

Signs cast Pahokee to same winds as New Orleans

By Emily J. Minor

Palm Beach Post Columnist

Thursday, May 04, 2006

PAHOKEE — When you've lived along Lake Okeechobee this long, you know things. Things the rest of us do not.

You recognize the rumble of the trucks at 2 a.m., carting in boulders to shore up the dike. "They always do it at night," says Carol Peaden.

You know about the little orange flags — the ones she thinks government officials punched into the ground, like cable TV guys, to signal a weak spot in the shore.

And you know that, when the storm actually comes, as Wilma did last fall, you leave the yard dog behind and get your behind to your mother's in St. Cloud.

"I don't stay here," Peaden says. "Not anymore."

Peaden has lived on the same quiet spot in Pahokee since 1971 and has operated Carol's Hair Barn from this piece of lakefront land since 1985. After the sudden death of her husband that year, she raised the four kids alone, allowing them to climb the grassy berm and swim in the lake on many days after school.

"You know what we've done," she says. "We've messed with Mother Nature."

Carol Peaden did not need the state to hire a panel of experts to tell her that the Herbert Hoover Dike around Lake Okeechobee — the very man-made contraption that's pretty much in her yard — has a "50-50" chance of failing during the next four years. Peaden pays attention.

"This could be another New Orleans," she says.

The governor's office is in a tizzy over the study, released this week, which South Florida water managers arranged after the debacle of Hurricane Katrina to examine the safety of the dike.

Gov. Jeb Bush said the only way to assure safety is to implement a mandatory evacuation plan for the Glades, but just how that would or could be done on such short notice — hurricane season starts in less than a month — is incredibly unclear.

When has the state ever done anything in less than 30 days?

So people like Peaden, who know the ins and outs of this quirky place, quickly reflect on reality.

You have to rely on yourself.

"People are going to have to use their common sense," she says. "This town needs to be evacuated."

At the restaurant a few miles down the road, a funky place that Ann O'Connell Rust opened several years ago, there is always talk.

"We are strange people," says Rust, who grew up here, left and returned much later in life. "There's not a person who grew up here who doesn't have an opinion about something."

The dike, of course, is among them.

"I've heard these tales all my life," she says, talking about the flooding after the big hurricanes in the '20s and then again in 1949.

Does she think the dike will break?

"How in the heck do I know?" she says.

But she does know this: the house they live in right now, the one that's been in the family for generations? She probably would feel so unsafe waiting out a storm in this town that she'd leave that precious house, leave it right behind.

"I really don't know if I could stay," she says, sitting and rocking outside her downtown Pahokee restaurant, Mister Jellyroll's.

Some days, life is full of serendipity, and that's why I'm glad I drove right past Carol's Hair Barn Wednesday, thought better of it, then turned around and went back.

Peaden's smart.

One of the guys at the local Army Corps of Engineers office, she cuts his hair.

"Every time he comes in, I have more questions." She can give you a lesson on water flow and shore stability and she knows about the dike that broke in Indiantown and the construction project going on in Port Mayaca.

She knows Pahokee's on the low end of the lake. She knows the lake level.

And she knows how the front bay window of her shop got a crack years ago, and it wasn't the kids. It was the constant jarring impact of those trucks rumbling by at night, carrying all that rock to shore up the shore, she says.

You and I — and apparently others with fancier titles — were in our own worlds about all this, fretting about New Orleans, wondering about our homes this summer, surprised as heck at this latest blare of ominous news. But Carol Peaden has never been nonchalant about that dike.

"People say, 'Oh, Carol. You're safe. You live on the dike.' But that doesn't make me feel any better. That dike's a killer."