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Letter from the Gulf: The View from Plaquemines Parish

JUNE 2010

By Vanessa Tolino



A shrimper heads towards a slick of oil off the coast of Venice, Louisiana. Photo by P.J. Hahno.

While driving down from New Orleans to Venice, “ground zero” of BP’s Deepwater Horizon oil spill, I heard Parish President Billy Nungesser on a local radio show. He was mid-rant, and his unusually desperate tone made my hands sweat. Billy’s normal demeanor is pretty damn level. He’s been non-stop talking to the press for a month; his statements have become rote: *We need our marsh, Louisiana’s fishing industry is a vital economic force in the state, my office has a plan, etc.* Not unimportant statements, of course, but I’ve heard them over and over. This day, Nungesser was losing it, publicly. The unstoppable crisis had started. Oil crept into the precious wetlands this week. The wetlands are an irreplaceable estuary filled with fish and wildlife, which Plaquemines fishers rely upon for their livelihoods. Nungesser now sounded alarmed, as the stakes are unthinkably high. Plaquemines Parish culture is on the brink of possible extinction.

But Plaquemines Parish won’t go down without a fight. Anyone who has spent time in the parish after Katrina can tell you that these folks are not willing to give up on their homeland. On the radio Nungesser declared the parish would begin dredging to build barrier islands without Army Corps of Engineers permits. “What’re they gonna do, arrest us? ARREST US!” A half hour later, a few minutes up the road from Venice, a sweet, burning smell attacked my eyes and nose. Oh God the oil. BP’s burning the oil. Billy’s yellin’ and screamin’ seemed as tiny as a shrimp boat skimming through the vast oil slick. Does fierce little Plaquemines Parish have a chance of winning this time?



A press conference in Venice concerning the spill, with Billy Nungesser (far right) and Bobby Jindal.

Venice is the southernmost town in Plaquemines Parish, a finger-shaped peninsula that juts into the Gulf of Mexico just south of New Orleans. There's only one main road from the city to the bottom of Plaquemines, Highway 23. Locals refer to their geography as "up the road" or "down the road." Up the road is Belle Chasse, an upper middle-class suburb equipped with all the consumer bells and whistles of any other typical American town. "Down the road" is anywhere south of Belle Chasse, but the term also connotes the culture associated with the fishing industry. Down-the-road folks have a reputation for caring about two things: family and the water. You hear a lot of passion for home in lower Plaquemines, and home includes the water. That water out there is as familiar to those fishers as the curvature of their spouse's body. The Gulf of Mexico and the Mississippi River provide all the concrete resources needed to live, as well as a deep sense of purpose. Driving down Highway 23, you can see the Mississippi River levee on

one side, and the marsh levee on the other. The Plaquemines are literally surrounded by water.



Herman Demoll's son stands on an island in the marsh, south of Venice. Photos by Vanessa Tolino.

After Hurricane Katrina ran the Gulf clear over the land in 2005, the population that returned down the road was predominately fishers and people with businesses supporting fishing and oil. Offshore oil workers usually live in other areas and commute. The fishers returned because lower Plaquemines Parish is home. They've never worked anywhere else; fishing in the bountiful waters where the Mississippi River dumps into the Gulf of Mexico is all they are qualified to do.

Herman Demoll and his wife, Nita, have lived down the road their entire lives. Herman was raised on Tiger Pass, a small area of the marsh, which is now partially a Halliburton chemical plant. As children, Herman and his siblings learned to trap and fish and took a boat to the mainland for school. In the late 60's, Demoll's family was forced to move up the road as their land on Tiger Pass was to be used for a Coast Guard station. For almost 30 years they lived on a lot of land beside Tidewater Road, the last road in Venice that leads directly to the water.

Tidewater Road was constructed for easy access to the commercial and sports fishing marinas, but now is also used for oil industry support. Tidewater seems to perfectly represent Louisiana's relationships with oil and fishing. On one side you see lush marsh, blue water, birds, jumping fish, alligators, and usually a few people sitting on beach chairs with a beer, their lines thrown in the water. The other side is a maze of industrial plants. The two live side by side, but the intimidating man-made industrial world towers over the domain of small birds and fish.

