

August 27, 2006

Tracing the Path of a Corpse, From the Street to Dignity

By [DAN BARRY](#)

NEW ORLEANS — More than a week after Hurricane Katrina nearly leveled this city, workers newly assigned to collect the dead stopped on a downtown street. There before them, on its back, lay another corpse, all but baked into a pose of submission by several hot suns.

The workers placed the corpse in a zippered black bag somewhat larger than the kind used to protect rented tuxedos. They slid their collection into the back of their vehicle, closed the door, and drove off into the ebbing chaos.

So began one dead man's journey toward eternal rest, a journey that continues to this day.

New Orleans may be a city accustomed to celebrating death, with jazz bands trailing funeral processions and Louis Armstrong forever singing: When I die, I want you to dress me in straight lace shoes/ I want a boxback coat and a Stetson hat/ Put a twenty-dollar gold piece on my watch chain/ So the boys'll know that I died standing pat.

But Hurricane Katrina denied most of the 1,464 victims in Louisiana such final flourishes of dignity; no watch chains for them, no stylish hats. The hurricane scattered bodies over hundreds of square miles, where water, heat and time distorted what many of the dead looked like in life. It was a forensic hell.

The system hastily conceived to fulfill a sacred mission — to collect, identify and release for burial hundreds of bodies — descended at times into the common ineptness of a motor vehicles bureau, ill equipped to deal with wholesale catastrophe. As a result, many families waited far too long for the release of identified bodies, delaying burial, prolonging grief.

Defying the bureaucratic impediments, pathologists, investigators and counselors rose to the sorrowful challenge. Working like wartime MASH units, they reunited families with their missing loved ones and attached

names to nearly 900 of the bodies they examined. Even so, some 50 victims remain unknown to the world still, a year later.

“I wish we could have identified everybody,” Dr. Louis Cataldie, the state medical examiner, said. “Ninety-nine percent is a failing rate if it’s your kid missing. That’s the bottom line.”

Among the silent ranks of these hundreds, among those wheeled in, probed, wheeled out and stored: that dead man collected on that downtown street. Our guide.

A Catatonic City

The dead man, a black man, had been sprawled like carrion on dry Union Street, just outside a parking garage, for several hot-crazed days after the late August hurricane. The only dignities granted him were a blue tarp across the face and orange traffic cones near the head, placed by a state trooper to keep the milling soldiers and reporters and law enforcement officials from driving over him like a speed bump.

Hundreds of other bodies were still out there, of course, tucked into attics, buried under debris, floating in the bruise-colored waters rubbing against rooftops. But this clothed corpse was so naked there among us that it seemed to reflect a catatonic city, in which basic societal tenets — such as, we collect our dead — had joined other precious belongings in floating away.

A full week after the hurricane, as the colossal forensic challenge before them came more clearly into focus, various government officials struggled with an awkward but unavoidable question: Who is going to pick up the bodies?

Federal and state officials quarreled with one another over who had responsibility for collection: The Federal Emergency Management Agency? Louisiana? The National Guard? Meanwhile, dead Americans decomposed on American soil.

“We’d ask, ‘So who’s going to pick up the bodies?’ ” Dr. Cataldie recalled. “And everybody would look at each other.”

The task finally fell to Kenyon International Emergency Services, a disaster-relief company that was eventually hired by the state. Its

president, Robert Jensen, said recently that he had been taken aback by the bureaucratic dithering over such a sensitive and obvious mission.

“Civilizations are often judged by how they treat their deceased,” Mr. Jensen said. In the case of the Louisiana dead, he added, “the system failed.”

Specifics can get lost in the chaos of catastrophe, in the midst of hundreds killed. Official memory can falter; official records can fail. But here is a chronicle of one dead man’s journey, based on the recollections of local, state and federal officials intimately involved in recovering and identifying the victims of the storm.

On Thursday, Sept. 8, 10 days after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, an ambulance or a small truck pulled up to Union Street. Workers, probably Kenyon employees wearing white protective overalls, carefully slipped the dead man into a black body bag. If they followed protocol, they carried him feet first — “As you walk in life,” Mr. Jensen said — then turned to place him headfirst into the back of their vehicle.

The workers drove a mile to the city’s convention center, where government officials had set up a Mortuary Affairs Collection Point, which is exactly what it sounds like. The workers placed the body in one of three 53-foot refrigerated trailers waiting to receive black bags, whose subtle bulges faintly suggested the human form.

