OCTOBER 12, 1886: THE NIGHT THAT JOHNSON'S BAYOU, LOUISIANA DIED

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Sources: Galveston "Daily News," October 14-23, 1886. Also, W. T. Block, "Verbatim Galveston News Articles of the 1886 Storm," Emerald of The Neches: The Chronicles of Beaumont, Texas, Nederland: 1980, pp. 353-370; also (secondary) W. T. Block, "October 12, 1886: The Night That Johnson's Bayou, Louisiana, Died," Frontier Tales of The Texas-Louisiana Borderlands, Nederland: 1988, pp. 252-258.

Upon crossing the Sabine Lake causeway from the Texas side en route to Cameron, Louisiana, one soon encounters an endless expanse of verdant marsh lands, seemingly uninhabitable by other than muskrats, alligators, and water moccasins. Purple cranes and marsh hens dart about among the bulrushes and cattails, and here and there a lone cypress dots the landscape, its branches bending beneath a colony of downy egrets. This duck hunter's paradise is crisscrossed by a half dozen marsh "cheniers," or live oak-studded ridges, the most prominent of which is Blue Buck Ridge. If one should follow a black-topped road to the north, the driver would soon cross Johnson's Bayou, a 100-foot wide stream, and end up on 10-mile long Smith Ridge, where the writer's great grandfather, Frederick Smith (Schmidt), an immigrant from Bremen, Germany, settled in 1835 and established his cotton plantation and cotton gin.

Until the building of the causeway about 1960, Johnson's Bayou, La., remained cut off and virtually isolated from the outside world, accessible only by water or air. Certainly, there was a shell road along the beach connecting the bayou community

with the parish seat of Cameron, but until 1931, such towns as Cameron, Creole, Oak Grove, and Grand Chenier could only be reached by water as well. And yet , by 1885 the marsh settlement had a population of 1,200 persons and annually produced 600 bales of cotton.

Johnson's Bayou is a wide, lazy stream that meanders generally southeasterly amid the marshes and cheniers in the direction of Mud Lake. At first glance, one questions why the pioneers of old would select such a homestead, buffeted as it perennially was by storm and isolation, but such was the "call" of good cotton lands during that age before the availability of commercial fertilizer. Many old-timers often swore that they could grow three bales to the acre there, and an old uncle often jested that Smith Ridge would make "good fertilizer" for East Texas. (The fathers of both of the writer's grandmothers, Duncan Smith and Frederick Smith, no kin to each other, lived there. The author is grand nephew of the following Johnson's Bayou pioneers, Austin "Buster" Smith, John Smith, Phineas Smith, Albert Smith, Gus Smith, Emory Smith, and Alonzo Smith, and there were at least six other Smith families to whom he was not related.) And to this day, like some of the nestors of Sabine Pass, Texas, a remnant of the bayou pioneers' descendants, like the Griffith families, still cling to the marsh ridges like barnacles on a boat's bottom.

The marsh terrain, where silence is marred only by the mating calls of the beautiful egrets, would never admit it, but entwined amid the bulrushes is some of the richest history in Southwest Louisiana. The first white men to visit there were probably French fur traders who traversed the bayou during the 1700s to barter trinkets with the Attakapas Indians for furs. These stone-age Indians lived there only during the summer months, gorging on a diet of alligators, fish and oysters. Some Indians survived in the area until after 1800, and the only existing, intact Attakapas vase, excavated at Johnson's Bayou, is dated to the "Marksville Culture" about 500 A. D.

The bayou took its name from the first settler, Daniel Johnson, who brought his family to that region about 1790. He was soon joined by his sons-in-law and other relatives, Solomon and Reuben Barrow, Henry Griffith, and Henry Orr, all of whom later moved to the Trinity River region in Texas. But Griffith later moved back to the bayou, where many of his descendants still live. In 1826, Orr became the 'alcalde' of the Mexican Municipality of Liberty, Texas.

