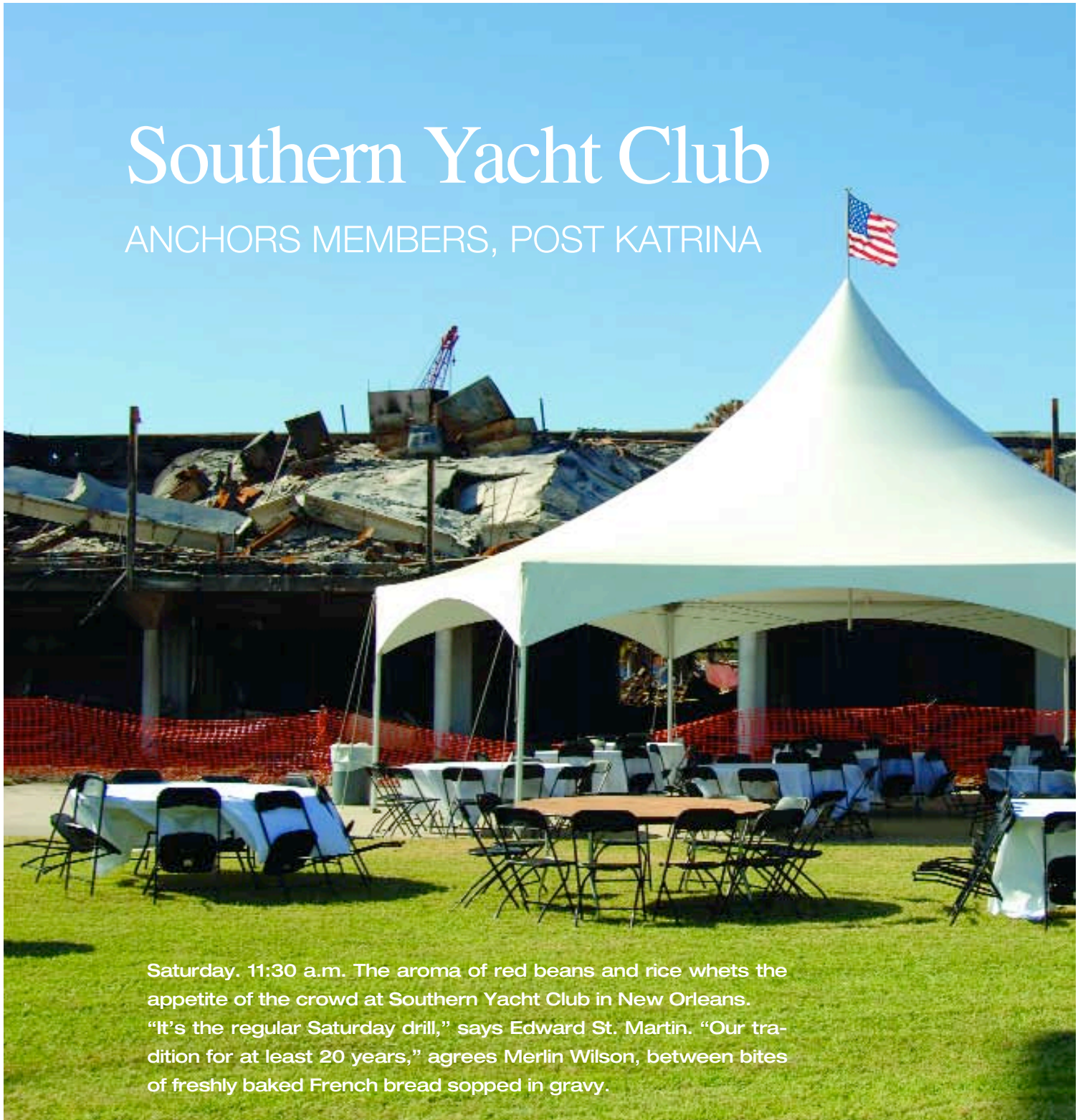


# Southern Yacht Club

ANCHORS MEMBERS, POST KATRINA



Saturday. 11:30 a.m. The aroma of red beans and rice whets the appetite of the crowd at Southern Yacht Club in New Orleans. "It's the regular Saturday drill," says Edward St. Martin. "Our tradition for at least 20 years," agrees Merlin Wilson, between bites of freshly baked French bread sopped in gravy.

