

R I D I N G T H E N I G H T M A R E E X P R E S S

New Orleans' Betsy Hurricane-Flood
As Written in 1965 and Updated in 1975
(Ten Years and Several Flood-Scares Later)

Hurricanes, Floods, Are Always "Timely" in the Gulf States

By Elizabeth S. Cousins Rogers
& Walter Rogers

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The two November, 1965 photographs of the Industiral Canal levee at Prieur and Johnson Streets are © 1974 by the COURIER, and are reprinted by permission.

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TO AWAIT A HURRICANE is fearful: no one can tell where a hurricane will hit. To wake in a hurricane plus a flood is to benumb the senses. When the unexpected bewildering awfulness rolls on, wave after wave, unbelievable facts constantly become more terrifying as the distant circumstances swiftly--or gradually--become clearer and clearer.

You're riding a nightmare express. You catch the scenes that flash by, but when you try to relate them, to explain the sinister causes of disaster which keep revealing themselves, you lose your grasp and float off. As a refugee, evacuee, dispossessed, who are you, anyway?

Thus, in the following eye-witness account, the reader is asked to ride the nightmare with a constantly shifting sense of time: This is how it happened; this is what we found out later; this is how it still looks, ten years and several hurricanes afterward.

Part One. We Write the Story Soon after September 9, 1965

THE PEOPLE'S STORY of New Orleans' Betsy is about the flooding--to the eaves--of the whole lower part of the city, known as "Below Industrial Canal." That's some 300 blocks of working-class homes, about 80% of them owned by Black folk--in short, a cherishable part of the city's Ninth Ward. The press has shown photographs but not too much of any victim's view.

It's possible the city fathers are not ill-pleased with such omissions. A credible source informs us that someone issued nationwide instructions to the media to "play it down, not to give New Orleans a black eye." In upper-class New Orleans, giving a black eye usually means, exposing our racism. Did authorities who gave orders in Betsy deserve a black eye? After reading our account, observers may understand why we believe they did.

We saw it happen, my husband Walter and I. We live in a low-lying area --St. Maurice Avenue between Florida and Law; we're the only remaining

white family at our end of the Ninth Ward. The whites scurried out in 1954, when the Supreme Court ordered school integration; they feared having their children attend a fine new Black school near us, the Hardin Elementary. (In 1961 it played a big part in integration, of which more below).

Our house is twenty blocks from the Industrial Canal; that's where the levee broke--or was bombed--in two or more places Betsy night. The canal cuts New Orleans in two, dividing the Ninth Ward and other down-river areas from the central business district, the Vieux Carré and the fine old residences uptown.

That was almost a month ago. Only now have we recovered enough from what we saw to begin piecing it together. It does queer things to you to be a dispossessed person, with only the clothes you stand in (and nary a shelf to lay them on at night--just the floor). We were scorned almost like beggars by disgruntled grocery and restaurant owners; some of them locked their doors against us. In the weeks after Betsy, Walter and I were moved nine times, losing a piece of our mind each time. So probably our narrative will be somewhat disjointed. People caught by Betsy could hardly recall their phone numbers.

What Happened in Flood Street

We'll begin it with a Mrs. M, whose story we got but not her name. Her home, she told us, was on aptly named Flood Street, between Prieur and Johnson, the two streets where the water suddenly thundered down, at the height of the hurricane, from two breaks in the canal levee nine blocks away.

That terrible night of September 9, Mrs. M told us, she was watching television at a friend's house down the street. As the roar of Betsy mounted, they heard Mayor Victor Schiro on the radio: "Go home and stay there, safe from falling wires and trees." It was bad advice. (Didn't the mayor know the canal levee already had one break, near the bridge at Claiborne Avenue?)

Just about then the power went off over the Ninth Ward as it usually does in storms--this is the lowest part of below-sea-level New Orleans. The phones went dead too; weak old radios silenced. Mrs. M was stumbling home in the dark through wind and stinging rain when she heard shouts and in lightning flashes saw her neighbors running. "Run for your life, the levee's broke!" Prieur and Johnson were already rivers.

In the panic, many thought to save their pets--dogs, cats, a rabbit. Mrs. M dashed home for identification papers and records. The water trapped her. She climbed on the table, the chiffo-robe, into the stifling attic. Tools to make an opening to the roof lay below the flood. Twelve hours she

cowered there, pressed to the roof. (Many, failing to reach attics, drowned in their houses; their bodies were found floating there days later.). Outside, the unseen wind was banging howling tossing whole trees, metal awnings, neon signs, whipping away and back the screams of the stranded.

Later we talked with refugees from Jourdan Avenue, along the canal; one and all said they'd seen men placing something on the levee at the height of the hurricane, then running; two fire blasts and tons of mud came bang bang bang against their houses; panic; scrambling for the roofs, frail raftlike refuges in the raging waters.

Such were the stories hundreds told us in the following weeks. Many shivered on roofs, in attics, even trees, for days before rescuers reached them. Some rescuers charged dearly for a place in a boat. A fireman told us many children's bodies were among the drowned. An unidentified baby was rescued alive and well, floating on a mattress. But a Coast Guard whom Walter met days later said he'd seen dozens of bodies being towed out, wired together like rafts. Newspapers reported 50 to 80-odd drowned in the Ninth Ward, but victims who went to morgues hunting relatives' bodies, told us there were 200 in just one morgue at our end of town. There were many more bodies in City Hall basement.

How It Happened to Us

W'ALTER AND I were home in bed at the height of the storm. In our 25 years here we'd lived through several hurricanes. Now as we heard our neighbors' carport roof crash against the dividing fence they'd promised to help pay for but then refused, we said, "Betsy is punishing them for breaking their word to a neighbor." Then I heard a gurgle, like the toilet backing up, and decided to investigate. I stepped into water knee-deep in the bedroom.

Alarmed, we fumbled in the dark for flashlight, watches, purses. We marked the base of a floor lamp, expecting to see that the water was already receding. It rose 2½ inches in 15 minutes. Wading into our workshop, we snatched up the manuscript of a novel, BIG WHEELS ROLLED IN TEXAS, work of years of scanty spare time--and shoved it with other papers into the attic (it saved them).

