Mississippi Oral History Project

Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Marnie Herrington

Interviewer: Beth Morgan

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Table of Contents

Saturday night before Katrina, Ocean Springs, Mississippi ...................................................1
Evacuating ..............................................................................................................................2
Monday, the storm; Crystal Springs, Mississippi .................................................................2
Going home, cleaning up ......................................................................................................3
Adjusting to new home .......................................................................................................4
Cleaning up fallen trees .....................................................................................................5
Morgan: OK. We’ll go ahead so I can identify you on the tape. Give me your name, please.

Herrington: My name is Marnie Herrington.

Morgan: And what was your address before you evacu­ated?

Herrington: I lived in Ocean Springs, Mississippi, 230 Hunter Drive.

Morgan: Where are you now?

Herrington: I’m in Hattiesburg. My family and I live on South Fifteenth Avenue in Hattiesburg.

Morgan: And when did y’all move in here?

Herrington: Gosh, I don’t even know the exact date. That’s amazing. I guess it was three weeks after [Hurricane] Katrina. Is that right? (Inaudible), two weeks.

Morgan: So are you going to permanently relocate here?

Herrington: It feels that way, right now. It does, the way it happened so fast. And *boom*, it just feels like we’re here, I guess, to stay.

Morgan: Well, tell me about the night. Tell me about how long you stayed in Ocean Springs.

Herrington: Well, when I went to bed, it was a Category Three. And my husband’s a truck driver, Bob, and he was gone; he was in Pennsylvania. And Sarah, our seventeen-year-old daughter, had spent the night at a friend’s house. And Sarah and I never evacuate for a [Category] Three ever, we just stayed. So we did not have any plans to evacuate at all. But that morning Bob called, and he said that he had been getting calls from my dad and his dad, and I know my dad had called the house and said I had to go. (laughter) And I got up and I turned on the TV and I looked and it
was a [Category] Five and I was like, “I have got to go.” So I went, I called Sarah and I couldn’t get a hold of her. It was early; at this point it was like nine o’clock in the morning. But I couldn’t get Sarah, so I went to find her, she wasn’t there so I went to another friend’s house and she didn’t want to go. I was like, “Girl, we have got to go.” And by the time I convinced her to go, we had just grabbed, basically overnight bags, we didn’t really secure the house very well at all. And we didn’t take the cat, our three cats. It was just us, and we headed for my mom’s house, my mom and dad’s house, Mimi and Paul, in Crystal Springs, Mississippi.

Morgan: What time did you eventually leave the city?

Herrington: I guess we were leaving Ocean Springs at 12:30.

Morgan: Sunday night?

Herrington: No, no. That was like lunch time.

Morgan: OK.

Herrington: That was lunch time, Sunday. Lunch time, Sunday, the twenty-eighth.

Unknown Voice: Oh yeah, I remember when you finally got on the road.

Herrington: Right. Sunday, the twenty-eighth. So we got out before it hit. We left lunch time Sunday, the twenty-eighth. And we didn’t get caught in major traffic. But we did take a few back roads, we didn’t stick to [Highway] 49, I mean, yeah, 49 all the way up. So we made it in good time and we got there and we watched TV.

Morgan: Where did your mom live?

Herrington: Crystal Springs, Mississippi. Basically, if you go up 49 to Magee, hang a left on [Highway] 28 and ride for an hour until you go into the woods, (laughter) and stop, you’re there, Copiah County, close to Hazlehurst. Beautiful town, that’s where the PTA (Parent-Teacher Association) originated and was the largest tomato producer in the United States for a while there. They still have the Tomato Festival, even though the tomato industry is gone. But Crystal Springs has quite a history. We watched the storm as long as we could, and then it was like a Category Three hurricane in Crystal Springs. I was telling Mom and Dad, “What y’all are having here, this feels like a Category Three on the Coast.” And we lost power there and were without power for days and days and days, mainly because they’re part of a rural power co-op and it just took longer, it wasn’t as much manpower. They didn’t have the huge corporation behind them. (Inaudible) from all over the US, the larger corporations. [Hurricane] Katrina went straight up the middle of the middle of Mississippi and started veering right, almost as if she was trying to make Nashville. It was amazing how powerful a storm she was.
Herrington: How long was it before you would be able to get back down to Ocean Springs?

