

Bolivar Memories

As I think about the destruction from Hurricane Ike, an old Paul Simon song, "Bookends Theme," plays in my head:

Time it was, and what a time it was.

It was...a time of innocence, a time of confidences.

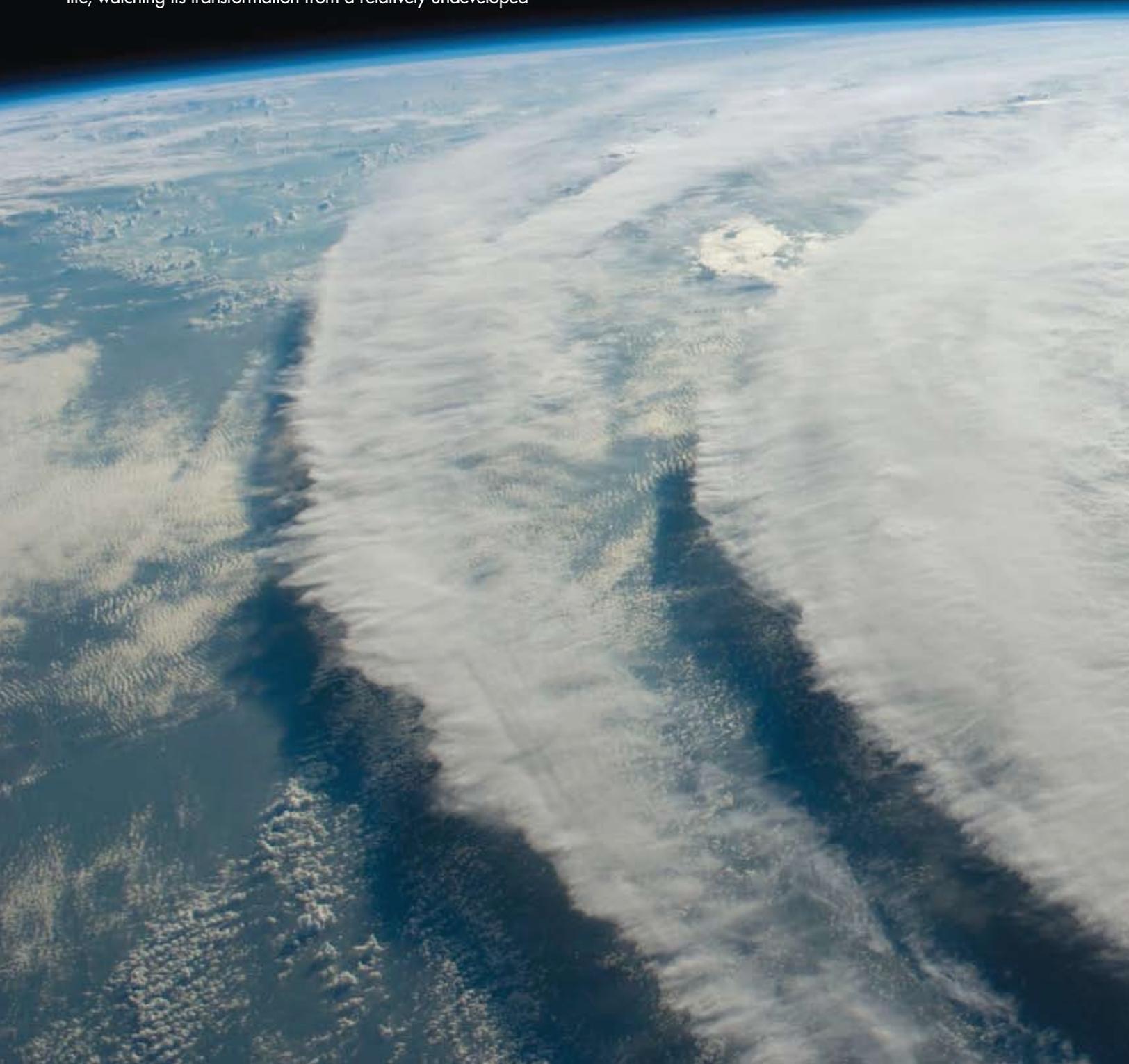
Long ago, it must be, I have a photograph.

