October 23, 2002----

CHOKOLOSKEE, Fla.----Fierce swells from the Gulf of Mexico splash across a crabber's boat named Crazy Horse. The waves come and go like the crack of a whip. Alfredo is a crabber from Santiago, Cuba, who is on the boat.

He is a gaunt rider on a tough stallion.

Alfredo is one of three fishermen on the boat for the Oct. 15 opening day of the annual stone crab harvest. Gulf water crashes into the faces of the crabbers with unforgiving speed. All crabbers rub saltwater out of their eyes. But at the end of a 14-hour day, Alfredo's tears seem to come from somewhere else.

Alfredo is a last-minute addition when a regular crabber fails to show up for the three-hour boat trip from Marathon north to Chokoloskee. After 250 pounds of crabs are harvested, Alfredo lies down on his back in the middle of the boat. He is wiped out. Alfredo closes his eyes and extends his arms. He slowly moves his fingers back and forth just like the claws of the crabs he has helped catch. At age 51, he is too old for this game. But the stone crab harvest is timeless.

The Florida Keys and the Florida coast of the Gulf of Mexico provide much of the world's stone crabs. Stone crabs are to seafood what filet mignon is to steak. The harvest season runs from Oct. 15 to May 15.

I join crabbers Alfredo, Lu Lu and Danielle along with Captain Mike Martone on a stark 43-foot fiberglass fisherman's boat that was built in Key West. Crazy Horse rocks back and forth to the rhythm of waves that are 3 feet high. I reportedly was the first Chicagoan to spend an entire day on a crabber's boat here.

None of the crabbers speak English. Lu Lu is from Mexico; Alfredo is able to tell me that crabbing pays better than the clothes factory where he worked in Miami, and Danielle is from Puerto Plata, Dominican Republic. These men work with determined dignity from 4 in the morning until 5 in the evening, six days a week. They take Monday off.

The crabbers don't actually harvest entire crabs. To assure the survival of the species, they quickly and efficiently twist and snap off a claw and toss the crab back into the water. Only one claw may be removed so the young crab can defend itself. After the crab reaches maturity, sometimes two claws can be removed.

The claws regenerate and it takes anywhere from a year to 24 months for them to reach legal size again. Egg-bearing females are not legally eligible for declawing. The crabbers consistently check the bloated underbellies of the crabs to determine their gender.

Claws sell for between $5 and $15 a pound, depending on wholesale or retail. The claws are rushed back to shore. They cannot be iced because the claw meat will freeze to the shells so it can't be removed except in little pieces.

The claws are sorted when day is done because prices are different for medium, large and jumbo. The fisheries weigh the claws. The claws make up the edible (and therefore financially valuable) weight of the whole crab.

"On the average, if you do three-quarters to a pound, it's an all-right day," Martone says. This is CrabTalk. Crabbers speak in pound-per-trap. The crabbers pulled about 250 pounds--or traps--in two grueling sessions.

For this expedition, the owner of the boat is paid for the claws brought in. Martone is paid weekly by the boat owner (he is not the owner of Crazy Horse). The crabbers are paid $120 each. The fishery sells the claws to restaurants and retail outlets.

This year's opening-day harvest arrives in the cold mist of a price war, so some crabbers stay ashore in order to keep the catch low and drive up prices.

My trip is arranged through a Marathon-based fishery run by a part-time fisherman and part-time general contractor. I meet him at 3 a.m. near the Marathon Marina & Boat Yard (close to the Chik-Tiki Bar and Grill). He has arms like totem poles. The big chief gets excited about bad weather.

A tropical storm is forming near the Grand Cayman Islands and a storm watch is up in Key West. "You will be rockin' and rollin'," he says to the city slicker. The big chief also claims to have done time in Leavenworth, Kansas, and El Reno, Okla., off old Route 66. "I did 13 years, seven months, standing straight up," he says with a smile. "They said I brought in 71/2 million pounds of pot and probably 60,000 kilos."

That's what they said.

"They didn't have a witness."

He takes me to Crazy Horse, which is being loaded up with bait--17 boxes of pig's feet. Each box is lined with block lettering: PORK HIND FEET. INEDIBLE. NOT INTENDED FOR HUMAN FOOD. Gear is stowed and the crabbers set provisions like Gatorade, apples and bananas in a white cooler. At 4:30 a.m., Crazy Horse sets sail under the stars. The crabbers adjourn to tiny bunks in a dank compartment beneath the boat's bridge, where they sleep during the three-hour trip to where the traps were placed early this month.

Martone selects the destination, 60 nautical miles from Marathon, near the island of Chokoloskee. This is a long way to go to find crabs. Martone has been fishing the

Gulf since 1986. He likes this area, just south of Everglades City.

"I know there's crabs there," he says while cruising at a 20-knot pace (roughly 25 mph in land speed). "Just by fishing over the years, you find the bottom that holds the crabs. We're looking for big crabs. They pay more."

Crabs are found in water 8 to 70 feet deep. They walk at night and move only when there is a stiff northern wind over the gulf. On this morning we travel to the tune of a 20-mile southwest wind. The crabbers won't go out to sea if the wind is more than 25 mph.

As we near the promising spot, Martone stomps on the deck of the bridge to wake up his crew. The crabbers quickly arise and begin work in a quiet and steadfast rhythm. Crabbers play three roles on a fishing boat, and they exchange parts as dawn turns into day.

Traps are black 16-by-16-inch boxes made of heavy plastic. The crabs get in by climbing up the side of the trap. They walk into a hole and stumble in. They cannot swim, so they cannot get out. Each trap can hold 10 or 12 crabs. Sometimes the crabbers pull a full trap. Other times they have discovered nothing but small groupers, grunts, pinfish and snails.

I've been to parties like that.

The traps are attached to buoys with 30 feet of rope. One crabber is positioned at the right rear of the boat and pulls in the buoy with a long gaff. The buoy is quickly attached to a pulley connected to a motor. The trap is snapped off the buoy and handed off to a second crabber.

The second crabber stands to the left of the first. He examines the trap, checks any crabs that have been trapped and inserts pig's feet as bait. He throws the crabs back in the water along with the weird fish. A flock of seagulls trail Crazy Horse in search of scraps.

The middle crabber then rolls the trap down a small conveyor belt, where a third crabber cleans the trap and removes barnacles. This crabber also stacks the traps, which weigh about 45 pounds each. The cleaned traps are locked and tossed back in the water. This process is done twice during our trip.

After spending a day watching these guys, the routine reminds me of an assembly line at sea. I wonder if the crabbers would ever be replaced by machines. "Good question," Martone answers. "I don't know how you would get a machine to grade and break the claws. I think we're stuck with having guys on the back. You need crew."

The crew's life is a bare-bones existence. There is no lunch break. There are few

rules and regulations on Crazy Horse. No one wears a life preserver. A couple of signs say, "Discharge of Oil Prohibited" and "Warning: No Illegal Drugs."

Alfredo, Lu Lu and Danielle work together but stand alone. They barely talk to each other. But there is an unspoken code among crabbers. The Gulf spray washes over them like a mystic waterfall. The sins of time are swept away, which may be the enduring secret all crabbers share.