That evening, the refrigerated trailer-truck weaved around destruction and flooding until it found Interstate 10, bound west. The victims in its hold were carried away from ghostly, damaged New Orleans, past bayous and tree glades, through farmland and over railroad tracks, 70 miles in all, to St. Gabriel, a small town named for the archangel who was a messenger of God.

The truck pulled up to a massive warehouse with no windows or signs. Two weeks earlier the building had contained cardboard crates of rubberized material. Now it housed the temporary mortuary made necessary by Hurricane Katrina.

‘A Lot of Praying’

Maybe that night, but more probably the next morning, the bag containing the dead man from Union Street was placed on a stainless

steel gurney at one of the warehouse's loading bays. The bag was unzipped and he was "decontaminated" — that is, rinsed lightly with a chlorine solution, to ward against the spread of disease.

Still in his body bag, still on a gurney, he was assigned an escort who stayed with him as he was wheeled through the warehouse, making stops along an assembly line of inquiry. Forensic pathologists, dentists, X-ray technicians and other specialists took turns examining him, each one searching for clues to his name in life.

Inside this eerie way station, black plastic sheeting covered the floor and served as curtains that divided, say, the dental team from the fingerprint team. The air was so pungent with death, and the heat so intense — especially with everyone wearing white protective suits and masks — that the operation would have to be shut down several times a day. And then out of the Louisiana gloaming would emerge another refrigerated truck, fresh from New Orleans.

"I had never really seen such devastation, so much decomposition," recalled Dr. Frank Minyard, the New Orleans coroner for more than 30 years. "I've seen decomposed bodies before, but one at a time. I never did see like a hundred at a time."

"It was very sobering," Dr. Minyard said. "And I did a lot of praying."

When the dead man from Union Street had completed his rounds inside the morgue, the bag in which he was contained was placed inside a new bag. By now some of the dead were being temporarily identified; he was not among them.

Mystery enveloped his identity, and also the cause of his death. The Louisiana state trooper who blessed him with a halo of traffic cones on Union Street had noticed a large bruise to the head and theorized that he had gotten into a brawl while riding out the storm in the nearby parking garage.

According to Dr. Cataldie, some pathologists speculated that the dead man had met with foul play, in part because Union Street was not in a flood zone. But Dr. Minyard, who had final say in the case, said his investigators believed the man had fallen and hit his head because the wound was inconsistent with an intentional blow.

“It’s very difficult,” Dr. Minyard said. “We didn’t have investigators on the scene.”

The dead man was lifted off the silvery gurney that carried him through a systematic attempt to solve his mysteries. Rechristened with an identification number in the absence of a name, he was then placed in one of the refrigerated trailers parked outside the St. Gabriel warehouse.

In the weeks to come, this system to find the missing and identify the dead, operating from the temporary morgue and a family assistance center in Baton Rouge, would prove to be clunky and smooth; coldly bureaucratic and intimately personal; illogical, inadequate and often heroic.

Here was Chris Roberts, a retired nurse, taking on the delicate job of informing families that a loved one had been identified among the dead; every word had to be phrased just so. Here too was Douglas Cross, an unassuming dentist flooded out of New Orleans, venturing into a water-corrupted state building in a protective suit and mask to retrieve moldy dental charts that might, might, link names to bodies.

But intergovernmental squabbles and bureaucratic foul-ups, along with the enormity of the catastrophe, sometimes conspired to prolong a family’s agony. Routine office equipment was hard to come by. Computer systems did not talk to each other. Disputes developed over delays in DNA testing and the level of identification necessary to release a body for burial.

Talk to those few who have returned to the city’s most damaged neighborhoods and you will hear stories like the one about Wilfred Johnson. A mule-stubborn Navy veteran, long retired from driving trucks, Mr. Johnson rarely left his apartment in the city’s Broadmoor neighborhood, choosing instead to temper his crippling arthritis with sips of Old Milwaukee beer.

Relatives begged him to leave in advance of the storm, telling him they had room in their car. But he refused, and the more they pressed him, the madder he got. “Go ahead on,” he kept saying. “Go ahead on.”

Ten weeks later, investigators tracing an odor found his body under debris in the living room. But eight months passed before officials

released his body for burial, said his daughter, Theresa Johnson. “I just buried him on the 21st of July,” she said.

