

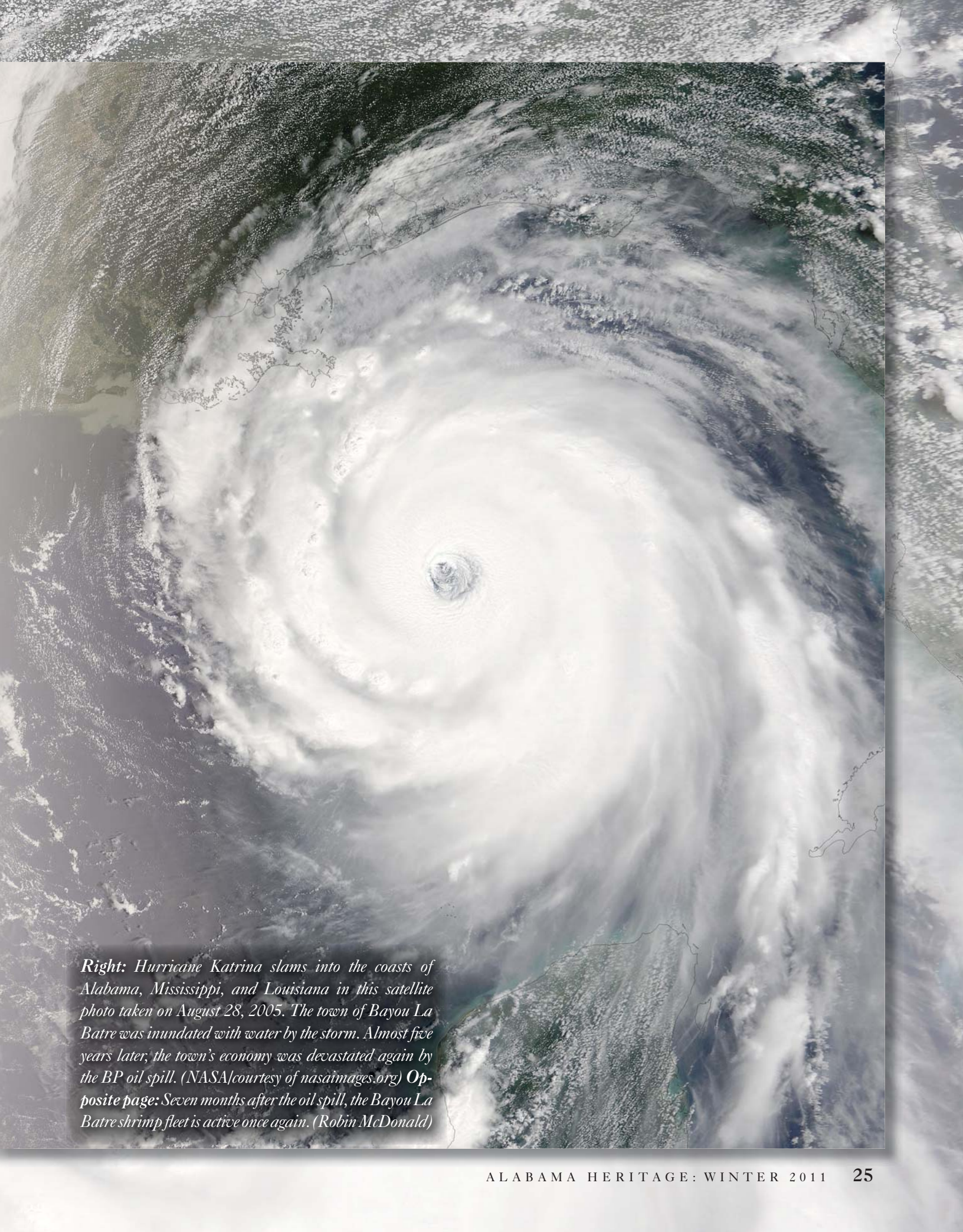
RESILIENCE AND STRENGTH IN  
BAYOU LA BATRE

# SURVIVING THE STORMS

*Life on Alabama's Gulf Coast blends beauty and bounty with devastation and tragedy. For centuries, the people of Bayou La Batre have risen to the challenge.*

