

Down In Mississippi

Day 1

It is about a 7 hour drive to Pearlington, a small community near Lake Pontchartrain just outside Slidell, Louisiana. Hurricane Katrina made landfall about 15 months earlier, striking Pearlington, Mississippi almost head-on. I heard even now there was still much to do there, so I decide to see for myself. My plan is to leave Chattanooga about 10AM Saturday and arrive before dark to look around and locate the Disaster Recovery Center. At the DRC I will meet four or five people in an advance work party traveling down from Knoxville's Fountain City Presbyterian Church.

I asked some friends over for dinner tonight. We spend quite the time relaxing in my home eating and talking about my trip on Saturday, the next day. We talk late into the night in my living room high on the hill with the vista of the lights and buildings of the city through my windows. So much for an early start.

I had made my list earlier Friday while I cooked our dinner. Saturday morning, all I plan to do is pay some bills and run some errands, and of course, pack my clothes and tools. My intent is to get back before next Friday to catch up with some old friends who are coming come into town. We spent many hours indulging in fellowship and excess down in Atlanta on Virginia Avenue during my days in grad school.

Naturally when Saturday rolls around I cannot find my saber saw, and spend probably thirty to forty-five minutes going up and down the hill from my shop to my furnace room where my tools are spread between in my paroxysm of remodeling. I have to wash some clothes. Finally with the clock pressing me I make a management decision. Sleeping bag, pillow, band-aids, my meds, 3 pairs of jeans, sweat shirt, work boots, sufficient socks and underwear and a fresh shirt to get me through to Thursday is all I need.

I fill my truck with diesel at the station as I leave town, figuring to make it down on one tank and still get back to Picayune for more if there isn't any fuel in Pearlington. I depart town about 11:30AM figuring with the time change I'll still get there before dark, but just barely.

It is a wonderfully sunny November day. Driving through north Alabama, absolutely beautiful color in the leaves of the trees decorate the side of Lookout Mountain and the low hills beyond all the way to Birmingham. With cruise control on 75 mph, all I have to do is watch the

road and the hills, and push the “seek” button on the radio to find a good FM station and enjoy the view. There is a lot of not too interesting church stations. I listen to 88.1 out of Chattanooga until it fades in static, then an NPR station out of Birmingham. On one sweep through the spectrum I find the Auburn game and listen to that until the signal fades. I pick up an Alabama map at a rest stop near Birmingham, and then back on the road I find the Alabama game on the radio. Luckily my late departure causes me to miss the horrendous traffic jam in Tuscaloosa from that game. I hear a few final scores later but as I near Mississippi, the only station is out of Meridian carrying the Old Miss game. Only the trees entertain.

I stop every two hours or so, for once I heed my doctor’s advice not to sit in the car too long with my history of blood clots. When I get to the Mississippi state line, I stop at the first rest area before Meridian and pick up a Mississippi map and a complimentary Diet Coke. I am getting excited, next comes Hattiesburg, then Picayune, then I-10/12 where I go back east eight to twelve miles to MS Rte 607, then south on MS 604 a couple of miles to Pearlinton. I though I still may make it there before dark.

From the map I got at the rest stop near Meridian I try to get an idea of how far north of the Gulf I am. It cannot be more than 100 miles, maybe 75 as the crow flies.

For the whole way the trees have been so pretty coming down and I continually watch them as I drove further south. I hardly ever take the time to enjoy fall, yet it has such a beauty, ever anticipating a green spring.

