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Phantom Winds, A Mystic Hymn of Louisiana

Book project narrative

The Culture of the Land here is indomitable. It has shaped us individually - and our culture as lived within it. There is no choice but to be enveloped. And in return for not disturbing it too much we get the things of life - seafood, abundant rain, outrageous growth, dense woodlands, plentiful crops, marshes to slow the storms, bayous full of fish, game, geese, ducks, on and on...

But we in South Louisiana have also evolved emotionally and spiritually from this land of decay and life. Our instinctual and subliminal thinking has been altered and shaped by the heavy air, the smell of decaying vegetation when we walk out our door in the summer, the wet gray sky of January with the sounds of gulls and geese, the hordes of mosquitoes when we walk through our yards, the tree frogs in the evenings in the woods, the dead quiet of August heat - the feeling that we are not at the heart of things but that nature is. We are altered by this denseness of life. We are more layered, more nuanced, just as our land here is exceptionally layered and nuanced.

This is what we set out to demonstrate in *Phantom Winds; A Mystic Hymn of Louisiana*. We wanted the photographs to evoke the complexity of South Louisiana with all its internal, below the surface life - the life that we feel but don't always notice. The life that can't go on if we don't start noticing. Lafcadio Hearn's writings corroborate the photographs by his lush, seductive language, his understanding of the exoticness of South Louisiana. His writing intimately describes the historic South Louisiana of his time but is also relevant now if you are ever out in the watery, damp, cold and heat of the marshes, swamps, and woods. His understanding of the fragile nature of the natural balance here - his understanding of the fury of hurricanes and the beauty of a simple life lived in harmony with the land - are relevant now. His love of cemeteries as places to contemplate in; places that metaphorically share their deepest messages if we listen. We in South Louisiana know this about cemeteries. He puts what we know in our souls into soulful words that we could have never articulated.

The book reinforces what we know already, puts it into visual poetry to go with Hearn's poetic prose. But to a wider audience it reveals South Louisiana as a place of mystery, complexity, dark musty beauty, and fragility that is fast disappearing. It screams quietly "save me". It shows to those who may not know, a land unknown. Maybe the photographs will open eyes; Hearn's words may open hearts. They - out there - will surely see what we see and support our efforts to save our unique and expressive home.

Never has it been more crucial to illustrate this. Just between the time the book was completed, right before Katrina and now, many of the very places we spent so much time photographing are going or gone. Rita, Gustav, Ike, development, undisciplined industry, climatic changes, cultural assimilation, carelessness, economics - conspire against us. But if the sheer beauty and poetry of South Louisiana can reach all of us here - and a larger audience as well, it can only help.

Many photography books have been published on the physical environment of South Louisiana - color and black and white. Our book is less about the literal flora and fauna of South Louisiana and more about the visual internal poetry of the land and Lafcadio Hearn's evocative accompanying descriptions.

Over many years we have grown to understand the value of photographing those things which many times fall below the radar; things that are so integral that they are no longer noticed - or so ordinary, or so seemingly unimportant - but these are frequently the very things that are truly iconic, when photographed from a slightly different perspective.

These photographs, paired with Hearn's excerpts, create a book that becomes a paean to the art and poetry of our land. We leave the bald facts to others.

Our *Phantom Winds* project will raise awareness of the unique beauty and value of the Louisiana coastal and inland swamps, plains, forests and culture - hopefully throughout the United States. And will do so in a way that is as unique and beautiful as the lands themselves.