

EYE ON THE GULF COAST

THE VIEW FROM A NEW ENGLAND ARTIST

Written & Illustrated by

Paul Gaj





www.eyeonthegulfcoast.com

EYE ON THE GULF COAST – THE VIEW FROM A NEW ENGLAND ARTIST



EYE ON

THE GULF COAST

THE VIEW FROM A NEW ENGLAND ARTIST

Written & Illustrated by
Paul Gaj

This book (and the journey that made it possible) has been published through the generous contributions and support of friends, family, corporate and private donors.

FRONT AND BACK COVERS: *West Florida Panhandle Looking Towards the Gulf. Acrylics on Panel.*

TITLE PAGE: *Up for Repairs. Pointe a la Hache, Louisiana. Pencil.*

PHOTO CREDITS: Unless otherwise indicated in the caption, all photographs have been taken by Paul Gaj.

ILLUSTRATION CREDITS: Unless otherwise indicated in the caption, all illustrations and diagrams have been created by Paul Gaj.

No part of this book may be reproduced, digitally stored, captured, or transmitted without the expressed written consent of the author other than for promotional purposes.

First printing, 2011
Copyright © 2011 by Paul Gaj

Cataloging in Publication Data

Paul Gaj, Groton, MA

Eye on the Gulf Coast – The View From a New England Artist

by Paul Gaj

Groton, 2011

80 p. 74 illus. 1.50 cm.

1. Eye on the Gulf Coast – Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida – Aftermath of the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill.

I. Paul Gaj

ISBN: 978-0-615-43679-1



A father and son, casting nets for bait. Bayou La Batre, Louisiana. *Pencil.*

For Nancie

Acknowledgements

I cannot begin my thanks without mentioning the overwhelming support given to me by my wife Nancie, my daughter Phoenix, and my son Maxfield. Without their love and encouragement, before, during, and after taking on this project, I would not have been able in good conscience to immerse myself in organizing and executing such an endeavor. I thank them deeply for their confidence in me.

To all of my donors and supporters who contributed monetarily and with the greatest moral support, I am eternally grateful. I felt rather gifted to be given so much by so many based solely on my desire to go to the Gulf Coast and document the aftermath of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, and the unconditional enthusiasm shown by everyone to help my cause and see the results of my efforts.

Having never been to many of the areas I visited, I was not sure what kind of reaction to expect from the residents as I approached them for information and direction. To my delight and expanding appreciation of the general population in this country, I was more than impressed with the outcome. I tried on all occasions to let the delicate line between observation and intrusion be my guide when speaking to anyone and/or photographing property and events. The reactions and responses were equally respectful.

My new friends from the Gulf Coast were more than gracious in the stories, kindness, hospitality, cuisine, and warm cheer they shared with me. I hope that the information and images I have collected will put that region in a clearer light and continue the focus on the adversity brought on by man, nature, and bureaucracy there. Hopefully, anyone who reads this book will have a greater appreciation for the beauty and resilience of the land, waters, and people of the Gulf Coast.

Paul Gaj
Artist, Illustrator, Author and Designer

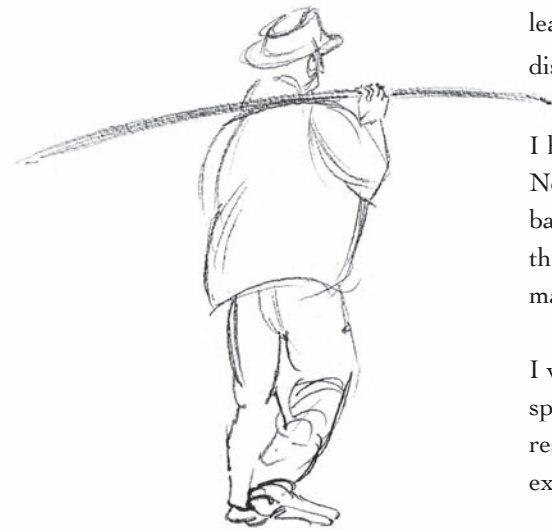
Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	6	MISSISSIPPI	50
INTRODUCTION	8	OCEAN SPRINGS	52
MAP OF THE GULF COAST	10	BILOXI	54
		GULFPORT	56
A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE GULF COAST	12	LONG BEACH, PASS CHRISTIAN, WAVELAND, AND BAY ST. LOUISE	58
WAR, SLAVERY, AND ALLEGIANCE	14	PICKING UP IN MISSISSIPPI	60
SEE FOOD. EAT FOOD.	16	LOUISIANA	62
HURRICANES	18	THE BOOGIE WOOGIE BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY	64
KATRINA	20	JUST OUTSIDE OF DELACROIX AND POINTE A LA HACHE	66
PETROLEUM, NATURAL GAS, COMMERCIAL FISHING, POLITICS, AND DISASTER	22	THE BIG EASY	68
DEEPWATER HORIZON CLEAN-UP	24	DELTA DAWN IN VENICE	70
		THE GULF OF MEXICO	72
FLORIDA	26	LOUISIANA CLEAN-UP	74
SUGAR SAND AND MOLASSES	28	HABITAT AND HUMANITY	76
THE BEST DEFENSE	31	ABOUT THE ARTIST	78
BOOMERANG	32	LIST OF DONORS AND SPECIAL THANKS	79
APALACHICOLA	34		
DEPARTING FLORIDA	36		
ALABAMA	38		
DAUPHIN ISLAND AND BAYOU LA BATRE	40		
BAYOU LA BATRE	42		
BAYOU LA BATRE – PART DEUX	45		
GULF SHORES, PERDIDO BAY, ORANGE BEACH, AND THE SWEET COAST OF ALABAMA	46		
CLEANING THE ALABAMA COAST	48		

Introduction

Many people throughout the country were appalled by the economic and ecological devastation in the Gulf of Mexico brought on by the tragic Deepwater Horizon oil spill which began with a deadly explosion on April 20, 2010. Eleven rig workers lost their lives, 17 were injured, and a total of 110 people survived. Nearly 206 million gallons of crude oil eventually leaked into the Gulf waters and close to 320 miles of the Louisiana coastline alone were impacted.

The wellhead was officially sealed on September 19, 2010, but the effects, both environmental and economic, persist. We all wanted to help in some way, yet as the leak was capped, the focus and interest from the rest of the country also began to dissipate, except for an incidental update on the evening news.



Fisherman tending to his boat. Pass Christian, Mississippi. Pencil.

I have spent a good portion of my career painting the seascapes and waterways of New England and could only imagine how awful it would feel to walk along tar-bathed sands on Cape Cod. It would be equally discouraging not to be able to enjoy the seafood that provides both livelihood and nourishment, or the pristine coves and marshes that have inspired decades of artists and visitors here.