Smuggling rather than cotton growing was probably the cause for the first settlement along the bayou. And certainly African slaves were the principal commodity of that nefarious traffic. Until 1821, the bayou was the extreme southwest corner of the United States while Spain ruled Texas. Between 1821 and 1846, during which time Texas was owned either by Mexico or was an independent republic, the bayou was still our nation's southwest extremity.

There were periods of intermittent slave smuggling along the Texas and Louisiana coasts. The first came during the era of filibustering and Lafitte piracy, and between 1816 and 1821, the New Orleans collector of customs kept the cutter "Lynx" on frequent patrol at or near the mouth of the Sabine estuary in a futile attempt to halt slave traders, three of whom were John, Rezin, and James Bowie.

According to Griffith family traditions, the Bowies visited Johnson's Bayou twice. During those years, the brothers smuggled 1,500 Africans, purchased from Lafitte at Galveston Island, some of whom were channeled along a neighboring stream, Black Bayou near the Sabine River delta, to the Louisiana sugar cane planters. On two occasions, James Bowie bought cattle from Henry Griffith to feed his slave coffles.

At the outbreak of the Texas Revolution, slave traders took advantage of the social upheaval in East Texas to renew their illicit activities. In 1836, Capt. John Taylor of the slave ship "Elizabeth" anchored his vessel for six weeks in the Sabine Pass while ferrying his chattels as far north as San Augustine, Texas. In the same year, a Spanish slave captain named Moro sailed up the Sabine River with 200 slaves. In 1837, an English slaver, under pursuit by a British frigate offshore, wrecked at Blue Buck Point near Johnson's Bayou. The smugglers again bought cattle from Griffith to feed their starving victims, and a slave riot that ensued had to be quelled with firearms as the Africans fought to eat the raw meat or gorge on the blood of the cattle.

As a result, the New Orleans collector again kept his cutter "pretty much in that (Sabine) neighborhood" in order to stop the slave ships. Captain R. Green, one of the first settlers of Orange, patrolled Sabine Lake continuously aboard the U. S. cutter "Woodbury." Because slave ships were being built at New Orleans, reputedly for the renewal of the Sabine Lake slave trade, the United States established its first Sabine customhouse at the Garrison Ridge, about a mile west of Johnson's Bayou, in 1839 with Capt. Green as its first collector. Green's Bayou at the Garrison took its name from him.

In 1837, Garrison Ridge, a live oak-studded chenier perhaps a half-mile in length, was the site of and took its name from the garrison of the 3rd U. S. Infantry Regiment encamped there, while the Sabine River was being mapped and cleared of logjams and other navigation impediments. During the Civil War, a Union Navy squadron encamped there for three months, and the Garrison is still a favorite retreat for pot hunters with metal detectors, searching for old coins, buried treasure, Indian artifacts, etc.

After 1825, a number of new families came to Johnson's Bayou. Eli Berwick settled on the Garrison in 1825 to become its first permanent resident. Frederick Smith came to Smith Ridge in 1835 and lived there until his death in 1877. Dr. Joe Erbelding was another German immigrant who was physician to the bayou settlers throughout his

lifetime. Duncan Smith (the writer's other great grandfather) moved to Johnson's Bayou after the hurricane of 1879 washed his home on the Calcasieu Pass at Leesburg (now Cameron) into the Gulf of Mexico.

Other pioneer settlers and their families, who had arrived ther by the 1850s, included James Bevan, John and Joseph Peveto, Isaac and Jack Simmons, Zadie, Joshua, and William Griffith, James Anderson, Joseph Luke, Jesse Dyson, Francois and Celestine Gallier, Elijah and Michael Ponicheck, Michel Gillen, D. Comstock, John Hamilton, and George Plummer (who was the lighthouse keeper).

Michel Peveto, a veteran of the Battle of New Orleans and long a resident of Jefferson County, Texas where he acquired a Mexican land grant, moved back to the bayou to raise the large family of his second marriage during his old age. In an 1860 farm community of nearly 300 residents, L. Simmons, W. Griffith, and Comstock were the merchants, whereas Gillen and Hamilton were the blacksmiths. About 100 slaves labored in the fields, producing an antebellum yield of about 400 bales.

