

**Cajun Adventure, Post Hurricane Rita
January 14 – 21, 2006**

By Gail Grenier Sweet ©2006

Anyone need a hand?

Anna was almost done with her school year in New Zealand when I popped the question over the phone.

“I was thinking about going down to Louisiana to help with hurricane recovery. Would you like to go with me?”

“YES!” was her answer, without a beat.

After Anna returned to Wisconsin in November, we narrowed down our volunteer time to the month of January. I’d have a break from teaching and she’d have a break from college.

We had plenty of motivation.... We both loved New Orleans. After almost 10 months abroad, Anna still had the travel bug. I wanted to “pay back” some of the fun Louisiana gave me during three prior visits filled with Cajun music, dance and food. I think both Anna and I were curious about the hurricane devastation, and wanted somehow to be part of history.

.... And January is a *good* month to be gone from Wisconsin.

Researching by phone, by Internet, and in person, and filling out forms, Anna and I tried for two months to get a volunteer assignment. Red Cross: NOT NOW. Archdiocese of New Orleans: NO RESPONSE. New Orleans connection through my church: CANCELLED. Our January free time was running out. I was desperate.

At last I struck gold on a long shot: Joe Paris.

Joe was a man I only knew from Cajun dancing. I remembered him as a wild-bearded, sparkly-eyed character who had challenged me with: “I bet I’m older than you.” (He was wrong by a few months.)

In September 2003, we met at a dance hall in Lafayette, Louisiana. My husband, Mike, and I were enjoying Festivals Acadiens, about two hours west of New Orleans in the heart of Acadiana. We were fairly new to Cajun dancing, but by then had adopted the Louisiana tradition of dancing with others as well as with each other to the traditional waltzes, two-steps and jigs.

We were at Grant Street, a historic dance hall that looks like a small bleak warehouse on the edge of downtown Lafayette. Steve Riley and the Mamou Playboys were fiddlin' and singin' up a storm there in celebration of the release of their album "Bon Reve." After I danced a jig with Joe Paris, he talked to me about his love of storytelling and about Louisiana. He wrote down my email address in a little notebook.

I never heard from Joe after that September, but I remembered him this January when I was running out of options for hurricane relief work. I typed "Joe Paris Storyteller" into Google. Bingo-- luck on the first try. I e-mailed Joe and asked if there was any need for volunteers in Acadiana. I included my phone number. Within the hour, he called me and said "Come on down!" He couldn't remember meeting me, but I guess he trusted that I wasn't a kook.

He said, "I enjoy hearing that lovely, and I do mean lovely, Midwestern accent." He promptly e-mailed five or six phone numbers I could try for an assignment.

Things moved fast once I started calling. Within a day, Anna and I were guaranteed work through the Diocese of Lafayette in collaboration with the local United Way. I grabbed frequent flier tickets through Northwest Airlines, and booked a hotel room which we were able to cancel almost immediately because we were offered free lodging at the Diocese dormitory, a former seminary.

When I let Joe know these developments, he said he'd try to meet us at the airport and offered to be our host in Lafayette.

He added, "I hope you plan to have some fun down here besides working."

My answer: "What? Leave cold Wisconsin in January and go to Louisiana and have some fun? Hmmmmm...."

Allons à Lafayette ("Let's go to Lafayette")

On Saturday January 14, we took a big plane to Memphis and from there, a little plane to Lafayette. I showed Anna where her dad and I stood in Lafayette airport in '03, when our flight to Milwaukee was delayed due to an alligator on the runway.

"We watched a guy come drag the gator by the tail, bundle it up, lift it into a pickup truck bed, and drive it away. Folks thought the gator must have walked here from a bayou nearby."

There is nothing easier than picking up a rental car at Lafayette airport. You grab your bag off the conveyor belt, go see a nice lady with an accent thick as syrup ("Ah just need to see your *credit cord*"), and walk outside to your car. There's no security guy or spikes to drive over as you leave.

It had been a record-breaking warm Wisconsin January, in the 50s much of the time. But Lafayette was warmer -- *I could smell the earth*. Anna and I took a whiff and smiled at each other, flinging our coats into the back seat of the rental car. We were going to enjoy this 65-degree weather.

First thing I did in the car was tune the radio to KBON, the Cajun station Mike and I sometimes listen to at home through the Web. Ah, KBON! Cajun, Zydeco, and swamp pop with a little country and R&B thrown in – right fine. Anna was about to get a heavy dose of my favorite dance music.

The 10-minute drive from the airport to the Diocese building was my first of many navigational challenges during our week there. Anna was supposed to be the navigator, but she was much more interested in writing in her journal than studying maps. (When we returned to Wisconsin, I learned that Anna had used those journals to record my bouts of dismay and verbal vulgarities as I repeatedly got lost.)

When we arrived at the Diocese building, Cheryll Guilbeau of United Way was there to greet us, as was Joe Paris, now beardless but still sparkly-eyed, wearing the rubber boots he had on for rose garden planting duty that day. The Diocese campus, known to locals as “Immaculata,” resembled a Spanish hacienda, like a smaller version of the Marine Corps Depot in San Diego, where our son Brian went through boot camp: lots of brick arches and a courtyard with graceful plantings, including crepe myrtles, palms, palmettos with sharp fan-like leaves, and kumquat trees. Mocking birds sang up and down the scale.

Mmmm. The South. My second home.

Cheryll led us up to the sprawling third floor dormitory, where we chose adjoining cubicles – little cells without doors, each containing a single bed and a chair. Cheryll showed us the occupied cell of our only dorm-mate, a woman named Sheri who was working with United Way through UMCOR, the Methodist outreach agency. We threw our bags inside the cubicles and prepared to leave for lunch.

Before Cheryll left us, she invited us to dinner the following Monday at Prejean’s, the famous Lafayette restaurant owned and run by her husband. I remembered eating some great gumbo at Prejean’s when Mike and I dined there in ’03 on the recommendation of a guide who had boated us through the Atchafalaya Swamp.

We were delighted, but not as thrilled as Joe, who snagged an invitation by proximity.

“Prejeans! Prejeans!” he kept repeating. (We were learning that Joe has no shortage of enthusiasm – for Prejeans, and for everything else.)

Joe jumped into our rental car and assumed navigation duties, a relief to me. We drove straight to Café des Amis in Breaux Bridge, still crowded even though it was about

1:30 pm and the Zydeco brunch was over. This lunch was the beginning of Anna and me trying lots of new tastes. Throughout our week in Lafayette, vegetarian Anna had bread pudding and plenty of dishes made with eggplant. I tried meat dishes we don't often find in Wisconsin, including fried breaded gator, crawfish, and frog legs (all delicious!). During that short week, we had more fried food, non-diet soda and caffeine coffee than we'd had in any combination of years before. Folks down there eat like the health food revolution never happened.

At one point, Anna asked if anyone wanted the "hot pepper" on her plate. Joe almost freaked out.

"That's not a pepper! That's pickled okra! Try it!"

Anna tried it and fell in love with the wonderful new taste and texture.

Joe and Anna and I sat for a couple of hours in Café des Amis and told stories back and forth, long past the time our plates had been whisked away. This was our entry into Southern Time.

Folks in Cajun country run at a slower speed than we do, I'm guessing because it's too hot and humid to move fast. I found myself adjusting easily to Southern time – I felt no pressure to get up and get gone.

After that lieisurely lunch, Anna and I returned to our dorm for a nap. Joe went back to his roses, with a plan to meet for dancing that night at Randol's. I told him he better change out of those rubber boots.

He answered with a big smile, "Down here you can dance in anything, chère!"