I wanted to document the immediate transformation of the Gulf in the wake of the spill through my watercolors, photographs, sketches and brief conversations with residents over a three week period and compile my observations into a book and exhibition titled “*Eye on the Gulf Coast – The View From a New England Artist*”.

What I was looking to bring back from my journey were not images of defeat and destruction, but rather optimism and human resilience. I believe that is what I have captured on the following pages.

The purpose of this project was twofold. First, as much as we in the Northeast and other parts of this country would like to, we could not go down there and scrub the oil off the rocks and birds, nor donate large sums of money to assist the effort. Second, as an artist, I not only want my work to say something about what I see, I want it to do something – have an effect – make an impression beyond a mere image, and in this case, generate additional publicity and support for the Gulf Coast. I am not trying to profit from the tragedy of others.

I have never intended to make an evil corporation or political issue from this. There are plenty of people and organizations out there doing that already. If anything, I was looking to become more informed about the situation from my first-hand experience, and I hope I could inform others and perhaps let the folks along the Gulf know that their tragedy is our tragedy and even though we are in New York or Minnesota, they are our citizen brothers and we truly care and want to help.

I could not have been more touched by the reaction I received from many of the people I spoke with. A large percentage thought it was incredible that someone from as far away as New England would care about their plight, let alone want to tell the story. Others were encouraged that the rest of the country hadn’t given up on their area or concern for their livelihood. They told me to say “...the shrimp are good and the coast is beautiful.” They are. Many also said they have always wanted to visit New England. I hope they do.

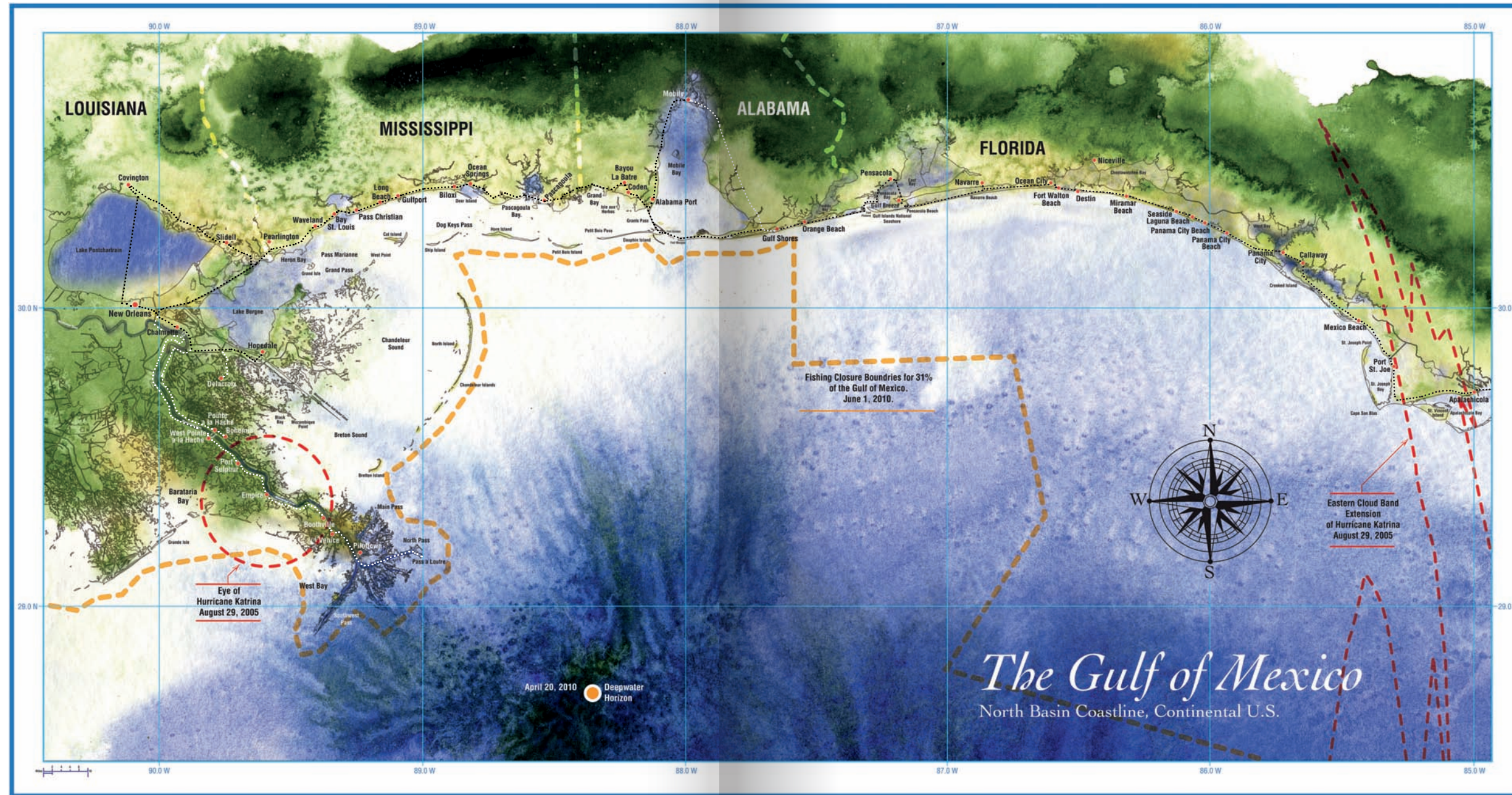
I must also admit to you that with the economic times being what they are all across the world and our country right now, a lot of people have been hit hard including myself and my family. After a great deal of self-evaluation, I could not help but wonder what made the victims of natural and industrial devastation keep their heads up in a downward economy. As I was told by one survivor of Hurricane Katrina, “You cry for about 15 minutes and then you start picking up the pieces.” That is what I intend to do.

Mapping the Story

The road trip from Groton, Massachusetts to Pensacola, Florida is 1,500 miles. Done safely, it took three long days. It is approximately 207 miles from Pensacola to Venice, Louisiana. If I had driven straight, it would have taken roughly 4.5 hours.

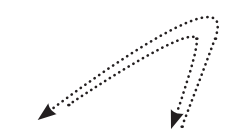
My plan was to spend 7 days in each direction and get as close to the coastline as possible. I hoped to get on the water outside of Mobile Bay in Alabama and off the coast of Venice, Louisiana. I was scheduled for a photo flight over Barataria Bay in Louisiana through a non-profit organization called SouthWings, but the pilot had his plane in for routine maintenance that weekend. I did manage to procure the services of a fish guide on the Mississippi River Delta out of Venice.

