

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

**W**HEN three tropical storms were reported rushing about the Atlantic ocean on September 15, 1926, the new Miami and boom-populated south Florida gave the news scant thought. Most of the population had never experienced a hurricane.

The summer had been comparatively quiet in Miami, although more than \$21,000,000 in new building had started since January 1. Twenty new school buildings had gone up, and the contract for the \$1,000,000 senior high school was ready to be let. A new plant costing \$1,000,000 was being rushed to completion for the Southern Baking Company, successors to John Seybold in Miami. The highway Construction Company of Ohio was engaged in laying \$2,000,000 worth of paved streets for Miami.

S. A. Ryan Motor Company was finishing its magnificent \$1,500,000 automobile show room on the Miami river, while near-by the four-story addition to the Florida East Coast railroad freight warehouse was being filled. Across the tracks from the freight depot was the new Wolf Construction Company warehouse, 8 stories high.

Although the number of real estate transactions in all subdivisions had steadily decreased since March, Coral Gables and George E. Merrick still carried on a vigorous sales campaign. They had sent out 20,000 invitations to property owners to come back in the fall for a look at what had been done in Coral Gables. Bids for paving the new Biscayne boulevard from Thirteenth street to Thirty-ninth were being opened in September, while on the western side of Miami the state road department was completing the Tamiami Trail. Two dredges had been moved in by the Arundel Corporation to begin work on Miami's new channel and harbor.

As September opened, everyone in south Florida was hopeful that the new tourist season would bring back something like another boom on a reduced scale. The people cheered at the opening of the first air mail service to Atlanta when the Miss Miami left on its maiden mail flight September 14. Much of the local conversation centered on the "First Battle of the Century" in Philadelphia, from which the popular Gene Tunney was to emerge the world's heavyweight boxing champion in a decision over Jack Dempsey.

Miamians suddenly realized on the morning of September 17 that trouble was ahead when a hurricane reported blowing 100 miles an hour was said to be pointing straight at the Florida coast from Turks island, north of Haiti. Owners of vessels in the harbor made their craft fast, while some moved into the Miami river. Only the old-timers who remembered the storm of 1910 and the heritage of hurricanes in the preceding century holed up and prepared for the worst. Even the gale which blew over Miami Friday the seventeenth brought on no special preparations to meet what followed.

By Friday night the hurricane was over Nassau and rushing toward Miami. It moved in on the Florida coast soon after midnight and by 6 o'clock Saturday morning the wind was shredding the East Coast of Florida from Stuart to the keys at an estimated 125 miles an hour at Miami Beach and 120 miles an hour on the mainland at Miami. One could only estimate it, as all weather instruments except those in protected places were destroyed.

Following the lull at 8 o'clock in the morning when hundreds came out into the peaceful summer morning, the wind suddenly picked up from the south and soon was blowing almost as hard from the opposite direction, bringing death and injuries to many who found themselves suddenly cut off from safety and menaced by lumber and strips of tin and refuse hurtling through the air with the speed of bullets.

We shall not attempt here to describe the hurricane nor the scenes of chaos and ruin which the storm left in its wake as it moved across Florida and up to Pensacola and Mobile. Better pens than this have left intimate and gripping passages to which historians can turn for the gory details.

All day Saturday the people of the lower East Coast fought for their lives against the wind. Peace from the slashing rain, the mountainous waves and the murderous wind came in the late afternoon, and the people of Miami and her sister cities began to grope their way through darkness and debris to find out what had taken place.

Communication with the outer world was cut off early Saturday, as wires went down and even the 437-foot tower of the Tropical Radio station in Hialeah, built to withstand wind of 100 miles an hour, slowly crumpled and fell. It was not until Sunday morning that a makeshift radio was set up in Hialeah, and a message relayed to the outer world through one of the near-by ships.

The nation's newspapers Sunday carried great black headlines "South Florida Wiped Out In Storm." That was all they knew, and the fame of Miami made all the more poignant the belief that this beautiful city had been flattened and destroyed. But by Sunday night the world knew that at least a few remnants of south Florida were left, and by Monday The Miami Herald printed an edition in the plant of the Palm Beach Post which carried north the first details of the storm.

Relief soon was on the way. The national guard took over the city under martial law for Sunday and Monday. The American Red Cross swung into immediate action. Food was free to those who had no money, and every hotel and apartment was opened to the homeless. Bathing suits were the uniforms of most of the people after the storm, as they picked their way about the debris-littered streets or through what was left of their homes.

