Tempting the Fates: Bonus Veterans, the Florida Keys, and the Storm of the Century

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On Saturday, August 31, 1935, a small tropical storm blew across the Bahamas. Its forty-five-mile-an-hour winds did little more than snap a few tree limbs before the storm slipped into the Straits of Florida.

But something happened to this windy thunderstorm when it touched the tepid waters between Andros Island and the Florida Keys. As it browsed slowly over the Straits on Sunday, September 1, well away from any passing ships that might have discovered what was happening and sounded a warning, it exploded into a killer hurricane of unprecedented strength. A mere thirty-six hours after it barely managed to rustle trees in the Bahamas, its strongest winds were approaching two hundred miles an hour.

The hurricane also was pushing a storm surge of twenty feet or more—enough water to easily submerge the low-lying Florida Keys.

The storm's phenomenal development into the most powerful U.S. hurricane on record was enough to give it permanent notoriety. But this storm took dead aim at a motley collection of former American servicemen who did not understand the mortal danger bearing down on them. Nor did the supervisors who were responsible for their safety. Instead, the men in charge left the luckless veterans completely unprotected from the storm's fury.

It was a catastrophe in the making, and on September 2, 1935—Labor Day Monday—the hurricane unleashed its unearthly fury on a

forty-mile stretch of beach from Tavernier to Marathon. About four hundred veterans who were living in beachfront work camps and working on a highway from Miami to Key West took a murderous punch from the storm. About 260 of them were killed. They were drowned beneath the roiling waters, or skewered by windblown lumber ripped from their flimsy work camps, or simply blown off the islands to God only knew where.

The official death toll from the Labor Day hurricane of 1935 was put at 408, including Upper Keys residents who were killed. But more may have died because many victims vanished without a trace.

The veterans' deaths caused a brief uproar in the corridors of power in Washington, D.C., as Republicans looked for a scandal to pin on the Democrats in the upcoming 1936 election campaigns, and Democrats scrambled to dodge blame.

The catastrophe in the Florida Keys was one of the best-documented tragedies in American history. Hundreds of witnesses were questioned under oath by investigators, and thousands of pages of supporting documents were collected. Yet the disaster was all but forgotten within a year or two of its occurrence. Skillful political maneuvering obscured the details of the disaster and led to the eventual exoneration of federal officials from any public blame for the veterans' deaths.

The veterans who died in the 1935 hurricane were casualties of the Great Depression. They were so desperate for work that they were willing to take a job at a place that, in 1935, would have easily qualified as the ends of the Earth.

In 1935, fewer than one thousand people lived on the Florida Keys outside of Key West.[1] Most of the residents were descendants of pioneer families—who had come to the islands from the Bahamas in the mid-nineteenth century.[2]

They lived without many of the creature comforts of even the early twentieth century. A few families had automobiles, and the villages of Tavernier and Marathon had small electric generators that were operated a few hours a day.

But most Keys residents did without electric lights, running water, and indoor plumbing, and in villages such as Islamorada, the number of outdoor privies far exceeded the number of telephones.[3]

Still, the Upper Keys were something of a rustic paradise for the inhabitants. Even in the middle of the Great Depression—when

millions of men were roaming the U.S. seeking jobs that weren't there—hunger wasn't a serious problem in the Keys. Seafood—such as spiny lobster and conch—was abundant, and small vegetable gardens dotted the islands.

Henry Morrison Flagler became a multi-millionaire as John D. Rockefeller's partner in the Standard Oil Company. When he visited Saint Augustine in 1885, he decided there was more money to be made by building a railroad and hotels down Florida's east coast.

By 1896, he had extended his Florida East Coast Railway to a sleepy settlement on Biscayne Bay known as Fort Dallas. Soon after the railroad arrived, the residents of the little village changed the name to Miami, and the town began to grow dramatically.

Flagler was convinced that there were more profits to be had by extending his railroad across the Florida Keys to Key West, and in 1905, he launched the massive, expensive, and dangerous work of laying rails down the islands. Island Hopping Railroad, know as The Evensean Railroad, completed in 1912, was a spectacular engineering and building feat.

Construction of a highway linking Miami and Key West was the product of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal and was devised after Key West and Monroe County officials declared bankruptcy in July 1934.[4] The financial collapse in the summer of 1934 was the culmination of a steady deterioration in Key West's fortunes for more than a decade.

When city and county leaders declared bankruptcy, Key West's population had shrunk to about thirteen thousand people, who were trying to stay alive on an average income of seven dollars per month.[5] Local officials handed over their governmental responsibilities to Florida Governor David Sholtz.[6]

Sholtz promptly declared that dealing with Key West's problems were the responsibility of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, the agency created by the Roosevelt Administration to cope with the nation's massive unemployment.[7]

The problem of what to do with Key West was only one of many difficulties facing President Roosevelt and his advisors. It was becoming clear to FDR that jobless World War I veterans were going to cause him some headaches, and he'd already seen a dramatic demonstration of the consequences of mishandling the veterans.

As the United States sank into the depths of the Great Depression in 1932, jobless veterans—most of whom had served in the U.S. Army in World War I—began assembling in Washington to lobby Congress for early payment of a so-called "bonus" they'd been promised as a reward for their service. The payment had been authorized in 1924 but wasn't scheduled to be paid until 1945.[8]

Most of the veterans who were eligible for the payment were to receive around one thousand dollars. But with no jobs, no money, and no prospects, the veterans decided they were willing to accept an immediate payment of five hundred dollars.

As Congress debated the early payment proposal during the spring and summer of 1932, about forty thousand veterans assembled in Washington hoping their sheer numbers would persuade legislators to approve the immediate five-hundred-dollar payment.

President Herbert Hoover staunchly opposed the early payment, and those veterans who had established on two sites in Washington, D.C., were forcibly evicted by the United States Army under orders from President Hoover, but in the summer of 1932, the House of Representatives approved a bill that would have allowed the payment.

Photos of the eviction were published on the front pages of newspapers across the nation. Franklin Roosevelt was one of millions of Americans who were appalled at the spectacle of veterans being chased out of the District of Columbia by troops. As he read newspaper accounts of the debacle at his home in Hyde Park, New York, FDR was convinced that the ouster of the former servicemen would cost Hoover his bid for reelection in November.

Roosevelt won a landslide in 1932. Soon after he took office in March 1933, however, the veterans began drifting back into Washington, D.C., to lobby again for early payment of the bonus.

Like his predecessor in the White House, FDR also was opposed to paying the bonus early. But Roosevelt had made a campaign promise to help the "forgotten man," and that phrase had resonated across the nation and helped carry FDR to an overwhelming victory.[9] The destitute, desperate veterans who were gathering in the district epitomized the forgotten men that FDR had promised to help.

And if the moral obligation wasn't enough to prompt Roosevelt to keep his campaign promise, he and his advisors knew he couldn't afford

the political damage that would result from newspaper photos of hungry families gathering in the nation's capital to beg for help.

FDR gave the veterans the use of an abandoned Army camp. He visited their encampment, waving his famous fedora in greeting as he approached. And he sent his wife, Eleanor Roosevelt, to meet with the men and listen to their problems.

But he refused to endorse paying the bonus, and the veterans continued to gather in Washington.

