

“Getting to Grand Isle” excerpt

by Ramona DeFelice Long

Grand Isle is a state park - The Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve - named for the dastardly pirate who was also the hero of the Battle of New Orleans. Every Louisiana schoolchild learns how Lafitte and his Baratavia corsairs made a deal with Andrew Jackson to double-cross the British and save the city during the War of 1812. After the war, President Madison pardoned Lafitte and his men for their piratical misdeeds. Unfortunately, Lafitte moved to Galveston and reverted to his misdeed-doing ways. Still, the state named a park after him lest we forget that, in the right circumstances, even a pirate can prove to be a patriot.

When I was a child, Grand Isle was not a state park. It was a day trip. The drive from our house was about forty-five minutes to the bridge and another fifteen minutes to the beach. My two brothers and I rode in the back of my dad's pickup, wearing swimsuits but no sunscreen, because sunscreen had not been invented, because according to my father, the sun was not as hot then as it is now. We crammed in among ice chests, beach chairs and blankets, a stack of newspaper to ignite the driftwood fire, a couple of garden shovels to dig trenches for war games. We dug them deep because we had never heard the term “shore erosion.” No beach umbrellas despite the brutal heat and sun. First aid consisted of my mother storing a shaker of Adolph's Meat Tenderizer in the ice chest in case jellyfish were in the water.

Every time my dad hit the brakes on the two-lane Highway 1, everything in the bed slid forward toward the cab. When he accelerated, the momentum sent it all in reverse, crashing into the tailgate. Including the three of us. In summer, the truck bed was virtually a griddle. It was like going down an aluminum slide on the playground at high noon—five seconds of joy flying downward, followed by an afternoon of excruciating butt burn.

It's amazing the tailgate held against repeated crashes, but it did. After every slam-and-slide, my dad would yell through the open cab window. "Y'all all right back there?" We always were. And if we weren't, we just ignored that banged head, or bumped elbow or oozing brush burn, because nobody wanted to mess up our good time at the beach.

And they were good times. It was worth the heat and the ceaseless bickering between my brothers to play in the water and catch crabs and build bonfires in the sand. But the best part of the day didn't happen at the beach. It happened on the bridge.

Maybe it was because those forty-five minutes of sliding around really wasn't that much fun, but when we got to the approach to the New Bridge, my dad would rap on the top of the cab. That meant it was time to scramble up and check out the view. On the left was Barataria Bay, dotted with shrimp trawlers weaving among countless saw grass islands; on the right was the huge open expanse of the Gulf. And when we reached the crest of the bridge, up ahead was the town of Grand Isle, with beach camps and diners and bait shops and tourist traps, all bright and shiny and lively. It wasn't the genteel collection of pretty summer cottages and getaway homes for rich families escaping down from "town," as described in Kate Chopin's short stories and novels, but that time was long gone, anyway. Grand Isle was—is, and ever shall be—a rinky dinky beach town that drew crowds for popular fishing rodeos and tournaments, for the annual seven-mile garage sale, and for something called an invitational boondoggle.

That first glimpse of the town and the glaringly bright blue of endless water was the best moment of the day. I caught my breath each time we hit the crest of the bridge. That first glimpse meant we were almost there, and it was oddly more exciting to be almost there than to actually be there.

We rode through Grand Isle standing up, hanging onto the cab, until we turned off Highway 1 onto one of the narrow lanes bordered by rickety wood and wire fencing. We bumped along past patches of grass and parked up near the fence, alongside the other day tripper vehicles. There was plenty of room for cars on the beach. We hopped down onto the searing hot sand, but we didn't wear sandals or flip-flops because nobody else did, and we grabbed our day's worth of food and supplies, and started hauling.

It was a long, long way to the water. That trek from the truck, on tiptoe over the hot sand down to the waves, seemed endless. By the time we finally hit the water, we were breathless, and it was glorious.

When I was in third grade, Sister Naomi taught us about rivers. She began at the beginning: the Cradle of Civilization. I can still picture her blackboard drawing of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers running parallel in Mesopotamia to form the Fertile Crescent. Next we moved into Egypt, and the great Nile River. She taught us that the Nile came in colors (the White Nile, the Blue Nile, the Yellow Nile), that the river ran backwards (south to north), and that the source was Victoria Falls. ("Dr. Livingstone, I presume?")

The Tigris and Euphrates and Nile were Old Rivers. Each year, their waters swelled and spilled over the banks and flooded the lands around them. These annual floods disrupted the life

of the ancient people, but Sister Naomi said they were good floods, because the river waters deposited the silt and sediment that made the crescent and the cradle so fertile.

The notion of a good flood was revolutionary in south Louisiana. By third grade, my classmates and I were veterans of hurricanes and evacuations. Most of us had high-water stains on the outside of our houses—and some on the inside. My father, a cowboy in a long line of cowboys, had lost an entire herd during Hurricane Hilda. The levees protecting the reclaimed pastureland called Delta Farms collapsed, and my dad's hundred head of Brangus heifers were left helpless against the rising water.

A kid today would say, *Floods are not your friend*. Back then, if I'd repeated what Sister Naomi taught us in class, my dad probably would have said, *A good flood? That sounds like Communism*. Although surely the ancient Mesopotamians had watermarks and drowned livestock, too, the ancient floods never sounded dangerous or destructive to me. Maybe that shows that Sister Naomi was such a good teacher, she taught me to see past the obvious. Or maybe I just had a hard time doubting a nun.

The culmination of the river lesson was the New River in our very own backyard, the mighty Mississippi. Everyone in my class had been on or over the Mississippi River. Later that very school year, on our annual field trip to City Park in New Orleans, our bus got stuck atop the Huey P. Long Bridge. The bus driver, another nun whose name I can't recall, handed out decks of cards. We played several hands of *Bouree* before traffic got moving.

The Mississippi might be a youngster in river years, but one look at its width (particularly from a stopped school bus on top of a bridge) and it was hard to imagine it any less important than those Old Rivers. Sister Naomi confirmed this. For centuries, the Mississippi had built and nourished the lands and barrier islands of south Louisiana. The river's natural delta switching

had swept back and forth across and fed the lower part of the state with the same kind of silt and sediment that had been deposited by the Old Rivers' annual floods.

But unlike the ancient Egyptians and Mesopotamians, our ancestors constructed homes and towns and didn't want to rebuild everything all over after every flood season. The Corps of Engineers came along and built levees to tame the river and stop the switching. And since the river couldn't sweep back and forth along the Delta, all that natural fertilization instead flowed out into the Gulf and drifted away. The Mississippi wasn't building anymore. It was still there, but it was like the Fishing Bridge on Grand Isle—obsolete from one of its primary purposes.

I remember that Sister Naomi said that part rather sadly, as if she knew some terrible secret she didn't want to share in a third grade lesson about rivers.

Excerpt from "Getting to Grand Isle" by Ramona DeFelice Long, published in
The Arkansas Review: A Journal of Delta Studies, vol. 3, no. 2, August 2012