

March '07

As I returned to Pearlinton for one last time to help the community recover from the devastating effects of hurricane Katrina, I was again delighted to have the company of my friend Rich Smrha. Since our last visit, we had kept in touch with our contacts in the community, but Charlie Holmes was preparing to terminate his connection with the work there and he was being replaced by a man from Colorado. In addition, much of the recovery work in Pearlinton was now being coordinated through the local Southern Baptist Church. Our own church was planning to send a short-term team in March 2007 and had made arrangements to stay in that Pearlinton church for the few days they would be there. We asked them to include us in their reservations for space, although we intended to stay for two weeks.

We followed the same routine traveling south this time and, when we arrived early in the week of March 1st, we connected with the group from our church and were provided space in one of the classrooms that had been temporarily converted to dormitories for volunteers.

Actually, I was the only one given space with the rest of the men from Christ Church. Rich's reputation for snoring had preceded him and space was found for him in another part of the church. His accommodations are shown here.

By this time, rebuilding of this church had been completed. The sanctuary was restored and in regular use. The multipurpose room was being used for multiple purposes, including as a dining room and lounging area for volunteers. The kitchen was well-equipped and served two



hot meals each day, morning and evening. The operation was being run at the time by a lady named Juanita from northern Mississippi, who lived in a motor home parked next to the church. She supervised volunteer cooks—when they were available—and did much of the cooking herself as the photo below shows. In addition

she coordinated requests for help from the community and, as far I could tell, managed just about all of the activities that originated at the church.

For the first time since I first went to Pearlinton, we had the luxury of indoor bathrooms—with showers—although there was a battery of outdoor showers behind the church for times when the number of volunteers was



substantial. Also, laundry facilities were now available in the church. Not all of the volunteers the church supported lived in the church. A vacant parsonage several blocks away also provided housing for groups of volunteers. Among those volunteers, one of the most memorable was a man we knew only as Papa Smurf, seen on the right. We saw him mostly just at mealtimes, although we did work at the same job site once and borrowed one of his tools.



One of our first activities after we were settled in our quarters was to go to visit Miss Lillian's house, which was not totally finished when we left for home in November. The completed project is shown below. However, we learned that Vanessa's house was still not finished,



although it was originally scheduled to be ready to occupy before Christmas. That project was now being handled by Charlie's replacement and we did work on it some later in our stay.

Our first assignment on this visit was in a house under construction. I think it was one of Charlie's houses. It was being constructed for a lady named Dallas, who can be seen below with her dog. The house needed some finish work done, but our most immediate task was to clean up some lousy plumbing work. However, this

time it was not the work of an amateur. The guy that had done the rough plumbing was Joe Cook, the fellow with whom I had installed water pumps in January of '06. My experience with Joe had been that he tended not to work *through* problems, but to work *around* them. Anything to get the job done and move on. Now we were



faced with two such situations.

In the first case, he couldn't connect the drain from the kitchen sink to a vent—because there was no vent. So he just left it that way. We rigged a vent for it. It was not ideal, but it was the best we could do. The second problem is shown on the left. This strange configuration was adopted because there was a problem putting the toilet where it was called for in the plans. It seems there was a floor joist right where the toilet flange was supposed to be installed.

So, instead of working through the floor joist problem, he worked around it by moving the toilet to a different location and feeding the water into the bathtub as you see it in the picture. Our problem was that, in this configuration, the nozzle was too short and fed the water onto the edge of the tub. We had to tear out the valves and the nozzle and start over. It's still a strange configuration, but it works.

We did a few more things in Dallas' house, including installing some pre-hung doors using Papa Smurf's electric brad nailer, and then asked Juanita who else she had on her list of residents that had requested help. She sent us to a lady named Anna, whose home, shown on the right, was the largest house in town that had survived the storm surge. To get an idea of how high the surge went in that part of town, imagine a line just below the upstairs windows. That was the high water mark in this house.

Anna was a widow who had come originally from Cuba and had lived in Pearlinton for a long time. She now lived in a large house trailer on her property, which occupied the whole block where she lived. By the time we arrived, the remodeling on the first



work is shown on the right.

Anna was a delightful lady to work for. She even invited us to have lunch with her in



floor was pretty well complete except for some finish work on the electrical wiring. That was the job we were requested to do. All of the wires had been pulled, but they had to be connected to a breaker panel and all of the outlets and switches on the first floor had to be installed, with their locations indicated on the breaker panel. What we were given to start with is shown on the left and the results of a few days



her trailer, along with a couple of other volunteers working that day on her property. She can be seen here as she was doing volunteer work herself at the church. She would have liked to have us stay around and reconfigure the plumbing in her upstairs bathroom, but the

fixtures were antiques and it would have required a lot more time and equipment than we had available. So we moved on for our few remaining days in Pearlington.

Before I recount those days, I have to introduce you to Hutch...Lawrence Hutcheson...a longer term resident at the church in Pearlington and delightful young man we befriended early in our stay there. We didn't see much of him during the day as he was supporting himself by working for contractors that were rebuilding houses in the area, but we saw him quite often at mealtimes and in the assembly area after dinner. In fact, later in our stay there, Rich and I were the only other volunteers staying with him at the church. He had grown up in the Northeast, had graduated from Vassar College and was still trying to find his place in the world.

As we were all approaching our last days in Pearlington, Hutch had terminated his association with the contractor with whom he had been working and we asked him to join us on the job we had undertaken as our final project. That project was at Vanessa's house. Since our arrival, we had been concerned that she and her granddaughters were still in that FEMA trailer when they had been promised new quarters by Christmas.

On the right is a photo of Hutch with me in front of that house. The jobs that remained to be done were mostly finish work. While the man from Colorado completed the installation of the HVAC system, we installed some lighting, cabinets and other fixtures in the girls' bathroom and then did some finish work in the kitchen. Meanwhile, Hutch had told us about a most interesting house he had worked on in another part of town, so we took time one day to check it out.

It was built on a very unusual concept. Apparently the owners determined that it would provide them a more secure structure in the event of another hurricane. That concept was basically a balloon made in the shape of a domed two-story structure. To build the structure, they blew up the balloon and, while it was inflated, they sprayed the inside with foam insulation. After a sufficient number of coats of the foam had dried, they framed out



the inside. The house was still under construction when we went to see it, but it was a good time to inspect it because we could see how things were being done. The picture above shows Hutch breaking into the house to give us a tour and the one on the left shows the framing in process.

Back at the church, where we were all preparing to return to our homes, my 77th birthday came around, and Juanita marked the occasion that evening by fixing a birthday dinner, complete with cake. It was a bit strange with just the four of us celebrating together in that big dining room, but I felt especially honored to have the day remembered by such good friends. As Rich and I were packing up to head home, Hutch was preparing to get back on his bicycle to ride the thirty miles to the New Orleans airport. He had come on his bike from that airport some months earlier and it had been his transportation while he worked in Pearlington. We made a more conventional return trip home in Rich's van.