

# Update



**HURRICANE!**

# CONTENTS DIRECTOR'S DESK

by Randy F. Nimnicht

- 2 Director's Desk  
HASF Directors
- 3 Hurricanes - I Hate Them!  
Jack Roberts
- 4 Mister Hurricane  
E. V. W. Jones
- 5 Florida Historical Society  
Picturing Our Past  
S. J. Boldrick
- 6 Hurricane Honeymoon  
Thelma Peters
- 8 The Hurricane in Florida  
Fiction  
Stuart B. McIver
- 9 The Disastrous 1928 Lake  
Okeechobee Hurricane  
Patsy West
- 10 Last Train to Key West  
Jerry Pardue



The voice of history past - that figurative phrase is the sort one often finds in Fourth of July speeches and other oratorical efforts. For HASF, the phrase also has a literal meaning. Thanks to our Oral History Program, HASF has a fine, growing collection of voices out of the past, consisting of tape recordings of individuals who helped build the South Florida community. Our Research Library currently holds 78 tapes representing interviews with 87 individuals.

Let me hasten to add that HASF is by no means the first, or only, organization in our area interested in oral history. Over the years, Dade Heritage Trust, the Miami Public Library, the Junior League of Miami, Inc., the Dade County Historical Board, Temple Israel of

*UPDATE*, its editors or the Historical Association of Southern Florida are not responsible for the statements of fact or opinion made by its contributors. We welcome documented evidence of error.

Miami, and the University of Miami, to name a few organizations, have undertaken taping. Numerous individuals in the course of their research have relied on the tape recorder to supplement their work when documents were not available.

Recognizing this local interest in oral history, Third Century, as part of the bicentennial effort, decided to hold an Oral History Workshop on April 5. Utilizing a grant from the Florida Citizen Committee for the Humanities, Third Century was able to bring Dr. Samuel Proctor to Miami to conduct the workshop. In addition to being a Florida historian of note, Proctor has been actively involved in an oral history program at the University of Florida since 1968 and is currently President of the National Oral History Association. The workshop was a resounding success and the attendance indicated a growing interest in our community for oral history. As a result of the workshop, a follow-up meeting was held on May 24 to form an um-

rella committee which will serve as a clearinghouse for information on local oral history efforts. HASF has agreed to play host to the umbrella committee, in addition to providing a variety of related services, including storage of tapes, cataloging, assistance with transcription, and answers to "how to do it" questions about taping techniques. Hopefully, HASF's contribution over the long haul will be characterized by continuity and attention to quality. Like any investment, the returns to be realized by researchers in the future will be directly proportional to the effort we put into the program now.

Oral history offers an exciting dimension for local history. If you are interested, HASF needs your help.



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## COVER

Cover: Mary Street and Bayshore Drive littered with the wreckage of the hurricane that hit Miami, September 15, 1945.

## UPDATE

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# HURRICANES-I HATE THEM!

by Jack Roberts



Hialeah reeled under the effects of two hurricanes in 1947. The previous year, the Post-War construction boom topped the four million dollar mark in the city. (Courtesy City of Hialeah)

After dreaming of Florida for years my wife and I came here for keeps in 1947. We were here only three days when a hurricane struck on September 4.

It scared us both. We were staying in the old Flamingo Hotel on the bay side of Miami Beach and the bay rolled like the ocean over the seawall, across the lawn and into the lobby.

A little more than a month later a second hurricane hit on October 9. This time we were in a dry place but it seemed the rain would never stop. After the storm I rode around what is now Miami Lakes in a speedboat. Water covered everything. This storm had caused such flooding the southeastern Florida counties would form a flood control district to tame the water in years to come.

*Our author is a veteran reporter, city editor, and columnist at the Miami News.*

Flood control is a mixed blessing. It produced the land which brought more people to Florida and knocked some holes in our Paradise Found.

But getting back to the storms of 1947. My wife began to have doubts about Florida and its storms. I insisted two storms in one year was a fluke.

The next year it was obvious I wasn't much of a weatherman. We had two more hurricanes. Our daughter, Gayle, was born during the second storm and was appropriately named.

As a young reporter at The Miami News I was getting the worst view possible. My assignment was to chase around with a photographer during the highest winds and greatest destruction.

Get caught in flood waters or have a huge tree fall in the path of your car and you have instant respect for 100-mile-an-hour winds.

A hurricane narrowly missed Miami in 1949 but Hurricane King made up for it in 1950. Billed as a small storm, it surprised everyone with winds up to 160 miles an hour.

We had moved into a brand-new home in Hialeah the day before the storm struck that night. I was at work, luckily. My poor wife was left in a house where the roof kept flapping up and down for an hour or so, letting in tons of water.

We would learn later that the roof simply hadn't been tied down. Thousands of GI jerry-built homes had been deroofed. We were luckier than most and there was a great outcry for better buildings.

That storm in 1950 was the forerunner of the most strenuous building code in Florida, a good lesson you might call it if you don't mind learning the hard way.

With Hurricane King's passing we had been through five hurricanes in four years and we were sick of them. My wife was convinced we had come to Hurricane Alley to live. But you know what happened next. It would be 10 years before another hurricane hit Miami.

But the end of 10 years of hurricane-free weather was signalled by Donna, which devastated the Florida Keys and did rather bad damage to some homes in South Dade. We lost our screen patio, difficult to rebuild even with money provided by the insurance company.

The patio was replaced mostly with our own labor but four years later Hurricane Cleo knocked it down again.

