



# Hurricane Rita

The Forgotten People of Rural Louisiana

Written and Photographed by Natalie Kaufman

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## The Forgotten People of Rural Louisiana



They feel like they have been forgotten. And pretty much, they're right.

They are the victims of Hurricane Rita. Victims of a hurricane that did \$10 billion worth of damage, but that followed too closely on the heels of the most infamous of all modern hurricanes, Katrina. It wasn't that Katrina was worse — both measured Category 3 at landfall — but that the New Orleans aftermath of Katrina was so shocking, there wasn't time enough to digest it before Rita came barreling through three weeks later.

Now, nearly 18 months later, the people of rural Louisiana are still struggling to rebuild their lives and communities.

This is Cajun country, where the elders still speak French and people still live life on their own time. The culture is one of tight-knit families and a fierce love of the land, where sentences are sprinkled with "tite," "fait-dodo," and "coulis," and food is served more often than not.

Two hundred and fifty years ago, the French settlers of Nova Scotia were driven out from Canada and settled here in the swamps, happy for the freedom they found in the isolation. They learned to farm the land, growing rice and sugar; they raised cattle and horses; and they fished the waters of the Gulf.

Now their descendants live on this land. It is not unusual —in fact, it is common— to find multiple generations living on the same property, a daughter's house within yards of her parents' house; Mamá and Papá (grandma and grandpa) living just across the street.

Hurricane waters, wind, and mud took a lot of what these generations had built. And help never really came to this area. So people are doing it themselves, supported by the grants and volunteers of groups like Southern Mutual Help.

This exhibit is based on the stories of families I met in Iberia and Vermillion Parishes, as a volunteer for Southern Mutual Help, from late December '06 to early January '07.

**Natalie Kaufman**

## Bryan Pitre

For three generations, the Pitres have been boat builders. Bryan Pitre learned the trade from his father, who learned the trade from his father. The Pitre Shipyard company sits along the banks of a canal in Delcambre (Del' - kum), a fishing community not 10 miles from the open waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

Bryan's home is within the shipyard property, his daughter's home right across the street. When Rita's evacuation was ordered, the Pitres took shelter at his son-in-law's family, near Lafayette 20 miles away. What they came home to was total devastation. Rita had brought a surge of water and mud over 8 feet high, which took over a week to recede.



I meet the Pitres in late December 2006, one week after the family has moved back into their newly rebuilt home. With crews of Southern Mutual Help volunteers on the weekends, and Bryan's own work all day every day, the house his mother and father built is finally back up —ten feet up, to be exact. Building codes in Louisiana now require homes to be 12 feet above sea level. His daughter's home is also rebuilt now, again, with grants and volunteer support from Southern Mutual Help. Teams of people would show up on a weekend and go back and forth between the two houses, depending on which construction specialty was needed at any given time.

It was a long wait. For over a year, Bryan, his bed-ridden wife, and his wheelchair-bound mother shared a trailer 15 feet long and 7 feet wide. His Daddy died not long after the hurricane. Bryan had to drop his business in order to focus on rebuilding his house.

Now that his house is done, will he reopen the shipyard, I ask? He walks me out to the shipyard to answer. The surge waters brought salt water in from the Gulf, damaging anything mechanical or metal. We look at his office, which looks much the same as it did when the waters receded. Files destroyed, furniture heaved into random piles, and everything covered in a layer of dried mud.

I ask his daughter Stacy if she and her husband and son ever thought about leaving. She tells me that absolutely yes, they did think about it. But that when her Papá (grandpa) died last year, he made her promise on his deathbed that she would not leave the Pitre land.

Bryan is 65. He has a signature hat he's worn during his whole career. Last year, a volunteer gave him a new one, in the same style. Bryan vowed he wouldn't give up his old hat until he'd moved back into his home. The hat now sits mounted above his front door, retired. It remains to be seen whether the new hat will see any boat work.



## Mary Merritte

Before I ever see Mary Merritte, I hear her working: as I walk up to her house, I hear the pounding of a hammer coming from inside.

Ms. Mary is a 55 year old grandma who is rebuilding her house by herself. And I mean really all by herself. She has done every little bit of construction alone.

"How do you get that sheetrock up all by yourself?" I ask. "Isn't it heavy?"

