

Three Months Later

As my Mississippi Journal indicated, my initial trip to Pearlinton, MS—about six weeks after it was devastated by hurricane Katrina—was sponsored by a group of Chicago area churches. That experience had inspired me to return to the area and continue the relief and recovery work I had started on that first trip. However, I felt I could be more effective in that effort if I could work more independently. So, when some unexpected income came my way soon after I returned from my first trip, I scheduled a return to Pearlinton a few months later for another couple of weeks of work there. This account, however, will be a lot less detailed than the Journal, as it is being written after an intermission of some eight years.

I had maintained contact with the people in Pearlinton and had been advised of the changes in leadership in the community over the preceding three months. In particular, I had been introduced to Larry Randall, a local resident who was now the person in charge of day-to-day activities in Pearlinton (The community was unincorporated and had no official local administration.), and Charlie Holmes, a psychology professor at a Baptist College in Hattiesburg who had come on a semi-permanent basis to represent the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in its disaster relief efforts there. At the time I arrived in January, Charlie was nominally in charge of Pearl Mart, the schoolhouse activity center I had described in my Journal. Sandy Molenhouse was still in the area and still lived in a trailer at Stennis Airport, but I think she was now about the only person from International Aid still working in the area. She had set up and was running a camp for volunteers on what had been a vacant field in the town of The Kiln, near the airport, where I visited her a couple of time while I was there.

Hoping to remove from my garage the big generator that had been donated earlier for relief work in Pearlinton, I found a way to secure it in the back of my van and left from home on the morning of January 13, 2006 (Friday). I made the fifteen hour trip on about the same schedule and followed the same route as the one in October. I even stayed the first night in the same motel in Grenada, MS, arriving at the school in Pearlinton early in the afternoon of the next day. I found Charlie Holmes in Pearl Mart and we found a place on site to store the generator, for which he said he would find a good use. He filled me in a bit concerning what was going on, most immediate of which was a community meeting scheduled for later that afternoon. It would be held in a



large tent that had been erected on the football field.

Meanwhile, I found accommodations in what was a computer lab before the storm. It was in the only part of the school that survived the storm—except the gym (Pearl Mart). The photo above shows that end of the school, which originally housed the library, the computer lab and the administrative offices. The offices now served as a medical clinic. The entrance to the computer lab was directly behind the ambulance in the photo. The photo on the left shows my little corner of this makeshift dormitory.

The parking lot of the school remained the site for a row of port-a-potties and a shower facility, as shown in the adjoining photo. In the months since I was last here, an outdoor laundry facility had been added just beyond the showers. The open feeding station had been replaced by a large mess tent, shown below. I'm not sure whether the food was cooked on



The community meeting held on the day I arrived was in a tent at least as large as the mess tent. It occupied much of the southeast corner of the football field. Regrettably, I did not get a picture of that tent, although as I will explain, it occupied my attention for a couple of days early in my stay there. I attended the meeting that afternoon,

which brought me up to date on relief and recovery progress in the community since I was there three months earlier. At the meeting, I encountered several people I had met in my earlier visit.

During that visit, we never had a drop of rain for the two weeks I was there. However, soon after I arrived this time, we were deluged. The meeting tent had not been trenched and was flooded in the interior. In addition, water had collected on the top of the tent on one side and was threatening to break the side supports. The space would not be usable until something was done. So, I volunteered to get it done. Fortunately, a short-term crew from Loving Neighbors (the Chicago area group that had sponsored my earlier trip) had arrived that week and had not yet begun working on their project. They agreed to help. We first set about emptying the collection of water from top of the tent and tightening the side supports. Then, some of the crew dug a trench around the tent and others filled with sand flooded areas inside the tent. As I recall, we had it usable in about a day.

I pointed out in my earlier Journal that one of the greatest needs in the community was for operational water pumps. No resident could qualify for a FEMA trailer until there was water and electricity available on the home site. Many sites had been serviced by the power company, but because there was no public water supply in Pearlington, all residents needed to have a pump installed to get water. During my interactions with Charlie Holmes after I arrived, I met a fellow named Joe Cook, who like Charlie, worked under the auspices of The Cooperative Baptist



site. It probably was. It came to the mess tent in insulated chests, as shown below. As I recall, the food was good...and plentiful.



Fellowship. Joe was from Ohio, but was spending the winter in Pearlington with his wife, who worked at Pearl Mart. That week, He was installing water pumps that were being supplied by the mission agency he represented, and he was looking for help with the work. I told him that I would lend a hand. The adjoining photo shows part of the original crew. Joe is the man in the middle. I don't recall the name of the guy in the white hat.

All of the requests for water pumps were being channeled through the operations center at



Pearl Mart, so we were responding to requests from all over Hancock County, including the rural areas around Bay St. Louis and Waveland. The operations center can be seen in the adjoining photo. Through the end of that week, the pump crew did installations all over the county. One memorable job was one in which we replaced a failing pump at a site that already had a FEMA trailer. The lady was so grateful that she invited us to a meal of corned beef and cabbage at her dining table, which was on a slab outside the door to her trailer.

Although it was approaching five months since Katrina hit Pearlington, the amount of debris in the community did not seem to me to have diminished greatly. Here is a photo I took during this visit. It was taken along the main street of Pearlington, across the street from the fire station. Many properties remained just as they had been left by the storm. I can recall one rural property for which a pump had been requested. It was so cluttered with debris that we could never locate



the well head.

By the end of that week, the pump crew had accumulated more volunteers than were really needed, so I decided to find other work for the next week. On that Sunday, I returned for services to the First Southern Baptist church, which I had attended on my first trip in October. It that time, we gathered under the front entryway, where the trailer can be seen in this picture. Now, the interior had been sufficiently cleaned that the congregation could gather just

inside the front door. That afternoon, I sought out Larry Randall to see if he knew somebody that needed help that day. Following is a story I wrote later detailing what Larry and I did that afternoon.