Then, from the impoverished despair of Key West, what seemed to be a perfect solution bubbled to the surface when Florida Governor David Sholtz decided the federal government should handle the island city's problems.

When Sholtz washed his hands of the Key West situation, the conundrum landed in the lap of Julius Stone, a glib, quick-thinking administrator in the Florida Emergency Relief Administration. The Florida ERA was one of dozens of state agencies created to administer the massive public works program set up by the Roosevelt Administration to put people back to work.

Stone was moved by Key West's tropical charm. Beneath the grime of neglect and uncollected garbage, he saw a lovely, verdant setting that would make an ideal tourist destination. So Stone decided to use federal money to clean up and repair Key West and advertise it as "the Bermuda of Florida." When President Roosevelt's advisors learned of Stone's idea, they saw opportunities to enhance the credibility of the New Deal on a national scale.

The August 12, 1934, edition of the *New York Times* included an article written by Julius Stone in which he described the Roosevelt Administration's plans for Key West. The transformation of Key West from a bankrupt, dilapidated, and nearly jobless city into a bustling little tourist town would be a model for solving the nation's economic difficulties, Stone wrote.

Key West's unique collection of houses would be restored, as would its "romantic lanes and byways," Stone said.

"We want visitors to breathe and feel the romance and lure of the sea, and the tradition of the pirate and wrecking enterprises of old," he said.

Even with Key West cleaned up, repainted, and portrayed as Florida's version of Bermuda, however, there was still one major obstacle to the

success of Stone's plan. In 1934, it was impossible to drive an automobile from Miami to Key West.

The highway ended about eighty-five miles south of Miami at the southern tip of Lower Matecumbe Key. There, drivers had to board a ferry for a slow, four-hour ride down Florida Bay to No Name Key. The motorists then disembarked from the ferry and drove the remaining twenty-five miles to Key West.

Stone realized that for his plan to succeed, motorists had to have a quicker way to get from Miami to Key West and back. The only way to do that was to build an island-hopping highway from Lower Matecumbe Key to Key West.

The decision to give the veterans jobs building a highway in Florida was undoubtedly influenced by Harry Hopkins, who was another close confidant of FDR. Hopkins believed that giving men jobs so they could earn a paycheck would restore their self-respect and self-confidence. The men would benefit from this, and so would society.

The plan seemed foolproof. The highway project would provide work for men who desperately needed it. The highway would throw open Key West to the rest of the nation and make the city solvent again. And sending the veterans to the isolated Keys would put them far, far away from the national press corps.

In the fall of 1934, veterans who came to Washington, D.C., seeking help were given a train ticket to a place most of them probably had never heard of—Windley Key, Florida.

Many of the men who made the trip down the east coast to the Keys were grateful for a job and a regular paycheck, and were determined to make the most of the opportunity. But many of them also were deeply troubled. Some were suffering from what would today be called post-traumatic stress disorder, caused by their combat experiences in World War I. In 1919, the condition was called "shell shock."

Many men who survived this gruesome experience were never the same. They were plagued with depression and often drank excessively. They had trouble finding and holding jobs, staying married, and raising children.

The economic chaos that followed the crash of the New York Stock Market in October 1929 threw more veterans into the ranks of the depressed and despondent.

The first veterans arrived in the Keys in November 1934 and were immediately put to work clearing brush and building a camp on the

beach on Windley Key. But it didn't take long for their personal problems and self-destructive habits to catch up with them. The veterans received their first paychecks on November 9, 1934. Almost immediately, the work camp erupted into a drunken, violent brawl among many of the veterans.

A steady stream of veterans began arriving in the Keys in the fall and winter of 1934-1935, and a second work camp was built at the foot of Lower Matecumbe Key. Other work camps for veterans were built elsewhere in Florida, and in South Carolina, as well.

Meanwhile, farther down the islands, the exclusive Long Key Fishing Camp opened for its brief season, which ran from December to April.

The fishing camp had been built as workers' housing and administration offices during the construction of the Key West extension of the Florida East Coast Railway. When the railroad was finished, the buildings on Long Key were converted into a fishing camp and getaway for some of the world's wealthiest people.

In Key West, the effort to clean up the city and publicize its natural charms was paying off in the winter of 1934-1935. More than forty thousand visitors came to the city to enjoy the mild winter.

As thousands of tourists discovered Key West, hundreds of jobless veterans were swelling the work camps of the Upper Keys. They came from all walks of life. There were attorneys, former high school principals, former newspaper reporters, and actors. There also were former professional athletes.

The camp on Windley Key was designated Camp 1. Another camp was established at the foot of Lower Matecumbe Key, where work would begin on a highway bridge to Jewfish Key. This camp was designated Camp 3.

The men were being housed in slap-dash, hastily constructed shacks and tents. There wasn't time to even minimally reinforce or anchor the huts. The camps were supervised by Colonel G. S. Robinson, who made it clear that he didn't have much use for the veterans. In a December 3, 1934, meeting with FERA and Florida ERA officials, Robinson said that about forty percent of the men in the work camps were "psychos."[10]

Other inconveniences made the living arrangements even more primitive. The men didn't have a place to take a shower or even relieve themselves.

Veterans Camp 3. Looking West from railroad. Lower Matecumbe Key, Florida. Photo courtesy of the Florida State Archives.

The veterans' resentment deepened as conditions in the work camps became worse. Federal inspectors wrote reports pointing out the unsanitary and primitive conditions in the camps that were now housing about six hundred men. The reports also criticized the administration of these camps for not improving them. Two veterans in the camps died from spinal meningitis, a disease that can spread rapidly in crowded living conditions.[11]

An explosion was inevitable. It came in late February 1935, when five veterans in Camp 3 formed a grievance committee when they learned that B. M. Duncan and Lawrence Bow, the camp administrators, were hiring skilled laborers from outside the work camps rather than hiring veterans with the same skills.

The committee demanded that their living conditions be improved, and that veterans be hired to fill jobs requiring skilled labor. Duncan's response was to have the committee members thrown in jail without bothering to get a warrant or even have them charged with a crime.

The men were outraged. On February 25, 1935, the veterans in Camp 3 went on strike, demanding that their jailed comrades be released.[12]

FERA and Florida ERA officials—including safety inspector Fred Ghent—came down to the Keys to meet with Duncan and Bow, but Duncan ducked the meeting, going instead to Miami to meet Governor David Sholtz and ride with him aboard the regular FEC passenger train

to Key West. The group did meet with Bow, who told them he did not think any of the veterans' demands should be met because that would only encourage them to demand more concessions.

Ghent and Sam Cutler, another Florida ERA official, left the work camps and returned to Miami. They bought a copy of an afternoon newspaper. They learned, to their astonishment, that National Guard troops had been sent to Islamorada.[13]

By now, reporters were finding their way to the Keys work camps to ask questions about the strike and the presence of the National Guard. Florida newspapers reported the unrest among the veterans.

Federal and state officials tried to improve living conditions in the camps and to more effectively organize the work camps. By April 1935, federal engineer Walter Hinchman was making progress in his efforts to resolve some of the camps' problems. He'd organized the veterans into work crews to clean up and landscape their camps. He ordered new khaki work uniforms for the men, had a recreation hall built for them, and organized several baseball teams.