After the Civil War, Ferdinand Pavell became the settlement's wealthiest citizen, although he maintained two residences until his death in 1912. He owned a cotton plantation, sugar mill, and gin house on the bayou, and operated a store, a cotton brokerage, and a shingle mill at Shellbank, La., also known as Pavell's Island, the delta island in the Sabine River.

Throughout the War Between the States, Johnson's Bayou was a Confederate crown of thorns, for many bayou settlers were open Union sympathizers. The many Cameron Parish (then Calcasieu) cane brakes and cheniers offered asylum to deserters and draft dodgers as well, many of them from Texas, and a band of 200 "Jayhawkers" roamed the countrysides, stealing cattle and horses and harassing the settlers.

Late in 1862, when the Union squadron encamped at Garrison Ridge, the officers attended dances given in their honor by the bayou planters and bought meat and vegetables from them. Nevertheless, Confederate cavalry, while hunting the "Jayhawkers," patrolled the area, and on May 5, 1864, the entire Sabine Pass garrison of Confederate troops debarked at Johnson's Bayou while en route to the Battle of Calcasieu Pass, La. Two days later, 166 Union prisoners captured at that battle were marched through Johnson's Bayou, en route to prison camps in Texas. In April, 1865, while Confederate troopers were "gathering beeves" near the bayou, they captured three escaped Union prisoners-of-war, whom the bayou Unionists had been harboring and who were trying to reach the blockade fleet offshore.

While the rest of the South was in turmoil during the Reconstruction years, Johnson's Bayou was prospering. Many new settlers moved in, some from the Northern states,

until by 1885, the population was estimated to number 1,200. Two distinct communities and post offices developed. Radford, the town at the head of bayou navigation, had 175 inhabitants, a steam cotton gin, and four stores, operated by Caswell Peveto, J. C. Griffith, Austin "Buster" Smith, and Calvin Peveto. Johnson, the other post office, was about equal to Radford in population and merchants, and was located nearer to the mouth of the bayou.

In the summer of 1886, cotton was still king, and the 600 or 700 acres planted in that crop were expected to yield from 900 to 1,000 bales. But sugar cane was rapidly approaching cotton in importance, and a number of new sugar mills already dotted the ridges. Many varieties of vegetables were grown and exported, and the hundred acres of bearing satsuma orange trees were already the main source of Galveston and Houston's citrus needs.

Two steamboats, the "Emily P." and the "Lark," remained exclusively in the Orange-Johnson's Bayou trade during the fall harvest season, hauling produce, cotton, and even cattle to market, and returning with merchandise, freight, and mail. A schooner name the "Dreadnaught" sailed in the Galveston-Johnson's Bayou trade the year round.

Although a series of seven hurricanes, dating back to Sept. 13, 1865, had buffeted the area periodically, none, not even the storms of 1865 or 1879, had been so severe as to inundate the ridges or discourage settlement. But the great storm of Oct. 12, 1886, was something different; it drowned 110 persons in one night, swept the ridges clean of all animal and plant life, and left only the sorrow and stench of death in its wake.

As the sun rose that morning, there was nothing to indicate that the furies of the sea were smoldering. The men had left to pick cotton in the fields, and wives went about their household chores. About noon, a moderate wind blew from the southeast, but no alarm was felt until around 4 o'clock P. M., when the waters of the bayou rose four feet in one hour. By six o'clock, a gale was blowing, and water was beginning to enter houses; by 7 P. M., a full-flown hurricane was rattling the windows and doors; and by 9 P. M., the waters of the bayou and Gulf had joined into a raging sea twelve feet deep, sweeping everything away in its path.