Morgan: I know it was at least four or five days. Bob, my husband, like I said, he was in Pennsylvania, he was sprinting. I talked to him on the phone, the cell phone. Because he was still coming down the East Coast as fast as he could, hoping to make it to the house after the storm. He was passing it on the east side as it was going up through the central part of the United States. And then when he tried to pass through Mobile, heading west toward Mississippi, from what I gather, it was so, so destroyed; so much damage that he had to take very small back roads and it took him a very, very, long time to get around Mobile and get back into Mississippi, but he did make it to our house. And he immediately began rescuing things that he could.

Morgan: Were you there at the same time with him, or did he get there first?

Herrington: He got there first. And he would not let me come down; he said that it was too much. I think he was afraid the cheese was going to flip off my cracker. (laughter) I think he was. He said it was just like a giant had come in and taken the house and dipped it in swamp water with raw sewage, shook it around, just shaking it up and throwing it back down again. The storm surge, when it came in, it churned up all this what we used to call swamp, it’s protective wetlands now. And with broken pipes, raw sewage churned all that up and just—as it swirled through the house, the refrigerator was knocked over. In the laundry room, it picked up the washing machine and somehow turned it catty-corner on its side, shoved the dryer underneath it, sat it back down like blocks that were just in this tiny space. The recycle bin managed to get twisted up under there. Everything was full of this gritty, stinky, disgusting filth, it was amazing. Pine straw, leaves, limbs, and then you’d see these undisturbed items. Like Bob tells me he saved my table for me to show me, the side table next to my favorite seat. It always has my nail clippers and my ash tray and little Mary statue, my incenses and whatnots on it. He said it was exactly the way it always was, it was sort of coated, but even the ashes in the ash tray were still formed like ashes. It was weird. But the couch was halfway in another room and, of course, all the electronics crashed and drowned. Anything electronic all—suddenly, drastically, back to the seventeenth century, all low tech.

Morgan: What were you able to salvage?

Herrington: Bob, I’ve always teased him about his sentimentality, but in this case, it was amazing. He immediately went and got all the photographs and peeled them apart, rinsed them off and laid them out to dry. And he saved so many photographs, he saved so many memories. He saved all my favorite little heartfelt items. The furniture that was not expensive, that we didn’t care about, just ruined, but my grandmother’s quilt—things that was stored high and dry stayed high and dry. Things that—he rinsed out a lot of things. Well, no, he didn’t rinse them out because there was no water. But he hung out a lot things and just let them dry so they wouldn’t rot and mildew. And we’re very blessed now to have a washer and dryer again here. And
so I’ve been slowly but surely going through and washing and trying to disinfect and deodorize the quilts and things, and a few things we could save. But opening a bag of these clothes is like, “Ooh, I remember that smell.” (laughter)

**Morgan:** Did you stay in the house after you went back?

**Herrington:** No, no. There was no staying in the house at all. There was just no way. In fact, I just went back this week. I know I’ll never go back again, because it’s already—they’ve torn out the sheetrock and there’s nothing left but outside walls and inside frame.

**Morgan:** So are you up here with your daughter and your husband now in Hattiesburg?

**Herrington:** Well, our daughter, who is seventeen, she grew up in Ocean Springs and she wouldn’t leave. She is staying with friends and she has a job. And she won’t come. She has come to Hattiesburg, and she set up a room here, but then she went back. She said she’s staying down there. And we talk all the time, almost every day, and I’ve been down there to see her several times.

**Morgan:** Did it worry you, as a mom, having her down there while the city is being rebuilt and everything, and so not normal?

**Herrington:** Well, yes and no. Bob is still working. He’s on the road during the week and he comes home on the weekends, which is how it always was. And Sarah and I were at home together, and as is natural at this age—well, not always, but—she and I were having conflict and there’s less conflict now that she’s there, I’m here.

**Morgan:** Well, tell me a little about rebuilding here in Hattiesburg. How is that going?

**Herrington:** Well Bob and I went to school here at USM [The University of Southern Mississippi]. And Sarah was actually born in Forrest General [Hospital]. So it’s bit of a circle feeling, except without Sarah. But Bob and I did come here without her. (laughter) We were here for a few years before she came along. So it’s been weird because I’ve run into several people that I knew in school. And I’m working on the house, trying to build a home feeling for our family. But it’s been just me also, like Sarah comes in occasionally, Bob’s here on the weekends. But I’ve been alone and it’s very interesting. I want to reach out, but I don’t want to seem needy. I want help, don’t want to seem (inaudible). It’s a new land, it’s something, you have to put out feelers.