By FRYE GAILLARD





*Right: Hurricane Katrina slams into the coasts of Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana in this satellite photo taken on August 28, 2005. The town of Bayou La Batre was inundated with water by the storm. Almost five years later, the town's economy was devastated again by the BP oil spill. (NASA/courtesy of nasaimages.org) **Opposite page:** Seven months after the oil spill, the Bayou La Batre shrimp fleet is active once again. (Robin McDonald)*

*Alma Bryant, a girl of thirteen in 1906, remembered being separated from her family as the tidal surge tore her house from its moorings.*

**A**BOUT ONCE A CENTURY in Bayou La Batre the catastrophic storms come roaring from the Gulf. Ninety-nine years before Hurricane Katrina there was the cyclone of 1906, a mighty wind that lasted for more than twenty-four hours, long before these events had names. The memories of it are present even now in the oral history of the bayou—in the family stories handed down for generations in this fishing village on the Alabama coast.

Alma Bryant, a girl of thirteen in 1906, and later her community's leading educator, remembered being separated from her family as the tidal surge tore her house from its moorings. "Rain, the coldest and heaviest I have ever felt, pounded me relentlessly," she would write. "Then the vicious wind picked me up and immersed me in one of those craters made by an uprooted tree. I clutched the limb...and held on for dear life, barely conscious of the weird noises all around me—the shrieks of frightened birds, the woeful cry of a drowning calf, the dying moans of Mr. Deakle's old white mare."

Bryant, in the end, was one of the lucky ones. She managed to swim through the floating debris—"the limp, dead chickens, bloated hogs, writhing snakes"—toward the flickering light of a house in the distance. At least 135 others did not survive, and the *Mobile Register*, the morning newspaper in the nearest city, carefully recorded the

details: two Bayou women lining up the bodies, covering them with shrouds; a frightened family emerging from the woods, where they had drifted all night in an open skiff; a writer's description of those who survived: "Most...resembled great chunks of liver-colored beef, so badly were they battered and bruised."

All of this is now part of the lore of Bayou La Batre, a place where residents freely acknowledge that life on the edge of the continent is hard. The battering of storms began early on, soon after the community's founding in 1789, and has continued—along with other, man-made disasters—into the first decade of the twenty-first century. But despite the weather, the looming changes in a global economy, and most recently, the British Petroleum (BP) oil spill, the people of Bayou La Batre have continued to survive, extracting their modest living from the sea.

**W**E LOVE IT LIKE A FARMER loves digging in the dirt," says long-time oysterman Avery Bates. "You sweat hard and see the bounty of the sea, and you're part of a heritage going back for generations. You're feeding your family and the people around you. You know you're a part of something worthwhile."

As Bates understands it, his has been a place where people have flourished for eight thousand years. According to the archaeological record, the earliest Native Americans arrived there around 6,000 BCE.



*Left: Images of damage to Bayou La Batre from the 1906 hurricane are scarce. This photo, taken in nearby Mobile, shows the extent of the devastation to the area after the storm hit. (University of South Alabama Archives) Opposite page: Pierre Le Moynes, Sieur d'Iberville, claimed the land that includes Bayou La Batre for France in the early 1700s. The area retains a French flavor to this day. (Alabama Department of Archives and History)*

They found abundant game in the forests—deer and bear, wild turkey and hogs—but their staples always came from the water. Like the Europeans who followed (and later the African Americans and Asians), the Indians shrimped, fished, and gathered oysters and clams. Down through the years, many scholars have marveled at the continuity of life on the bayou. Anthropologist Diane Silvia, writing in the *Gulf Coast Historical Quarterly*, argued that the coastal Indians were fundamentally different from their neighbors further north. There, the intricately organized tribes—the Choctaws, Chickasaws, and Creeks—built their lives around farming, and by the time the Europeans arrived, they were living in larger communities and towns with all the interdependence that required.

But down on the coast, the Native Americans grew accustomed to the self-sufficiency of the sea—the venerated notion that a man and his family could make it on their own. Sometimes it was hard, especially when the storms blew in from the Gulf, but for anybody who was willing to work, there was a reliable living to be made from the water. In the view of many scholars, that was the story of the archaeological record, and the story of the written history that followed.

**T**HE AREA'S RECORDED HISTORY began in the early 1700s when the French explorer Pierre Le Moyne, Sieur d'Iberville began a series of expeditions to the area, laying claim to the land for King Louis XIV. One of the men in those expeditions, Jean Baptiste Baudreau dit Graveline, fathered a son with an Indian woman he called Susanne. The mixed-blood son, whose name was Jean Baptiste Baudreau, began a life of adventure along the Alabama coast that eventually led to his execution. Among other things, the married Baudreau seduced a teenaged girl whose family was living in what is now Coden, nestled on the eastern shore of the bayou. Books have been written about that affair, shrouding history with legend.