I did not lodge in luxury nor dine in splendor, though I ate and slept well on most occasions. In fact, I brought a small camping stove, provisions, and plenty of bottled water which I made good use of along the road.



The Itinerary

- November 1, 2010**
Navarre, FL
- November 2**
Navarre, FL, to Mobile, AL
- November 3, 4**
Mobile, AL to Gulfport, MS
- November 5, 6**
Gulfport, MS to Chalmette, LA
- November 7**
Chalmette, LA to Covington, LA
- November 8**
Covington, LA to Venice, LA
- November 9**
Venice, LA to Long Beach, MS
- November 10, 11, 12**
Gulfport, MS to Biloxi, MS
- November 13**
Gulfport, MS to Gulf Shores, AL
- November 14**
Gulf Shores, AL to Apalachicola, FL



The small black and white dotted lines show the route I followed along the coast by taking a "boomerang" approach to revisit the same areas.

A Brief History of the Gulf Coast

The Gulf of Mexico is the ninth largest body of water in the world. Minimal tidal ranges are 2 to 2 1/2 feet, but storm surges of 14 -16 feet and more have occurred. When you look out over the vast expanse of water on a crystal November afternoon, it looks like a brilliant, dazzling, sparkling, monstrous jewel. That jewel has rewarded and plagued the southern coast of the United States for hundreds of thousands of years.

Some 200 million years ago, during the Triassic Period, the Gulf basin was formed by tectonic rifting. There is no viable evidence that an asteroid created the Gulf. The surface area of the Gulf has long been pushed and pulled by other forces of nature. Due to the warm, shallow waters, it is a breeding ground for accelerating the velocity of killer hurricanes. Thirty-three rivers from 31 states in the U.S. empty into the Gulf. Those same rivers feed vast amounts of nutrients into the Gulf and combined with upwelling from its own waters provide enriched food sources for the sea life there.

Before European exploration, the Gulf was a source of food and sustenance as well as trade and transportation for early native settlers. It is said that Amerigo Vespucci was the first to map the Gulf of Mexico after exploring its coastline in 1497. Shipwrecks along the Pensacola shores show evidence of early Spanish occupation. In 1697, the French settled in the Mobile Bay area of Massacre Island, which is today known as Dauphin Island. The French also established forts in the Bay of Biloxi behind Ocean Springs. The Gulf Coast has seen its

share of civilization development and governmental land grabbing. It is and was a strategic area from a military and an economic standpoint.

In 1682 René-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle claimed the Mississippi River region of the Gulf for France and named it Louisiana in honor of King Louise XIV. The French were desperate to establish settlements and a foothold in Mississippi, Alabama, and the Louisiana area of the Gulf Coast. They were the first to introduce African slaves to the region in the early 1730s to provide cheap labor for agricultural projects. Pierre LeMoyne, Sieur d'Iberville, was chosen to lead the colonization of Louisiana. At the same time the English were encroaching on the area from Georgia and thus began the conflicts leading to the French and Indian War, and France ceding all land to the English in the Treaty of Paris in 1763. Unknown to the English, the French signed a secret treaty with the Spanish giving them all land to the west of the Mississippi River, including New Orleans.



The French would take it back briefly in the early 1800s before Thomas Jefferson made one of the greatest land purchases in history. The final battle of the War of 1812 between the United States and the British took place in New Orleans in 1815. It was another 50 years of growing pains before the Civil War ended in 1865 and took yet another terrible toll on the economic growth and the lives, society, and culture of the region.

Like the rest of the country, the area has had its crosses to bear. So much of what has made America and has made us proud comes from the Gulf Coast. So much of what we don't want to look at or remember also comes from there. People change. Attitudes change. Governments, economies, and boundaries morph and adapt. The Gulf Coast has probably seen more, been through more, and morphed and adapted more than any other part of the country in our short history, simply because of its proximity to what is deemed valuable by men in lofty wooden rooms, gilded carriages, or whirling silver helicopters.

This view of the Gulf of Mexico from the coast of Alabama has not changed in the five centuries since the first wave of European explorers laid eyes on this sparkling monster of a jewel. November 10, 2010.

War, Slavery, and Allegiance

I started an early autumn day in Biloxi, Mississippi with a tour of Beauvoir, the “Jeff” Davis estate and site of the historic confederate cemetery, where the tomb of the Unknown Confederate Soldier lies. I aptly paid my respects on this Veterans’ Day morning. The renovated main house and libraries on the estate along with a few outer buildings had been severely damaged – torn by the wind and waves of Katrina on August 29, 2005. Somehow, the remaining live oaks seem to have endured the most incredible extremes of weather and provide a comforting canopy for these resting souls.

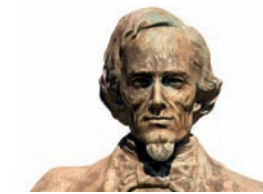
The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier of the Confederate States of America. Beauvoir, Biloxi, Mississippi.



Jefferson Davis, the first and only Confederate President, is spoken of with great respect here. And it is said he was also torn by the responsibility of leading the South during the Civil War. His parting speech to Congress left not a dry eye in the gallery. Originally a Senator of the United States, he chose to ally his allegiance with his home state and territory. There is much allegiance to home and state here.

In my mind, there is no question regarding the acceptance, tolerance, or practice of slavery. It is has no place in a civilized society. But I speak from my place and my time period with the grand telescope of hindsight, reason, and history. I am not saying the passions on both sides of the Civil War were wrong or right. As we know from research and careful study, both sides were conflicted in their own center point of the greater good and the acceptance of what had been established. We seem to have selectively evolved our tolerances, and acceptance, and thankfully have become more human in the process.

You may be wondering what this train of thought has to do with hurricanes and oil spills. It has everything to do with the context in which people of a particular time and place deal with the situations they are faced with and how they choose to react and respond, for better or worse.



Jefferson Davis was born in Kentucky and later served in the U.S. Army after graduating from West Point. He was a U.S. Senator from the state of Mississippi for 10 years, and was elected the first and only Confederate President in 1861. Later, captured and tried for treason, a review of his leadership and strategic decision-making policies came under attack. In the final analysis, over time, and with objective consideration, he is thought of with great reverence today. He retired at the Beauvoir estate in Biloxi, Mississippi.

After Davis' death, Beauvoir became a home and hospital for Confederate veterans. It also houses the Confederate Cemetery. Greatly damaged by Katrina, it has since been restored and is undergoing construction of a new library.



See Food. Eat Food.