Mary smiles and laughs, which she does a lot. "Well, when it gets too heavy, I ask my grandson Robbie and he helps me." Mary's smaller than me (5'3") and Robbie's

10 years old. The whole time we talk, she never lets go of the hammer and screwdriver she had in her hand when I walked up. WonderGranny's on a mission.

Since October 2005, three weeks after the storm, she has been laboring on that house. First gutting it, and now rebuilding it. Southern Mutual Help eventually "found" her, and gave her a grant of \$5,000, which was spent on lumber.

"If it could be organized, would you ever want them to send you a team of volunteers to help you finish?" I ask. "Nah," she replies, explaining that she's come this far alone, and that, "When I'm finished I'm gonna sit back and say 'Look what I did!'"

"I've always worked in hard labor, anyway," she laughs. Her pre-retirement life included 15 years in a sugarmill and about a year out on an oil rig.

"What's been the hardest part?" I ask.

She laughs again, "Learning to cut wood straight!" She explains that it has been a self-taught process, mostly, though she did take a basic class on building years earlier, because as she tells me, "I always had an interest in it." She could not have known how fully she would one day develop that interest.

To take a tour of this slowly emerging phoenix, with Ms. Mary the grandma talking roofing and framing and joists and rotary saws, well, it makes you believe. Makes you believe in people, if nothing else.

When she finishes the house itself, she will need another \$5,000 to get it raised up another couple feet, so the next big one doesn't take away all her hard work.

For now, she lives with her daughter's family in their trailer, which has always been right next door to her house. Her goal is to finish everything in time for her birthday, in October. She will have been building for two years straight.

# Neil Bourke

"We were all born and raised in the marsh," replies Neil Bourke, when I ask him if he and his wife ever thought about leaving, after Rita leveled their house.

We are talking on the porch of his house-in-progress on Pecan Island, a raggedly beautiful hamlet deep in the marshes. "This is home," he says. "Where we gonna go? Other places, you got wildfires, earthquakes, tornadoes... At least we have warnings, with the surges."

When it was clear that their house was a total loss, he and his wife considered how they would re-establish their life. "We went and looked at mobile homes —for about five minutes." The couple agreed that was not an option.

Twenty years ago, Mr. Neil tells me, they had built their house themselves. "But that was when I was 30! I asked my wife, should we try it again? She said, 'Yes. Let's go for it.'"

"I'm 50 now. People told me, 'you can't do it.' I said, 'Well, pass back here in a year.'" In that year, Mr. Neil has built a house with his own two hands. He emphasizes that his son helped a lot, but there's been no construction help otherwise. He works four 10-hour shifts a week at his job, and then spends all his free time building. Southern Mutual Help was able to give the family a grant, which he shows me was used to buy lumber for the handmade paneling in the bedrooms.

"I'm not a carpenter but I have a lot of common sense," he tells me as I admire the astonishing woodwork. "A lot of things may not be exactly right, but I tell you what, I built it strong." It's an unbelievably beautiful house, a lovingly handmade cottage with a sweeping view of the marshes this family loves so much.

"When we had nowhere to go, a friend offered that we could use his trailer. But I don't like to live in town (referring to Abbeville, a town of 11,000). Every time you leave your house, you gotta lock the door, lock the car... I like the peace and quiet out here."

I ask him when he thinks he'll be done building. "Well, if Road Home would come through tomorrow, it would take me another three months to complete it. If not, it's going to be another year." Road Home is the federal program established to help Katrina and Rita hurricane victims, which to date

has cut less than 100 checks in response to nearly 200,000 applications for help.

In all the time we talk, Mr. Neil is nothing less than a gracious, thoughtful host. There is no trace of bitterness, only steady determination and country practicality.

"When the cow's bogged down, you gotta go pull her out. You can't leave her bogged in." Simple as that, it appears. You lose your house, you go and rebuild it.

Clearly, four generations of Bourkes on Pecan Island have figured a few things out.





## Janine Curol

"I call my house the 'We-house,'" Janine Curol tells me when we meet at her nearly-finished home. "We built it."

She explains how Southern Mutual Help recommended her house to a group of Mennonite volunteers from Pennsylvania, who over the last year have rebuilt her home. Mennonites are highly skilled builders who, as part of their beliefs, construct homes together as a community. "If I hadn't called Southern Mutual Help, I wouldn't be where I am today," she says.