Preserve your memories; they're all that's left you.

My memories of the beach are mostly of Bolivar Peninsula. It was my first beach, and I have returned to it all of my life, watching its transformation from a relatively undeveloped

area to a series of growing beach house subdivisions. Although I have seen the impact of storms on the peninsula for a half century, it is difficult to absorb the reality of Ike's devastation.

For the first twenty years of my life, the beaches at Bolivar and Galveston were the only ones I visited. My family would drive through the refineries in Port Arthur, pull off the beach road (old Highway 87) at the first sign of the ocean, drive out onto the sand, and lay a blanket on a spot away from other people. For me, this was "the beach," complete with gobs of oil



that had to be removed from our feet with kerosene or baby oil, cars driving too fast up and down the sand, and pieces of broken bottles and flip-top tabs. Nonetheless, to me Bolivar was a beautiful place where brown waves met brown sand.

As I grew older, beach blankets gave way to beach cabins. Growing up was different back in the early 1960s. With drivers' education, we got our licenses at fourteen, and our parents thought nothing about letting us make the forty or fifty mile drive to the beach. My first glimpse of anything approaching

adult freedom was a trip with two friends to a beach cabin on the Port Arthur side of Crystal Beach sometime early in high school. We stayed at a cabin that family and friends had built on the beach to provide a roof over their heads while enjoying the ocean. Such self-built cabins, which owners often called "camps," were the most common dwellings on Bolivar in this era. Nothing fancy, they were places for working people to spend their weekends relaxing, fishing, and splashing in the waves.



Image of Hurricane Ike at sea on September 10, 2008, taken by the crew of the International Space Station.

Permission: World Wide Photos

In these years, whatever you needed for your stay, you brought along with you, since there were few stores on the peninsula. After unloading the groceries, we took glorious drives up and down the beach by ourselves in an old pickup. One night we flirted with the limits of freedom by borrowing a watermelon from a neighbor's watermelon patch. Later we rode down 87 toward the ferry landing in the back of the pickup. We passed quickly through the scattered collection of filling stations and beach cabins that constituted the unincorporated "town" of Crystal Beach. Most of the remainder of the trip featured undeveloped beach on our left and fenced pastures on our right. This was Bolivar Peninsula in the early 1960s, before the wave of construction brought by the oil boom of the 1970s. With as many cows as people and more open land than subdivisions, it was a world apart from Beaumont, much less Houston.

The memory of a much different trip to a beach cabin on Bolivar several years later is even stronger. I graduated from college at age twenty-one in June of 1970, and then spent the summer waiting to go to basic training in the army in October. That summer my wife Suzy and I lived at my parents' home. I worked as a laborer in a petrochemical plant; she helped care for my dad, who was dying a miserable death from cancer. Between his burial in August and the start of basic training, my young wife and my young self decided to spend a week at Bolivar trying to wash off some of our sorrow and to forget about our impending separation.

My backdoor neighbors owned an old-fashioned beach cabin, and they rented it to us at a cut rate. As I scribbled directions, they joked that we couldn't miss their cabin, since it was painted pink. Once on Bolivar, we drove on past the major landmark, Swede's store, turned left into a cluster of beach cabins, and followed the directions down narrow roads to a funky pink cabin. The key they gave us fit into the lock but did not open the door, so I pried open a screen, pushed up a window, and climbed in. (This was, after all, a cabin, not a fancy home with an expensive security system.) We then enjoyed a couple of memorable days at the beach. The waves were higher than we had ever seen. We had a big raft and a rowdy ocean all to ourselves, since almost no one was there in September. An old couple were our only neighbors, and they enjoyed sitting in their lawn chairs and watching the giddy kids frolic in the big waves. We were enveloped by the ocean, oblivious to anything beyond the waves—so much so, in fact, that the old couple had to tell us that Tropical Storm Felice was out in the Gulf moving toward Galveston.

Reluctantly heeding calls to evacuate Bolivar, we returned home to wait out the storm. I walked over to tell our neighbors how much we were enjoying their cabin, particularly the great outdoor shower for rinsing off. They looked puzzled; it turned out that their cabin did not have an outdoor shower. We had missed the last turn in their directions and stumbled upon the only other pink beach cabin for miles. Although breaking and entering seemed somewhat more serious than borrowing a watermelon, we nonetheless returned to the scene of the crime after the storm had cleared. The old couple smiled and waved at us as we drove past them. Surely they had second thoughts when they saw us moving into our second pink cabin of the week, but the police never came.