The fresh shrimp from Alabama are white or a pale pink. I sketched this one in the sink of a Best Western Hotel before heading to Florida.
Watercolor and Black Pen.

There is nothing that swims, crawls, walks, or flies that hasn't been cooked and eaten along the Gulf. In particular, I was told that Louisiana has no problem with pests or varmints since they have figured out a way to make everything tasty. At any time of day, you can find someone fishing a creek or crabbing a bayou. There is no curfew on fishin'.

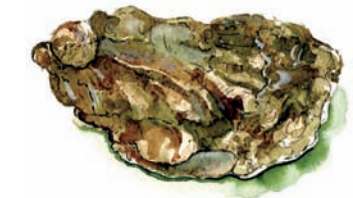
You cannot start your day, or walk a mile without being near something delicious in this part of the United States. At Jackie's suggestion, one of the rangers at Fort Pickens, I began my culinary explorations in Pensacola, Florida at Jerry's Cajun Cafe. I had to go right for the gumbo. They also offered me a wonderful little sampler of their other treats. There is nothing like the fish and shrimp to be had, fresh caught and fried on the docks of the Poor Man's Yacht Club in Ocean Springs, Mississippi on a Saturday morning. The seafood stuffed potato at the Crawl-gator Bar and Grill at the Cypress Cove Marina in Venice, Louisiana makes for a nice dinner when you are in that part of the Delta. They'll also cook your cleaned catch for you. La Bayou Restaurant on Bourbon Street had some great Creole Jambalaya, Shrimp Ya-Ya, and Fried Gator Pontchartrain. It became a favorite respite in New Orleans. And to get you going in the morning, the Light House Bakery on Dauphin Island, Alabama serves up the most incredible fresh baked cinnamon rolls and pastries you can imagine.

I happened to be in Bayou La Batre, Alabama around lunch time during one of my turns through that part of the coast and stopped at Cap'n Frank's BBQ Shack. Now, the Cap'n's Shack is really just that, with two outside "booths" on the front porch. You can get your barbecued sandwich on a Bun or Po' Boy, which is about two buns in size. It comes heaped with homemade coleslaw and extra sauce. I could have had the pulled pork or chicken, but the "Bayou Pig" caught my eye. I wasn't going to be having anything like that in New England in the near future. So a delicious pile of Barbecued Bayou Pig on a Bun with coleslaw and sauce cost \$3.65. Yee hah!

Oh, and can we talk oysters? Not everyone is fond of the oyster. I love the old adage that says "...it was a brave man who ate the first oyster." A good oyster is a fantastic delicacy. A bad oyster is a bad memory. They are credited with enhancing virility and contain enormous amounts of zinc and protein as well as vitamins A, B1, B2, B3, C and D. Well, whatever the advantage of oysters, along the Gulf, they are devoured with voracious enthusiasm. I would say I must have eaten close to 12 dozen oysters while on my trip. They are prepared differently in each area. Unfortunately, because most of the beds in eastern Louisiana on to Florida were closed, I was not eating the local fare. Most of the oysters I ate were from Texas. Far enough from the effects of the spill and fresh water flushing to be safe for consumption.

Dirty rice, jambalaya, fried crab, shrimp gumbo, fried shrimp, baked shrimp, stuffed shrimp, shrimp salad, shrimp and shrimp. You get the idea. There are so many ways to enjoy so many foods along the Gulf that you have to pace yourself. It is clearly an area that thrives off the bounty that breeds in the surrounding waters. Which is why the risk of eating tainted seafood from the Gulf has been even more devastating. It is cultural, recreational, gastronomical, and economical in terms of its impact on the livelihood and way of life there. I was told in Alabama that the waters and seafood have been monitored for a number of years before the oil spill and consistently since. Although there is concern over the amount of hydrocarbons and toxins that may have made their way into some of the sea life, you would have to be a scientist to determine what the ultimate risk level is. Even the scientists disagree with the testing parameters, sample volumes, and sample areas being studied.

The bottom line is this. No one knows for sure. Obviously you would not pluck fish from the waters in the immediate spill area and not expect them to be badly affected. Oysters further away in shallow waters that have no means of mobility would also be adversely affected. As one commercial fisherman told me, "Fish ain't stupid. They don't swim and stay in poisoned waters anymore than we would run into a fire." Personal discretion, research, and moderation would be your best guide. I ate quite a bit of shrimp, oysters, and fish there. To the best of my knowledge it was safe. I know it was delicious.



Oysters come in many colors and sizes. It is what's under the shell that matters. Whether raw, grilled, or crusted with cheese, there were no lack of styles to try.
Watercolor and Black Pen.



Satsumas are a mandarin orange-like citrus fruit introduced to the Gulf region in the 1800s. They currently grow in small groves along the levee plains of the Mississippi River in Louisiana.
Watercolor.

Hurricanes

I have only witnessed 2 hurricanes in my lifetime. One was Gloria in September of 1985 in Mystic, Connecticut. The other was Bob in 1991 in Halifax, Massachusetts. Gloria was a category one and Bob a category two. Being close to the water for Gloria, I recall boarding up windows and there were many downed trees in my vicinity. The eye of Bob passed over us in Halifax with an eerie calm I'll never forget.

The Saffir-Simpson Hurricane Scale

The 1-5 rating is based on a hurricane's current intensity. All wind speeds use the U.S. 1-minute average.

Category 1 Hurricane:

Winds 74-95 mph.
Storm surge generally 4-5 ft above normal.

Category 2 Hurricane:

Winds 96-110 mph.
Storm surge generally 6-8 feet above normal.

Category 3 Hurricane:

Winds 111-130 mph.
Storm surge generally 9-12 ft above normal.

Category 4 Hurricane:

Winds 131-155 mph.
Storm surge generally 13-18 ft above normal.