On April 1, the camps came under the supervision of Fred Ghent. The former safety inspector for the Florida ERA seemed like a good choice for the job. On April 24, Ghent met with the veterans to explain his plans for the work camps. He told the men that he could identify with them.

"I don't believe there is a man in the ranks who would be here if he wasn't a victim of the Depression and his financial condition, which was caused by something beyond his control," Ghent said.[14]

National Guard commanders were determined to curtail the veterans' drinking and set up an inspection post at Tavernier to monitor automobile traffic coming into the Keys. At Plantation Key, guard soldiers stopped cars and searched them for whiskey, but tourists became angry at this intrusion, and the searches soon were discontinued.

Monroe County Sheriff Karl Thompson was so worried about the veterans' behavior that on April 9, 1935, he sent a letter to General Vivian Collins of the Florida National Guard asking that the guard be kept in the Keys indefinitely. "Owing to the mental condition of a great many of the Veterans and their attitude toward society, I would hesitate to say just how long this armed force will be necessary," Thompson wrote.

Meanwhile, veterans continued arriving in the Keys, and in April 1935 another work camp was established. This camp, built on the beach near the northern end of Lower Matecumbe Key, was called Camp 5.

Although none of the Keys work camps were built on high ground, the site chosen for Camp 5 was the worst. The camp overlooked the Atlantic Ocean at one of the narrowest and lowest points on Lower Matecumbe Key.

Joseph Fecteau, a veteran from Massachusetts, later told investigators that the camp's kitchen often was flooded. "In fact, at high tide it would come in and put the fire out," Fecteau said. "We could not do any cooking there in the rainy season."[15]

By May, the improvements in the work camps had improved the veterans' living conditions and morale. The camps had been cleaned up, and most of the tents that had housed the veterans had been replaced with small, simple four-man cottages, which the men referred to as "shacks." The cottages were arranged in neat rows that created streets, and the veterans erected signs designating them with the names of streets in Washington, D.C., such as "Vermont Avenue" and "Pennsylvania Avenue."

The men could also play volleyball or shoot pool in a recreation hall, and the camps' baseball teams had become an obsession among the veterans. The veterans started building a baseball park overlooking Snake Creek.

Despite Sheriff Karl Thompson's request that troops be left in the Keys indefinitely, state officials decided that the volatile situation that had led the enraged veterans to go on strike in February seemed to be defused. On May 13, the National Guard troops left the Keys.

Although conditions in the work camps were indeed greatly improved, the veterans had not lost their fondness for drunkenness and sometimes-disruptive behavior. Paydays in the camps still became a free-for-all brawl, and dozens of veterans who didn't stay in the camps when they got their pay boarded FEC trains to go carousing in Miami, Homestead, and Key West.

The veterans' behavior—especially their method of commandeering transportation—also continued to keep Keys residents on edge. When the men didn't feel like walking, they'd join hands and form a human chain to block the highway and force a car to stop. Then they'd pile into the vehicle and tell the astonished driver where they wanted to go.

When the men wanted to go longer distances and either didn't want to wait for a passenger train or didn't have money for a ticket, they piled logs across the Florida East Coast Railway tracks to stop a freight

train. When the train stopped, they climbed aboard and demanded to be delivered to their destination.[16]

Soon after veterans work program administrator Fred Ghent returned to his office in Jacksonville, he started work on resolving a difficult problem—protecting the veterans in the Keys from hurricanes. Ghent and Florida ERA officials first considered building a large, steel-reinforced concrete warehouse that would double as a hurricane shelter. But that proposal was dropped because it was considered too expensive.

Ghent then turned to the only other solution available to him—evacuating the men aboard a Florida East Coast Railway train.

On May 16, 1935, Ghent wrote the first in a series of letters to Scott Loflin, who had been appointed a receiver for the FEC when the railroad declared bankruptcy. Ghent's letter to Loflin wasn't so much a request for help in resolving the evacuation problem as it was a demand that the FEC provide this help on Ghent's terms. Ghent told Loflin that he wanted five passenger coaches made available at all times to remove the men from the islands.

Soon after Ghent sent his letter to Loflin, the camps' newspaper, the *Key Veteran News*, reported that arrangements had been made to evacuate the men from the Keys if a hurricane threatened them. But in a June 6 response to Ghent's letter, Loflin gave no indication that arrangements had been finalized for providing an evacuation train for the veterans. In his letter, Loflin told Ghent that it would take about twelve hours from the time a train was ordered to get the men out of the Keys.

Loflin also told Ghent that FEC officials would have to know in advance where the men would be taken, and Florida ERA officials would have to make arrangements in advance with local officials to provide water and sanitation services at the evacuation train's destination.

So, as the 1935 hurricane season began, Fred Ghent considered the evacuations arrangements essentially completed, and Scott Loflin considered them still under discussion.

While Ghent and Loflin were exchanging letters, work progressed on the bridge from Lower Matecumbe Key to Jewfish Key. On June 7, workers started pouring concrete for the first of 187 bridge supports.

Ed Sheeran was in charge of the bridge construction, but he was finding it difficult to get much work from the veterans assigned to his project. Regulations imposed by the Florida ERA administrators supervising

the camps restricted the veterans to only about five hours of work per day. Still, by early July, four concrete supports for the bridge had been finished.

On the evening of July 7, a powerful thunderstorm pounded the work camps with driving rain and high winds. The blow was a reminder that the worst part of the hurricane season was only a few weeks away, and soon after the storm, Sam Cutler, one of the camps' administrators, went to Miami to meet with U.S. Weather Bureau meteorologist Ernest Carson.

Carson made an impression on Cutler when he told him that hurricanes posed a serious danger to the Keys even if they didn't make landfall on one of the islands. Any time a hurricane was in the Straits of Florida, Carson said, it was probably going to cause flooding and high winds on the Keys.[17]

On August 1, Ray W. Sheldon started work as supervisor of the three veterans' work camps in the Keys. Sheldon, a Massachusetts native, had lived in Florida since 1923 and had been living in West Palm Beach when the terrible hurricane of 1928 struck.[18] That storm killed at least two thousand when it shoved water from Lake Okeechobee through several lakeside towns.

Fred Ghent came down from Jacksonville to meet with his new administrator. Ghent told Sheldon that if a hurricane came their way, they'd evacuate the veterans aboard a special train provided by the Florida East Coast Railway.

Ghent and other Florida ERA officials then left for Washington, D.C., to discuss the veterans work program. But the program had fallen into deep disfavor in the Roosevelt Administration.

On August 11, 1935, Fred Ghent learned that the veterans' work camps would be closed November 1 and he would be out of a job.[19]

The veterans in the Keys learned that their work camps would be closed at the same time the summer's first hurricane formed. The storm briefly headed toward the United States, but turned northward and away from land.

Hurricane-savvy Keys residents were relieved when the storm turned away from them, but many veterans in the work camps were disappointed. They'd been hoping all summer to see a hurricane. As the Labor Day weekend approached, John Ambrose, a veteran in Camp 5 who was a correspondent for the *Key Veteran News*, penned his disappointment at not seeing a big blow.

Ambrose's column was published in the August 31, 1935, edition of the *Key Veteran News*. As the newspaper was being distributed in the work camps in the Keys, the hurricane that Ambrose longed for was approaching the Bahamas.

