

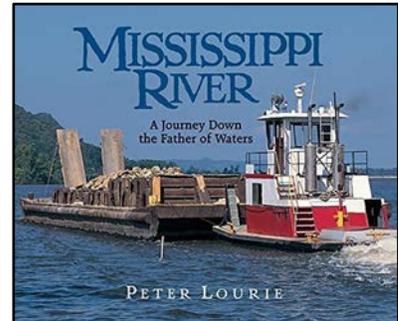
# Writing to Explore with Peter Lourie



Mississippi River Journal

## In the Path of Hurricane George

Wrapping up my trip down the Mississippi for the children's book that was published in the spring of 2000, I came to New Orleans for good food and a rest after traveling 2,200 miles from Lake Itasca in Minnesota, and came, instead, into a city thrown into panic by an oncoming hurricane. The following is taken from my Mississippi River Journal.



### Saturday, September 26, 1998

Hurricane Georges is heading straight for the Mississippi Delta with 110 mph winds and rain beyond anything since Betsy came to New Orleans 33 years ago in 1965. The bellhop at the hotel can't remember Betsy because he wasn't alive yet.

In the Atlantic and Gulf, meteorologists are tracking no less than four hurricanes simultaneously – the first time this has occurred in recorded history. Last evening when I came down to the French Quarter, Interstate 10 going north was locked in miles of traffic of fleeing people. I breezed down the ghostly highway heading into the oncoming hurricane feeling a little stupid, but excited, too.

After a brilliantly sunny day, the first teaser of rain came to New Orleans and flopped around on the roof of this old hotel across from St. Louis Cathedral on Jackson Square. At nine-forty-seven on Saturday night, I heard the lonely sound of someone boarding up windows on the street outside.

On the pillow in the room a note From the Management read, "A power outage of some duration is likely. Our hotel does not have emergency generators....Please cooperate with us during this very difficult period..."

Possible flooding from combined rain and high tides, the weather wizzards are saying, might run as high as 17 to 19 feet. That could put the first floor of this hotel underwater. No one is quite sure. Anything over 14 inches of rain will flood the street.

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My car, with the canoe on top, is on the first floor of the garage. It won't fit into the garage elevator. So by the time I take the canoe off and lash it down to something on the first floor, the electricity will have gone and there will be no saving the car. I should get the canoe off sometime early Sunday a.m. Might need it. What a picture that would make. Canoeing Bourbon Street.

The French Quarter is the highest part of downtown New Orleans, but nevertheless is eight feet below sea level. Its electrical power comes from underground and there are two substations on either end of the Quarter. The city has shut off 100 control gates in the surrounding levees, closing off the rising Mississippi on one side and Lake Pontchartrain on the other. There was all kinds of hurricane talk in Pere Antoine's when I ate dinner at 7:00 last night but tourists, mostly German, seemed calm and excited. By nine the rain started, and a wind that was mild, but scary because it shook the roof of the hotel. I'm on the fifth and top floor. Images of roofs being torn off buildings were running rampant on the weather Channel, to which the people in the shelters are glued. I would say the level of adrenaline is about as high as it gets before a bit of panic.

Now by ten all the rain and wind has stopped except the pounding of owners putting up huge plywood boards against the windows of their hotels and eateries. A few college-aged kids rove St. Ann's street, but just down two blocks Bourbon Street is hopping, with lights and bums and music and bars and balcony peepers. It's a thinner show than usual, but a show nevertheless.

One man on a tall step-ladder was taking down the swinging sign for the Charthouse restaurant on Jackson Square.

### **Sunday, September 27**

Slept fitfully, but when I woke the sky was bright gray. Georges is a slowmover and is still off shore by two hundred miles, coming at us at only 10 miles an hour. The weather people keep talking about being able to see the eye of the hurricane on the satellite photos, which, they say, is not good, because it means the hurricane is not weakening, and might even increase in ferocity.

Walked down to the river and saw the tugs all moored together along both sides of the Mississippi like cows or horses or goats or sheep. The captain on an offshore utility tug threw me a hauser to put around a capstan. He said he'd been moored further down toward the Gulf but wasn't secure there, so he came to downtown for safer harbor. Like the pilot and captain I met on a tow in Vicksburg, this one too had long hair. Must be a sort of fraternity among

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Mississippi captains and pilots. He said I could come back when they opened the levee gates and maybe even have some food with him. He'd be onboard for the duration.

Police cars and sirens blasting. Only a few stores open. Everyone stocking up on fruit and water. I have freeze-dried stuff from camping in Minnesota. The lady making the coffee downstairs is doing it all day and maybe for the duration. I want to tip her really well.