But there is no doubt that Baudreau was regarded by the French as an outlaw, and in the summer of 1757, he was tried and executed on the wheel. It was, apparently, the only time this grisly and medieval instrument of torture was ever to be used on American soil. The official



report to the King of France described the execution this way: “On the 7th of last June, the man named Baudreau and the man named Joseph Francois Bazille... were sentenced to have their bodies broken, alive; to die upon the wheel; and to have their bodies cut into 4 pieces and thrown on the garbage dump, all of which had been carried out, in front of the troops, three hours after the sentence was handed down.”

Baudreau left several children behind—one of whom, Louise Catherine, married Joseph Bosarge, who would soon become the patriarch of the largest, most prominent family in the area. Bosarge secured a land grant in 1789 and built a home on the western shore of the Bayou La Batre. Named for a gun emplacement near its mouth, the bayou was one of several estuaries winding through marsh grass savannah before reaching the grey-blue waters of the Gulf. For more than half a century, the community that Joseph Bosarge founded was not much more than a frontier village. Its hardy band of low-country settlers fished, farmed, and hunted game in the woods, often battling the wolves that threatened their cattle.

Not surprisingly, colorful legends still abound from those days, and, during the nineteenth century, stories of scandalous outlaw settlers changed to tales of confrontations with violent pirates. In the 1950s a Mobile author named Julian Rayford set about the task of recording the area's legends. In his book *Whistlin' Woman and Crowin' Hen* Rayford recounted a visit with Uncle Bud Rabby, whose family was one of the first in Coden, just a few miles east of the Bosarge land. Uncle Bud himself came of age near the end of the nineteenth century, and he said his father-in-law had once killed a pirate.

“Killed a pirate?” said Rayford.

“He killed him dead,” declared Uncle Bud. “Sure did! Killed him in a fist fight.”

Uncle Bud went on to explain that back in 1837, give or take a couple of years, the pirate Spud Thompson had come ashore in Coden, spoiling for a fight. He found some local men at a dance, and beat up several before he met Mulford Dorlon. Dorlon was not a man to be trifled with, and he ended the fighting spree with one punch.

“Hit him under the jaw and broke his neck,” reported Uncle Bud, who would eventually become Dorlon's son-in-law.

*One by one, the elegant hotels—the Rolston, the Oleander—began to close, unable to withstand the devastations of the weather.*

**B**Y THE END of the nineteenth century, all of that was simply part of the lore. The frontier had faded, the pirates were gone, and Bayou La Batre had developed a multi-layered identity. It was, first of all, a fishing village where shellfish flourished in the labyrinth of bayous, as well as the waters of Mississippi Sound, that shallow and bountiful part of the Gulf that lay just north of Dauphin Island. The oystermen in their small wooden boats pulled their catch from the bottom with hand-held tongs, shucking the oysters in family-run businesses on the shores of the bayou. Children often worked side by side with their parents. Shrimpers and fishermen cast their nets in the sound, and seafood production defined the life of the town.

But Bayou La Batre and next-door Coden had also entered their glory years of posh hotels, tree-shaded streets, and tourists pouring in from all over the country. The Bay Shore Railroad, jutting south from Mobile, cut through the heart of the lush coastal forests, and made it an easy trip for the visitors.

Then came the fateful storm of 1906.



*Above: In this early twentieth century photo, two boys identified as Alfred and Willie fish for oysters in Mobile Bay with the characteristic hand-held tongs. (Library of Congress) Below: Before the 1906 hurricane struck Bayou La Batre, the coastal town appeared serene and open for business. The storm, however, devastated the area, and residents spent years trying to recover. (Phillip G. Austin Collection, University of South Alabama Archives)*



It began on a Wednesday afternoon, September 26, the winds first blowing in from the north. That was a good sign. Whatever their force, the powerful gusts were working against the waves, that wall of water surging up from the south. But then the wind shifted, and the water rushed ashore, flooding the homes and hotels of the bayou. In subsequent years, as more storms followed, the community seemed to turn in on itself. One by one, the elegant hotels—the Rolston, the Oleander—began to close, unable to withstand the devastations of the weather and the inevitable evolution of the coastal economy. But the people survived, their subsistence, now more than ever, tied to the sea.