Hurricanes? You can have them. They aren't fun, they cost money, they scare you for prolonged stretches and then there's that awful cleanup period. I hate hurricanes.



The last high water on Palm Avenue in 1947 was taken away in only four days after experts said it would take weeks. The Central and Southern Florida Flood Control District almost certainly would prevent a recurrence of such a flood. (Courtesy City of Hialeah.)

# MISTER HURRICANE

by E. V. W. Jones

Like David and Goliath, Grady Norton came forth to do battle with giant hurricanes and succeeded very nearly beyond belief.

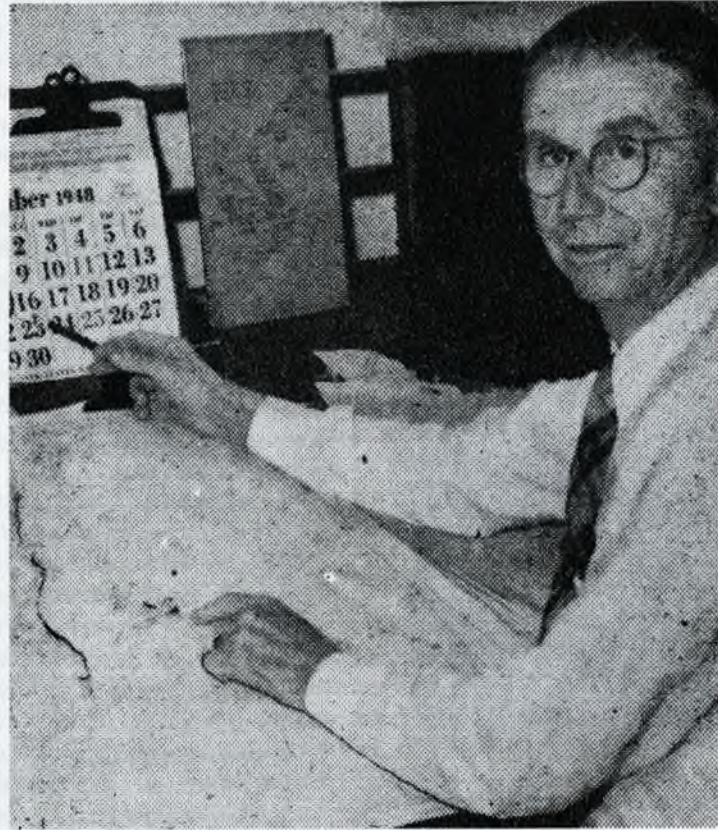
Norton's weapons were a calm voice that inspired public confidence, a willingness to speak out on the dangers of an approaching storm, and the best knowledge available in his day of the cosmic forces that controlled the meteorological monsters.

His goal was to save lives, and official records state that "his issuance of accurate and timely hurricane warnings has resulted in a tremendous reduction in the loss of life due to hurricanes." The record, from a citation presented in 1949 with a silver medal for meritorious service, added: "During the 10-year period from 1936-45, the number of hurricane fatalities for each unit of ten million dollars property damage was decreased by 87 per cent." Additionally, Norton posthumously was awarded the Department of Commerce Gold Medal for "exceptional service".

Unofficial statisticians figured that meant a reduction of fatalities from 500 to 5 in a routine, 100-mile-an-hour or less hurricane. Superstorms were more deadly.

Norton died October 9, 1954, while Hurricane Hazel whipped the Caribbean Sea

*Eddie Jones is a retired state chief of the Associated Press who also wrote for the Miami Herald. During his thirty-odd years in Miami he covered many, many hurricanes. Norton himself dubbed Jones "The Number One hurricane reporter in the world."*



The late Grady Norton, who was considered a genius at hurricane forecasting, developed the theory that currents of air at high altitudes steered hurricanes.

with 125-mile winds. Unlike the Biblical David, Norton was forced to do battle time after time as new hurricane Goliaths came upon the battlefield, and the stresses of contending with Hazel's idiosyncrasies were blamed for a stroke which killed Norton.

Hazel, in turn, killed between 600 and 1,000 persons in Haiti, the Bahamas, North and South Carolina, portions of Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania and the Lake Ontario area of Canada, besides inflicting a fatal stroke on Norton. The hurricane wrecked property worth \$350,400,000 while destroying entire towns and heavily damaging some cities. Winds of 98 miles an hour gusted around the Capitol dome in Washington, 94 miles an hour around Independence

Hall in Philadelphia, and 114 miles an hour among Manhattan's skyscrapers. Peak winds in the storm were 150 miles an hour.

Grady Norton's soft Alabama drawl seemed a pitifully weak weapon to use against such awesome power, but he used it as effectively as the original David used his slingshot against the sword-wielding giant of history.

He was the son of a Choctaw County, Alabama, farmer, and he studied meteorology at Texas A. and M. He joined the Weather Bureau in 1915 in Oklahoma and served in Little Rock, Macon, Louisville and New Orleans before coming to Florida.

His baptism of fire with hurricanes came in 1928, while he was assigned to Louisville and visited Florida on vacation. The terrible

hurricane of that year blew the water out of Lake Okeechobee and drowned nearly 2,000 persons around its shores. Norton observed the mass burial of hundreds of victims, and returned to Louisville fighting mad.

He began a study of hurricane warnings, learning that the winds were already approaching hurricane force when warning flags were hoisted in the great Miami storm of 1926, killing over 200 and causing \$111,775,000 property damage.

He found other instances of inadequate warnings and, he thought, unnecessary deaths. In time, a Hurricane Forecast Center was established at Jacksonville, Florida, and in 1935 he became its first director.

