



*Published in the Sun Herald on Wednesday, Oct. 9, 2013

How a rubber boot transformed shrimp processing

Before technology became a major asset to the shrimp processing industry in 1949, all shrimp peeling, washing, deveining and grading was done manually. In many cases, it was a long day of tedious and exhaustive work for entire families. While men were dragging nets along the Gulf waters for fresh catch, women and children were in canning factories peeling shrimp by hand.

All that began to change after 17-year-old J.M. Lapeyre accepted a challenge in 1943 from his father, who owned a shrimp plant in Louisiana, to design an automated shrimp peeler. Lapeyre's imagination and analytical mind set the course when one day, he stepped on a shrimp with his rubber boot and noticed the meat had ejected cleanly out of its shell.

So began the process to create an automated shrimp peeler machine that would eventually revolutionize the industry.

"I got my original idea, believe it or not, in church. When I was supposed to be praying, I was thinking about how to get the shrimp out of the shell because my father had said that 'if you want to make a lot of money, invent a shrimp peeling machine,' and I thought, 'why not squeeze them out of the shell?' And so when I got down to the plant the next time, I began to step just to the side of the shrimp with my rubber boots to see if I could not in fact squeeze the shell from the meat. And...it worked."

Research and innovation took Lapeyre to his mother's washing machine, which operated with rubber rollers. After adding running water and a mechanical pressure feed to the machine, he hit the jackpot when he discovered his invention produced a "pinch and release" effect with no damage to the shrimp.

In 1949, Lapeyre founded Laitram Machinery, Inc. in Harahan, La., to manufacture and sell the first automatic shrimp peeling machine, and in 1951, he patented the invention, which is the same design leased around the world today.

Lapeyre, who died in 1989, completely transformed the industry, and the effects of his

ingenious idea were especially felt on the Gulf Coast. After he started the company, six machines were placed in Coast processors, and shrimp of any size could be peeled, including the small ones that were usually passed over by factory workers.

Jonathan McLendon, vice president of Biloxi Freezing & Processing, says the advanced technology incorporated into Laitram Machinery's design allows his company to process more than 100,000 pounds of shrimp daily.

“The actual peeling machines get fed through a computer operated automated feed system, and it's a really unique, handy set of technology that uses laser beams similar to those used on your garage door,” McLendon said. “What Lapeyre came up with by using the soft rubber rollers that were on his mother's old-fashioned washing machine is a design still used around the world today. Obviously, the technology has much improved since then, but we still use a series of long, soft rubber rollers to peel the shrimp, and the basic design of the peeling machine remains unchanged.”

To learn more about Laitram Machinery and the history of the shrimp peeling machine, visit laitrammachinery.com.

[INSERT VIDEO WMV FILE THAT WAS EMAILED OCT. 9.]

- The file Laitram set up is no longer active, so if video was not downloaded, then link below will have to be used. If video file was downloaded, then note with asterisk needs to be added.

<http://laitrammachinery.com/rfi.aspx?id=2147483783>

*Video courtesy of Laitram Machinery

This story is part of the Gulf Coast Seafood Fall Shrimp Celebration, a campaign by the Mississippi Hospitality & Restaurant Association and its partners Gulf Seafood Trace and the Gulf Seafood Marketing Coalition to promote area restaurants serving traceable Gulf shrimp. Visit gulfshrimptales.com to learn more about Gulf shrimp and the celebration.