Saturday Night: Randol's

Randol's looked just as I remembered it from dancing there with Mike in '03: a wooden dance floor, bleachers for resting dancers, diners beyond. What I recalled most vividly were the giant fans. When I had tried to describe them to Anna, all I could say was "They're as tall as you are."

There stood the fans in all their hugeness -- and even though it was winter, we needed them after dancing a while. The Lafayette Cajun Devils squeezed accordion and sawed fiddle on the wooden stage, near a giant flag with the fleur de lis.

"The fleur de lis is coming to represent the rising New Orleans," Joe said. Before this trip, I knew the fleur de lis only as a famous symbol of France and part of the flag of Quebec province. The image came to mean more to me as the week progressed.

Anna is a quick study, and soon she was following Joe's lead like she had danced Cajun all her life. He introduced her to the fast Cajun jig (he called it "swing"), including a funny butt-to-butt move. Joe is a baby geezer like me, so after he got all sweaty dancing with Anna, I was his "rest stop." He led me through measured waltzes and two-steps, not nearly as raucous as his dancing with Anna. Fine with me!

Joe said, "There's live music every night in the Lafayette area, and all day Saturday and Sunday, with almost never a cover charge." Amazing, especially when you figure that most dancers aren't big drinkers. What keeps the dance hall owners going?

By the end of our time at Randol's, Anna and I were both dancing with lots of different partners, most of them old enough to be Anna's dad or grand-dad. She didn't seem to mind. The music "had" her.

Anna looked like a princess on the dance floor. She wore a long skirt, open-toed high-heeled shoes, a strapless form-fitting top, and her dreadlocks in a big ponytail. Unfortunately, I hadn't thought to warn her that Cajun music can be very active in the upper body, with lots of twists and turns. At one point, she confided to me that she started worrying she'd lose her top.

"Mom, I went into the bathroom and did hard-out dancing, kinda spastic, to make sure this top wouldn't fall off." She was secure. However, later she said, "I'll never wear a strapless top again for Cajun dancing!" She would soon learn a similar lesson about open-toed shoes.

Sunday: Breaux Bridge and Whiskey River Landing

We slept well that night and rose late on Sunday. After a little prayer meeting, Anna and I took off for Breaux Bridge. Anna had the idea of doing some gift shopping in the funky stores we had seen there with Joe the day before. Unfortunately, most of them were closed -- because it was Sunday, I thought (another difference from the North!). We enjoyed another lunch at Café des Amis and explored a couple of church cemeteries along the Bayou Teche.

Bayou Teche

Joe explained that Bayou Teche was the route the Cajuns took when they traveled from New Orleans to what became known as Acadiana. The English had expelled them from their home in Acadia, Nova Scotia in the 1700s when they refused to pledge allegiance to England and her church. Many of them wound up in New Orleans, where the fancy French folk wanted nothing to do with the Acadian ("Cajun") country bumpkins.

“The sides of the Mississippi have their own currents,” Joe said, “so the Cajuns traveled *up* the Mississippi river along its edges, against the main current of the river, and into the Bayou Teche.” The bayou looks like a big brown river itself.

Anna had never seen the aboveground cemeteries when we visited New Orleans years ago, so these gravesites were a revelation to her. Some of the caskets were tipped over from the water surge of Hurricane Rita. Though not as grand as the ones in New Orleans, these cemeteries are similar in their resemblance to villages of little white tomb-houses. Joe had explained that the water table is only about two feet below the ground’s surface – thus the need for aboveground burial. The bayou was brown, still and calm that sunny Sunday. Live oaks stretched their twisted limbs out in incredible horizontalness. Birds sang. No one walked about. It was hard to imagine the place alive with hurricane howls and a 30-mile surge of ocean water.

Moi, La Danseuse

I did a little soft-shoe dance as Anna and I strolled on a wooden deck overlooking Bayou Teche. When we started to walk from deck to car, I suddenly realized I was falling... BOOM! I fell to my knees, and SPLAT! I found myself splayed flat on my stomach, legs and arms spread-eagle. I had somehow missed a step off the deck. Lucky for me, the steps were long ones, like platforms. Otherwise, I would have toppled down several short steps instead of landing relatively safely on one level. Anna was as startled as I was.

“Are you okay?” she asked, her voice full of motherly concern.

“Yeah, I think so. My knees hurt, though,” I said, picking myself up. I rolled up my khakis and found one reddened knee and one knee skinned just to the point of tiny points of blood. My right wrist was already showing signs of bruising, and it hurt.

The best part of my falling accident was that I didn’t tumble in front of other people. Only Anna saw me. Usually when I fall in public, my pride is what hurts the most.

The worst part of my falling accident was realizing that had I really hurt myself, I would have been useless as a volunteer before I even started.

For the next six days in Louisiana and for more than a week beyond that, I watched my knee scab up and the bruise on my inner wrist change from black and blue to green and yellow. Eventually another very painful bruise formed on the *outside* of my wrist – I never figured that out.

On the bank of the bayou, Anna and I discovered a grassy parking area for a bunch of small pontoon barges carrying what looked at first like twisted metal. It looked

like a junkyard until we realized the metal was sculpture strung with Christmas lights, obviously for a parade down the bayou at night. (Joe later explained the barges float at Christmas and again at Mardi Gras.)

After our wandering, we headed for home and another nap (my idea of “happy hour”). That night we planned to go with Joe to Whiskey River Landing for a completely different musical experience: Geno Delafosse’s zydeco.

“It’s a dive, with a ceiling so low you can almost touch it,” was how Joe described Angelle’s Whiskey River Landing on the Atchafalaya Swamp. But I really wanted to see this famous dance hall, the location for the recording of one of my favorite CDs -- “Balfa Toujours Live at Whiskey River.” And I wanted Anna to experience zydeco, the black cousin to Cajun music. Cajun has French lyrics and a backwoods sound. Zydeco features American lyrics as well as French, and replaces the tinny Cajun triangle with the more raucous-sounding metal rub-board. Cajun music uses the little traditional accordion that looks like a squeezebox; zydeco usually includes a large piano accordion. Zydeco has a lot of repetition and sounds more rhythm-and- bluesy than Cajun. Later in the week at one of our volunteer assignments, a carpenter named Freeman defined the sound perfectly: “Zydeco is nothin’ but the blues with an accordion.”

Again, Joe navigated and I drove the three of us to Whiskey River Landing. As we got closer, we began driving *on* a levee, a disconcerting experience for this Northerner. Eventually we came upon hundreds of cars and pick-up trucks, many of them parked at crazy angles on the side of the steep levee, like they could tip over at any moment. I felt scared just looking at them. I parked on a sanely level patch of earth beside the swamp, and we went in.

This was the only place all week that charged a cover fee – \$6 I think. It was already loud *outside* the building. I was relieved immediately to recall that I had earplugs packed in the little “dance purse” I always sling over my shoulder for outings like this. Earplugs inserted, I was ready for the onslaught of sound. When I realized how crowded it was, I felt like running... but I could see that the newly-turned-21 Anna was ready for action. Finally – a place where the median age wasn’t 50. I looked at Joe and he looked at me.

“We’ll have to offer it up,” I said – a phrase from our Catholic upbringing that we both understood. For the first half-hour or so, we hunkered down in a corner where there was enough room for us to dance a step or two. Anna immediately danced with two black partners much her senior. The first was an excellent zydeco dancer. The second, Anna informed me later, kept “grinding” into her. She added that when Joe and I danced closer to her and The Grinder, he eased up a bit, knowing I was her mother.

To escape The Grinder, we switched corners. Getting across the room was a challenge. We had to literally snake our bodies through the crush of hundreds of other bodies – drinking, laughing, cowboy-hat wearing dancers, young, old, black, white. We danced a little while in corner number two, where we got a better view of Geno and his

band. (What a *pretty* man!) Finally Ann found a guy her age to dance with, a young Marine named Josh. Joe and I eventually forsook the corner. We eased into the crowd and danced. It was like dancing with eight people besides Joe, because I swear there were seven other bodies touching mine.

