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# Tales of Wind and Water: Houma Indians and Hurricanes

**T. MAYHEART DARDAR**

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The majority of the Houma people live in the southern portions of Lafourche and Terrebonne parishes in south Louisiana. Today more than 50 percent of the Houma still live within a twenty-five-mile radius of the town of Montegut. In the adjacent parishes of Jefferson, Plaquemines, St. Mary, and St. Bernard are smaller Houma settlements that trace back to the early twentieth century. Before the 1960s Houma Indian children could not attend public school in Lafourche and Terrebonne. After years of fighting this type of discrimination several family groups migrated to the adjacent parishes. There they found new trapping and fishing grounds, and some found the chance to “pass” their children into school systems more tolerant of or less knowledgeable about Indians.

I grew up in the Houma community that had formed in lower Plaquemines Parish, about thirty miles north of the mouth of the Mississippi River. We were originally from one of the larger Houma settlements on Bayou Lafourche just below the town of Golden Meadow. Sometime in 1964 we relocated to Plaquemines to live near my Uncle Hannah, my dad’s brother. The Houma community there was centered near the town of Venice with extended family groups clustered along the local waterways. The Half-Way House, Tiger Pass, Spanish Pass, Stryker’s Woods, and the Village were the major Houma settlements with a population that would fluctuate over the years but would never grow to more than a few hundred individuals.

In those years it was to us a paradise; the waters were filled with shrimp, crabs, and fish, and the marshes teemed with muskrat, nutria, coons, otters, and minks. My dad, Raymond Mayheart Dardar (or simply “Mayheart” to the Indian community), was as good a trawler and trapper as any in the tribe. Fishing, hunting, and trapping were the traditional occupations of my people. Like the generations before him, my dad was a child of the bayous, marshes, and swamps of Louisiana, and his knowledge of Houma lifeways provided for all our needs. We lived in a little wood-framed house on Spanish Pass that

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T. Mayheart Dardar was born in 1962 on the Houma Indian settlement at Golden Meadow, Louisiana. He currently serves as the Vice-Principal Chief of the United Houma Nation.

my mom, Elsie, affectionately liked to call her “little green acres.” In time we would move into a mobile home inside the levee system, about half a mile from that house.

I don’t remember ever being scared of hurricanes, but from an early age my father taught me to respect the natural world that surrounded us. I remember days on the boat or on the river bank watching squall lines build up over the Gulf waters and make their way ashore. The swirling clouds, streaks of lighting, and claps of thunder left me awestruck at the power of creation. Hurricane stories are an integral part of Houma folklore, and the tales of winds and water have been told and repeated over the generations. The *Chenièrè Caminanda* Hurricane of 1893 and the storms of 1915 and 1926 were all profound events in recent tribal history.

In 1965 I was three years old; in September of that year my personal experience with hurricanes would begin with Betsy. I don’t remember much of the experience, but I do remember that part of the roof blew off the house we had evacuated to. It was after Hurricane Betsy that my parents decided to move from Spanish Pass to inside the levees in Venice. I’m sure they were doing what they could to keep us safe from the next storm; one thing you can always be sure of here in south Louisiana is that sometime in the future there will be a next storm.

I have no recollection of what I was doing on 5 August 1969, but I know I was blissfully unaware of a tropical wave that had formed off the western coast of Africa. Even at seven years old if I had known about it I am sure my sensibility and worldview could not have comprehended the effect this particular weather system was to have on my family and community. My father was the most influential person in my life, and over time I’ve come to realize that he was right about a great many things, some of which it has taken me years to see. There was one instance, however, when I can honestly admit his wisdom fell short.

By 14 August that tropical wave had turned into Hurricane Camille and was headed our way. Although weather forecasting then was nowhere as sophisticated as it is today, we still had ample warning, and by the night of 16 August lower Plaquemines was under a mandatory evacuation order. My dad told us he didn’t think it was going to be that bad; we’ll probably be home by the next day. Mom packed us a suitcase with one change of clothes each, and we climbed in the Buick and headed up the road. The memories of Betsy were still fresh then, we had fared pretty well for Betsy, and so my parents thought it just wasn’t going to be that bad.

