

November '06

After I came home from Pearlington in January, I was determined to return as soon as circumstances made it possible. Rebuilding had not yet begun and there was going to be a lot of rebuilding to do. However, family obligations—and a health issue requiring major surgery—delayed any such effort for the next ten months. During that time, my friend Rich Smrha had retired from his job as an industrial arts teacher at a suburban school and I had convinced him to join me on the next trip south. In fact, he agreed to drive his van when we went.

Meanwhile, I had remained in contact with Charlie Holmes in Pearlington, who was looking forward to our arrival as he had a number of rebuilding projects underway that he was hoping to plug us into when we arrived. So, we loaded our tools in Rich's van and hit the road during the week of November 5, 2006, hoping to put in two weeks of work and return home by Thanksgiving.

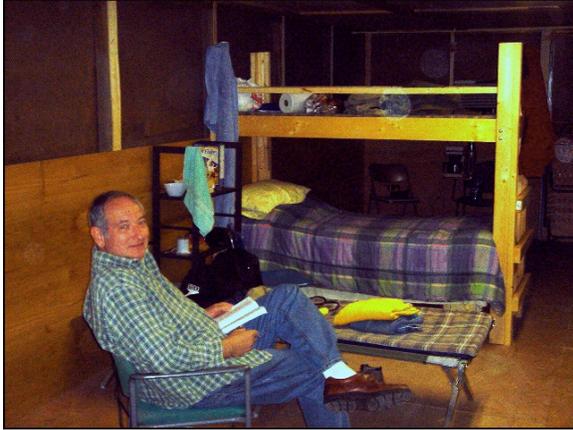
We followed the same route I had driven on my earlier trips and stayed over in the same town in northern Mississippi. On the road the next morning, I made contact with Charlie, who was very anxious to see us as he had a crisis in one of the new houses he had just built and into which the owners had already moved. So, as we drove onto the football field at the school (Pearl Mart), I could spot Charlie walking across the field from his motor home to greet us. Our unpacking would have to wait till we had dealt with his crisis.

Charlie, representing the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, was building homes in Pearlington for a fraction of the cost of a commercially-built structure. Most of the savings in cost came from the fact that most of the labor was volunteer—folks like Rich and me. Regrettably, not all of that labor was equally skilled. In the current case, one of those unskilled volunteers had installed a mixing valve in the shower of a new home and it was leaking in gushes. All the water in the house had to be shut off till the problem was fixed, leaving the family in their new house with no water.

Charlie led us to a house a short distance from Pearl Mart, introduced us to the owner and showed us the problem. The wall behind the mixing valve was soaked, as was the floor—although most of the standing water had been mopped up. Without going into the details, the volunteer had used the wrong sealant when he connected the water pipes to the mixing valve and the connections could not take the water pressure. Our job was to make the connections correctly and get the water turned back on so the family could return to a somewhat normal life—although temporarily without a shower. That would have to wait for Charlie's construction crew to repair the water damage. We had the connections made and the water back on in a short time and returned to the football field to move into our new quarters.

Those quarters were in a bunkhouse that had been built since I was here last. There were three of them along the north side of the field, behind Rich's van. Ours was the center one. We had it all to ourselves while we were there. The showers were in the white building on the right. The kitchen and dining area were behind the showers. The gymnasium (Pearl Mart) can be seen in the background.





The picture on the left shows our quarters, with all the comforts of home including, in the background, Rich's coffee maker that he had programmed to provide him a fresh cup first thing every morning. What I didn't realize when I agreed to live in close quarters with my friend was that he snores at night—forcefully. He had chosen a bunk somewhat distant from mine, but that didn't help a lot, so I decide to wear my hearing aids at night with the batteries removed. That helped some, but sometimes I'd just have to holler at him to turn over.

By the time we arrived in Pearlington on this visit, it had been more than fourteen months since the hurricane and rebuilding had begun in earnest. This was more true for this village than for a lot of the surrounding areas. In the early days after Katrina, news reports had singled out Pearlington as a particularly devastated, but mostly neglected community. This was the primary reason that our church had originally selected the village for our mission focus. Apparently, a lot of other charitable organizations had been similarly motivated by those early reports. Now Pearlington was a beehive of construction activity. Yet, when I took Rich for a tour of the region, we found areas—particularly some more affluent areas—in which no re-construction at all was taking place.

