

FROM JOE PRATT, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



EYES OF STORMS

The eye of Hurricane Audrey was a thing of beauty. Even as an eight-year old, I understood that I was lucky to be in this memorable place. More than fifty years later, I remember the thrill, the danger, the privilege of being in the eye of the storm. I remember also learning of the price paid for this privilege.

The whole adventure started suddenly and ended quickly. Tropical storm Audrey popped up off Mexico in the Bay of Campeche on June 25, 1957. She quickly charged due north, taking aim at the Texas-Louisiana border. Late on the night of the twenty-sixth, radio broadcasts along that part of the Gulf Coast warned of a potentially dangerous hurricane a hundred miles or so out in the Gulf that might make landfall the next afternoon. In our home just on the Texas side of the state line in the refinery town of Port Neches, we listened warily to this forecast, but without much sense of urgency.

In those days before weather satellites, we did not expect much warning before a storm. There were no beautiful time lapse photographs from above Audrey showing her eye as it developed and spun toward us; no detailed projections of her probable path; no traffic jams as people fled “up home” to the safety of relatives in East Texas; no crazed television weather men intent on scaring us to death.

We turned off the radio and battened down the house. My dad, a fireman at a nearby synthetic rubber plant, did his duty and went off to help prepare the plant for the storm. The rest of us went to sleep. Before dawn Audrey neared the coast, having picked up strength and speed during the night. We locked up, grabbed a few small valuables, and walked several blocks to the closest brick structure, Woodcrest Elementary School, where I had just completed the third grade.

There we found other refinery workers’ families waiting for the storm in the interior hallway of my school, which had become a make-shift shelter. We did not wait long. In the early morning the winds picked up sharply from the east, carrying heavy rains. We had no windows through which to watch the show outside, but we could hear the wind and rain and feel the force of nature all around us. Growing up in southeast Texas, I had few experiences against which to measure my feelings. Being in a hurricane seemed more exciting than even the fieriest of sermons at a Southern Baptist church, but less exciting than a touchdown by the mighty Indians at a high school football playoff game.

When the wind subsided and the eye of the storm moved over us, the fun began. No doubt frazzled by our rowdiness in the hallway, the moms let the boys out to play. After hours cooped up inside a dim hallway, we were free. Naturally, someone had brought that most valuable of possessions, a football, to the hurricane shelter. This was, after all, small town Texas. Free to choose, we chose the familiar, a game of football in a schoolyard in which we often played.

But today there was one amazing difference. Today we were in the eye of the storm, splashing around underneath a blue hole in the sky filled with birds. On the wet ground, we played football with the energy of muddy boys unleashed from confinement; above us, more birds than we had ever seen in one place circled in the clear blue sky. Boys and birds were trapped together in the calm during the storm.

All too soon, a mom called out, “Boys, y’all come on in now, the winds startin’ tuh change.” Back into our hallway we scrambled as the winds picked up, this time from the west. But having thrown spirals in Audrey’s eye, we future Indians found her winds and rains almost tame. After the storm finally had passed, we walked back home, where the only visible signs of damage were limbs and dead birds strewn about amid a few lost shingles. The only damage I had suffered was muddy clothes; hurricanes might come and go, but life would go on.

Or not. Later that day came horrifying reports out of Cameron, Louisiana, a small town thirty miles or so down the coast. While we had been playing football, desperate folks in Cameron had been clinging to trees or floating debris, fighting winner-take-all battles against the winds and waters from the storm surge of Audrey. Some 500 people, including several hundred children, had died. Almost every structure in the town had been washed away by an angry ocean driven by 145-miles-per-hour winds.

Like us, those in Cameron went to bed on the night of June 26 thinking they would have the morning of June 27 to pack and leave. In the early morning, however, water in their homes announced that they had no choice but to hunker down and try to survive. We grew up on tales of what happened next. At barbershops and in the backs of school buses, we heard stories of an entire town washed away by a storm surge too high and strong to imagine. We heard tales of the grim struggles of those who survived the churning waters and flying objects. We heard how the scene after the storm reminded some veterans of the carnage of World War II. Our memory banks filed these stories under “Hurricane Audrey,” along with the image of a football floating peacefully through a blue sky with birds everywhere.

We learned valuable lessons from Audrey. Pay more attention to big storms. When in doubt, run away. The dirty east side of a hurricane on the Gulf Coast holds the greatest danger. We knew in our heart of hearts Audrey’s darkest lesson: better you than me; better Cameron than Port Neches.