Betsy’s 155 miles per hour winds and the storm surge that came before it caused extensive flooding in the New Orleans area, but southern Plaquemines was spared the severe devastation. It was not to be so with Camille; on the night of 17 August she crossed the southern tip of Plaquemines Parish and slammed into the Mississippi Gulf Coast with wind gust at more than two hundred miles per hour. Today, as an adult, I can comprehend the statistics: hundreds dead, thousands injured, and tens of thousands of homes damaged or destroyed. As a child then, all I knew was my reality: my hometown had ceased to exist as a functioning community. I made the first trip back with my dad by boat before the highway was fully cleared. What I saw was forever

etched in my mind, and it would be more than three decades before I would ever see something similar. Houses were destroyed, tossed about like toys. Trees were uprooted, cars flooded, boats scattered on the bank, and dead animals were hanging from trees.

Being a kid has its advantages in these situations; to the young the scarred landscape gives way to new adventure. I remember one day finding a marble collection scattered amidst the rubble, by the time I finished scrounging I had two cigar boxes full of marbles. School was another adventure as we moved around the New Orleans area until we could return home. When Camille hit I was in first grade at Boothville-Venice High School (first through twelfth grades); it would be 1973 and I would be in fifth grade before I could return to the rebuilt school. We had moved back to Venice in 1971 but had to be bussed to the schools in Buras until Boothville-Venice was rebuilt. To my parents fell the adult responsibilities of rebuilding our lives, and in the actions of my father came the life lessons about how Houma people respond to these events. I would not realize at the time that his example would be a blueprint for me thirty-six years later.

During this period I saw the Indian community come back together in Venice as the seasonal cycle of fishing and trapping was resumed. The key to our recovery was the same as it had always been for generation after generation: the land. Like all indigenous people we are children of the land, the bounty of the earth sustains us, and the strength of the land gives us the ability to overcome. In 1969 we had never heard the words “coastal erosion,” and though the process we know so well today had already begun, the effects were still mostly hidden.

It was that still-vital marshland that had absorbed enough of Camille’s wrath to enable the levees to hold and the population centers to survive. Even those Indian settlements outside the levee system were able to recover; they had flooded, but they survived. I witnessed also the spirit of the Houma people as they moved across settlements to reach out to each other. We traveled to Mississippi to help some relatives there just as family from Lafourche came over to help us. There were no newspaper articles or television reports about the condition of Indian people in the affected areas, but the word was out within the Houma community. It helped that Camille had hit the smaller eastern settlements and that the bulk of the tribe’s population in Lafourche and Terrebonne had remained safe.

As you would expect, all these lessons did not immediately sink in. My childhood was not spent rehashing the wisdom of my elders, but the seed was planted; when the time came the teachings were there. It is said by the old ones that God does not give grace beforehand for us to keep in storage, but when the time of trial is at hand then the grace that we need to make it through will be there for us. In indigenous society we pass on in legends, parables, and life lessons to the younger generation stories that may not seem relevant at the time, but if we hold on to these stories the day will come when they will be the key to finding the grace we need to overcome.

This was not foremost in my thoughts as the last weekend of August 2005 approached. At the time I knew that there was a hurricane named Katrina

headed for the Gulf, but the last report I'd heard predicted it would hit the west coast of Florida. Forty-three years of living in hurricane country has not made me a fan of the Weather Channel; I find tracking hurricanes distracting, and so I refuse to alter my life until I have to do so. When it is definitely headed my way, then I tend to the evacuation ritual, but until then I refuse to live in fear. I have friends who pack up at the first hurricane warning and spend the rest of hurricane season living out of their suitcase.

My concerns that particular weekend were Parker and Skylar, my two oldest grandchildren who were to celebrate their birthdays on the 26th and 29th. We were preparing for their party when I learned that some people were already beginning to evacuate. As I tuned in to the Weather Channel I learned that Katrina had crossed Florida and was in the Gulf; instead of turning north as had been expected she was tracking west, and the strike probabilities were falling on south Louisiana. The Houma community in south Plaquemines that now lay in the path of this new storm was not the same as it had been when Camille came to call. The old places like Stryker's Woods, Tiger Pass, and the Half-Way House were uninhabited, with the Houma people now either living in the Village or inside the levees from Venice up to Buras.

Gone too was the vibrant healthy marsh that once surrounded us. In many places open water lapped at the base of the levee, and dead trees stood as testimony to the intrusion of saltwater into the once freshwater systems. Where high banks of earth covered in vegetation once stood there was nothing but small islands, ponds, and bays. Now the words *coastal erosion* are on everyone's lips, but unfortunately there wasn't and still isn't the political will to match the overwhelming evidence that we are washing away. To the people of the land, Louisiana politicians are little more than Nero and his fiddle. For years we spoke to whomever would listen; we talked of defending the land, of restoring what was being eaten up by the avarice of industry and commerce, but in the end no one acted. We knew the storm was coming; we knew that another Camille would eventually find us in our weakened state. Over the years we had dodged the bullet many times, but fate would eventually find us. When I turned on the Weather Channel that Saturday and saw a massive storm filling the Gulf and headed our way something deep inside said "this is the one."

