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Watered by Tempests: Hurricanes in the Cultural Fabric of the United Houma Nation

J. DANIEL D'ONEY

Hurricanes Katrina and Rita affected hundreds of thousands in southern Louisiana. To say that they touched people of every stripe and color dramatically is a gross understatement. Aside from the horrendous loss of life and property damage, families were uprooted, traditions disrupted, and one of the largest migrations in American history forced on a state with traditionally the lowest outmigration rate. Still, as hurricane survivors know, a large difference separates standing battered versus lying destroyed. What Katrina and, more significantly, Rita dealt the United Houma Nation and other tribes of southeastern Louisiana was a harsh strike but not a death blow. On the contrary, Katrina and Rita were only the last in a series of hurricanes that have shaped Indian settlement and culture. Through all those storms the Houmas have persevered, helped each other, and used tempests to reaffirm who they are. This article will examine several hurricanes and how they affected Houma history and culture.

Though the Houma lived among highland bluffs when they first met the French in 1699, within seven years they had relocated down the Mississippi and to the Bayou St. John area just outside New Orleans. A few years later they moved back upstream to the area known in colonial times as Upper Lafourche, near modern Donaldsonville, Louisiana. There the Houma provided foodstuffs to La Nouvelle-Orléans and also buffered the settlement against hostile tribes and the English. Houma political power waned dramatically during the Spanish colonial era as increasing numbers of Germans, Acadians, and Canary Islanders (Isleños) settled along the river. Not only did these groups supplant the Houma as food producers and soldiers, but also increasing conflict with settlers convinced elders that the best route to survival was to relocate down bayous into Lafourche Interior and into modern Lafourche, Terrebonne, and St. Mary parishes.

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Visitors first entering bayou country are immediately struck by the overwhelming impression of water and flatness. Though there are rippling soil gradations, an average visitor sees only a landscape that stretches flat and green and is as seemingly boring as a billiard table. Natives of this region, however, see something quite different: a quiet grandeur, a region of sleeping waters, a place of rich soil and rich waters allowing Indians to support large families for generations without asking charity of anyone, a place of traditions that extend back (as far as people who call it home are concerned) forever. In short, they see what was a sanctuary for ancestors and home to them.

Though people living along the Gulf Coast accept its dangers as calmly as its beauty, the landscape of southern Louisiana has consistently inspired superlatives. Exaggerations hold a kernel of truth, as many residents of bayou country have created rich lives and rich cultural tapestries, but this does not mean the landscape yielded its treasures willingly. On the contrary, in several important respects southern Louisiana is a harsh environment, despite the abundant rainfall and fertility of soil; mosquito-borne diseases no longer decimate the area, but heat and high humidity are as intense now as in the past, and visitors in warmer months invariably compare the air to a hot, wet blanket. High water is a constant enemy, and hurricanes sweeping across the almost-sea-level terrain can destroy in hours what took generations to build.

Though southern Louisiana shelters a number of Indian tribes, one major similarity dominates: settlement invariably ties to elevation. High ground is important in most cultures; however, it is even more precious where there are no hills, only rises of a few feet in terrain. It seems paradoxical that the highest elevation always stands next to the waterway; however, this makes perfect sense when considering southern Louisiana alluvial patterns. When rivers and bayous stretched over vast plains during periodic flooding and lost their strong current, coarser sediments deposited first and formed high, rich land closest to the waterways. Finer and lighter sediments were carried farther away from the bayou and into swamps, eventually forming soil that was heavy and the first to flood. Geographers designate the region closest to a waterway as a levee (from the French word *lever*, which means “to raise”) environment, and all lower Louisiana settlements are tied to such ridges. On moving away from the bayous one descends a gentle ramp that declines several miles into the swamp environment characterized by water and trees, and, eventually, closer to the Gulf, into marshes characterized by water and grasses.¹

Parishes in which ancestors of the United Houma Nation moved encompass all three main geographic elements of southeastern Louisiana: levee, swamp, and marsh. St. Mary, Lafourche, and Terrebonne parishes at the extreme southeastern section of Louisiana all contained the earliest members of the nation, but the latter two play the most prominent role, with most historical records on the Houma deriving from Terrebonne. These three parishes stretch along the Gulf of Mexico from east to west, and the United Houma Nation recognizes these three parishes as a homeland, not a place in which they have lived forever, but as close to forever as most care to ponder. Houma settlement was invariably tied to high ground for two reasons: they

could live and grow crops in soils not waterlogged by a high water table and garner protection from the frequent storms that sweep the area.

