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The Gulf Will Rise Again

By JOHN GRISHAM

Biloxi, Miss.

ON Aug. 17, 1969, Hurricane Camille roared onto the Gulf Coast with winds of more than 200 miles an hour, only the second Category 5 storm to hit the mainland United States. It killed 143 people in Mississippi, and 201 more in flooding in central Virginia.

Over the years, Hurricane Camille's legend grew, and it was not uncommon when I was a child and student in Mississippi to hear horrific tales from coast residents who had survived it. I myself was sleeping in a Boy Scout pup tent 200 miles inland when the storm swept through. Our losses were minimal - the tents, sleeping bags, some food - but over time I managed to spice up the adventure and add a little danger to it.

For almost 40 years, it was a well-established belief that the Gulf Coast had taken nature's mightiest blow, picked itself up, learned some lessons and survived rather well. There could simply never be another storm like Hurricane Camille.

After walking the flattened streets of Biloxi, though, I suspect that Hurricane Camille will soon be downgraded to an April shower. The devastation from Hurricane Katrina, a storm surge 80 miles wide and close to 30 feet high, is incomprehensible. North from the beach for a half a mile, virtually every house has been reduced to kindling and debris. At least 100,000 people in Jackson County - poor, middle-class, wealthy - are homeless.

I search for a friend's home, a grand old place with a long wide porch where we'd sit and gaze at the ocean, and find nothing but rubble. Mary Mahoney's, the venerable French restaurant and my favorite place to eat on the coast, is standing, but gutted. It's built of stone and survived many storms but had seen nothing like Hurricane Katrina.

Even without Hurricane Rita chewing its way across the region, the notion of starting again is nearly impossible to grasp. Some areas will have no electricity for months. The schools, churches, libraries and offices lucky enough to be standing can't open for weeks. Those not standing will be scooped up in the rubble, then rebuilt. But where, and at what cost?

So much has disappeared - highways, streets, bridges, treatment plants, docks, ports. The next seafood harvest is years away, and the shrimpers have lost their boats. The bustling casino business - 14,000 jobs and \$500,000 a day in tax revenues - will be closed for months and may take years to recover. Lawyer friends of mine lost not only their homes and offices, but their records and their courthouses.

At least half of the homes and businesses destroyed were not insured against flood losses. For decades, developers, builders, real estate and insurance agents have been telling people: "Don't worry, Camille didn't touch this area. It'll never flood." This advice was not ill intentioned; it simply reflected what most people believed. Now, those who listened to it and built anyway are facing bankruptcy.

As dark as these days are, though, there is hope. It doesn't come from handouts or legislation, and it certainly doesn't come from speeches promising rosy days ahead. Folks dependent on donated groceries are completely unmoved by campaign-style predictions of a glorious future. It's much too early for such talk.

Hope here comes from the people and their remarkable belief that, if we all stick together, we'll survive. The residents

of the Gulf Coast have an enormous pride in their ability to take a punch, even a knockout blow, and stagger gamely back into the center of the ring. Their parents survived Camille, and Betsy and Frederic, and they are determined to get the best of this latest legend.

Those who've lost everything have nothing to give but their courage and sweat, and there is an abundance of both along the coast these days. At a school in the small town of De Lisle, the superintendent, who's living in the parking lot, gives a quick tour of the gymnasium, which is now a makeshift food dispensary where everything is free and volunteers hurriedly unpack supplies. Two nearby schools have vanished, so in three weeks she plans to open doors to any student who can get to her school. Temporary trailers have been ordered and she hopes they're on the way. Ninety-five percent of her teachers are homeless but nonetheless eager to return to the classrooms.

Though she is uncertain where she'll find the money to pay the teachers, rent the trailers and buy gas for the buses, she and her staff are excited about reopening. It's important for her students to touch and feel something normal. She's lost her home, but her primary concern is for the children. "Could you send us some books?" she asks me. Choking back tears, my wife and I say, "Yes, we certainly could."

Normalcy is the key, and the people cling to anything that's familiar - the school, a church, a routine, but especially to one another. Flying low in a Black Hawk over the devastated beach towns, the National Guard general who is our host says, "What this place needs is a good football game." And he's right. It's Friday, and a few lucky schools are gearing up for the big games, all of which have been rescheduled out of town. Signs of normal life are slowly emerging.

The task of rebuilding is monumental and disheartening to the outsider. But to the battle-scarred survivors of the Gulf Coast, today is better than yesterday, and tomorrow something good will happen.

When William Faulkner accepted the Nobel Prize in 1950, he said, in part: "I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion, sacrifice and endurance."

Today, Faulkner would find in his native state a resilient spirit that is amazing to behold. The people here will sacrifice and give and give until one day this storm will be behind them, and they will look back, like their parents and grandparents, and quietly say, "We prevailed."

John Grisham is the author, most recently, of "The Broker."