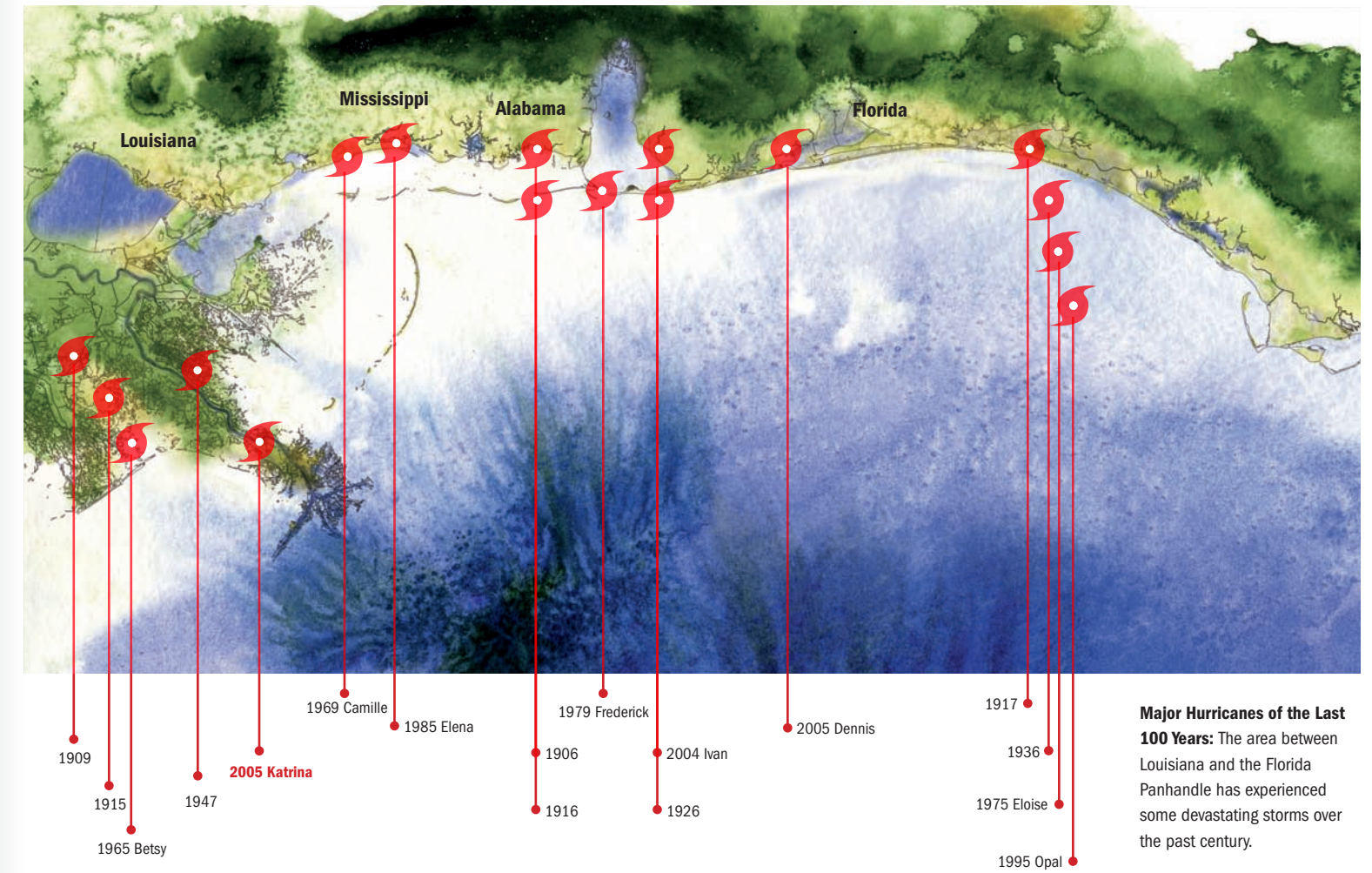
Category 5 Hurricane:

Winds greater than 155 mph.
Storm surge generally greater than 18 ft above normal.

Since 1900, nearly 40 major hurricanes have cut through the Gulf of Mexico from the coast of Texas to the Florida Panhandle. Making its way from Cuba into the Gulf, the Galveston Hurricane, a category 4, was one of the deadliest natural disasters in U.S. history. It tore through the shores of Galveston, Texas, on September 8, 1900, and took the lives of over 6,000 people.

Seven other hurricanes were close to category 4 intensity when making landfall. The only category 5 hurricanes to hit the coast were Camille in 1969 and Katrina in 2005. (Katrina may have actually been a category 4 by the time it made landfall). Historically, there have been two major periods of intense tropical activity in the Gulf. The first was between 1900 and 1920 when 11 major hurricanes hit the area. The second was between 1960 and 1980 when 10 major hurricanes scarred the Gulf.

Katrina was its own category of beast. Katrina first struck the Gulf Coast in Buras, Louisiana with 140 mph winds and then attacked near Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, with 135 mph winds. Katrina created a 27 foot storm surge in Gulfport, Mississippi and a 22 foot storm surge in Bay St. Louis. Waves as high as 48 feet occurred offshore. Estimates of Katrina's highest surges have ranged from a 35 foot storm surge in Waveland, Mississippi, to at least 15 feet along the entire Mississippi coast, demolishing most buildings, including hotels and casinos, and leading to extensive inland flooding.

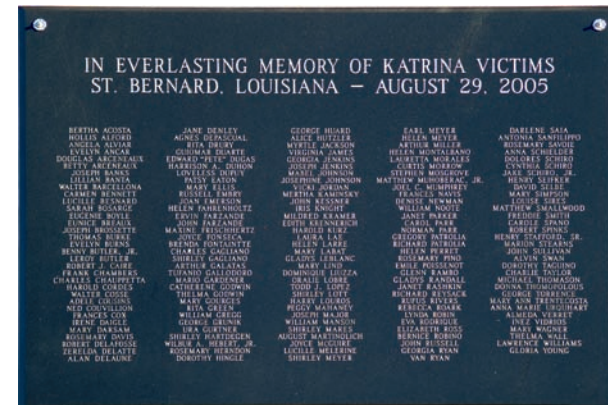


Major Hurricanes of the Last 100 Years: The area between Louisiana and the Florida Panhandle has experienced some devastating storms over the past century.

<p>Hurricane Camille Category: 5 Landfall: Gulfport, MS August 18, 1969 Wind Speed: 180 mph Storm Surge: 24.3 feet. Lives Taken: 250 Damage: \$1.421 billion</p>	<p>Hurricane Elena Category: 3 Landfall: Biloxi, MS September 2, 1985 Wind Speed: 125 mph Lives Taken: 0 Damage: \$1.25 billion</p>	<p>Hurricane Frederick Category: 3 Landfall: Dauphin Island, AL September 13, 1979 Wind Speed: 125 mph Lives Taken: 5 Damage: \$2.3 billion</p>	<p>Hurricane Ivan Category: 3 Landfall: Gulf Shores, AL September 16, 2004 Wind Speed: 130 mph Lives Taken: 124 Damage: \$14.2 billion</p>	<p>Hurricane Katrina Category: 5 Landfall: Buras, LA August 29, 2005 Wind Speed: 175 mph Storm Surge: 27 feet Lives Taken: 1,833 Damage: \$81 - \$200 billion</p>
---	--	--	---	--

Katrina

As often as I would bring up the subject of the oil spill, the conversation was equally diverted to stories or mention of Hurricane Katrina. How could it not be so? Katrina was deadly, devastating, and unrelenting in its punishment. The spill is a quiet killer slowly oozing its way towards land. Katrina was a screeching, crashing nemesis that showed no mercy, favor, or prejudice towards rich or poor, black or white. The spill was at sea and has made its spiralling marks along the sand and silt marshes. Katrina stole lives, land, property and souls.



