

EYEWITNESS

# KEYWORD KATRINA

BLOGGING FROM THE EYE  
OF THE STORM

by Cynthia Joyce



BARELY TEN YEARS LATER and it's already impossible to recall with any precision the depths of uncertainty that was life post-Katrina.

For about six months after the storm, my hands shook too hard for me to write down much of anything. I was incredibly grateful to all those who did, to all those who, either professionally or quasi-publicly, struggled to make sense of that dramatically distorted reality. Explaining "what it was like" in the disaster zone post-Katrina was not only difficult—it was constantly required of everyone who lived through it.

Which is why, even though a print collection of online writing might seem to be beside the point, it's worth resurfacing the digital remnants, words that have since been forgotten or lost in a shuffle between servers, relegated forever to Page Not Found status. The Internet, it turns out, is not forever.

This anthology is a cross-section of online-only entries that were written between August 2005 and August 2007, one that reveals a layer of post-Katrina life that wasn't typically picked up by traditional news outlets or preserved in any official record. It's as much a testament to lost memories as it is to memories about what we lost.

Blown apart but finding one another online, evacuees all asked the same questions: When can we go back? Where are my people? Where is the government? Where is the mayor? What about Mardi Gras? Together, professional and do-it-yourself writers created an online text that was immediate, responsive, and specific to the needs of a traumatized community.

Food was a recurring theme in these posts. Bloggers made lists of the foods they missed, of ingredients and dishes they couldn't find outside New Orleans. When people evacuated, they were reminded that the rest of the world didn't eat and drink like they did. "Baton Rouge doesn't know what osso buco is. Baton Rouge sucks," wrote one frustrated home cook.

When restaurants did reopen, the feeling was one of overwhelming gratitude. It was not a small thing for even the smallest café or convenience store to reopen. If a neighborhood had a place to eat, it could entice families back to rebuild their homes. For returning storm victims, food was sustenance in every sense of the word.

# WHAT THE HELL IS WATER? THIS IS WATER.

by Ann Glaviano  
Aug. 31, 2005

YES, IT COULD BE WORSE. And that doesn't make this any better. Yesterday I finally got in touch with my Aunt Pattie. They're staying at a hotel off Siegen. She came to visit me at the restaurant, along with Aunt Ellen, Uncle Tim, Cullen, Aunt Shannon, Lee, Kurt, Mimi, and Grandpa—and I kept watching the door for them—and kept waiting for my mom to walk in. I wanted her to. I wanted her to but she never did. Then my family was at the door and I ran across the restaurant and tackled my uncle. Aunt Shannon cried when she saw me.

They'd let me use the office phone to call the hotel. When I got my Aunt Pattie on the phone—this was at about 6 p.m. Tuesday night; the last relative I'd spoken to was my brother at around 10 p.m. Sunday—she signed off our phone conversation saying, "Okay, I'll see you, I'm so glad you called—Mimi and Grandpa are coming—I'll call the restaurant if something changes but I'll see you in a little bit—"

Then she paused and said, "You know everything's gone, right?"

I didn't see the news till Monday night. I knew St. Bernard (where my family lives) would be underwater. I was sitting with Abby, Barrett, Jacob and his cousin and brother—we're from Metairie, the West Bank, Destrehan. We're watching CNN at Barrett's house (Barrett said, "Why is this crap still on?" and Jacob's cousin said, "She hasn't seen it yet"—my house didn't have power, still doesn't) and we're identifying neighborhoods, or trying to, from the helicopter shots—but it all looks like houses and water, houses and water, and that same pan across the Clearview Mall parking lot, Target and Zea's with the roof torn off.

I'm learning the geography of the city from this aerial view. I didn't realize the 17th Street Canal was the one right by my house, at the end of Vets, separating Jefferson and Orleans Parish. All I knew about the 17th Street Canal was that it was between "eight-by-yo-mama's" and "six-pack-a-Dixie" in the "12 Yats of Christmas" song. We're watching CNN and they're talking about the breach in the 17th Street Canal and I sang, "17th Street Canal," and after a beat, Abby sang, "Dix pack of sixie," and I was glad to be with a bunch of motherfucking New Orleans refugees right then.

All day yesterday I was so glib because none of it is real. I had a hair appointment on Magazine Street at 1 p.m. today. It wasn't until I was reading the WWL TV forum and watching the live feed online—it wasn't until I saw Blanco crying and Landrieu saying, with great force, "You should get down on your knees"—that's when I lost it. I was alone at Rikki's house doubled over.

