

# On Bayou Sauvage: the Life and Death of Jeanfreaux's Fishermen's Rest

I write this to pay homage to my past and, further, to put my childhood to rest once and for all. by Louis Bourgeois

About six weeks after Katrina, my sister Claire came back to Twin Belle Farm here in North Mississippi, where she and other relatives stayed through the storm and for weeks after until it was safe to go back home again. She gave us an up-date on that state of things in my hometown of Slidell, Louisiana, where I spent my first twenty-seven years of life. Claire brought with her a half dozen or so color digital pictures, none of which were of Slidell, but showed our paternal grandmother's home and place of business, Jeanfreaux's Fishermen's Rest, a marina located off highway 90 in New Orleans East on Bayou Sauvage. Jeanfreaux's was a functioning business for well over sixty years.

In the pictures, there is hardly anything left at all, just a few stubby green wooden pilings that were used to keep the house off the muddy shell-impacted ground; there were also a few hermetic concrete posts that kept either end of the front porch up. The only structure left standing at all was a thin white metal frame that use to be part of the tin lean-to at the back of the house where my grandmother would sell fresh shrimp by the pound out of white and blue ice chests heavy with ice. The shrimp could either be eaten or used for fishing bait. Most of it was used for bait.

Although I knew the place had been swept away during the hurricane, a week earlier a cousin of mine called and said over the phone that it was "completely eradicated," I was still thoroughly stunned by my sister's pictures; a family business of almost three generations, a unique way of life in a small fishing village on the outskirts of New Orleans was now physically erased forever. My grandmother sold Jeanfreaux's Fishermen's Rest in early 2002 to the shipping yard next door for parking space. This ended a sixty year old tradition of renting skiffs, pirogues, life jackets, oars and anchors; catching and selling live crabs right off the back steps, of fig trees and rozo cane blowing in the wind, and clouds of ducks crossing the bayou into the magnificent Chico Lagoon, the largest lagoon on our end of Bayou Sauvage. I remember once when I was fourteen, how excited I got because, while reading *Field and Stream* the night before a big duck hunt outing with my father and two uncles, the columnist in the article mentioned Chico Lagoon as one of the top spots in America for Scaup hunting (a Scaup is a kind of sea duck). I was shocked that a national magazine would take notice of our little neck of the woods at all.

One luminary figure that stands out from all the wreckage in my sister's color prints is The Sentinel, a tall cypress tree across the bayou from the Fishermen's Rest that's been dead at least half a century. Although most of the houses and businesses were irremediably destroyed by Katrina, The Sentinel remains as it always has been, noble and invulnerable to change—only a chain saw, axe, nuclear war, or the complete erosion of the marsh will take down The Sentinel. When I was very young, I remember an old black fisherman who always rented the same red fiberglass skiff. In fact, he would not use any other skiff if that one was

already rented for the day; he would forgo a whole day of fishing if he couldn't rent this particular skiff. This obsession was particularly engrossing for me because the skiff happened to be named after me, *The Edmond*. I remember him talking to another fisherman one day, an old Jewish shoe salesman, who was locally famous for his long thick bamboo cane poles which at their base were as big around as the big end of a Louisville Slugger and up to twenty feet in length. Although he had a whole set of these poles which he kept in the rafters of one of the boat sheds, he would call his pole Bertha. One fisherman to another, he said to the shoe salesman, "When I die I want to die standing up forever, like that tree across the way."

Bayou Sauvage (from the French meaning "Wild Bayou") was for centuries inhabited by peaceful basket weaving Native Americans whose burial mounds and dumping grounds have been researched thoroughly by Louisiana State University some 90 miles north in Baton Rouge. The last remnants of the indigenous population of this area was driven out or starved to death toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by mostly white settlers from New Orleans who couldn't take city life anymore. Many of them saw an opportunity to make a living off the land or entrepreneurial opportunity, such as ferry services for the un-bridged passes at Chef Menteur and The Rigolets, or trade stores to serve the new L & N railroad. The settlers of Bayou Sauvage and Lake St. Catherine were by temperament a rebellious breed; they did not like to be told what to do, they did not like government regulations and thoroughly hated the city landscape of New Orleans, they loved the marshland that encircled the city beyond the levees.