Somewhere between Meridian and Hattiesburg a perception grows that something is not right about the trees. I realize the bare pines and small oaks have a decided tilt, leaning more or less north or northwest and many of the limbs seemed stripped. As I near Hattiesburg, maybe 50-60 miles due North of the gulf, I begin to see a few dead pines snapped off six to ten feet from the ground. Beyond Hattiesburg there are large gaps along I-59 where only sparse stands of trees remain with occasional large piles of collected stumps. Quite soon thereafter uprooted oaks lying on the ground in the midst of the woods appear. Near milepost 100 from the Louisiana state line I see a blown down road sign. By mile post 85 the frequency of broken pines on the ground has significantly increased. By milepost 55 there are large treeless gaps in the median. The highway crews have been landscaping from massive piles of woodchips of ground up trees. Around mile post 43, I find a whole field of trailer homes, stacked shoulder to shoulder. There are hundreds if not thousands of them totally covering an open field, still pristine and clean as new. I learn later

they are FEMA trailers, sent there for hurricane survivors. Between the Fed's not allowing trailers in "flood zones" and the depopulation of this area, they just sit empty and unused.

At milepost 35 near the Wolf River between Poplarville and Lumberton, A steel radio tower is twisted and bent around and over. There are downed trees still in the median from here on in. By the time I reach to Picayune, 462 miles from Chattanooga, I am averaging about seventy. It is five in the afternoon and still light. I decide with all the uncertainty of my observations it is time to fill up the truck. I have no idea of what I'll find in Pearlinton.

By the time I made Interstate 10 about two miles from Slidell, LA and turned to head east the sun is down and it is dark. The near-full moon rose not long after leaving Picayune, almost like a star in the sky leading me towards Pearlinton. Shortly after crossing the Pearl River I find MS 607 and exit, reach to Rte. 604 and turn south to drive into Pearlinton. Only the moon heralds my entry. It is dark and with no streetlights and few houses, I am lost.

I drive on into more or less what I am sure is the community. I see a young man in a car sits ready to turn onto Rte 604 and quickly turn onto the street road. I lower my window and wave at him until he lowers his. Having his attention, I ask him, "Do you know where the Disaster Recovery Center is?"

He gives me a blank look.

"It used to be an elementary school."

Even though it was dark, I can see the big smile as he realized where I want to go.

"Follow me!"

He makes a quick U-turn and leads me down some twisting road. He stops at a 90-degree right turn in the road and points towards a military mess tent to the right. To my left I see a couple of signs and two buildings beyond a tall chain link fence. One sign says "Pearl Mart" and the other says "Charles B. Murphy Elementary School." The school itself sits on the other side of the large parking lot beyond the gate. So, this is the Disaster Recovery Center.

I turned into the lot beyond the fence, wave good-bye to the young man and drive to the school building at the far end where a few cars and a Ford 4x4 are parked. The Ford and the rest of the cars must belong to the people from Fountain City Presbyterian Church. These guys and their friends have traveled here to work six times in the last twelve months. They have built a really good relationship with a few key local people who point them towards folks that really need help.

Even with the bright moon, I cannot see anything else. I drive up to the school whose front obviously had been windows, but now is comprised four 4x8 sheets of plywood bearing a complicated painted mural I cannot not fully read in the poor light. I enter the door walking into a large room containing maybe thirty or so cots with blankets, and a back wall window space similar to the front, four 4x8 sheets of plywood again, except these hold two air conditioners. I introduce myself to Bob, the first person I see. He introduces me to the rest of the five people from FCPC. They have waited on me before they depart for dinner at Turtle's over on US90 not far east of 604 and the bridge over the Pearl River to Slidell beside Lake Pontchartrain. Bob says they have the best catfish around. I gladly go along, because I find there is no other place around to eat or buy groceries; you have to drive to the new WalMart in Bay St. Louis or Slidell for that. Turtle's is the only place to eat for miles.

The hurricane and surge wiped it out Turtle's, but it was one of the first places re-established. They pitched a tent on the side of the building for a kitchen, found some portable stoves and salvaged the beer in the locker within the washed out building. Turtle's with its alligator pond out back was back in business at ground zero as fast as the Wal-Mart Store. The catfish and beer are greasy but great. I sit listening to my new friends' stories of how people survived in Hancock County. It generates a great anxiety about what awaits discovery in the light of Sunday morning and the week beyond. I think that my plans on getting back to Chattanooga on Friday to see my old friends probably aren't going to happen. What have I gotten myself into?