I learned to track storms obsessively, almost as if I might guide them away from my family. Almost fifty years after Audrey, I kept close tabs as the television image of the mammoth Hurricane Rita moved ever closer to the Texas Coast in September 2005. After the announcement of a mandatory evacuation from our home south of Houston, my wife and I drove to a small town above Beaumont to stay with family members until the hurricane passed. Several days later, we found ourselves huddled in the hallway of a small brick home waiting for Rita, which had chased us up the coast. In the absolute darkness of an East Texas night without electricity, we listened to the wind and rain pounding away on the house. We also listened for a time to “hurricane talk radio,” with people in the middle of the storm calling in to report on conditions. One particularly sobering call described the realities of the storm as it moved steadily toward us: “Yeh, the wind’s pickin’ up here. Wait a minute, I gotta go now. A tree just come through the roof and hit my brother.” The call reminded me that I was no longer a kid, but rather the ranking adult in a crew of three people in danger. Yet I knew I was powerless. The storm would do with us what it chose.

At dawn, I peeked out as the winds of Rita’s western eye wall roared around us. I saw a tall pine bend like a fishing rod with a big bass on the hook then crash to earth. Pretty, but pretty scary. Three of us now sat together in the living room making small talk as the winds gradually subsided. Against all logic, we talked by cell phone from the eye of a

hurricane with our daughter, who was safe in Boston. We tried to reassure her and ourselves that we would be fine.

By about noon, the storm had passed. When I went outside

to survey the damage, I saw how lucky we had been. Big trees had crashed through roofs of houses around us and through a storage shed in our back yard. A twister—a small tornado—had passed perhaps fifteen feet from the spot inside the house where my wife and I had spent the night. As we cleaned up debris from our yard, we heard the news of damage from Rita, which had finally decided to take a path much like Audrey had taken decades earlier. The sad news came over the radio that Cameron once again had borne the brunt of the dirty side of the hurricane. Although few structures remained standing there, no deaths were reported. The descendants of the survivors of Hurricane Audrey had the good sense and the time to evacuate.

The memory of playing football in the eye of Hurricane Audrey came to me later that night. Rita had cleared the air and turned off the lights for miles around. As my wife and I walked down a narrow road through the pines, the tension of evacuating into the eye of the storm melted away as we looked up into the night sky. Above us was not a bright blue sky filled with birds, but a deep black sky filled with more stars than we had seen in years. The stars proclaimed that we had survived our harrowing four-day ordeal. Rita had forced us to confront once again how suddenly and unexpectedly the storms of life could arise, how randomly they could

pick us out from the crowd, and how fortunate we were that the storm had passed. We could return, at least for now, to our real lives of family and friends and work. ★

Memories from Hurricane Audrey: The Deadly Storm of 1957

In her recently published book, *Hurricane Audrey: The Deadly Storm of 1957*, Cathy C. Post uses interviews and correspondence to recreate the experiences of some of those who survived the full impact of Hurricane Audrey in Cameron, Louisiana.

The book’s account of the arrival of the storm begins with a powerful statement of fact: “Few people who saw the actual tidal wave lived to tell. Those who did survive it never forgot it.” (p. 121) Post’s haunting book includes vivid memories of houses being carried away in the storm surge, and people clinging to floating roofs and other debris. The book recounts the ordeals of various individuals and families after they had been tossed into the swirling water: “Once they were thrown into the water they grabbed for anything that floated. The animals did the same. Bobcats and raccoons, rats and mice, nutria and snakes—all sought higher, drier ground.” (p. 125) The heart of the book includes stories of a day and night spent trying to stay alive. People fight crazed cattle for space on floating rooftops; poisonous water moccasins challenge frightened humans for any available refuge from the salt water; tired, defeated people lose their grip and are washed away into the waters. Amid such scenes of devastation and desperation, Post also depicts scenes of courage, as neighbors struggle to help each other survive.

The account of a husband and wife battling for their lives for hours before finally finding some respite in calmer waters and winds puts my own memory of playing football in the eye of the Audrey into perspective. The wife looks up at the sun shining brightly overhead and says, “Thank God, it’s over.” Her husband sees storm clouds on all sides and responds, “I think we are in the eye of the hurricane.” (pp.164-65) When the eye passes and the storm returns, the exhausted couple’s fight for life begins anew. After a long day and night in the waters, however, the wife does not survive. ★

All quotations are taken from Cathy C. Post, *Hurricane Audrey: The Deadly Storm of 1957* (Gretna, Louisiana: Pelican Publishing Company, 2007).