James H. Gilman, as the only member of the Miami city commission in Miami at the time of the storm, was in complete charge of the immediate emergency measures, and did a heroic job of preventing panic and supplying the most urgent human needs. In

addition to his own untiring efforts, he used the personnel of the Bank of Bay Biscayne, which he headed, wherever needed.

Mr. Gilman also was director of the Red Cross work until E. B. Douglas returned from California. Committees hastily organized by the citizens to clear streets, house the homeless, provide food, and search debris for the dead or injured, found in James H. Gilman a tower of strength in that emergency.

Two hundred and fifty lost children and babies were restored to their parents at a children's bureau in the White Temple. Some, of course, had no surviving parents nor records to tell anything about them. Three hundred volunteer plumbers covered the city to stop water leaks and enable the city water system to be restored.

A special train was chartered by Joseph W. Young of Hollywood in New York, and left at midnight Sunday on a record 31-hour run, carrying Mayor E. C. Romfh, James A. Allison, John H. Levi, Frank B. Shutts, James Fowler and Mr. and Mrs. Jesse Andrews back from summer vacations to throw what resources they had into the rescue work.

Meeting with Gov. John W. Martin in Miami Tuesday morning, Mayor Romfh organized a general executive committee to take charge of reconstruction and rehabilitation for the 47,000 left homeless by the storm. This committee was composed of Frank B. Shutts as chairman, Mrs. Ruth Bryan Owen, Mayor Romfh, F. M. Hudson, Senator John W. Watson, E. B. Douglas, head of the local chapter of the American Red Cross, and Ross A. Reeder, chairman of the general relief committee. The Red Cross handled immediate relief cases. C. H. Reeder was in charge of food relief stations which dotted this area.

As the executive committee swung into supreme control of the Miami rehabilitation, Miami Beach began to dig out from under the deep layer of sand overlying streets and even hotel lobbies, with a "dictator" in charge of each of 16 districts, and John B. Reid directing the program. National guardsmen remained in the lower East Coast under command of Col. Vivian B. Collins for nearly two weeks, but there was no martial law after Monday the twentieth.

The wildest disorder prevailed along the water front, where boats of every description had been picked up and hurled inland, to rest grotesquely on aristocratic Point View lawns, to fill S. Bayshore drive in Silver Bluff, dot the new Bayfront park and nestle up against bayfront hotels. Ninety vessels were sunk or damaged in the Miami river, and 49 in the bay were sunk or battered around. The two dredges starting work on the ship channel sank. The schooner Rose Mahoney was driven up on the bayfront and remained there for a long time. The Baltimore and Carolina Line warehouses were completely destroyed, and the others were pretty well ruined.

In Miami, 2,000 homes were destroyed and 3,000 damaged, principally from roofs blowing off and windows blowing in. The haste of boom construction exacted a frightful toll. Even worse were conditions at Fort Lauderdale where 1,200 houses were blown

down and 3,600 damaged. In Hollywood where the front was blown out of at least one hotel, 1,000 houses were gone, and 2,000 were damaged. So it went, in lesser degree, beyond Stuart, and far down on the keys.

The little town of Moore Haven on the western shore of Lake Okeechobee was almost demolished, and national guardsmen evacuated the entire community to Sebring.

Altogether, 113 known dead were recovered after the storm, while 854 were received in hospitals and countless others licked their own wounds. It was the greatest catastrophe in the history of the United States since the fire and earthquake in San Francisco. The entire world, from presidents and kings on down, seemed moved by the story. Donations totaling more than \$3,000,000 were given the American Red Cross for Florida relief, and nearly \$250,000 was sent directly into Miami in response to an appeal from the executive committee.

In addition to the general nation-wide response, William R. Hearst's Chicago Herald-Examiner sent a special train to Miami Thursday after the storm, with 100 doctors, nurses and engineers, and equipment which included four chlorine water treating units. Also, Hearst gave the first \$10,000 received by the executive committee. The members of the special train were scattered from Homestead to Fort Lauderdale and worked night and day for more than a week.

Every available state agency was pulled into southeast Florida by Governor Martin to assist the national guard in aiding the people. The gunboat Cuba arrived from Havana with a detail of doctors, the gift of President Machado.

The wind and water had pushed the street car tracks from the center of the county causeway to the outer edge and knocked down the poles, so it was necessary to route all traffic to Miami Beach over the Venetian causeway. Sheriff Henry R. Chase and the Miami Beach police detailed armed men to watch beside a "censor" who kept undesirable characters from getting to Miami Beach during its period of recovery.