**T**raditions are ritualistic activities. They're the ties that bind. For the members of Southern Yacht Club (SYC), the tradition of eating red beans and rice each Saturday provides stability when everything else around them

has changed.

SYC is located in Lakeview where most of its members lived before Hurricane Katrina's biblical flood. When the

*By LISA HOOGERWERF KNAPP*

17th Street Canal breached, about 100 residents and countless pets died in Lakeview. The flood ravaged the entire 70124 zip code area, an affluent neighborhood on the shores of Lake Pontchartrain.

**Volunteers organized closing day regatta festivities just two months after Hurricane Katrina.**



PHOTOS BY BOB MAHER

Biased Spike Lee films don't mention Lakeview, but it definitely was one of the hardest hit areas in New Orleans. Today, the greater Lakeview area is a ghost town of wrecked, abandoned homes stained with waterlines 8' high. Its

streets are dotted with bulldozed lots, gutted houses, for-sale signs, and FEMA trailers. Nothing looks the same, especially at night, when the lack of porch lights leaves its big boulevards pitch black. It's downright spooky.

But the Christmas lights at Southern Yacht Club were a beacon luring members through Lakeview's darkness a few months ago. The fact that SYC is still a thriving racing club and social hub after the worst natural disaster in American history is nothing short of phenomenal.

After SYC flooded on August 29, 2005, a ruptured gas line exploded and the club became a blazing inferno. While the remnants were demolished in December 2005, the heart of the club – its membership – remains in tact. Only a building and some sailboats were destroyed.

SYC, founded in 1849, is very much alive and kicking. The nation's second oldest yacht club is still an anchor for members who endure a daily living nightmare where their favorite restaurants, grocery stores, businesses, and schools remain closed.

"You don't get used to it (the destruction) even if you drive through it every day," says Susan Weaver, office manager at Sintes Boatworks and Sea Chest Marine Store. Their stores reopened in January 2006, after a lot of crawling.

"People call every day saying, 'I think I'm going to buy this,'" Weaver says. "Business is picking up."

If you look north on Lake Pontchartrain toward Mandeville, instead of south toward Lakeview, you'd swear nothing has changed. Sailors are still floating and boating. 400 members and 50 boats participated in SYC's annual closing regatta on October 21, 2005. They partied in front of the torched club as they salvaged its historic Ondine Cup, a souvenir of the club's first race two centuries ago. SYC lost its coveted trophy room, but

amazingly, it only lost 40 of its members. SYC is still 1,700 strong, and its members are closer than ever before.

"We're all in the same boat and SYC is a refuge," says Dr. Bill Swanson, one of St. Martin's buddies. "You come here and everything seems normal."

Swanson, a sociologist from Lakeview, eats lunch at SYC daily. His boat was lost and he lives in a FEMA trailer next to his once beautiful home, which is under restoration. Part of Swanson's job

not going on," Swanson says. "It was just a question of how quickly we could regroup and get things back together."

At the time of the flood and fire, Corky Potts, an attorney, was commodore. Potts lost his law office, his home, and his sailboat. But he never lost his spirit. Corky put his own elbow grease into the clean-up, wrestled with the insurance company, and reopened the temporary facility in April 2005.

SYC will break ground on a new \$7

pated in the Optimist mid-winter nationals, PHRF class series, Race to the Coast, Ladies Pink Ribbon Regatta, and Sugar Bowl Collegiate Regatta. There were fewer boats, but enough to hold a race. Ironically, the lake water that ruined everyone's homes still nourishes their souls.

