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Lillian and John Gray exhibit photos of their sons who were lost at sea while dredging for oysters

## A TIRELESS VIGIL

Family waits, hopes for return of sons after 17 years

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On Feb. 4, 1966, three of Lillian and John Gray's sons left Biloxi aboard the *Freddie Weicks Jr.* to dredge for oysters off the Louisiana coast. They never returned.

To the Coast Guard, the disappearance of the Gray brothers and their 50-foot fishing boat remains an official mystery. Searchers never found the boys' bodies or any wreckage from the boat.

Seventeen years later, the Grays remain haunted by the disappearance, but they still hope against the odds that, somehow, their sons are alive.

"I still have nightmares," says Mrs. Gray. "One time I dreamed that my oldest boy came to me through a crowd and said, 'I can't stay, I just come to let you know we're all right.'"

"Sometimes I dream that he says 'We need some help, mom. We'd like for you to get some help for us.' And I say, 'I sure will.' Then I go all to pieces and wake up."

"It's been rough," says John Gray, who has been a part time fisherman for most of his 71 years. "This time of year is the roughest."

The Grays, who live in North Biloxi, had seven children, six of them sons.

In January 1966, their oldest son, Billy, then 27, was painting tankers in Louisiana. But February's rain and fog brought outdoor painting jobs to a halt.

So Billy, who also worked part time as a captain for Cruso Canning Co. in Biloxi, came home to "get a boat and make a few dollars while he waited," John Gray remembers.

With his brothers Belton, 23, and Barry, 16, as his crew, Billy dredged for oysters for five days 60 miles from Biloxi.

A fourth brother, Benny Gray, was working nearby aboard the *P.T. Kettering*. "Barry was supposed to be in school," John Gray says, "but if he got a chance to go out with them older boys, he'd take off school."

"All our boys was close," his wife says. "If they wasn't on a boat working, they was out playing around together, fishing, swimming, cutting up."

The boys had planned to return to Biloxi on Feb. 9. But that morning, even though the sky was overcast, Billy and his two brothers decided to stay out another day.

"Benny headed on home, anyway," Mr. Gray says. "After he left, the wind sprang up. It got so rough that Benny's boat filled about half way up with water, but they made it in."

No one worried about the boys still in the bayou. John Gray says the islands in the Breton Sound should have shielded them from the storm, and that Billy was an able captain.

"The boy knew the water," he says. "I've seen him leave here. It'd be so foggy

you couldn't see from here to the porch, and he'd go out on a fishing boat, catch a load of fish, and come back into the factory. And the fog would stay the whole trip."

But when the *John Weicks Jr.* failed to return by dark on the 10th, the Grays began to worry. That worry turned to panic.

For several days, Coast Guard planes searched a 2,685-square-mile area for the missing vessel, Coast Guard records show.

A local expedition, including John Gray and about 65 fishing boats, joined the search.

"There was nothing out there," he says. "They couldn't find a piece of lumber, or an oil can or anything. There wasn't a matchbook afloat."

A Coast Guard report, dated Oct. 7, 1966, lists the cause of the disappearance of the *Freddie Weicks Jr.* and its crew as "unknown and undeterminable."

"The best deduction is that the vessel sunk," the report continues. "It is further concluded that Billy Gray, Belton Gray and Barry Gray are missing and presumed dead."

"We never believed that," Mr. Gray says. "For years I used to leave my job

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