That same year, on Labor Day, a hurricane small in size but with winds estimated at 200 miles an hour swept over the Florida Keys. Four hundred World War I veterans who were sent to highway-building camps between Snake Creek and Lower Matecumbe after a bonus march on Washington lost their lives. A train sent to bring them to safety was washed off the tracks at Islamorada.

Norton and the Key West weatherman had tried to have the men evacuated before the storm struck. But it was a holiday weekend and those officials who could be reached were slow to act. An investigation later centered around the adequacy of warnings and the loss of the rescue train. Norton showed that he had given warnings 17 hours in advance and personally alerted camp officials of the approaching danger. Nevertheless, some of the blame for the disaster was laid on him.

"I went to the Keys and saw CCC boys bring decaying bodies out of the mangrove swamps and cremate them," said Norton. "I didn't think any of this could be blamed on my warnings, but I never wanted to see it happen again."

He developed a theory that high altitude currents steered hurricanes, and with the development of radar he could have balloons tracked at 60,000 feet for an indication of the future course of the storm. His success was phenomenal. He could declare a hurricane alert 36 hours in advance for a coastal area, then give specific hurricane warnings 24 hours in advance for a smaller area. With the long warning period, residents could prepare adequately. The death rate began to plummet. (Hurricane alerts are now termed hurricane watches.)

Norton made good use of Air Force and Navy hurricane hunters and heaped praise upon their skill and bravery. But he had no weather satellites photographing an

entire hemisphere from pole to pole, nor computers which could whirl data in their electronic brains to produce hurricane predictions that a seasoned forecaster could refine into a hard, tangible warning in a few minutes.

Norton's widow, Ruth, and his many surviving friends and admirers listen to broadcast storm information expressed in precise, often scientific language. No criticism is implied, but their thoughts go back to another day, another era, when a quiet voice would come on the radio:

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is Grady Norton down at the Weather Bureau. There is a hurricane coming our way, and I'm going to have to order hurricane warnings displayed here. This is a dangerous storm. It blew down houses when it passed over Cuba, and we should get ready for it because it could do the same here . . ."

He received calls from elderly folk after storms had passed. They told him "you soothed and comforted us."

Mister Hurricane.

## THE FLORIDA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The goals of the Florida Historical Society remain as they were so eloquently described in 1857: To explore the field of Florida history, to seek and gather up the ancient chronicles in which its annals are contained, to retain the legendary lore which may yet throw light upon the past, to trace its monuments and remains, to elucidate what has been written, to disprove the false and support the true, to do justice to the men who have figured in the olden time, to keep and preserve all that is known in trust for those who

are to come after us, to increase and extend the knowledge of our history, and to teach our children that first essential knowledge, the history of our state.

Annual memberships in the Florida Historical Society range in cost from \$10 to \$75, with other, more special categories available. These prices include the quarterly newsletter.

The Florida Historical Society, University of South Florida Library, Tampa, Florida 33620.

## PICTURING OUR PAST by S. J. Boldrick



This view of Brickell Avenue looking north from Vizcaya shows damage to the hammock caused by the Hurricane of September 18, 1926.



Three barges were washed ashore on Bayshore Drive (Biscayne Boulevard today) in front of the McAllister and Columbus Hotels.



Hit broadside by the wind, the upper stories of the 17-floor Meyer-Kiser building buckled and later had to be torn off. Scaffolding prevented rubble from falling on pedestrians. (All photos: Romer Collection, Miami-Dade Public Library.)

# HURRICANE HONEYMOON

by Thelma Peters

We were married the evening of September 3, 1926, in the white frame community church of Arch Creek. My family, the Ephraim Petersons, had moved to Florida from Missouri in 1914; the groom's family, the Thomas J. Peterses, came to Miami before the railroad. Thomas J. Jr. and I were classmates at Miami High School when it was located on N.W. 3rd Avenue.

A reception at my family's modest home near Arch Creek was followed by a less formal one aboard the *Esmeralda* at the city docks. The *Esmeralda* was a 250-ton steam yacht, reputedly built for Fleischmann of yeast fame, and purchased in 1925 by Mr. Peters, owner of the Halcyon Hotel in Miami, to carry passengers to his newer hotel in Bimini. Bimini was beginning to attract tourists: it had great fishing and it was "wet."

Since it was off season the yacht, with a somewhat reduced crew of fourteen, was turned over to us for our honeymoon. As we left the city dock, nearby craft tooted and whistled and our friends raced their cars to the County Causeway to honk us out the channel. It was a wonderfully noisy and happy send-off. No one guessed that the fine old yacht was making its final trip.

The next morning we were anchored in the translucent sea off the two Biminis waiting for a tender to take us to the hotel dock at North Bimini. Half of Alicetown, a motley assortment of islanders, was at the dock to watch us disembark.

The hotel seemed beautiful to me, its palm-shaded



The 250-ton steam yacht, *Esmeralda*, ran passengers from Miami to Bimini.



The 100-room Hotel Bimini opened under the name of the Bimini Rod and Gun Club in 1920. Ahead of its time, it had only limited success.



One wing of the Hotel Bimini following the Hurricane of 1926. It was never rebuilt.

grounds running from bay to ocean across the narrow island. Most of it was boarded up but the best bedroom had been prepared for us and the spacious public rooms were open. Five people were living there: the caretakers, Mr. and Mrs. Harris, and three surveyors who were doing some work for Mr. Peters on South Bimini where he hoped to build a golf course. A cook came in by day.

