“The only thing that hurts a person,” W. F. Henry, Jr., President of Cameron Police Jury says, “is to have people ask, ‘What’s wrong with you people? Why do you stay here?’”

Unassuming Henry is the last person who would believe himself a poet, but what comes out when he answers his own question is pure poetry.

“When you, a stranger, drive down Main Street here, you don’t see much—a few businesses strung out along one street, that’s all. But if you live here, it’s different. This is where you were born. This is what you are used to.” He spreads his big hands in emphasis, and his voice is full of feeling. “Cameron has been good to us!”

If this latter sounds a bit shocking at first to the stranger, it should not be, for it is a part of the accumulated wisdom of mankind that we treasure most that for which we have worked the hardest, have endured the most. And perhaps that is why Cameron Parish, that fifty-mile strip of weather-beaten coast elicits such fierce devotion from the people who live there. Between 500 and 600 people

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This is Cameron

Cameron Revisited
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died in Audrey on June 27, 1957. The devastation was almost complete along the 50-mile stretch of coastline. Water up to 12 feet washed across the flat land, sweeping the people and all their possessions back more than a dozen miles to the relatively higher ground around the Intracoastal Canal. The waters of Lake Calcasieu at Lake Charles blended with the Gulf to form a solid sheet of treacherous water. And this was only the worst. Storms have always been part of life in Cameron — and always will be.

Yet, there is undeniable charm in the endless stretches of flat land broken so unpredictably throughout with patches of blue water; in the twisted oaks as sturdy as the people of Cameron themselves; in the graceful snow-white birds flying against the sky and the Gulf; in the Gulf itself — so endlessly beautiful whether sun-dappled or gray against a gray sky.

Jennings Jones, affable assistant district attorney of Cameron, sits at his desk in a neat building he shares with his brother just behind the big hulk of the Cameron Courthouse which weathered Audrey 12 years ago. "I just wonder," Jones says thoughtfully, "if Audrey didn't leave us with a deep-seated psychosis. We have had a new development since Audrey; people have bought farms and built houses in Beauregard and Vernon Parishes and in the Toledo Bend area. They spend weekends and spare time there. The cattlemen take their cattle up there during what we call the storm season beginning the first of June and lasting through September or October... Before they bought the farms, those first few years after Audrey, they drove their cattle out when there was a storm warning. The cattle clogged the highways so, people could hardly evacuate in an emergency. Now they haul the cattle away in trucks during the entire storm season and leave them there.

"And the people go to these farm houses in the hills. They feel more secure, safer away from the Gulf."

Dr. Clark, who lost three children in Audrey agrees. "Yes, I believe people get nervous now when the storm season comes. And the people my age, around 40 or 50, began to worry more, not just about the safety of their persons, but, remember a lot of people had everything they had wiped out, and at middle age they think what would happen if this should occur again and how hard it would be to replace their possessions; and they buy homes in Lake Charles or Toledo Bend; you might say they have winter homes and summer homes!"

Cameron summer homes, conversely, are away from the Coast during the summer when the storm coincides with what would ordinarily be the time for beach-time fun.

"The children cry to go to the beach," Jones reflects. "They don't remember. But the adults, even when we are walking on the beach, have a different feeling since Audrey. 'It is so pretty,' someone will say, 'but the Gulf can be an evil thing' — 'You can't even walk on the beach without remembering.'"

People of Cameron universally decry the comments coming after the tragic hurricane that they had not heeded warnings to leave the area. This was simply not the way it was, they say firmly. Never in the history of Cameron Parish had there been such a
tragedy, and yet storms were as much a part of life to the people of Cameron as the mosquitoes they have long since learned to live with. The language of the United States Weather Bureau and the people of this rugged coast land was not the same. When the warning was given that the people should evacuate to higher ground, Cameron residents listened and understood: higher ground meant the ridges, the cheniers, several feet in elevation from the rest of the coastal area. This they did.

