

Bayou islanders resist call to abandon home

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A day in the life of Edison Dardar starts with a caterwaul of a shout. A yawlp. His chest puffs up: "Yay-hoooo!" Morning cries down the road greet him. "Wa-hoooo!" ... "Yaaaah!" ... "Aaaahh-eee." The Indian fisherman smiles. His cousins and nephews are doing well.

Soon enough, roosters and dogs join the morning chorus, and the island is awake.

"It keeps your chest clear," the 60-year-old barrel-chested fisherman rationalizes. "Over in Bourg, if I did that, they'd probably put me in jail."

Bourg is a tidy Cajun bayou town a few miles north of Dardar's hurricane-smashed Indian village in the marsh where holdout families are being urged to move by a tribal chief, scientists and public officials.

Why? Because life on this spit of soggy land 6 miles from the Gulf of the Mexico may soon be impossible for the interrelated families with French, Choctaw, Houma, Biloxi and Chitimacha bloodlines that go back 170 years when a Frenchman came here with his Choctaw wife and named the island after his father, Jean Charles.

The road to the island is caving in. Hurricanes are flooding homes more often. The gulf gets closer every year. Isle de Jean Charles is at risk of disappearing under the Gulf of Mexico.

But to Edison Dardar and his kin, the name Bourg sounds like a prison.

"What am I going to do there? Wake up and look at the road?" Edison Dardar shrugs. "No, not me. I'm not moving. This island is more beautiful than ever. This island is a gold mine for me."

He casts for shrimp at sunset behind his house. Sips coffee at Oxcelia's, his sister's place up the road, in the mornings. Checks in on Leodilla, his blind, 90-year-old mother who's old enough to remember the huts made of mud and grass, or bousillage. His wife, Elizabeth, is content watching old Westerns like "Bonanza" and feeding her chicks. A son still lives at a home they raised on 12-foot stilts after Hurricane Andrew in 1992 flooded the island. It wobbles like Jell-o when someone walks from one room to the next.

With a bad limp from 40 years of backbreaking work dredging for oysters, Edison Dardar hobbles over to a handmade plywood sign on the road through the village. He stands next to it proudly.

It reads: "Island is not for sale. If you don't like the island stay off. Don't give up fight for you rights. It's worth saving. Edison Dardar Jr."

"My son wrote it," Dardar, who cannot read and write himself, says with a grin.

From New Orleans, it's a long road to this alligator- and mosquito-infested marsh island. The road goes past the city's outskirts, postwar suburbs and po' boy sandwich shops; it sails across Cajun farmlands of sugar cane fields, moss-draped oaks and roadside watermelon vendors. You must drive beyond the inland fishing towns connected by clunky drawbridges and bayous bobbing with shrimp trawlers and hyacinth.

Push on, and the canopy thins out, the road crosses a levee and enters the wide open expanse of marsh tidelands that runs for miles out to the Gulf of Mexico.

An end-of-the-world nausea sets in on the narrow road that rolls across open water toward Isle de Jean Charles. A crooked yellow sign warns: "Water On Road." When high tides and a stiff southern wind combine, the road is slick with water. Half the road caved in after last year's hurricane season.

A gut check hits as the road wends through the island. Half the houses are empty shells, blown apart by hurricanes. Most of the others are raised high on pilings - not for the view, but to keep sofas, beds and Grandma's photos out of the Gulf's regular inundations. The church is gone, the store is gone, most of the children too.

The islanders are living the doomsday scenario that many researchers say awaits Miami, Houston, Savannah, New York: A rising sea at the doorstep.

The village sits outside the main levee systems of south Louisiana, and in the middle of some of the fastest eroding wetlands in the world. For the past 80 years, oil drilling, logging and the Army Corps of Engineers' levee building on the Mississippi River have doomed the island. The knockout is the combination of sea level rise and intense hurricanes.

"In the 1980s, I asked someone to take me to look at Fala, an important Indian settlement, and he took me out there in a boat and said, 'Look down,'" recalled Jack Campisi, an anthropologist who's worked to get south Louisiana's American Indians recognized by the federal government. So far, the Bureau of Indian Affairs has shot down their petitions. "What's at stake is a viable ethnic identity. It's easier to do if you have a federal relationship."

Many tribes moved into the swamps to escape enslavement or forced banishment after Congress passed the 1830 Indian Removal Act. Today, there are about 20,000 American

Indians on the coast. Until the 1950s, most Indians lived in isolation with limited interaction with whites. Old timers recall barefoot children scampering into the woods to hide when the first cars rattled onto the island in the 1950s.

Before the coast was overrun by the oil boom and shipyards, the Indians lived off the land, growing small gardens and raising livestock. Fish, oysters, crawfish and crabs were staples. For medicine, they relied on plants. There was "bon blanc" tea made from a leafy plant. Medicinal teas were gotten from boiling "citronelle," "venera," a Houma word for sage, and the bark of the "bois connu" tree.