In the approximately one hundred years after migration from Upper Lafourche, Houma families spread through the Deltaic Plain and divided into various communities: Golden Meadow, Galliano, Grand Bois, Isle Jean Charles, Grand Caillou, Dularge, Dulac, Montegut, and Point au Chien. They carried their former village plat to bayou country but with one important variation; in this plat the settlements reconfigured their relationship to bayous, now facing waterways on adjacent high land and forming the long “main street” so typical of bayou country. In the same way, echoes of Houma architecture seen both in the highlands and in Upper Lafourche were noted along the bayous. Cabins usually had dome-shaped roofs, with a smoke hole that could be closed in inclement weather. *Bousillage* (a mixture of moss and mud usually whitewashed gleaming ivory to protect against the elements) was smoothed over outside walls, and the “dirt” floor (actually clay from swamps, which when treated and dried was hard as concrete) was elevated to offer protection against groundwater. Woven palmetto was then placed over the floor for added protection against moisture. Though they sound flimsy these materials offered good protection in hurricanes and were easily repaired once storms had passed; settlers often built cabins near giant oaks, which not only indicated the location of highest ground but also offered protection from high winds. As time progressed, traditional Houma mud-floored structures gave way to pier-raised cabins so water could pass underneath.²

Just as each Houma dwelling reflected the personalities of those living within as the inhabitants adapted to their environment, so did each community have its own particular flavor and character. Perhaps the best way to think of these communities is as different members of the same family, sharing common bonds and challenges but each having a distinct personality that other communities recognize. One thing all Houma settlements share, however, is a complex relationship with their watery environment, especially the way that a calm day can burst into fury. Despite its beautiful name, Golden Meadow has the newest but darkest history, linked as it is with one of the worst hurricanes in Louisiana history. A brief examination of this settlement reveals much about Houma demography, and that the nation’s history did not stop at some academically defined point in a distant past.

The community of Leeville once stretched along Bayou Lafourche nine miles south of Golden Meadow and seventeen miles north of the Gulf Coast, though saltwater intrusion and marsh subsidence have eroded much of the area. What was solid marsh as recently as the late 1980s and firm land several decades before that is now mostly water; extensive rice fields and orange groves once radiated from a church, school, and grocery. Unless already familiar with the area, one would never guess that several hundred souls once resided there until the hurricanes of 1909 and 1915 swept over them, but mention of the latter storm still quiets many older members of the United Houma Nation. The expanse of water and grass where homes once stood has a desolate beauty, but few people think much about it as they drive down the

highway to fish or swim at Grand Isle, concentrating instead on the roadway so their vehicles do not careen into the water only a few feet on either side.³

The hurricane season of 1915 had been an uneasy time for southern Louisiana residents. The “great hurricane” of 20 September 1909 had landed just west of New Orleans and pushed fifteen feet of water over the coast and five feet into Leeville, caused five million dollars in damages, and killed 353 people. The approach of that date still made people nervous, but Gulf residents knew that big tempests worked in cycles, and the next few years of relatively mild storms convinced them that they were out of the dangerous part of the rotation. Winds invariably veered away or downgraded to tropical storms by the time they hit Louisiana. This feeling of security weakened on 16 August 1915, when a large hurricane barreled across Texas one hundred miles west of Galveston. Even that far from southern Louisiana, the tempest put Grand Isle under six feet of water in some places and flooded almost all of coastal Louisiana. Leeville was not destroyed but experienced high winds and a few feet of water, and residents had spent a bit more than a month cutting up fallen trees and cleaning homes.⁴

People paused and looked at the sky many times in early September as they scrubbed watermarks off walls, but by 29 September Leeville residents finally allowed themselves a sigh of relief over morning coffee. They were in the slow part of the cycle, no one had been hurt, and, after all, mud washes off. Animals were nervous but not hysterical, and skies were cloudy but not unusually so for that time of the year. A few older people noticed a strange ringing in their ears as wind picked up but decided to enjoy the day rather than borrow trouble. All this would change over the next few hours as the wind stiffened and a light rain began. Children started chores in the windy and dim light but paused when they saw man-of-war birds hurtling inland, as even the youngest bayou resident knew that “storm birds” retreated before only the worst tempests.⁵

One thing to bear in mind about hurricanes is that, though information is often correct it is also often incomplete. For example, wind sensors are usually accurate in gauging gusts and sustained winds but often dissolve at close to 140 miles per hour. Thus, the information they record is true as far as it goes, but it is curtailed. In the same way, accounts of the 1915 hurricane as it affected Leeville might be accurate in most details but do not necessarily include the perspectives of all involved. One study of Louisiana coastal communities damaged or destroyed by hurricanes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries stated that Leeville suffered no casualties because residents had small boat motors by which they escaped up Bayou Lafourche. That was surely true of certain people, but likely was not true for all; the economic status of some residents precluded boat motors in 1915, and not all people in the community even owned boats. Just as important, weather warnings in 1915 before radio, television, or satellites were not nearly as effective as today. Moreover, one should never underestimate the stubbornness of southern Louisianans during a hurricane, even under evacuation orders. Some exhibit a measure of faith and foolhardiness truly puzzling to those quick to move to higher ground.⁶

Houma oral histories indicate that some Indians stayed in the Leeville area, and those people bore the fury of the storm. Several hours after children first noticed the storm birds, rain was falling horizontally rather than vertically, and, as winds gusted, giant oaks swaying in the morning were bent almost to the ground with trunks and branches twisting in opposite directions. Shortly after that, parts of cabins started to separate. Bayou Lafourche rose higher and then higher again, but far worse was that water now flowed seventeen miles back from the Gulf. Within a few hours, parents were desperately boring holes in floors of raised cabins to admit water and stabilize houses before the rising surge swept them off their piers. The barometric pressure of 28.01" in New Orleans was the lowest ever recorded in the United States until that time, and as the hurricane made landfall that night at Grand Isle, winds reaching up to 140 miles an hour swept across southern Louisiana.⁷