Henry, a Civil Defense officer since before Audrey, comments that the devastating Hurricane Audrey brought permanent changes in our methods for storm detection and storm warnings. At that time 12 years ago, Henry says, there was only one plane flying into the eye of these storms, evaluating and reporting their findings, but now ten or twelve planes patrol the coasts from North Carolina to the Mexican border. Warnings are now more emphatic: Evacuate Galveston, or Cameron, or wherever.

Some of the lasting ill effects of the storm have been the reluctance of lending agencies, including the Federal Housing Authorities, to lend money for houses to be constructed on this stretch of coast land. Insurance on property is harder to get than it should be, one man said.

"You would be surprised how many people have completely blanked out Audrey," Juror Henry said. "They simply couldn't do their work and live, remembering, and we face storms all the time. They would drive you crazy if you kept remembering the experience we had during Audrey."

At least five or six individuals in the little parish seat alone lost their entire families—husbands or wives and children. They have remarried and have other families; and few people but lost someone, and even fewer who did not lose possessions. Many lost everything.

Police Jury President Henry's family survived only because his wife was so slow getting things together for the children that they missed what they thought was a chance to evacuate—only Henry's receptionist, Peggy, her husband and children who did leave proved it was too late at that time. The family clung to a roof top—only the house divided and the husband drifted one way and Peggy and the children another. The husband survived. Peggy and the children drowned out there somewhere in the stormy night.

Henry and his family were with 142 other people in a two-story house belonging to his father-in-law. The group huddled together in two bedrooms and a bath, some of the men going downstairs in the rising water to knock out doors and windows so the house wouldn't cause the house to float. The feeling is that the house with its immense cypress sills survived more than any other reason because of the tremendous weight of the refugees clinging to life in its upstairs rooms. They watched house after house float by, their occupants hanging to the roof tops. The men in the house of Henry's father-in-law formed a human chain, to reach out and bring the survivors into their own shelter, but in their panic many who might have been saved refused to leave the floating roof tops. "We could have saved at least 15 or 20 we saw floating by that night," Henry sighs regretfully yet.

Remembered, along with their own bald jokes over longed-for cigarettes and the realization of many a man that he had not a penny, not a head of cattle, not a home, not a thing to call his own, was the overwhelming generosity and goodness of the American people.

And let no man wonder if the valor and guts and greatness that built the United States is somehow drained away with the relative "softness" of modern living. For one of the heritages of Cameron is that these Louisianians were as strong and as stout-hearted and capable as any from any generation.

Take Dr. Clark, a young medical doctor in 1957 who worked feverishly with the injured and ill, even when his wife was lost during the storm and his three children were drowned.

Clark is middle-aged now, busy as a bee at his Cameron clinic. Laugh crinkles under his eyes constantly accentuate a warm smile, and his eyes sparkle with the joie de vivre. He and his wife rebuilt a huge house on the beach, though he laughs and protests it isn't nearly as big as it looks (which is immense). The reception rooms and walls are lined with photographs—mostly of his wife and five children (his wife, a nurse, survived the storm after floating miles away in the darkness). The photographs are the result of his hobby, which includes owning five cameras and an ingenious darkroom he cleverly fits into his X-ray room at the clinic.

John and Joe, his grown sons, the only children to survive the storm, are obviously as devoted to Cameron as their parents. "I tried to send John to LSU," the doctor says with his easy laugh, "but he had to come back for hunting season, and when that was over, he had to come back for fishing season. So I finally said, 'I give up. Come on home! And he commutes to McNeese at Lake Charles!"

"Is he going to be a doctor?"

"I hope so," he confessed, smiling more broadly. "We can use another one."

"And Joe wants to be a dentist. We need a good dentist at Cameron!"

"My goodness, do you expect them all to be doctors and stay in Cameron."

Dr. Clark made a gesture with his hands, "No," he laughed again. "I wouldn't force them or try to make them stay here, but that would be nice. Then I could do some hunting and fishing!"

"You see," he said, "We're doing what we love to do here where we love to be. I could have gone somewhere else. But my wife and I are both from here, and this is where we'll stay!"

And such is the heritage that it is a good guess so will their children and their children's children. Cameron, after all, is good to the strong people of Cameron, and they will stay there.