The storm that would become the most powerful hurricane to strike the United States started as a tropical wave that blew off the west coast of Africa near the Cape Verde Islands in late August.

In 1935—long before the days of weather satellites and Doppler radar—tracking the path and development of a tropical storm was a combination of skill and guesswork. The only accurate information about the exact position and intensity of a hurricane came from ships near the storm, and ships' captains were doing their best to get as far away from the blow as possible.

By the time the weather system had reached the Bahamas, it had developed into a minimal tropical storm. On Saturday evening, August 31, the storm crossed the Bahamas with winds of forty-five miles an hour. It wasn't much more than a rainy, windy thunderstorm.

But when the storm entered the Straits of Florida on Sunday morning, September 1, it found perfect conditions for rapid strengthening. Hurricanes draw strength from waters that have been heated to at least eighty degrees Fahrenheit. On September 1, the water in the Straits was eighty-six degrees, and there were no upper level winds to tear it apart or impede its development.

On the Keys, camp officials started handing out pay envelopes Friday afternoon, starting at Camp 1 on Windley Key and working their way down the islands to Camp 5 and then Camp 3. By the time they'd paid off the veterans at Camp 3, many veterans at Camp 1 were already roaring drunk.

Around 9:30 p.m. Friday, the U.S. Weather Bureau issued its first advisory about the stormy conditions. The advisory reported "unsettled and slightly squally" conditions east of the Bahamas.

About three hundred veterans left the camps for the holiday weekend, and about four hundred decided to stay in the Keys. Camps administrator Ray Sheldon joined the departing veterans. Sheldon had gotten married a few days earlier, and he and his new bride were going to Key West for a brief honeymoon.

Sheldon's assistant, Sam Cutler, had hoped to go fishing, but when he saw his boss leaving, he knew he'd be spending the holiday weekend at

the office in the Hotel Matecumbe. Cutler's disappointment at missing his fishing trip vanished, however, when he saw the U.S. Weather Bureau advisory. Cutler started tracking the storm on a wall map, pushing thumbtacks into the map to mark its position.

The U.S. Weather Bureau released another storm advisory on Saturday night. The bureau ordered northeast storm warnings hoisted from Fort Pierce to Miami.

Around 5:00 Sunday morning, Ray Sheldon was awakened at his hotel room by a phone call from Gerald Kennedy of the U.S. Weather Bureau's Key West office. The meteorologist told Sheldon that conditions were going to get worse in the Keys during the next twenty-four hours and suggested he take the next ferry back to the work camps because ferry service probably would soon be stopped until the bad weather passed.[20]

Sheldon called Fred Ghent in Jacksonville to discuss what Kennedy had told him. At 8 a.m., Sheldon and his wife boarded the ferry at No Name Key to return to the work camps.

After finishing his phone call with Sheldon, Ghent called the Florida East Coast Railway's chief dispatcher in New Smyrna Beach and arranged to have extra passenger cars added to the southbound and northbound trains through the Keys later that day. Ghent's call was the first of a series of calls from work camps' officials to railroad officials to discuss evacuating the veterans from the Keys. But no one actually gave an order for the evacuation train, and FEC officials said later that they would not assemble a train until a definite order had been given.[21]

In Miami, U.S. Coast Guard officers had been closely watching the Weather Bureau advisories, and on Sunday morning they decided to get the Coast Guard base at Dinner Key ready for rough weather. And although the Weather Bureau advisories weren't yet predicting a hurricane in the area, a Coast Guard airplane piloted by Lieutenant (j. g.) William Clemmer took off loaded with special hurricane warnings to be dropped to holiday boaters in the Keys. When Clemmer spotted boaters, he and his crew dropped an orange streamer attached to a block of wood. The streamer had the words "hurricane warning" printed on it.

Clemmer dropped all of his warnings, and then headed back to Dinner Key for more. He had decided not to drop any warnings at the veterans' work camps. He didn't want to cause alarm there, and he assumed the camp administrators were doing what was necessary to protect their men.

While holiday fishing boats were heeding Clemmer's warnings and leaving the Keys, Sam Cutler and Eugene Pattison, a clerk in the work camps' office, went down to Lower Matecumbe Key to talk to Ed Sheeran, who was supervising the highway that would someday link Miami to Key West. Cutler had been closely monitoring the Weather Bureau's advisories for almost twenty-four hours, and he wanted to get Sheeran's take on the situation.

"I have never been through a hurricane, and never knew what they were," Cutler said later. "I didn't feel that I was in a position to judge on a matter of that sort, but I was fearful of the safety of the men."[22]

Sheeran had been watching the Weather Bureau bulletins, but he'd also been getting barometric pressure readings from Key West and Miami. He was convinced the storm was closer than the Weather Bureau thought and would strike them sometime Monday, and he gave Cutler a bleak assessment.

"I said it looked pretty bad to me," Sheeran said later. "It was squally and the barometer kept dropping. I asked Mr. Cutler if he'd ordered a train but he said 'No,' as he could get it on three hours' notice."

Sheeran, who had seen what could happen when hurricane warnings were ignored in the Keys, told Cutler and Pattison that they needed to get ready for trouble.

"I told them they had a bad storm coming and they better have the men out of there because it was a bad place for them," Sheeran said.[23]

Cutler was affected by Sheeran's warning, and when he got back to his office, he called Fred Ghent.

Cutler repeated Sheeran's warnings and suggested that the veterans be evacuated from the Keys. Ghent told Cutler that Sheldon was on his way back from Key West and would take charge when he arrived.[24]

Out on Florida Bay, however, the ferry carrying Sheldon and his wife had run into problems. One of the ferry's propeller shafts broke, dramatically slowing its speed. The ferry would be hours late arriving at Lower Matecumbe Key.[25]

As the ferry finally pulled into its slip around 4 p.m., the U.S. Weather Bureau issued a new advisory on the storm. The Weather Bureau had upgraded it to a hurricane. The advisory said the storm was just off the coast of Cuba, about 275 miles east of Havana.

But Cuban meteorologists were puzzled. Barometers there had been rising since the previous day, an indication that the storm could be

moving away from Cuba. Still, Cuban authorities decided to take no chances. A special train was sent to evacuate the residents of Isabela des Agua on Cuba's northern coast.[26]

When Ray Sheldon got back to his office at the Hotel Matecumbe, he assembled his staff for a meeting.

"The majority of us thought they would go ahead and order out the train so we could get the men out," said D. A. Malcolm, the auditor for the camps.[27]

But Sheldon was not impressed. "He gave us to understand that he was in charge and would take care of the situation," Malcolm said.

Sheldon spent Sunday evening in his office by the telephone. To pass the time, he played cards with his wife, Camp 1 superintendent William Hardaker, and Hardaker's wife. Occasionally, Sheldon put down his cards to place or accept phone calls. He spoke to P. L. Gaddis, a district superintendent for Florida East Coast Railway, about how long it would take to get a special train to the Keys. But Sheldon and Gaddis apparently misunderstood each other. Sheldon asked Gaddis if a train could be in the Keys four hours after it was ordered. Gaddis said yes, but later said he meant that a train could be in the Keys in four hours if a locomotive was available that already had sufficient steam built up.[28]

Sheldon, however, apparently hung up the phone thinking that he could order a special train at any time and expect it to arrive four hours later. It was a fatal misunderstanding.