The Category 4 hurricane pushed fourteen feet of water over the coast and up waterways, and the Gulf merged with river and bayous to form an unbroken sheet of water stretching dozens of miles. Though the *raz de maree*, or storm surge riding above the tide, was slowed by rich vegetation around Leeville, when it hit the community it still had a nine foot height; after the storm, seaweed was found fifteen feet high in trees. Though human logic indicates that a nine-foot wave should have twice as much force as a four-and-a-half foot wave, each time height is doubled force actually increases by four times. In a study of Hurricane Camille, Ernest Zebrowski and Judith Howard estimated that in comparing a twelve-foot wave (not abnormally high in a hurricane) with a three-foot wave, the larger wave carries approximately sixteen times the power of the smaller wave, sixteen times the destructive force. Combine that with possible logs of ten feet across carried inland by the surge at a possible rate of fifty or sixty miles per hour, and the destructive force of a hurricane grows more apparent.⁸

Reconstructing details of the 1915 hurricane on Leeville is almost impossible given the area's radical landscape shift from that time, but the end result of that storm is well documented. Buildings and people along the shore (or more than a dozen miles from the former shore) were no match for 140 mile-per-hour winds and a twelve-foot-high *raz de maree* that swept over landscapes and breached levees; the coast-wide death toll of 275 would have been much higher except for the strong-arm tactics of parish officials. Survivors told of houses ripped apart as parents were torn from children, husbands from wives. People struggled from beneath waves only to surface as debris hit them at more than a hundred miles an hour. When the storm abated, the scene in Leeville was total devastation. Only one out of one hundred buildings was left standing, and other Indian communities close to the shore had also been hit hard. Those few Houma who endured the storm buried the dead they could find and then slogged through the water nine miles to Golden Meadow and left Leeville to its fate. The community experienced a pseudo-rebirth after 1930 with the discovery of oil, and by 1937 the Leeville Oilfield had 297 producing wells, but those are long gone, and the site today is a watery ghost of its former self. Visitors notice only a bridge, a water tower, and a handful of raised camps and businesses at a watery locale where Indian children once

stood among orange trees and peered nervously at the flight of storm birds. Unsatisfied with the hundreds it took, the Gulf has moved steadily inland through erosion and, if the process continues at its present rate, within a few years it will have consumed the area completely.⁹

Golden Meadow is, in many respects, the child of hurricanes. Survivors of previous storms moved away from the Gulf and established themselves at Bayou Lafourche's natural levee and were later joined by refugees from Leeville. Though population studies indicate that only about 5 percent of Golden Meadow's 2,151 residents (according to the 2000 census) are Native American, many think of it as an Indian community, and with good reason. Fleeing ever southward from Euro-American incursion, the nation sought asylum almost on the Gulf, only to meet death in another form. Gathering the survivors, they fled to a settlement just up the bayou and found sanctuary. Almost a hundred years later, this community remains home to many members of the United Houma Nation, but it is only one home. An examination of each Houma community would reveal a complex relationship with storms that affected not only how and where they settled but also how they built in that environment.

Settlement patterns and demography reveal much about an Indian people, as do the stories they tell. The Houma stand as a good example of this, as their folklore reveals themselves, their culture, and their place in the physical landscape. After their remove to bayou country the Houma incorporated various elements of the local landscape into their oral tradition and used those elements to reinforce their sense of place. Many of these stories contain strong similarities to folklore from various global or southern Louisiana cultures, but the separating factor is the strong tie Houma folktales have with their specific terrain. In some cases they share these stories with Euro-American neighbors, albeit incorporating Native elements, but in other cases the stories seem a product solely of Indian culture. Though there are many variations from village to village and person to person, Houma folk tradition can generally be categorized into *loup-garou* (shape-shifters), *feu-follets* (false fire), *loutains* and *hommes de bois* (imps and woodmen), spirit stories, buried treasures, warnings and superstitions, miscellaneous stories, tales of ancestors, and hurricane stories.¹⁰

As with spirit stories, tales of warnings and superstitions take many forms, with many stories related directly to clouds or weather-related signs that might appear before storms. When he was still a teenager researching his tribe's history, Professor Bruce Duthu recorded a story of a hand-shaped cloud that appeared in the sky to a group of Houma. Different people saw the cloud holding up a different number of fingers. If a person saw one finger held up, that person would lose one family member in a few days. If a different person saw three fingers held up, three family members would die within a few days and so on. Whether this fate might be averted depended on the viewer's personal belief system, but in many cases this was a warning of what might happen in the next storm.