Mornings we went deepsea fishing, evenings we often joined the surveyors in fishing for shark off the dock. We strolled the narrow stony Kings Highway under the coconuts past tiny unpainted houses and stores or climbed the ridge to admire the vivid seascapes. An idyllic honeymoon until -

The wind began to rise and the barometer to fall. The islanders, wise to hurricanes, were pulling out their boats and battening down their homes. We were glad the *Esmeralda* had returned to Miami for supplies. Then on Friday night, September 17, the 1926 Killer Hurricane bore down on Bimini several hours earlier than it hit Miami.

The seven of us in the hotel holed up in what Mr. Harris said was the safest spot, a storeroom cut out of the rocky ridge on which the hotel was perched and reached by going down a ladder from the kitchen. We took with us a kerosene lantern, flashlights, blankets, water and food. The room was about twelve by twelve with deep shelves, mostly empty, on three sides. We sat on the floor or lay down on the wide lower shelves.

The screaming roar of the

storm was less here but the bangs and crashes over our heads told us the hotel was faring badly. If that weren't enough there was drama in our little cell: Mrs. Harris, who was quite elderly, was having a heart attack. The men made a bed for her by putting a shelf across two crates and padding it with a blanket. I was sure she was dying.

It was a long night. By morning Mrs. Harris was better and the storm seemed to have lessened. One by one we went up the ladder to see what was left of the world. Not much. Only the very top of the island "hogsback" was above water. The bay dashed against the foundations of the hotel on one side, the ocean on the other. We were like a ship stranded atop a reef.

The walls of the hotel were intact but much of the roof was gone except in the west or kitchen wing. Windows had blown in, furniture was askew, rugs and mattresses sodden. On our tour of exploration we came upon four strangers under the main stairs - rumrunners from Miami who had abandoned their boat in the night. We added them to our "guest" list.

Toward noon when the water receded a bit the island's British doctor and his wife joined us. Their house had been destroyed. Now we were thirteen.

There were piles of debris caught all along the sharp rise of the ridge, and all our men worked there in the driving rain most of the day hunting for survivors. Once my husband came in to say they had found the four Saunders women, all dead, and he needed sheets to wrap them in. The Saunders family had lived near the hotel in a good two-story frame house. Mrs. Saunders had put a bowl of island roses in our room to welcome us and we had called

to thank them. Now only Mr. Saunders was left, a dazed, elderly waif picking through the ruin.

We never again saw our regular cook. The doctor's wife was caring for Mrs. Harris so the cooking job fell to me. There was no electricity or gas so I wrestled with a two-burner kerosene stove with set-on oven.



The Kings Highway, North Bimini, following the 1926 Hurricane.

I soon proved that I knew nothing about cooking when I added sweetened condensed milk to a casserole of macaroni. But I was quite good at opening cans of beans and corned beef and none of my twelve boarders complained.

Not a dock, boat, or house on the island was undamaged - most were totally destroyed. Yet islanders have a knack for survival. Of the 300 or more on the island only eleven were killed. Some saved themselves by embracing the trunk of a coconut tree and floating upward as the water rose but sustaining terrible lacerations and bruises from the constant battering of the wind.

The remaining nights in the hotel we and our guests picked out own dry spots to sleep. Thomas and I chose the ladies' lounge off the lobby because it had a dry floor.

The wireless station had been destroyed and we had no way to send a message out. Nor was there left a single seaworthy boat with the exception of the rumrunners' -

hand, had given us up as lost.

On Tuesday the 21st my father-in-law arrived to rescue us as we knew he would. Then we learned for the first time of the disaster that had befallen Miami. He said there had not been a boat in Miami with the capability of making the Bimini run - every one destroyed. He hired the first seagoing boat to reach the



The *Esmeralda* upon being raised from the bay bottom near the city docks. The *Rose Mahoney*, another hurricane casualty, is in the background. (All photos courtesy of the author.)

they thought when the rain stopped they could repair theirs. The rain did stop on Sunday and they went to work on it.

Meantime we were handing out eggs, potatoes, and canned goods to a parade of homeless, hungry people.

Monday dawned fair and almost calm making the island even more bedraggled by contrast. We heard the sputtering of the rumrunners' boat, then its steady roar. They came to the hotel to say they were ready to take off, would take messages to our folks. I, for one, had not worried about my family, not guessing the hurricane had hit Miami. They, on the other

Bay - a tug from Savannah - and it was necessary for us to go right back. We rounded up our personal things. Meantime Mr. Peters offered transportation to Miami to anyone who wanted it. About fifty islanders went with us.

The Bimini Hotel was never rebuilt. For a time it was guarded to keep away looters but that became impractical. Some of the furnishings were moved to Miami, the rest abandoned. For years we used Bimini pink-and-white blankets and I still use daily some of the Bimini Hotel flat silver.

As for the *Esmeralda*, she sank at the city dock in  
*Continued on page 11*

# THE HURRICANE IN FLORIDA FICTION

by Stuart B. McIver

The hurricane is a major part of the South Florida scene along with the palmetto bug, the real estate salesman, the real estate buyer, the booster, the smuggler and sunburn. Not all of these have been adjudged worthy of treatment in Florida fiction. I know of no stories about the palmetto bug. Let's see how the hurricane has fared.

In Florida fiction, is the hurricane primarily a supporting actor, a *deus ex machina* to extract an author from various dilemmas, or is she a protagonist? The answer is "supporting actor," generally appearing as one of many complications visited upon the characters in a book.

