

1/8/06

Dear Roy,

Well, I expect that when Bev gets the mail tomorrow we will have at least one letter from you. We got back from New Orleans last night about 9 PM.

As you know we left for New Orleans to volunteer on December 25 and we returned as I said on January 7. On our fourteen days in New Orleans, six were touristy and eight were working days. I suppose a good way to describe the trip is not to report day by day, but to consider topics like the destruction, the touring experience, the volunteer work, the people, the rebuilding, etc. However, I guess the touring will get wrapped into the destruction description, and the people and the volunteering will get become intertwined. So here goes.

We stayed at the bachelor pad (816 Austerlitz) of a young man named Evan. Evan went north to visit his mother at Christmas and he kindly allowed us to use his rooms in the triplex that he owns. I have some pictures that I'll put insert from time to time. To begin with, here is a shot of the exterior taken at about 8AM. I have no idea how old the house is. It was probably in the late 1800s or early 1900s. It is in what is called the Lower Garden District.



To put it in prospective, New Orleans was founded by Bienville in about 1718. The original residential development was in what is now the French Quarter. Some years after the Louisiana Purchase, the more affluent “Americans” began the development of the Garden District because of their desire to distance themselves from the inhabitants of the French Quarter – pirates, sailors, trappers, free slaves, Creoles, and other undesirables. The Garden District was largely developed in the 1830’s and 1840’s. Hence, the Lower Garden District – closer to the river and/or farther west was settled after that. This history I have just indicates that the Garden District was planned out by a gentleman by the name of Lafon. Reflecting his love for the classics, Lafon named his streets after the nine

muses of Greek mythology: Calliope, Clio, Erato, Thalia, Melphomene, Terpsichore, Euterpe, Polymnia and Urania. All the colored street names figured in our travel to and from our daily work. However, Austerlitz was some two miles to the west of this area.



Evan was or is the President of the Young Democrats of Tulane. There are numerous indications from his residence of his political involvement. While he is working toward acquiring a position to be trained in Arabic by the military, his library indicates that he is reading a broad spectrum of works from the classics to modern political and social best sellers.

As far as I can see, Evan is making do quite well. His flat included a large living room/kitchen/eating area, plus a bedroom, and a washroom. Above is a picture of Beverly refilling our water bottles for another day at work. To cover a broken pane of glass, Evan used a political sign loosely pinned and taped over the hole. One evening I was called upon to fortify that repair because about 9 PM some critter – probably a bat – decided to make a home outside that loosely attached sign.



Next I will include a picture of the bedroom so that you see why I referred to this as a bachelor pad. The mattress is on the floor. It was quite comfortable. Most of our days there had 70s for highs. One or two evenings, temps got down to the 40's and we had to use a number of blankets.

Most homes around town had little or no front lawn. Land is scarce. That is why cemeteries of which I took no pictures are filled with aboveground crypts. (Someone corrected us to assert that the presence of crypts to do with conservation of space more than the height of the water table in New Orleans.)

So let's see. On the day after Christmas, the center was not open so we went to tour. The main street just a few houses north of us was Magazine Street. It was about as yuppie as it gets in my small knowledge of NO (New Orleans as in NOPD). Flashy shops along with rather shabby. A first shot of that area is the coffee shop (Rue de la Course) below where we sat on the first stop on Monday morning. A bike, a couple motorcycles, a Mercedes out front. I turned and took a shot to the east and the terrain looked a less well maintained.



We spent a number of our evenings on this street. We eat at Mona's about three nights (Middle Eastern – the favorite), Table One (overpriced), Café Rani (good salad), Sake Café (Japanese), Byblío (Middle Eastern), and an Indian restaurant (Nirvana). (One night we ate in the French Quarter and once up north of Tulane.) A lot of places were open, yet not all. As we moved out of this area for work or touring, we saw many eating-places still not open. Popeye's is a popular fast food chain (chicken) down there. It had 7 of its 36 locations open. Some or most were damaged, but even if they could open, would there be customers/workers?

After the cup of coffee, we drove north to Lake Pontchartrain. All I can say is that we started from our fairly decent surroundings that had suffered from wind damage but not flooding. Piles of rubble were still frequent in our area. City services and waste removal did not seem to be a priority. The bottom line in so many aspects of this tragedy is: Where are you going to dump all the waste and rubble.

I can't remember quite which street we used to head north. I was only my second excursion around the city. (We ate in the French Quarter on Christmas night.) I believe we traveled up Broad to St. Bernard Avenue. It was only a few blocks north of our "digs" when the destruction was everywhere. Although it was not perceptible to us, we were descending into the flood area. One of the sights on this drive

was an area of city project housing. It was actually too large an area to capture on film. Behind the fences that surrounded the blocks of the project were simple drab two story brick buildings. Let's say that each building might house 4 families. They were all alike and all naked and empty. The doors stood open. No one was living there at all. It was just the first of many shocking wastelands. It was a silent reminder of the poor who were now somewhere else. It would be a huge expense to rehabilitate them. Although I do not remember any watermarks on those buildings, they were in the flood area. The only question sometimes was how high.

Most residences I saw in New Orleans were built on slabs. No basements. I presume that even the flooding of water a few inches to a foot deep could cause massive problems. Many places stood in water for weeks. Their owners or occupants were not allowed to return for some time. Had they been able to return earlier, I still don't know what they could have done.

Many homes had roof damage from the hurricane. FEMA had provided huge blue tarps and they were on many of the roofs. They had been visible when we flew into town on Christmas. They either covered a portion or the entire roof of the houses.



As we reached within -- let's say -- a half-mile of the lake, we did wind through some expensive and undamaged houses. We had driven up the other edge of New Orleans's bowl topography to Lakeshore Drive. We saw damaged hangers at the N.O. Lakefront Airport and drove into a marina and viewed a ravaged boathouse. The boathouse had lots of its metal siding gone. The ships inside were damaged or sunk at their moorings.

Beverly posed with another hapless boat. It was the *Sabbatical* out of Iowa City, Iowa. It should have stayed up in corn country.

We drove back to Austerlitz and decided to see how far south we could go toward the Gulf. We crossed the Mississippi on the US 90 Bridge and traveled through the town of Gretna. I guess we went 40 or 50 miles south until we reached Port Sulphur. To the left was the levee and in the distance you could see the bridges of ocean-going vessels. They were apparently tied up. There was no place for visitors to stop and view the river. There was at least one section of oil refineries. We did go past Port Sulphur. (The highway map marks a sulphur mine several miles south of that town.) Heavy trucks were traveling both directions apparently hauling debris. Maybe 5 miles beyond Port Sulphur was a checkpoint manned by a sheriff's deputy who asked if we lived in the area - Plaquemines Parish. Since we did not, we were not permitted to proceed. We pulled a U-turn and returned to New Orleans --- reaching there just after sundown.

Port Sulphur was probably the most complete destruction that we saw during the trip. I will include several shots of that town. It had fallen victim to the storm surge. If levees were there to protect it, they were of no use.



Like this one, some houses were just flattened.

Some or maybe many houses floated and came to rest in strange places.



I have another shot of a house setting on top of a semi-tractor. But the picture of the van under the house above gives you the same idea. Finally the house at the right and the one farther down the road gave a new meaning to the term “roadhouses”.