Then I went to work.

I cried over cheese and onion enchiladas (the lady said she didn't want the onions) and people were tipping like crazy. Like crazy. You could tell the New Orleans tables, they were the families with little kids and the parents slamming back beer and margaritas. The husband at fifty-three said he wanted chicken quesadillas, eighty-six peppers and onions, and I asked the wife if she wanted the peppers and onions on her quesadillas. She looked at me blurrily and said, "You know, at this point I really don't care," and I said, "What part of New Orleans are you from?" They were from Kenner. I told her I was from Metairie and hadn't been able to get in touch with my mom, dad, or brother since Sunday; she looked at me like a horrified, sympathetic mother.

The table behind them was from Covington and then the Shackletons sat down at eighty-one when my aunts and uncles left. I wouldn't have known it was them, except the dad was wearing a white polo with St. Catherine of Siena Men's Club embroidered on it. I touched his shirt and said "I graduated from there," and as it turns out, Sydney and Adam are sitting right there, unrecognizable now to me, but I was on Quiz Bowl with Adam when I was an eighth-grade girl and he was a seventh-grade boy, and Sydney was in Michael's class. This is what happens when New Orleans comes to Baton Rouge.

I walked out of work with 120 dollars on a Tuesday night and went

to Chelsea's, where Shuchin bought me a lemon drop, and PJ's friend serendipitously brought out a bourbon and Coke that he didn't want, and then he bought me a tequila shot because I'd never done one and he's from New Orleans and so is PJ and everyone at Chelsea's was a refugee and we toasted to that. I was too drunk to drive home, so Anson brought me to Barrett's, where I showered and slept.

Today I got voicemail messages for the first time since Sunday. My phone hasn't rung in three days. From Dallas, my dad says: "I am safe, please get in touch." From his dorm in Natchitoches, my brother says: "Have you been able to get in touch with Mom, because the first extended is this weekend and, uh, I don't know what I'm doing."

The first extended weekend. I'd completely forgotten. All the LSMSA (Louisiana School for Math, Science, and the Arts) kids are required to leave campus. Michael is supposed to come home for a visit.

I told Barrett, "I've got to figure out a way to get Michael home."  
He said, "What home?"



## WAVES

by Brooks Hamaker  
September 12, 2005

IT'S NOT VERY PRETTY, no matter the brush used to paint it.

Tonight, I watched one more endless video stream "live from the mean streets of New Orleans." It occurred to me that, unless you happen to be from New Orleans or have spent a whole lot of time there, there is no way that you can understand what it's like for natives to watch these scenes unfold.

We're scattered across the country, but we scan the same images, looking not for dead bodies or the occasional looter, but trying to identify where in the hell the cameras are pointed. New Orleans has many, many identifiable neighborhoods. In a flash, a native can figure out what part of town is being shown. St. Stephen's Church? That's Napoleon and Magazine. Wagner's Meats (You can't beat our meat!)? That's Claiborne Avenue. Those cars all up and down the middle of the street? People moved them there to keep them out of the water. It usually works. This time, sadly, there may not be anyone to go back and reclaim the car from the neutral ground.

I've spent a great deal of my life (not to mention money) hanging around New Orleans in the thick of the food-and-music scene. So when I see shots of neighborhoods, I think of clubs, restaurants, and bars. Maybe it sounds cold, but the first thing that I thought of when I heard that the water was rising fast in the industrial canal and flooding the Ninth Ward was what would happen to the Saturn Bar, St. Roch Cemetery, and the Captain's Houses.

When the 17th Street Canal broke, I heard about it on local radio station WWL. Loyal and attentive listeners were told that the canal had

broken “right behind Deanie’s on the City Park side,” and that “Sid Mar’s had washed through the hole.” A foreigner listening to the radio might not make much sense of that, but if you were from New Orleans, you knew exactly where they were talking about.

Another long shot of Rampart Street: The cameras cross over Treme, going for one more long, too-often repeated shot of the Vieux Carré. Look down and see the Municipal Auditorium, WWOZ, Peristyle, Mama Rosa’s, and the Funky Butt. All of these places have gotten my time and money over the years. I saw Van Morrison, The New Orleans Brass, and Harrah’s Temporary Casino in the Auditorium. I remember when OZ was on top of Tipitina’s at Tchoupitoulas and Napoleon, and when it moved to Armstrong Park. I listened to late-night shows with back-to-back appearances by J Monque’d and Ernie K. Doe (one of the wildest nights in regularly scheduled radio history. The tapes are still traded among those in the know.) I remember (though not very clearly) stumbling down St. Louis Street from the Funky Butt after a long night of real jazz with Astral Project, or the Dozen, or any of dozens of the unsung and underpaid heroes of the New Orleans music scene.