Basic training did, however, all too soon. Then came graduate school on the east coast and a job in California. The 1970s are to me a blur of motion marked by frequent drives across the country in our Rambler American, the birth of our daughter, and our swimming fool of a golden retriever, who loved all beaches equally. Along the way we discovered beaches far different than Bolivar. Stays at a Cape Cod-style beach home on Nantucket, a rental cabin on Cape Hatteras, a condo on St. Croix, a motel near Destin, Florida, and a cottage in Carmel revealed that some beaches had white sand and blue water. By the time we returned to Texas to live in 1981, we knew what pretty beaches looked like, but we still found ourselves drawn to Bolivar.

Ten years had brought dramatic changes in the appearance of the peninsula. The most obvious was the absence of a reliable road from Port Arthur to Bolivar. High waters from a series of hurricanes had severely damaged Highway 87 from Sabine Pass to High Island, and that thirty-two mile strip of the beach road had been temporarily closed...forever. By the early 1980s, full-scale houses on piers had begun to replace beach cabins on parts of Bolivar. Although some still called these fancy houses "beach cabins," most were nicer



than any house I will ever own. Indeed, the future of Bolivar was already evident across the ferry and past the seawall on the west end of Galveston, where structures I came to call beach mansions had begun to appear. On Bolivar Peninsula, upscale subdivisions were gradually taking over what had been stretches of empty beach. In the newly incorporated town of Crystal Beach, the proliferation of new businesses to serve the growing number of part-time beach cabin inhabitants had begun to give this section of Bolivar the feel of a tourist resort. There goes the neighborhood.

For the next twenty years, we rented cabins at Bolivar for functions ranging from our daughter's birthdays to our niece's wedding, when twenty or so family members congregated on Bolivar for much of a week. We regularly rented a big old-fashioned beach cabin at Caplen beach from my sister's friend and neighbor in Beaumont. I knew I would like the cabin before seeing it when I heard the directions: "once you cross Rollover Pass, look for the cabin with 'LINN' on the roof." A previous owner had used dark shingles on a white roof to spell out the family name in big block letters. This decreased the likelihood of pink-cabin mistakes, and it also helped me spot the cabin several times on Southwest Airlines



Major, Billy, Owen, and Michele Murphy and the view from the deck of the Murphy house.

flights from Hobby to points east. The LINN cabin had been built in the early twentieth century to serve as an elementary school, but a storm ended these plans by depositing it in the East Bay. In the 1920s, a new owner salvaged the cabin and relocated it on Caplen beach. It was a glorious, giant cabin, with a big screened porch on three sides with hammock beds hanging from the roof. It had a raggedy old red piano, and few could resist pounding out an off-key "song." Alas, it also had a beach that seemed to have moved closer to the backdoor every time we visited, as storms ate away the shoreline.

In the years traveling to and from the LINN cabin, we could not help but see the changes brought by "gentrification," Bolivar style. A great old-fashioned burger joint, the O.K. Corral, offered milk shakes near a water slide that was never mistaken for the Schlitterbahn. A golf course of sorts graced the far west end of the peninsula. New restaurants and bars dotted the landscape; the symbol of the arrival of Crystal Beach as a full-scale entertainment center was the opening of a karaoke bar.

With the continued spread of beach house developments on Bolivar, a new stage of its growth moved forward in the early twenty-first century, marked by an honest-to-goodness supermarket, a spiffy new post office, and a fine new elementary school. Several summers ago, even a strip mall came to the neighborhood.

