

JUBILANT SHRIMPERS RETURN TO SEA AFTER CAMILLE TRAGEDY

James T. Wooten

An ancient mariners' ritual, honored by time and deepened by calamity, was repeated here today as a long line of shrimp boats chugged past a Roman Catholic priest for the blessings of the church.

"Stretch forth to them thy right hand, O Lord," he intoned while dozens of colorfully decorated vessels plowed out into the Gulf of Mexico to begin again a vocation crippled since last August when a hurricane nearly obliterated this once prosperous coastline.

Camille, the storm that took 144 lives and destroyed nearly a billion dollars worth of property, left behind a legacy of death and destruction that, after 10 months, still haunts those who survived its wrath.

It played no favorites. Plush resort inns where affluent whites came to play were flattened along with the squalid shacks where Negroes lived on welfare--and the shrimpers, predominantly of Slavic and French-Canadian origins, were almost destroyed by the 200-mile-an-hour winds that struck here Aug. 17.

A New Day

Their boats were damaged, and factories that processed and distributed the shrimp were destroyed. But today, beneath a searing sun and a nearly cloudless sky, the men whose livelihoods have long been dependent on the abundance and popularity of the small pink crustaceans proudly steered their new or repaired boats out to sea with a bright promise of a new day.

"Come forth your servants with a calm voyage and a safe harbor," the Rev. Morgan Kavanaugh prayed as the shrimpers and their awkward ships moved past his makeshift chancel on the stern of a boat called 'The Elmer Williams'.

In white vestments, and assisted by another priest and several altar boys, he sprinkled holy water on the churning waters of the gulf and prayed that the masters and all hands aboard the high-masted ships would be recalled "again to the happiness of country and home."

A native of Ireland, Father Kavanaugh offered his blessing in a brogue reminiscent of Barry Fitzgerald's and Pat O'Brien's cinematic roles as clerics. And the fishing community of Biloxi, a historic port city 90 miles west of New Orleans, responded with the abandoned merriment of a Mardi Gras celebration.

Dancing and Beer

Their jubilation, expressed by dancing in the streets to the music of a Dixieland band and the consumption of gallons of beer on board the ships and on the white sand beaches, marked an end to 293 days of frustration and despair borne of the storm's havoc.

In Biloxi alone, a predominantly Catholic city of 50,000 population, 16 persons were killed, stately old mansions were leveled, prosperous businessmen wiped out, nationally famous restaurants razed, lush green golf courses scarred, and the factories that gave economic meaning to the lives of the shrimpers destroyed.

In one evening of terror, a city whose reputation was based on the carefree élan of tourists and vacationers was brought to its knees by the fury of nature.

Eventoday, the hurricane's power is still evident up and down the 200-mile coast from Pass Christian, the hardest hit of the Mississippi Coast communities, to Mobile, where fringes of the storm battered that city and its people.

Mr. Wooten is a reporter for The New York Times. His report from Biloxi, Miss., appeared on June 8.

In Pass Christian, skeletons of homes and motels stand along the beachfront highway. There are lonely mailboxes, perched on bent standards, empty and without accompanying houses.

Bricks and Steel and Boats

Piles of bricks and twisted steel dot the beach along with pleasure boats washed ashore by the winds and the floods. At nearby Gulfport, in the confines of the Mississippi state docks, a huge tanker still rests heavily on the land as wrecking crews with torches and cranes take her apart piece by piece for salvage.

Near Biloxi, two stone mastiffs stand guard against intruders over a slab of concrete that once was the foundation for an expensive house, and the giant, ageless oak trees that once formed a leafy tunnel for cars traveling along the beach are bent and twisted and bare.

There are hulks of cars and trucks rusting in the salt breezes from the Gulf--and there is, among some of those whose lives were disrupted by the winds, a certain bitterness toward the government agency that moved in to alleviate the suffering.

The State of Mississippi, for instance, only last month gave its final approval to a \$10.5-million appropriation for coastal areas hit by the storm. Until then, only \$500,000 had actually reached the disaster area.

The Federal Government, working through the Army Corps of Engineers, the Small Business Administration and other agencies, has, in the opinion of many residents, failed to keep

the President's commitment to restore this area.

Red Tape Delays

At every level of the bureaucracy, there are red tape delays, structural impediments and official interference with the progress of renewal, local residents believe.

But all that was behind Biloxi today.

The ships' flags applauded in the breeze, their horns blasted with deafening enthusiasm, and the ruddy, hardy shrimpers laughed and swigged their beer and forgot about yesterday.

"The blessing of the fleet takes on an added importance and deeper meaning and significance because of the storm," Father Kavanaugh told those who attended an early mass today at St. Michael's, the church where he and his associate, the Rev. George Murphy, also an Irish native, spent the night of Camille clinging desperately to statues of the Virgin Mary and St. Joseph.

Those who heard him understood him. Their city had waited 10 months for a symbol of resurgence and the old tradition of the shrimp fleet blessing was enough.

"We cannot afford the luxury of self-pity," the priest said. "God in his goodness has seen fit to leave us here on this earth. You have your boats, your health and you have your families to support, so let's get on with the business of living with a deeper faith and trust in God."

