

Lower Mississippi River Dispatch No. 303

August 29, 2015:

10-year commemoration of Hurricane Katrina:

"Wow. Louisiana. Oh my God, where am I going to go?"



"You are Beautiful" Graffiti on building above Industrial Canal, New Orleans

With stories by:

Mark "River" Peoples

-- and --

"Wolfie" Chris Staudinger



The Natchez steaming upstream from the Moonwalk at the French Quarter

August 29, 2005

Wow. Louisiana. Oh my God, where am I going to go?

by "Wolfie" Chris Staudinger

As today has come and the radio has played and replayed songs about New Orleans, songs about flooding, Fats Domino's Walking to New Orleans, I've thought about why we do the commemorating. "What is it makes you want to dwell in disaster?" someone recently asked me, maybe not rhetorically since I've spent the entire summer building a boat that revisits the storm. I asked myself that question over and over and over. Why lick old wounds when there's a big horizon in the sky? I've come up with a lot of reasons to head for the horizon.

But, after everything in the last ten years and in the last three months of boat building, I want to remember the wounds for a couple of reasons.

There was a lot of beauty in all of the loss. For me, that was the family who hosted me in Dallas. God bless the Chevalliers. They were a family who had strong roots in Louisiana and took me into their house sight unseen! I lived there for four months, no questions asked. They were one of thirty or forty families from Jesuit College Prep in Dallas that took kids in after the storm. Millions of people did beautiful welcoming things like this, and a million more came to New Orleans to help rebuild, and we wouldn't be here right now if it weren't for other people's help. That is certain.

Then there was just the loss. Katrina made me realize what it could be like never to come back home, if only for a split second in time.

An interview that I did for the boat has replayed over and over in my mind, along with these songs on the radio. Her name is Myrna, and, like me, she didn't lose anyone, and she didn't lose very much materially after the storm: she had a home to come back to eventually. Recalling that time, she told me "Dije yo, se perdió Luisiana. Y yo pensé que se había perdido. Que había desaparecido, ¿verdad? , del mapa, como decimos nosotros. Y digo yo, y pues si me puse a llorar porque digo yo, wow Luisiana. Y decía yo, ay Dios mío. Ay Dios mío. Para dónde vuelvo yo? " / " I said, Louisiana is Lost. And I thought we'd lost it. That it had disappeared, right? From the map, like we say. And I said-- and, well, I started to cry because I said, 'Wow. Louisiana.' And I said, 'Oh my God, where am I going to go?'"

You don't need a hurricane to know this feeling of loss or potential loss - it's just the splinter of a future without something you love that can shock you and frighten you into thinking differently or changing. With Katrina, it just happened to a million people all at once.

I think as I move away from Katrina and an identity of disaster, these are the memories I want to take with me. They make the dancing sweeter.

Chris Staudinger: Paper Boat

Chris Staudinger and his father have built the skeleton of a 16-foot canoe. The boat is big enough, Staudinger hopes, to carry the memories of the post-Katrina community.

Beginning with a reception at Byrdie's Gallery, 2242 St. Claude Ave., on Saturday (Aug. 29) from 6 to 10 p.m., Staudinger will coat the hull of the

boat with 2005 storm and flood stories he has gathered from contributors. He hopes that eight layers of paper, brushed with polyurethane, will make the vessel watertight. Though he's not sure when or where he'll take the canoe to water, he plans to make it "fully functional."

Staudinger calls the project "Paper Boat."

"Paper Boat" will be Staudinger's first conceptual artwork. In the past, he confined his artistic expression to the written word.

"I'm actually more of a writer or poet," he said. "I've never really considered myself a visual artist. I just want to do something different."

Staudinger said that he used to lead canoe trips in Mississippi and once helped build a 34-foot canoe to ply the Mississippi River. Memory of that was the spark of the "Paper Boat" project.

Staudinger will be on hand Saturday to accept written stories on any sort of paper, or to record stories that he will then transcribe. After that, he will periodically move the boat to other sites, gathering stories as he goes.

"It's gong to be an ongoing process," he said. "Saturday is just the beginning. I'll take it to schools, libraries, churches, whoever thinks it's a good idea."

For more about "Paper Boat" read the story in the Saturday Times Picayune NOLA.com by Doug MacCash:

http://www.nola.com/arts/index.ssf/2015/08/help_build_a_paper_boat_of_kat.html



Paddling past Jax Brewery, the St. Louis Cathedral and the French Market

Katrina

by Mark River Peoples

It was the end of October. The water had receded in most areas around the city of New Orleans. My brother, William Eugene Peoples and family were visiting St. Louis, fresh off their stay in Deritter, Louisiana. They rented a house to weather the storm until the waters exited their home in New Orleans. Barely a foot of water occupied their home on Gentilly Ave., but they still lost just as much as the individuals whom lost entire homes.

