

Opinion

The heartbreak of watching as 'home' gets washed away

By Keith Heard

MY BILOXI ROOTS

Home is the place you carry in your heart, not necessarily where you reside. For me, despite living more than half my life in this area, "home" has always been the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

What makes that area so special? Pondering this brings me great joy — and relief from current misery — as I recall centuries of rich history and years of adolescent bliss.

My hometown, Biloxi, was founded by French explorers in 1699 and became the first capital of French Louisiana. The town was named after Indians who lived there, giving our high school its nickname and spawning legends still being told when I was a child.

The Gulf of Mexico yielded abundant fish, shrimp and oysters, ensuring a livelihood for generations of Biloxians. When I was growing up in the 1960s, the seafood industry was dominated by Yugoslavian immigrants who arrived before World War I. After Saigon fell in 1975, the Yugoslavian community made way for Vietnamese immigrants, who through diligence and thrift gradually bought their own boats and homes, earning a place in the local pecking order and grudging respect from wary predecessors. Tragically, many of the Vietnamese immigrants lived in a part of town that was nearly wiped out by Hurricane Katrina.

Biloxi prospered as a seafood town and scenic getaway from the hustle, bustle and summer heat of first New Orleans and, later on, St. Louis and Chicago, as trains delivered tourists and seasonal residents to its relaxing shores. West of town, owners of Chicago's Edgewater Hotel built Edgewater Gulf, a resort that even had its own train station. In 1950, the area's appeal was enhanced by cre-

ation of the world's longest man-made beach, a stepping stone to the playful waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

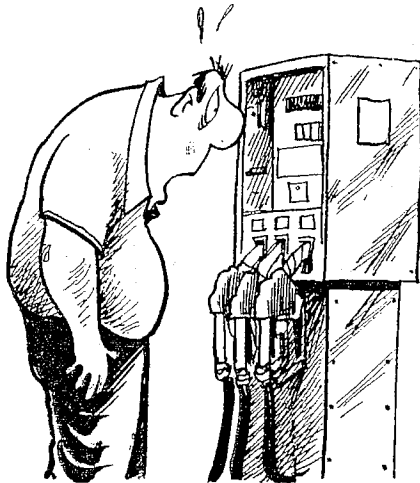
In my youth, tourism, seafood and Keesler Air Force Base formed the heart of the local economy. Catholic priests blessed the fleet every shrimping season; tourists came to fish and play golf; and Keesler, once billed as the world's largest electronic training center, brought in servicemen from around the country. Their well-traveled children were my classmates, opening my eyes to a wider world.

Growing up in Biloxi was idyllic. My friends and I biked all over the flat peninsula, played ball until our shadows merged with the twilight, fished off the piers along Back Bay, drank Barq's root beer (where did you think it came from?) and celebrated birthdays with watermelon rind fights while we ran around in nothing but shorts. Tourists, airmen and shrimp boats came and went, but, to me growing up, there was a sense of permanent bliss about life that seemed as deeply rooted as the majestic oaks that grew right to the water's edge.

Everything changed in 1969, when Hurricane Camille left shrimp boats on the railroad tracks and in people's front yards, uprooted magnificent trees, leveled modern apartment houses and gutted antebellum homes. But the unprecedented damage was not so great that people felt their little slice of heaven was gone forever. One friend concluded we would be all right when he learned the Biloxi lighthouse, built in 1848 and painted black when Lincoln was assassinated, had survived the storm.

When I left for college in New England in 1973, the coast was back on its feet, building ships in Pascagoula, hauling shrimp out of the gulf, test-firing Saturn rockets in Hancock County and reintroducing tourists to beautiful beaches and sparkling gulf waters. I was

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incredibly homesick my first year in college, but then I became increasingly enamored with New York, returning to the city for good to practice maritime law in 1980.

Nevertheless, when it was time to re-charge the batteries, I always went back to Biloxi, back to the house where I grew up, back to family, friends and neighbors, Barq's and a crabmeat and cheese po' boy. No matter how long I stayed away, I always felt at home there. With few tall buildings, the sky seemed to go on forever, and breathtaking sunsets were spread out against the sky like T. S. Eliot's "patient etherized upon a table." Everyone wanted to hear about New York, but I just wanted to walk barefoot on the beach while egrets and herons waded offshore.

I always felt whole in Biloxi, warmed by the sun and the company of family and friends, happy to be sitting under the pecan tree in our backyard, listening to my father analyze the world's problems. Everything seemed to be in the right place.

That feeling diminished when my mother died last year, but I still had a deep-rooted sense of place, a feeling that I would carry a bit of Biloxi in me for the rest of my life. Now I cling to the memories as I watch images of mind-numbing devastation and listen to the cries of local residents. The remaining oaks have been shredded and defoliated; four-lane bridges that survived Camille have been

destroyed; landmarks such as Beauvoir, Jefferson Davis' last home, are nothing but hollow shells. Islands and entire towns have simply been swept away.

The severity and extent of the destruction has already prompted some residents to look for new areas to get on with their lives; that is understandable. However, my concern lies with coastal residents who are too poor to relocate or too rooted to the area to ever want to leave. Some already talk of rebuilding, and I am encouraged by their fortitude. I feel a compelling need to help those who plan to stay. Fortunately, as chairman of the outreach committee at Second Congregational Church, I am positioned to coordinate some meaningful assistance, in addition to reaching into my own wallet.

Others need to make a similar commitment. The Gulf Coast gave many people a remarkable way of life when we were young. The Biloxi lighthouse is still there, and her beacon lights the way back home. Now is the time for transplanted sons and daughters of the coast to return with sleeves rolled up.

No, I don't intend to move back. My family and career are here. But I will do my part, even from afar, to help the residents of the Mississippi Gulf Coast rebuild their lives.

Keith Heard lives in Greenwich, practices maritime law in New York City and may be reached at kheard@optonline.net.