

March 16, 2008----

BILOXI, Miss.---Some travel moments are too powerful to be framed by a camera or postcard. They draw a tear and run as deep as a promise.

This is how it is when noted Biloxi potter Brian Nettles explains how Hurricane Katrina changed his work.

"I'm now interested in identifying this location, much like Japanese potters," Nettles said in his studio in Pass Christian, a half-hour west of Biloxi. "In Japan, people can look at a pot and say, 'That's from Tokoname' because of the color and type of clay."

Like many, Nettles had little choice but to make a fresh start after Katrina. The hurricane decimated his inventory of pottery.

"We lost 2,000 pots," said the 40-year-old Nettles, who's found some of his artwork scattered through the woods after it floated away in the storm.

"It's actually ironic," he said. "Clay is dissolved rock. I take it out of that state and turn it back to stoneware with trees that were grown here."

Nettles is a guest curator at Biloxi's Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art, which is operating out of temporary digs thanks to Katrina. The museum is devoted to George Ohr (1857-1918), "The Mad Potter of Biloxi." The father of American pottery, Ohr was known for multicolored glazes and his audacious approach. He was from the South.

The \$30 million museum complex was less than a year away from being finished in August 2005 when the force of Katrina tossed a barge from the neighboring Grand Casino into the construction site on an oak tree-lined peninsula jutting into Biloxi Bay. Ohr's pottery was spared from the storm. Museum benefactor and civil rights activist Jerry O'Keefe had shipped most of his personal Ohr collection out of harm's way.

As work resumes on the new museum, Ohr-O'Keefe has moved from a trailer into its current home at the historic Glenn Swetman House, where roughly 30 Ohr pieces are on display.

Pritzker Prize-winning architect Frank Gehry is designing the new museum, slated to open in 2010. Part of the pavilion's futuristic-looking exterior shell, which will be made of Gehry's trademark brushed stainless steel, went up late last year.

Locals call the rebuilding effort "Welcome Back Potter!"

"This is not only exciting from an architectural sense," said Marjie Gowdy, executive director of the museum. "But it is one of the first things coming back on the Gulf Coast. It is a symbol of rebirth."

Nettles lives alone near his studio on 30 acres along the Wolf River that empties into Bay Saint Louis. The land is a good source of potters' clay in the soggy areas along cypress swamps.

When the eye of Hurricane Katrina came across Bay Saint Louis, Nettles lost everything. He and his wife split up after the storm.

On a good day, Nettles will comb the property with his 4-year-old son, searching for his pots that have washed ashore. At night the marsh is eerily quiet. The woody compound is so dark you have to watch every step.

There is only a silent promise of better things to come.

Pass Christian is four miles off the Gulf Coast, west of Biloxi. Before the storm, Pass Christian's population totaled 6,500. "Today it is about 2,000," Nettles said. "There are only 500 homes still standing. One hundred percent of the commercial district --gone. My showroom was washed away to a concrete slab. I lost two kilns. My town has been wiped off the map."

"It was a good place to live," he added. "At one time Pass Christian was a big resort town. During the 1800s, the money people from New Orleans spilled over. There weren't sewers, and during the hot summer the mosquitoes would come. They came here for the cool ocean breezes."

During the 1950s, U.S. Highway 90 through the Gulf Coast was known as "The Southern Route 66." Mom-and-pop restaurants and beachfront motels lined the highway. In 1950, my parents honeymooned at the since-raised Edgewater Park Hotel between Biloxi and Gulfport. The hotel was a sister property to the Edgewater Beach in Chicago. The Chicago-Gulf Coast connection still exists today.

Highway 90 is an emotional drive that reveals the grit of Katrina's destruction. The Gulf Coast from Pass Christian to Biloxi suffered the brunt of Katrina. New Orleans, about 70 minutes away by car on Highway 90, tumbled as a result of the floods from broken levees.

The Gus Stevens Sea Food Restaurant & Buccaneer Lounge (signified by a giant, neon fish) was once a popular spot along Highway 90 in Biloxi. The since-shuttered lounge booked Jerry Lee Lewis and Andy Griffith, but it's best known as the last place siren singer/actress Jayne Mansfield performed.

After a June gig in 1967, Mansfield and her companion, Sam Brody, hopped in an Electra Buick with a Stevens' bartender. Destination: New Orleans. Mansfield's three kids slept in the back seat. Not far from Pass Christian, the Buick crossed the Bay St. Louis Bridge, where they slammed into a tractor-trailer. Mansfield was killed and urban legend says she was decapitated. But locals will tell you Mansfield was wearing a blond wig that flew off her head after impact.

Nettles grew up in Ocean Springs, a couple miles east of Biloxi across the new Biloxi-Bay Bridge. The previous bridge was destroyed by Katrina, but Ocean Springs was pretty much spared from the storm.

These days, Nettles is shifting his focus away from strictly aesthetic work and focusing more on creating pottery people can use. His work ranges from \$25 for a coffee mug to up to thousands of dollars for a sculpture. His work has appeared in Chicago at SOFA, the International Expositions of Sculpture

Objects & Functional Art. He's back at work with a new 5,000-pound kiln donated by West Virginia-based industrial kiln-maker Danser.

The free spirit of Ohr has influenced Nettles' style.

"Everybody who grew up on the coast grew up knowing Ohr and Ocean Springs artist Walter Anderson," Nettles explained. "Ocean Springs and Biloxi are ceramic communities. Most parts of the country you tell someone you're a potter and they don't have a clue what you're talking about. Here, they do."

"Ohr was a master craftsman," Nettles said. "His pots are masterfully thrown and his glazes for his time period were incredible. Remember, he didn't call his clay supplier as I do if I need chemicals. He melted down lead musket balls to make glaze. He knew what he was doing. He had the term 'Mad Potter' and yeah, maybe he was mad, but I think that was for show. You read his writings and it's abstract expressionism, but that movement had not started."

When completed, the Ohr-O'Keefe Museum will play off the style of Gulf Coast shotgun houses. Gehry noted how every home in the area had a modest front porch, so he incorporated sweeping, angular porches into his design. Five Gehry-built structures will be connected by walkways.

"I found out that Gehry started out studying ceramics at the University of Southern California," Nettles said. "His ceramics teacher kept Ohr pots on his desk."

Gehry, whose high-profile work can be found in Bilbao, Spain, and Chicago's Millennium Park, wound up working in Biloxi thanks to New Orleans sculptor Bob Tannen and his wife, Jeanne Nathan, who helped the museum recruit their architect friend for the job.

"I don't know how Chicago reacted to Gehry, but he does draw cultural tourists," Nettles said. "Before the storm there was a lot more cultural tourism along the coast. The Ohr-O'Keefe Museum was going to be the jewel. Gehry was excited. It's definitely the most positive thing for the coast. It will be the only Gehry building in the South. And Point Cadet, which it will be in, is in one of the poorest communities in the state."

The Point Cadet area of eastern Biloxi has always had strong ties to the fishing industry -- a world Nettles knows well. His mother's side of the family has made sails for fishing boats for seven generations. It's this kind of history that binds Nettles to the beleaguered coastal area that is his home.

"I had offers to move all over the country and even Japan," Nettles said. "But after the storm, financially I couldn't. I didn't have flood insurance. But I'm from here ... I wanted to leave. In hindsight, I'm glad I didn't leave."

"It's as if your friend was in a bar fight and he was down and out, getting his ass kicked. And you packed up and left," he said. "You don't do that."