As the nation watched the Katrina tragedy unfold one of the most-asked questions was, why didn't those people evacuate? The reality for poor people living in south Louisiana is that you have to make hard choices every time a storm approaches. Packing up and leaving home cost money, and so poor people have to balance the risk level with their ability to survive. Even if you have a place of refuge with family or at a shelter there are still transportation and food costs that factor in as well as time away from work and the resulting loss of income. For those on a fixed income or when welfare timing factors in, Katrina hit at the end of the month, the time when resources run low. If it is a busy hurricane season with multiple evacuations you eventually get to a point where you almost can't afford to leave. If you do make the decision to leave there are other hard choices to make. You are forced to take a hard look at the life you've worked to build, your home, and your possessions and decide what leaves with you and what gets left behind. My dad always said, "you can't take

it with you when you die,” and I recall the lyrics to an old Don Henley tune that says, “there ain’t no hearses with luggage racks”; both kind of express the frame of mind you have to have during these times.

I had come to understand over the years that personal possessions were nice but not always essential. There were times when we tried to be practical, evacuating with appliances and televisions because we could not afford to replace them all if they were lost. What happened was that we did more damage to those things trying to pack and transport them while running from a storm that missed us anyway. So you make choices: important papers, clothes, pictures, and some personal items. For me it was a collection of books and papers collected over the thirty-six years since Camille; in the end I had room for one plastic container that held a few books and folders.

For the Houma fishermen there are the added concerns of boats and motors, the tools of the trade. Boat trailers are restricted on the highways after a certain point in the evacuation schedule, and many fishermen lack a trailer capable of carrying a boat the distance needed to escape the threatened area. So again there are choices to be made: leave the boats and your ability to make money behind or stay and try to save it hoping that the storm will not be too severe. So on Saturday the 27th we made those decisions, packed my work truck and our family car, loaded up the two grandchildren, and headed north up Highway 23.

A year before we had done this for Hurricane Ivan and got caught up in a poorly run state evacuation plan that turned our normally three-hour trip to some friends in Lafayette, Louisiana into a thirteen-hour ordeal. My wife is handicapped with a back condition and can only comfortably drive for short periods so we decided to leave my truck at a friend’s home in Belle Chasse, a town at the northern end of Plaquemines Parish some sixty miles or so from our home, and continue on in one vehicle.

Like my parents before me I was judging the potential of this storm by the effects of the last one; Belle Chasse had been safe from Camille. It would be a month before I could get back to Belle Chasse and the truck that held half of all that we had left, a month before I could find out if it was safe or if it had gone under the waters that had covered our home. We made it to Lafayette that night, and the world became surreal as I sat before the television and watched as the beast called Katrina made her way toward my home. At a little after six o’clock on the morning of August 29 the eye of Katrina came ashore about twenty miles north of my home, and the world as I knew it changed forever. There are no words that I can use to describe adequately the emotions I felt that morning as I realized what had happened. Over the next couple of days I sat, like the rest of the world, transfixed in front of the television and watched the horrors that unfolded in New Orleans. All the apprehension that had been building in the years since Hurricane Camille exploded; we saw our worse-case scenario come alive before our eyes.

After a couple of days I gathered myself together and made my way back to Lafourche to help as the tribe began to put together a relief effort for the Houma affected by Katrina. The numbers were heartbreaking as we learned that in the parishes of Jefferson, Plaquemines, and St. Bernard some four

thousand tribal citizens were impacted, with about a thousand of that number, myself included, now homeless. About a week into the relief effort representatives from the National Council of American Indians (NCAI) contacted us and wanted to view the devastated area to see if they could assist us. They were able to get a Civil Air Patrol plane to take us on a flight over lower Plaquemines. Two NCAI officials, a representative from the First Nations of Canada, Houma Principal Chief Brenda Dardar-Robichaux, and I boarded the flight in Houma and headed southeast toward my home. The flight was a little bumpy and the cockpit a little warm, but the wave of airsickness that hit me and several of the others had much more to do with what we saw than our flight conditions.

There was mile after mile of total devastation as I viewed a parish still mostly covered with water that flowed though the huge holes torn through the levees by the power of Katrina's surge. Eventually we passed over my daughter's house, then my own, and afterward my son's—all underwater. Further south we crossed over the place in which the Village had stood a week before, and all I could see was bare ground; the storm surge had swept the entire settlement away. At that point the airsickness overcame me, and I spent the return flight with my eyes closed. Afterward one of the NCAI officials asked for my reaction, and I remember telling him that it was like my feet lost contact with the ground and my grasp of reality let go. All that was familiar, all that I had come to know from the forty years spent living in one place, was gone.