Water was now gushing under the front door in a strong current. Should we try to get our typewriters, camera, workman's tools, electric appliances up to the attic? While we debated in confusion, the water became waist-deep. The bed floated, Chests of drawers quietly slumped forward; the drawers float-

ed out. An empty garbage can from the kitchen cruised by. "Good night!" exclaimed Walter. "We'd better get out while we still can!"

We fished for shorts, tennis shoes, jackets, forced open the swollen door. Holding purses and watches high, straddling fallen trees, we reached the street. Ceiling lights were on in our car and in all cars; they had shorted. (A week later those cars were still under water; all were ruined and most insurance policies didn't cover flood damage. Ironically, we got car insurance because during the flood someone stole our car and our policy covered theft.)

Walter grabbed my arm; there was considerable current. "Keep away from the gutters" he kept warning, "it's higher in the middle." We waded past the Hardin School, pride of our neighborhood and a Civilian Defense Shelter; people were trying to climb in the windows. (We learned afterward that all school buildings in the Ninth Ward were locked by official orders Betsy night.)

Dim figures on high porches yelled at us through the wild gusts, "You'll never make it to St.Claude--come up here with us!" They all had to be rescued later from attic or roof, some by helicopters. Wires were down; trees cracked and broke with every blast, wind and rain whipped our faces; at every cross-roads we met a stiff current full of floating logs and sewage. We waded a mile in the icy water, gratefully recalling our long habit of year-round bathing in Lake Pontchartrain. "We're tough," said Walter, teeth chattering.

Near St.Claude Avenue, which is several feet higher than Law Street, the water was quite shallow; we saw flashing police lights and thought it was a rescue party but on arriving we found they'd only been placing a freight car on a spur so as to block all vehicles from entering or leaving St.Maurice. (No one ever explained this.) On St.Claude, covered trucks were evacuating National Guard troops from the barracks in Arabi, downstream; they wouldn't take the Black women and children clamoring at the cross-roads.

A crowd of us took shelter in a fire-house, asking why the big warm bakery wasn't thrown open. "They're afraid it'll go," the fireman said, evasively. (He didn't tell us, but the bakery workers had been sent home earlier to rescue their families. Why couldn't the whole Ninth Ward have been warned, too?)

Finally our whole crowd got into a school, after angry Black mothers threatened the Black custodian, "City orders or no city orders, if you don't open that do' we gonna tear you to pieces." The door was opened.

Neighbors and strangers crammed the three floors, all of us dripping wet

and shivering. Dogs darted underfoot, yelping when stepped on. An old man died on the floor; a coat was thrown over him. An ambulance was somehow secured to carry out a pregnant woman whose birth pains had started. The toilets backed up; before long, water rose knee-deep on the ground floor. We urged the people to make for the bridge to the upper city but most wouldn't budge.

The New Orleans Four of 1961

Incidentally, this was McDonough 19, a "white" school made world-famous back in 1961 when Black kindergarteners entered the First Grade, escorted by U.S.marshalls. Daily they braved the insults, threats and rocks of racists who daily besieged the building. Examinations had been stiff: of 100 who volunteered, only four were accepted. It was these tiny children, the "New Orleans Four," trained at Hardin Elementary (Mrs. Zenobia M. Johnson, principal) who carried out the Supreme Court decision of 1954 to break the racial barrier. One of the Four attended Frantz School, also in the Ninth Ward; she was helped by a white Methodist pastor, Rev.Foreman, and a retired white teacher, Mrs. Norbert Sands; the two families formed a car pool to carry their and their neighbors' children to school all year.

Leaving McDonough 19 on foot, Walter and I waded the half mile to the St.Claude bridge. City busses weren't running; little blue busses from Negro churches were carrying refugees to dry ground across the canal. Two "white" schools, Washington and Nicholls, received us. At Washington, white children had seized all the big toys; I induced them to play with Black children who'd been huddling in a corner. The white parents didn't like this and Walter and I were moved across the street to Nicholls. We were surprised to find that Nicholls, a source of racist insults to the "New Orleans Four" in 1961, had some of the darkest, dirtiest toilets we'd ever seen, no better than the poorest Negro school. "Separate but equal poverty," Walter commented.

Everything here was in confusion. Someone issued Army blankets; everyone dropped down on them and slept, half dead with fatigue. Our clothes dried on us, stained with the sewage in the flood waters. A badly organized clothing distribution almost became a free-for-all fight. A few of us tried to maintain a waiting line, in vain. But order was secured on the food line, when Walt was put in charge of one door and a policeman the other.

Soon papers, bottles, sodden food bits lay everywhere. Forgetting our blistered, infected feet, Walter and I plunged into organizing a cleanup of

(1) See Robert Coles, CHILDREN IN CRISIS: A Study in Courage and Fear (Little, c 1967)

the three floors and filthy toilets. The custodian, it was said, had gone home. No one knew where mops and pails were kept, but Walt found them and some young Black people helped with cleanup.

The whites had occupied the class-rooms; we and the Blacks had our blankets in the halls. One white woman swept her dust right over our sleeping neighbors till Walter shouted at her. She looked surprised and stopped sweeping; as soon as possible she moved her family to the "white" third floor. The trash we collected piled shoulder-high by the side door. Walter found a policeman back at the bridge and induced him to call a city garbage truck.

I Uncover My Prejudice

Ironically, it was at racist Nicholls that I began to lose a prejudice. My New England Protestant parents had imbued me with a distrust of Catholics; I'd been made to feel they were some sort of foreigners. But all through Betsy, the nuns were the first to aid the victims and the last to leave. I still didn't like it that the priests, who did nothing but say mass and rush off, were photographed, but not the hardworking nuns. At the same time, I saw Protestant clergymen, Black clergymen included, act the same way. It was not a new thought that many of the devout have a lot to learn. Anyway, after this I couldn't see the nuns as other than very kind, dependable people. Furthermore, it's our experience in the South that Black children from white Catholic schools do not approach white people with the dreadful apprehension that is otherwise so frequent and so hard to dissolve.

The Girl Scouts, a Mrs. Applegate and a teen-age troop of volunteers, were active helpers, especially in bringing order to the clothing issue. When we were all ordered to an unused naval base at Algiers, across the Mississippi River, Mrs. Applegate loaded her station wagon with the mountains of donated clothing to carry there, then just as cheerfully unloaded it all to transport, instead, a truckload of candy sent by citizens of Kenner, La.; it looked like about \$500 worth. Rain had begun to fall and she wanted it to reach the children before it got spoiled. The school building was already closed. She was to take Walt and me with her but he had disappeared somewhere. "We'll get over there somehow," I told the weary woman.