The Fishermen's Rest as I knew it opened in 1939 when my paternal great grandfather, Louis Jeanfreaux, attempted to settle down and lead as normal a life as possible for a man of his time and place. Jeanfreaux had been the leader of a large rum-running operation in New Orleans during Prohibition and right before the 21<sup>st</sup> Amendment was repealed, the Federal Government caught up with him and he was convicted for tax evasion. He and his wife, Dee Dee, were both sent to federal prison for exactly a year and a day. When he got out of prison, he swore to lead a legitimate life. Before Prohibition, Louis Jeanfreaux was an avid trapper and fisherman, living off the land of St. Bernard Parish. He wanted Jeanfreaux's Fishermen's Rest to serve as an outlet for his love of the outdoors, South Louisiana style. He wanted Jeanfreaux's Fishermen's Rest to be a continuation of his life as a professional hunter, fishermen, trapper, and boat maker, the kind of life he led before he got involved with the grand adventures of his rum-running operation during Prohibition.

Jeanfreaux died a slow death in 1962 from emphysema. Perhaps he was surprised to have died with his boots off in bed, but at least it was *his* bed and not a hospital bed. His wife Dee Dee took over the marina after he died and gained local celebrity status for having the un-canny ability to catch Sheep's Head (a kind of salt water drum fish) at the end of the boat shed wharf anytime of the day or night. She used a hand line or a crude cane pole, it would never occur to her to use a rod and reel like everyone else in those days. She would just throw a line overboard and within a few minutes she would have a tug of war match with some mag-

nificent Sheep's Head. It was always a Sheep's head! Once, she did catch a flounder and was genuinely flabbergasted. She also became known for her fried chicken which she sold by the bucketful off the front porch of the Fishermen's Rest.

When Dee Dee died, my grandmother, Claire Jeanfreaux, took over the Fishermen's Rest. Of course, Jeanfreaux was her maiden name, her last name was actually Bourgeois, but everyone along the bayou addressed her by her maiden name and she was known as Miz Jeanfreaux. Even I have a hard time thinking of her as a Bourgeois. The Bourgeois of my family have historically been either peaceful farmers or science and math teachers, whereas the Jeanfreauxs never went to school past the 6<sup>th</sup> grade and were poachers or outlaws of one kind or another. They were more exciting than the quiet and fairly intelligent Bourgeois. The Huckleberry Finn side of me always gravitated toward the Jeanfreauxs whereas the bookish Tom Sawyer side of me gravitated toward the Bourgeois.

My grandmother took over Jeanfreaux's when I was three. I was the oldest and for some time the only grandson, I was a constant presence on Bayou Sauvage. In this environment, I developed my first memories which years later I translated into poems and lyrical prose works. For example, in one prose poem sequence predictably entitled "Memories of Water," I recalled from my distant past large seabirds perching at the top of The Sentinel, as my father scraped barnacles from the bottom of a red skiff; the skiff is named after my father, *The Louis*. It is incredibly early in the morning; it is a dark humid morning in early August 1974.

In the same prose poem sequence, I recall that a few months earlier on a windy morning, I woke up and my breakfast was not laid out for me on the old glorious yellow Formica topped table as it always was. I walked out the back door and onto the warped and weather worn boat shed wharf, shirtless with long brown hair well past my shoulders. I walked to the end of the wharf and caught sight of my grandmother standing up in the middle of one of her small green wooden skiffs as it jostled in the water next to a massive ship called *Alcedin*. It had just been let off the ramparts of the shipyard next door, Halter Marine, and in keeping with maritime tradition, they called the only woman nearby, my grandmother, from next door to christen the ship before it made it's first voyage on the ocean. My grandmother let down her extremely long white hair and it flowed in the hard wind against the black hull of this ship. It was the first and only time I ever saw her hair when it was not in a tight knot at the nape of her neck. The local priest, Father Red, who incidentally was the only resident of this area to perish during Katrina, finished his prayer and everyone made the sign of the cross at the same time, then they all looked toward my grandmother and she raised the bottle of champagne high above her head and smashed it against the ship. Thirty years later the image of that ship still seems un-real to me as it floated against the puny skiffs and yachts that were tied to my grandmother's wharf.

