

The Wreck of Houseboat No. 4 October 1906

By WILLIAM H. SAUNDERS

With the approach of each new hurricane season, I often think over my experience of fifty-three years ago when I, with 160 other men, was washed away from Long Key on the morning of the 18th of October, and lived to tell the tale.

I had been living on the southeast coast of Florida for some fifteen years, first at "Lake Worth Lagoon", now West Palm Beach, and at Miami for a part of the time. There had been four hurricanes while I was living at Lake Worth. I thought that I had learned all there was to know about such storms. But the fifth one was by far the worst, and I found out a lot more about them.

Henry M. Flagler had made a good start on building the Florida East Coast Railway from Homestead on the mainland over the keys that stretched out southwest to Key West. One of the main points where open water had to be bridged with concrete arches started at Long Key and extended to little Money Key almost five miles away.

The story of the assembling of men, material and machinery was a saga in itself. But it is enough for our purpose to say that housing and feeding needs were met by towing an old Mississippi River barge across the Gulf of Mexico, making the below decks into kitchen and dining room, and building a one story frame house on deck that resembled the Christmas Noah's Ark of our childhood days. The house served as sleeping quarters for some 150 to 175 men as well as offices for the Division Engineer and his men who were directing the work. Several gasoline powered tugs were used to push barge loads of material from huge stock piles to the machinery that was used to set piles, erect the forms, set the reinforcing steel and mix and pour the cement. It was my fortune to have a marine engineer's license, and by reason of it to be chief engineer on the tug PALM. The routine work was on a twenty-four hour, around the clock schedule. Work was getting well into stride in the fall of 1906, when a hurricane hit Long Key on the morning of October 18th. As a matter of fact, the wind had increased so much that all

work had been shut down at midnight and all men had retired to Houseboat No. 4 as the old barge was called.

We were all trying to get some sleep, but for many of us who had had some experience with hurricanes, it was an uneasy sort of effort. Hurricane warnings were unknown at the time. The weather bureau had not yet developed the modern system of detecting and locating them. However, as I look back to that time, I am sure that the men whose forefathers had lived on the keys had developed some sixth sense regarding the approach of a hurricane. It was the practice at the time to hire these conchs as they were known on the mainland to pilot the many tugs, steamboats, and small launches that were used to move the men to and from work, carry the officials to and from Miami and Key West, and move the barge loads of material on the construction project. Possibly because of this sense of impending storm not one of them was on the job at the time, leaving the work in the hands of persons who knew nothing about such storms.

At six o'clock on the morning of the 18th, there was not a single craft with gasoline power that could be started. They were already wet by the spray. There was as yet no realization of serious danger, but as a consequence of the wet engines none of the men on the Houseboat were transferred to Long Key and greater safety.

By early morning the wind, blowing from the North was so strong that we all began to fear that the dolphins would be pulled up and let us blow away, or that the cables would break and set us adrift in the storm. The cables did break at about seven-thirty, and we were swiftly on our way southward across Hawk's Channel and into the famous Gulf Stream in a hurricane wind estimated at more than 100 miles an hour.

While we were still in Hawk's Channel the seas were heavy enough to show us that the Old Mississippi wooden barge would not last very long. The working of the hull developed leaks. Efforts at pumping out the water were useless. As the barge was lifted on the waves the planking on the sides would open enough that one could thrust his hand into the opened cracks. When the wave was directly under the barge, those planks would snap together with a loud crack, and a fine mist would pop out like steam.

The planks were long pieces of timber 14" by 4", four by fourteens. The sides of the craft were practically straight up, with little or no curve toward the bottom. They were fastened to nearly upright ribs as well as being drift-bolted to each other. This was done by boring vertical holes

through two and a half planks and driving in iron rods into the holes. These holes were so arranged that there was a rod through each plank about every twelve inches. These drift bolts account for at least seven men coming through the "journey" alive to be picked up on the following morning.

Below decks the barge was used as a kitchen and dining room. As there was no installation of electric lights, dependence was had at night on kerosene lamps, and during the day time to windows that had been cut in those side planks, well above the water line. The wood for a length of three feet was cut out, leaving the 'drift bolts' across the openings.