After she left, Walter came up, dripping wet. He'd been back to our submerged home, dear fellow, in a boat with a Coast Guard, and dived down inside, in the water full of sewage, dead fish and snakes, to get me a pair of better shoes for my swollen feet. The only hitch was, they were both for the same foot. We sat down outside the deserted school and cried.

Just then the tireless nuns drove up in their minibus, their long veils flapping in the rain. They solved our problem of crossing the river. These many kindnesses from many people will never be forgotten by the Betsy victims.

On reaching the naval base late and half sick with fatigue, we were told "Full up, can't take you." It was the last straw. I muttered, "Then let me die right here on the ground." The Sisters somehow got us into a school across the street, already crammed with sleeping children and parents, mostly Black; our neighbors waved from the cots. Though most whites had joined relatives beyond flood areas, one sourfaced woman had got left behind. She grumbled "At least they could keep us together!" "We are together," I said, "together with our friends. What you're asking is to be separate." She didn't speak to me again all night, though we were indeed put "together" with other derelict whites.

Devout--with a Lot to Learn

This school was well equipped, a big playground, clean, spacious toilets, cleanup by the staff--what a relief! though they didn't like it a bit, to clean up after Black folk. At breakfast, Walter and I washed dishes in the cafeteria, an ample meal of scrambled eggs, toast and coffee--at tables. A tall young Negro, obviously well educated, brought in used plates which he scraped neatly. When we sat down to eat he hung back but we made him join us and discovered he is pastor of a church on St. Maurice we pass frequently. Besides that, he holds a scientific job at a science institute on the lakefront. We became good friends--we thought. But later when we tried to get the Black clergy in the Ninth Ward to organize their parishioners to demand flood compensation (not loans), he gave us no more help than any of the other clergy, Black or white. Churches got grants for rebuilding, without any struggle. Maybe we were naive to think pastors would stick their necks out to urge similar benefits for their flocks.

After breakfast we noticed that a white 10-year-old, not a refugee, had got into the school building and was insulting the women and young boys by zipping and unzipping his pants, murmuring obscenities. Walt took the young "superior" white by the belt to the policeman on duty and had him ejected. There are many ways a friendly white person can be useful in an unfair situation. We determined to stay with the Black victims till this was over. The authorities never stopped urging us to accept offers of "nice white couples" to take us into their homes. We knew we'd have more privacy at the base.

Later that day we were moved to the hangars at the naval base. Here, by final evacuation day, October 2, some 14,000 victims were sheltered, fed, med-

icated, given some clothes. A big task, its performance somewhat clouded because it was so little, so late, and much of it so grudging.

Life with 14,000 Victims

AS WE CAME IN --the day was sunny, at last--the high mesh fences bloomed with clean laundry flapping in the wind and sun. Army cots were being set up for the several thousand already in the huge base. Everyone was rushing to wash off the filth of Betsy. This wasn't easy, as there were few utensils and only two faucets for the 5,000 at our end of the base. I saw two existing flush toilets being removed, apparently to prevent Black refugees' use of them.

The toilet situation soon became acute. Old wooden privies such as the city then supplied for Mardi Gras and July Fourth at the lakefront, had been hastily brought, but were not emptied daily; most of the doors wouldn't fasten; there was no toilet paper. The Rogers' voices were loud among those complaining to authorities, but it wasn't until a few days before final evacuation from the base, that adequate laundry trays were installed, outdoors. It was almost as long, before metal portolets with chemical treatment units were provided. (I believe the city never used the old wooden privies again.)

We made friends with a Mrs. Rockett, who slept near us with her husband and young family. He heads a waterfront union. We laughed because he wears a roll-brim hat like a strawboss in a cane or cotton field; workers derisively call it a "wool hat." His wife told me he drinks too much. After Betsy, when we visited them, we always found him reading the Bible.

Mrs. Rockett, an executive type, graduate of a Mississippi trade school, was made a clothing distributor; thus she was familiar with all parts of the base. She led me to an officers' nice washroom, showers, hot and cold wash-tubs. But these were locked on the second night. One small washroom remained available for women, one for men. (Showers and toilets in both had been removed.) Washbasins had no stoppers so folk used paper wads, which got sucked down the drains; the basins soon became unusable.

People begged the Navy and Army cooks, who fed us in long lines outdoors, for empty gallon cans to do their wash in. Resourceful nuns cleaned huge garbage cans, filled them with warm water and washed the babies in the open air--a sight that made us long for our lost camera. Devoted Black teachers from the elementary schools came for games and exercises with the restless youngsters.

Medical care was free. There was a mass injection for diphtheria and tetanus (no one was asked about recent such injections). Diarrhea and some other cases went to the dispensary, operating temporarily, where Tulane doctors said flood-polluted drinking water caused the diarrhea; we were

treated with paregoric. Then the dispensary closed and we had only the First Aid units in the hangars, with visiting doctors at certain hours. The doctors I saw were all kind. Some of the Red Cross people were nice, others were bureaucratic and racist. One nurse refused a sweet old Black lady her prescription until I complained to the doctor, who took prompt action.

We all welcomed the construction of shower rooms--till we found that the women's showers were separated from the men's only by a partition that didn't reach the ceiling. Of course the men looked over, as the Army knew they would. But authorities who insult women have no respect for themselves either. To one of many complaints an Army guard (white) replied, "Lady, if I ketch one-a them so-and-so's lookin' over, it'll be the bayonet."

This was just another of the many ways in which we (mostly Black) refugees were treated like animals. True, there was plenty of food, plenty of fresh milk. The hitch was that though indoor space was available, meals were served outdoors to long standing lines, no place to sit or put your plate. Rain fell on us and our food; wind often blew it off the plates; paper dishes, plastic forks, nauseating piles of spilled beans soon littered the scene (trash cans were too few, seldom emptied). I had a hot argument with a Major Juneau from Alaska, after which we were allowed to eat inside and a few tables and benches were supplied for kids and old folks; others sat on the floor.

