

# The Biloxi Point

## A Christmas Memory

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"Son, we're going to the Point after church, so keep your suit coat on," my Dad said.

"The Point? Why there?" I asked.

"Your mother has some Christmas goodies to deliver." Dad rolled his eyes and smiled. "You know your mother. Mr. And Mrs. Clause all rolled into one."

Then, I rolled my eyes in dismay. I was fourteen. All I could think about was going home, eating pot roast, and putting the finishing touches on our new aluminum Christmas tree with its rotating color wheel. The tree was a silvery creation covered in shiny, multicolored ornaments from the local TG&Y store. I was happy my family was up with the times. It was, after all, 1966.

As we rode along Highway 90 in the family Rambler, I peered out the window at the bleak, windswept sand flats. It was a typical winter day: rainy, coupled with bone-chilling cold. My thoughts then turned to our destination. "The Point? Wasn't a girl at Gulfport East High School dating a boy from there? And wasn't there a big stink about him being from the wrong side of town?" Just then, Dad swerved to avoid a huge pothole. The Rambler skidded on the slick pavement. Dad quickly regained control, and we plowed onward through the rain. Onward toward the Point.

The Biloxi Point, so called by the locals since the early 1950s, was wedged between Back Bay and the Gulf of Mexico on a flat finger of land jutting east. In its heyday, the Point was a boisterous, thriving community. Its inhabitants were good as gold and tough as nails. Many of them spoke with thick accents reminiscent of New Orleans or the Bronx. Quaint houses, corner grocery stores, movie theaters, juke joints, and churches dotted the Point's many streets. I refer to the Point in the past tense because this once bustling hamlet was all but destroyed by Katrina. It only exists now in its few remaining landmarks, in old postcards, and in the vibrant memories of those people who once called it home.

Old-timers referred to the Point as Point Cadet. The earliest reference to Point Cadet was in the *Biloxi Herald* newspaper dated

December 15, 1888. It stated, "*Point Cadet will need a boarding house if its present growth continues.*" That early growth was due to one thing: the heaping baskets of seafood that came from the teeming, tawny-brown waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

In its early days, Biloxi supplied only local markets with "*succulent shrimp and plump oysters,*" according to a *Mississippi History Now* article. But as Coastal railroads expanded their services—and ice for refrigeration was introduced—local businessmen envisioned a seafood market that exceeded the boundaries of the Point. These businessmen would also lend their names to much of Biloxi's history. Mr. Lopez, Mr. Dukate, and Mr. Gorenflo, as well as others, opened some of Biloxi's first seafood packing houses.



According to *Mississippi History Now*, "Once the canning factories opened, Mr. Dukate traveled to Baltimore, Maryland, to study oyster and shrimp canning methods in that booming seafood processing area." While there, he was introduced to the seasonal workers who were an integral part of the entire process. The Bohemians, as they were known, were Polish. He was impressed by their work habits, and upon his return to Biloxi he and his partners hired trains to transport these workers south. The seafood enterprise of Mr. Dukate and his partners was so successful, it helped fuel the growth of other seafood companies. That success gave birth to the Biloxi seafood industry. It was instrumental in expanding Biloxi's 1890s population from 1,500 to over 3,000.

The Poles were not the only workers who migrated south to work in the burgeoning sea-

food industry. Escaping the hardships of life in Eastern Europe, people from Yugoslavia, Bosnia, and Herzegovina immigrated to the Coast, bringing with them their rich family traditions. In the ensuing years, "Biloxi's seafood industry continued to expand, harvesting the seemingly, never-ending catches in the Gulf of Mexico and its numerous bays and bayous." Because of that expansion, Biloxi became known as "The Seafood Capital of the World."

The seafood capital of the world was much more than just a moniker; the city was home to families who were immensely proud of their way of life. From their boats, which harvested teeming swarms of shrimp and oysters, to their family members, who worked from "can see to can't" in the seafood factories, families who lived on the Point were close-knit. Their social and cultural ties were embroidered into the very fabric of their everyday lives.