Many parishes (counties), including this one, now have mandatory evacuation. Apparently 1.5 million people have left the city. Some have reached as far north as Jackson, Mississippi, and apparently are now furious to discover that the city has opened the superdome as a shelter, capable of holding up to 100,000 people. Evacuees are being asked to bring their own food and water. Not, and the talking heads on t.v. emphasize, their furniture....

But of course not everyone can go to a shelter. And now the hotel is even filling up with locals who want a solid building on higher ground. I'm pretty positive they'll close the bridge over the Mississippi here. Someone said on the news that it can take up to 75 mph winds. But the city is expecting at least that.

I photographed the big flood gates that allow traffic to go through the levee to the river. These steel doors on tracks will be shutting soon, and there will be no way out. I have flashlight, mace, whistle, lifejacked, paddles and of course my trusty canoe. Mace? What about looting???

### **11:00 am, Sunday**

Gates all shut in the levee. It took three to four men to pull the heavy doors shut. The hotel is filling up. One guy in the hotel is from ABC and is interviewing people. Meeting people is what this storm is all about. There is near panic in the air, but also great humanity. In the hotel lobby, I met the former captain of a mine sweeper. He talked about the terror of facing hurricanes at sea. How you run from them hours before they hit, how once in the Straits of Taiwan he and other merchant vessels found the lee of a two-mile-long island and simply circled for days while the storm played its course.

### **12 pm**

Some breaking figures on the storm. Wind already gusting to 41 even though the eye is still 175 miles southeast of the city of New Orleans and has slowed to 8 miles per hour. Georges is 75 miles southeast of the actual mouth of the river, where 31-foot waves and 58 mph winds have kicked up the seas. The fear now is that Georges will come over the city and stall, creating as much as 30 inches of rain. The winds are still 110 mph and are forecasted to go to 120 mph

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before it hits land making it a force 3 storm. The cut off between force 2 & 3 is 110/111. The mayor of the city has ordered a curfew after 6 pm. Tropical force winds (40 mph) will hit us this evening, gusting to 70 mph. The center is to hit us Monday around seven a.m.

Disturbance might go east of the city by a few miles. Heaviest of rain, what they are calling the storm surge, will be heaviest just east of us. But all that water may back up in the lake and flood back on us. Interstates are now closed. Bridges are closed.

### 1:22 pm

It's a muggy 93 degrees, and the superdome and the convention center are now filling up with last-minute evacuees. Concern now is what happens if the superdome loses its electricity with thousands of confused tired and fearful people in it. People are arriving at the superdome with big bags of supplies and pillows and sleeping gear. And are reminded not to bring any furniture....

Along Bourbon and Chartres Street, the tourists walk around as if awaiting a parade, a bit stunned that the hurricane hasn't hit yet. If the hurricane stalls when it hits the coast, it could bring the rainfall (storm surge because we are below sea level) to 30 inches, which would definitely flood the French Quarter. I have to watch out with the local people when I say that I'm hoping for the worst. The New Orleans people look at me with a nasty sort of look when I say that I'm writing a kid's book about the Mississippi River and canoeing up Bourbon Street would be a cool ending.

One t.v. announcer said the curfew begins at six and "you WILL be arrested if you're caught out on the streets." The curfew is partly to guard against looting.

### 3:45 pm

Starting to rain lightly. Wind not so bad here in the French Quarter, but some gusts come as surprises. The ringing of bells from St. Louis. I've lashed my canoe to the ceiling of the first floor of the hotel garage, and the car has gone to level four. That's good.

Watching television and the swirling red, orange and green patterns of Georges making landfall, it's as if some kind of monster is swirling its way into New Orleans. A thing with an intelligence. This storm left Africa two weeks ago and has been a hurricane for many days. It seems to be zeroing in on the French Quarter. That's intelligence.

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### 6:50 pm

I see outside the streets are empty. This city is ready. The light has gone yellow and the swallows have taken over the sky above the church, over the French and Spanish rooftops. They are drunk in the wild wind. They hardly use their wings. I wonder if they're panicking or if this is just good fun.

The sky has suddenly turned a morbid purple as it darkens. Not far above them is a fast-moving group of puffy gray clouds, and breaks in the sky with blue. The church bells sound eerie in the purple darkening light. Many here have been praying that the eye goes east of the city. Looks like now the talking heads are saying the eye might brush East New Orleans but head mostly north and not west, thereby giving us only tropical storm velocity winds (39-73) instead of hurricane velocity (74-110).