The High Cost of Recovery

After I returned from my most recent trip to aid in recovery efforts along the Gulf Coast of Mississippi after Hurricane Katrina, I was asked how things had changed in the three months since I was first there in October, soon after the storm. The short answer was, “ More FEMA trailers, but surprisingly little less of the original devastation.” Of course, the reality of this devastation was not just about piles of debris and houses with blue-tarped roofs. Mostly it was about the continued suffering of people trying to survive in that community, Pearlinton. The reality of that suffering was indelibly etched in my own memory by an experience I had one day while I was there.

It was Sunday. I had spent most of the past week installing water pumps to help people qualify for FEMA trailers. (Most of the rural areas along that part of the Mississippi coast do not have either public water or sewer. Before the hurricane, they got their water from shallow wells using surface pumps. Those pumps were destroyed by the storm and had to be replaced before a trailer could be placed on the site.) The rest of the pump crew was taking Sunday off, so after church I asked a local friend if he could suggest someone who could use some help that day. He did, and led me to a home site where a FEMA trailer had been recently installed next to the remains of a washed-out residence.

The home site was the property of a handicapped man and his wife. A used washer and dryer had been provided by family members and we were there to install them. Like the water pumps—and any other appliances that used electric motors—their own washer and dryer had been destroyed by the flood. Of course, there is no room to install such major appliances in the kind of travel trailer FEMA provides, so they had to be put outside in a place where they could be securely positioned and the woman could access them easily. The ideal place was behind the trailer, next to the pole that held the breaker box providing electric power to the site.

We needed a platform to support the appliances in the space we selected. Fortunately, we didn't have to build it. (Building materials remained at a premium in the area.) A suitable platform was available, half hidden in the woods behind the trailer. It was the base for a storage shed that the couple had used before Katrina and that had been washed into the woods by the storm. The aluminum walls and roof of the shed had been ripped off and now the base sat in the woods stacked with plastic storage boxes—most of them full of water, but still holding the material that had been stored there. While my friend went to get his tractor, I busied myself cleaning the “debris” off the platform so we could drag it out of the woods.

I'm sure what I went through doing that job that day has been—and will be—repeated many, many times as the process of recovery continues in the area...but for me it was a sobering experience. Most of the boxes contained Christmas decorations. All of them contained things that were obviously considered family treasures. Now they were simply obstacles—obstacles to the next step in recovery for this family. My job was to do away with the obstacles. I did it, but it was extremely distasteful—pouring bins of water-soaked memorabilia onto the ground in the Mississippi woods so that these good people could make the next small step toward recovering a normal life.

We got the washer and dryer installed that day—and, hopefully, it helped make life a little easier for this deserving couple—but I will never completely erase from my memory the image of my part in the destruction of their family history. Yet, I must go back to Mississippi, because an even more indelible image is one revealing the determination of the people of this community to hold onto their faith, conquer their adversities and rebuild their lives. I want to continue to be a part of that effort.

The computer lab I called home was not particularly crowded during my first week there. Individual volunteers came and went but I don't think we ever had more than a half dozen at any one time, although it could probably accommodate at least thirty. One of those roommates was a fellow from Virginia that supervised crews of volunteers that built sheds to adjoin FEMA trailers. Most of the men in his crews lived on the building site, which was in the front yard of a flooded out house on the main street of the town, as shown on the right. Here is a close-up view of their sign on the tree:



The sheds they built (8 by 12 feet, pictured below) were given to residents to provide additional space for their belongings. FEMA trailers were relatively small travel trailers and they were not intended to house a family and all of its possessions for an extended period. So, the sheds built by this crew from Virginia—and the volunteers they recruited locally—were welcome additions to their meager

properties as these residents struggled to recover.

Sometime during our stay together in the computer lab, the shed builder learned that I could do electrical wiring. He needed someone to wire the sheds after they were installed by his crew. I volunteered and spent most of the next week being an electrician. The wiring of the sheds was very simple—just an overhead light with a switch inside the door and two outlets, one on each of the side walls. The conduit was Romex and the boxes were blue plastic. The interior wiring was connected through the wall to a short cable with a male plug that the homeowner could connect with an extension cord. That was it. Finish the job and move on to another.



One of those others was for a shed that had been installed at the site of a camp for volunteers being set up by the Presbyterians. The camp was right on the main street, next door to the fire station. On the left is a photo of the camp. The shed can be seen over the hood of my van. The tents in the camp were of most interesting construction. They were made of corrugated plastic, delivered as a lightweight flat package and opened like an accordion to be set up and used.

While I was wiring this shed, a mission

executive from the Presbyterian Church came and asked if I would consider wiring the new breaker panel that was being installed on the power pole shown in the photo above. Electricians were at a premium at that time and an electrician's license (which I did not have) was not considered essential as long as you could do the work—and I never undertook anything I could not do as well as a professional. The camp had been getting its power by means of a temporary underground cable from the fire station next door. It was a kind of Rube Goldberg arrangement and needed to be replaced with something safer and more permanent. So, when I finished the backlog of sheds needing to be wired, I turned my attention to the camp, where I set about moving the temporary circuits to the new breaker panel and testing all the circuits to assure that they had proper continuity.

By the time I finished that job, it was late in my second week there, which was about as much time as I had set out to spend on this trip. The decision to leave for home was made for me when a large group of volunteers from the Florida panhandle showed up for the weekend and flooded the computer lab with new residents. One of those residents with a bunk next to mine snored thunderously. I left for home the next day.