

Hurricane Florence: A Meditation

No surprise, this is a meditation about power...power and the strength of things built to last...power and the tenacity of tree trunks and roots...and the resiliency of people buffeted by hurricanes.

This is a story about an old two-storied barn and an ancient pecan tree, next to each other at the edge of a large field in Swansboro, corner of Main Street Extension and Mt. Pleasant Rd. This is a story about Hurricane Florence when it came and blew the tree down on top of the barn and destroyed it...and the pecan tree, too.

As an artist, I was drawn (pun intended) to the wreckage, I know the owner, Susan Casper, who gave me permission to go on the land. I parked at Peggy's beauty salon next to the Childcare center and walked across the road and up into the field. I didn't think I'd be noticed. Peggy and her customers kept track of me. A friend, David Krawchuck (with a wicked sense of humor) drove by and saw me and later told his friends Jim was "outstanding in his field." Someone wondered about that "strange, lonely" man seated in a folding lawn chair in the middle of the plowed field. On another day, April Clark, one of my former students, stopped her car on Main Street Extension, walked up the hill for a conversation.

For about six hours, over three days, I sketched in pencil and then inked two drawings. A long enough time for meditation...

And enough time to think about strength and power. Susan's family, the Jones's, called the barn a pack house. It was built in the early 1900's, and, like many relics of the tobacco era, was weathered and still standing. It's been years since they've grown tobacco.

The pack house was moved to the present location in the '40's and stayed in good upright condition, that is. until Hurricane Florence.

Not a fair contest. Florence's winds were somewhere around a hundred miles an hour. The pecan tree, like countless trees in our area, was no obstacle, simply another example of Florence's power. I walked around the downed tree many times, up close and personal. Amazing! The trunk is large enough for two people to embrace. The hole made by the upturned roots measures twelve by twenty feet. I counted off steps---upright the tree would have been more than seventy feet tall. The force of the fall was so great, the two major lower limbs were actually broken when the tree hit the ground, like someone crushing their knees if they fell straight down and hard on a concrete pavement. The wreckage is remarkable. (...and the artist hopes his drawing can do justice to the scene.)

Another power apparent here: the strength of generations. Susan, now a grandmother, remembers the importance of the pack house for the family farm. On the first floor they kept farm equipment, feed for livestock and, at one time, stabled mules. When Susan was a child, she helped sort, grade and pack tobacco in the upper story. "We didn't plant the pecan tree," she said, "It sprouted in the 1950's when a bird carried the seed for the tree to the site. The pecans it produced were never very good though. They were too small and bitter."

One afternoon when I was drawing, Joel Worley, Susan's nephew, wondered who I was and what I was doing, sitting in a folding chair on the property, walked across the field to check me out. I told him about Susan's okay and showed him the sketches. He was worried about the safety of kids playing around the wreckage and talked about history.

The family uses the pack house for storage including the large Christmas wreath they hang on the barn facing Main Street Extension. It's an important reminder of the season and he hoped he could find it intact in the debris. He said his mother, Susan's sister who lives in Morehead City, was so upset about the pack house, she waited a week and a half before she could see the damage.

A barn, a tree, a hurricane. Meditations on the greatness of power, but even more about family history and experience. Think of the long years associated with the tree and the pack house. Family tragedies and joys. There is storm damage at the site. A tree falls. A building is destroyed, but the wreckage does not tear the fabric of the family. Its power remains pursuing the future.

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