A phenomenon occurred that night that I've only experienced a few times in my dancing life: I crossed the line from dancing into *dancing ecstasy*. It only happens when I'm tired and ready to quit. All of a sudden the music gets *into* me. I'm not me anymore – I become a dancing machine, one with the sound, one with the sweat. Wonderful.

Just around the end of Geno's session, I looked up and saw about seven young women dancing on top of the bar. I looked around for Anna. I found her and pointed toward the bar. Within seconds, she had joined the dancin' queens. Most of the others danced a safe zydeco two-step, but Anna did a free-form dance, all smiles, arms flinging, dreadlocks flying.

Geno played long beyond his scheduled finish, but it was time for the workers to go home and get some sleep. I walked outside and took a long look at the swamp waters, stretching out from the landing, vast, quiet, dark. I felt happy. I like swamps.

Anna and Josh were talking and talking. Finally Joe and I pried her away for the ride home.

Lesson learned by Anna that night: Don't wear open-toed shoes for zydeco. Her toes got stomped. She recounted how a girl in the rest room spotted her as an outsider. The girl said, "We all wear boots."

Earlier, Joe had explained the genesis of zydeco music. The word zydeco, he said, comes from the French word for green beans. (I later looked up the term – it's *les haricots*, pronounced in Cajun French as "layz-ah'-dee-co.") Joe said in the old days, black women washed their laundry outside in big pots of boiling water. Being efficient, they'd start second pots of water for beans, to get their cooking done at the same time.

"Where women are, men follow," Joe said. "Men in the villages soon learned that women could be found around the pots of beans. To impress the women, the men brought harmonicas and fiddles and they sang songs. Their music became known as bean music."

"*Les haricots*" music became zydeco music.

Joe told us stories I've never heard anywhere else. Joe is a professional storyteller. I never knew if his stories were true, but I liked them. I've scattered some of his tales throughout this remembrance.

Zydeco

I heard another explanation of how the word “zydeco” came to be. In April '06, an old Cajun accordion-maker from Iota, Louisiana, named Larry Miller, told me this story during Cajun weekend at Folklore Village in Dodgeville, Wisconsin:

Long ago, Creole people in Louisiana ate a lot of beans. They were poor, and salt was a luxury. If they happened to be lucky enough to have a pig, they'd cook up the pork, and the salty water would give flavor to their beans. A common saying was, “*Comment sont les haricots?*” (How are the beans?) If the answer was, “*Les haricots sont salés,*” (The beans are salty), it meant times were good. If the answer was, “*Les haricots pas sont salés,*” (The beans aren't salty), it meant times were tough.

After he discovered the piano accordion in the 60s, Clifton Chenier made a popular record called “*Les haricots pas sont salés.*” People started asking for “that *s'haricot*” (zydeco) music.” The term stuck.

Larry noted that even today, Creole zydeco musicians prefer using the old squeeze-box style accordions and melodeons. “They put the piano accordions on the album covers because they look fancier,” he said.

Monday: Dolores and Huey

I think it was Monday morning that we finally met our dorm-mate, Sheri. Up until then I was beginning to think she was the Invisible Woman. She was very young, only 31, which shocked me because for some reason I expected her to be old, like me. She was tall, fresh-faced and beautiful, with boy-short hair. She looked like a college athlete. When we met her, she was almost two-thirds through her three weeks as a volunteer, experiencing extreme homesickness for her husband and 11-year-old stepdaughter back in Maine. She was also experiencing some frustration with the efficiency of UMCOR, her “parent” volunteer organization. They weren't always on top of having jobs ready for her.

“I hate to sit around and do nothing, because then I get more homesick,” Sheri said. “I can sit around back home. I came here to work.”

Like us, Sheri had felt the call to go in person to work in Louisiana. Like us, she spent a ton of time searching the Web to finally find a place she could work. She had taken a month unpaid leave of absence from her job in order to volunteer. Like us, she had purchased her own airline ticket.

However, unlike us, she was also buying her own food. We were lucky to have volunteers from Lafayette Diocese providing us with a stocked refrigerator and chicken, beans and rice, casseroles and salads – saving us a lot of cash. Sheri hadn't been

introduced to Cajun dancing. Instead, she had bought a month membership at the local health club, where she worked out at night and enjoyed a hot tub to sooth her muscles sore from pounding nails. Sheri's assignment was in Abbeville, not far from where we'd be working. We invited Sheri to join us dancing on Friday night. She said she'd love that.

We bid Sheri a good day and walked downstairs to meet Sister Ancilla. Anna had to do some last-minute organizing that made us five or eight minutes late. I fretted to Anna about this later in the car. "You don't keep nuns waiting," I told her. "You don't understand nuns cuz you never had any for teachers. Nuns always do things right and they can be a little scary."

Anna was flabbergasted that I would be afraid, even a teensy bit, of a nun. She never had the experience I had in the 50s, a group of 60 second-grade classmates in one room, an unsmiling black-habited Sister Yolanda keeping order through sheer fear.

Sister Ancilla, a smiling nun in street clothes, drove ahead of us, leading us to our assignment in New Iberia, about a half-hour away. All along the way, the land was FLAT, as it had been everywhere we had driven so far. (I thought about lyrics from a Steve Riley's song, "*La terre si plat*" – The land so flat.) Here and there we saw fields of sugar cane, a bunch of one-foot plants at this point – not tall rows as they had appeared when Mike and I visited during the month of September.

Dogs and kids, kids and dogs, laughing and barking. They were our greeters when Anna and I arrived at Dolores and Huey's home. It was January 16, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day, so the kids had a break from school. Some ran, one rode a mini-bike around FEMA trailers and debris still strewn on the rural property since the water surge caused by Hurricane Rita flooded their homes four months earlier.

Martin Luther King, Jr. and my brother George

I don't think much about Martin Luther King on January 16, because it's also my brother George's birthday. He would have been 41 this year, had he not died young. He comes and goes in my thoughts and sometimes in my dreams at night, but always on January 16, he is with me.

I remember shoveling snow with George. It was the day after Thanksgiving, 1977. George was 12. He was staying at our house so he could hang out with Mike and me and our little son Charlie. George was thrilled to be an uncle. We awoke that Friday to giant drifts of snow blocking our garage doors and halfway up our windows. We all grabbed shovels. George was SLOW, shoveling here and there, throwing snowballs here and there. We dubbed him "the screen door in a submarine." George died in a car accident nine months after that snowy day.

I recently dreamed that he was an excellent writer. When I woke up, I thought about that dream and figured George might have become a writer if he had the chance to grow up. Before he died, he was already writing songs and playing guitar. Would he have joined Anna and me in Louisiana? Would he have liked Cajun and Zydeco music? Would he have danced with us? Would his hair still be auburn? Would he have any hair? It's hard to think of him as a middle-aged man. It's Feb. 23 as I write this. I've been in a George funk all month. I wish he were here.

Sister Ancilla introduced Dolores to Anna and me. It was 9:00 am, we had our work gloves and goggles, and we were ready to work. But this day would provide our second lesson in Southern time. It clearly wasn't time to work. Dolores fairly bubbled with stories flowing in what I came to recognize as a thick Cajun country accent. Her drawn-out vowels screamed "South" and her consonants screamed "French."

For instance, Dolores gestured to her back yard and said, "Da brush is real tick ovah dere."

French speakers, like most Europeans except Spaniards, have a hard time saying "th." And Dolores was a French speaker – Cajun French, which is a different from the Parisian French I learned in school. Cajun French has a rolled "r" like we hear in Spanish or Italian, instead of the guttural "r" associated with the classic French of, say, Pepe le Peuw singing "Every little breeze whispers Louise."