The Flight Bag Survival Kit

There were no partitions in the big hangars; men, women and children slept wherever they could find space for their cots. This evoked a gasp of horror from my sister in New Hampshire, whom I finally managed to telephone: "You mean you're sleeping alongside of several hundred colored?" Racism in New England! It made me feel rather snappish: "Why not? We didn't expect the St. Charles Hotel." But it was comforting to hear her voice and to get her generous check and package--dressing-gown, washcloths, scissors, needles, pen and inexpensive watch, all in a highly useful flight bag from her many travels.

Life in the hangars did present some difficulties, such as noise. Certain groups (including the few whites) insisted on talking all night; some gambled noisily, others played transistors; the noisiest ones would sleep all day, refusing to do their share of the cleanup, which the majority did without complaining. The children helped; Walter made them little carts out

of empty cartons dragged by a string; they took pride in collecting and dumping the trash as the grownups swept and mopped. (I was bedridden with ankles swollen the size of my knees.) In the last week, our hangar leaked; the cots stood like islands in deep pools of water, clothes piled on them.

"Hurry Home"

Walter chafed at the constant nagging from local Red Cross and other volunteers, "Hurry and get to your homes, to avoid an epidemic." "How's that?" he'd question. "Our homes are pest-holes now. And if there was an epidemic, we'd all have to be isolated anyway, somewhere like this." There was clearly a desire to sweep the victims under the rug. None of us knew a Congressional hearing was going on in New Orleans, no victims invited. We were all thinking of the thick slime on our walls and woodwork, the buckled floors, grimed windows, dismembered furniture, filthy mattresses--all the prized possessions now useless, many still unpaid for. Folk were bitter about the small broom and pail given each family near departure, "to clean up your home with."

Part Two. People of the Flood

MR. MESUKAMI was a Japanese farmer we met at the base. He told us he'd worked his Mississippi River Delta farm in Buras, La., since 1922; 43 years of stubborn, fairly successful labor. Now it was gone: Betsy lashed all those downstream areas much worse than it did ours. In Buras, Venice, Port Sulphur, Point à la Hache, farms, homes, animals, machinery, soil, crops, simply vanished, as his did. Worse still for Mesukami, the flood trapped him, his body under water with a nest of fire ants.

Talking to Mesukami, Walter and I were acutely conscious of the parallel between the fire ants' attack and our country's A-bomb attack on his. We were equally conscious of U.S. sins in Vietnam, the more so because when we first saw him he looked tragically like a napalm victim. Through the bandages his face, neck, chest, arms showed the mottled lumps of burning ant bites. He improved daily and was finally cured. But his continuity of life was gone. This is probably the worst thing about disasters. As Walter said, "No loan can make up for 43 years' lost work--only a substantial cash compensation, like what is planned for churches and schools." A government loan at 3% or 4%, with part to be "forgiven" on repayment of a stated amount, may be a bonanza to a going business. But for those who've lost homes, tools, furnishings, cars, jobs, even part of their minds, a loan, on a home already mortgaged, just brings eventual foreclosure that much nearer. Many who

took Small Business Administration loans, came to agree with us later.

After Betsy we learned that Sen. Birch Bayh (D-Ind) had introduced, before Betsy, a multiple-disaster insurance bill--wind, flood, prairie fire, forest fire--designed to induce participation by states not subject to flood. It would provide stable, ready funds instead of rushing separate legislation for each disaster. Under the bill, no state could get federal disaster loans unless it had met disaster-protection requirements, thus ensuring widespread responsibility. We liked its favoring grants to individuals rather than loans, especially for shelter for those who'd lost homes.

First introduced in the Senate April 3, 1965 (40 co-signers), it would have applied to Betsy claims, but the House delayed passage till October, 1965, and then scrapped major provisions. Bayh reintroduced it Jan. 17, 1967, with teeth restored.⁽²⁾ But our Louisiana Sen. Russell Long and Rep. Hale Boggs raised fanfare for their flood insurance bill and Bayh's bill was lost.

N EWS REACHED the base, of a tragedy that had occurred in our neighborhood. For years we'd seen an elderly white woman shopping in a wheel chair at the little grocery on St. Maurice at Tonti. Neighbors said she'd lived alone since the death of her husband in a previous flood. She propelled her chair herself, always cheerful and friendly, even tended her garden and fed the dogs who guarded her home. But the faithful dogs couldn't save her from Betsy. Hearing their howls in the storm, a kindly Black neighbor waded to her rescue. It was too late; she was drowned.

Mr. François and the Traveling Watch

Less tragic is the story of Mr. François, one of our many naval base acquaintances. A tired, thin little man with poor eyesight, he lives, he said, by caring for lawns and gardens. He was well informed on Negro history, especially Reconstruction, in which Louisiana played such an important part.⁽³⁾ As flood waters receded he left the base daily for the arduous work of cleaning his home. Down-at-the-heel like all of us, he carried his few belongings back and forth in a worn suitcase to prevent their being stolen at the base.

I offered him the good traveling watch my sister had sent us; we'd saved our own watches and it seemed greedy to keep three. His face lit up

(2) CONGRESSIONAL RECORD, Vol. 113 No. 5

(3) DuBois, W. E. B., BLACK RECONSTRUCTION IN AMERICA (Meridian 1935, 1965)
(Liberty-Prometheus 1957)

Quarles, Benjamin, THE NEGRO IN THE CIVIL WAR (Little, Brown, 1953)

like a rainbow; he departed almost skipping. That night a changed Mr. François came back to sleep at the base. Shaved, a new hat, clean shirt and pants that fit. Proudly he drew out his watch, on a chain he'd bought for it. We told him again where it had traveled: England, France, Germany, Switzerland, Greece, Japan, ending with New Hampshire. He beamed. A watch from foreign parts, to a self-educated man who'd never had a watch. A restoration of confidence.

The Best People

WALTER OFTEN SAYS, "If you want to find the best people, go work at the bottom where the work of lifting the level of society is hardest and most thankless; you'll find them working there." No better proof of this is needed than our near neighbors, the Dixon sisters of Tupelo Street.

When Walter and I came to St. Maurice from the Vieux Carré in 1951, this area was like country. Cows and goats grazed along the railroad levee, to the annoyance of passing freight trains. Beyond the railroad, a big leafy swamp--cypress, maple, hackberry, sweetgum, elder--was home to scores of wild songbirds; people fished and crabbed there; children picked blackberries by the pailful to sell.

