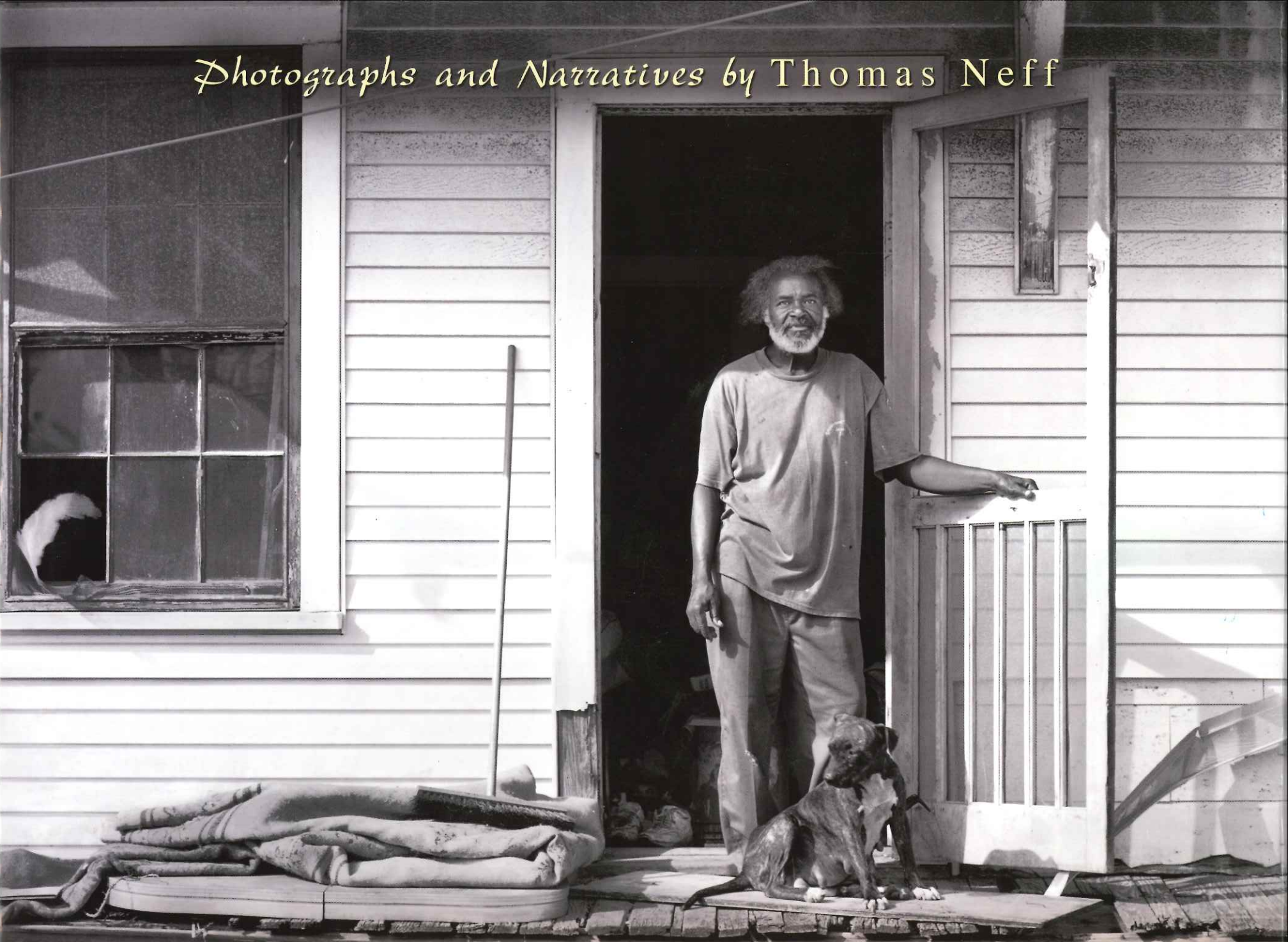


*Photographs and Narratives by Thomas Neff*



**HOLDING OUT AND  
HANGING ON**  
*Surviving Hurricane Katrina*

## Foreword

Thomas Neff first knocked on my door in late October 2005, when New Orleans was still reeling from the punch of Hurricane Katrina. He had arrived in the city as a first responder with the East Baton Rouge Sheriff's Office, working with those who had chosen to stay in their Lakeview homes only to be stranded by the catastrophic flooding after the failure of the Seventeenth Street Canal. Neff was in the early days of a sabbatical leave from his teaching post as a professor of art at Louisiana State University. Unable to ignore the unfolding crisis in New Orleans, he had abandoned his plan to photograph in his native California and the West, subjects he had worked with thirty years earlier, to volunteer in New Orleans. After two subsequent trips to help friends rescue cats from flooded Mid-City homes, Neff returned to the city with the tools of his own profession, a 5 x 7 view camera and black-and-white film, and began to photograph many of the remarkable people he had met in the preceding weeks. On that cold October night, on my deserted street in my house with partial services, I saw a dozen or so small work prints of Neff's photographs of those who had weathered the storm and its chaotic aftermath. I immediately knew that this would be a significant body of work for the Ogden Museum to show after we reopened.

As Neff's project unfolded, so did our understanding of the complex events surrounding the hurricane, the flood, and the

ensuing humanitarian disaster. The news could only begin to suggest the immense scale and the lasting effect on the city and its residents. Katrina's impact was biblical in proportion and, like the Great Flood of 1927, will remain one of the defining moments in the history of the region and the nation. Whether they lost very little or everything, New Orleanians could immediately segment their lives into pre- and post-Katrina realities.

The images of destruction, chaos, and human despair that began to pour out of New Orleans immediately after the storm shocked the world. In addition to producing several bodies of distinguished photojournalism, photographers began to concentrate on specific subjects and neighborhoods. Neff's project is unique in several ways. First, he largely avoids sensational imagery of overwhelming destruction that is still evident in 70 percent of the city. He also avoids the intrusive images of residences and artifacts of those who fled and have been unable to return home. As he chooses to capture his subjects in conventional black and white, we may understand Neff's project as working between the history of portraiture, reportage, and documentary photography. Working with a view camera slows the flow of images and demands a greater interaction between photographer and subject. This traditional approach stands in sharp contrast to the real-time immediacy of digital reportage and also invites the viewer to contemplate