Around 10:30 p.m., meteorologist Ernest Carson at the U.S. Weather Bureau's Miami office called Sheldon's office. Carson said it would be safe to stay in the Keys until Monday morning and promised to call back if anything changed before then.

The card game broke up, and Sheldon and his wife left the office to go to bed. Sheldon told two of his clerks to sleep on cots in his office in case the Weather Bureau called during the night.

The Weather Bureau did indeed call. Clerk Robert Ayer took the call around 3:30 a.m. The Weather Bureau's latest advisory warned that the storm would pass through the Florida Straits Monday with hurricane force winds at its center. The Keys would experience unusually high tides and gale-force winds later Monday.[29]

Out in the Florida Straits, the storm was undergoing a dramatic transformation from a minimal hurricane to a monster. In less than 36

hours, the storm's strongest winds would increase from about 85 miles an hour to better than 160 miles an hour.

But the storm also was slowing and making a gradual turn northward. When a hurricane does this it usually weakens because its slower speed gives it more time to churn up deeper, cooler water, and the cooler water deprives the storm of its fuel.

Occasionally, however, a hurricane explodes while it's making this slow turn. Research meteorologists now think that this dramatic intensification could be caused by large, deep pockets of unusually warm water that form in the late summer in the Gulf of Mexico. Sometimes these pockets drift into the Straits of Florida.

Meteorologist Chris Landsea of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration thinks the Labor Day hurricane of 1935 may have crossed one of these deep, warm-water pockets as it made its turn in the Straits of Florida. When the storm came out of its turn, it was headed for the Florida Keys, and it had become a hurricane unlike anything that had ever been seen.[30]

Albert Buck, a labor foreman at Camp 1 from Kinston, North Carolina, got up early Monday morning to check the weather.

"I got up at 5:30 and I looked at the barometer and stayed with the barometer for an hour," Buck said. "During that hour the barometer dropped five points."

And the low clouds hanging over the Atlantic Ocean seemed ominous. "Monday morning, the clouds looked so muddy and so close until it looked like you could reach out and get hold of them," he said.[31]

But the U.S. Weather Bureau was still reporting that the center of the hurricane was just off the coast of Cuba and headed for Havana. And when Ray Sheldon spoke with meteorologist Ernest Carson in Miami shortly after 8 a.m., Carson told him that the storm posed no immediate danger to the Keys.

Sheldon also talked with William Johns, a reporter for the *Miami Daily News* who called around 9:30 a.m.

"What are you going to do about this evacuation in case that storm hits?" Johns asked.[32]

"I have two trains waiting in Miami that can get down here on about three or four hours' notice, and in case it gets too bad, why, we will send for them," Sheldon said.[33]

That afternoon, the *Miami Daily News* published a story saying work camp officials had two trains ready and waiting in Miami to evacuate the veterans.

But the waiting trains didn't exist. They were a figment of Sheldon's imagination, created by his and Ghent's misunderstandings of their conversations with Florida East Coast Railway officials.

In Washington, D.C., Perry Fellows, chief engineer for the FERA, was having breakfast when he noticed a small front-page story in the *Washington Post* with an attention-grabbing headline: "Hurricane Heads Toward Florida."

The *Post* story reported that the hurricane was in the Straits of Florida. Although it was a holiday, Fellows decided he'd better go to his office to check on the situation in the Florida Keys.

Fellows got to his office in downtown Washington around 9:30 a.m. and talked with Aubrey Williams, an assistant to Works Progress Administration director Harry Hopkins. They decided to make sure the veterans were being evacuated from the Keys.

Around 11 a.m., Fellows finally reached Conrad Van Hyning, the director of the Florida Emergency Relief Administration. Fellows said he told Van Hyning to order the veterans to be evacuated right away. Van Hyning couldn't get through to Sheldon, however, so he called M. E. Gilfond, a Florida ERA administrator in Key West, and told him to relay the message to Sheldon to get the veterans out of the Keys.[34]

But when Gilfond reached Sheldon around 11:45 a.m. and told him to move the veterans out, Sheldon wouldn't budge even though he'd been ordered to evacuate by officials far up the chain of command. He told Gilfond he was watching his barometer and keeping tabs on the path of the storm, and "at the first sign of danger we would order the train out."

What Sheldon didn't realize, however, was that when the "first sign of danger" appeared, it could be too late to move the men to safety.

A few minutes after talking to Gilfond, Sheldon started trying to reach Fred Ghent in Jacksonville, but Ghent was taking a long lunch break.[35]

At 1:30 p.m., the U.S. Weather Bureau issued a hurricane warning for Key West. Seven minutes later, Ghent finally returned Sheldon's phone call. Sheldon told his boss that his barometer was falling rapidly and said the evacuation train should be ordered immediately.

At 2:05 p.m., Ghent reached F. L. Aitcheson, the Florida East Coast Railway's assistant superintendent, at his home in Jacksonville. Ghent told Aitcheson that he wanted a special train sent to the work camps in the Keys, and Aitcheson said it would be there by 6:30 p.m.[36]

Cuban weather observers were disagreeing about the position of the hurricane. In Havana, police had gone door-to-door warning residents of the approaching storm. But barometers had been rising for more than twenty-four hours.

Finally, Cuban officials came up with a bold plan to get a fix on the storm's position. They would send a fighter plane out to find it. Captain Leonard Povey, an American who was a flight instructor in the Cuban army air force, drew the assignment.

Povey took off on his dangerous assignment Monday afternoon, and soon found the hurricane.[37]

"It appeared to be a cone-shaped body of clouds, inverted, rising to an altitude of 12,000 feet," Povey said later. "The waves in the sea below broke against each other like (they were) striking a sea wall."

Povey noted that the hurricane was well north of the position being given by the U.S. Weather Bureau. Havana was no longer in danger, but the Florida Keys were on the bull's-eye.[38]

The hurricane was well north of the position being given by the U.S. Weather Bureau. Havana was no longer in danger, but the Florida Keys were on the bull's-eye. HASF 1983-34-12.

Around 4:25 p.m., engineer J. J. Haycraft opened the throttle of FEC locomotive #447, and the evacuation train rolled out of the Florida East Coast Railway's yard in Miami. But Haycraft had to bring the train to a halt almost immediately. A railroad drawbridge had been raised to allow holiday pleasure boats to pass.[39]

As the FEC train idled on the tracks, the U.S. Weather Bureau issued a new and chilling advisory. The hurricane was "apparently moving northwestward towards Florida Keys," the bulletin said.

Around 5:15 p.m., the evacuation train stopped again in Homestead, where the FEC had a locomotive turntable. Train master George Branch and engineer Haycraft had decided to turn around the locomotive. While the train was stopped, *Miami Daily News* reporter William Johns and several veterans boarded the train.[40]

The train resumed its journey around 5:30 p.m. The locomotive had been turned around so that its nose was coupled to the front of the train. The locomotive was still at the head of the train, but it was now traveling backwards as it pulled the train southward. This configuration would allow the locomotive to be moved to the other end of the train in the Keys. There was no turntable in the Keys, but Haycraft could stop the train at a sidetrack. The train crew could uncouple the locomotive, and Haycraft could use the sidetrack to move the locomotive to the other end of the train. The locomotive would then be re-coupled to the other end of the train. The locomotive's headlight would then be pointing northward, illuminating the tracks as it pulled the train out of the Keys.