After Hurricane Katrina, Demoll and his family were unable to return to the lot on Tidewater Road, and again were forced to move farther up the road. Times were tough, but they made adjustments and prayed. It took over four years, but as of this January, Herman and Nita were feeling okay again. They had a new double-wide trailer and Herman finally got a new boat. He was excited about the upcoming shrimp season.

On April 18 Daybrook Fisheries, a menhaden (a type of herring, also known as "pogys") plant in lower Plaquemines, held its annual "Blessing of the Fleet" as a celebration of the beginning of Daybrook's season. Daybrook is one of Plaquemines's biggest employers. Over 400 people attended, including Nungesser and Congressman Charlie Melancon, a Democrat whose district includes Plaquemines. Attendees ate seafood, listened to music, and watched as a priest christened Daybrook's fleet. Two days later the Deepwater Horizon rig exploded.



A plain marsh.

Fishers felt the effects of the spill immediately. Within one week, the oil spill was substantial enough for the state government to shut down fishing and oyster dredging in the Gulf waters to the east of the Mississippi River to prevent possible contamination. The federal government soon began closing fishing zones farther offshore. Oyster fishermen have leases to specific tracts of land at the bottom of the Gulf. Anyone with oyster leases exclusively on the east side was landlocked, forced to do almost anything to stay busy as they waited to find out if the waters would be reopened. Charter boat captains, who take tourists into the Gulf for sports fishing, faced swaths of cancellations. Hunter Caballero and Lance Walker had been booked solid for May, but lost 13 reservations almost immediately. Daybrook Fisheries sought alternative areas for fishing. All of Plaquemines

began watching the news, and talking about the oil in the Gulf constantly. The situation was getting serious.

Eleven days after the explosion, President Obama declared a state of emergency, and prepared for a visit to Venice. Media people from all over the globe invaded. Whereas after Katrina, residents complained about not receiving enough media attention, now they were complaining about being hounded. Journalists were complaining too—that there was nothing to see yet. The oil was still far away, threatening to come ashore, but weather conditions were keeping it at bay.

The weekend Obama came to town, BP began holding trainings for its “Vessel of Opportunity” program. Ostensibly, it would help fishers sidelined by the spill go back to work by helping with the cleanup. It sounded like a decent attempt to create local employment and keep money flowing through the community.

On April 30, a series of trainings began at the Boothville-Venice Elementary School. The trainings were intended to provide hazardous materials certifications so that fishers would be legally qualified to deploy and pick up spill-control boom. Hundreds of locals showed up, including a large number of Vietnamese shrimpers, some of whom did not speak fluent English. BP didn’t provide an interpreter.

At the session, Nita Demoll greeted me with a smile and hug and expressed her concern. But like many people I spoke with that day, Nita seemed detached from the disaster.

“We made it through Katrina, I suppose we can make it through this!”

Herman, meanwhile, was disappointed about not shrimping, but optimistic about finding work with BP and being able to pay bills. Kip Marquise, a shrimper in Venice for 26 years, had a more jaundiced view.

“This is a PR campaign to make the world think BP is doing the right thing,” Marquise said. “I’m worried about the community having problems, that some will get work and some won’t.”

Indeed only a fraction of the 900 people who received training that weekend have been employed with BP’s program. After a long, poorly designed training session, boat captains were asked to stay. A BP official produced a stack of Master Charter Agreements, or “contracts,” and strongly suggested that anyone interested in working sign on the dotted line, immediately. By Monday morning, Judge Ginger Berrigan of the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana had deemed the first page of BP’s contracts unusable. That’s because it contained a waiver stipulating that employees give up their First Amendment rights and not talk to the press without BP’s approval; that they give BP a one-month notification before filing any legal action; and that they hold BP harmless for any accidents. The rest of the contract stands, which is basically a charter agreement for BP to hire the use of locals’ boats. The same day the waiver was declared unusable, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) shut down the trainings to investigate if they were being properly conducted.