Dolores used the term "French," not "Cajun," like most country Cajuns I've met through years of going to Cajun dancing and cooking workshops. When Anna and I told her we liked the Lafayette dance halls, Dolores said, "Dose Frenchies really know how to shake a leg."

Talking with Dolores, we learned that she's one year older than I am (she's 56), and that she and Huey (her "little husband," as she said) have been married 38 years. She told us Huey is a tugboat captain who has trouble getting work because of his heart problems and employers' fear of medical bills. We learned about their children and grandchildren and about James, a nephew they adopted when he was a baby. Now in his mid-20s, James had a high fever when he was about five and ever since has been unable to walk or eat on his own. Because of his scoliosis, he can't spend much time in a wheelchair. He lies in bed most of the time and uses a ventilator.

James

I asked if we could meet James. Huey said "Sure." He took Anna and me inside the FEMA trailer, where James lay on his side on a hospital bed, his attendant (his sister) nearby. James had dark hair, was basically a handsome young man. He was wearing

only a diaper and was covered with a thin blanket. Huey said James couldn't see us, yet James seemed to react to us, writhing clumsily on the bed.

After we visited James, Huey told us that doctors claim James doesn't know them. "But James reacts to me and Dolores. He loves outings, and if an outing gets cancelled, he reacts big time. He lets you know he's disappointed," Huey said.

They have a wheelchair-lift equipped Winnebago to take James places. It was in that Winnebago that the three of them fled to Lafayette when they heard Hurricane Rita was on her way.

Huey said he used to go out to bars all the time, but everything changed when James became disabled. Huey and Dolores modified their house and their lives to taking care of a little boy who couldn't walk or communicate. Huey said, "I wouldn't do it again," yet he kept referring to James as "my little boy" and using other pet names for him. Both Huey and Dolores told us how hard they have struggled to find James good caregivers who keep James clean and safe. They clearly love him.

Seeing James made me think about Terri Schiavo. James has a feeding tube, like Terri needed. Unlike Terri, he sometimes uses a ventilator to help him breathe. Why are people like Terri and James here? I don't know all the answers, but I do know this: they teach us compassion.

Huey and Dolores had raised five children in their two-bedroom, tin-roofed, big-porched home that's over 100 years old. After they learned their house was ruined, they rented a trailer just big enough for a toilet and a bed for James. Huey and Dolores slept in chairs for three months. Eventually they got a larger trailer through FEMA, parked nearby, big enough to hold a bed for them as well as one for James. The two beds are parked head-to-foot. The original trailer is now their "outhouse."

Huey, a small man with health problems ("I quit smoking 30 years too late," he said), told us that he and Dolores own 15 acres of land. Most of their children have set up housing on the property in a motley assortment of trailers along the road. Adding to the mix are abandoned vehicles, including a tractor, a small school bus, a huge trailer home, and a elevator-equipped "handicap van," door ajar. Chickens wander everywhere. All day long Anna and I heard roosters crow. It was a good old sound, reminding us of our days tending our own flock back home, seven years ago.

After an hour and a half of stories, we were ready to start work. We tuned KBON in on the radio, to steam us along. God must have a black sense of humor because our first job was one of my most hated: taping seams on drywall. I clearly remember proclaiming about 20 years ago to Mike: "I will *never* do drywall again!"

Ha, ha. Joke's on me. Actually, the first pass-through wasn't hard – we just had to get the tape to stick to the wall. Eventually Bob and B.J. came and assured us that they

would do the finer work of smoothing mud over tape during the next two days, allowing for drying time between work sessions. Bob was a distant relative of the family, and he knew drywall. I never found out if he and B.J. were volunteers like us, or if they were getting paid. Bob was frankly horrified that United Way and the Diocese of Lafayette would send amateurs like us to do drywall. I told him that somehow the message had got through that the home would be ready for painting that week, and we could certainly paint. Ah, well. It worked out fine -- we did the rough work and left the fine work to Bob and B.J.

After a half-day of taping seams, we were as far as we could go on the drywall, so we worked for the rest of the day cleaning the yard. It was a perfect day, about 70 degrees (I saw a mosquito!), and the air felt great. After Anna and I lugged debris for a while, Dolores and Huey and their daughter-in-law Soraya and assorted grandkids joined in. We were like a team of ants, hauling brush, lumber, limbs, glass, drywall, and five-gallon motor oil buckets.

Gradually we formed the debris into piles, which is what Dolores said she had done before Hurricane Rita hit. Rita's water surge undid all the piles Dolores had made, strewing the mess into the back of their yard, and also floating two boats from neighboring lots to right beside their home.

At the end of the afternoon, we had gathered two giant mounds of wood for bonfires, plus a long assortment of junk at the road near the freezer and stove that were there already. A garbage man sat on a front-end loader at the road for about an hour, watching us work. He was clearly on Southern time, waiting for his truck-partner. The garbage man told me he would take everything except the freezer, which stank something amazing when we bumped it. If you bump a stinky freezer once, I guarantee you'll never bump it again. The smell of death.

Prejean's

Monday night, Anna and I drove on our own to Prejean's to meet Cheryll Guilbeau for dinner as planned. Navigating at dusk was a challenge and I took a wrong turn, but as always, wrong turns are interesting. We were in horse country, where the streets have names like "Thoroughbred" and "Palomino." Even in the gathering darkness, we couldn't miss seeing an amazing plantation-style mansion sitting back as if sipping a mint julep, surrounded by acres and acres enclosed in white fences.

Finally we arrived at Prejeans, just five minutes late (whew!). Sitting outside having a smoke was Anna's new Marine friend Josh. She had told him at Whiskey River Landing that we'd be there. The three of us went inside, where a giant taxidermied alligator reigned over the long tables below. We easily found Cheryll with her son and our friend Joe already digging into the biggest plate of (of course) fried appetizers I've ever seen. We dug in, too, and then enjoyed another liesurely meal full of new tastes. I found that Cheryll, like Joe, was a food-sharer. We were like one big family, swapping

and sharing food off each other's plates, using our fingers, kind of gross really but no one was sick and no one seemed to mind.

During the meal, I mostly talked with Cheryll and her son; Anna and Josh put their heads together; and Joe asked every woman nearby to dance.

"My grandmother always told me that if a woman takes the trouble to get dressed up, you should at least ask her to dance," he said.

We were sitting not far from Les Frères Michot, three guys sitting on chairs and playing traditional Cajun dance hall/back porch music, amplified just a bit. (No need for ear plugs here!)

Josh asked them if he could join them with his accordion, but they turned him down. Afterwards, Josh complained that they played "wanky." "You can play traditional music without sounding wanky," he told me.

Anna told him, "You're just bitter cuz they wouldn't let you play."

I thought Les Frères Michot were wonderful. Joe explained, "There are so many Michots that you never know which of them you'll see – and they're all good."

It was drizzling outside when we walked to our cars. We stopped for a few minutes and Josh gave us an impromptu concert on his fiddle. His fingers flew. Joe said, "You can hear the Celtic influences in that tune." We sure could.

Later, Anna told me about some of the things Josh had told her. He's a Cajun, one of six siblings. (Joe is one of eight siblings, but from the Baby Boomer generation.) Josh told Anna that unlike Northerners, people get married earlier in Louisiana and have kids sooner.

"Y'all care more about money up North," he said.

Anna countered that Northerners just want to get an education and a good job first, so they can provide for their kids – unintentionally making Josh's point rather than refuting it. Josh also told Anna, "I probably won't have any teeth when I get old."

