

You Can't Rebuild 58 Years

You can't really grasp the scope of loss until you get up-close and personal. Looking at what was left, I couldn't help thinking it might have been better if the Colonel came back and his home was simply gone. That it had been washed into the Bayou and then Gulf, leaving nothing but a slab of mud and lost memories. Seeing it in ruins had to be worse.

"Fifty eight years are gone," he whispered through teary eyes, shortly after we met. A veteran of World War II, Korea and Vietnam, the 83 year old soldier surrendered to the fact that, "you can't rebuild 58 years." During his 30 years in the Army, he was awarded the Bronze star. The certificate was on the floor wet, in frame with broken glass. The medal, if in the shambles, wasn't found.



I can't fathom what he felt when he first came back to his Gulfport home after the storm. From the front lawn, the traditional brick house looks untouched. But inside, his whole life was on the floor – broken, swollen and moldy.

The images of the storms' continuing aftermath – the fetid conditions, shattered trusses, neighborhoods turned to swamp and obliterated small towns – can't possibly convey what it's like when you walk through the door of just one of these thousands of flooded homes. You're stunned at destruction, saddened by the immense losses and retching from the putrid stink of spoiled food, rotting carpet and mold covered walls. Nor can the very best news footage bring you the surreal chaos of the destruction caused by nothing more than rushing water – upturned and shattered furniture, swollen doors and drawers, broken glass and family photos, favorite books, and the grandkid's artwork dissolving into puddles of dank sludge.

That's what he came back to. On TV, survivors proudly talk about how they'll rebuild. The Colonel and his now ill wife have been married for 58 years and have lived in this house – their first – for 36 of those years. At 83, rebuilding isn't likely.

A team of volunteers from Tallahassee's Trinity United Methodist had come to help. Though not a member of the church I asked to go. We carried out furniture, collected their souvenirs and trinkets, sorted crystal and china, cut out carpet, cracked open the back of a beautiful, ebony

cabinet, with doors too swollen to open, salvaged prescriptions from the sewage in the bathroom and gagged when someone moved a refrigerator full of rotting meat and milk.

Heartbreaking for me, a photographer, were the photos. People, places and memories – some going back a hundred years – disappeared into a milky paste as they were separated. Tintype images, created in the 1800s, dissolved into powdery flakes when exposed to light.

But for me, there was a dark side to helping. Sorting through the ruins, I couldn't help but feel like a scavenger, a character from the movie *Road Warrior* or maybe a philanthropic looter asked to invade this man's home and privacy.

More specifically, it would have been too overwhelming for the Colonel and too overwhelming for his daughter to decide what should be saved or trashed. So we did. So if you pulled wet clothes from a drawer so you could move the dresser. You had to decide. Save or toss? I found a broken leg next to an antique chair. Will someone glue it back on or does the chair go to the growing pile out front? Does he want those lighters from his unit in Korea? Are the wet dresses in a box under the bed important? What about that water-soaked print he got in Thailand or the carving from Japan?

You can't help but feeling like an officer on the *Titanic* – you get in the lifeboat but you don't. Worse yet, you feel like an invasive intruder, a stranger violating the Colonel's privacy. How should I presume to judge which of his memories are worth keeping?

The only thing he specifically asked me to save was his daughter's baby book that had been meticulously kept by his wife. Some of the ink had dissolved into light blue stains, but most of the pages were readable. I smiled as I read about what she liked to eat when she was two and how she played nice with others when four. Later, pretty horrified, I found I was privy to things she didn't know about herself. She'd never seen the book until that day.

People comfort survivors by saying, "They're only things. Thank God no one was hurt." But it's not that simple. You can scoff at the idea that we're defined by our things. But in a tragedy like this, you recognize the inverse: things help define who we are, where we've been and what we find important. Why did he save that newspaper clipping, that book of matches, or those postcards? Because they are – were – a part of his life, times and experiences. And, while it was sometimes uncomfortable; I'm pleased and honored to have shared them.