



Oyster Bayou

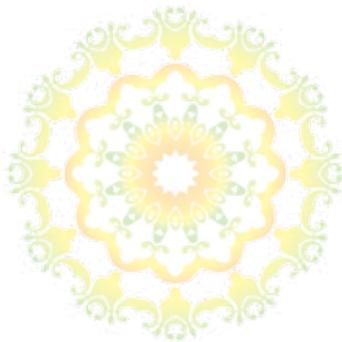
Beauvoir Memories

“Let’s go skinny dippin’!” yelled Steve Denton. “Last one in’s a rotten egg!” Steven’s verbal gauntlet slammed me and the other neighborhood boys into high gear. We threw caution - and our clothes - to the wind, jumping headlong into the tawny-brown waters of Oyster Bayou, oblivious to the famous house it skirted or its feisty resident. The house was Beauvoir; the bayou’s feisty resident was an alligator.

Beauvoir was the last home in which Jefferson Davis lived. Mr. Davis, the only President of the Confederate States of America, occupied the house from 1877 until his death in 1889. After the War between the States, Mr. Davis was charged with treason, and imprisoned for two years, but was eventually absolved of any guilt. During that time he lost his fortune and his health. These problems did not go unnoticed by Sarah Anne Dorsey, a staunch Confederate and Natchez novelist. A friend of Mrs. Davis’, Sarah Anne offered Beauvoir as a haven to the ailing Davis. Falling in love with the house and its grounds, the entire Davis Family eventually came to live at Beauvoir. They asked Sarah Anne if she was willing to sell? She said “Yes!” And the

rest is history. While living at Beauvoir, Mr. Davis began writing his memoir, *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government*. As he aged, some of Mr. Davis’ most pleasant moments were those in which he enjoyed the view of the Gulf of Mexico from his front lawn, or quietly contemplated life from the quite serenity of Oyster Bayou.

Beauvoir (meaning beautiful view) was built in 1848 for James Brown, a Mississippi cotton planter. Most of the construction work was completed by Mr. Brown’s slaves, with the finer interior work completed by craftsmen from New Orleans. Here, a great deal of attention was lavished, particularly in the use of frescoed designs on the walls and ceilings of the vast central hallway and the



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double parlors. In these rooms, painted rococo panels grace the walls, while deep cornices in classical designs enhance the tops of the windows. The doors were painted in faux-wood designs, imitating burlled walnut and other exotic woods. The painted frescoes and doors are some of Beauvoir's most outstanding features, and rank with the very best in the country. The Davis' filled their new home with lovely antiques: Mahogany tester beds; elegant parlor sets upholstered in lush silk damask; fine porcelain; and portraits of Mr. Davis and his daughter Winnie, dressed in her Mardi Gras silks as Queen of Comus.

After Mr. Davis' death, the house and land were left to Winnie, but upon her death its ownership reverted to Mrs. Davis, who sold much of the property in 1902 to the Mississippi Division of the Sons of Confederate Veterans. She did so to preserve the house as a memorial to her husband, and as a retirement home for Confederate veterans and their widows. As a child, I remember a long row of little cabins, almost like slave cabins on a great plantation, in which the retired had lived. The little cabins were silent and all but forgotten by that time, their inhabitants long promoted to Glory.

Beauvoir, its antiques, treasures, and memories, was almost promoted to Glory by Katrina's lacerating wind and water. By the afternoon of August 29, 2005, the beautiful house was nothing more than a shattered shell of its former self. Standing 13 feet above sea level on 10 foot piers, the house had one foot of water in it. The porches were torn away by the water, and large sections of the roof were peeled away by the wind, exposing the treasures there in. But the house's misery was just beginning. Because thousands of homes in which thousands of people lived had been destroyed or severely damaged by the storm, Beauvoir's "Extreme Makeover" would have to wait. The house was stabilized, the roof covered, and there the great house waited as the Mississippi Gulf Coast pulled itself up by the boot straps to begin its own extreme makeover. A year passed before the restoration of Beauvoir began, much of it by artisans who donated their knowledge, time, and talent. Aided by the financial assistance of federal, state, and private organizations, the house was reborn in 2008; a phoenix risen from the watery ashes of one of the greatest natural disasters to hit the U.S. mainland.

But that natural disaster was in the future

when the neighborhood boys and I decided to go skinny dipping. That summer's day was particularly hot, so hot the chickens were laying boiled eggs; skinny dipping seemed like a smart, cooling thing to do. And boys being boys, we'd forgotten our parent's stern admonition to stay out of Oyster Bayou, thus avoiding its ill-natured resident.

So there we were, yelling, splashing, and swimming naked as jaybirds, unaware that Ol' Man Gator had had enough of naked urchins disturbing his watery fiefdom. Suddenly, to express his extreme displeasure, Ol' Man Gator emitted a raspy grunt, followed by an ominous hiss. He then opened his gargantuan mouth, exposing his equally gargantuan teeth.

Friends! Let me tell you! I mean no disrespect to the Good



Lord, but we were walking on water trying to get out of it. The older boys had enough sense to grab their clothes... and put them on. Not Moi! I grabbed my Buster Brown tennis shoes, Sears and Roebuck shirt and shorts, along with my Fruit of the Loom underwear and dashed home through the woods. I dashed into our house at 5204 Greater Avenue yelling, "MOM!! MOM!! I almost got ate-up by an alligator!!"

Being eaten by an alligator would have been a merciful death compared to the whuppin' I got from my mother. Hungry alligators or not! One should not run through the woods naked! I got reminded of that fact once agin when my dad - the Marine - bounded through the door. I don't know who was holler-ing louder, me or the other neighborhood boys, all of which met the same fate as I did.

But we learned our lesson... sorta. We never went skinny dipping in Oyster Bayou again, but boys being boys, we found another spot in a gravel pit pond near the L&N train tracts. Many a summer's after-



noon, as we swam naked as God brought us into the world, the *Humming Bird* rushed by on its way to New Orleans. I've often wondered what the elegant people in the elegant dining car thought about the naked Mississippi mudlarks splashing away to their heart's content.

I look back on those days and won-



der whatever became of the little boy who skinny-dipped in Oyster Bayou and a grave pit, laughed at elegant people on a train, and who didn't have a care in the world. With the world in free-fall and the future a murky pot of grey, I often think about him and look for him in old photographs and grainy films shot by his Dad. That little boy was alive and free, but most of all... just a boy who loved life.

Please remember to keep our troops in your prayers. May God bless, and keep a song in your heart!



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