The locals often joked that on their part of the Alabama coast, a year was not divided into winter, spring, summer, and fall. “Around here,” said one old-timer, “it’s shrimp, oysters, crabs, or fish, depending on what we’re catching at the time.”

In one form or another, the seafood was always abundant, even during the Great Depression of the 1930s, and it was then that a new wave of immigrants arrived. Instead of traveling from foreign lands, they came from the farming country of Alabama and Mississippi, and many of the new arrivals were African Americans. Nancy McCall, a long-time community activist and descendant of one such arrival to the area, says her family came in search of something better.

Her forebears had been sharecroppers in south Mississippi, and according to stories handed down in the family, the plantation owners in that part of the state kept a close and heavy-handed watch on the workers, restricting their movements and their ability to assemble or gather with their neighbors. “They lived in a pretty bad place,” she says. McCall’s great-uncle, Crate West, hated that way of life, regarding it as not much better than slavery, and late one night he gathered his family and took them to a place where the freight train slowed on its way to Mobile. They had packed salt meat, biscuits,



*Above: Children often worked shucking oysters or fishing, helping to support their families during hard times. In this Lewis Hine photo, a girl identified as “Little Nettie” works at the Alabama Canning Company in Bayou La Batre. (Library of Congress) Left: In the early twentieth century, people were drawn to Bayou La Batre for the nice accommodations (like the Rolston Hotel, seen here) and the recreational activities. In this 1916 photo, W. G. Oliver of Birmingham stands next to the tarpon he caught while fishing near Coden. (Erik Overbey Collection, University of South Alabama Archives)*

and a half-gallon of molasses, all of it carefully wrapped in a quilt. Just before midnight, with the moon overhead, they jumped on board the slow-moving freight.

“Around daylight they were getting hungry,” says McCall, recounting the story. “They unwrapped the food and discovered the top had popped off the molasses. They sopped biscuits and salt meat right off that quilt.”

West and his family disembarked from the train in Mobile and made their way south to Coden. What they found when they arrived was a deeply segregated community, for Bayou La Batre, the adjacent village, was a “sunset” town, a place where blacks were not welcome after dark. But West and the others found plenty of work, and by the 1950s the walls of segregation were beginning to fall. On Midway Street, a pitted dirt road where the

*“Right here,” says Truat Nguyen, who came from Vietnam, “I have freedom. I have human rights.... We are here for the children to have a better life.”*

family lived, many of their closest neighbors were white. As Nancy McCall remembered it later, there developed a kind of live-and-let-live acceptance that was stronger in the end than the legacy of prejudice.

But it was a spirit that was tested periodically over time, especially in the 1970s when yet another wave of immigrants arrived. They came this time from Southeast Asia, the desperate survivors of genocide and war. Some were Cambodian, others Laotian or Vietnamese, and they found themselves on the losing side when American forces pulled out of the region. In a five-year period beginning in 1975, more than seven hundred Asians came to the bayou, and by the early 1980s they made up a third of the local population.

Koan Ang, now a teacher's aide in the Mobile County Public Schools, was one of those early refugees. In 1975

*Vietnamese shrimper Vai Nguyen poses on his boat at the Bayou La Batre dock in 2010. Asian immigrants reinvigorated the seafood industry on the Gulf of Mexico. (Robin McDonald)*



she had been a young mother in Cambodia when communist forces took control of the country. “It was a true killing field,” she says. “I lost forty-two people in my family—forty-two killed in one night. My sister, brother, nephew, all killed in one night. I was in the hospital. I could not control myself. I had lost too much for one time, and it broke my nerves.”

But Ang eventually found peace on the bayou. She raised two children, a daughter who is now a medical doctor, and a son who is a mechanical engineer. Like the other refugees, she endured some prejudice when she first arrived—the language barriers, the flashes of suspicion against the Buddhist faith that many of the immigrants had brought from Asia. But it did not take long before she and many others could also feel a mutual respect, a shared work ethic between themselves and the families who had lived on the bayou for years.

