

Weathering the Storm

by Amy

In the darkness of that Friday night in September, when the winds roared and the rain tattooed roofs, and salty water crept then leaped ashore the sleepy Texas coastline, lives were changed forever. Homes slipped away, businesses were pounded, crops devastated, livestock scattered to the far corners of the county and piles upon piles of debris, - natural and man-made, - stacked high around any standing object onto which it could clasp. A new benchmark of devastation was etched in the history of Chambers County.

The Damage

The Waterborne Education Center was not spared this damage. We awoke on Saturday to find our beloved vessels broken from their moorings and sitting on dry land near the public boat ramp at Lake Anahuac, not even in the harbor. *Moss Bluff* appeared to have drifted upright on the rising water and then set down neatly on land against a tree as the water receded. The stereoscope and monitor were still set up, as if ready for the next field lab, and not a single life vest or hip wader was shaken from its stowage.

Smith Point, however, was another story. She had tumbled to her side during the storm and lost a window in the wheelhouse, which sent salty water and debris spilling through the cabin, engine room and lab. All equipment onboard was tossed and battered and mixed with diesel that seeped in from the engine room. When the water pulled away, *Smith Point* lay on her starboard side. After nine years of noble service, it appears her last voyage was a rough one.

The WEC office also took a beating. A nearby building, abandoned and in disrepair for years, broke apart in the wind, sending debris flying into the WEC yard. Large pieces of lumber from the dilapidated building speared through the east wall of the office, punching holes in the siding, damaging the electrical connections and leaving two timbers lodge in the wall, stabbed all the way through to the building's interior. The wooden privacy fence at the rear of the building lay flat and a section of the chain link fencing at the front of the property was collapsed by flying tin from the same neighboring building. The wooden WEC sign hanging in the iron archway was torn from its anchor and came crashing to the driveway. Around the yard, sheets of tin and trash and lumber were scattered to all sides of the building from the neighboring property.

The Trinity River ran black for days. Refrigerators, ice chests, propane tanks, lost boats, skeletons of homes and every piece of personal effects imaginable

drifted in the river, hung in the trees and were piled on the banks.

Recovery Begins

Except to salvage equipment from the vessels, the WEC was closed the week following the storm to allow employees time to tend to their personal lives. The next week, we opened in the mornings on generator power to field phone calls and begin the recovery process. All trips on the calendar for the remainder of 2008 were cancelled or postponed to the spring. All told, 27 field labs were erased from the books. Just weeks before, we had proudly beamed that the WEC was on track to break the 100-trip annual goal for the first time since 2004. We were finally overcoming the aftermath of Hurricane Rita. We spoke too soon.

When the power came back 11 days after the storm, the WEC office reopened in earnest. Our staff began researching relief opportunities, possible charter vessels and developing plans of action for all the "what now" questions that popped up.

Since it was evident that field labs would be suspended for several months, the WEC staff began working on an in-class presentation of the effects of the storm on the Trinity River and the natural renewal process. This project is still in the development stage, but will be ready soon for all interested groups, including any of those who were forced to cancel in the fall. (This presentation is available at no charge. Call Wes to schedule your presentation.)

The repair process of the WEC office is underway. It should be back in mint condition by early January 2009, if not sooner. However, the waiting game for the fate of *Smith Point* and *Moss Bluff* continues. The vessels, owned by Chambers-Liberty Counties Navigation District, became just one of many projects CLCND has on their "To Do" list. Major projects, i.e. restoring the levees around Lake Anahuac to supply water to the City of Anahuac and Trinity Bay Conservation District for public consumption, took precedence over repair of the vessels.

Some progress has been made. The boats have been moved to Houston, which was no small task. Now bids are being received for the repair work. The Coast Guard requires full dry dock inspection before the vessels can be released for service. In the mean time, the WEC is researching alternate vessels to serve as either substitutes until the existing ones can be repaired, or in the case that the end does not justify the means, to replace our hardworking vessels. Either

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View from the rear of WEC office



Equipment damaged on *Smith Point*

The bluff overlooking the channel at Fort Anahuac Park around 7:30 a.m. on Saturday, September 13, 2008.

The Waterborne Education Center

810 Miller Street
P.O. Box 9
Anahuac, Texas 77514

Phone: 409.267.3547
Fax: 409.267.3758

Check out the
website
www.txwaterborne.org

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way, the WEC has set March 1, 2009 as its return to service goal. At that point, we will have at least one vessel available for charter. We are now accepting reservations for single vessel field labs for the spring.

The Future

The road to recovery is not expected to be smooth, but the WEC staff and board are determined to make 2009, our 10th year of service, a success. But we need your help. The WEC is actively seeking funds to help heal the wounds caused by IKE and continue providing the stellar education services that have become our trademark. If you feel the need to help, your heart felt assistance would be greatly appreciated. Any donation you deem fitting will be used to put the WEC back on the water. The WEC is a federally-recognized 501c(3) non-profit, and as such, all donations to it are tax-deductible. Donors will be recognized by the WEC in 2009. Please stay in touch. We will post updates on the website and in newsletters.

The Cost of IKE

Your donation will help the WEC take care of the following expenses:

- Building repairs not covered by insurance.
- Replacement of educational equipment stored on *Smith Point*.
- Assistance with vessel repair, or full cost of substitute charter or replacement purchase.
- Man hours, travel, and supplies related to development and implementation of in-class presentations.
- In office man-hours for work not currently support by existing grants.
- Other yet unforeseen expenses.