Coral Gables was damaged least of all the cities. In Hialeah and in the outskirts of Miami where flimsy frame houses and piles of junk and trash were hurled about by the terrific wind, the destruction was beyond all description. Damage to plate glass windows, left unprotected, resulted in most of the downtown buildings being drenched with water. The Meyer-Kiser building was condemned as unsafe and later was torn down to its present height.

Within a week, Mayor Romfh sent a long statement to the press of the nation declaring Miami was almost back to normal, and at the end of 10 days the national guard was demobilized, and the citizens' committee restored the full reins of recovery to the regular city and county government.

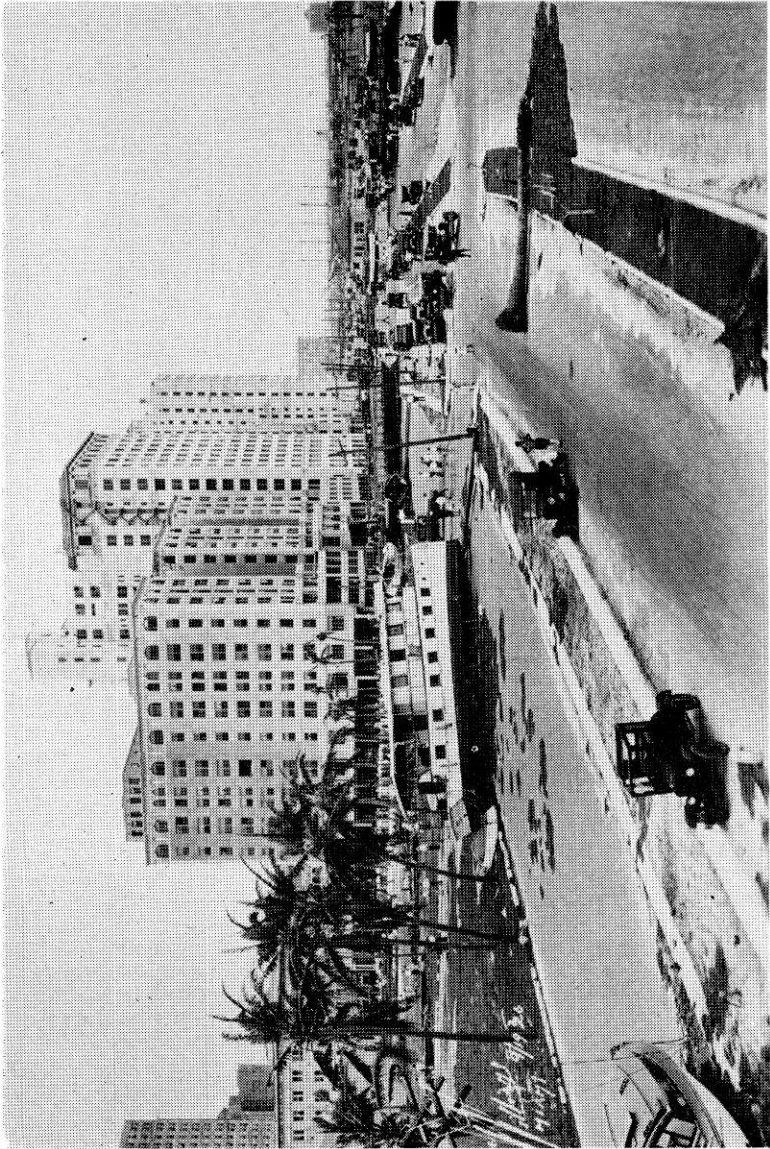
Mayor Romfh declared Miami was almost recovered. But she had not and the following tourist season was one of the poorest in years. All the shoddy work of the boom stood out for the world

to see, and for years there were grim reminders all about to make investors think twice before they bought in Florida.

Building loss in the Miami area was estimated at \$20,000,000, although only \$5,000,000 in building permits were issued later by Miami specifically for repairing storm damage. Most of the destruction took place in the jerry-built houses and little stores thrown up when labor and materials were at such a premium and the demand for housing was so urgent.

The second phase of the boom, the construction era, was ended with the hurricane. For eight long years, Miami tried to beat back, through bank failures, a world-wide depression and the choking constriction of the nation's credit. By 1933 Miami began to pull ahead of most records of the 1925 boom. Today we have achieved a new real estate movement that has not, of course, brought as much money, or quite so many people, or as much nervous prostration to the people of Florida as that other one did, but it is infinitely more satisfying.





... wrecked boats cluttered Biscayne Boulevard and Royal Palm Park following the 1926 hurricane---schooner Rose Mahoney in the distance.—Copyright, Williams.