But a blight attacked the area; a certain landlord bought up a good half of it (lots were cheap--we got ours for \$750). He built a number of stable-like cement bungalows and a dozen, or more, scattered two-story tenements of cheerless one-room "apartments"--open invitations to underpaid single women to "better themselves" by a little prostitution. (The buildings were obviously designed to better only the landlord and the barkeeps and gangsters he encouraged to operate here. The city should never have given building permits.)

It didn't take area inhabitants long to reject these housing insults. They not only moved out but tore them apart, breaking the windows, removing frames and doors, plumbing fixtures, even the iron staircases. Now, in 1965, as the flood waters cleared, there stood the derelict buildings, architectural zombies, a total waste of housing resources.

The neighborhood already had one blight we hadn't noticed when we first moved here, a canal running down the middle of Tupelo Street, the next street to ours. This was one of old New Orleans' open-drainage ditches, some 30 feet deep and 50 feet wide, built to hold rainwater from the streets till the pumping stations that serve the city can pump it into the river and into Lake Pontchartrain. Most of the old canals were covered years ago.

But this end of Tupelo Street, one of the city's neglected areas, had become by 1965 a place to throw dead cats and trash. The ditch smelled. Heavy rains caused it to overflow; sometimes children drowned there.

At this sad end of Tupelo, a block from our house, live two sisters, Corrie and Ida Mae Dixon, our two best friends and neighbors. They are Black, as all our neighbors are. They were raised on a Mississippi farm owned by their parents; part of the family still lives on the homestead, trying unsuccessfully to farm. Corrie and Ida Mae often entertain us with their early reminiscences of cows, mules, greedy acquaintances and neighboring white folks, some of whom surprisingly still lend a friendly hand with reclaiming stolen cows or settling intricate legal matters.

To Live Straight and Kind

The Dixon sisters, like many other hard-pressed Mississippians, came to New Orleans young and unskilled in city ways, looking for work. Gently reared, reliable, resourceful, both were determined to live straight and kind--and they've succeeded. Both married, had to divorce uncooperative husbands. For some 30 years, working in hotels and white folks' families, at less than \$1,000 a year, they've managed, by heaven knows what self-denial, to clear the mortgages on two small house-and-lots, side by side on Tupelo. Ida Mae's has plumbing and a blue-and-white metal awning.

Their way has been strewn with betrayals--by crooked lawyers, realtors, contractors. Such leeches habitually overcharge any customer, Black or white, who seems vulnerable. A common thing is for a plumber to write a contract tying in the house and lot "in case of failure to pay"; then in his haste to profit, he puts the plumbing in wrong. The customer pays for shoddy work and materials or loses the home.

The Dixons have learned to come to us for advice before signing anything. In reverse, they have helped whenever we launched some plan for betterment of the community, as well as initiating action themselves. Petitions, demonstrations, being at court as witnesses, taking the mike at City Council, they are real militants against the mountain of petty injustices heaped on Black and poor and women. Often, injustice (and outright theft) come from their neighbors, most of whom lacked the childhood training that has contributed to our friends' gentleness, reliability and public spirit. Injustice also comes from lady bosses who call Corrie "Carrie." Corrie was named for a Miss Corrie Slater, quite possibly of the wealthy cotton people who established the Slater Fund for Negro education. But the "educated" uptown white ladies find the name Corrie

"too hard to remember."

Finally Corrie decided to quit housework at \$1 an hour (and lots of unpaid overtime) to care at home for a feeble old lady, "Auntee," 96, for a small monthly welfare check; this had to cover the expenses of both recipient and caretaker. To save money the three women moved together into Ida Mae's house. Between them the sisters keep Auntee clean, lift her in and out of bed, feed her well. Former caretakers had locked her in a room, filthy, and spent her check on booze. Auntee had developed dirty half-crazy habits: The Dixons say charitably, "Auntee is absent-minded." But by the time Betsy struck, Auntee had mended her ways, become content to sit in the sun or watch TV.

The rising water trapped all three women in the attic. Corrie somehow tore open a passage to a porch roof and pushed her sister through; together they hauled out helpless, heavy Auntee. Clawing at their skirts was Boston, a beloved watch dog; they had to chonk him back into the attic. (Many pets became rabid; police had to shoot them.)

A boat came--with one place. Hoodlum neighbors, always jealous of the sisters' strict, frugal lives, yelled from their roofs to rescuers, "Take us, Mister! Leave them old sisters drown!"

"You go, sister" said Ida Mae, "he'll come back for Auntee and me." But, as Corrie learned later, he never came back. Walter and I, ourselves draggled, met her in the naval base hangars, searching for Ida Mae, whom she affectionately calls Baby. When clothes were distributed, she always picked out something "for Baby." Walt and I would look at one another and shake our heads; we couldn't believe she'd ever see Baby again.

But she did. Ten days after the disaster, when base phones were working at last (and free to victims), Corrie got through to her sister. Ida Mae had somehow brought Auntee and herself, near collapse, safe to Charity Hospital. With Red Cross and other volunteer aid, a brief entrance was then arranged for Ida Mae and Auntee to Thomy Lafon Home. Then the Home closed. Quandary.

The Rights of Refugees

Twenty-five flood victims were in line ahead of Corrie Dixon when she came, for help on this problem, to the Red Cross at the naval base. Here the immediate needs of 14,000 persons--temporary housing, a few weeks' food--were being handled by an overworked staff of ARC case workers from Washing-

ton, D.C., ably directed by Mrs. Alice Phillips. By now, workers and "cases" were worn to a frazzle. Many in the line had waited all the previous day.

Mrs. Phillips, slight, white-haired, crisp-mannered, spoke to the 25 waiting on the hard wooden chairs. "I am going to put Mrs. Dixon's case ahead of yours. I want you to know why. I was going to take next an 86-year-old here. But Mrs. Dixon and her sister have a ward of 96, now in a home that closed yesterday; she must be moved. There is a coldwater flat to move her to, on which Red Cross will temporarily pay rent. Because of age and emergency I will take her case next but only if you all agree it's the fair thing to do. In a show of hands." The hands went up, with patient smiles, at this unusual recognition of the rights of refugees to a measure of self-determination, as valuable as food and rent.

So the two valiants and their ward have a temporary home, which tireless Corrie leaves daily for the sodden houses on Tupelo. The beloved Boston is there every day to welcome her; he had spent the flood on our roof. Now she must scrape, hose, boil what is salvageable, drag out sewage-soaked mattresses and fragmented furniture to be burned or (overoptimistically) to be removed by the city.

