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Tohoku Travelogue

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Photo 1. Water level higher than land

Hurricane Katrina tour in New Orleans

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Hurricane Katrina Tour

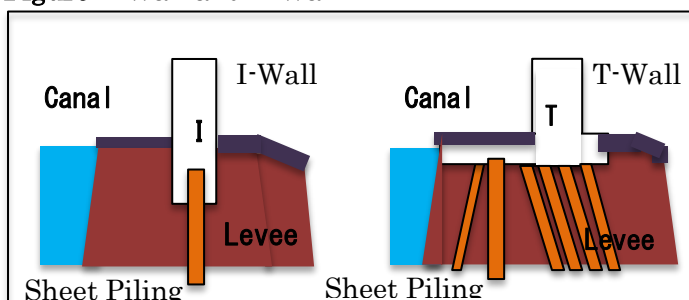
"There are two types of levees (**Figure**). The I-Wall type has a wall and sheet piling in the shape of the letter 'I'. The T-Wall type has a wall in the shape of a 'T' and bars that support the wall. The T-Walls are stronger, but many I-Walls were used in this city. The reason is ...money." Daniel, our tour guide, told us sadly.

He said he studied history and education in a university. With his background I thought he learned this information during the recovery or reconstruction process of the city. At the same time I remembered how little I had known about disasters before the earthquake and tsunami in 2011 in Japan, when I myself became one of the tsunami victims.

The explanation made by Daniel in the bus was a part of the "Disaster Katrina tour" (Gray Line) that was conducted on January 6, 2018. Rain and wind of Hurricane Katrina brought big damage to the city of New Orleans in August 29, 2005. 1,836 people died in the storm. It changed the lives of many survivors as well. I thought Daniel, who has been brought up in this city, might not have become a tour guide if there had not been the disaster.

The twelve participants of the tour quietly and carefully listened to his explanations. When Daniel explained how heavy it rained in inches, a participant asked him how much it was in centimeters. I thought he was from outside of the United States. The phenomena that many foreign people visit the area after the big disaster was what happened and is possibly what is happening in Tohoku, too.

Figure: I-Wall and T-Wall



Source: Elaboration based on the leaflet of Gray Line

The tour bus visited the New Basin Canal Lighthouse on the shore of Lake Pontchartrain that was devastated by the hurricane and reconstructed in 2013 as a small museum and souvenir shop. We could learn more through the guide there.

From the bus window we watched pumping houses and homes that were heavily damaged by flooding after the levees were broken. Now the levees were reconstructed, but we could tell the surface of water in the canal was higher than the land at Levee Break Memorial Garden (Photo 1).

As the last part of the tour of 3.5 hours we visited "Morning Call" café in City Park where we had typical sweet beignets with a lot of white sugar on top and café-au-lait.

My stay in Virginia

Besides my short trip to New Orleans, I have principally stayed in Ashland, Virginia since August 2017. I live on the campus of the Randolph-Macon College (<http://www.rmc.edu>).

My stay in Virginia was an unexpected one. This was caused by the earthquake and tsunami that struck Tohoku in March 11, 2011. In the disaster an American woman, twenty-four year old Ms. Taylor Anderson passed away. Randolph-Macon College was her alma mater. After graduating from the college, she became an English teacher of JET (The Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme) and was in Ishinomaki city. On the day of the earthquake, she helped evacuations of students and after that she was killed by the tsunami.

After the disaster some teachers and students of Randolph-Macon College began to visit Ishinomaki city (sponsored by Taylor Anderson Memorial Fund and TOMODACHI). Teachers of Ishinomaki Senshu University, including myself, gave them information on the disaster and reconstruction process. During the visits professor Dr. Lauren Bell asked if anyone would like to volunteer to give lectures at Randolph-Macon College as a Fulbright scholar. I applied for the position and fortunately was accepted.

On the Randolph-Macon College campus there is an open air memorial bench with Ms. Taylor's name plate (Photo 2). In my Randolph-Macon classroom I showed students pictures of the disaster area of Tohoku and told them what happened and what we learned after the disaster. Explaining the disaster is the one of main reasons I am here.

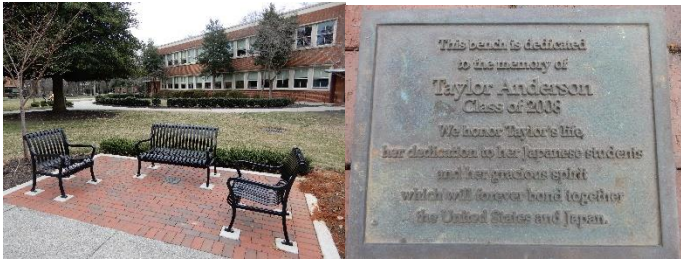


Photo 2. Bench for Ms. Taylor Anderson

Commonalities of two disasters

As hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and tsunami in Tohoku were principally caused by water, there were commonalities in the forms of the disaster and in the challenges of reconstruction. When I looked at the picture of New Orleans taken from the sky after Katrina, which shows most (80%) of the city was flooded, I couldn't help remembering the Ishinomaki city after the tsunami.

