Ken Murphy’s photos reveal a hauntingly beautiful landscape. The images of his beloved homeland, published in two books, are all the more poignant because many of the places were erased on Aug. 29, 2005.

“They may be the only record of a lot of these places,” says Murphy ’86 (photo illustration). “No one had ever published a book about the coast, or about the state, on this scale.”

The first printing of Murphy’s 2001 book, My South Coast Home, sold out before Hurricane Katrina. Last year, Murphy’s second photo book, Mississippi, came out and My South Coast Home was reissued.

The photos for the two books were among the few possessions Murphy was able to save from the storm. Less than 72 hours before Katrina struck, Murphy was in Navarre, Fla., for a family party at his sister’s house. When he learned that the monster storm was taking dead aim on his part of the Gulf Coast, he sped home to Bay St. Louis, Miss., loaded what he could into his van, and drove back to Florida, where most of his large family took shelter.

He was able to save the materials for the two books because everything was crated up and ready to ship to the printer. But all of his other photos – more than two decades of professional work – were destroyed. He grabbed a few of his cameras, but the rest of his equipment was lost. Within a few days, Murphy got a view of the devastation from a friend’s airplane. Shortly after, the family loaded up supplies and returned to what remained of their homes. Murphy, his wife, three children and several other family members set up camp near a brother-in-law’s destroyed house.

“It felt like a combat zone,” Murphy says. “Debris, stench, helicopters overhead. At one point, we had a problem with a looter trying to steal gas. It was total survival mode, just trying to get by day by day and save whatever we could.”

The family felt lucky to move into two FEMA trailers in October 2005 – never imagining that’s where they’d be living two years after the storm.

“It’s the nightmare that won’t end,”
Murphy says. But bad as things have been, he remains philosophical. “It will never get back to normal,” he says. “The old normal is gone, but at some point there will be a new normal.”

He points out that the region recovered from Hurricane Camille, a category five hurricane that struck in 1969. His photos – all taken years after that storm – are evidence of the healing power of time and perseverance.

Meanwhile, the two books have been a positive note in a pretty bleak period, and Murphy credits their existence to fate – a force that has played a major role in his life.

Murphy joined the Army at age 17 and became a tank commander. He was stationed in Mannheim, Germany, when an accident resulted in the loss of his right index finger and damage to his right thumb and middle finger. Following his convalescence, he received a new assignment to the Special Services Arts and Crafts Facility in Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., where he ultimately operated the photography section for three years.

There he developed a passion for photography and taught himself as much as he could. When he left the Army after a total of eight years, he started thinking about going to school for photography. That brought him to RIT.

After graduating in 1986, Murphy worked as a commercial photographer for a time in New Orleans, then back home in Bay St. Louis. Assignments have included work for Coast Magazine, Sierra Magazine, several books, numerous business publications and assorted advertising projects.

By 1998, he had accumulated a sizeable and eclectic collection of photos – large and medium format as well as 35 mm. The idea of a book took hold.

“I half-heartedly contacted some publishers,” he says. But ultimately he borrowed money from family members and had 8,600 copies of My South Coast Home printed in 2001. They sold out in three years.

Meanwhile, he began work on Mississippi. Since Katrina, both books have become highly prized, and Murphy continues to travel around the state for book-signing appearances. There have been numerous newspaper articles and TV appearances. Mississippi recently won an award from the Independent Book Publishers. He’s also working on Mississippi II, which he hopes to publish in three or four years.

After losing so much, Murphy feels lucky. “I always felt, as corny as it may sound, that I was on a mission,” he says. “As it turns out, that was true.”

For more information about the books, call Murphy at 228-216-0465 or e-mail him at KenMurphySouth@aol.com.

Fate, in fact, launched his career in photography.

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