It seemed like an accurate prophecy, judging by a lot of the folks we'd met down there. Either they have no dental insurance and can't afford dental care, or they have bad diets and oral hygiene, or some combination. Whatever the reason, lots of people are missing lots of teeth. With the teeny tiny houses standing on cinder blocks, many in disrepair, Cajun country looked poor without the help of a hurricane.

But as we discovered dancing and working with them, folks in Acadiana have great wealth. They are rich in fun despite their poverty in material things. They are always ready to laugh, always ready to tease. How many American towns like Lafayette,

with a population of 200,000 people (now 300,000 with New Orleans evacuees), could keep musicians busy seven days a week?

After we parted, Josh returned directly to his Marine base in New Orleans. He had been in Lafayette just to visit his family for the weekend, and to listen to music.

Tuesday: New Iberia and Avery Island

Tuesday was a short workday for Anna and me. It was my first day trying to navigate by myself to New Iberia. I failed miserably, and Sister Ancilla's hand-drawn map didn't help. I turned the wrong direction and created an hour-long detour that took us almost to Crowley and back. Flat land, flat land, flat land all the way, with nothing familiar in sight. During that hour, I felt like crying several times from sheer frustration, but I'm not much of a crier. Had I been able to let out my frustration, I think I might have felt better.

"Well, Joe's from Crowley, so at least we saw a little of where he's from," I said to Anna, trying to look at the bright side. Thank God for cell phones that work in the boondocks, because I was able to call Una at the Diocese offices and get corrected directions. Turns out that Sister -- of all people!! -- had written something wrong on the map. She wrote "Acadiana Hwy" instead of "Evangeline Hwy." Very un-nunlike to make a mistake, in my experience.

Bob and B.J. had a good chuckle at my navigational woes when we arrived in late morning. Huey's big joke was, "I'm gonna tie a string to your car before you drive home, and you can follow it back next time."

It wasn't hard to figure out that Bob wanted to do a professional job of final mud-smoothing work on the drywall seams, so Anna and I busied ourselves pounding nails and adding another coat of mud over the drywall nails. I swept dust and debris for a couple of hours. I had forgotten how much sweeping is involved with remodeling -- that was what Mike and I did every day when we remodeled our home in 1981.

It was colder than earlier in the week, around 60 degrees, but bright and sunny, so we decided to take the late afternoon for a trip to Avery Island nearby. Avery Island is the home of the Tabasco sauce factory and the "Jungle Gardens," an amazing transformation of old salt quarries.

We decided to tour the gardens first. Joe had raved about a Buddha statue there. According to Joe, the statue was a gift to Americans who rescued it from robbers who stole it from ancient China. The paths winding through the amazing 250-acre gardens encompass about four miles, a bit much for late in the day, so we decided to drive through. We stopped here and there to admire the amazing bamboo plantings. We searched the many lagoons for alligators -- no luck on such a cool day. When we finally found the Buddha, we were surprised to find him young, the Prince Siddhartha. It was an amazing large statue many times life-size, made of carved and painted wood. According

to our guide sheet, Siddhartha Gautama “sits cross-legged in the center of the sacred lotus flower... quite as he did 800 years ago in the Shonfa Temple near Peiping, where he had been placed by the Emperor Hui-Tsung during the Tsung Dynasty between the years 960 and 1127 AD.” Wow. He was *old*.

The Buddha is protected inside a glass house with a pagoda top. The path to the statue is winding, with amazing greenery and statues here and there along the way. Behind the Buddha is an amazing stand of tall bamboo, in front a quiet lagoon. Lovely!

By the time we finished moseying through the gardens, we found the Tabasco sauce factory to be closed for tours. But Anna snuck inside and snapped a couple of pictures for her friend in Minnesota who is crazy for Tabasco sauce.

After three nights of music, Anna and I were ready for a quiet night. We had a “readathon” dinner and went to bed early.

Wednesday: Walter and Marian

Sister Ancilla, a woman of mercy and driving skills, led us to our new assignment: Walter and Marian’s home in Delcambre. (The locals pronounce it “DEL-come.”) Sister told us we’d be stripping the finish off kitchen cabinets. Now I was sure God had a funny sense of humor because next to doing drywall, stripping wood is my next-most-hated do-it-yourself job.

We pulled up to a small house in a neighborhood. There was a statue of Mary outside the home. Unlike Dolores and Huey’s place, this place felt more small-town than rural. We met Walter right away, and there was a lot less chat than when we first met Dolores. We bid Sister goodbye and got right to work. I warned Anna about how furniture stripper can burn your skin, but we never felt the sting as we worked. They must have improved the product since my furniture-stripping days 25 and 30 years ago.

Tomboy

At some point this week, Joe told me, “You’re kind of a tomboy.”

Wow. No one ever called me that before.

Long ago I worked with a woman who had lived in Louisiana. She called it the most “male-chauvinistic state in the Union.” I wonder if Joe’s comment to me reflected a little of that old feeling. Maybe women who work on drywall and cabinets are not quite normal, and thus “tomboys.” Or maybe there was another reason Joe made that comment. Anyway, I took it as a compliment.

Now if only I had the body of a nice tomboy marathon-runner.

Walter was a man of few words but many smiles, as was his friend Freeman. Freeman was the man who had built new lower cabinets in the kitchen. Our job was to strip the top cabinets so all the cabinets could be painted to match. While we slathered on the stinky stripping solution, Walter took trim boards outdoors to paint. Freeman nailed up paneling and did other carpenter work all around the house.

Walter had lost his left leg below the knee in a car accident about 30 years earlier. Using crutches didn't slow him down. He was everywhere in the house and yard, doing projects, moving building materials and running errands.

Dolores and Huey had re-designed their house to accommodate a wheelchair for James. Similarly, Walter and Marian took the disaster as an opportunity for redesigning their home. Walter explained to us how his house used to be laid out. As long as old stud walls had to be torn out and new stud walls had to be rebuilt, they might as well be situated more conveniently. What Walter created was a shotgun house, where you could stand at the front door and shoot a gun straight through a long hallway and out the back door. I had seen a lot of those homes in Key West and New Orleans and always wondered how they'd be arranged on the inside. Now I knew. The living room, bedrooms, kitchen, and dinette extend off the central hallway like peas in a pod.

There was a storage room off the living room. I said, "That would make a good utility room."

Walter loved the idea. "I never thought of that!" he said. He and Marian had lived with their washer and dryer in the kitchenette for so long they didn't question it. We brainstormed a while about water pipes and electric or gas to the dryer, but both Walter and Freeman thought it was do-able. I felt like a regular house-designer.

After we'd been working on the cabinets for a few hours, Walter introduced us to Marian. She was bed-ridden in their FEMA trailer in the neat-as-a-pin back yard. Walter told us that Marian had a kidney transplant 16 years earlier, but Marian was having medical problems now. She hoped she wouldn't need dialysis again.

Anna and I approached Marian's bed slowly. Marian looked tiny. Her eyes were sunken and black-rimmed. But Marian was all smiles, just like Walter. She thanked us for helping and she spoke of her faith. She said it was what kept her going. She laughed about the nosy neighbors who wanted to know about "those people" who were helping.

"I just told them the church sent them, God sent them!" she said with another laugh.

Anna told me later, "After we met Marian, I had a shot of energy." Before that, she was about ready to quit for the day. We had talked about driving again to Avery Island and trying to catch the tour of the Tabasco factory before it closed at 4:00 pm. No chance of that after meeting Marian. Anna was on fire.

At about 2:00 in the afternoon, I realized I had pushed too hard as I rubbed against the wood to get off the old finish. My old herniated discs in my neck must have got irritated, inflamed, and squeezed the nerve again. Then the nerve tells the muscles to get irritated and pretty soon I have a big tight painful mess in my neck and shoulder. I knew I had to stop or I might have to go to the doctor, which happened recently when I painted a small room back home.