Actually, trash lay on Ninth Ward streets for over a year. It might still be there but for the temporary presence, arranged by the local American Friends Service Committee, of some twenty energetic college students from other states, for relief work. They organized cleanup squads among the youth, laying the basis for a playground; taught the babies of returning victims; held forums for adults, to find out what they considered priorities; above all, they put pressure on the city to get busy and reopen the two closed fire stations, the lower Ninth Ward's only fire protection.

Part Three -- We Prepare to Fight Back

FOR SOME REASON all food we refugees bought on our difficult trips to town was confiscated without previous notice by an officious Catholic priest. It was said the authorities were looking for dope. But Walter was annoyed when they took onions he'd bought as a cure for the colds we all had contracted from exposure.

To circumvent the unwelcome censorship, I bought a beige cloth beret (cap) which I could stuff with several score folded leaflets.⁽⁴⁾ These we had contrived for circulation inside the base. They outlined a procedure for applying for compensation through the churches. Later leaflets (after the churches failed to respond) listed the developed six-point Betsy Flood Victims' demands.

(4) "Fellow Flood Sufferers," about Sept. 20, 1965

All our leaflets warned against accepting loans, all of which could end by taking away what was left of their homes.

The Leaflets in My Hat

Having lost our own duplicating apparatus, we had asked, and got help in preparing the leaflets; most of it was given us free of charge, in aid to the flood victims as a whole. Our helpers included Jim Dombrowski and his staff, of Southern Conference Educational Fund; Black students at the Straight Business School; Rocke and Rhodes, two ladies who operate a prestigious duplicating service. Two unions helped--United Packinghouse, and Sacksewers & Water Carriers, headed by Jonathan Rockett, husband of Mrs. Annie Rockett, the executive lady whose handling of clothes distribution we had admired.

This help enabled us to come out of the base in October with a skeleton organization which was to become "Betsy Flood Victims." We announced Walter Rogers as temporary vice-chairman; as chairman, Annie Rockett. Unfortunately Mrs. Rockett proceeded to let us down, refusing to appear at our Betsy Flood Victims' meetings. (We learned she had landed a lucrative job as cook in the City Hall cafeteria; this perhaps explained her defection from an organization formed as a gadfly to City Hall bureaucrats.)

However, enough brave and faithful souls were found to carry the organization for over two years, building it to an unofficial membership of 200. Rev. John Henry Craft kindly assumed chairmanship; Mrs. Hattie Mae Craft (no relative) was our highly skilled secretary (her husband is an over-the-road truckdriver, exhausting work). Our dear neighbor Corrie Dixon became membership chairman and ace petition circulator; she never missed a meeting. Mrs. Thelma Powell, another staunch supporter, was later part of a delegation to the Mayor.

We met in the Mercy Seat Baptist Church, Caffin and Galvez, at a rent of \$2 per meeting. To Walter and me it seemed unfortunate that the pastor, Rev. Reddie Johnson, should take up 15 minutes of each meeting with an invocation, and his wife ten more in singing "Sweet Hour of Prayer." Our time was already short, for explaining, hearing opinions and grievances and planning action. We couldn't protest, because this was the only meeting-place we could find in the floodstricken area. But to control the meeting-place and then control the agenda as well, amounts to dictatorship--in this case by the clergy, of just one sect, to which not everyone belonged.

Our difficulties were compounded when the pastor's wife volunteered

to be treasurer, then at meeting after meeting failed to render an accounting of the funds (slightly over \$100). The cleric's zeal for the church treasury so outweighed responsibility toward the flood victims' money that we finally had to dissolve the organization at a loss to ourselves. The half-dozen who had done the most work had to pay out of their own pockets for the legal dissolution-notice in the LOUISIANA WEEKLY. Once again, it was clear that the ostentatiously devout have some lessons yet to learn about the Golden Rule.

WHAT THE FLOOD VICTIMS ASKED

WE STAVED OFF dissolution of the Betsy Flood Victims until after their demands had been taken to everyone we could think of. They were as follows:

1. \$10,000 grant (not loan) per family, to rebuild.
2. Moratorium on collections for ruined time-payment purchases.
3. Free food stamps to needy.
4. Rent control (as in World War II).
5. Safe levees for all New Orleans.
6. End Vietnam war -- apply that wasted money to home needs.

The stop-the-war item was considered so dangerous in 1965 that the Packinghouse Union secretary, whom we paid to type the stencil, garbled it beyond recognition. We were, and are, proud of all our demands, especially this one, which history by 1975 was to prove so correct. Other items--rent control, free food stamps, safe levees--are still on the agenda, ten years after Betsy.

We took our demands to the City Council (all male, all white); it jeered and heckled our Black spokesperson. To Mayor Schiro, who turned us over to Rep. Hébert, who ignored us, though he was the representative of the Ninth Ward. To Sen. Birch Bayh, whose multiple disaster insurance bill we commended; he sent us a copy. To the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (whose ambiguous Betsy Damage Report we secured with great difficulty): ⁽⁵⁾ it read: "...three members were sent to the Industrial Canal to sandbag a leak that had developed in the levee. This group continued to work until the winds make it (sic) impracticable to continue the sandbagging." End of sentence, end of paragraph. What happened then? In answer, a Betsy Flood Victims' song asked bluntly, "Who Made the Lower Ninth a Spillway?"

We went to the Small Business Administration office, protesting SBA failure to aid the poverty property owners who needed aid the most; SBA gave

(5) U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Betsy Hurricane Damage Report, 1965, p.8. See Walter Rogers' letters of June 6 and June 30, 1966.

us pamphlets and shrugged off our questions. We protested the concealed aid-to-big-business aspects of Urban Renewal⁽⁶⁾ at meeting after meeting called by local proponents of what James Baldwin aptly called Negro Removal. We sent a mass postcard⁽⁷⁾ to George Romney, Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, who himself called Urban Renewal "a dismal failure." A New Orleans priest, Father Miller of St. Alphonse Parish, was the only New Orleans voice, besides ours, to point to the flaw at the top of Urban Renewal programs, namely--the Supreme Court decision in Berman VS Parker, 1954. It changed the wording on eminent domain (which then permitted government seizure of private property for public use) to permit such seizure "for public purpose." Thus it legalized government eviction of masses of poor folk in favor of developers, heavily subsidized via government loans; their alleged "purpose" of low-cost housing actually resulted in rents of \$100 per room and up.