She proudly gives me a tour of the house, which now awaits only the final framing of windows and doors. Her FEMA-provided trailer, in which she has lived with her husband and teenage son for the last year, is visible through the kitchen window. The family dog, Little Man, keeps a keen eye on me as we walk through.

Against a bare wall in the kitchen is a small Christmas tree, surrounded by stuffed animals. (Christmas was just days earlier).

"All I wanted for Christmas was to spend the night in my house," says Janine. When we visit her future bedroom, I see the inflatable mattress her husband set up to fulfill her wish.

Tears well up in her eyes as she again and again expresses her gratitude to Southern Mutual Help and the Mennonites. "I was doing it alone until they came," she says, "My husband works twelve to fourteen hours a day, so it was just me in here."

"I've told them, 'My home is always your home.'"

She adds that in dealing with life post-Rita, "There have been so many letdowns, I didn't believe it when they promised me they'd complete it." And now it's just about done.

I ask if she has a housewarming plan in mind. Her eyes light up and she tells me it's gonna be one heck of a crab boil.



## Stan and Joan Romanowski

How does a retired couple end up here, in the swamps of Louisiana, a thousand miles from home? In September 2006, Stan and Joan Romanowski watched the hurricane anniversary coverage on TV. By October, they were driving down to Louisiana in their RV from Michigan, having decided they had to go down and help.

"We were looking for something to do," says Joan, a retired school teacher. "There are only so many games of 'FreeCell' he can play," she adds, laughing.

Now, every single day, the couple works to help the families of Vermillion Parish rebuild their lives and community. Stan, a retired software engineer, is a life-long do-it-yourselfer, and works on rebuilding homes through the coordination of Southern Mutual Help. Joan volunteers her teaching skills as a reading specialist at the local school.

"So you just felt compelled to come down here?" I ask.

"At this point in our lives, we've got a lot of freedom. We don't know how many years we've got," says Stan.

"—We got a whole lot older this winter," quips Joan. The three of us laugh, knowing the emotionally draining effect of seeing decent people struggling everywhere you look.

I am talking to them on a January morning, three and a half months into their stay. "Have you had any days off, really?"

Silence. They're stumped.

"No, I don't remember..." replies Stan. Then he adds, "I think there might have been one day where we didn't work and didn't do laundry or anything."

"We're tired. It's been hard," says Joan. "Christmas was really hard without our family."

"But Pops asked us to Thanksgiving and Christmas," Stan adds. "It was just their family and us," he says, clearly touched by the gesture.

By now in the interview, they are looking a bit restless. There's work waiting for them.

"We miss our home," says Stan. They had moved into their newly-built dream retirement home only months before leaving for Louisiana.

"The RV's getting pretty tight," adds Joan. "But then you think of the families who are still living in FEMA trailers, which are half the size."

"Will you stay in touch with people when you go back home?" I ask.

"Oh yeah," says Stan. "These have got to be the friendliest people in the world. We've become close with several of the families."

Stan and Joan tell me they're committed to being home by Palm Sunday this spring. That will mark six straight months of volunteer work.

## Tommy Sagrera

On the road out to Pecan Island, just a sneeze before you hit Sagrera Road, Tommy Sagrera works every day to build his home. The day I visit, one of his brothers is there helping him.

Before Rita hit, Tommy was ranching cattle out in Chenier Teague, in the marshes, same as his family had for over 100 years. The storm completely destroyed his home there and took nearly every head of cattle he had.

Luckily, the USDA did reimburse him for 75% of the value of his cattle. "I give them the thumbs up," he says, tacitly acknowledging the colossal failures of other government programs.

But didn't he lose equipment and feed, too, I ask? Tommy smiles and explains that the beauty of ranching in the marshes is that you never have to feed: controlled burning allows green grass to come up. "For 30 years, we've left them out in the marsh to feed. But now we can't take that chance," alluding to the future day he'll be able to resume his living.

For now, he builds. He's building a log cabin, having learned of the energy efficiencies of such a home. He tells me that a friend has one and almost never runs the air conditioning, such is the self-insulating quality of the logs. The exterior was a log cabin kit he ordered and got up in only two days. "Like putting together Lincoln Logs when you were a kid," he says, "—but heavier."