“I want to finish this today,” Anna said. She was a scraping machine. So I explained to Walter that I had to give my shoulder a rest, and I took off for a walk through the neighborhood. I passed many houses as tidy as Walter and Marian’s, and then came to a church cemetery. I looked at the small above-ground crypts, some of them toppled from the water surge. Finally I ended up at Walter and Marian’s little church, St. Martin de Porres, whose bells Anna and I had been hearing peal all day. You can see the steeple from Walter and Marian’s house. I thought sure the church would be locked, as churches usually are nowadays, but the front door was open.

I walked in. The church was beautiful, simple, Gothic, blue and white. A lady knelt in on of the front rows, part of a “perpetual adoration” team I guessed, like the group at St. Mary’s church back home in Menomonee Falls. They take turns praying in the church 24 hours a day. (Imagine all that good energy going out into the world, just like my Grandma Hoerig praying Rosaries all day.)

I went into a pew a few rows behind the lady, glad she didn’t turn around to see the dusty woman with a ponytail sticking through the back of her baseball cap.

I knelt to say a prayer. One prayer came to my mind instantly:

“Thank you.”

Never in my life has that prayer come so easily.

The Greatest Prayer

Once I heard a story about a Buddhist monk. Someone asked him, “What is the greatest prayer?” The monk answered, “There is only one proper prayer. It is ‘thank you.’”

Usually I have to remind myself to say “thank you.” Not today.

When I returned to Walter and Marian’s house, Anna was still going full-steam. There was no stopping her. My shoulder pain was beginning to scream, so I knew I wouldn’t be joining her that day. Walter told me where I could go see the shrimping boats nearby. I jumped into our car and drove there. The boats were beautiful in their functional and funky way, all lined up along the moorings.

I wasn't sure if the shrimpers were home for the day, or idle because of the hurricane. I'd heard that Rita destroyed the shrimp grounds and oyster beds, but I wasn't sure about that. Someone had also told us that Rita's swell brought salty sea water onto farmers' fields 30 miles inland. Since it hadn't rained much since then, the salt remained and farmers hadn't been able to plant. Some scientists were working to develop a rice strain that could tolerate the salinated soil, but no luck so far.

At 5:00 pm I was back in the house and Anna had finally killed the stripping project. She turned to us, arms flung out, as if to say "Ta-da!" Freeman, Walter and I clapped. The wood was smooth as a baby's butt.

First stop on the way home that evening was Walgreens to find Ben-Gay and Ibuprofen for the ailing baby geezer with the sore shoulder. Back at the dorm, we ate a quick supper. Then Anna the massage therapist kneaded and pressed my sore spots for almost an hour. She slapped a Ben-Gay compress on top, I took four Ibuprofen pills, and went to bed for the night at 7:00 pm. I slept hard for the next 12 hours.

Thursday: Delcambre and New Orleans

I was still in shoulder shell-shock, so I knew I couldn't do any heavy work on Thursday. We easily found Walter and Marian's home in Delcambre – navigating was finally getting simpler on our sixth day there! Sheesh.

When we arrived, Walter and Freeman had a good old soul station on the radio. I wished I had found that one yesterday when I couldn't get good reception for KBON. Freeman told us that he used to play out a lot as a musician, good old soul and R&B. He doesn't like the "new stuff." Neither do I.

I went to work sweeping sawdust and doing a little paint-priming on trim boards. Walter painted near me, usually sitting on a wheeled stool. However, once I caught him standing on his one good leg, painting away as smoothly and firmly as could be.

"When I saw you do that, I thought 'I bet that man dances,'" I told him later.

"I did do a bit of Zydeco years ago," he said with a little laugh. He said his back hurt him more in recent years, though, so his dancing days were over for now. I thought how hard it must be to keep a spine straight if you're always walking on one leg. Walter told me he recently took disability retirement from the plant where he had worked for 30 years.

Freeman taught Anna how to use a caulking gun, and she went to work caulking every crevice and wood trim mar she could find. We knew it would be a short day of work, because we had decided to finally go to New Orleans that day.

We had a decent map, but Freeman and Walter augmented it with their own directions. Walter kept saying, "When you leave New Orleans, be sure to stay in the

right lane and follow the 'Bootie' sign. Don't go through Baton Rouge because if there's an accident on that causeway, you can get stuck for four or five hours. There's nowhere to go."

I made him spell "Bootie." He thought it was "Boute" or something like that.

Finally Walter said, "Stevie Wonder and Ray Charles couldn't get lost going there." I didn't pick up on that joke until an hour later, when we were on the road to New Orleans.

Anna and I bid our good-byes to Walter and Freeman and left shortly after 1:00 pm. We knew it was the last time we'd see these two lovely men, and that was sad for us. I can't count the number of times Walter said "Thank you" to us. He called me "ma'am" a lot. It was humbling to be thanked so profusely.

Allons à New Orleans! Let's go to New Orleans! Taking on any such trip is something that makes me feel I must gird my loins for battle – my never-ending battle with navigation. But Anna and I really wanted to go – to see the damage from Hurricane Katrina, and to have fun in the place we remembered so well from our trip there in January of 2003. During that visit, Mike and I and Anna had a rendezvous with my brother Dan, his wife Nan and their two daughters Nikki and Ali. They live in California. Our official reason to gather was to celebrate Nikki's 21st birthday. Unofficial reason – who needs a reason? It was a great time, in spite of not enough warm clothing for the 50-degree dampness.

The sky was so amazing as we drove along that Anna leaned out the window to snap a picture. Better than a "Simpsons" sky – bluer than blue, lots of white clouds posing for a photo.

When I think of Louisiana, I think of "prairie." As we drove, there was a prairie burn blazing away – lots of smoke drifting in the sky. It was weird to see big flames so near the freeway.

Eventually, I realized we were on a bridge – probably crossing the Atchafalaya Swamp below. Mike and I had spent a couple of hours on that swamp when we visited for Festivals Acadiens in September 2003. It is vast. It covers almost 600,000 acres, our country's largest swamp wilderness.

Before the DNR got strict about wetlands, Louisiana built this amazing causeway right through the swamp. It goes ON and ON and ON. Joe Paris later told us that the usual cost for a mile of interstate is one million bucks... but for the Louisiana bridge-freeways, the cost can be many millions per mile. The pylons have to reach 60 to 80 feet down under the swamps to firm ground.

Our trip from Delcambre to New Orleans – about two hours -- was mostly on bridges! We were surrounded by swamp vegetation – spooky skeletal swamp trees and Spanish moss hanging all around us. I have never been on a more amazing car ride.

We arrived in New Orleans about 3:00 pm and got off the freeway around the Super Dome, where thousands of flood victims huddled during the weeks after Katrina hit. I had no idea where to find the lower ninth ward, where the damage was the worst, so we just drove around.

I was amazed to find that the style of homes I thought unique to the French Quarter was common all through New Orleans: funky frame houses, some shotgun-style, with gracious front porches and carved decorations. Now there was a new decoration: blue tarps -- stretched tightly over hundreds of roofs. On many houses, we saw the signs we had read about: an "X" with date of rescuer's visit, report on bodies or survivors found, report on animals found and rescued.

On every street corner were signs advertising clean-up crews and insurance experts.

A quiet game in the street

New Orleans four and a half months after Hurricane Katrina: piles of drywall, rags, litter, a freezer, a fridge. The most amazing scene that stays in my mind is this: On a side street behind a parked car, four people played a game at a card table set down right where another car might park. A few friends hung around nearby. It was as if there was no expectation of traffic, and the street was the most pleasant place to play a game.