Rodney Lyons, a fifth-generation shrimper, maintains that the Asians breathed new life into the local economy. “It made Bayou La Batre even more of a seafood production town,” he says. “The Asian workers would pick one hundred to one hundred-twenty pounds of crabmeat a day. They doubled the production of American pickers. It made the crab business grow. If they were shucking oysters, they sometimes worked twelve hours a day, and changed the whole complexion of oyster production. They shrimped also. They bought up old boats and worked hard and upgraded their boats. They were heavy producers, and people had to respect that.”

For their part, many of the Asians say they found what they were looking for as well. “Right here,” says Truat Nguyen, who came from Vietnam, “I have freedom. I have human rights.... We are here for the children to have a better life.”

**A**S THE TWENTIETH CENTURY drew to a close, Bayou La Batre was a village of 2,300 people—whites, blacks, and Asians—living together in relative harmony and peace. In 1994 they endured a curious splash of fame when the movie *Forrest Gump*, based on the novel by Alabamian Winston Groom, made a fleeting mention of the bayou. A few tourists came to the village after that, eager to see what

it looked like, and there were occasional artists and photographers also, drawn to the live oak trees and the water.

For the most part, however, life simply moved at a slow and steady pace as shrimpers and oystermen plied their trade, seafood shops processed the catch, and a ship-building industry grew up around them. It was not easy work, but it was mostly predictable and deeply rooted in the history of the place. But there were also storm clouds on the horizon—some of which were the literal kind. In 1998 there was Hurricane Georges, followed by Ivan in 2004, and then in the summer of 2005, the devastating surge of Hurricane Katrina. On August 29, the storm came ashore, pushing fifteen feet of water through the heart of the town. More than two thousand of Bayou La Batre's 2,300 residents were forced from their homes, some of them narrowly escaping death.

And though there were no fatalities in the village this time, the people faced problems beyond their control as they began to rebuild. Some of their conflicts simply had to do with the devastation itself, the twisted wreckage that had once been their homes. But there were insurance companies that were slow to pay, and the tensions of living in cramped FEMA trailers. Even when people finally got back to work, the coastal economy seemed to be against them. Perhaps most urgently, higher fuel prices and competition from imported shrimp, now cheaper than those caught closer to home, were squeezing the profit margin for the shrimpers. "It's been just devastating," said Dr. Bob Shipp, chair of marine sciences at the University of South Alabama. Crab and oyster production remained more promising, but in Bayou La Batre shrimping had always been the largest industry.

And then came the BP oil spill.

On April 20, 2010, the oil giant's Deepwater Horizon well exploded in the Gulf some forty miles off the coast of Louisiana. Eleven workers died, and a gusher of oil—some 200 million gallons before it was stopped—spewed into the waters at a depth of more than five thousand feet. As the oil slick spread to the beaches and fragile marshlands from Louisiana to Florida, BP sprayed thousands of gallons of Corexit, a chemical dispersant that causes oil to sink.

As spring gave way to a long, hot summer, a cloud of uncertainty hovered over the Gulf, especially in communities such as Bayou La Batre, where most people made their living from the water. "It's like a monster that's out there," said Bayou Mayor Stan Wright. By the beginning of September, early testing indicated that



*Shrimper Samuel Lyon, right, rinses his catch on the Bayou La Batre dock seven months after the oil spill. (Robin McDonald)*

Gulf seafood was once again safe, but nobody was sure about the long-term effects. Would contaminants, either in the form of sunken oil or dispersants, enter the Gulf food chain? Would problems of toxicity occur down the line? And even if the food in the long run was safe, could the seafood producers in Bayou La Batre win back the confidence of their buyers elsewhere?

Those were the questions nobody could answer, and with the oil spill coming so close to Katrina, many people along the coast began to talk about a threatened way of life. But in Bayou La Batre, the residents turned to their history for strength—a legacy of overcoming hard times going back to the earliest days of the village. They said they understood the uncertainty of the times. But the hope remained that the bayou culture—that battered self-reliance with its ties to the water—might be stubborn enough to survive.

---

*This article was adapted from the book *In the Path of Storms: Bayou La Batre, Coden, and the Alabama Gulf Coast* (2008, University of Alabama Press), which Frye Gaillard co-edited with Sheila Hagler and Peggy Denniston for Pebble Hill Books at the Caroline Marshall Draughon Center for the Arts & Humanities at Auburn University. The work grew out of a partnership with the AU College of Education's Truman Pierce Institute and was funded by the Kettering Foundation.* **AH**