the larger context of circumstances surrounding the photograph. Neff's Katrina portraits capture his subjects in the places or the conditions in which he first met them. The resulting images are not pulled from the flow of daily life but are the result of a thoughtful dialogue between the photographer and his sitters.

Thomas Neff brings a lifetime of experience as a photographer to this body of work. A native of Riverside, California, Neff studied at the University of California at Riverside and the University of Colorado at Boulder. While working on his master's thesis, he became interested in a local story of the demise of the family-owned ranch in the Southwest. His thesis project concentrated on the varied stories of those farmers and ranchers who were trying to stem the tide of the wholesale industrialization of privately owned operations. His approach was simple, clear, and effective. "I listened, I became a friend, I got involved, and I would go back to the same people and places over time, resulting in multiple print sequences and narratives." Neff would retool this approach in the fall of 2005 and over a period of five months produce approximately two hundred portraits of New Orleanians who had stayed in the city during, and in the majority of cases after, the storm.

The portraits chosen for this publication represent a cross section of the larger body of work that captures a range of New

Orleanians from diverse social, racial, and geographical backgrounds. From the homeless to the wealthy uptowners, Neff's subjects not only reveal their own stories, but also suggest thousands of others that will never be documented and presented to a wider audience. Even a photograph without written text may be read as a narrative through the evocative representation of an individual within the context of his or her shattered world.

Neff's exhibition "Come Hell and High Water" opened at the Ogden Museum in April 2006. Although a few of his subjects had died in the intervening months, many held court by their photographs on the opening night, and others visited during the following months. For most viewers this work struck a distinctly personal chord. Many people saw either their own experience or the experience of people they knew mirrored in the photographs. For the audience outside New Orleans, these photographs are both documents of individual experience and markers of the perseverance of the human spirit in the face of tragedy. For me, they represent a body of work created in that rare moment when art intersects life and illuminates both. It will help us remember.

David Houston

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