SYC's renowned races still rock challenging Lake Pontchartrain. The club has produced more Olympic medalists than any other yachting organization. John



*Top left: The crew of "Lunami" relax after racing on their 40' Beneteau.*

*Top: "2nd Cup 2nd Line" won the powerboat division in SYC's opening day boat parade in April 2006.*

*Left: The opening day regatta ceremony was the inaugural event to kick off SYC's temporary facility in April 2006.*

is helping people adjust to difficult changes. So he knows, firsthand, that the support system of the yacht club makes its members feel better.

"People who belong to a group like a church, bowling league, or yacht club all handle stress and cope better," he says.

"The existence of this club helps our mental health. I leave the lunch feeling better and it's cheaper than psychiatry.

"The sailing members really love the club and there was never a question of

million facility later this year. A temporary modular building currently houses the bar and restaurant. New Orleans gourmet fare is the menu: turtle soup, gumbo, fried oyster poboys, jumbo shrimp cocktails, muffalettas, and filets with Béarnaise sauce for landlubbers.

Members turned out in record numbers for SYC's annual meeting in December 2005. The club held its raucous Bards of the Bilge party during Mardi Gras. As usual, members partici-

Dane and Austin Sperry will represent Team USA in the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. They are currently ranked 13th in the world and uphold yet another SYC tradition that Katrina couldn't kill.

"2006 was an active year," says Bob Maher, SYC member and club photographer. "Although the building was destroyed and parts of the club near the city were destroyed, we still have most everyone together."

Sticking together during a crisis is rule

number one in a marine emergency. Fellow yachtsmen across the country have stepped up to the plate to help SYC when it mattered most. The New York Yacht Club (NYYC) staff organized a \$32,000 donation to aid affected SYC staff. This generous donation was achieved by foregoing their annual Christmas parties in 2005.

Members of reciprocating yacht clubs are encouraged to visit SYC for dockage and a hot meal while getting gas, diesel,

stone's throw from SYC.

However, cruisers enroute to New Orleans from Texas should get current maps and exercise caution when crossing the Gulf of Mexico.

"Several oil platforms were decapitated by Hurricane Rita," says Joe Farrell, president of Resolve Marine Group, a marine salvage and damage control company. "Just because you don't see the rig on the surface doesn't mean it's not there," he says. "The weather carried

it will take about 35 days to remove 109 derelict vessels. Hard hat divers will walk the bottom of the Municipal Yacht Harbor, foot by foot, to clear all debris. A side scan bottom profiling sonar will complement their efforts.

Corky's volunteer brigade worked with commercial crews to make SYC's marina safe and navigable for everyone to enjoy over a year ago. The marine community on the west end of New Orleans' lakefront looks forward to the municipal



*Top left and left: SYC members clear debris and navigational hazards to clean the harbor in August 2006, a year after the hurricane.*

*Top: Members enjoy some quality relaxation time during a "grill your own" picnic.*

and ice at Schubert's Marine. N'awlins is open...and all you'll are welcome.

When you cruise to SYC, rest assured that it's a safe place to run your boat. The sailing yacht *Fair Jeanne* enjoyed SYC's hospitality in December. This tall sailing ship, 81', tied up at SYC's junior dock during the fifth leg of her silver jubilee voyage down the Mississippi River. Also, *Lady Grace Marie*, Tom Benson's big Burger, is back home at its private dock on West Lakeshore Drive, a

buoys away, but they might still be there. Use a wide berth wherever a rig was labeled on the chart."

Resolve was part of the team that worked on Louisiana's channels and Intracoastal waterways to make them navigable during 2006.

"The channels are in pretty darn good shape," Farrell says. Resolve recently won the contract to clean up the Municipal Yacht Harbor in New Orleans, SYC's neighbor. Once the project commences,

club's clean-up as Lakeview recovers and rebuilds. The people of Lakeview are determined to get their lives back, one day at a time.

As for Southern Yacht Club, it doesn't have to come back...it never left.

"We're still here, with all our friends," St. Martin says, as he and Wilson belly up to the buffet for a second helping of red beans and rice.

"The Corinthian spirit is stronger than any hurricane." 