It was about 9:00 A. M. when the flimsy house aboard the top deck blew away like a pack of cards, carrying an unknown number of men with it. We were then in very heavy seas, and it was only a few minutes until the top deck planking had worked loose, and was ready to float away when the barge finally filled with water, and very shortly separated into loose planks, two long sides of those drift-bolted 4 by 14 heavy planks, and two partial sections of the ends of the boat.

Those top planks were about 40 feet long, 2 by 12 inch, and as they were drifting away some of them headed endwise to the wind, and as they floated up on a wave, if a few feet happened to project momentarily above the wave crest, the wind would lift the whole plank out of the water and send it whirling end over end towards the South. Planks would crisscross other planks. And I saw one poor chap hanging on to a plank, and another plank acting like a huge pair of shears, slice into his chest, enough that his heart showed momentarily before a huge wave broke over everything. When my raft came to the surface, and I could look again, the planks and the man were both gone from sight.

I had been told when I first arrived in Florida, that there never was any thunder and lightning with a hurricane. As far as I had known in the four storms I had been through that was a true saying. This storm disproved all old sayings. I have heard some terrific loud cracks of thunder along the Florida East Coast, but none of them surpassed the loud explosions that we heard about eleven that morning.

There was one other feature of that old barge that had a very direct bearing on my own experiences. For some reason the top deck had been built out with an overhang of some three or four feet, probably to provide a walk-way all around that house that was used for sleeping, and offices of the engineers. As the river steamers from Miami must come alongside the

barge to transfer provisions and passengers, this deck overhang would have caused much damage to the upper works of the steamers. To avoid this a series of 6 x 6 inch timbers were fastened to the deck edge, and held away the same distance from the side of the barge at the steamer deck gunwales by a short 6 x 6 and a three-quarter wet bolt through the lower end of the upright and the side of the barge. These timbers were about 9 feet long. When the old barge went to pieces one of these bolts hung on to the end of the 9 foot 6 x 6, and when the side of the barge turned smooth side up, that timber was thrashing back and forth at one end of the 'raft' we were on. Most of the 10 men that made this raft were able to sit in those windows that had been cut for light, and hold on to the drift bolts that were left uncut. I had tried sitting in one of the 'windows' but found I was wider through the hips than the rest, and I, with another man in the same fix, elected to hang over the end of the 6 x 6 timber, and grasp the iron bolt and hang on. Taking turns at having our stomachs against the end of that timber, with the other chap lying against his back, spoon fashion. When I got home on the 20th, there was a very plain square mark on my stomach where the force of the waves forced me against that timber hard enough to leave a mark.

It is hard to describe the way the waves rose up some three stories, and then broke over us and the raft, with tons and tons of water. This lasted at the worst about three hours. Then the worst of the wind was over, but the seas seemed to grow higher, until about 4:00 P. M. when the wind dropped to a light breeze, and we could stand up on the raft.

In spite of the real tragedy of men lost, there were some things that happened that caused a grin among the rest of us. The water supply on the houseboat was a square cypress tank bolted together very firmly. When two men saw this tank float loose from the general wreckage, they saw a sure way to float, and left the trash they were hanging on, and took over that tank. They were like two squirrels on the outside of the cage, and every shift of wave or wind would start the cage to turning, and those two trying to stop its turning, by one climbing up on one side, and the other sliding down on the other side. The square shape of the tank was forever scraping and bruising their bodies from head to foot, and they were probably the worst bruised of any of the survivors. However, these two were picked up about 5:00 P. M. and were lucky to have good medical help aboard the "JENNY".

Despite the fact that Clara Barton had the Red Cross pretty well organized at that time, first aid kits were very rudimentary. Liquid laudanum was about the only pain relief. As a result, some of the men that were wild

with panic decided to end it all before the barge even went to pieces. Claiming that as they could not swim and were afraid that sharks would devour their bodies, they filled their pilot coat pockets with any heavy material they could find, mostly canned beef, drank about a half teacup of laudanum, wrapped themselves in a blanket, and lay on the dining tables and went to sleep. I regret to say that the chief pilot of the PALM, my own tug, did this very thing. He was a tug pilot in New York Harbor before he came South to work on that overseas job.

Other men were almost as frantic. I know of my own observation that before that flimsy house blew off the barge that a large group of them climbed up under the roof, as they thought they would be that much longer out of water, with no thought that the house itself would collapse even before the barge broke up. I am pretty sure none of that group survived.

