The national media turned the spotlight on Biloxi in mid-September, days before Hurricane Ivan turned its devastation eastward. Here, in a story published as part of its cover story package on the storm, USA Today told the story of Biloxi, its people and the success we're continuing to enjoy.

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2002 photo by John Fitzhugh, *The* (South Mississippi) *Sun Herald*, via AP

Vibrant economy: Legalized in 1992, casinos such as these in Biloxi, Miss., have helped turn the city into a tourist haven. The city's population also has soared.

Flattened in '69, Biloxi again at risk

Bustling city on Mississippi's coast, rebuilt after Hurricane Camille, has much to lose

By Larry Copeland
and Haya El Nasser
USA TODAY

BILOXI, Miss. – Residents here gather every Aug. 17 to remember Hurricane Camille, one of the deadliest storms in U.S. history. They gather at the Hurricane Camille Memorial to read the names of 172 people dead or missing after the 1969 storm ripped the city apart and leveled 26 miles of the Mississippi coastline.

This week, as Hurricane Ivan looms in the Gulf of Mexico, residents don't need an anniversary to remember Camille.

"We're scared to death," said Mayor A.J. Holloway, 65. "Anybody that went through Camille, that's all we're thinking about now."

If Ivan brings its own path of destruction when it comes ashore tonight or tomorrow, Biloxi stands to lose much more than it did in 1969.

Since Mississippi legalized gambling in 1992, the Biloxi area has blossomed into the gambling capital of the South. About $3 billion in new development has poured in over the past decade.

Nine floating casinos have replaced the old shrimp boats on the city's waterfront that was ravaged by Camille. The number of hotel rooms more than quadrupled to 18,000. Visitors flocking here for deep-sea fishing, gambling and the historic charms of the first French settlement in the Mississippi Valley soared from 1 million to 12 million a year. More than $50 million was invested in new schools.

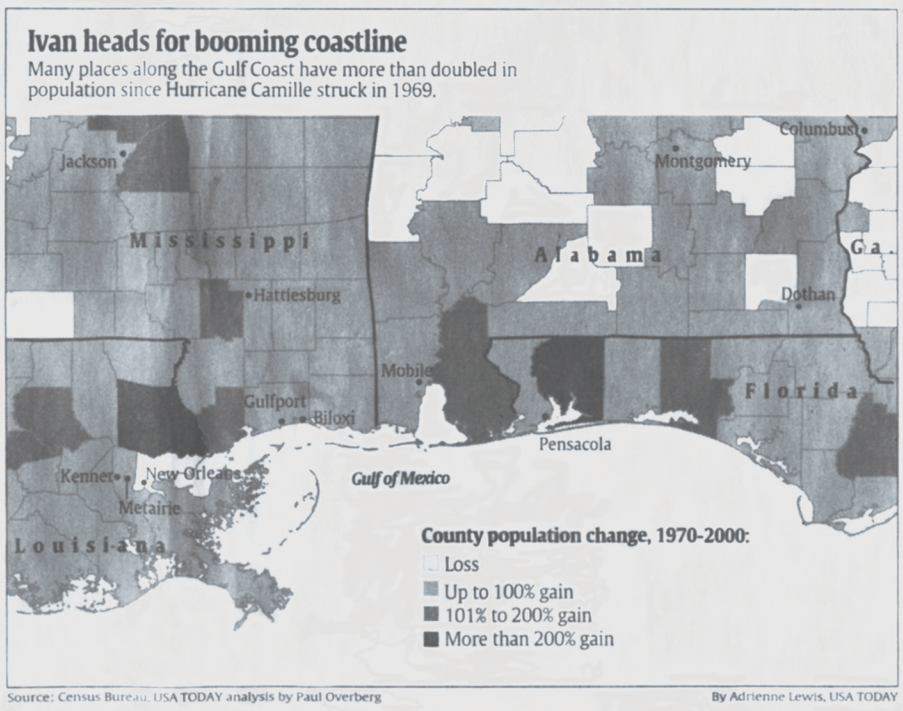
Since 1970, the population of the Biloxi-Gulfport-Pascagoula metropolitan area has more than doubled to 368,000 today. It has risen 20% since 1990.

"Gaming is the engine driving our economy," says Vincent Creel, a Biloxi native and city spokesman. "It used to be that when Mom and Dad sent their kids to college, they knew they wouldn't be coming back because they didn't have opportunities here."

The gambling and tourism boom has created service and management jobs. Taxes from gaming make up more than a third of the annual city budget of $120 million. Sales tax accounts for another 20%.