At the Alligator Reef Lighthouse about four miles offshore from Upper Matecumbe Key, keeper Jones Pervis and his assistants were getting ready for rough weather when assistant keeper James Duncan saw a gigantic wave rolling toward them. Duncan shouted a warning, and the three men ran into the lighthouse and frantically climbed up the ladder.

The huge wave barreled past the lighthouse, leaving the keepers soaked but alive.[41]

At Camp 1, Leroy J. McMullen, a veteran from Akron, Ohio, was talking about the storm with four friends in his cabin when the massive wave rolled onto Windley Key.

"We'd been telling ourselves how much better this was than France," McMullen said. "I guess we shouldn't have been bragging. The next minute we were underwater. I guess a mountain wave hit us."

The surge plowed into the immobilized evacuation train. The passenger cars, which weighed about 120 tons each, were lifted and hurled off the tracks like a child's toy. HASF 256-38 MATLACK.

The worsening storm also created problems for the rescue train. The winds took down a trackside tower crane on Windley Key, and the crane's steel cable was hurled across the tracks. When the locomotive crossed the cable around 6:50 p.m., it became entangled with the train and jerked it to a halt. It took the train crew about eighty minutes to untangle the cable so the train could resume its trip.

The winds also started destroying larger buildings. At Camp 3, the roof of the mess hall was yanked off the building. In Islamorada, the train station started coming to pieces, and Ray Sheldon and others who'd been awaiting the evacuation train climbed into a boxcar parked on a nearby sidetrack.[42]

A dozen or so other men were in the boxcar with Sheldon as the hurricane howled around them. As the men waited for the evacuation train, Sheldon said repeatedly that he'd done everything he could to get the veterans to safety.[43]

Ray Sheldon saw a glimmer of hope on the railroad tracks. Through the cracks in the boxcar slats, he saw a light. The evacuation train had at last arrived at Islamorada.

Sheldon climbed down from the boxcar and slogged through the water to the locomotive. When he left the boxcar, the water was ankle-deep. When he reached the locomotive, which was less than one hundred feet away, the water was waist deep.[44]

He tried to mask his fears as he climbed into the cab of the locomotive. "You're the man we've been looking for," he said to engineer J. J. Haycraft.

Sheldon told Haycraft that he wanted to take the train down to Lower Matecumbe Key and pick up the veterans at Camp 3. Then they'd work their way back up the islands to Camp 5 and Camp 1.

But when Haycraft tried to start the locomotive, nothing happened. The hurricane's fierce winds had blown one of its cars off the tracks, causing the train's air brakes to automatically lock.[45]

The surge plowed into the immobilized evacuation train. The passenger cars, which weighed about 120 tons each, were lifted and hurled off the tracks like a child's toy. Only the locomotive, which weighed about 160 tons, remained upright on the tracks.

The dozen or so men aboard the passenger cars were shaken and terrified, but no one was seriously injured.[46]

Had the storm surge simply swept past the Upper Keys and into Florida Bay, it still would have undoubtedly killed people. But the causeways built between the islands to support the railroad tracks made this surge even more deadly. When the water slammed into the causeways, it piled up, spread out and sent floodwaters across the island.

By 9 p.m., the tiny eye of the hurricane had reached the Upper Keys. At Camp 3 on Lower Matecumbe Key, the veterans who'd survived the first part of the storm said the wind stopped like someone had flipped a switch, and they could see stars overhead.[47]

A few minutes past 9 p.m., the veterans at Camp 3 heard a strange rustling sound. They realized the rustling was caused by a huge wave rushing toward them. The front side of the hurricane's eye had swept the ocean waters away from Lower Matecumbe Key, but when the eye passed and the wind shifted, the water rushed back toward the island.

About one hundred veterans were clinging to a railroad tanker car parked on a sidetrack near Camp 3. The returning water submerged the island, slammed into the tanker, and carried away perhaps twenty-five men.[48]

By 9:45 p.m., those who were still able to watch their barometers saw a long-awaited sight—the needles were rising. The worst part of the hurricane was moving away from them.[49]

Although the worst of the hurricane was well past the Keys by daybreak, the islands were still pounded by high winds and heavy rain on Tuesday, September 4. At daybreak on Wednesday, September 5, the Coast Guard had two seaplanes aloft for search and rescue operations. And would-be rescuers were gathering at Snake Creek. But the bridge from Plantation Key to Windley Key had been swept away by the storm, and Snake Creek had been turned into a raging torrent by the hurricane's floodwaters.[50]

National Guard troops also were arriving. A rescue effort—disorganized, chaotic, but determined—was underway.

The aftermath of the hurricane was horrifying. The official death toll from the hurricane was 408, but it may have been higher. Many victims were simply blown off the island and never seen again.

About 260 veterans were killed. Their corpses were everywhere—floating in the surf, entangled in the mangroves, protruding from the wreckage of the work camps. The rescue workers went about the grim task of collecting and trying to identify them.

After the fearsome storm on Matacombe Key, 1935. HASF 83-80-1.

President Roosevelt wanted the veterans killed in the storm to be interred at Arlington National Cemetery, but it was impossible to move the rapidly decomposing bodies that far. About 110 were sent to Miami and buried in a mass grave in Woodlawn Park Cemetery in the western portion of today's Little Havana. But Florida state health officials feared that collecting and transporting all of the bodies could create a serious threat to public health, and decided to cremate the rest of the storm victims in the Keys.

In Washington, D.C., Roosevelt Administration officials were shocked at the death toll in the work camps and were scrambling to contain a potential scandal. WPA director Harry Hopkins blamed the U.S. Weather Bureau for the tragedy, saying the hurricane advisories the bureau had issued weren't worded strongly enough to convey the danger of the storm. But Hopkins's statement was met with howls of protest, and some newspapers—especially in southern coastal states where residents were familiar with hurricanes—noted in editorials that the advisories had prompted their residents to take precautions.[51]

On Friday, September 6, 1935, Aubrey Williams, who was Hopkins's assistant, arrived in Miami with Colonel James Ijams. Williams was there to investigate the tragedy and write a report for President Roosevelt. Ijams's task was to organize a memorial service for the veterans who were to be buried in Woodlawn Park Cemetery.

Williams talked to perhaps a dozen people and examined a few documents. On Sunday night, September 8, as the veterans were being buried with much pomp and ceremony in Woodlawn, FDR was receiving Williams's report.

The WPA assistant director had concluded that no one was to blame for the veterans' deaths and the tragedy had been caused by "an act of God."

Williams's hasty report sparked outrage across the nation, and a flurry of other investigations followed. The Veterans of Foreign Wars conducted an investigation, as did the American Legion. Both investigations eventually concluded that camp administrators were responsible for the veterans' deaths.

There also was frustration in the Veterans Administration, where General Frank Hines, the VA's director, had been receiving an outpouring of letters from furious veterans and relatives of the men who'd been killed.

Hines sent for David Kennamer, a skilled and dogged VA investigator. Hines dispatched Kennamer to Florida with instructions to get to the bottom of the tragedy on the Keys. He authorized Kennamer to hire a team of assistant investigators and secretaries to help him.