The earliest appearance of a fictional hurricane that we have found is 1862, when Francis R. Goulding's *The Young Marooners on the Florida Coast* was published. In this boys' book, written in 1850, the young heroes are buffeted by a severe hurricane but it is by no means a major factor in the story.

In *Shine Terrill* Kirk Munroe uses a hurricane to pile more grief onto the young hero of his boys' book. Shine has already fled from his home in Georgia, fearful that he has accidentally killed his wicked stepfather. Compared with his troubles with the law, the stepfather, moonshiners and rattlesnakes, the hurricane he encounters near the Florida-Georgia border is just not a very impressive foe.

*Mr. McIver is currently at work on books on Guy Bradley, the Audubon warden slain near Flamingo in 1905, and on Yesterday's Palm Beach in Seemann Publishing's "Historic Cities" series.*

"By this time," Munroe writes, "the heavens were shrouded with low-hanging clouds, swept onward in ragged masses by a roaring wind that had attained the force of a gale . . . The oncoming night promised to be one of tempestuous fury, and our lost lads regarded its approach with dismay."

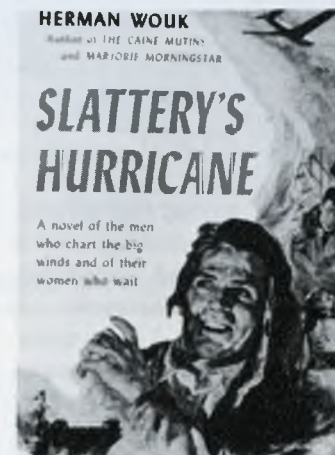


Shine, however, responded with a stout-hearted 1899 slogan to buck up the spirits of his young friend, a "Northern lad" named Tom Burgess, "We've got to look out sharp if we don't want to be blown away. Great Scott, how it blows."

In 1926 the Florida land boom collapsed. And as if to make sure there could be no doubt about the totality of the "bust," nature delivered one final elemental punctuation point, a killer hurricane that seemed to roar "End of Era Period." Fate's gesture was so flamboyant it would have seemed excessive if invented by a writer. And even though it happened in real life, writers of Florida fiction have generally stayed away from it. For example, Wyatt Blassingame in *The Golden Geyser* and Theodore Pratt in *The Big Bubble* each wrote about the Boom and the Bust. Neither used the real-life hurricane.

Pratt, however, did employ a hurricane to blow away the first primitive shack occupied by hero and heroine in *The Flame Tree*, a novel about the early Flagler era in Palm Beach. It was not a major event in the story, just one of many incidents that brought home to the heroine the difference between life in a northern city and the Florida frontier of the 1890s. Later Pratt wrote an insubstantial, mildly pornographic work called *The Big Blow*. The hurricane was the whole story, the only character of interest.

In *The Sea and the Stars* Robert Wilder made up for earlier neglect by giving us two hurricanes in his long saga of the development of East Florida. The first is the 1926 hurricane. His description is an interesting account but it has little importance in the overall story. A few years



later Hurricane Dora serves a major function. The book's hero, a developer of tycoon proportions, has in his old age miscalculated and built an unprofitable development. Dora blows it away. Since it was insured, the hurricane saves the hero from financial disaster. The big wind here was a *deus ex machina*, generally regarded as an unworthy fiction device. Wilder made it work,

simply by treating Dora with a light ironic touch.

The 1926 hurricane battered the lower East Coast, visiting huge losses in life and property on the area, and then moved on across the Everglades to Lake Okechobee. There its forces battered down the muck dike that protected Moore Haven from the lake and drowned over 300 people. Richard Powell makes this deadly phase of the storm an important event in *I Take This Land*. Joel Benedict, an appealing, Hoss Cartwright-type character, has established a muck farm near the lake. Then a great storm approached and the barometer dropped lower and lower. Joel "peered through the shutter and saw that something was happening to the dike. It squirmed like a dying snake, twitching and heaving and bulging. Then, suddenly it was gone, and an enormous white-bearded monster raced across the fields toward the house. He didn't say anything to the others. There was no use . . ."

In 1928 an even deadlier killer hurricane struck the lake area. The death toll may have been as high as 3000. No one knows, since many of the victims were migrant laborers. Zora Neale Hurston wrote of this storm in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Alfred J. and Kathryn Abbey Hanna wrote that Mrs. Hurston's book "gives a graphic picture of migratory labor conditions and the tragedy of the hurricane of 1928." Unfortunately, this book is out of print and I was unable to find a copy.

The 1935 hurricane hit the Keys with sickening force, killing hundreds of World  
*Continued on page 11*



## THE DISASTROUS 1928 LAKE OKEECHOBEE HURRICANE

by Patsy West

Based upon personal interviews with Everett G. West and Walter L. Hale and a taped interview with Victor V. Bullock, made by Thelma P. Peters. All are residents of Ft. Lauderdale.

The hurricane of September 16, 1928, did little damage in the Miami/Ft. Lauderdale area, but it spent its full fury on Palm Beach and the vulnerable Lake Okeechobee area. Many persons who knew the lake in lesser storms feared for the persons living in its vicinity because Lake Okeechobee was so vast and shallow, any abnormal wind velocity whipped up waves on the water causing flooding over the superficial, inadequate dike system. In the 1928 hurricane, as the winds gusted from the northwest side of the lake, the water was pushed out of the banks on the southeastern shore. New levees had been built after the 1926 storm, but they were not durable and rose only a few feet above the lake's high water mark. As the levees broke, flood waters ten feet high swept through the towns of Pahokee, Belle Glade, and South Bay.