There was a single fig tree in the yard which consisted of a little less than an acre of land (fairly large for waterfront property) and it was a thriving and verdant tree during summer. It was always inhabited by large black birds, fish crows, bob-tailed grackles, and the like. After my grandmoth-

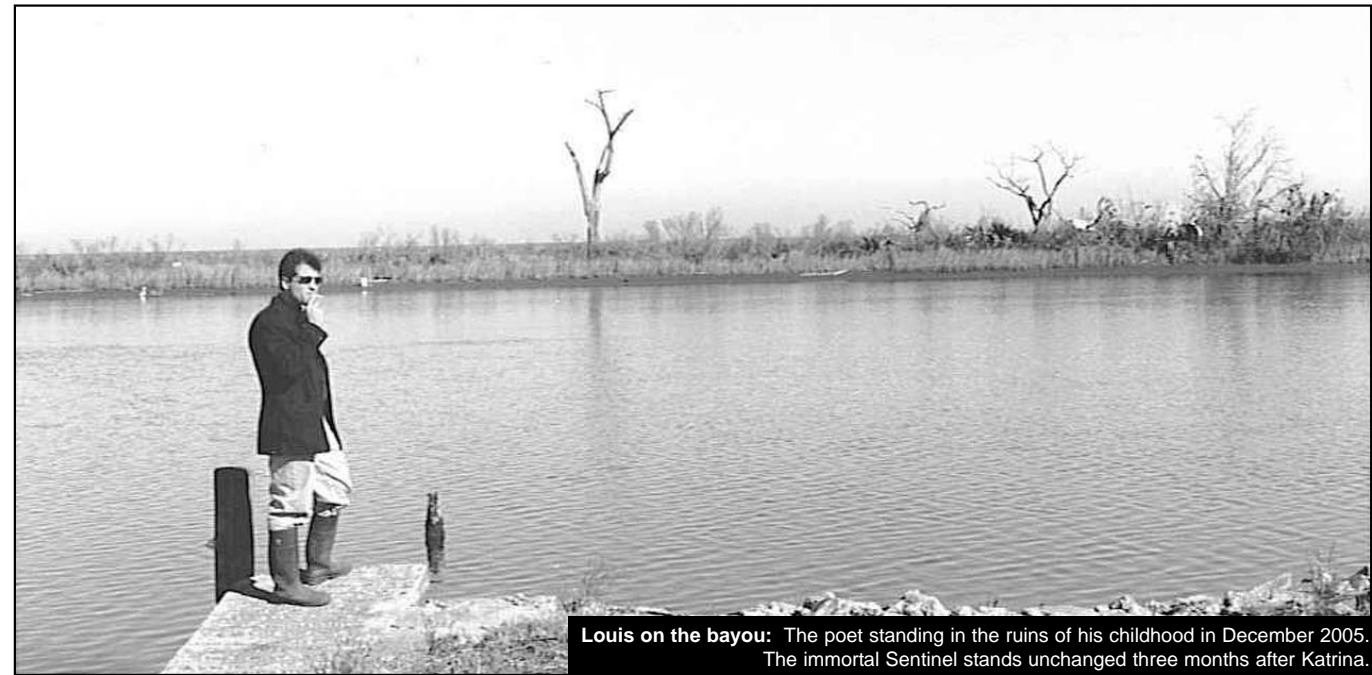
er was finished cleaning out all the skiffs that went out that day, she'd go to the kitchen and come back out with plastic bags full of leftover bread, rice, and grits. She would put the bags down by her feet and clap her hands hard above her head until all the birds within earshot would fly from every direction and land in the soft Bermuda grass that grew in patches in the yard. I once saw a black grosbeck (American Cormorant) walk right up to her like a swarthy child demanding a treat.