Standing in her father’s old living room, near stains left on the floor by his body, Ms. Johnson recalled how nothing seemed to speed the process, including DNA provided by family members. Finally, several weeks ago, investigators came to retrieve DNA from a suit still hanging in the closet, a toothbrush in the kitchen cabinet and some empty cans saying Old Milwaukee.

Soon after, Wilfred Johnson was released.

His birthday was in January, his daughter said, adding, “He made 80 in the morgue.”

As weeks turned into months, the unsettled rest continued for many of the hurricane victims, including Wilfred Johnson and the dead man from Union Street.

In late November, federal officials closed the warehouse morgue in St. Gabriel — so inadequate that workers had to sleep in the classrooms of an old school — and opened a huge new morgue, one with dormitories, showers and a cafeteria, that had been hastily built on 40 acres of private land in Carville, several miles away. There was more than enough room for all those refrigerated trucks so sadly necessary.

Chuck Smith, a FEMA official in Louisiana, said that planning for the new morgue began shortly after the hurricane, when estimates for the number of dead were as high as 10,000. Although the actual number proved to be much lower, Mr. Smith said, the new building was used for other purposes, including the “recasketing” of hundreds of remains disinterred by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Still, by the time the new morgue opened, most of the autopsies had been completed. Dr. Minyard quickly christened it a “Forensic Taj Mahal,” a nickname that stuck.

Federal officials closed the Taj Mahal of Carville just three months after it opened, saying the forensic crisis of the hurricane had passed. The federal government still rents the property, and Mr. Smith said the building could be an essential resource in the event of another large disaster.

“It’s easy to look back in retrospect and ask, ‘Could we do without?’ ” he said. “The answer would probably be yes. But without a doubt, it was the right decision.”

All the while, the dead man from Union Street remained among the 200 other unclaimed or unidentified bodies stored in refrigerated trailers outside that new morgue. With the shutdown of the operation, they would now be transferred to the custody of Dr. Minyard, the coroner of New Orleans.

In the last days of winter, workers lifted the black bag containing the dead man and placed it in a casket of the same material as the gurney that once carried him: silver steel. “They were the same caskets that the military used,” Mr. Smith said. “And we chose the same casket for everybody.”

Inside a bag, and another bag, and now a steel casket, he was carried by a truck serving as a hearse, back through the verdant farmlands of St. Gabriel parish, back onto Interstate 10, bound east for New Orleans, from whose pavement he had been retrieved six months earlier.

A Silent Warehouse

Today, a year later, the St. Gabriel warehouse that served as a temporary morgue has returned to being just a warehouse. Trailer trucks without refrigeration pull in and pull out. Cardboard boxes, not dead bodies, are moved around, as it should be.

A few miles away, behind a stone-crushing operation, large buildings of blinding white loom in contrast to the flat green of rural Carville. This, briefly, was FEMA’s state-of-the-art morgue, the Taj Mahal. Now the fenced-in property is deserted, save for the guards who chase the curious away.

Here in New Orleans, the coroner, Dr. Minyard, still has no permanent office — the old one was flooded — so he and his staff work out of an old funeral home in the tough Central City neighborhood, where the hurricane caused only a pause in the poverty and violence. Here and there a local pastor has planted signs like lilies; they read, “Thou Shalt Not Kill.”

In the parking lot behind the coroner's office, three refrigerated trailers hum a constant dirge that echoes off the tired, neighboring houses, some occupied, some vacated. In addition to the newly dead of this city, the trailers contain the skeletal remains of 29 people found by cadaver dogs in the weeks after the temporary morgue operation was shut down.

Dr. Minyard said his staff was working hard to identify them. Meanwhile, every two days, a contractor comes to refuel the engines of those refrigerated trailers.

And on the outskirts of downtown, amid an industrial stretch of weedy lots and discarded beer bottles, there stands an off-white warehouse with no windows or signs, just like the one in St. Gabriel. You are not supposed to know where it is.

Inside are stored 85 or so caskets containing the remains of unclaimed or unidentified victims of Hurricane Katrina, August 2005. Since they cannot remain here forever, city and state officials are planning a memorial park where these dead can be buried, and remembered. It is going to take a while, though.

Finally, in this isolated warehouse, in one of the silvery-steel caskets, lies a man who was effectively washed clean of his name and role in life. About all that is known of him is that he was found on Union Street in New Orleans, facing up.