In the disaster tour Daniel told us what had happened in New Orleans. Alarmed by the big hurricane, many people tried to escape by cars and this caused traffic jams. Many cars became trash. Boats were washed up on the ground and into buildings. The evacuation spot of last resort, Louisiana Superdome, was so full of evacuees and so uncomfortable that mass media published exaggerated stories of homicides and robberies. One person, who became desperate, killed himself. People criticized the slow reaction of FEMA(Federal Emergency Management Agency) and praised the rescue activity of the coast guards. The difference in the land height was a crucial factor that decided the degree of damage. Insurance was a key to finance reconstruction.

Other facts I knew were also similar to Ishinomaki city. Big bridge on the lake was broken. As levees were destroyed, the low land of the city was flooded, but the famous downtown area the French Quarter survived, because of its high elevation. Among the dead a high percentage was aged. Most reconstructed houses in the flooded area have been rebuilt with elevated ground floors now. Reconstructions are still going on, but many people left the city.

Many volunteers gathered in New Orleans. Randolph-Macon College also organized a team to support recovery in New Orleans as a part of several courses. Three teachers and 24 students rode on the bus to New Orleans. It took 18 hours to get there. They helped cleaning houses there.

Debris, boats on the ground, blue tarps, shelters, frustration of victims, the fact that small differences of terrain made big differences in damages, population decrease, volunteers...these aspects reminded me of the case of Ishinomaki city.

Mardi Gras

The Presbytère, Louisiana State Museum, in front of the Jackson square in New Orleans had an exhibition titled "Living with Hurricanes: Katrina and Beyond". On the next day of the tour I visited

JITR(Japan Institute of Tourism Research)-Tohoku there to learn more about Katrina.

At the entrance there was a display of a broken piano and a costume worn during Mardi Gras (Photo 3). I understood these were symbols of the reconstruction and culture the citizens are proud of. New Orleans is well known for Jazz and fusion of cultures.

On the first floor there are technological explanations of the disaster. A video showed us the mechanism of destruction of the levees. Several patterns in a screen were set to show how the flood waters broke them. I understood levees can be breached even when they look like hills, if the inside structure allows the penetration of water under it.

These exhibitions also reminded me of the fact we studied a lot about the tsunami after 2011 in Ishinomaki city. Very few people knew even the now famous saying "tsunami tendenko" (In case of a tsunami escape by yourself, since there is no time to help others.) before the disaster. We didn't care about breakwaters in Ishinomaki city.

On the second floor there were exhibitions on Mardi Gras: masks, costumes, floats and throws that were used in the parade. In the reconstruction process people needed this famous cultural event as an expression of their spirit. Having this will strengthen the citizen's will to reconstruct the city. This was a part of "resilience" of the city that pushes back the disaster.

Looking at exhibitions of Mardi Gras reminded me of "Kawabiraki Matsuri" Opening River festival in Ishinomaki city. In the summer of 2011 five months after the disaster we held the festival. I think that was the spirit of citizens of Ishinomaki city. I remember some people were sobbing along the Kitakami River, looking at lanterns on the float going away. I guessed they were families of the dead. In the same way I imagined many people in New Orleans shed tears, looking at Mardi Gras parade in 2006.

I wish reconstruction and development of two cities go well.

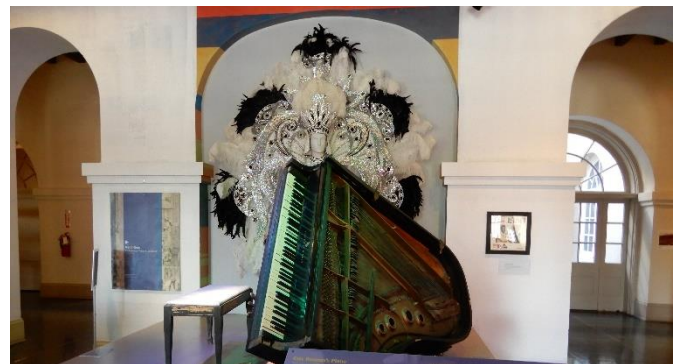


Photo 3. Broken piano and Mardi Gras costume

<Annotation> I offer my condolences to the families and the friends of the victims of Hurricane Katrina and the Great East Japan Earthquake, especially those of Ms. Taylor Anderson. I greatly appreciate the Fulbright program, Randolph-Macon College and Ishinomaki Senshu University for supporting my stay in the USA.