Even simple household chores were subject to certain forms of behavior shaped by the dangerous work Houma men did in the Gulf. One gathered

dust into a corner and picked it up rather than sweeping it outside; some said that spirits gathered outside to protect a house might be annoyed to have dust swept onto their feet, whereas other Houma maintained that sweeping dust outside after a husband had left for work was extremely dangerous because it was the same as sweeping out the person's soul. In short, he would not come back from work. Although this might seem a bit of charming folklore, many Houma men had dangerous occupations. Family chronicles are full of healthy young men who met swift death at the hands of sudden storms, by gas fumes on boats, due to unstoppable bleeding after a man's vessel hit a swell and he was injured, and by other freak events. The possibility that one's husband, father, brother, or son would not come home was always real on even the calmest day, and such a simple event as improper sweeping was to be avoided if it tempted fate.¹¹

As with any people who have lived in the same location for generations, the Houma maintain a huge trove of miscellaneous stories and ancestral tales that tie them to the past and provide life lessons. A last area for examination, hurricane stories, is one shared by any people in a coastal environment but is one that is especially important to the Houma, with their dependence on bayous and Gulf waters and their residence in low-lying areas. Such stories hold a central place in Houma worldview, with much of life's patterns divided into the time before a particular hurricane and the time after it.

Even communities not directly affected by the hurricane's eye often sustain major damage because of winds and rising tides. This pattern intensified with the passage of time, and Houma communities that had once been areas of refuge for Indians lower down the bayou now became danger spots. To again reference Leeville, during the massive 1893 hurricane that pushed so many people from the coast, the locale contained massive oaks and lush vegetation rising above a *cheniere*—a southern Louisiana term for a land ridge deriving from the word *chêne* (oak) for the trees that grew there. The ridge was surrounded by marsh, bayous, and small ponds that gave the appearance of a large island, but rice and orange groves flourished, as did abundant plant and animal life.¹²

The diversity of Leeville flora and fauna started to change in 1903 with the damming of Bayou Lafourche upstream at Donaldsonville. Bayou Lafourche had flowed from the Mississippi, and damming the distributary insured that residents of the bayou no longer had to worry about floods. Unfortunately, they also no longer had fresh water moving downstream in such great quantities. Now, brackish water and, far worse, salt water started to move upstream at high tide and during storms; this killed vegetation, and, in turn, the lack of vegetation produced greater soil erosion. The end result was that hurricanes started to sweep further inland and with greater force.¹³

The energy of the 1915 hurricane that struck Leeville was not merely a result of vegetative change given that the bayou was only dammed in 1903, but vegetative change and consequent erosion certainly stands as a major factor in the area today. It is fashionable to blame the canals that oil companies dig as the major culprit in bayou erosion (even as it was once fashionable to praise companies for bringing money into bayou areas), and oil companies

have certainly played a part, but in such a delicately balanced environment any action produces severe consequences. The damming of Bayou Lafourche was just such an action, as was the building of an elevated road at Isle de Jean Charles and consequent erosion caused by an attendant shift in water currents. On whatever factors one blames coastal erosion, it is certainly taking place, with the secondary result that, without marsh barriers to slow a storm surge, hurricanes now sweep inland further and with greater intensity. Katrina was an outstanding example of this. Given Houma location in settlements close to the marshes, they feel the impact more severely than other groups, and the storm surge reaches higher with each hurricane.¹⁴

Experiences of southern Louisiana Indians during hurricanes have changed dramatically in recent decades because the warning system is now effective enough that people can flee inland; and because most Houma now own vehicles, they have means as well as knowledge to flee. Nevertheless, coastal storms are still a major topic of conversation; to paraphrase Mark Twain's famous statement, the Houma talk about the weather a great deal even though there is nothing they can do about it. Any gathering of Indians will produce a diversity of hurricane stories, but for many people Hurricane Betsy in 1965 is the most definitive. Most likely, she is still so important because many older members of the nation were children or young people in 1965, and the event marked their worlds. For whatever reason, oral records of Betsy abound, and one does not have to go far to find people willing to talk about her.

Several hurricanes stand out in the minds of Louisianans: Audrey in 1957, Betsy in 1965, Camille in 1969, Andrew in 1992, and the combined disasters of Katrina and Rita only a few weeks apart in 2005. Though each of these storms inspires different emotions depending on what part of the Gulf Coast one is in, Betsy arguably wreaked the most havoc on bayou country. Many people who live through hurricanes anthropomorphize them and assign personality traits. Betsy was a September storm, which many people hold are the worst, but she was also a "nightstalker," one who wreaks havoc as a sign of her coming but then lingers offshore until cover of darkness. She swept up from the eastern Atlantic and moved westward on 1 and 2 September directly below Florida. Pausing almost as if choosing a path, the storm then abruptly entered the Gulf of Mexico on Wednesday, 8 September. With movement over warm Gulf waters the storm picked up speed and force, like a huge beast preparing to ram. Her eye was forty miles across, with a forward motion of twenty miles per hour, and she was heading straight for Grand Isle.

Southern Louisiana residents moved extremely fast to avoid the hurricane. Given the hundreds of thousands of New Orleanians, and that they had a day between Betsy entering the Gulf on 8 September and her eye passing over Grand Isle between nine and ten o'clock at night on 9 September, the populace had little time to evacuate. It was the severity of this storm and the tenacity people showed in its face that made so many New Orleanians unwilling to evacuate for Katrina forty years later, as they felt that they had survived Betsy and Camille, and no hurricane could be as bad as those. Though many city residents could not flee during Betsy, this was not the

case in low-lying coastal areas. That any were able to evacuate at all given the speed of the hurricane is surprising, but Hurricane Audrey had taken 556 souls in southwest Louisiana only twelve years before, and local agencies and the US Weather Bureau were predicting another Audrey. Bayou people in general and the Houma in particular were in no mood to play hero. They moved quickly. Voluntary evacuation started the morning of 9 September, and official evacuation was declared at 2:35 p.m. By midafternoon lower Lafourche was completely evacuated, and by nine o'clock that night Betsy was pounding the coast.¹⁵