A tribute to 164 lives lost in St. Bernard Parish alone. Shell Beach, Louisiana. November 8, 2010.

There has been much said and written about Katrina, but from some of the stories, and more importantly, the haunted look in people's eyes I observed, there are many tales too painful to tell. I found it most humbling and remarkably courageous on his part to listen to Mike's story of riding out Katrina with his dog in his Boston Whaler, tied to an oak tree just blocks from the shoreline in Biloxi. He later saved a neighbor and his dog as well, at great peril to himself. Others were not so lucky as could be seen by the memorials erected throughout Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida. I often asked myself before visiting the Gulf coast why anyone would stay and endure year after year of possible destruction. The answer is simple, but perhaps not logical from an outsider's view: people of the Gulf love the Gulf. They love the water and the pace and the days that are so warm and light you can't help but feel blessed for standing in your spot and squinting out at that monstrous jewel. They love the comfort of its serenity, when it is serene.

They are also fervently bound to the area, whether through ancestry or regional migration. It all goes back to allegiance and to some degree, resilience. The risk of being swept away is far less important than making a stand and holding on to home and friends, habit, tradition, and comfort. Holding on to house and life is not always as easy.



**KATRINA WAS BIG
BUT GOD IS
BIGGER
ST. CLARE PARISH**

All that remains along many parts of the coast are the supporting beams and foundations or just the front stoops from demolished homes. If you made a 180 degree turn from this scene, you would be looking out at the Gulf just 150 yards away. The storm surge that hit this area would have been up to the top limbs of the barren tree on the left. Waveland, Mississippi. November 5, 2010.

An economy of words and sentiment pretty much sums up the resilience of the people of the Gulf Coast. Waveland, Mississippi. November 5, 2010.

Petroleum, Natural Gas, Commercial Fishing, Politics, and Disaster

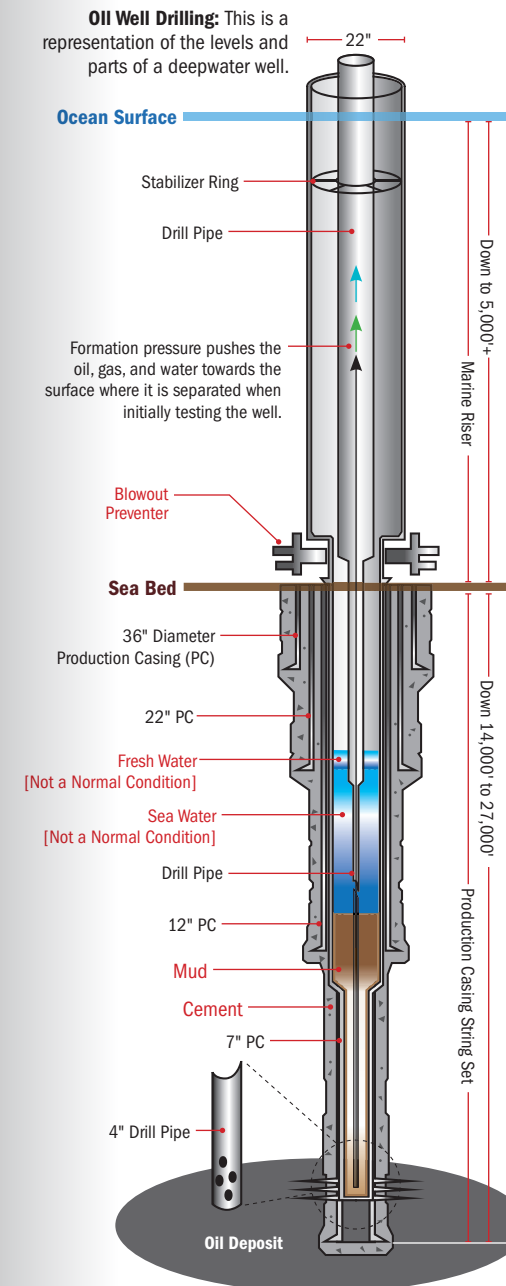
The United States border along the Gulf coastline is 1,680 miles. Since the 1910s, its seabeds have been punctured by man and machine in search of its rich bounty of petroleum and natural gas. Looking from the air, you can see the lines of gas and oil pipelines crisscrossing their way through the bayous and marshes to the refineries and storage facilities inland. All along the Mississippi River, barges and tankers are shuttling fossil fuels to be used in our homes, cars, and manufacturing facilities.



A push barge heads down the Mississippi River past one of many petroleum plants along the way. November 6, 2010.

If you were to place a period (.) on the map on pages 10 and 11 where every oil rig, gas platform, and well existed along the coast, you would see an overwhelming cluster of thousands of dots. Until I became involved with this story I gave little thought to how or where our oil came from. Texaco, Chevron, Exxon/Mobil, Conoco/Phillips, Shell, Gulf and of course BP are all familiar names. They are the industrial entities that keep us powered and themselves in power along the coast. When you look at those thousands of dots, you can't help but wonder how it is that there aren't more mishaps and spills. The fact of the matter is that there are. They are just not as big and deadly or publicized as the Deepwater Horizon spill. Before the Deepwater Horizon leak, the second worst environmental disaster also happened in the Gulf. In 1979, the shallower IXTOC ONE well spewed its oil into the Bay of Campeche off the coast of Mexico for 9 months.

The fishing industry and the oil industry have had somewhat of a love/hate relationship over the years. The recent disaster has put a lot less love in the mix. The Gulf states find themselves in a bit of a conundrum. They thrive off both industries, but are compensated far higher by petroleum money. That makes it hard for the fisherman to have an equal ground when their interests are at stake. If you add the conservation and ecology concerns to the mix, you end up with a rather large bowl of conflicting opinions and multiple self-interests.

