

The Lost and the Found Down South
Steve Lopez
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Columnist Steve Lopez joined the staff of The Times in May 2001, after four years at Time Inc. where he wrote for Time, Sports Illustrated, Life and Entertainment Weekly as editor-at-large.

While at Time, he helped establish the Bonus Section, a series of narrative news features. His first story in the series, about the French capture of Philadelphia hippie guru and suspected murderer Ira Einhorn, won a Society of Professional Journalists Award for national magazines.



He also was the author of Time magazine's "Campaign diary," a road journal filed during the 2000-01 presidential campaign; and of the weekly, "American Scene" column, for which he traveled the United States.

Prior to joining Time Inc., Lopez was a columnist at The Philadelphia Inquirer, where he won the H.L. Mencken Writing Award, the Ernie Pyle Award for human interest writing and a National Headliner Award for column writing. During his 12 years at the Inquirer, he filed dispatches from Iraq, Bosnia, Colombia and the Soviet Union.

His earlier newspaper jobs were at the San Jose Mercury News, the Oakland Tribune and three other daily newspapers in Northern California.

He is the author of three novels, "Third and Indiana," "The Sunday Macaroni Club," and "In the Clear." A collection of his columns is published in the book "Land of Giants: Where No Good Deed Goes Unpunished."

Lopez is married and has two sons.

On the crisis scale, the theft of my computer here this week was somewhere between trivial and picayune. You can't dial 911 in the middle of a deadly and historic catastrophe and expect the police to be on the lookout for a stolen Dell laptop.

I'd like it back, though, along with my backpack and an overnight bag, so I headed back to the neighborhood where I got ripped off to see if by chance my stuff was for sale on the street.

As I drove into the city from Lafayette, the radio news was all Katrina, and it didn't sound terribly different from the way it had sounded when I arrived at the Houston Astrodome on Saturday.

A million or so people are homeless, scattered and in limbo. Families remain separated, the fate of New Orleans and many other communities is uncertain, the body count may be in the thousands, but no one knows for sure, and it's still not clear why the initial rescue effort was so horrifically inadequate.

President Bush promised to "lead an investigation into what went right and what went wrong." I think I can help shed some light.

If you pour money and manpower into Iraq, hire an amateur to run the Federal Emergency Management Agency and ignore repeated warnings of potentially disastrous flood problems, you're in trouble when a Big One hits.

It's all pretty obvious, so maybe Bush would also have time to take a good, hard look at the insurance industry. On my drive into New Orleans, I heard an insurance rep say he was sorry to have to deliver bad news to so many Katrina victims who thought they were covered, but found out otherwise.

Asked for an example of what's not covered, he said:

"Wind-driven rain."

I say we round up all the looters and insurance executives and tie them to utility poles before the next hurricane hits.

As for the rescue recovery investigation, Bush should call a nurse named Lynn McMorris, who worked the triage operation at the airport in New Orleans for a week.

"We needed more manpower, more medicine, more everything. It was totally inadequate," McMorris told me at the Lafayette Cajundome, where she now cares for evacuees.

"We'd have 1,400 people in line at triage, and it would take hours to

get to them. We had to get a pediatric strike force to go into the crowd and hold up their kids so we could see who was sickest. We had cardiac arrest, everything. We even had an alligator bite, for God's sake. Thirty percent of them had dysentery, and we had to send them back out in the same ... clothes they came in with."

McMorris worked 40 hours at a time, and that kind of spirit was abundant everywhere I visited. I saw volunteers by the hundreds at evacuation centers and listened to people call offering jobs, food, clothing, moral support.

Not that everyone sang "Kumbaya." A story in the Sunday Advertiser of Lafayette looked like it had been written by former California Gov. Pete Wilson.

"Never the Same," whined the headline on a page-one story about thousands of evacuees seeking shelter in Lafayette. "They just keep coming," the story began. "Even when they aren't supposed to be here."

Maybe the Minutemen can spare a battalion or two.

In Lake Charles, two middle-aged black couples who had evacuated from New Orleans told me they had gone out for waffles and were told they would have to pay before they ate.

Compared to that, the theft of my computer was a minor offense, but I sped through the abandoned French Quarter and over to the flooded east side of New Orleans in hot pursuit.

What could my own computer cost me on the street? \$10 or \$20?

Katrina met her match when she knocked on the door of Kajun's pub - the kind of joint that makes it imperative to rebuild New Orleans in this nation of cookie-cutter towns - and I started my search for the computer there.

"You still open?" I asked owner JoAnn Guidos, who has kept the beer cold and the pub busy with diehards who would rather risk drowning than give up their barstools.

"Honey, I'm always open," Guidos said.

I asked if anyone had tried to fence a Dell computer. And she had no good news for me. "They warehoused all that stuff," she said. "TV sets, DVD players, everything. Every business on this block was looted. They'll wait until this all dies down before they try to sell it."

Who's going to buy it now?

Well, I did have \$20 in my pocket, but Guidos was probably right.

I went to the corner where the thief got into my trunk while I was out in a skiff with Capt. Thomas Sterling, the tattooed character who was running rescue operations in the flooded 9th Ward.

On Clouet Street, I found no computer, no clues and not much action because the National Guard was making a sweep, calling for an evacuation. "I'll go to work on it," one neighbor promised as he took my phone number, but he didn't hold out much hope that I'd ever see my computer again.

A couple of weary holdouts named Milous McKenzie and Arnold Scott bummed a ride from me, saying they were finally ready to evacuate. When I told them about the neighbor who promised to look for my computer, Scott said he knew the guy.

"He's probably the one who's got it," he said.

Yeah. I kind of figured.

The news was not all bad on Wednesday, though.

Last Saturday, I wrote about a New Orleans ambulance operator who rescued as many people as he could and then left town assuming his two daughters, 9 and 6, had evacuated with their mother. But Robert Jemison then heard from a relative that the girls were on a roof with water rising, the day after Katrina hit, when their cellphone went dead.

"Call Dad," said the sign Jemison hoisted around the Houston Astrodome, where he told me he refused to give up hope after nearly a week of worry.

When I called him Wednesday, Jemison had good news. His phone had rung a few days ago, and his oldest daughter was on the line.

Everyone was just fine. Praise be, and life goes on.