

December 18, 2005-----

NEW ORLEANS --- There is no foliage in the upscale Lakeview neighborhood near Lake Pontchartrain. The sound of children has been stilled in the Lower 9th Ward.

There are no words to describe the barren city still desolate nearly four months after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans.

Arlo Guthrie, his family and fellow musicians got a two-hour private police-escorted tour that brought home their "Ridin' on the City of New Orleans" journey, which began Dec. 5 at Union Station. Amtrak's historic City of New Orleans train arrived here Thursday night. Along the route, Guthrie and other musicians played concerts to raise money to restore the New Orleans musical infrastructure.

On Friday afternoon, Arlo Guthrie stood in front of Fats Domino's vacant house in the Lower 9th Ward. The songwriter struggled to find words.

The Lower 9th opened up only last week after being inundated when water breached the levee that formed the ward's western boundary. "It's kind of hard to imagine even being here," Guthrie said as he glanced over his shoulder.

Domino's house was once Cadillac pink. It is now splattered with mud, debris and loving graffiti. Carnage went down Domino's beloved Caffin Avenue as far as the eye could see. "You wonder what is going to happen," Guthrie said. "No kids. No sound of kids."

He stopped and walked away. His singer-songwriter daughter, Sarah Lee Guthrie, cried as she boarded the bus. The December sky was gray. And much of New Orleans looked like nuclear winter.

In the Lower 9th, levees had been overtopped by funnels of water. In Lakeview, damage was worse. Big brick houses once worth between \$300,000 and \$450,000 looked like junk-shop accordions.

Layers of dirt made cars seem prehistoric. A few roofs were covered with bright blue tarps, which locals call "FEMA Roofs." (The Federal Emergency Management Agency deems these homes salvageable.)

"The scope of this is larger than you can imagine until you're actually looking at it," Guthrie said.

The Lower 9th and Lakeview districts are the hardest-hit sections of New Orleans, where 80 percent of the neighborhoods were flooded.

South Carrollton Avenue is wiped out, but buildings are intact. Uptown is coming back to life. Streetcar service is scheduled to resume Sunday on Canal Street, but the St. Charles line is shut down indefinitely. Even Bourbon Street is slow and edgy.

New Orleans officials say between 70,000 and 100,000 residents have returned. But the wounds are so deep you cannot hear the birds from the sky. There is an eerie silence around the city.

Thursday's nine-hour "Ridin' on the City of New Orleans" train ride from Memphis also revealed a range of emotion. A full moon illuminated the nine-car train as it pulled out of downtown Memphis at 6:50 a.m. and New Orleans singer-songwriter Jack Neilson led a singalong of Bob Dylan's "I Shall Be Released" in a business class car.

By 1:30 p.m., the City of New Orleans had reached Hammond, La., and the first serious signs of hurricane damage could be seen.

Trees were twisted like pipe cleaners. Fast food signs were still blown out. Two men raked cemetery grounds along the tracks. Amtrak brought along a vintage Illinois Central office car just for the historic ride. The shell of the refurbished car was delivered to the Illinois Central from Chicago's Pullman railroad car company in 1955. Known then as IC #1, the car was placed in service in 1956. The original Formica walls are now covered with smooth Brazilian rosewood to reflect the original color scheme. During the trip, the car and its back porch served as headquarters for Guthrie, family members and legendary singer-songwriter-raconteur Ramblin' Jack Elliott.

Elliott was a running partner of Woody Guthrie. During a sun-drenched stretch from Yazoo City to Jackson, Miss., Elliott kicked back, removed his big Texas cowboy hat and recalled big times in New Orleans. "The first time I got to New Orleans, a policeman named George informed me I needed a haircut," Elliott said. "He said it was against the law to have long hair in New Orleans. This was 1953. I was busking with my guitar on Bourbon Street." Elliott said his 1953 repertoire included "Worried Man Blues" and appropriately enough, "Rock Island Line." This weekend's visit was his first since the mid-1980s, when he appeared at the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival.

The New Orleans Convention and Visitors Bureau has declared New Year's weekend as the city's official reopening for tourists -- at the same time Gray Line Tours launches a "Hurricane Devastation Tour" (10 percent of the \$35 ticket goes to hurricane relief charities). Life goes on. But here, life will never be the same.