite decades of research, turning catfish into a viable industry was hampered by difficulties with equipment, pond construction, spawning, feed, disease, oxidation, pollution, water management, storage, and marketing. Unforeseen problems sprang up, such as the failure of the beef-processing machine to skin catfish at one farm. (The solution was to take the processor’s blades outside and sharpen them on the concrete street curb.) Some farmers lost their investment when previously undetected pond pollution made the fish taste bad. In the early years, these entrepreneurs often built replicas of what they had seen at Auburn’s demonstration ponds, using materials they found lying around on their farms to make what they needed for their ponds and hatcheries. One farmer, Joe Kyser, mortgaged his property in order to join in this dream. When he harvested his first crop, he iced his fish live, loaded them into a trailer attached to his tractor, and drove off with his cargo for shipment to Chicago.

Fishing for Gold recounts its tales chronologically, artfully balancing oral histories and smoothly blending quotes into the narrative. The epic begins in late 1960 with Greensboro farmers Chester O. Stephens, Richard True, and Bryant Allen, who created an ad hoc starter catfish company, STRAL (an acronym formed from their last names), which initially sold more ideas than fingerlings. The founders often acted more like aquaculture missionaries than salesmen.

STRAL found unofficial partners in Greensboro's state prison ranch and Auburn University. In 1966, when the company opened a processing plant in Greensboro to buy the catfish that farmers had raised from the company's fingerlings, it only managed to acquire one new partner, Greensboro butcher Joe Glover. Its processing "plant" was the back of his store. Two years later, STRAL opened a formal factory that it subsequently sold to Nebraska Consolidated Mills. In 1970, the industry finally achieved permanency and profitability when Farm Fresh Catfish opened a competing plant across the street in Greensboro.

Many other aspects of southern agriculture went through similar revolutionary changes during these years, but unfortunately they do not have a Karni R. Perez to act as their Boswell. Having read a number of poorly compiled oral histories, I plan to hold this work up as an example to my students of how to get oral history "right." Perez has thoroughly researched and documented her topic, and she supplies the context by filling in the backgrounds of the persons she interviews. I hope we will see more histories that, like this one, have been prepared from the "ground up" and that so effectively document local economic change in twentieth-century America.

Robert S. Davis is director of the Family and Regional History Program of Wallace State Community College, Hanceville, Alabama. His many publications include Tracing Your Alabama Past (2004) and Cotton, Fire, and Dreams: The Robert Findlay Iron Works and Heavy Industry in Macon, Georgia, 1839–1912 (1998). His latest work, Ghosts and Shadows of Andersonville, will be published in 2006 by Mercer University Press.