Betsy is remembered as a storm that breached the levees in New Orleans, particularly the Industrial Canal, which would be so controversial when it broke again after Katrina, but the damage done along the bayous was significant. Gusts on Grand Isle were reported at 160 miles per hour, and only three buildings on the island withstood the surge; towns and settlements slightly north suffered less damage, but the storm was devastating enough to make the area look as if it was smashed by a vengeful giant. Stories detailing the experiences of Houma Indians abound from this storm, such as fishermen who lowered nets to steady themselves as bayous underneath them bucked like horses. A Houma woman's white Coast Guard husband was required to ride out the storm on Grand Isle due to his position as key personnel. He spent much of Betsy tied to the top of a flooded building to avoid being blown away; gazing at an infinity of water for hours, he wondered if his view was what ancient mariners had thought the edge of the world looked like.¹⁶

One of the most interesting Houma Indian stories about Betsy was recorded from Mrs. Kirvin Parfait in 1978. It says a great deal about the Houma view of their Catholicism, loyalty to each other, and cool heads during a crisis. Living just up the bayou from Dulac, she heard the evacuation order that Thursday morning, but because she had a son in a New Orleans seminary and a husband in Port Sulfur, she did not want to leave until both had a chance to reach home, and moving out of the area would have meant separation from one or both. Mrs. Parfait related how she gathered her brood and tried desperately to contact her older son as the hurricane swept inland. Leaving the room briefly, she returned to find her small children saying that a man had come into the room and told them to leave. Gently reminding them to stop making up stories, she absentmindedly looked out the window over protests that they had to leave. By the time her oldest son made it back home, the hurricane was buffeting the community, and Mrs. Parfait decided they had to flee immediately, despite the absence of her husband.

The next several hours blurred into an ordeal of flagging down a priest, having the wind turn his car in another direction, and avoiding downed power lines. The day and night presented a series of events that did not seem possible. Trapped in the stalled car by water and wind, Mrs. Parfait watched in disbelief as the storm bent giant oaks from one side to the other at their base, the way a terrier shakes a rat. Buildings she had thought were solidly constructed accordion pleated just before the group sought refuge inside. A massive tree collapsed on their vehicle but only scratched the hood. The priest who had given them a ride went into shock, but at least had the presence of

mind to administer last rites because he and Mrs. Parfait thought all in the vehicle were about to die; she did her best to keep the children asleep, so that they would not be awake when death came.

When the eerily calm eye of the storm passed around midnight, the party was shocked to find everyone still alive. They radioed their location, somehow got the car started, and made it to a safe area. Reunited with her husband, she and all her extended family survived Betsy and attended mass the following Sunday at Holy Family Church to give thanks. Looking at the clear blue skies and bright sun, it did not seem possible that only the previous Thursday she and her family had received last rites not far from here. She was even more surprised a few minutes later, however, when on passing the small statue of the infant Jesus, her young children toddled over to it and declared in a loud voice that he was the little man who had told them to leave. Not knowing what they were talking about, Mrs. Parfait asked what they meant, and they repeated their story about how the “small man” had appeared while she was out of the room and told them to leave. Much to the surprise of her family when she arrived home, Mrs. Parfait burst into tears.

Different people might interpret her story different ways. Nonbelievers might view it as signifying the crutch that Catholic dogma provides. Others might view it in a larger anthropological and folk tradition, because other cultures also note a man appearing during times of stress when children are too young (or in the case of an Internet story circulated in the 1990s, in too atheistic an environment) to recognize him but later point to Jesus as the man who saved them. Believers might view this story as a sign that *le Bon Dieu* does speak through the mouths of babes, and that He stands by innocents in sunlight as He also stands by them in storms. Mrs. Parfait, who stressed in the interview that she did not like telling the story because she thought people would laugh at her, viewed it as a sign that perhaps her faith had not been strong enough, but that she did the best she could under the circumstances. She was not perfect, but she would do her best. Though she did not phrase it this way in her interview, her attitude that we are not perfect, but we are stronger than we can possibly know, is what has, taken to a tribal level, ensured (and will continue to ensure) Houma survival.¹⁷

The Houma are a distinct group of people, but they are also part of a greater landscape. In the same way that every southern Louisiana hurricane has affected both individuals and a greater community, when Katrina and Rita struck during 2005 she dealt a blow to all southern Louisiana people, not just the Houma. Having said that, specific ways the hurricanes affected the Houma differs from other groups. Katrina hit Indian settlements with massive wind damage and ripped roofs off many buildings but without the kind of water flooding New Orleans; rather, prevailing currents actually sucked much water away from Houma settlements. When Rita hit a couple of weeks after Katrina, however, there was much more extensive damage in terms of heavy rain onto severely damaged roofs and with tidal flooding; there was seven feet of water in Dulac, for instance. In examining their impact, these storms must be taken as a unit, as a “double whammy” that dealt the community a devastating blow.¹⁸

As for how the Houma Indian community reacted to the storms, this also separates them from other groups. The images one saw on television in the days after the storms differed markedly in such areas as water retention (unlike in New Orleans, the water in bayou communities washed back into the Gulf) and cultural cohesion. In hindsight, the factors that most separate the Houma from other groups hit by the storms include a modern tribal migration back to homelands, a strong cultural cohesion in the aftermath of the hurricane, and a subsequent strengthening of tribal solidarity.

