

“Vanishing Pearls: The Oystermen of Pointe a la Hache

Written by Kam Williams



On April 20, 2010, the Deepwater Horizon, a drilling rig owned and operated by British Petroleum (BP), exploded, spilling over 50 million barrels of oil in the Gulf of Mexico before it was finally capped weeks later. In June, President Obama announced that the company had set aside \$20 billion in cash designated to help those deleteriously affected by the ecological disaster.

Kenneth Feinberg's law firm, which had previously handled the distribution of the September 11th Victim Compensation Fund, was retained at a rate of \$850,000/month to handle the BP one also. Although the TV commercials running in the company's highly-saturated PR campaign would have you believe that it was contrite and committed to undoing any damage, truth be told, that carefully-cultivated corporate image bore little relation to how it was actually treating many of the victims seeking restitution.

Take, for example, Pointe a la Hache, an African-American enclave located in Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana. For generations, the men of that Gulf shore village of less than 300 had supported their families by plying their trade as oyster fishermen. However, the BP spill put the brothers out of business and by 2012 the tiny black community had effectively been turned into a ghost town.

Its little-known ordeal is the subject of "Vanishing Pearls," a heartbreaking documentary directed by Nailah Jefferson. The film retraces the blight visited upon Pointe a la Hache by focusing primarily on the plight of a local leader named Byron Encalade.

Encalade was the owner of Encalade Fisheries, a family business which employed his brother, his nephew and five of his cousins. In the wake of the spill, he filed a claim and very patiently awaited a check from BP.

But when he finally received a letter stating, "Your file is denied," his whole world was turned upside-down. Now, a proud provider who had never in his life looked to the government for a handout suddenly found himself dependent on food stamps. His relatives also needed help from friends, charities and subsidies to survive, and had trouble understanding why no one cared

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about their predicament.

Meanwhile, Attorney Feinberg, ostensibly running interference for the profit-driven polluter, publicly stated "I see no evidence of anything other than fair treatment by BP. I think they wanted to do the right thing, and they did."

His conclusion was a far cry from that of embittered Byron who lamented, "They've destroyed us... The world must know what BP did to this community." Sadly, the devastation visited upon Pointe a la Hache is most likely a microcosm of a scenario being played out again and again in working-class communities all along the Gulf Coast.

Excellent (4 stars)

Unrated

Running time: 80 minutes

Distributor: AFFRM

To see a trailer for "Vanishing Pearls," visit: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kv_fSdu_tI8