As we moved out of neighborhoods and toward the French Quarter, traffic got *heavy*. I wanted to buy a map of New Orleans. To do this, I pulled into a tiny strip mall where traffic was literally moving in every direction. I threw some cash in Anna's hand and she ran into the Walgreens to buy a map. While I dodged cars for 20 minutes, she made her purchase and was back to the car before I could reach the exit. Whew!

Who could forget the name "Tchoupitoulas Street?" That was the artery I followed to the French Quarter. We found a public parking lot next to the levee right near Jackson Square. It was 4:00 pm now, and we wanted to leave around 7:00 so I'd still be up for work at Dolores and Huey's home tomorrow. Three hours seemed like a good short visit.

Anna and I wandered over to the French Market, but it was closed – darn! We encountered the truly dirtiest buskers either of us had ever seen – clothes filthy, wrinkled like old toilet paper, fingernails black. Joe had told us, "It's been rough for street performers since the hurricanes."

We poked through a few tourist trap gift shops. One shirt had two hurricane graphics right over the bosom area – one swirl labeled "Rita" and one "Katrina," with the label "Girls Gone Wild." Another shirt highlighted Rita, Katrina and Wilma – "Twisted Sisters." One said, "FEMA – Our 4-letter f-word." One said "Katrina Recovery Team,"

but there was nothing for Rita. I think Rita and Cajun country have been forgotten. Again, signs of the fleur de lis were everywhere.

As evening grew dark, we passed Jackson Square and I looked for candles and card tables. What a shock to see *not one* fortune teller in the giant square! There used to be card table after card table set up for the tourists. There weren't any tourists walking through the square, either. It was positively ghostly.

Everywhere we walked, we saw businesses emblazoned with signs reading "NOW OPEN!" Harrad's Casino had a sign saying it would open in a month. After we walked for a time, we ducked into a Middle East restaurant to eat dinner. Grape leaves wrapped around rice and meats and vegetables, other foreign delectables. Strange food to eat in New Orleans, but it hit the spot.

We wandered for a while on residential Bourbon Street, but never reached the heart of the French Quarter. We never heard any music. But it was enough for us. We needed to be on our way – we were workers this visit, not just tourists.

It was about 8:00 pm when we finally left the Quarter, and 8:30 by the time we found our way to the expressway. It took us a long time to find our preferred entrance, which was blocked off by a semi that got stuck. We puzzled our way to another entrance. Finally on the freeway, we were buzzing along just as Walter and Freeman had directed us, when Anna and I got into a conversation about nose piercing.

"I think the nose rings are actually cute on some people, if they're really tiny," I admitted.

"I should get one!" said Anna, enthusiasm unbounding.

"No, you should NOT get one," I said with conviction, as the sign for "Boute" flew by me on the right.

NO! We were on the way to Baton Rouge.

DANG! There was no turning back, and there were probably 100 miles between us and the next exit.

Freeman was right. You can get stuck forever on that causeway. After rolling along at top speed for about an hour, we came to an almost-dead stop.

DANG!

I reverted to an old trick of mine that I often use at the post office, especially around Christmas time: I noted the time. Often, a slow-down is much shorter than I perceive it to be. This one turned out to be a half-hour, though it *felt* like two. It was

caused not by an accident, but by construction that closed off the right lane. We all had to *merge*.

When I read the “Merge left ” sign, I merged immediately. For the next 15 minutes, I watched cars, trucks, and even a great lumbering SEMI whiz past me on the right, even though the drivers must have seen the same “Merge left” sign. Grrrr!

When the end of the right lane came into sight, I said, “It’ll be a cold day in hell before I let those f---ing f---heads into this lane.”

Anna furiously wrote that quotation into her journal, apparently amused at my non-momlike utterance.

And I had to eat my words, or let a guy in a red sports car bash into my car. I let him in.

We got home about 11:00 pm, and went fast to sleep for our last day of work.

Friday: Huey and Dolores again

By our last day I was almost an expert finding New Iberia. Anna and I had taken exactly one work day to adjust to Southern Time, so we never again rushed to work as if we were punching a clock. However, we got to Dolores and Huey’s respectably early. We were hoping the two final coats of mud would have been dried and sanded on the drywall, so today could be painting day.

We were dreaming.

The seams were dry all right, but they all needed to be sanded. So Anna and I armed ourselves with dust masks – I even used goggles – and we started to sand. Kirsten was home from school, and after a little instruction from me, she joined our effort.

I had said, “Why are you home from school?”

“I’m sick,” she said, stretching out the “i” in “si-i-i-i-k.”

“You don’t look sick.”

“I got lice,” she explained. She pronounced the word “lice” short and sharp.

Like all kids, Kirsten was glad to be part of the work project. She worked for at least a half-hour before she got tired of it.

Still paranoid about my neck and shoulder, I sanded gingerly all morning. Anna pushed hard against the wall, and wound up hurting her back around the shoulder blades.

While Bob and B.J. tried to get an electric sander to work, we hand-sanded the whole house. The only things we skipped were the ceilings.

After lunch, we returned to yard clean-up, moving our attention to opposite side of the house from where we had cleaned up on Monday. It was fun to be outside again, especially after getting covered with the white dust from the drywall mud. There was so much dust on my watch I wondered if it would still work (it did). B.J. told me that apprentice drywallers always get the job of sanding, and do it for days on end. He said when he did it, he never used a mask because masks bothered him. Between all that dust over the years and his habit of stopping often to smoke cigarettes, his lungs must have been in rough shape.

Anna and I fell in love more than ever with Kirsten that day, and also with Lucky. Lucky was one of the many dogs that haunted the place. He was a chihuahua mix, all brown soft fur, maybe 15 pounds, sweet as could be. Anna and I couldn't stop picking him up and petting him, and he loved the attention.

“Take him!” Dolores said.

“Take him!” Huey said.

On and off all day as we worked, Anna and I talked about taking Lucky. We even talked about neutering him once we got home; it was obvious Lucky was a ladies' man. Huey was horrified by that idea.

“No! That's mean. You'd turn him into a gay dog,” he said.

In the end, rationality won. At the end of the day, we hugged everyone goodbye, including Lucky.

Just as we got in our car to leave, my cell phone rang. It was Joe. He wanted us to pick him up from where he was doing storytelling that day, in St. Martinville, “on our way home.”

We had allotted just about enough time to take a nap and eat before our planned dance outing to Randol's. And I was NAVIGATED OUT. Picking up Joe was the last thing I wanted to do. But of course I said “yes.” Joe had explained that the way he lived without car and house was by doing nice things for people. He put gardens in all the homes of the siblings with whom he stayed. He cooked for them also, as he planned to do for us tonight.

Of course we got lost finding Joe, but finally worked our way to where he was thanks to stopping and asking for directions and contacting Joe again on a cell phone with a dying battery. As we drove to Immaculata with Joe navigating, he pointed out crawfish ponds. I had heard about them from Huey and Dolores, but didn't know what to look for. Joe pointed to the little plastic traps sticking out here and there in a field we were passing.

He explained that when rice fields or cane fields “rest,” they’re used for crawfish ponds. The fields are flooded and the traps capture the crawfish and make it easy to harvest the little creatures.

Joe had me take a short detour through the Lake Martin swampy wilderness area. Beautiful, spooky witches’ hair hanging off gnarled trees everywhere. (Witches’ hair is my name for Spanish moss.) We looked for gators. No luck.

One of the roads we took that evening was “Forty Arpent Road.” Joe explained about arpents. “The early settlers who lived here had a rule that you don’t build a house closer than 40 arpents from the bayou – so you wouldn’t get flooded. The 40-arpent line was considered a safe distance from the bayou.”

I wonder if all the flooding would have happened if people today followed the 40 arpent rule.