Initially, I preferred the old Bolivar to the new, the rugged old cabins to the new-fangled upscale homes on stilts. This began to change, however, when a friend began to offer the use of a beach mansion on the west end of Galveston. Then my sister Carolyn and her husband Bob Murphy bought a great house on the first row at Lafitte's Landing, a beach-style subdivision between Rollover Pass and the town of Crystal Beach. I discovered the joys of a great deck looking out at the ocean, a good kitchen, central air and heat, and all sorts of other amenities. The deck of my sister's cabin became one of my favorite hangouts. What a show: the sights and sounds of the waves meeting the sand; the porpoises and shrimp boats; the spectacle of a sky full of stars, a thunderstorm out in the Gulf, or even the lights of offshore platforms. Best of all, squadron after squadron of brown pelicans flew right over the deck. As a bonus, when I wanted something to eat or drink, I could make a quick trip to the supermarket. Life was good at the beach.

I began to take regular advantage of the Murphys' generous offers to use their beach house as a place to write. Part of my writer's ritual was a long walk on the beach at sunrise before I sat down in front of the computer. On these walks, I had to look away from the ocean to avoid the glare from the rising sun, and I could not help but look closely at the new Bolivar—the rows of beach houses stretching farther and farther into beach-front areas once devoid of development. Two questions came to mind: (1) how long could this growth continue without fundamentally changing the experience of going to the beach at Bolivar; and (2) how large would a storm have to be to do serious damage to these recently constructed houses?

At Bolivar the threat of hurricanes hung in the air in the summer and fall. You could track the histories of storms by looking at the receding coastline. But I found even more sobering storm warnings in a great little book I first



Big waves at Bolivar, spring break 2008.

discovered in the bookshelves at the LINN cabin, A. Pat Daniels's *Bolivar! Gulf Coast Peninsula*. Writing with the passion of a part-time resident of Bolivar, Daniels traces the history of the peninsula through a combination of documents and interviews. I read this short, entertaining book from front to back the first time I picked it up, and I have read it several more times since. I always return to the short section called "Storms over Bolivar." Here Daniels presents a list of the many hurricanes and tropical storms that have passed over the peninsula since 1766, complete with gripping stories of the struggles for survival in the big storms of 1900 and 1915. Both storms brought death and widespread damage to Bolivar, destroying most of the structures on the peninsula. During both, those who did not evacuate faced death, with hundreds finding refuge from high waters in the Bolivar lighthouse near the ferry landing. I had, of course, heard the stories of the "Great Galveston storm" of 1900, and I even knew about the massive storm in 1915. But the sheer number of big storms over Bolivar grabbed my attention. For as long as people had lived there, they could be certain that still another bad hurricane lurked out there in the Gulf with Bolivar's name on it.

I thought of Daniels's book each time a hurricane threatened our part of the coast. In 2005 Hurricane Rita scored a near miss, heading straight for the Murphy house before moving up the coast a bit just before making landfall. This year as I watched for news of Hurricane Ike after evacuating to a friend's home in Austin, I kept worrying about predictions that a massive storm surge up Galveston Bay could flood homes all along Clear Lake and Clear Creek, including my home in Friendswood. Knowing that Ike was not supposed to make landfall until late Friday night, I was stunned by the televised images of waves splashing up above the Galveston seawall at ten on Friday morning. I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw reports that the center of the storm was moving slightly up the coast, putting the big storm surge to the east of us. And then it struck me that our good fortune might spell disaster for Bolivar. Television accounts of water rising on the peninsula well before dark gave me the idea to call someone with a reminder of the safe haven the Bolivar

lighthouse had offered in the distant past, but I did not know who to call with my strange historian's knowledge.

I stayed up most of the night of Ike watching news accounts of its landfall. Groggy from too little sleep and too much beer, I recalled my last long visit to Bolivar during spring break six months earlier, when I stayed at the Murphy house for a week. A big storm on the first day pushed high waves all the way to the sand dunes, reminding my wife and me of our journey to the pink beach cabin almost forty years earlier. The turbulence and power of the usually tame Gulf fascinated me, and I watched the rough surf for hours. What an amazing spectacle it would be, I mused, to watch a big storm surge coming up out of the ocean. Having seen this beach all of my life, what a sight it would be to have a protected space from which to see it transformed by the extreme conditions brought by a hundred-year storm. As I watched and waited for news by myself in a dark room in Austin, two hundred miles away on Bolivar, there were no protected places west of High Island as Ike churned around and over those who had not evacuated.