The morning following the storm, C.J. West and C.A. Root left Ft. Lauderdale for the lake in West's car, traveling up the West Palm Beach Canal Road. West had surveyed around the lake in 1914-15 and knew that damage from the storm would be severe. Although the road was covered with debris almost to the point of impassability, they went far enough to see what had happened on the lake and returned home late that night to load up extra gear for rescue operations. At sunrise they were underway

again with West's sixteen-year-old son, Everett, a swimmer with Red Cross lifesaving training, a small flat-bottomed boat and two outboard motors. Many other members of the Ft. Lauderdale swimming team and other volunteers left for the lake to help out in any way they could.

They arrived at Pahokee that afternoon. There were only two or three buildings which remained standing. A

alcohol, and started up the North New River Canal. "In those days, you could go right up to Lake Okeechobee on the canal. So we got up there, and the smell began getting bad. Soon we hit something solid, so we tied up till morning." In the daylight they could see that they were in South Bay, where a dredging outfit had saved more than two hundred people by gathering them into the dredge which rode out the storm safely. Bullock's boat

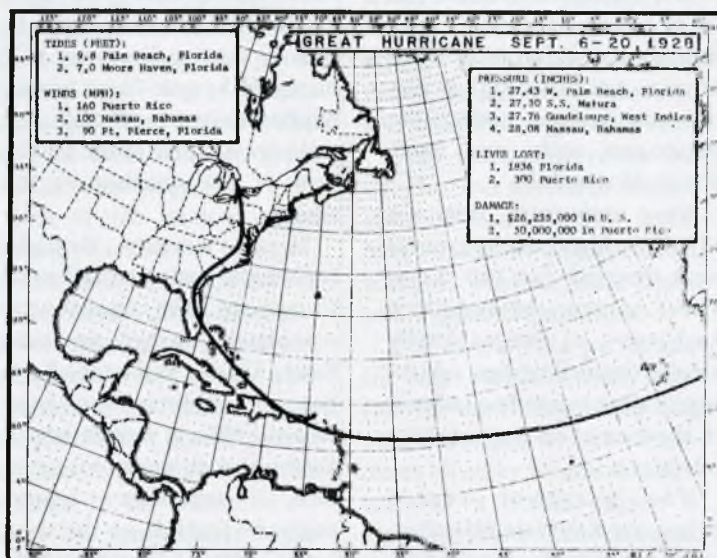
At the small town of Pelican Bay, seventy-four farm workers climbed into huge ficus trees that grew nearby hoping to escape the flood, but the wind weakened the tree roots in the spongy muck and the trees toppled, crowding the occupants.

The year 1928 had the outlook of an extremely productive winter vegetable season in this fertile farmland, and as many as 5,000 itinerant workers, including many Bahamians, were living in the area in makeshift tents and shacks. As there was no census, it is not known how many perished or who they were. At least 2,500 persons were estimated to have been killed or drowned, but the official toll was 1,836.

The initial job for the rescue workers was to hunt for survivors by boat along the masses of waterlogged vegetation and in the hammocks. But, as the dead far outnumbered the living, the task became that of retrieving bodies. A common sight was a person in a small outboard dragging as many as nine bodies in the wake of his boat.

Because of rapid decomposition, the retrieval of bodies was a race against time. Coffins were hastily made. The bodies were stacked like cordwood and then shipped off in the coffins to Palm Beach for identification and burial, as soon as the road was cleared. At Belle Glade, the authorities declared martial law. They told the volunteers to "go out and lime these bodies down and put a stick with a white rag on it as a marker. We have to move fast before disease and pestilence move in." Others were put in piles of three hundred and burned

*Continued on page 11*



*Courtesy of National Weather Service, NOAA.*

bare handful of the population of Pahokee remained alive, and they were in severe shock. Most of these survivors had lost their entire families.

An old frame hotel had managed to stay together, although it was out of plumb about 10 degrees. This became the headquarters for the rescue workers, survivors and later, the Red Cross.

Victor V. Bullock of the U.S. Coast Guard was on leave during the hurricane, but volunteered to go up to the lake to help. He took a picket boat from the Base in Ft. Lauderdale, loaded with six drums of fuel oil and five five-gallon cans of pure grain

had run into the dike and they were directed through the channel, which had been masked by lily pads and debris, into the lake. They then headed for Belle Glade where they located the other Coast Guard boats and crew.

Warnings had been issued prior to the storm, but the people had been too late heeding them. Many who had tried to flee by automobile were found drowned in their vehicles which had been swept into the drainage ditches by winds exceeding 160 mph. Some persons managed to find floating objects to cling to but were beaten by debris or smothered in wavelike rolling masses of water hyacinths.

# LAST TRAIN TO KEY WEST

by Jerry Pardue



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Railroads eagerly sought passenger business in the early thirties. A special excursion train would often be run to a point two hundred miles away from home, commonly leaving at daybreak Sunday and returning home at midnight, total fare \$1 per person. Overnight and weekend trips were somewhat higher.

One of the latter was the ill-fated Key West excursion operated by the Florida East Coast Railway from Miami during the Labor Day weekend of September 1935. Advertisements in the Miami daily newspapers and on placards around the stations and elsewhere proclaimed this big four-dollar train-ride bargain, accommodations at Key West extra.

The trip was scheduled to leave Miami early on Saturday, August 31, reach Key West in the late forenoon, leave Key West Monday afternoon, Labor Day, returning to Miami that evening.