**Morgan:** And this house that you’ve moved into had storm damage too, is that correct?

**Herrington:** Yes, it did.
Morgan: Tell me about the damage this house had.

Herrington: Well, the next door neighbor, John Moore, had a very old oak in his backyard, a gigantic thing. It came down in a southward direction in my backyard. So it came down in our backyard from the southwest direction. (laughter) So it took out his shed, our shed, and this house’s shed; the VW [Volkswagen] van, the VW bus that’s been parked here for three years, I believe. And the crown, that’s just the trunk, OK, and where the branches start to come out, you know, these thick huge branches, that was just the trunk and where the branches start to come apart that did that. Now, we’re talking about the part of the branches that have leaves on them, OK. (laughter) That’s how big this tree was. The rest of the crown was actual leaves now. It filled (laughter) our backyard, two of our trees, the back of the house and then comes on into the kitchen, opening the French doors and filling up part of the back of the kitchen. “Hello, I’m in the house now.” (laughter)

Morgan: How did you manage to get rid of the trees?

Herrington: That’s one of the family miracles. I have so many wonderful miracle stories; we’ve just been so blessed, so supported. My friends, family, everyone, oh, it’s amazing. So my dad, of course, is going to come with his chainsaw and do the whole tree himself. (laughter) OK, and he’s just sixty-seven and he’s bringing his sixty-nine year old friend, A.C. Quarter, who is made of baling wire (?) (laughter) to help him. And of course, they have this young man that they know through their hunting camp who is a professional tree surgeon, or tree service, owns his own business. He happens to be in the process of selling it off right now up in Tupelo. He’s perfectly willing and ready to come on down and help. And daddy’s like, “No, no, no, you don’t have to do that.” And this is going on for days before we actually moved in, we know there’s a tree here. And by the time all these phone calls have gone back and forth, back and forth, my mother just grabbed a phone and said, “Robert, come on.” And so this wonderful man, Robert Majors, drives down with this incredible equipment. He’s got some serious chainsaws, I mean, serious chainsaws, and tremendous amounts of experience, he knows exactly what he’s doing. And Bill, and Bob and A.C., and my dad, Ernest Herrington, Robert Majors just make a day’s work of it. And this is post oak, the heaviest oak there is. There are holes in the front yard. There are two post oaks in the front yard as well, that when the phone poles, now in the front yard, the telephone poles on this block, four of them snapped and the power lines came down, breaking branches and trees all along this block. And when those phone poles snapped, they pulled the meter boxes that were connected to them, just snatched them off the houses. But they snapped these oak limbs in front of this house, and you could see holes in the front yard, where those limbs came straight down. And they hit so hard they made like post holes. (laughter) Post oak is amazing. I tried to pick up some of those limbs and they are just amazingly heavy. Watching these men do this all day long, heavy oak, from cutting it and hauling it to a pile at the edge of the street, it’s just amazing how hard they labored. And Bill, the owner of the house, and Bob got up on the roof with these guns, they looked like caulking...
guns, with roofing tar in them. And all the shingles that had blown off, they went around—all the holes that had been punched in the roof from the tree, they just went around and covered them up with temporary shingles, patching it up to keep rain from coming in. Clearly, the house is going to get a new roof. Plus the insurance, he’s paid enough in insurance for now to buy a new roof. So it works out, that’s what insurance is for. You pay for it in advance, so you get it when you need it. But they got up there in the baking sun and patched up the hole. And it’s worked, they did a good job.

**Morgan:** We talked about blessings; if you had to kind of think about the best blessing to come out of all of this, what would that be?

**Herrington:** Wow, you know, I think I broke myself of that habit of putting things in a hierarchy like that. I think I used to do that a lot, but that’s a bad habit for me. I don’t do that anymore.

**Morgan:** Just pick one.

**Herrington:** Pick a good one?

**Morgan:** Um-hm.

**Herrington:** I’ll pick a good one.

**Morgan:** Pick a good one.

**Herrington:** The size of this house. I was sitting here today—I will pick a recent one, one that’s fresh in my mind, how about that? Bob and I were moving around the house together, and he was in the kitchen doing his thing and I was fiddling with a box. And we were moving around the house together, and there’s a little more space in this house—see, I lived in big houses before, just these sprawling older homes with the rickety old floors. I’m not saying they were fixed up real nice or anything, they were just big, OK. (laughter) And I don’t like a real big house. And I kind of like a smaller home, I like a smaller house. This is bigger than our other house, big enough for us. I like that we have more space in this house, we don’t bump into each other as much, and that’s good. That’s a good point.

**Morgan:** Well, thank you for talking to me.

**Herrington:** Well, thank you.

(end of interview)