WPA officials, however, were very uneasy about a VA investigator reexamining the veterans' deaths. They sent John Abt, a WPA attorney, to Florida. Abt's alleged purpose was to help Kennamer with the investigation, but privately, he saw his purpose to hinder the VA investigator.

Kennamer arrived in Miami on September 12, 1935, and went straight to work. During the coming two months, he and his assistants would take sworn statements from hundreds of people, including veterans who'd survived the hurricane and Florida ERA officials who'd been in charge of the work program in the state. He compiled thousands of pages of supporting documents.

On October 30, Kennamer turned in his report and documentation to General Frank Hines. It was a meticulous piece of work, hundreds of pages long.

Kennamer placed the blame for the veterans' deaths squarely on the Florida ERA officials. The investigator reasoned that Sheldon and others in charge of the Keys work camps knew that hurricanes posed a threat to the veterans' safety, and they knew they were responsible for coming up with a sound, effective plan to protect them.

But Ray Sheldon and Fred Ghent never followed through on the plan that would have been the simplest and most effective—making sure a train was available to get the veterans off the islands, Kennamer said.

Kennamer acknowledged that the hurricane advisories issued by the U.S. Weather Bureau "were not entirely accurate," but he also pointed out that the bulletins had warned of danger and were not as inaccurate as some people were saying.

Kennamer also laid out a theory as to why the work camps administrators had waited until the last possible moment to order an evacuation train instead of simply calling for the train a day or so before the hurricane was expected.

Dealing with the veterans under the best circumstances was difficult, and the circumstances in the work camps during the Labor Day weekend were far from the best. The men were angry and upset at the news that the work camps would soon be closed. And many of the approximately

four hundred men who'd remained in the camps during the weekend had been drinking heavily for two or three days.

Keeping these drunken, angry men under control while they were aboard a train would have been a nightmare, especially since Sheldon had only a half-dozen or so sheriff's deputies as his security force. So, Kennamer reasoned, Sheldon and Ghent had wanted to minimize the length of time the veterans would have to be aboard the train. They'd wanted to wait until the last possible moment to load them on the trains so that they could be hauled away from the camps for a few hours until the worst of the storm had passed, then brought back to the camps as quickly as possible.[52]

Unfortunately, Sheldon and Ghent had badly miscalculated.

General Frank Hines, the VA director, didn't make Kennamer's exhaustive report public, but he did give a copy to Representative John Rankin, a Democrat from Mississippi.

The conclusions of the American Legion and VFW investigations were being publicized, however. And FDR's political enemies were looking for an opportunity to hang a scandal around his neck as he was about to start his campaign for reelection. Author and Key West resident Ernest Hemingway, who detested the Roosevelt Administration, wrote a scathing essay for *The New Masses* magazine accusing FDR and his allies of murdering the veterans.

The *Chicago Tribune,* published by Roosevelt's old enemy Colonel Robert McCormick, published an editorial on September 12, 1935, saying that leaving the veterans on the Keys during hurricane season was "a piece of criminal folly committed by someone in Washington."

Questions about why the veterans hadn't been evacuated from the Keys were still swirling when the seventy-fourth Congress convened for its second session in January 1936. But a powerful Roosevelt ally was determined to quash those questions once and for all.

But in 1936, Rankin was an opportunistic ally of FDR and had traded several political favors with the president. He'd also been appointed to Roosevelt's reelection campaign committee.

In 1936, Rankin was chairman of the House Committee on World War Veterans' Legislation, and in this capacity he introduced a bill to compensate the families of the veterans who'd died in the Labor Day hurricane. The bill would go before his committee for review and a

recommendation. And as part of this review, Rankin would conduct hearings on the tragedy in the Keys.

On March 25, 1936, Rankin told a reporter for the *New York Times* that he intended to find out what had happened in the Keys. "There has been much criticism of the administration policy in this matter, and I intend to build up a record on just what happened," Rankin said.

But Rankin actually intended to compile a one-sided collection of facts and statements of varying degrees of accuracy that he could hold up as proof that the Roosevelt Administration was not responsible for the veterans' deaths.

Rankin's hearings got underway on March 26, 1936. His committee was composed of fourteen Democrats, including himself. There were six Republicans and one member of the Progressive Party on the panel.

In January 2002, John McAfee, an attorney in New Bern, North Carolina, who specializes in federal law, examined transcripts of the hearings conducted by Rankin. McAfee wrote two detailed legal opinions of Rankin's hearings based on his examination.

"Representative Rankin, we can see from the transcripts, was no fool," McAfee wrote. "He knew that to avoid the political damage of the Matecumbe devastation, he had to concentrate on presenting the public a version of events which assured voters that the Government took all reasonable precautions when it came to the safety of its honored soldiers...In hindsight, it appears that he was suppressing any opposing views to his own, and actually testified more than he questioned." [53]

The result was that Rankin—aided by Patman—built a "record" of events that excluded any evidence that Sheldon, Ghent, and other administrators had made mistakes. "Rankin and Patman clearly knew the rules of evidence, because they abused them quite deftly," McAfee wrote.[54]

Rankin wrapped up his hearings in May 1936 and sent a recommendation to the House of Representatives that the bill to compensate the families of the veterans killed in the hurricane be approved. His recommendation included a single paragraph saying that no one had been at fault for the tragedy.

Committee member Edith Nourse Rogers wrote a scathing minority opinion in which she said administrators showed "a surprising lack of judgment on the part of those responsible for the welfare of the men under their charge."

"This hurricane has been called an act of God," Rogers wrote. "God may be held responsible for this storm, but He cannot be blamed for leaving these men in the path of the storm, nor can He be blamed for depriving them of their only available method of leaving."[55]

But the Labor Day hurricane of 1935 began fading from public consciousness after Rankin's sham hearings ended. The astonishing power of the hurricane—and the tragedy it caused—became a permanent part of the collective memory of Keys residents, however.

Meteorologists continued to study data about the hurricane, starting with the barometer belonging to Ivar Olsen, who'd ridden out the hurricane aboard his boat on Long Key. The U.S. Weather Bureau tested Olsen's barometer after the hurricane and determined it was a reliable instrument capable of giving accurate readings. They also determined that Olsen's barometer had recorded a barometric pressure reading of 26.35 inches—the lowest official reading of any hurricane that has struck the U.S. Based on their findings from Olsen's barometer, the Labor Day hurricane of 1935 is still considered the most intense hurricane to make landfall in the U.S.[56]

Notes

[1] Jerry Wilkinson, unpublished manuscript based on the Florida census of the Florida Keys for 1935, no date, in the possession of Jerry Wilkinson, president of the Historical Preservation Society of the Upper Keys, Tavernier, Florida.

[2] Richard E. Gentry, "Early Families of Upper Matecumbe," *Tequesta*, 34 (1974), 57.

[3] Interview by author with Bernard Russell, Islamorada, Florida, 6 December 1996.

[4] Garry Boulard, "State of Emergency: Key West in the Great Depression," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, 67 (October 1988), 166.

[5] Ibid, 169.

[6] Ibid, 166.

[7] Ibid.

[8] William Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream: A Narrative History of America 1932-1972* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1973), 1.

[9] No Author, "Forgotten child," *Time*, 19 (30 May 1932), 14.