As the water rose, many of us mentally checked off the streets that held our favorite restaurants and clubs. Not only would we be very unlikely to be eating there or listening to music there any time soon, but we wondered what was going on with the people who had worked there. With the exception of a lucky few, most people in New Orleans have been born and raised living hand-to-mouth—including the owners of many of the funky little dives that tourists often fall in love with. And if the owners aren’t getting rich, think about your waitress, or the guy who washes the dishes, or parks your car, or carries your bag. These folks didn’t live where tourists often travel, but they had homes just like you and me, and the areas that they lived in have been among the most severely affected. Many of these people have left New Orleans for good—but the ones that return? Man, will they have some stories to tell. Epic tales of long trips, hardship, strange customs in stranger lands, and finally of their triumphant return to the City that Care Forgot (no moniker could be more accurate at the moment). That’s what I am waiting on. Those stories.

I’m waiting to drive in on Friday afternoon, weary from a long day at work but not so tired that I am willing to pay the parking thieves for one of their little spots. I will circle around on Esplanade, make the turn onto Chartres, and head back to Frenchman Street, looking for a free spot in the block behind Doerr Furniture, just past Santa Fe Restaurant. I’ll grab my stuff, double-check to make sure I didn’t leave anything in the car that I might ever want again, and stroll off down Frenchman: past Snug Harbor, Café Brasil, Mona’s, the Praline Connection, a cool tattoo parlor that tempts me every time I go by it, and finally out of the Faubourg past Checkpoint Charlie’s. I’ll cross Esplanade and make a right. On down to Royal Street and into the Quarter, past the block of residential property, past the Golden Lantern (Home of the Mr. Leather Contest, where I was once the celebrity “straight” judge), Bennachin African Restaurant, Mona Lisa’s, and into the Verti Marte. I’ll get a newspaper, a quart of milk, a couple of bottles of club soda, a couple of Hubig’s pies (lemon, thanks) and a pint of whatever Ben and Jerry’s looks right. I’ll go outside, walk across the street, unlock the door, and walk into the courtyard, marveling as I always do at the fact that it’s been there so long and looked so much the same all these many years.

Once I put my things up, I’ll head back, tripping down Gov. Nicholls to Decatur and through the French Market. Over to the Moonwalk, all the way down the river, past the Aquarium. There, I’ll

walk over and ask where my son's brick is (I never can remember where that damn thing is). Once I satisfy myself that it's still there, I'll walk a few blocks down Canal and make the right back into the Quarter onto Royal. I'll probably check in at the Monteleone, just to make sure that the Carousel is still going 'round, and then I'll go past the Supreme Court Building (formerly known as the Wildlife and Fisheries building, formerly known as the old Supreme Court Building—this is a very complicated structure), past the folks lining up for dinner at Brennan's that evening, past the antique stores, the cool old gun shop, the Rib Room in the bottom of the Royal Orleans (maybe they will enlarge the rooms, finally, as they redo it), and then, just before I get home, I'll stop in at PJ's and get a large iced coffee to go. A real iced coffee, made the way that apparently no one else in the Deep South knows how to make it—big go cup, ice, dark-roast coffee (no chicory, no cow, thanks). And then I'll go back home and put my feet up and watch WWL as they report on the latest Saints disaster.

Many of the places I have mentioned might be unfamiliar to you, but if you have ever been to New Orleans—even once—others were not. I know you pictured those landmarks, along with what were once unremarkable places, and you remembered that trip. You might have a photo on your wall of you and some loved one standing in front of General Jackson with St. Louis Cathedral in the background. Or maybe, on some shelf, you have a hurricane glass from Pat O's filled with change. Maybe it's a string or two of hard-earned Mardi Gras beads hanging from a rearview, or a couple of Carnival doubloons tucked into a dresser drawer. A ticket from the Superbowl or the Final Four pinned behind a Superdome magnet on your fridge. No matter the souvenir you chose to keep from your visit, one thing is sure, you left part of your heart in New Orleans. We can't wait until you can come back and try to find it. 🍷

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# TO LIVE AND DINE IN DIXIE

THE EVOLUTION OF  
URBAN FOOD CULTURE IN  
THE JIM CROW SOUTH

ANGELA JILL COOLEY

COMING MAY 15 FROM UGA PRESS