We made it back to our dorm just in time to eat, wash up, and change out of our dusty clothes. Joe made supper from our many leftovers. It was yummy, and we were delighted that Sheri joined us.

People’s lives

Sheri, Anna and I talked about our experiences helping people with their houses. Sheri said, “I think that listening to people’s stories is even more important than working on the houses.”

We agreed with her.

When we finished supper, we showed Sheri our drawer of leftover food in the fridge and invited her to enjoy it – she had about a week more until she left for home back in Maine.

On the way to Randol’s, Joe somehow got wind of the fact that Anna wanted to buy a ring as a souvenir of her trip, but hadn’t found one. He told us there was an excellent flea market *on the way to the airport* where we could probably find a nice artsy ring. In fact, “if you watch now, you’ll see the way to go – it’s the same route you’ll take tomorrow.”

We needed to be at the airport by 10:30. I didn’t mind getting up early to shop, but I was *tired* of navigating.

“But this is on the way to the airport!!”

Okay, we’ll go in the morning.

That night at Randol's, we listened to a pick-up band featuring the very old Marlin Fonteneau with Ray Abshire and the very young Courtney Granger. They sat on chairs and played, in the style of the old Cajun dance halls and back-porch Cajun music-making. I walked up to Courtney and Ray and told them, "I have both your albums. I love your music." They smiled broadly.

We danced with a lot of the locals, one who looked exactly like Tony Perkins of "Psycho" fame. Sheri took to Cajun dancing with ease. Tony Perkins asked if we had danced here before.

"Yes," I said, "Saturday night."

Tony remembered Anna from that night, "looking like a princess." It was the evening she had worn the long Gypsy-style skirt, the strapless top and the high heels. By now, Anna knew how to dress for comfort and ease. She wore jeans, a pretty top, and boots. Cajun dancing is a bit too athletic for princess attire.

At one point, Anna began teaching Cajun two-step to a hunky 14-year-old German foreign exchange student. Joe laughed hard at that sight. "Look at that Wisconsin girl teaching Cajun dance in Louisiana!"

Anna told me later that the German boy asked her if she was "a real Cajun."

Are Greniers Cajuns?

I wondered about that question. Acadian people were booted out of Canada in the 1700s and scattered into New England as well as Louisiana and other places. My dad's family is from Massachusetts.

I checked my family tree. It looks like the answer is no, we're not Cajuns. My Grandfather "Peperes'" father was born in Weedon, P.Q., Canada, baptized at the Church of St. Janvier de Weedon. So our Canuck ancestors were still in Canada in the late 1800s.

We danced longer than we planned to. I walked up to Courtney and Ray again, and thanked them. They beamed and kept sawin' and fiddlin'.

We took Joe back to St. Martinville. The night was dark and the back roads even darker. Sheri drove along with us to be extra navigation assurance, something I really appreciated.

Back at the dorm, we bid her good night and packed our bags.

Go Figure

Anna and I were honored to give our time and effort to help with hurricane recovery. However, it was unsettling, to say the least, when we learned about government overspending. Sr. Ancilla told us the government was paying \$600 a week for \$60 campsites around Lafayette. She also said they paid \$1,200 per week per stateroom in cruise ships for medical volunteers in New Orleans – and no gasoline was being expended to motor the cruise ships docked for the duration.

My nurse friend “Prairie Dawn” volunteered in New Orleans at the same time Anna and I worked in Lafayette. She stayed in one of those cruise ships, and helped at St. Bernard’s Hospital in the lower ninth ward. It was like a M.A.S.H. unit. She said they had no lab, no x-ray machine, and no centrifuge to sterilize instruments. Many patients came in with sky-high blood pressure readings (from stress from living in a tent city, she guessed) – their lower blood pressure number was higher than the top number should be. “They would have been hospitalized in Wisconsin,” Prairie Dawn said.

The parent corporate owner of the hospital had abdicated. Nurses told my friend they had lost their pensions. Doctors said they themselves didn’t have medical insurance – apparently a common way of life in Louisiana. Prairie Dawn said doctors were working as volunteers, 10 and 12 hour days. My friend worked there for two weeks of 12-hour days. When she came home, she experienced chaos nightmares.

The New Orleans Kiwanis are organizing an effort to gather items needed by St. Bernard’s Hospital, New Orleans, LA. Donations may be sent to them as well as to United Way, Lafayette, LA, or to the Catholic Diocese of Lafayette, 1408 Carmel Avenue, Lafayette, LA 70501.

Saturday: The Flea Market that Wasn’t

We got up early and found the flea market location no sweat, except the flea market wasn’t there. Grrr. Luckily we found Joe by cell phone. He had just arrived there himself.

We found out the flea market shuts down almost completely during the winter months. There were just a few vendors, and we took full advantage of their presence. We bought brown organic eggs (a thank you gift for Joe), kumquats and satsuma (both flavors new to us), and pickled okra!!, then enjoyed coffee and sweet bread in a coffee shop nearby. Joe, as usual, chatted up the locals (“Where do you live? What’s your dad’s name?”) and got a tip for a jewelry shop nearby for Anna’s *ring*.

We had just enough time to search for a jewelry shop. Trouble was, most stores were not supposed to open until 10:00 am. Joe led us to a shop that didn’t have rings but he kept asking until he found one. Finally, thanks to Joe’s persistence and my patience, Anna found not one but two rings, inexpensive, silver, unique. She put them on her fingers and flung her be-ringed hands outward. Almost every finger had a ring from

some different place in the world, including Key West, Northern Ireland, Australia and New Zealand.

“I still have three fingers left with no rings!” she announced.

To my surprise, I found a little sterling silver fleur de lis charm at our last shop. I had been thinking how nice it would be to have one to put on the silver chain I usually wear around my neck. I usually wear a Celtic cross I found in Dublin, but it would be nice to wear something French for a change. I bought the charm.

“Now I can wear two sides of my ethnic heritage,” I said to Anna and Joe, slipping the charm onto the chain. “I wonder how I should show my German side – with a bratwurst charm?”

Anna and I left with other souvenirs, also. Joe gave her a necklace with a pendant he made out of volcanic rock and clay – beautiful. He gave me a little Paris Posey, a tiny pin-on flower-holder he made out of clay. I remembered learning about these little things at Old Falls Village back in Menomonee Falls. In the old days, women would pin the little flower-holders onto their dresses and put tiny flowers, in water, inside them.

Joe’s best gifts to us were the stories he told constantly, history then and now, about the places we went. We hugged him goodbye and drove to the airport.

This time there was no gator on the runway, and our flights went without a hitch. One of the best parts about coming home was letting Mike do the driving! I was *sick* of navigating. I realized on this trip that one reason I’m so bad at navigating is that I’ve been married for 33 years to a guy who insists on driving and I, lazy, don’t pay attention.

In the week to come, I returned to my various jobs but my feet felt like a sleepwalker’s feet, like I was walking through Jello. I could not wake up. It felt like depression, but I wasn’t depressed. I thought it might be mental and physical exhaustion, but that didn’t make much sense to me. I had a couple of chaos dreams, which maybe reflected that I was disturbed deep down by all the evidences of chaos I saw in Louisiana.

Finally on the seventh day of exhaustion, I figured out what was probably behind my fatigue: NO SUN! I had worked and walked so much in the bright Louisiana sun for a week, and then came home to cloud-cover. After that epiphany, I kept lots of lights turned on and got better quickly.

Anna had an incredibly hectic first week back in town. It was the start of second semester, which is stressful in itself. Beyond that, she had to go from class to class to beg to be allowed to late-register, because of registering after deadline when she returned from New Zealand last semester.

I called and asked her if she was experiencing any bad dreams or having any difficulty after our week in Louisiana.

“No, not at all,” she said. “Those people lost their homes. I can handle this.”

The End