The Houma have gone through a series of migrations in their history. Their movement from one area to another as a means of survival stands as one factor distinguishing them as a separate southern Louisiana people. Though remove to bayou country might be considered their last movement as a tribal unit, there was a smaller migration out of the bayous over the past several decades. During the early and mid-twentieth century when segregation of blacks and Indians was status quo in Louisiana, significant numbers of Indians moved to New Orleans in order to pass for white in that culturally diverse city; just how significant is difficult to ascertain because many of those people and their descendants now have birth certificates stating that they are white. Later, after segregation was overturned, there was an increasing migration to the New Orleans area, though now for economic opportunity.¹⁹

Generally, Houma who moved to the Crescent City area settled in suburbs rather than the Ninth Ward, but those areas were also hit hard by Katrina. Faced with rebuilding or moving, some came back to bayou country. It might be an overstatement to say that this constitutes another massive migration, but movement definitely brings members of extended Indian families back into communities. Although there might still be social prejudice on the part of non-Indians, the legal segregation that characterized Houma history in much of the twentieth century has passed, and the bayou country that shaped their early lives is much more of an attractive place than it was a couple of decades ago.

While New Orleans–area Houma contemplate moving out of New Orleans as individuals, residents of Houma settlements contemplate moving to higher ground as a group. This has been a hot topic in Isle de Jean Charles and other Indian communities and will only increase as the federal government hems and haws about building a levee protection system. To place this in proper context, many people who live in Dulac today have ancestors who once lived about five miles farther south, in an area now underwater; those ancestors moved to higher ground as a group, and their descendants now face many of the same issues. The history of Leeville residents moving to Golden Meadow has already been examined in this article, and the modern residents of low-lying communities are now in the same position of either staying where tradition has placed them, or moving to another, higher area where they can survive as a people.²⁰

Another area in which the Houma differ from other people hit by Katrina and Rita is the way they absorbed these storms into their cultural fabric. Although it is callous to say that the Houma are more accustomed to hurricanes than other groups (and ridiculous to think that anyone ever grows

used to 150 mile-per-hour winds), the fact is that they have lived in the coastal region longer than most Euro-Americans, African Americans, and some other tribes. Moreover, they also have a strong tradition of living close to the water. Floodwaters inundating the city were part of early New Orleans history but not part of its modern fabric; the city has not flooded anywhere close to Katrina levels since Betsy, and many young people have only secondhand stories of that hurricane. This is not the case for the Houma. Aside from the hurricanes already mentioned, Juan and Andrew dramatically affected the tribe, and even young adults maintain vivid memories of those storms.

It is foolish to make sweeping generalizations about why individuals react the way they do to disaster, and even more foolish to make generalizations about groups, but both Houma and Cajuns in bayou country displayed a cultural cohesion and independence in the days following Katrina and Rita that was lacking in some other communities. Perhaps this is because of the high degree of cultural cohesion they had before the storm—as opposed to New Orleans, which has traditionally been a city of neighborhoods wracked by ethnic and economic differences. Others might argue that it simply was a matter of elders and capable leaders being there to band together. This was not the case in New Orleans, where flooding prevented communication, and people were quickly scattered to different locations.

In the days immediately following the storms, workforces of Houma and Cajun men, sometimes working within their own ethnic groups but sometimes crossing ethnic boundaries, located people who needed help and performed group tasks such as lifting and removing large boats that had floated into yards, trees, and roads. Food brigades were formed, and people began the long process of helping others clean homes. Many older Houma speak only French, and younger bilinguals spent hours translating for them in frustrating dealings with authorities. Indians along the coast were also fortunate in help they received from other Indian peoples, in stark contrast to the lack of help they received from the federal government. Aside from the failings of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Houma and other small area tribes have the added burden of not yet having received federal recognition, which would have made a huge difference in acquiring aid.

One question that arose was whether some people were being denied help if they were not of the right tribe. The Houma was originally a larger tribe than it is now, but in the 1990s some members left to form political units of their own and make separate bids for recognition. These units are called the Pointe-au-Chien Tribe, the Isle de Jean Charles Indian Band of Biloxi-Chitimacha, the Grand Caillou/Dulac Band, and the Biloxi-Chitimacha Confederation of Muskogeas. Most leaders of these groups are strong-willed and possess the same mixture of affection and annoyance that characterizes both political opponents and people who have known each other all their lives. In the chaos that followed the hurricanes, even people who got along well perhaps found themselves slipping through the cracks.