So the tribal relief effort began as we, like the rest of the people hit by Katrina would learn, could not count on any assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) or the Red Cross. As this is being written, two years later, still no significant assistance has come to the Houma Nation from either of these sources. The Houma recovery has been totally funded by other tribes and tribal organizations, philanthropic organizations, and church groups. Working with the relief effort keeps my mind focused and helps me not to dwell too deeply on my personal situation. It also afforded me the opportunity to reconnect with the Houmas from Venice. As we worked to try and locate our people that evacuated, we found thirty people from the Village sharing a three-bedroom house provided to them by a church in Houma. Several other families were grouped together in Baton Rouge; slowly we found our people and funneled aid to them as it came into the tribe.

Three weeks into the effort we were confronted with Hurricane Rita and the compounding of our problems. Rita's storm surge flowed into lower Terrebonne Parish, and the homes of another four thousand Houmas went under the waves. In a three-week span half of the tribe's population of sixteen thousand was affected by these two storms. Rita did not make landfall in Terrebonne Parish; instead she passed to the south on her way to southwest Louisiana. Like their Houma brethren in Plaquemines, and all the Houma settlements, the old Houma communities of Dulac, DuLarge, Point-aux-Chene, Isle de Jean Charles, and Montegut are surrounded by rapidly disappearing marshlands that offer little or no protection.

For most of the world Katrina and Rita, the storms of 2005, were catastrophic events. For the Houma people they were the culmination of

centuries of abuse and neglect. Two hundred years of nonrecognition by the United States had left the tribe in its scattered settlements at the edges of the Gulf of Mexico. Despite federal neglect, for many years the Houma prospered as the land sustained us, but the avarice of empire eventually made its way into our isolated bayou homeland. The dawn of the twentieth century brought the land speculators, oil companies, and politicians, and the process of taking and exploiting Houma land began. Levee systems were built, bayous were blocked, and canals were dug into the marshlands and swamps to allow access to the oil industry. At first the changes made by industry and commerce came slowly, and the people of the land could adapt. As I said, when Camille came in 1969 the land had enough strength left to protect and recover.

Since 1969 we have had years of rhetoric and studies but very little commitment or action. So when the storms of 2005 arrived, they found an unprotected coastline ripe for destruction. There is no mystery to why Katrina was the most destructive hurricane in US history; at least it is until the next one comes our way. The political leaders tell us they work hard to protect us. The federal agency that has overseen the engineering disasters and failed levee systems that have brought us to this point, the US Corps of Engineers, has the assignment to protect us from future storms. Behind the scenes these political leaders continue to funnel money to projects that aid industry elites and will have a negative impact on the poor, people of color, and the indigenous.

What is the future of the Houma? A study was recently released with a bright red line drawn across the southern edge of Louisiana. We are told that if some drastic action is not taken in coastal restoration in the next ten years it will be too late to save those communities below the red line. Every Houma Indian community, the majority of our sixteen thousand citizens, lives below that red line. They tell us that in the end it will not be “cost-effective” to spend the millions of dollars needed to protect our isolated communities adequately. There is a word circulating amidst politicians and scientists now that Native people have heard before: *relocation*.

For the Houma, as for all indigenous people, existence is about people and place. Our ties to each other and our ties to the land are part of the dynamics of our identity and culture. As we have watched the destruction of our homeland it has been as if they were digging in our chest and tearing out our heart. Now they talk about cost-effectiveness, but when they were digging those canals and damming those bayous to get at the riches, the desired price was no object. Now that they have sated their appetite, and all that is left are poor people at the mercy of the elements they have left us exposed to, we hear about their fiscal responsibilities.

Since the storms of 2005 the Houma fishermen have returned and are still working on rebuilding their lives. The United Houma Nation continues, without federal assistance, to aid its citizens. Politicians in Louisiana and Washington continue to talk, and, acre by acre, south Louisiana continues to disappear beneath the waves. The tribe actively seeks the acquisition of a new land base a little farther up the bayou, but funds for such an endeavor have yet to materialize. The reality that another hurricane will one day come is with



us, however, and we know that soon some of us will have to relocate whether we want to or not. The hope is to have a tribal land base available that offers the Houma a place of refuge and the Houma Nation a path to the future. For me, for my family, for my tribe, hurricane season is always about more than just hurricanes.