[10] Transcript of meeting of Ed Neff, Col. G. S. Robinson, and W. H. D. Hinchman, 3 December 1934; Records Group 69 006.1, Works Progress Administration Selected Records Relating to the 1935 Florida Hurricane, National Archives, College Park, Md.

[11] W.H.D. Hinchman, letter to Jacob Baker, assistant administrator of Federal Emergency Relief Administration, 25 March 1916; Records Group 69 006.1, Works Progress Administration Selected Records Relating to the 1935 Florida Hurricane, National Archives, College Park, Md.

[12] R.M. Porter,"Strike at the Veterans' work camps, Florida," memorandum to a "Mr. Baker," 9 March 1935, Records Group 69 006.1, Works Progress Administration, Selected Records Relating to the 1935 Florida Hurricane, National Archives, College Park, Md.

[13] Memorandum to a "Mr. Conner" from Fred Ghent, 2 March 1935; Records Group 69 006.1, Works Progress Administration Selected Records Relating to the 1935 Florida Hurricane, National Archives, College Park, Md.

[14] *Key Veteran News*, 4 May 1935.

[15] Statement of Joseph Fecteau, "Florida Hurricane Disaster, Hearings before the Committee on World War Veterans' Legislation, House of

Representatives, Seventy-Fourth Congress, Second Session on H.R. 9486," 473.

[16] Interview by author of Bernard Russell, Islamorada, Florida, 12 April 1997.

[17] Statement of Sam Cutler, Records Group 69 006.1, Works Progress Administration Selected Records Relating to the 1935 Florida Hurricane, National Archives, College Park, Md.

[18] Statement of Ray Sheldon, Records Group 69 006.1, Works Progress Administration Selected Records Relating to the 1935 Florida Hurricane, National Archives, College Park, Md.

[19] Statement of Fred Ghent, Records Group 69 006.1, Works Progress Administration.

[20] Statement of Ray Sheldon, Records Group 69 006.1, Works Progress Administration.

[21] Statement of Fred Ghent, Records Group 69 006.1, Works Progress Administration Selected Records Relating to the 1935 Florida Hurricane, National Archives, College Park, Md.

[22] Statement of Sam Cutler, Records Group 69 006.1, Works Progress Administration Selected Records Relating to the 1935 Florida Hurricane, National Archives, College Park, Md.

[23] Statement of Ed Sheeran, Records Group 69 006.1, Works Progress Administration Selected Records Relating to the 1935 Florida Hurricane, National Archives, College Park, Md.

[24] Statement of Fred Ghent, Records Group 69 006.1, Works Progress Administration.

[25] Statement of William Albury, Records Group 69 006.1, Works Progress Administration Selected Records Relating to the 1935 Florida Hurricane, National Archives, College Park, Md.

[26] No author, "Hurricane Sweeps Coast of Florida with 80 mile wind," *Havana Post*, 3 September 1935, 1.

[27] Statement of D. A. Malcolm, Records Group 69 006.1, Works Progress Administration Selected Records Relating to the 1935 Florida Hurricane, National Archives, College Park, Md.

[28] Statements of Ray Sheldon and William A. Hardaker, Records Group 69 006.1, Works Progress Administration Selected Records Relating to the 1935 Florida Hurricane, National Archives, College Park, Md.

[29] Statement of Robert Ayer, Records Group 69 006.1, Works Progress Administration Selected Records Relating to the 1935 Florida

Hurricane, National Archives, College Park, Md.

[30] Telephone interview by author of Chris Landsea, 21 January 2000.

[31] Statement of Albert Buck, Records Group 69 006.1, Works Progress Administration Selected Records Relating to the 1935 Florida Hurricane, National Archives, College Park, Md.

[32] Statement of William Johns, Records Group 69 006.1, Works Progress Administration Selected Records Relating to the 1935 Florida Hurricane, National Archives, College Park, Md.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Statement of Conrad Van Hyning, Records Group 69 006.1, Works Progress Administration Selected Records Relating to the 1935 Florida Hurricane, National Archives, College Park, Md.

[35] Statement of Ray Sheldon, Records Group 69 006.1, Works Progress Administration.

[36] Statement of Fred Ghent, Records Group 69 006.1, Works Progress Administration.

[37] No Author, "Hurricane Sweeps Coast of Florida," *Havana Post*, 3 September 1935, 1.

[38] No Author, "Cubans Plan Aerial Hurricane Patrols," *Miami Herald*, 23 September 1935; No Author, "Aerial Patrol May Ride Herd On Hurricanes," *St. Petersburg Times*, 23 September 1935; No Author, "Storm Patrol Talked In Cuba," *Orlando Sentinel*, 23 September 1935.

[39] J. J. Haycraft, "Engineer Tells of Train Wreck," *Miami Daily News*, 5 September 1935, 11.

[40] Statement of William Johns, Records Group 69 006.1, Works Progress Administration.

[41] Journal of the Light Station at Alligator Reef, 2 September 1935; from the collection of the Historical Preservation Society of the Upper Keys, Tavernier, Florida.

[42] Statement of Ray Sheldon, Records Group 69 006.1, Works Progress Administration.

[43] Statement of John Good, Records Group 69 006.1, Works Progress Administration Selected Records Relating to the 1935 Florida Hurricane, National Archives, College Park, Md.

[44] Statement of Ray Sheldon, Records Group 69 006.1, Works Progress Administration Selected Records Relating to the 1935 Florida Hurricane, National Archives, College Park, Md.

[45] Haycraft, "Engineer Tells," *Miami Daily News*, 5 September 1935, 11.
[46] Statement of William Johns, Records Group 69 006.1, Works Progress Administration Selected Records Relating to the 1935 Florida Hurricane, National Archives, College Park, Md.
[47] Statement of Arthur Mewshaw, Records Group 69 006.1, Works Progress Administration Selected Records Relating to the 1935 Florida Hurricane, National Archives, College Park, Md.
[48] Statement of Arthur Mewshaw, Records Group 69 006.1, Works Progress Administration.
[49] McDonald, "The Hurricane," *Monthly Weather Review*, 63 (September 1935), 269.
[50] "Chronological List of Events," Records Group 26, Records of the U.S. Coast Guard, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
[51] Felix Bruner, "Hopkins Scores Weather Report in Storm Deaths," *Washington Post*, 6 September 1935.
[52] David Kennamer, Confidential Report of Investigations regarding Florida hurricane disaster, 30 October 1935; Records Group 15, Subgroup 5-3, "Veterans Administration: Records of Investigation of Damage to Veterans Camps Caused by Hurricane of September 2, 1935," National Archives, Washington, D.C.
[53] Robert J. McAfee, esquire, letter to author, entitled "Re. Labor Day Hurricane of 1935 Congressional Hearings," 14 January 2002.
[54] Robert J. McAfee, esquire, letter to author, "Re. Labor Day Hurricane of 1935 Congressional Hearings," by Robert J. McAfee, attorney at law, 17 January 2002.
[55] Congressional Record, 80, Part 8, 28 May 1936 to 6 June 1936, 9.
[56] W.F. McDonald, "Lowest Barometer Reading in the Florida Keys Storm of September 2, 1935," *Monthly Weather Review* 63 (October 1935), 295.