They gave themselves nicknames like Jiggs, Gogie, and Cat Fish. After a hard work week, they could unwind on a Saturday night by watching Hollywood's latest endeavor at the Roxy or Avenue theaters. They could also enjoy the camaraderie to be found at the Slavonian Hall or the Fleur de Lis Society. Those needing more stimulating entertainment could belly up to the many neighborhood bars like the Question Mark or the L&R. One four-way stop in the Point boasted a bar on each corner.

But come Sunday morning, those needing atonement for their raucous night of carousing could find forgiveness in the Point's many churches. The jewel in that religious crown was St. Michael's Catholic Church, known then and now as the "Fisherman's Church." Of course, there were exceptions to the need for atonement. Allen Sonnier and his partner in boyish pranks, Frank Wescovich, were alter boys back in the day. Allen told me that they often drank their church's communion wine. Just before being caught by the priest, they chucked the empty wine bottles into the woods. Boys will be boys, even in the Point!

Jammie Maricich Taylor, who grew up on the Point, told me: "To be from the Point meant that you knew where you stood in life, and you knew who

your friends were. We were basically one big family and everyone knew everyone else. And if we didn't know you personally, we knew your family."

When she married, she moved away from the Point. But when her husband passed away, she had a choice to make: stay where she was, or come home to the Point?

"I chose to come back home where I knew I was loved," she said.

On that bleak, December day in 1966, I was first introduced to that love of which Jammie spoke. Our Rambler slowed to a stop in front of a small house that had seen better days. Its paint was peeling and its roof sagged, but the front porch was still inviting. My mother, who taught school in the Biloxi School System, knew the family. We gathered the packages wrapped in festive Christmas paper and approached the front door. Before we arrived, the door opened, and a sweet-looking, elderly lady shuffled onto the porch. My mother hugged her, and she invited us in.

To this good day, I'll never forget the smell that greeted us. It was an evocative soufflé of sweet pipe tobacco, boiling shrimp on the stove, and the pungent, salty smell of the sea. The lady told us the men-folk were on the piers repairing their nets for the next day's catch. From behind a tattered curtain, two small faces appeared. They were smiling, happy, and giggled a lot.

I then noticed their Christmas tree: a small, scraggly pine. But its decorations are what I remember the most. The children had pasted glass Mardi Gras beads onto oyster shells, and had hung them on the tree. A simple tinfoil star topped the tree. Under it was a simple Nativity scene, its manger created from driftwood.

The little lady was most appreciative of the packages. She gave Mom and me a big hug. The children giggled. We wished them a Merry Christmas and left. As we drove out of sight, I looked back. The little lady and the children were standing on the front porch, smiling and waving goodbye. Little did I know I was about to learn a valuable lesson.

"Mom, are those people poor?" I asked. "Why don't they have a Christmas tree like ours?"

Before my mother could answer, Dad chimed in: "Son, you think they're poor because they don't have a tree like ours? Or live in a brick house like we do?"

"Yessir," I answered. "And why do my school friends laugh when someone mentions the Point?"

"Son, some folks think they're better than other folks," Dad said. "Take folks from the Point for instance. They fish. They shrimp. They work in the seafood industry. They're a proud and hardworking lot. And because they are, some folks laugh at that. But your mother and me never have. We don't want you to either."

"But are they poor?" I asked again.

"Poor? No son, they aren't," answered Dad. "They're wealthier than a lot of rich people. Because folks from the Point love their families, their children, their way of life..."

"And because they do," Mom interrupted, "They have riches beyond compare."

Dad switched on the car radio. The soft baritone of Nat King Cole, singing *God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen*, warmed the silence with Christmas cheer. I nestled into the padded comfort of the back seat. I looked out the window once more, pondering what my parents had said. The rain, like melting molasses, coated the car windows. The wind blew the tide across the bleak sand flats, and the family Rambler drove onward through the rain. Onward toward home.

Here's wishing each of you a Merry Christmas and a Happy Holiday!

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

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