My brother married a Creole woman from New Orleans named Katina. He loves Louisiana, once telling me, "Brotha, I will be in New Orleans for the rest of my life." Having a young daughter named after our deceased mother, Jade Iveara Peoples, only worry was about her pink room and if it was like she left it. Katina's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Greene, lost everything.

The visit to St. Louis was the beginning of the long, tedious road to rebuilding their lives in New Orleans. My brother, a stern, disciplined, retired Army officer, who taught me work ethic on the football field and Katina, his wife, a doctor, displaced from her practice, were letting the family know they were all right, but just starting over.

They looked good, but I could see the stress in their bodies. Having taken everyone into the house they rented, you could see the heavy load being carried through their eyes. Katina had two brothers that had families that lived with her parents, plus various nieces and nephews all hunkering down, figuring out the next step. I knew my brother had a plan, but he needed help.

As I foraged through the kitchen, I could hear my brother talking to our father in the other room. He had proper insurance, but the cost of a lot of the work that needed done seemed higher than what insurance companies paid out. Crews of workers from Mexico roamed the neighborhoods offering services to desperate homeowners needing help. The problem was, it wasn't cheap. The workers were taking advantage of the tragedy of our nation, profiting whenever possible. I heard my brother say to our father, " They want \$6500 dollars just to tear out the floors!" Our father responds, " I got the perfect person to help you. Your brother Mark!"

I smiled knowing I could help my brother get through a very tough time of his life. The plan was for him and his family to return to the rental home in Derritter, Louisiana while we squatted at the home in New Orleans. He would go to work daily, while I attacked tearing out the floors and the lower walls of sheetrock damaged by the brackish water. On weekends, him and I would drive to Derritter to see the family.

I decided to take the train to New Orleans. As a lover of the train from my college days, I thought it would be great to see the Delta and Louisiana from that perspective. I wanted to see the aftermath of the storm. I wanted to feel the landscape as I headed into the devastation. The train ride was excellent. The

sun started to rise as we approached the Delta. I instantly started seeing sharecropper shacks and miles of cotton looking like snow. Fisherman line the lakes and rivers. I got confused thinking I would see less, but noticed more life than expected. Herds of deer running through the bayous filled with cypress trees and palmettos. Pelicans, roseate spoonbills, egrets, and wood ducks took flight as the train rolled by. I didn't see any devastation to wildlife, but thriving ecosystems -reborn.

I arrived in New Orleans. My brother picked me up from the train station after a long day at work. Eyes weary and I noticed something out of the ordinary. There were half smoked cigars in his ashtray. No way, I thought to myself, my straight-laced brother smoking! He informed me it helps keep him awake during his long drive between homes. He explained to me that we will be staying in the house upstairs away from the mold infested downstairs area. He briefed me on the safety issues. The street lights were still off in many areas and illegal activities like looting, drug dealing, and robberies were rampant in the dark. Thieves even watch houses in which home owners hadn't returned.

"Tomorrow morning, I will show you everything you been reading about. It's important that you see this with your own eyes."

That night I stared out my niece's window watching shadows in the night. Dogs barked all night, with an occasional gunshot in the distant. Vehicles drove slowly through the night. Darkness ruled. The smell of death, decay, and brackish water filled the air. I opened all the windows so the mold wouldn't harm us in our sleep. I didn't sleep that night, I could fill the death in the air.

The morning took forever to come. So excited and fearful of what I would see. The day started with a ride through some of the most decimated areas. Drove of vehicles stored underneath highways. More cars lined parking lots with noticeable damage from the acidic brackish water. Personal debris from homes littered the city. The markings on the homes symbolized where bodies had been retrieved. Rumors floated through the community about bodies being missed and mismanaged. I was amazed at the damage standing brackish water could make.

We ended the day with the drive to Deritter to see family. I was excited knowing Mrs. Green would have a spread of Creole inspired food. The plan was to bulk up on great food and start the work Monday morning. We sat around in the biggest room of the home eating and telling stories, but not once bringing up Katrina. I got the feeling they were all talked out, ready to move on.

The work day arrived quickly. Myself and a sledgehammer working consistent throughout the day, occasionally stopping to load the wheel barrel, and haul debris to the street. Trucks of workers would drive by giving me dirty looks as if I was stealing their work, but this was my chore. Every swing I made was for family and humanity. Dust filled the house as I continued on strong all day. I was determined to

leave here with my family in a better place. I knew I could help my family off to a great start and incubate the healing process. I tried to double my work daily, so my brother would see results when he arrived home. Every day the large pile in the driveway increased. I could see the load being lifted off his back. It got to a point when he would return from work , we would just crack open a beer, talk, and call it a day.

Mark River



Algier's Ferry, wharves and docks along waterfront at the base of Canal Street

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"You are Beautiful" Grafetti on building above Industrial Canal

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