As the waters reached waist-deep in the homes, terror gripped the settlement. Some retreated at first to second story levels, while others abandoned home for the outdoors -- to cling to driftwood or the tops of trees. Parents lashed their small children to tree branches, only to see the trees uprooted by the winds or the branches blown away.

Some houses, such as that of Duncan Smith, broke loose and floated into Sabine Lake (seven years earlier he had lost another home on the Calcasieu Pass the same way).

But at least half of the casualties, such as the entire Owen Jones family, were drowned or crushed in their homes. Eight occupants of the Jones house retreated upstairs when the waters rose, but the continuous pounding of the waves and winds weakened and tore away the walls until the roof collapsed.

There were five people, the parents and three children, in the Joseph Paisley home, when the house began to disintegrate piece by piece. A son, 6-year-old Hancock, floated away on a bed. As the first arc of dawn rose above that panorama of death and destruction, four members of the Paisley family were drowned, but Hancock was found, alive but insensible, 10 miles away on his feather bed.

The Jeremiah Quinns were prosperous cotton and orange growers when the flooding began. When their home went to pieces, they clung to floating debris, with the waves casting them against walls and wood until their heads were a mass of contusions. Twelve hours later, Quinn was found six miles away, still clutching his dead wife, and muttering mostly incoherently but affectionately, "Cheer up, Mary! It'll soon be over."

Bill Stafford, a boisterous and hard-drinking farm laborer, was alone, except for two toddlers, ages 2 and 4, left in his charge at the Ralph Hackett home when the massive storm struck. For 12 torturous hours after the waters rose, he gripped the clothing of the infant in his teeth, held the older daughter tightly with one arm, and clutched a floating log with the other. The next day, a relief party found them alive but insensible. The baby soon died, but Stafford and the little girl recovered. The parents, Mr. and Mrs. Hackett, also floated out alive, clutching debris from a Radford store, but the couple were 10 miles apart when found.

When the night of horror ended, there was hardly a bayou family left intact. Everyone had lost someone near and dear among the 110 drowning victims of the storm. Another 86 had died at Sabine Pass. Seventeen small children at Johnson's Bayou were orphaned without parents or siblings, and 20 parents lost all of their children. None, or no more than one, survived of the Jones, Paisley, Quinn, F. Gallier, S. Gallier, E. Fanchett, Joseph Luke, George Stephens, William Ferguson, Frank Tanner, George Smith, Alfred Lambert, Michel Wagley, Adam Smith, Henry Johnson, and Richard Hambrick families, and eight children of the Sam Brown family also drowned. Within five days, 75 of the bodies were recovered and buried, but many of them were never found.

By Oct. 14, rescue parties were arriving to ferry the dazed survivors away to Beaumont and Orange. In their greatest rescue effort ever, these two towns were soon housing and feeding 1,800 destitute victims from Johnson's Bayou, Radford, and Sabine Pass, and the hearts of the state and nation opened up with large gifts of

money and provisions.

After the waters receded, the scenes of desolation were appalling. Only one store building was still standing in Radford; Johnson was entirely swept away, and the stench from the putrifying carcasses of 20,000 cattle became unbearable. The few surviving cattle soon went mad for want of fresh water, but before dying, they often charged and attacked the rescuing parties.

"Tuesday," wrote a Galveston newspaper correspondent, "Johnson's Bayou was a thriving community with more than one thousand inhabitants. Today it is a community of beggars . . . . The buzzards are the only feathered fowl in the air."

Radford was never rebuilt, for many of the survivors returned eventually to the Northern states or moved away to Texas. But like Sabine Pass, a nucleus of nestors straggled back to rebuild from the debris and keep the settlement alive. Their children and grandchildren have since survived more recent storms, but unlike the grandparents, they've had the advantages of modern technology to keep themselves abreast of the weather conditions and help them escape before the furies of the Gulf churn in around them once more. Since June 26, 1957, when Hurricane Audrey killed 500 people in Cameron Parish, one need only shout, "Storm!," and the people of Johnson's Bayou scurry across the causeway to safety in Port Arthur, Texas.