

Memories of Bolivar and the LINN House

Hilda Lopez of Beaumont wrote these reflections after Hurricane Ike washed away her family's cabin on Caplen Beach.



The site of the LINN house after Ike.

The History

Eighty-four years ago the new school at Caplen was lifted by a storm and set in East Bay. Galveston County abandoned the school. The Oxford family brought the school back and made it their beach cottage. In 1929 Guy Linn bought the house and it remained in the Linn family for the next 48 years. For the last 33 years it has had our name on the deed but it will always be the Linn house. The true history of the grand old lady was not the physical house but rather was what the house represented. Hospitality. Fun. Love. Family. Friends. And maybe a little cold beer.

Caplen

The oldest houses on the beach were at Caplen. They were large. Land went from highway to beach. Families had owned the same houses for generations. In the beginning, families had spent the entire summer at the beach. In the spring, people were sent down to plant gardens. At the beginning of the summer, cows and chickens were sent down by train. No road led to Caplen. At High Island, one got on the beach and drove to the houses. By the 1950s, each house had been updated to include indoor bathrooms, running water (now they even had hot water), and some had been so bold as to replace the screens with windows.

When we bought the Linn house, we were the new kids on the block. Strangers. We began updating the house. Twenty-six gallons of white paint brightened the inside; new fabric covered the furniture. Our kitchen now included new cabinets, a stove with all the burners working, and even a dishwasher. A sun deck was added. Our neighbors were not impressed. They came. They looked. They nodded. They smiled. Each and every one had the same comment. "I'm glad you kept the hanging beds." But one could tell they thought these new kids were going to ruin the neighborhood.

The Peninsula

The people made the peninsula like no other place that I know of. One of my first experiences in dealing with "the locals" was the building of the deck. I hired a local for a set fee plus cost of materials. When it came time to pay, I found out he had charged the materials to me. Before I paid him I went to check and see what he had charged. I got to the lumber yard and they could not find an account in my name or [my husband] Johnny's name. We even tried Linn since that was the name on the roof of the house. No luck. I ask them to try once more, giving the full name, Dr. John Joseph Lopez. No luck. Then they ask what kind of doctor he was. When I replied dentist, they knew where they had put the charges. An account had been opened to "the dentist on the beach."

We decided that we needed a telephone. I called

Southwestern Bell. After answering a long series of questions, I was told they didn't know if they serviced my area but they would research it and call back. Knowing that Claud's had a phone, I called Claud and asked how he got service. He told me to call the Cameron telephone company. The only question I was asked was where I wanted the bill sent. They gave me a number in High Island and told me the next time I headed for the beach to just call this number and I could get my phone installed. Sure, I thought, this is really going to work. Headed for the beach the next Saturday. Called. By the time I got to the house the phone was being installed. Billy, the phone man, came in, had a beer, and told us the best place to go crabbing.

Interviewed a handyman about some work that I needed done. When I got through he told me, "Well, lady, if I wanted to work that hard I would move to Beaumont. All I need is enough money to keep me in shrimp and beer." The electrician showed up a day late. His excuse? "I'd been barbecuing since early morning and by the time you called at noon, I was so drunk that my breath alone would set the house on fire."

The list goes on and on. The ferry captain that let my first grade grandson drive the ferry from Galveston to Bolivar. The lady at the cut [at Rollover Pass] who spent days and days teaching my son and his friend all about fishing at the cut. The septic tank guy who drove a truck with a large lettered sign that read "I really know my shit."

The House

The insurance adjuster wants me to make a diagram of the house with approximate room dimensions. A floor plan is not what we lost. How can one explain that we measure rooms not in feet but how many we can sleep. It seems they do not care that the walls were 12-inch heart of pine, the floors were oak and cypress, the ceilings were high. It was built to catch the wind from every directions.

The adjuster also wants us to list the contents of the house with age and cost of each item. Age and cost have nothing to do with the loss. How does one replace an old, round, leaning oak table that had a heart and a history. Do they not care that we kept repairing it year after year with no thoughts of ever giving it up? We have sat around the table and played hundreds, maybe even thousands, of games of cards. Our family and our friends come into the house and sit at the table. Chairs are filled. More chairs are brought in. Floor



The LINN house in its prime.

space is taken. People sit on kitchen cabinet tops. Drinks, food, good times are shared. For years I have sat around that table with friends and the friendship has turned into a sisterhood. We even trade stories about the table itself. Yes, it's true that many years ago someone was shot and killed at this very table. Well no, it was not the only shooting at the table, but it was the only death.

I can put a cost on ten single beds and one queen, but what about the hanging beds? Two double beds with sagging mattresses, set on iron frames, hanging from chains. They were placed on the southeast and the southwest corners of the house so that there was always a breeze on one or the other. First ones in the house called dubs on those beds. Each could sleep two, but at times at least four kids would pile in. A great place for a afternoon nap, rocking a baby, sharing secrets with a friend, or seeing how high one could swing the bed without breaking a window.

The adjuster might question why one would have over 60 windows and 13 ceiling fans. He wouldn't know that air-conditioning is a new thing to Caplen. Before air-conditioning, windows were always up, with sticks propping most of them. Ceiling fans were on with a few floor fans for extra wind. The windows were old and leaky. When the wind blew strong and seeped through the windows, the house sang its own song. At night one would be lulled to sleep with the sound of the surf and morning would be announced with the raising of the sun and the cry of the gull. At night, when the rains came, everyone would jump out of bed and run to shut the windows, mop up the wet floors and raid the kitchen for pots to put under the leaks.

Then it all changed. A grandson was born. Carter. The perfect child. Johnny saw a bead of sweat on Carter's brow. No longer did I have my perfect house. Roofs were ripped off and replaced with a new non-leaking roof. No more wind song. Windows were replaced with new insulated glass. No more wonderful old unfinished porch ceiling. Insulation was added and a new ceiling. Air-conditioning was installed. I learned to love the comfort of the cool air, but I always missed the sounds and smells it took from me.

The End

Once Johnny realized that our kids had never seen a beach with blue water and white sand. He took the family to the Caribbean. On about the second day of our trip, my son asked if the people here knew about Bolivar Peninsula. When we told him no, he informed us that he was not surprised because if they knew about Bolivar they surely would not be here. After all, he couldn't find one light bulb on the beach.

Yes, our water was brown, tar was on the beach, sticker burrs in the grass, days and even nights were hot, jelly fish in the water, but we loved it. We only needed enough to keep us in beer and shrimp.

All is gone now. Ike took our house, the swinging beds, the picnic table, and the oak kitchen table. The gumbo pot is gone. Walls of pictures are no more. Ike was able to rob us of what we cherished but Ike was not able to wash away our memories. When one recalls a memory one still has the beach house. We did not lose a house, we lost a way of life.