The next day Suzy and I sat with Carolyn and Bob at the Austin home of her son and his family. The mood was not that of one of our family get-togethers at the beach house. We were not sitting on the deck of the beach house at Bolivar watching pelicans or out on the beach playing with our great nephews. Instead, we were searching for news about our homes and the beach house. One "news" broadcast brought a frenzied outburst from a reporter, who screamed into the camera: "Crystal Beach is gone." We laughed at how the fools on TV always exaggerated, but we later learned that this particular fool was more or less correct. Most of the structures on Bolivar had either disappeared or suffered serious damage. Photos on the internet seemed to show empty spaces where the first rows of cabins had been at Lafitte's Landing. After power was finally restored at my own house, which suffered significant damage in Ike, I surfed the web obsessively looking at web sites with images of the mind-numbing damage on the





Sailboat beached at Bolivar after Ike.



The view from under the late deck of the Murphy house after Ike.

Bolivar peninsula.

Several weeks after the storm, when homeowners could finally return to Bolivar, my sister and her husband confronted the harsh reality of the peninsula after Ike. They saw that the LINN cabin had vanished, and that much of the lot on which

it had stood for more than eighty years was in the ocean. At the site on their own beach house, they found nothing except some silverware, a plate, their golf cart buried in sand in a ditch across the road, and chunks of concrete where the driveway had been. Not even the piers remained. Ike's tidal surge washed away most of the houses on the first and second rows facing the beach all along Bolivar. Farther back from the ocean, many of the structures that remained suffered serious damage from the wind and water, as well as from collisions with beach houses ripped from their piers which careened across the peninsula like giant bumper cars.

Months passed after Hurricane Ike before I mustered the courage to go and see the devastation that resulted when the ocean chewed up Bolivar Peninsula and spit out the pieces from Chambers County to Padre Island. Although I knew I would find a landscape several people had compared to "a giant battlefield," I was not prepared for the miles of desolation I encountered on the road from High Island to Crystal Beach a full three months after the hurricane.

Along with my wife, daughter, and son-in-law, I followed Carolyn and Bob to the site of their cabin. The loss of familiar landmarks made it difficult to keep our bearings. We walked the beach looking back at what had been the first row of cabins. So little remained of the beach house that had given us such pleasure in the past that we could not be certain exactly where it had stood. Up the road toward Galveston the supermarket was in shambles; its sturdy fortress-like front wall stood tall between a mound of debris out by Highway 87 and the gutted interior of the store. Most of the exterior walls of the fine new strip mall had been washed away. We made no

effort to find the old pink cabin, figuring that if we could not find it in 1970 with good directions, we had little chance of identifying it amid the chaos of Bolivar after Ike. Along the beach at Gilcrest was the much photographed "only house standing" that the national media had adopted as a symbol of hope amid the devastation of Ike; the house looked to be on mighty shaky ground. On down the road toward High Island stood a beautiful sailboat grounded on the beach, standing as a stark reminder of how much was left to be done to return the peninsula to its previous state.

My memories of the beach on Bolivar before Ike now stand in sharp contrast to the ravaged landscape there. A century ago in 1900 and 1915, residents on this barrier island in the Gulf twice faced similar destruction and the same sense of loss and confusion about the future. Like these earlier citizens of Bolivar, many of those who lost everything they owned on Bolivar during Ike plan to do what Americans have always done: build something bigger and better. Once the beach is cleared, they and their families and friends will rebuild and once again enjoy their beach houses and the vacation communities on the peninsula. Then a year or a hundred years later, others will stand at the same spot looking once again at the destruction from what nature has always done: destroy man-made structures on barrier islands with massive tidal surges driven by hurricane winds.

After sixty years on earth, I now accept as a normal, almost comprehensible, part of life the sad reality that people die. The death of a place, however, is for me a strange new reality. Sure, the brown waves still meet the brown sand at Bolivar, and in places, you can make your way through the debris and walk along the beach. But the landscape no longer matches my memories. The physical symbols of this unique place have been washed and blown away. In this sense, Ike destroyed history itself, leaving no record of the changes I have witnessed over my lifetime. Memories of Bolivar are all that are left me--memories of times of innocence, when big waves meant big fun, and we remained confident that hurricanes would pass us by and destroy someone else's beach.

• **Joe Pratt** is editor of *Houston History* magazine.