

## It's Shreveport's Season

By Yolanda Young  
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Shreveport, Louisiana. Ever heard of it? Before Hurricane Katrina, my home town was suffering an identity crisis.

It's all because of the rivers. Countless tomes evoke the grandness of New Orleans's Mississippi and the magnificent places -- Jackson Square, the Garden District and the French Quarter -- that are among the National Historical Landmarks that form its backdrop.

By contrast, Shreveport's Red River is a narrow swath of muddy water that plays host to riverboat casinos. Between the two cities are 340 miles of swamp, road construction and humidity.

Even Baton Rouge, known as the state capital, and tiny Grambling, population 4,487, famed for legendary football coach Eddie Robinson, got more air time. Shreveport, meanwhile, was just another southern town near the Texas border.

No more. Now it's known as Hollywood South and hyped in Entertainment Weekly, Variety and People magazines alongside the likes of Ashton Kutcher, Antonio Banderas and Denzel Washington, all of whom have made movies there since Hurricane Katrina. "We don't have to sell the city," says Arlena Acree, Shreveport's director of film, media and entertainment. "They already know about us. Someone compared this to California's gold rush."

Clearly N'awlins's catastrophic loss was our gain. But as I read in the Shreveport Times of the city's achievements, my glee is tinged with guilt. Is it right to prosper from others' misfortune? My mother, a Bible thumper like many in the city, consults Genesis, which tells the story of when seven years of famine struck Egypt. People came from all over to buy the food that Joseph had stored. "Well, he didn't give it away," she points out.

Nearly 200 years after Capt. Henry Miller Shreve cleared the Red River, it's Shreveport's season. The city's population of 200,000 is about evenly split between black and white residents, and its main source of jobs has been the health-care industry. Casinos and manufacturing plants have a huge impact on the economy as well, according to Shreveport's Chamber of Commerce.

Since Katrina, I've seen new signs of progress each time I visit my family. There are hands accessorized with Starbucks cups, a recently constructed Hilton hotel, the city's first black mayor, Cedric Glover, elected in November 2006.

Shreveport's history is likely to mirror that of Oakland, Calif. Before the great earthquake of 1906, Oakland was anonymous, but it doubled in size and gained a national profile when residents of San Francisco fled there after their city was devastated. San Francisco quickly regained its stature, but it gave Oakland a chance to grow.

Of course, "growth" is a loaded issue as it relates to Hurricane Katrina, because many evacuees were black and poor. Shreveport was even "lucky" in that respect. It took in only 7,000 to 20,000 evacuees. By contrast, the Houston region gained 123,000 people and a little town near New Orleans called Northshore St. Tammany grew by 40,000.

Rather than draining city resources, the evacuees presented another reason for Shreveporters to feel good about themselves. While newcomers have faced some backlash, many more citizens have welcomed them. Students from Shreveport's job corps and Centenary College (currently on Newsweek's "25 Hottest Schools" list) raised money and built homes.

Some New Orleanians have found fortune in Shreveport as well. Southern University of Shreveport has helped evacuees reopen businesses.

All these things are a nice turn for the city, but it is the movie business that has given it something to talk about. When I grew up there the skating rink, Friday night football and the one-story mall anchored by Sears were the major sources of amusement. Now the Louisiana movie blog ( <http://louisianamovies.blogspot.com/>) touts residents working as extras alongside movie stars.

Producers were drawn to New Orleans in part because of tax incentives offered by the state. After Katrina struck, many of them wanted to remain in Louisiana. And a funny thing happened up I-49. Film companies discovered that Shreveport was a pretty good place to do business.

With no traffic congestion, crews can move from one end of the city to the other in 15 minutes. Housing and apartment rentals are reasonably priced. Since August 2005, the city's has had 25 film and television projects with revenue exceeding \$300 million. Movie Maker magazine ranked Shreveport sixth on its "Top Ten U.S. Cities to Live, Work and Make Movies."

There are a few drawbacks, such as no direct flights to Los Angeles. But they haven't derailed this steamer. Millennium Films, which recently wrapped filming in Shreveport of "Major Movie Star" and "Blonde Ambition," starring Jessica Simpson, has announced plans to make six films a year and build a \$10 million, 6.7- to 20-acre facility in Ledbetter Heights (known as "the bottom" when I was growing up).

There is room in this biz for all of Louisiana, said Chris Stelly, film and television director for the Louisiana Economic Development Department. "The storm opened up the state. Now North Louisiana, New Iberia and Natchitoches are in play even as New Orleans returns to business," he said.

We can only imagine what the meal would have looked like if not for Katrina, but that's how the dish got served. My home town seems determined to make the most of this course.

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