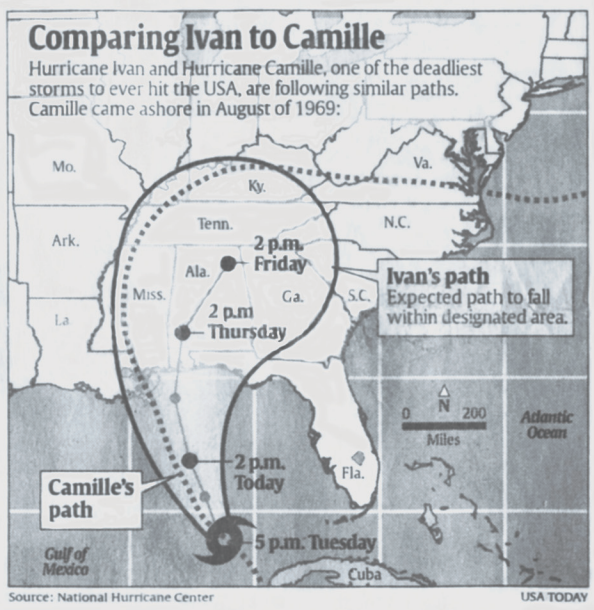
"That's why today we know we have so much more to lose," Creel said. "We have not had anything of this magnitude threaten our city since we've had all this growth. It's going to be a real test of the mooring systems of these casinos."

The casinos are designed to withstand 155-mph winds and a 15-foot tidal surge, he said. They were ordered to close at noon Tuesday, and all marine vessels were being evacuated from about 500 slips in Biloxi Peninsula. Harrison County authorities ordered a mandatory evacuation of all areas south of Interstate 10.



Source: Census Bureau, USA TODAY analysis by Paul Overberg

By Adrienne Lewis, USA TODAY



Source: National Hurricane Center

USA TODAY

"That's a very low area," said Holloway. "During Camille, it was covered in water. We need them to get out of there."

Everybody is remembering Camille's 190-mph winds. The storm is legendary. It was one of just three Category 5 hurricanes ever to strike the continental USA. After it swept through Mississippi, 131 people were dead and 41 missing. It then moved inland to Tennessee, Kentucky, West Virginia and Virginia. In total, more than 250 died.

Camille left "vacant lots, slabs, steps and driveways leading to nowhere," according to *Hurricane Camille: Monster Storm of the Gulf Coast*, a 2004 book by Philip D. Hearn, a research writer at Mississippi State University and former reporter.

For "a five-hour period of hell and high water," Camille battered the Mississippi Gulf Coast and "destroyed 100 years of growth and progress," Hearn wrote.

According to the book, which draws heavily on accounts from survivors, Camille produced a tidal surge of 24 feet. Nearly 9,000 were injured in Mississippi alone.

But the likelihood of another 190-mph storm is extremely unlikely. Camille is still regarded as a remarkable string of circumstances lining up just right. The storm gathered nearly 80 mph in speed in the final day as it approached the coast. Ivan was clocked at 140 mph Tuesday and is not likely to rise above 155 mph – still lethal, but falling well short of Camille's rampage.

Bobby Mahoney, owner of Mary Mahoney's Old French House Restaurant, was 23 when Camille roared ashore. He was at his mother's house near the beach. Family and friends were having a hurricane party.

"We had white caps breaking in the living room," he says. The house was 18 feet above sea level, but the surge was so violent that water rose 8 to 10 feet in the house. Mahoney and everyone climbed to the attic. But the house survived because it had a poured concrete basement.

"The basement filled up with water and stabilized the house," he says.

Mahoney and his family are not evacuating for Ivan. They closed the restaurant, the 24-hour cafe, the pub and gift shop they run and planned to hunker down in their condo built with reinforced steel and poured concrete. It's about 150 yards from the water.

Mahoney is more worried about Ivan's aftermath. After Camille, roads were torn up, homes and churches destroyed, apartments leveled.

"People like to think you're never going to see one as strong as Camille," recalls Creel, who was 9 at the time. His parents' house was spared. His grandparents' house was destroyed.

While many in the USA consider Camille the worst storm of their lifetimes, it is far from the deadliest. On Sept. 8, 1900, the Gulf Coast of Texas was consumed by what was likely the most lethal storm to hit the mainland. Dubbed Isaac's Storm, it brought huge ocean swells that decimated Galveston and killed as many as 8,000 people.

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El Nasser reported f… McLean, Va.

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City Of BILOXI