According to the Oil Pollution Act of 1990, BP is financially responsible for loss of livelihoods resulting from the oil spill. Fishers are already receiving reparation checks from BP, a few have chartered their boats to the company, and others have been hired to work at the docks, loading boom for 10 bucks an hour. I ran into Herman Demoll the day he and several family members found out they had been hired through the program.

“At least it’s somethin’—it’ll help us get by for now,” he said.

But on Thursday, May 27, BP issued a press release stating that it was shutting down the Vessels of Opportunity Program in neighboring St. Bernard Parish, because four fishers had become violently ill. So the future of the program in Plaquemines seemed very much in doubt.

If the fishers themselves are affected, the service industry that caters to them is also in jeopardy. Roseina Copeland owns a small restaurant next door to Daybrook. Ninety-nine percent of her customers are employees of Daybrook, and if the fishers don’t make any money neither does she. But Copeland loves her home and is willing to endure hardships to stay there. After Katrina she slept on the floor of a shack and sold cold drinks until she scraped together enough money to open a proper restaurant. She was just starting to feel comfortable again. Though she’s terrified by the oil spill, like almost everyone I’ve spoken to, she harbors no resentment towards BP or oil companies in general. If offshore oil drilling shuts down as well, what industry will be left in Plaquemines?

Billy Nungesser has battled for the parish from the start. Within two weeks, he devised a plan to section off the coastal marsh and assign boats to deploy and remove boom. President Obama green-lighted Nungesser’s plan, and it went into effect almost immediately. Nungesser, a Republican, has praised Obama’s efficiency. But it soon became apparent that boom wouldn’t be enough to save the precious marsh. Nungesser then devised another plan—to dredge sand and build barrier islands. Governor Bobby Jindal has backed the plan, and is fighting for it alongside Nungesser. Oil is easier to clean from sand than marsh, and Nungesser hopes the sand barriers will serve as an absorbent. Barrier islands also provide much needed storm protection. Louisiana’s wetlands have been a source of concern for 30 years, steadily washing away without any coherent rescue plan from the state. Various factors cause wetland deterioration, but Louisiana’s marshes were primarily damaged by oil companies dredging canals. Now it appears the oil itself could be the final death of the marsh.

“Support Billy’s Barrier Island Plan!” says a bumper sticker circulating through Plaquemines. Although some residents in Southern Louisiana are rolling their eyes, saying the barrier-islands plan is too little too late, others are rallying behind Nungesser—and are just glad to have a leader taking action. As of this writing, a tiny portion of Nungesser’s plan has been approved by the Army Corps of Engineers, but it’s unclear whether it will actually have any effect.

The waiting period has ended. Oil is in the marsh, and crude-soaked pelicans and sea turtles are washing ashore. People are realizing the gravity of the situation. Fisheries in Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana have been declared a federal disaster zone, making fishers eligible for unemployment compensation. Town hall meetings are being held in coastal towns to allow community members to vent. A large protest against BP is planned in New Orleans.

Until the oil crept into the marsh, there had been an undercurrent of hope, a sense that a miracle could happen. After all, in the aftermath of Katrina, the men with boats shared with men who didn’t, and they got back in the water as soon as possible. They didn’t need the federal government’s assistance because they could still fish and eke out a living.

The spill is different. Surviving a killer hurricane is a rite of passage for those down the road, but no one has ever encountered an oil spill of this proportion. Terri Sercovich, editor of *The Plaquemines Gazette*, got all teary-eyed when she described a photo she decided to run on the cover of the local paper the week the oil came into the marsh. It's an aerial view of a tiny shrimp skiff surrounded by the blackness of the oil. As Sercovich, who was raised down the road, emphatically explained, a single shrimper stood little chance in an ocean of crude. —May 28, 2010

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