

THE HONORARY CAJUN FROM TREYNOR

Former mayor and retired Union Pacific executive Ken Koehler recently spoke to Club members about his experience with the Red Cross relief effort in Louisiana after hurricane Katrina. Ken said this was his 38th assignment for Red Cross national disaster relief. Disaster relief volunteers have to be ready to go on short notice. Ken got a call to travel to Louisiana the next day. Of course, Red Cross makes the travel arrangements. His first day he reported to Baton Rouge, but was sent to Covington the 2nd day and then told to report to Lacome, Louisiana where he served 22 days. Ken explained Lacome is on the northeast shore of Lake Pontchartrain with a population of about 5,000. The Red Cross had 25 to 45 living in a shelter but was feeding over 1,000 refugees and homeless each day. Ken said his normal day the first week was 4 a.m. to midnight, with no electricity, no running water, no bed, and temperatures over 90 F each day. There was one cell phone owned by a doctor in the whole shelter. After a week they received cots and bedding from Forestry Services. Then the Forestry Services also provided mobile shower and lavatories, and mobile laundry services. Ken noted that four National Guard personnel were on guard duty 24 hours each day to prevent crime and looting. Ken was very thankful for their presence. After twelve days electrical service was restored. Ken said most of the food and supplies came from the Riverton Springs Church in Riverton, KS, over 700 miles away. The church group kept asking about their needs and returned seven times with supplies. Local residents were very appreciative of Red Cross efforts and brought treats for the workers. Ken spent a great deal of time helping to unload supplies from trucks, especially bottled water. Toys and stuffed animals were donated and distributed to children and most families in the shelter had children. Clothing donations were difficult to manage, as the Red Cross does not accept these donations. Ken said that after 22 days he came to know some of the people being helped, especially a little girl for which he helped find medical assistance and an eighty-seven year old gentleman who shared his poetry each day. In appreciation for Ken's service to the people, they presented him a certificate naming him 'Honorary Cajun'