Skiffs were rented without motors for as little as \$5.00 a day. The larger fiberglass skiffs were \$7.00 a day until the mid 1980s when the price went up to \$10.00. The oars, life jackets, and anchors were rented separately. You could launch your boat for \$2.00 or rent a pirogue for \$3.00. During the spring, which was the height of the fishing season, my grandmother would take in as much as \$1000.00 in a weekend even with the modest prices she charged. In the house was a little store next to the kitchen where she sold canned goods, fishing tackle, crackers, and other items needed just for fishing. The place was always overrun with people from every rung of the social-economic ladder. It was the kind of place where rich and poor, black and white, intermingled freely without any social or racial hang-ups, because the one and only concern was fishing. On more than one occasion I saw CEOs fishing along side the janitors who worked for them back in downtown New Orleans.

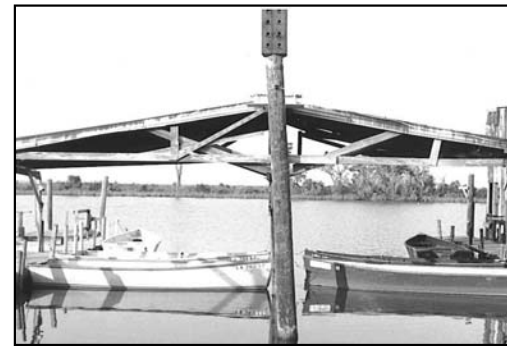
I was a normal beautiful, healthy child born to young working class parents. A lot of middle class children might have had a lot more things than me, but they didn't have the Fishermen's Rest, which I considered more valuable than anything my richer friends owned and I wouldn't have traded it or my life for anything. To me the Fishermen's Rest was the best place on earth. I had no literary pretensions at this age, even though I wrote countless free verse poems and even more song lyrics; I had no idea that I was writing literature at all. For me, poetry was whatever The Beatles sang, who I listened to *ad nauseam*. At this age, it's safe to say, that The Beatles and the marshes of Bayou Sauvage were my initial poetic education. Even to this day, my writing is still one way or another influenced by these two sources.

After Katrina, I didn't have the nerve to go back home until X-mas time, three months after the storm. The I-10 Bridge was out of course so we took the old Five Mile Bridge across the lake from Slidell to New Orleans East. The ride along Highway 11 on the New Orleans side was as expected; nearly everything was gone except the White Castle that some rich eccentric had built in the mid-1980s. You would have thought he was building the Arc in the middle of New Mexico the way people carried on about building such a thing in the marsh, but it was still very intact and I was glad it survived—at least a fragment of my childhood had survived the heavy winds and the thirty foot sea surge.

On Highway 90, all along the levee were miles of house debris—yachts and shrimping boats were washed up on the shoulder of the highway, even three months after the storm. Arriving where the Fishermen's Rest use to be, I was not very surprised of course, my sister's pictures were quite accurate. Standing on the shore of my childhood with The Sentinel still behind me, there really wasn't anything left to be sad about at all.



**Louis on the bayou:** The poet standing in the ruins of his childhood in December 2005. The immortal Sentinel stands unchanged three months after Katrina.



**Left:** Main boathouse of Jeanfreaux's in May 2001.



**Right:** Main boathouse of Jeanfreaux's after Katrina.

All photographs taken by Rebecca Bourgeois



**Jeanfreaux's Fishermen's Rest** before being sold in 2002.



**Left:** House on Irish Bayou obliterated by Katrina

**Right:** Shrimp boat on Chef Highway three months after Katrina.

**Below:** Castle built in mid 1980s on Irish Bayou.

