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Hell or High Water: How Cajun Fortitude Withstood Hurricanes Rita and Ike

Ron Thibodeaux

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INDIE BOOK AWARDS 2013 national grand prize winner for regional nonfiction
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Americans will long remember 2005 as the year of the hurricane, when so many storms formed in the north Atlantic that we ran out of names and had to use letters of the Greek alphabet to identify them. In the midst of that turmoil, one of the decade's most imposing hurricanes set itself apart from all others. It was, for a time, the largest hurricane ever measured within the Gulf of Mexico, and one of the strongest Category 5 hurricanes ever recorded. When it struck South Louisiana, its enormous storm surge and intense winds threatened more than just tens of thousands of local residents it took dead aim on a culture and a way of life unique to all of the United States as well.

But this is not the story that most Americans think they know. This was not Hurricane Katrina, which held the country in rapt attention as the human misery throughout flooded New Orleans was compounded by inept government response at every level. No, this was Hurricane Rita, the other Louisiana disaster of 2005. Rita clobbered communities across the entire 250-mile coastal foundation of Acadiana, America's one-of-a-kind Cajun country. From one end of the Louisiana coast to another, towns were flooded, populations were left homeless and without public services, and communities were all but wiped off the map.

As soon as Rita trailed off the National Weather Service radar, though, it also disappeared from the American consciousness. While New Orleans remained headline news, the communities hit so hard by Rita were all but forgotten and left to fend for themselves. But fend they did. Members of this predominantly Cajun population did what their Acadian forebears had done for centuries before them: adapt, survive, thrive in hostile environments. Their can-do, self-sufficient response to Hurricane Rita contrasted with the seeming paralysis afflicting much of post-Katrina New Orleans, but it was indicative of the history of the Cajun people in Louisiana, going back to their Acadian roots.

Incredibly, three years later, powerful Hurricane Ike provided an instant replay, taking an eerily similar track and slamming many of the same communities across South Louisiana. Hell Or High Water: How Cajun Fortitude Withstood Hurricanes Rita and Ike is the story of those places, their people, and their shared triumph against adversity. It's a story brought to life by a rich history and compelling, interwoven accounts of contemporary storm experiences from the hardy people of the Louisiana bayous.

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