But anything could happen at this point and it seems the storm is slowing, which means more rain and rain. The direction is still unpredictable since the direction of Georges is determined by very high winds in the system.

Across the street a woman has come out onto her balcony for a minute, then enters her house and comes out the door downstairs with a full-sized poodle. She is picking up refuse collected in the street.

### 8:00 pm

The t.v. just went out, thank god. I'm sick of the talking heads, almost as sick as I am of the heads talking about Clinton and Lewinsky. I have my marine radio. Rain moderately hard now, wind gusting in New Orleans to 68 and at the mouth of the river to 79. At the moment Georges is only 30 miles southeast of the mouth of the river and 130 miles southeast of the French Quarter. High tide is expected tomorrow morning and with all the rain we're going to get, it's anyone's guess exactly what the totals will be. Last hurricane one of the levees broke and flooding in that area was immense. So much of forecasting here depends on levees holding, on how wind and rain are combined with direction and duration of storm in any one location. Also pumps. New Orleans has a pumping system....???

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### Monday, September 28

#### 5:00 am

Waking up to the locals' glee that Hurricane Georges has taken a more northerly path and gone towards Biloxi, MS. No one here is thinking much about the people in Biloxi. Just that New Orleans has "dodged a bullet," as one radio guy said. Power lines down some places, t.v. not working yet, curfew still in effect, shelters holding people. But the city is happy. And I suppose there will be no whitewater paddling on Bourbon Street.

#### 9:00 am

Downstairs in the hotel lobby an older woman is telling earthquake stories about the time she was in a bad one and her daughter thought the earth was about to end, and everyone was dropping things on the floor as the house shook like thunder.

The coffee urn is getting low, and hardly anything to eat left. The radio up in Vermont is telling my friends that the path of the storm could change and New Orleans could still get hit pretty severely. It is continuing to rain and tropical force winds keep on coming. Jean Craighead George says in an email message this morning, " My father loved hurricanes, like you. He did stay out of them, though, but could not wait to see what damage they had done [Mr. Craighead was a well-known naturalist in the Everglades] and how the flora repaired this damage -- all the mangroves put out adventitious growth days after Hurricane Donna went through. With the tiny leaves all over stems and branches and trunks -- they survived the salt water. I did want to see you paddling down Bourbon street."

The wind here is starting to howl and the rain pelting out of the mean, gray sky. I want to get out and do some photographing, but the curfew is still in effect. I think all of us in this hotel and in the region and in the shelters are getting pretty stir-crazy. Fourteen thousand people are being held (some say "hostage") at the superdome and some are trying to get out, getting angry now, tired and yearning for home. The novelty is quickly wearing off. Half of them brought no food, so they have been given hotdogs and cornflakes with condensed milk. Which doesn't make their stay a nice one.

#### 11:00 am

Wind and rain picking up. Maybe this thing isn't over yet. Funny how we are optimists, and with our optimism we try to put the hurricane into a little bottle, so we can put it out to sea for some other unlucky souls to recover.

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### 12:00 noon

Tropical force winds still with us. Downed lines, lots of neighborhoods with no electricity, some flooding happening now.

### 12:45 pm

I broke curfew and roamed the empty city. I was not allowed up the World Trade Center; all the rooftop observation balconies in town have closed to the public. I found a hot meal in the Marriott and photographed an empty Jackson Square. Restaurants all closed for the day. Lots of tourists in the hotels are busting to spend their money, but with nowhere to spend it.

In the aftermath now, winds still high, but not that high, and a growing public criticism of the extended curfews and closed highways and bridges. The 14,000 stuck in the superdome are getting really restless. The governor is being blasted for keeping people from their homes, even when the hurricane is north of us. Also many of the churches are being criticized for turning away the masses instead of providing a place of refuge.

### 3:45 pm

Evacuees who escaped the city are waiting en mass to come home. They're waiting in Alabama, they're waiting in Mississippi, they're waiting in Jackson and Memphis. Millions. They're waiting in the superdome and they're waiting all over the south to come home, and because the highways are still closed, these people are getting really angry. They wish they'd never left in the first place. Maybe they won't evacuate the next time.

### 4:00 pm

Update on Georges, which is now above Biloxi, drifting north at 3 miles an hour. Wind speed has dropped to a tropical storm, maximum wind now 70 mph. Roads open now. All highways are going to be jammed with people coming back. Millions of cars are hitting the road as I write this. That's it. The storm is dying its land-death, Bourbon Street is back in action, and the radio announcer is yelling at the top of his lungs, "Come on home, come on home."