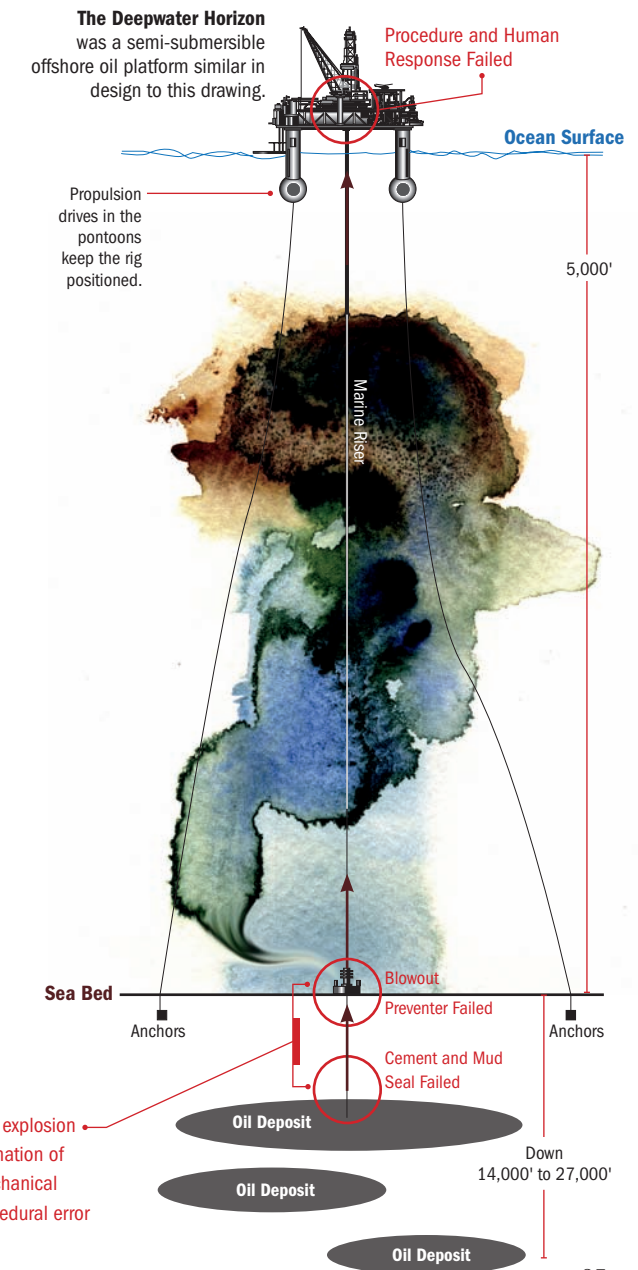


When you take a look at how these offshore rigs and wells are designed and drilled, it is a marvel of modern science and technology. You can be assured that the oil companies aren't out there to pollute the environment, endanger lives, or lose money. This is a risky, expensive, and lucrative proposition, when all goes well.

I was fortunate enough to spend a Sunday afternoon and evening in Covington, Louisiana with my wife's cousin Beth and her husband Tommy. Aside from the gracious hospitality of both, it turns out Tommy knew a bit about oil rigs and was able to explain the process to me. Having been a rig supervisor as far offshore as 70 miles, combined with an engineering background, Tommy had some great insight into the oil industry in general as well as some of the shortcomings that led up to the Deepwater Horizon disaster. Before I left their home on a crisp November morning, Tommy and I exchanged sketches and details so that I might better understand the drilling process.

Although the investigation into the exact cause of the explosion and spill is still under way, it is believed that a combination of faulty cement in the sub-floor section of the line, mechanical failure of the Blowout Preventer, and human and procedural error at the surface led to the ultimate disaster.

Diagrams are not to exact scale.



Deepwater Horizon Clean-Up

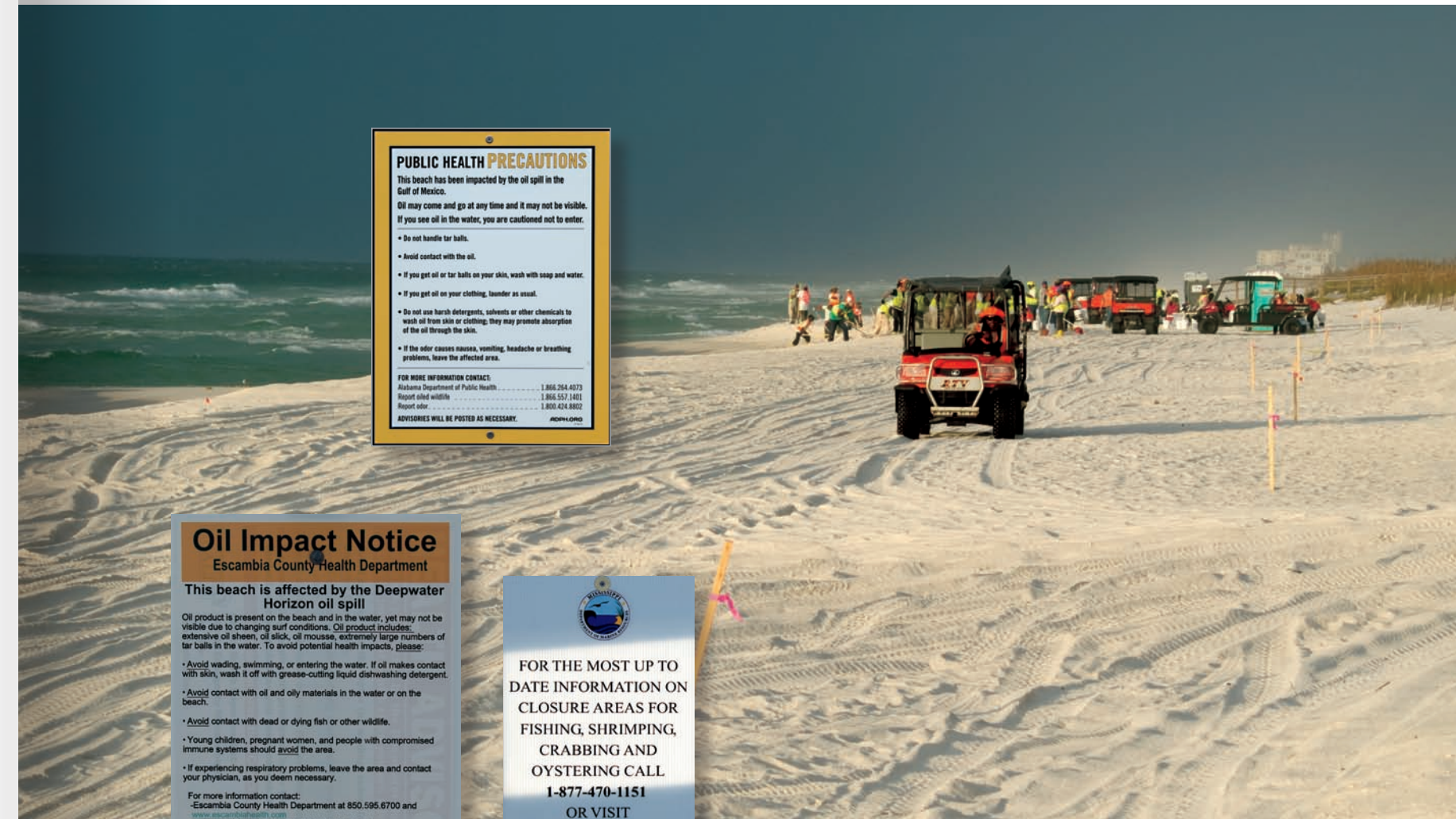
The blowout, fire, and sinking of the Deepwater Horizon, were only the beginning of what will probably be considered the most disastrous and expensive environmental event in U.S. history to date. After the finger pointing, PR blitz, press conferences, and months of public opinion-damaging underwater video, the evaluation of the coastal impact and clean-up began.