We embodied the Betsy Flood Victims demands in a petition to Sen. Russell Long; he sidestepped it with a noncommittal letter. We learned that at the Congressional hearing in New Orleans⁽⁸⁾ to which victims were not invited, Long had offhandedly advocated giving each family a couple of hundred dollars grant, saying in effect, "They mostly have only a shack, a bed and a stove in there...so forget the loans...it would be too hard to find those people, to collect." Gov. McKeithen told the hearings it looked like we'd have to build better levees "or go back to thinking the unthinkable." The unthinkable! Such as deliberate drowning of untold numbers of working people, to save the well to do!

After-Betsy Collapse of Railroad Levee

Walter and a photographer took pictures of the Industrial Canal levee breaks nearest us, at Prieur and Johnson, and the two huge piles of mud that flew from those breaks (on the west) to Jourdan Avenue (on the east) in the teeth of a 90-mile east wind. Nine years later, these were finally reproduced in the weekly COURIER.⁽⁹⁾ Walt also photographed the railroad levee at Florida Avenue which, soon after Betsy, quietly flattened like a thrown custard pie,⁽¹⁰⁾ showing that even the levees of the mighty Louisiana Southern

(6) See Abrams, Charles (chief Government housing expert for 30 years), THE CITY IS THE FRONTIER (Harper & Row, 1965). pp.157-8, 221.

(7) See attached mass postcard to George Romney.

(8) Hearings of H.R. Committee on Public Works, New Orleans, October, 1965; quotes of Long and McKeithen are from memory; our copy of the hearings has gone to the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.--escr.

(9) COURIER, July 18-24, 1974.

(10) Clipping, N.O.STATES-ITEM 10.10.66, post-Betsy collapse of Florida Avenue canal levee (by railroad tracks).

Railway Company were less than adequately maintained.

We have described the flood-points nearest us--three that we know of, one at Claiborne which developed before dark, and the two blasted near midnight at Prieur and Johnson--all in the levee of the Industrial Canal. The even worse flooding, downriver of us, came from breaks in the Mississippi River levees. The U.S. Engineers reported the gauges broke when the river level reached 17.5 feet, so the actual water depth was not determined. Additional flooding came from the Gulf Outlet Canal which in 1965 admittedly had no levees at all. It was built to save big shipping companies a few hours' port fees. On the night of Betsy, a tidal wave, resulting from hurricane winds and water combined, swept up the Gulf Outlet with a force no one had anticipated. Apparently that's when somebody panicked and the canal levees were breached.

A Smith College friend wrote me at the time, "We find it hard to believe the levee was deliberately opened as you think. What would be the motive?"

My friend is an unusually warm and sensitive person (though we disagree about the NEW YORK TIMES giving all the news that's fit to print). And of course she was writing this before Watergate, before Cambodia. But it was not before Hiroshima and Nagasaki: they were a nightmare express the U.S. (and the NEW YORK TIMES) have let themselves forget. There were--and still are--those with "motives" for aggression, for the insanity of total nuclear destruction. All citizens share a responsibility to remember this.

The Court of Public Opinion Was Closed

JUST BEFORE THE YEAR of the flood was up, we prepared a Betsy Flood Victims suit to be entered in the "court of public opinion" (the local press; oldtimers like Walter and me aren't very with-it in television). Chief demand was for a Congressional hearing in New Orleans to answer the questions of the flood victims, all previously excluded. We had no legal advisor, just a dim idea that the statute of limitations for bringing suit might close down September 9, 1966.

We thought it worth trying. Our news releases had got good coverage in the PITTSBURGH COURIER, HOUSTON INFORMER, BLACK DISPATCH (Okla.), York (Pa.) GAZETTE & DAILY, PEOPLE'S WORLD (Calif.), DAILY WORLD (N.Y.) and LOUISIANA WEEKLY, thought to be owned by the TIMES-PICAYUNE. We didn't expect sympathetic coverage from the stuffy local daily, but we hoped the WEEKLY, run by Black folk, would play up our suit. Mysterious obstacles developed, however: the photo hadn't arrived, it was lost, it didn't develop right. Our story didn't appear.

"It was censored" said Walter. "Too effective; the bosses couldn't allow it." Walter always sees whatever happens as a gain for the working class. If they lose, he says "It's a lesson: they won't make the same mistakes next time." He was as pleased as he was annoyed when in the very last half-hour of the last day at the naval base (October 2), the police put a parking ticket on the car we'd rented for our house-hunting trips. There were no real streets at that part of the base. We had parked by the Red Cross, waiting to take Mr. Mesukami to some New Orleans friends of his. "You and I" Walt recommended me "have been a thorn in the racists' toe. If we weren't, why were they always urging us to go home and avoid epidemics? It's not epidemics they're scared of, it's labor solidarity, Black and white and Asian."

Red Cross Aftermath

MANY PEOPLE HAVE ASKED US, what about the Red Cross program after the naval base closed? Well, it was good, but with flaws. Long waiting lines formed now at Stalling Center, a school grounds just uptown of the Industrial Canal. Here we were interviewed, at first inside, then later in striped round tents. At the second or third interview we received the list of what was allowed in the form of credits at the stores. Each grant was strictly allocated --so much for bed, stove, refrigerator, table, underwear. Most of the refugees already had had some kind of outer clothing from the bales at the naval base, used clothing collected from all over the States; we were told it had originally been donated for Vietnam.

A healthy, determined applicant who proved eligible for the grants came off well, getting credit probably from about \$400 to \$1,000 per household, according to size, in allocations. One difficulty was that old folks, invalids and those lacking transportation--all the many unable to be in the waiting lines--got nothing.

Another hitch was that you were supposed to spend all the grant made you for underwear, socks, etc, in one store on one day. Very orderly for the store, no doubt, but a galling limitation for the refugee. There were some merchants who made generous gifts of underwear, sweaters, etc, to the program. We didn't hear of any such gifts from furniture dealers. In fact the frantic demand for goods enabled dealers to clear their warehouses of stuff otherwise unsaleable and many did so. In the chest of drawers we got (with my sister's check), the thin plywood drawers were stapled in and the hand-

didn't fit. But oh! how good it was to get your things off the floor, into some kind of order!

