

## Floods Drown ‘High Ground’ in Uncertain, Texas

by Jim Gary

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The towering old cypress trees, dripping with Spanish moss and umber water, create an almost primordial backdrop for Uncertain, Texas, a place where time seems to operate differently. Coming to Uncertain feels like walking decades into the past, but stay here very long, and you’ll ask yourself how the days slipped away so fast.

Time has always been a friend to those who live on the west side of Caddo Lake, but in March of 2016, time became their enemy.



**Photo: Jim Gary**

The small, close-knit community — with one road in and the same road out — is accustomed to dealing with flood water. Growing up here, flooding was at minimum an annual event. Local residents know which roads not to take, where to find high ground and how to “live off the grid” for a few days.

But the recent flood that struck Caddo Lake broke all the rules. Within hours many roads became impassable, stranding residents and their vehicles. People went to bed at night and woke to completely flooded yards. One resident told me she had to weigh down her trailer with concrete blocks to keep it from floating away as her family frantically tried to get their belongings out. For many, the high ground just wasn’t high enough.

In a matter of days, flood water reached the level at which it usually crests — between 173 to 176 feet — when the forecast called for even more water, some rain but mainly run-off from other areas. During the worst of it, the water rose close to a near-record 180 feet.

I grabbed a kayak and went to check on my family's properties. As I was making my rounds, I witnessed an elderly couple in a flat-bottomed boat paddling away from their home, their craft stacked high with trash bags full of belongings and ice chests overflowing with the contents of an emptied freezer. That's when it hit me: This one is different.

Some may ask, "Why go back to the swamp?" Because it's part of who they are and what they love. The image was so striking. It told a sad yet beautiful story of the resilience of these people, my friends and family members. It made me realize that most outsiders will never get to see what is happening in these areas cut off from vehicle and motor boat traffic. I wanted to use my camera to tell people's stories in a way only images can. Over the course of five days when the flood water rose up to eight feet, I managed to shoot hundreds of photos of the Caddo Lake area and its residents, documenting the progress of arguably the most destructive flood ever to strike here.

The images depict homes under water, many full of memories passed down through generations. I watched the threshold of a home, which has been in our family for almost 70 years and survived countless floods, finally breached by water.

Some may ask, "Why go back to the swamp?" Because it's part of who they are and what they love. Like Thoreau, Caddo Lake people go there to live deliberately in one of the wildest and richest gardens we have. For many of them, Thoreau's sentiment would resonate: "Though you may think me perverse," he wrote, "if it were proposed to me to dwell in the neighborhood of the most beautiful garden that ever human art contrived, or else of a Dismal Swamp, I should certainly decide for the swamp." The people of Uncertain are tough and independent. They will recover and rebuild.

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Jim Gary is a former technology instructor and, thanks to his lovely wife Monni, is currently a stay-at-home father of 4-year-old Zoe and 2-year-old Ben.

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