A member of an oil spill clean-up crew walks along Gulf Islands National Seashore searching for tar balls and oil residue. This may be considered the norm over the coming months along the Gulf beaches. *Watercolor.*

When I started my coastal trek from Navarre Beach, Florida to Venice, Louisiana, I had no idea what to expect based on news footage and articles I had seen or read. My first-hand experience would prove to be enlightening and discouraging at the same time. The task at hand for these crews along the beaches seems almost as futile as when, as a child, I would build those moat-surrounded castles along the tide line – only to see them caved in and dissolved before my eyes. If you were to throw a jar of honey into a bowl of sugar, or a cup of molasses into a container of salt, it would give you an idea of the trouble you might have separating the tar from the sand. Spray the mess with olive oil and water and you have the clean-up challenge.

Because of a fairly strict perimeter around the clean-up areas, I was only able to get moderately close to where the crews were working. I spoke to 2 supervisors, one in Florida and one in Alabama about the effort. One was simply doing his job of making sure the crew was doing theirs. He explained that there were areas of minor damage and areas that would take heavy equipment to resolve. The other was contracted to utilize his company's heavy construction vehicles to literally remove the beach from a section of the Alabama coast. He did share that he was not totally in agreement with the clean-up strategy. He even referred to the castles in the sand scenario. In each state I visited, I encountered varying degrees of effort and damage in the clean-up process. I also encountered a mixture of outrage, resignation, and optimism.



Signs of the times posted throughout Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana.

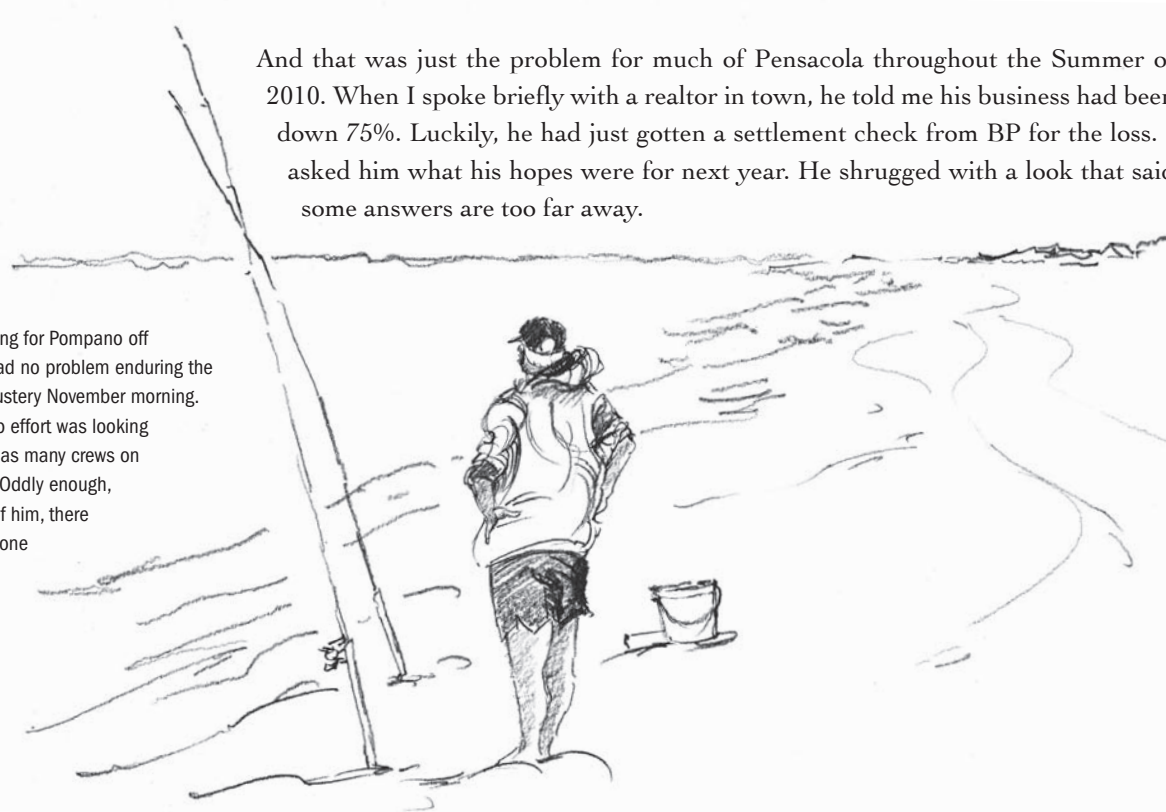
Large scale clean-up group outside of Pensacola Beach, Florida. Just one of many land-based clean-up sites I encountered along the coast. November 2, 2010.

Florida

First impressions are the most important. I came across a number of extreme ones as I began my coastal foray from Navarre Beach westward to Fort Pickens through the Gulf Islands National Seashore just off Pensacola, Florida. Pristine windswept beaches were countered by ATVs and orange vested clean-up crews. Surf casting retirees shared gull screeches and salt air with men toting plastic bags and rakes. Not exactly a photo-op for tourism.

And that was just the problem for much of Pensacola throughout the Summer of 2010. When I spoke briefly with a realtor in town, he told me his business had been down 75%. Luckily, he had just gotten a settlement check from BP for the loss. I asked him what his hopes were for next year. He shrugged with a look that said some answers are too far away.

This elderly gentleman, fishing for Pompano off Pensacola Beach, Florida had no problem enduring the wind driven sand on this blustery November morning. He did say that the clean-up effort was looking better to him. There weren't as many crews on the beach nor as much tar. Oddly enough, several miles oneach side of him, there was a flurry of work being done on the sand. *Pencil.*



Navarre Beach, Florida. The morning of November 2, 2010.