On 10 October 2005 United Houma Nation Principal Chief Brenda Dardar-Robichaux and Chairman of the Pointe-au-Chien Indian Tribe Charles Verdin spoke together on the *Democracy Now!* radio program and presented a

remarkably unified front. Reading the transcript of these two political leaders working together after being at loggerheads for years is a slightly surreal experience, but it also shows why the Indians of Terrebonne, Lafourche, and St. Mary parishes have endured as long as they have. Regardless of their differences, Robichaux and Verdin know each other well, and their personalities and communication styles meshed nicely as they voiced their communities' needs and expressed gratitude to other Indian and non-Indian groups for aid. Both were extremely proactive in seeking help, and from the interview one would have no idea that these two leaders stand on opposing political sides.²¹

Given recriminations along the storm-ravaged Gulf Coast in Katrina's wake, lack of conflict among small tribes who have traditionally quarreled seems surprising, but it becomes much less so when one considers that these communities are linked by family ties, common environment, and common experiences. Moreover, they also stand as good examples of the theme that, however much you might dislike your own extended family, you will usually choose them over others. These Indian groups have only had themselves to rely on for hundreds of years, and when crisis struck they quickly slipped back into traditional forms of behavior, putting aside individual differences for the common survival. The aftermath of Katrina and Rita have forged (or perhaps just revealed) solidarity on two levels. First, the individual bands reinforced their sense of who they are. With Houma who had moved to New Orleans coming back to the bayou landscape and with members of the United Houma Nation keeping tallies of who needed help, tribal identity was reinforced and strengthened. Second, various Indian units along the bayous that had stood in conflict also forged a renewed sense of common cause and common danger, of reaching across political boundaries in a small pan-Indian movement.

In conclusion, Katrina and Rita should be examined in a broad cultural context rather than as isolated storms. In several decades they might be as prominent in the minds of older tribal members as Betsy is today, but hurricanes have shaped Houma culture since the tribe's arrival in bayou country, both in terms of settlement patterns and in folklore developed in response to storms. Devastating tempests have not destroyed the Houma, and, in contrast to ethnic traditions of New Orleans that are in real danger of being lost, storms such as these two seem actually to have galvanized their culture. We see that in past hurricanes and see it in the aftermath of Katrina and Rita. Poet John Giardi once wrote about a garden that exists in the eye of a hurricane, of how the first man and first woman made a choice about why they should exist when surrounded by danger and destruction. They pondered carefully and still chose to live . . . as did the former residents of Leeville, as did Mrs. Kervin Parfait, as do the Indians of today's bayou country. In the darkness of the storm they still have each other, and in a garden that waits within the eye of that hurricane, seeded with tradition and watered by tempests, amazing things can grow. The survival of a people is one such flower.

NOTES

1. See Malcolm Comeaux, "The Environmental Impact," in *The Cajuns: Essays on Their History and Culture*, ed. Glenn R. Conrad (Lafayette: The Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1978), 145–57; for further explanation of the importance of these levees in settlement patterns, see Ari Kelman, *A River and Its City: The Nature of Landscape in New Orleans* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 20–21.

2. Many Indians in these communities no longer register as members of the Houma Nation, but these settlements have traditionally been associated with the nation and even today have residents who claim affiliation with the Houma. Thus, as a gesture of diplomacy, these communities contain members of the Houma Nation, but not all Indians in those communities are necessarily of the United Houma Nation, Inc. Moreover, many Cajuns and other non-Natives live in some of these communities, particularly Montegut and Golden Meadow, so the reader should not think of all these as exclusively Indian communities but rather as communities in which many Indians live, whatever the settlements might have been in the past. Bryan Guevin, "The Ethno-Archaeology of the Houma Indians," MA thesis, Louisiana State University, 1979, 100; Audrey B. Westerman, "History of Isle de Jean Charles," *Terrebonne Life Lines* 21, no. 1 (2002): 64. These structures reflect both traditional Houma cabins and Cajun dwellings that the Indians showed them how to build along the Mississippi, hence the similarity to some early Cajun dwellings.

3. "Louisiana Wetland News, Winter 2002," http://www.seagrantfish.lsu.edu/pdfs/lwn/2002/winter_02.pdf, 1 (accessed 6 November 2006).

4. Hurricanes were not named until 1947 when the National Weather Service gave a name to Hurricane George. Until then, they were usually denoted by the year they hit or the location, such as the Galveston Hurricane of 1900. The 13–22 September 1909 hurricane referenced in this paragraph is also called "The Grand Isle Hurricane" in reference to where it hit land. US Army Engineer District, New Orleans Corps of Engineers, *Hurricane Study: History of Hurricane Occurrences Along Coastal Louisiana* (New Orleans, LA, 1972), 21–23, plates 10–12; Weather Underground, "1909 Hurricane Archive: Weather Underground," <http://www.wunderground.com/hurricane/at1909.asp> (accessed 28 June 2007).

5. Like many places throughout Louisiana, Leeville was a surprisingly cosmopolitan mix. Along with the Native Americans in the community were a fair number of Acadians, Creoles, blacks, Yugoslavians, Italians, and assorted other groups. Many in the community had fled north after the 1893 destruction of the Cheniere Caminada and other coastal communities because they were still close enough to the Gulf to work old fishing beds but far enough away to feel secure from storms.

6. Dale P. Rogers, *Cheniere Caminda: Buried at Sea* (Thibodaux, LA: Dale Rogers, 1981), 35.

7. Brenda Dardar-Robichaux, interview by author, 8 August 2003; the interview took place at T. Harry Williams Oral History Center, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge.

8. Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry, Urban Forestry Program, *Hurricane Resistant Landscapes: Preparing the Landscape to Withstand Hurricane Storms* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1994), 1–2 (prepared by Louisiana State

University School of Landscape Architecture for the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry); Rogers, *Cheniere Caminda*, 35, 40; Ernest Zebrowski and Judith A. Howard, *Category 5: The Story of Camille, Lessons Unlearned from America's Most Violent Hurricane* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2005), 69–70.

9. Isaac Monroe Cline, *Tropical Cyclones* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1926), 262; Tanya Ditto, *The Longest Street in the World: A Story of Lafourche Parish and Grand Isle* (Baton Rouge, LA: Moran Publishing Company, 1980), 96–97.

10. N. Bruce Duthu, *A Study in Folklore: The Houma Indians of Louisiana*, independent research project (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College, 1978), 9. Other Houma folktales exist in other sources, but they still fit into the rubric created by Duthu. Although Professor Duthu's research was later published in *Louisiana Folklife* 4 (1979): 1–33 as "Folklore of the Houma Indians," the independent study he did served as the basis of that article and will be cited here when the information overlaps. This author is much aware of the tendency to marginalize Native myths and stories by locating them under the rubric of "folklore," but the term is used without apology in this section for two reasons. First, the tales stand apart from Houma religious stories and illustrate criteria stated on page 7 of the definitive *Louisiana Folklife: A Guide to the State*, ed. Nicholas R. Spitzer (Baton Rouge: Louisiana Folklife Program, 1985) that folklife and folklore reflect "performances, practices, products and worldviews that characterize contemporary folk communities." Second, the days when "folklore" was used as a pejorative in the same way that Native arts were often disparaged as "crafts" has fortunately passed due to the efforts of folk scholars. At least, that is the hope of this writer.

11. Duthu, *A Study in Folklore*, 27–28.

12. William A. Read, *Louisiana-French*, rev. ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1963), 25. For further reading on *cheniers*, see Henry V. Howe and R. J. Russell, "Cheniers of Southwestern Louisiana," *The Geographical Review* 25, no. 3 (1935): 449–61. Though it examines the other side of the state, this article addresses *cheniers* in a mostly Indian context. Moreover, it is interesting to compare their information to modern geology given the changes that have taken place in coastal Louisiana since 1935.

13. One finds various years for when the final separation of Bayou Lafourche from the Mississippi took place. The years 1903, 1905, and 1906 are all given in sources as the date for the damming of the bayou, based on what stage of the closure one notes. The year given here is the first in which the bayou was "officially" closed, as noted in a 1955 site marker.

14. Coastal Research Group, *Sea Level Rise and the Recent Evolution of the Louisiana Coast: A Collection of Reprints, Technical Report No. 83-3* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, Department of Geology, October 1983), 6–7; "Written Off," *New Orleans Times Picayune*, 23 June 2002 (part of the "Washing Away" special series that the *New Orleans Times Picayune* ran on coastal erosion), http://www.nola.com/hurricane/indexQS.ssf?washingaway/writtenoff_1.html (accessed 7 July 2007).

15. US Army Engineer District, New Orleans Corps of Engineers, *Hurricane Study*, 38–40.

16. Oral communication with Corinne Paulk, 14 July 1995; though a number of works address Hurricane Betsy, interested readers should read Alvin Dupree et al., *Betsy: The Story of the Most Devastating Hurricane Ever to Strike Louisiana*, published by the *Lafourche Comet* and the *Lafourche Press-News* in December 1965 (Hill Memorial Library,

Louisiana State University). Reporters and first responders took excellent pictures and kept detailed logs of the event, reporting from not only a professional but also a personal perspective.

17. Duthu, *A Study in Folklore*, 36–41.

18. Oral communication with Kirby Verret, 2 July 2007.

19. For further information on Houma migration and consequent mobility in racial classification, see three theses: Jessica Parks, “Social Classification of Race: The Case of the Houma of Louisiana,” BA thesis, Tulane University, 1974; Edison Peter Roy, “The Indians of Dulac: A Descriptive Study of a Racial Hybrid Community in Terrebonne Parish, Louisiana,” MA thesis, Louisiana State University, 1959; and Max E. Stanton, “The Indians in the Grand Caillou-Dulac Community,” MA thesis, Louisiana State University, 1971. These theses have been disparaged by people on both sides of the United Houma Nation bid for federal recognition, but they are definitely worth a read.

20. Father Roch Naquin, interview by author, 30 September 1996; Howard and Rita Dion, interview by author, 18 August 2003; Ronald Courteaux, Marlene Foret, and Audrey Westerman, interview by author, 17 August 2003; Albert Naquin, interview by author, 11 August 2003; Brenda Dardar-Robichaux, interview by author, 8 August 2003; All these oral interviews are lodged at the T. Harry Williams Oral History Center, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge.

21. *Democracy Now!*, “Indian Tribes and Hurricane Katrina: Overlooked by the Federal Government, Relief Organizations and the Corporate Media,” 10 October 2005, <http://www.democracynow.org/article.pl?sid=05/10/10/1335220> (accessed 6 July 2007). Information from the preceding three paragraphs was taken in part from this interview.