For myself, I was truly scared, and had very grave doubts that any of us would be alive when the storm had passed. The main idea in my mind was that although I had a small life insurance policy, I had some way gotten the idea that the insurance was very hard to collect if the corpse was missing, and it took seven years before the courts would certify a legal death. I felt I just had to do everything possible to come through alive, as my family in Miami would have a very tough time to make a living. So it was no laudanum for me, nor any risk of the smashed up house. I stayed outside until the barge broke up, and was lucky enough to make that long side of the barge that brought seven of us through alive.

The first man rescued about 4:00 P. M. on the 18th was picked up by the Austrian Steamer JENNY. A tramp freighter that had loaded from Gulfport, Mississippi, and Pensacola, Florida, bound for her home port of Trieste, Austria. This steamer had been in enough of the outer fringes of the storm near Key West so that her deck load of barreled rosin had all been washed overboard. The equipment aboard this steamer was very primitive. One life boat, no electric lights of any kind, and dependent on condensed steam to lubricate the cylinders of her triple expansion engine.

When this first man was seen, and reported to the Captain, he immediately followed the immemorial code of the Seven Seas. The steamer was maneuvered to the windward of the man, and lay broadside to the wind and seas, undergoing the most sickening rolling, while an oil bag was lowered to smooth the seas as much as possible, and the lone boat lowered with only two oarsmen, in the lee of the steamer. The boat was really so small that five average men made as heavy a load as was at all safe in that wind and sea.

When the boat returned with this man, it was soon found that there was only one man aboard the steamer that could speak English, a stoker in the fire room. When he had translated this man's story of what had happened at Long Key, the Captain ordered his ship to be sailed in large circles, hoping to save some more men. This was done all that evening and until 1:30 on the morning of the 19th. During that time they had picked up forty-nine men from all sorts of wreckage, our seven being the very last. The Captain afterward stated that no more wreckage or men were sighted. He decided as he did not have enough stores aboard to feed the extra 49 as well as his ship's crew, if he sailed for home, he returned to Key West, and turned us over to the U. S. authorities.

We arrived in Key West about 10:00 A. M., but were not put ashore until all arrangements were completed. I understand that a price was paid per head to the Captain for his salvage and care for the group. We were also furnished new clothing by the Railway company, as most of us had only rags and ribbons when we landed aboard the steamer. The ship's crew had divided their few belongings among us but that did little more than help cover our nakedness.

From Long Key alone there were as many as 150 men on that house boat, and the day before the Steamer ST. LUCIE had brought some 50 more men that had not even been set to work nor had their names recorded. The total number may have been as high as 175. The most diligent search has accounted for but 72 men that were rescued. So it is very possible that this was Florida's worst loss of life in a hurricane, up to that time.

A personal touch or two, my eldest son was a messenger boy for the Western Union in Miami at the time, and he was getting news first hand of the Long Key disaster. The local Miami paper had reported the probable loss of "Water Boat No. 4", in the evening edition, but the paper did not get into my wife's hands until my son had come home that evening. She was sure that reference to Water Boat No. 4 meant Houseboat No. 4, and that I was probably lost. When we were allowed to go ashore in Key West I had filed a telegram telling her of my safety. The press of other telegrams, press dispatches, and other personal wires delayed mine for about 20 minutes after that paper had arrived in my home. When a knock came at that time, my son was at the door ahead of his mother, and there was the night messenger boy with my wire. I have always been very glad that I filed that telegram when I did that afternoon.

I also still have the small bundle of a tattered pair of denim work pants, and a scrap of the shirt I was wearing, when I went aboard the JENNY. As the PALM was one of the fastest tugs, we were frequently sent to Miami on special trips for important material when it had run short. I had known that we were slated to make such a trip on October 20th, and had written that I would be home on that date. The Steamer MIAMI, belonging to the Flagler System was in port in Key West through the storm, and as soon as we were turned over to the Commissioner and properly clothed we were put aboard the MIAMI for a return to the city of Miami. Accordingly on the morning of the 20th, we steamed past Fowey Rocks lighthouse about 10:00 A. M. and went ashore about 11:00.

I was set to work at Miami, and did not return to the work on the Keys again. I was put in charge of the suction Dredge TOMOKA, then in Lake Mabel near Ft. Lauderdale. I later had word that the tug PALM had finally come ashore on Long Key very little damaged, and was again fitted up and put to work.

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