The interior holds an even better story. All the lumber for framing and construction is salvaged lumber that Tommy has collected from destroyed homes in the area. "I just asked people, if their house was going to be torn down, could I come in and take the wood first?" Word spread and he ended up with more offers than he could handle. He explains that any

wood that was above the water line (of the hurricane surge), unless it now has molding or termites, is absolutely fine to work with. He estimates his finished home will contain the recycled lumber of about fourteen homes.

A steady source of salvaged materials comes from right on the property, where his sister's destroyed home slumps next to his emerging cabin. She decided to relocate, he tells me, so, knowing he would not rebuild out in Chenier Teague, he took over the land.

I ask him about the lack of media coverage in rural areas after Hurricane Rita.

"It was the state of New Orleans, not the state of Louisiana," he says, referring to the Katrina-focused headlines that dominated the news.

I tell him I mean to change that.



# Pops and Barbara Saucier

"She's only just now finished crying," Burke "Pops" Saucier tells me of his wife, Barbara. Life this last year and a half has been very hard on the couple.

"I'm 60 years old," he says, "I never thought I'd have to beg for clothes, beg for food, beg for a place to stay." When Rita barreled through, she brought 8 feet of surging water, moving their home 100 yards off its pilings and destroying everything inside. Their two sons' houses, also on the property, were destroyed too.

When the waters finally receded a week later, the mess left behind was a thing of horror. "Clint's house (their eldest son) was broken in half. There was a layer of mud eight inches thick, everywhere. And it stank, boy did it stink." In their yard and inside the houses, they found live shrimp, live fish, and live snakes. And then they tell me about the dead cows. Surrounded by farms, their property was littered with the carcasses of drowned cows and horses when they came back.

"Did the government come to take care of that?" I ask.

With the even tone of a man who has accepted this rough chapter of life, he answers that help did not come. The carcasses started smelling really bad, so first they poured lyme over them. Then, when it became apparent that no help would ever come, he borrowed a backhoe from a friend and buried them.

"It's hell, you know. You work forty years and in the blink of an eye, it's gone," says Pops.

"When we came here and seen our houses, we all cried," he says, "Mostly for the kids, because they're just getting started in life." Barbara shows me a picture of their granddaughter Jolie, and tells me she hopes their grandchildren will be able to come back home soon.

"Every day you do a little," explains Barbara, "but it seems like it will never end."

Pops is quick to point out that Southern Mutual Help has helped the process along significantly. His son James' home was just finished, now built up on a berm to meet new Louisiana sea-level codes. Clint's home is still a work in progress, but they're expecting a team of Southern Mutual Help volunteers the following week. Pops and Barbara live in a FEMA-provided trailer, parked only feet away from their slumping former house.

"They say they only give you what you can handle," philosophizes Pops, and then with a flash of typical Louisiana wit, he adds, "—but we got a lot to handle."

It is late afternoon and a spectacular sunset begins to fire up the sky across the fields. A full moon rises in the twilight behind us.

"I love it here," says Barbara, "Ain't nothing in the world you could pay me to leave."



# What you can do



## **Donate your time or money.**

Visit [southernmutualhelp.org](http://southernmutualhelp.org) to volunteer or make a donation.

## **Travel as a tourist to Louisiana.**

In Iberia Parish and the nearby city of Lafayette you can find live Cajun music every night of the week.

Nearby Avery Island is where Tabasco Sauce was invented and is still made. I highly recommend the jalepeno ice cream!

Swamp tours and fishing trips are easy to find everywhere along the coast.

In New Orleans, the French Quarter was untouched by the hurricanes and is still as beautiful as ever, though tourism isn't back to even half of what it was.

## **Curb your impact on global warming.**

The connection between greenhouse emissions and increasingly frequent storms is clear.

Use energy efficient light bulbs.

Switch to wind power at [www.conedsolutions.com/grassroots](http://www.conedsolutions.com/grassroots).

Take public transportation or carpool whenever possible.

Buy local produce at farmers markets: transportation is the biggest contributor to greenhouse gasses overall.

Use less disposables: the manufacturing process is a big carbon contributor, so choosing more durable and reusable items means less emissions. Buy a mug for your morning coffee and tell stores to hold the shopping bag on small purchases you can carry yourself.

For more ideas, visit [http://www.stopglobalwarming.org/sgw\\_actionitems.asp](http://www.stopglobalwarming.org/sgw_actionitems.asp)