One of the trying features was the slow deliveries. We got a fine big Norge right away (and it lasted ten years). But we slept on the floor of our rented room till Christmas, when the bed finally arrived.

Personal Reconstruction

AS SOON AS we'd found a room we could afford, Walter, with his usual steadfastness, undertook the heartbreaking cleanup of what was left of our home and belongings. After one look, I couldn't bear to go there. Most of our irreplaceable labor library, records of our organizing work in New Orleans, our large give-away library (donated books), were lost forever--a mass of smelly goo on the floor of the workshop. My saddest book losses were a first edition of Lewis Carroll's DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE and THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS and a 3-volume HISTOIRE DE PROVENCE (1777) in handset type on handmade paper; we'd just had it beautifully rebound.

Luckily, the clothes we'd had in a trunk, packed with para-di-chloro-benzine, came through well enough to wear. All other fabrics had to be washed many times. We used jar after jar of cream-tartar to get the smell out of things. Every night Walt would come home with a bale of filthy hangings, linens, shoes, kitchen, desk and garden stuff. I'd sort it, throw most of it away, wash the rest. Our rented room gave us access to a washing machine and a big drying yard.

Walter hired some friendly young Black neighbors at modest wages (which he taught them to stipulate beforehand, together with their hours of work). He supplied lunch and they all had a good time scrubbing, scraping and hosing the walls, sloshing out the floors. He was pleased when these teen-agers, after lunch, burst into Christmas carols.

The old half of the house had to be torn down. We had a contractor raise the remainder two feet higher and then rebuild the kitchen, diningroom and bath, adding a second folding attic stairway at the new end of the house. It was 1971 before we could get back to live there.

Writing up the Nightmare

In the immediate agony of post-Betsy, our main struggle was on paper--to put together our tattered flood experience so it could be published. Mrs. Phillips, of the Washington Red Cross, had expressed interest in this effort. She tried to have our grant include a new typewriter. A nosey ARC

official insisted he must see our manuscript. When we refused, talk of a typewriter was dropped. My sister's generous check enabled us to buy one, and we got started. I did more of the drafting than usual, reading each day's output to Walter at night for criticism and correction. Usually, with paper in front of us, we'll be talking out what we're going to say, and as he questions, narrates or analyzes, I rush to put it down, the pungent way he says it. His style is simpler, more earthy and direct than mine. I need that corrective, always remembering we write for working people, shy of long words and tortuous sentences. I claim I'm better than he is at choosing the final order in which to present the ideas or events. We dovetail-- as my sister once remarked admiringly.

All this time of course we were both working on the Betsy Flood Victims organization. We got involved in the Grape Boycott and later, with Tulane and Loyola students, in the peace movement. I also made us some clothes. We were pretty busy.

By some miracle, the flood story was finished by October 11, ready to mail. The NATIONAL GUARDIAN, a liberal weekly verging on the radical, had expressed interest in it. The editor then was James Aronson. He called it "fascinating;" it stayed there four weeks (while the news value evaporated); then it came back. Blunk. The GUARDIAN staff split up shortly afterward. We never learned if our manuscript was one of the editorial bones of contention or if the paper was affected by the ban on flood news supposedly issued by New Orleans authorities. A New York agency liked the story too and tried hard to place it, but it reached them too late, and we filed it sadly away.

What Happened to CORE?

ANOTHER DISAPPOINTMENT of 1965 was the failure of CORE (Committee on Racial Equality) to respond to our appeals for aid in organizing the Betsy victims in our area. Betsy seemed to us to be a national matter. Gov. McKeithen had ranked it with the Chicago Fire (1871) and San Francisco Earthquake (1906) as a major disaster.

CORE certainly knew how to buck the Establishment, and here was a catastrophe due at least in part to Establishment indifference and inadequacy. Item: the failure to give timely evacuation warnings. Item: the official locking of school buildings. Item: the undeniable bombing of the canal levee, ⁽¹¹⁾ Item: the road-block on St. Maurice Ave. Item: the admitted

(11) See photos 1-4.

insufficiency of the river levees downstream. Item: the levee-lacking Gulf Outlet Canal. Item: the numerous unexplained gaps in levees rebuilt after Betsy. ⁽¹²⁾ Item: the after-Betsy collapse of the Florida Avenue railroad levee. ⁽¹³⁾ Item: the generally callous attitude toward refugees, especially Blacks. Item: the confiscation of individual purchases, made with such difficulty from the naval base. Item: the year-long failure to restore the two fire-houses, especially in view of the everlasting delay in cleanup of the discarded furnishings that filled every gutter and empty lot; a fire, among houses mostly of wood construction, at that point would have been the final wipe-out of us all. Final item: New Orleans' gleeful espousing of the deceptive schemes of Urban Renewal (now somewhat remedied after ten years of angry citizen protest and several hundred tons of Establishment's neat, heavy vellum studies and reports).

The lasting damage done to city areas of Black and white workers' and professionals' homes called for a drive for adequate compensation. This was clearly a fundamental issue on which, with CORE help, there could have been a long-term peoples' movement under combined Black and white leadership (and legwork!). CORE had the prestige, the experience, the skills, the forces. It was known and admired for its splended work for New Orleans through the '60's. But it closed its New Orleans office soon after Betsy. We felt, and still feel, that an opportunity was missed here which, if grasped, would have kept the liberation movement of the '60's alive and growing, at least in New Orleans.

Instead, came that strange U.S. period (now fortunately being laid aside) when "militant" Blacks (mostly of middle-class background) refused to struggle alongside whites, no matter how sympathetic and able, calling them all honkies; yet these same overnight revolutionaries had no qualms about trading the militant dashiki for the wide lapel and fat tie of a salaried servant of the Establishment, their acknowledged enemy.

Black IS beautiful. That's a happy fact. Getting it acknowledged by whites--and savored by Blacks--was a big step forward for all of us. But skin color alone is not beauty. The heart still matters. Responsibility to society still matters. Says Walter, who spent his young years with the direct-action, worker-run Industrial Workers of the World, "The old IWW slogan, 'One for All and All for One' is still the only way to a future for the working class."

(12) See photos 6,7.

(13) New Orleans STATES-ITEM 10.10.66.