Hundreds took advantage of the rare bargain, the last opportunity of the summer season before the start of school. The train chuffed out of Miami on time and arrived at Key West on time, discharging its passengers for a weekend of fishing, sunbathing, visiting, and loafing.

Even then, a tropical disturbance was forming to the east

of the Bahamas but received scant notice. It was not until Sunday that it began to merit serious attention, but it was not practical to collect the passengers early and leave ahead of schedule.

Near departure time on Monday, hurricane warnings were hoisted for the Keys. These square, red-and-black harbingers of danger finally alerted the authorities; no one would dare to send out a train in the face of an approaching hurricane.

The hurricane roared across the Keys late that afternoon. Hundreds perished by drowning, the railroad was demolished for miles, telephone and telegraph lines were severed, and what little highway there was sustained heavy damage.

Casualties in Key West were few or none, since the highest wind there, although less than a hundred miles from the center of the vicious hurricane, did not exceed fifty miles per hour.

But what of the trainload of visitors? No railroad existed any longer; the highway dependent upon two ferry jumps over deep water, was out of service.

None of this, however, became known at Key West until considerably later. About 10:00 p.m. the wind at Key West had begun to sub-

side, the passengers were loaded, and the train began to inch its way up the Keys, still harassed by gale-force winds, neither railroad officials nor train crew aware of the condition of the roadbed or the tracks.

It was nearly daylight before the awful truth began to appear. The tracks were completely washed out near Snake Creek, well up the Keys but still a long way from Miami. Efforts were made to assess the damage, to ascertain if temporary repairs might be feasible on the spot, and to provide for the safety and comfort of the many passengers.

Needless to say, the news vendors on the train sold out their entire stock of snacks and sandwiches almost at

once. The passengers accepted the emergency situation in good humor, leaving the train on foot to forage for food and finding a small grocery store with a proprietor and some stock intact. What beverages he had, soft drinks and others not so soft, sold out immediately. During the stop of several hours at the end of the line a rumor spread through the crowd that Miami had been wiped out by the hurricane; it was accepted by many, oblivious to the fact that communications with the mainland were nonexistent; portable radios were unheard of in those days.

Finally the decision was reached that a return to Key West was the only possibility. Having to back a train all that distance naturally took more hours. The weary passengers returned to their lodgings, including the legendary La Concha Hotel, early Wednesday morning.

At 5 p.m. Wednesday the Peninsular & Occidental *SS Cuba* arrived, stopping briefly at Key West enroute from Havana to Tampa. Although the vessel was loaded with other excursionists returning home from a weekend in



This could have been the Florida East Coast Railway Excursion train that offered rides from Miami to Key West. (Photo from FEC Railway. Official negative now in collection of Seth Bramson.)

**SAMPLE ROUND-TRIP FARES**

FROM	TO	Key West	Miami
Ashville	N. C.	\$20 85	\$16 85
Atlanta	Ga.	18 10	14 10
Baltimore	Md.	28 55	24 55
Birmingham	Ala.	19 90	15 90
Chattanooga	Tenn.	20 85	16 85
Cincinnati	Ohio	27 70	23 75
Hendersonville	N. C.	20 40	16 40
Louisville	Ky.	27 15	23 15
Macon	Ga.	16 35	12 35
Memphis	Tenn.	24 95	20 95
Nashville	Tenn.	23 90	19 90
New Orleans	La.	23 35	19 35
New York	N. Y.	35 25	31 25
Philadelphia	Pa.	32 00	28 00
Richmond	Va.	24 75	20 80
Savannah	Ga.	14 75	10 75
St. Louis	Mo.	29 85	25 90
Washington	D. C.	27 10	23 10
<b>Local Destination</b>			
Daytona Beach	Fla.	\$ 9 15	\$ 5 15
Fort Lauderdale	Fla.	4 50	50
Hollywood	Fla.	4 35	50
Jacksonville	Fla.	11 30	7 35
Key West	Fla.		4 00
Miami	Fla.	4 00	
St. Augustine	Fla.	10 60	6 60
West Palm Beach	Fla.	5 35	1 35

Courtesy of Seth Bramson

Havana, the stranded railroad passengers were boarded, nearly all of them as deck passengers.

The attendants on the *Cuba* did their best to accommodate their supercargo. One spirited young lady, remembered by several aboard the train as "The Girl in Red", succumbed to the excitement and the still-rough Gulf of Mexico, becoming ill enough to need bed rest. An official of the steamship line surrendered his stateroom, allowing the girl to rest in his berth during the overnight trip to Tampa.

Other passengers fared but little better. Dining-room stewards passed among the travellers, offering food, finding few takers. Some of the queasy ones scattered at the sight of a man bearing food, many of them spending most of the night at the rail.

By now it was early Thursday and Tampa was at hand. A special train had been ordered and was waiting, the motley passengers boarding immediately for return to Miami. The route chosen was Tampa to a point near Sanford, thence to Miami on the tracks of the Florida East Coast Railway.

Now that solid ground was under their feet, the famished

passengers began again to forage for food, little of which was on their train. Several operating stops were made, and despite the entreaties of the train crew, many of the travellers scattered seeking any establishment with a sign of food. Apparently they all found their way back to the train, summoned by many hoots of the locomotive's steam whistle.

It was near midnight Thursday when the disheveled refugees reached Miami. A good many of them reportedly were employees of one of the leading downtown department stores; the record does not show how many of them reported for work Friday morning or how the store had fared in their absence since Tuesday morning.