"We had no running water. We washed our clothes in the bayou," recalled Hilda Naquin, a 95-year-old Houma woman who grew up between mud walls covered in newspapers and under a thatched palmetto roof. "We didn't have much to eat. My grandpa used to plant a garden. Thank God for that. Our oven was made outside with the dirt and mud."

This isolation was imposed, as stories of discrimination attest. Indian children were barred from schools until the 1960s and called "sabines," a derogatory term.

"My daddy couldn't go get a haircut up the bayou. He couldn't get a hamburger in the town of Golden Meadow," said Laura Billiot, Hilda Naquin's daughter. "The prejudices are still there today; not as bad, but they're still there."

Albert Naquin, one of two tribal chiefs recognized by the islanders, stands on the sinking road surveying his old village. The sound of water laps at the road and fills the silences between his words.

"They had a small lake over yonder, just north of here. Wonder Lake. Now it's all open water," Naquin says.

He resembles a defeated general surveying a battlefield. The contours of the past - smoke rising from thatched-roof homes, barefoot children splashing in crawfish ponds, fishermen poking through the marshes in pirogues - shimmer on the flat marsh horizon in front of him. But these are only memories now. For him, it's time to move inland and reconstitute the tribe behind the safety of levees.

"We didn't have any money. We lived off the land. We had our own cows, we had our pigs, we had chickens, and they were fishermen, and they also raised the garden. So, during the Depression, we didn't even feel that at all," Naquin says.

The idea of moving to Bourg was Albert Naquin's idea. He's talking with state and federal officials about a \$12 million plan to buy a tract of land for 60 homes, in return for not fixing the road.

But his intentions are regarded with skepticism and open hostility by the families that remain on the island. Naquin's family moved off the island after a hurricane destroyed their home in the 1970s.

"Sometimes I feel like Moses," he says. "But Moses had something to go by. I don't have anything. I mean, I'm just an old Indian guy from down here."

He shakes his head. "I'm taking a beating."

Isle de Jean Charles is not the first Indian village to face relocation because of erosion and sea level rise. These factors are combining to force the relocation of seaside villages like Newtok, Shishmaref, Unalakleet and Kivalina in Alaska.

"This is not something that is happening just in Louisiana and it is not something that is theoretical," said Robert Young, the director of the Program for the Study of Developed Shorelines at Western Carolina University in Cullowhee, N.C. "If we don't at least talk about relocation, nature will make those decisions for us, and they won't necessarily be the ones we want to make."

Since Hurricane Katrina, Louisiana officials and the Army Corps of Engineers have set about drawing lines across south Louisiana to determine what can and cannot be saved from sea level rise and delta erosion.

"They drew this broad red line, and said the entire area below the red line would be at risk," said Michael Dardar, a diesel mechanic, tribal historian and a leader with the United Houma Nation. "Every major Houma community is below that red line. Lower Dulac, Pointe Aux Chenes, Isle de Jean Charles. Our whole way of life is in danger."

This bleak future has been the topic of a recent series of community meetings, called "How Safe, How Soon?"

And at each meeting, Brenda Dardar, the principal chief of the Houmas, has gone in with the same message:

"We need to make sure that we can adapt, whether it's elevating our homes, building smart or moving to a different location. Our history's important, our culture's important and preserving our communities is important."

Isle de Jean Charles may be on the wrong side of the line being drawn across the map of south Louisiana. But defiance here seems immovable. The Dardars, Naquins, Billiots and Verdins aren't going easily.

"I wouldn't move. No way. I don't care if this place floods time and again. Nobody but me is living on this land," says T.J. Dardar, a fisherman and one of Edison's cousins, squatting outside his dilapidated wooden house. It's missing siding, needs a coat of paint; piles of beer cans, burnt trash and assorted junk lie around it. A heap of asphalt shingles, with a couple of television boxes thrown in, slumps into the canal across the road.

Notwithstanding the flooding, dangerous road and declining sense of community, it's not hard to see why people want to stay.

"You can do anything you want on this island - catch your crabs, your shrimp, dry your shrimp," Edison Dardar says. "I see nothing changed, me," he says on a walk through his village. So what, he says, if there is now water where he once saw grass? "We were killing duck (when there was land). Now we're killing shrimp. If you're hungry, you make a living."

Back home, his tangy shrimp are drying on a tarp behind his house. Chickens squawk. He mashes a piece of shrimp between his teeth. "They still need to dry some more."

Time slows down here. The plop of a fish brings a great silence of the marsh. Dardar rests for a moment and the symphony of frogs, bugs and birds comes back.

"Make some good gumbo, jambalaya. Talk about good, partner."

"Leave? For what?" he says.

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