Charlie Holmes had a number of new homes under construction when we arrived and he had singled out for us one of them that was awaiting the installation of the plumbing before the finish work could be done on the interior. However, before I describe that project, I have to tell the story of the doorbell.

On one or both of my earlier trips, I had encountered an older gentleman that lived in a tent on his property along Whites Road—the main street through the northeast quarter of the town. I recalled him mostly because I had been advised by some of his neighbors that he had no car to get to Pearl Mart for picking up food and other necessities. So, on my frequent trips through that part of town I had given him a lift several times over the weeks I was there. Now, he was having a house built for him and, in a conversation with him soon after we arrived, he expressed concern that his new house would have no doorbell. We decided to remedy that and, while we were shopping for supplies across the Pearl River in Slidell, LA, we picked up a wireless doorbell. It was a quick and easy install and the old guy was very pleased when he saw it and heard it do its job. The adjoining photo shows the man and his grandson, along with the crew of volunteers that were doing some finish work on the house. The doorbell button is highlighted in the circle.



The house in which Charlie wanted us to install the plumbing was being built for a single woman, named Vanessa, who was currently living in a FEMA trailer with three granddaughters. It was a three-bedroom home designed with a full bath for the girls and a master bath with

shower for Vanessa. The photo below shows the house before we started working on it. The wellhead with pump and blue expansion tank can be seen in the front yard. Our job was to do all



the rough plumbing, including installation of the tub and shower in the girls' bath and the shower-surround in the master bath—plus all the drain lines and vents for connection to the septic tank.

In this part of the country, PVC pipe, rather than copper, was used for feeding water through the system. The requirements for PVC sewer lines are probably pretty much the same everywhere. So we set about putting in the water and sewer lines. I think it took us about a week. One night during that week, it rained hard—several inches—and it was still raining

when we went to work the next morning. At that time, we were both working under the house, where most of the connections had to be made. That turned out to be a difficult day, because the mosquitoes didn't like the rain any more than we did and, even after dosing ourselves with repellent, they still made their presence most disagreeable.

While we were at work on this house, a group of men from Willow Creek Church in the far western suburbs of Chicago moved into the bunk house next door to us. They had built a house in a warehouse near their church and had transported it to Pearlinton on two flatbed trailers which they had parked next to the First Southern Baptist church, where I had been worshiping since my first visit fourteen months earlier. The photo on the right was taken on 11/16/06 at 8:37 in the morning.



The Willow Creek crew had already installed a foundation (photo below) for the house on the property of the lady for whom the



house was being erected—a lady named Miss Lillian, whom I had met on my first trip to Pearlinton a year earlier. At the time, Lillian was living in the library at the school and she could be seen every day handing out grocery bags to people coming to Pearl Mart for supplies. Her FEMA trailer can be seen in this photo behind the orange excavating machine. Living in one of the other trailers visible in the photo was her daughter, Vanessa (and her three grandchildren), who would be moving into the house in which Rich and I had been doing the plumbing.

In fact, when the Willow Creek crew discovered that we were doing plumbing, they told us they would be needing the rough plumbing done on Miss Lillian's house and asked if we were available to do it. We had finished at Vanessa's, so we volunteered...but first, there had to be a house to work on. The crew took care of that in half a day. The photo above was taken just before noon. The photo on the left below was taken at 3:13 pm that day and the one on the right at 5:40 pm. All the finish plumbing had been done in the house before it was transported to



Pearlington. So all of our work would be carried out in that three-foot high crawl space inside the foundation, where we had to connect water to the house from the pump, route it to various parts of the house and run sewer lines to the septic tank.

The photo on the right shows the crawl space and Rich at work on one of the water lines. You can see that it was not a very convenient place to work and we had to move from place to place on hands and knees or at a duck waddle. In the photo below is Miss Lillian waving from the deck outside her trailer. She could be found sitting on that deck every day as



her new house was taking shape. We were told that she had been living in a mobile home when the hurricane hit and this was going to be her first real house.

By the time we finished the plumbing on this house, we were so sore from duck waddling in that cramped space that we decided to leave for home the next day...and we made it for Thanksgiving dinner.