One of the excursionists, Harvey Farmer of Miami, says he rode "the last train out of Key West", the ill-fated excursion that had to stop at the washout. He says he was also a passenger on "the last train into Key West", that same trip that had to back up from the washout to the station. Certainly his roundabout route back to Miami qualifies the trip as a big four dollars' worth.

The railroad was never rebuilt. After a few years, the highway was reconstructed using the railroad right of way and many of the causeways and filled stretches, including the famed Seven Mile Bridge. Originally a toll road, the "Highway that Went to Sea" was freed in the early fifties. One of the original railroad mileposts still stands beside the highway a few miles northeast of Key West.

Credit is extended to Mr. and Mrs. Harvey Farmer, passengers on this excursion, for their excellent recall of events that took place on that memorable occasion forty years ago.

This author was stationed in 1935 at the Key West Weather Bureau, now known as National Weather Service. Part of the material herein is based upon his recollections of that memorable period. The FEC train was later removed to Port Everglades by ferry.

A shorter version of this article has been published in *Muse News*.

*Continued from page 7*

Miami, becoming an obstructive nuisance. There were so many hulks in the bay and wrecks on the bayfront in Miami that it was a year before the *Esmeralda* was raised, found to be valueless, and towed to a grave at sea.

Mrs. Harris recovered and the Harrises moved to Miami. Rotund, bearded and jovial Mr. Harris always had seasonal work as Santa Claus at a Flagler Street store.

The loss of the yacht and the hotel started a chain reaction for the Peters family and other dominoes fell. Hundreds of other Miami families suffered a similar fate. A catalytic blow had changed the Boom to the Bust.

*Continued from page 8*

War I veterans and wrecking Flagler's railroad to Key West. In *Hurricane Road* Nora K. Smiley and Louise V. White wrote of this and other storms that plagued the railroad.

Ernest Hemingway was living in Key West in September of 1935. He sailed up to Lower Matecumbe Key which had borne the brunt of the storm. Among the hundreds of bodies he saw there was Joe Lowe, the original of the rummy in *To Have and Have Not*. He wrote no fiction about this storm - only an angry article blaming Washington bureaucrats for the high death toll.

*Continued on page 12*

*Continued from page 9*



Courtesy of National Weather Service, NOAA.

with the fuel oil that had been brought. Identifying features were noted and articles of identification were bagged and sent to Palm Beach.

The twenty-five gallons of grain alcohol brought by the U.S. Coast Guard was for the volunteers' consumption. In this time of Prohibition, it was an added lift to these men who performed such grisly tasks each day.

Fortunately for the volunteers at Belle Glade, there was a small bit of humor to be found. A demolished warehouse was found in the devastated town where the men could get a new change of clothes for the next day: "One day I was a cowboy, the next I had a tuxedo on!"

When great farmland is involved, nothing can stop the dedicated farmer. Just one year after this disaster, the town of Belle Glade was five times larger than it had been the previous year. Winter vegetable yields from this area have made national news repeatedly. Farmers still occasionally find the bones of unaccounted victims from the great hurricane as grim reminders of the destructive powers of nature. Today, with the protective Hoover Dike system, eighty-five miles long and twenty feet above the normal level of the lake, authorities believe that this terrible disaster will never repeat itself.



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Continued from Page 11

Hemingway's only fiction involving a hurricane in the Keys was "*After the Storm*," a short story based on a true story about the sinking of the Spanish liner, *Val Banera*.

Robert Lewis Taylor batters his engaging characters with a ferocious 19th century hurricane in *A Journey To Matecumbe*, while Henry Hayes Stansbury's *Hurricane in the Keys* takes place in the Upper Keys in 1966.

*Tales of the Tamiami* by Will Horne tells of hurricanes that have struck the Everglades, among them the 1928 storm.

Elsewhere in Florida, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings makes a wet hurricane an important happening in her novel, *The*

*Yearling*. The storm's heavy flooding has a major impact on the life of the settlers near Ocala.

In *The Wrath and the Wind* Alexander Key writes entertainingly of the calamities that struck the Panhandle town of St. Joseph in the 1840s. Yellow fever in 1841 and a devastating hurricane in 1843 literally wiped the town off the map. Years later it was rebuilt as Port St. Joe.

One of the most readable hurricane books is John D. MacDonald's *Murder in the Wind*, which takes place on the Gulf Coast near Cedar Keys and Yankeetown. In MacDonald's book, Hurricane Hilda is the major character, introduced to the reader in the first chapter and

thereafter the book's moving force, its true protagonist.

The fliers who probe the eyes of the great West Indian storms are the subject of at least two books, *Hurricane Fighters* by Pauline B. Innis and Joseph Archibald, a story of the Navy's Early Warning Squadron, and *Slattery's Hurricane* by Herman Wouk. For a writer who was later to give us *The Caine Mutiny*, the Slattery book is an incredible collection of stereotyped characters and cliches, from the girl friend who sings in a night club and the narcotic smugglers to the climactic scene right out of the old "that crazy kid, he knocked the captain out and took the plane up himself" school.

Our own Marjory Stoneman Douglas ventured once into adult fiction—*Road to the Sun* has a hurricane as a background supporter in the concluding chapter. Then Thelma Strabel, who long lived in the southernmost house in Key West, wrote *Reap the Wild Wind*, later made into a movie. Here again the storm is only supporting the story.

So, prepare yourself for the 1975 hurricane season with tracking charts, masking tape, and transistor radio; then, from this list of books, you should be able to find something to read by the flickering candlelight the hurricane will bring.

"Great Scott, how it blows."