

# THE OCTOBER 1947 “HURRICANE”

## DISASTER ON TOP OF DISASTER

by MARJORIE DICKEY PARSONS

A few days earlier I returned to Fort Lauderdale after an absence of several months, just in time to experience the climax of the 1947 hurricane season — the ninth of the year. There was a lot of water and wading, not along or in the Atlantic Ocean, but on the main streets of 1947 Fort Lauderdale. Intervening years have brought so many changes that it seems wise to recall that era in the city's history.

The post-World War II recovery was beginning to impact Fort Lauderdale, and a “return to normalcy” brought welcomed changes. Wartime blackouts were over. The checkpoints, manned by armed sentries on bridges leading to Fort Lauderdale and Broward beaches, were gone; people moved to and from the beaches freely. Purchases of meat, shoes, gasoline, and tires could be made *without* ration coupons. Automobiles were rolling from assembly lines again, and new cars were in evidence. An air of optimism pervaded the area. Partially developed subdivisions, abandoned after the collapse of the 1920s land boom followed by the 1926 hurricane, were being reactivated with new capital. A steamroller of new development was just beginning to gain momentum.

When the voter registration books in Fort Lauderdale closed on October 10, 1947, there were 8,293 voters in the city qualified to vote in the city election scheduled later in the month.

The television revolution had not engulfed the country. One did *not* “see” the news and weather. Such reports came via radio. Special newspaper editions informed people of unusual and late-breaking events. The terms “aquifers” and “environmental concerns” were rarely seen in news reporting. Flood control was, however, a topic of intense interest in south Florida. The state conservation officer for the region was Fred Cabot. In the September 18, 1947, edition of the *Fort Lauderdale News and Evening Sentinel*, there was a picture of Officer Cabot showing young turtles, appar-

ently hatched on Broward beaches, which were washed ashore by the September 17, 1947, hurricane with its winds exceeding 100 miles per hour.

The use of “hurricane-hunter” planes had begun in the early 1940s, but the war had clamped necessary radio silence over the Atlantic, and few weather reports were received from ships at sea during wartime. Ten hurricanes were reported in 1943 and a like number in 1944 and 1945 as well. Florida was in the path of two of the six hurricanes of 1946. Nineteen forty-seven was another year of many storms.<sup>1</sup>

*As many articles in past issues of Broward Legacy have demonstrated, Broward County is an area shaped by its waters and man's efforts to utilize and control them. Perhaps the greatest display of destructive power unleashed on the county by water was provided by the storms and resulting floods in the fall of 1947. This natural disaster, unwittingly aided by man's attempts to master nature, forced county and state officials to seek more effective means of flood control, ultimately resulting in the creation of the Central and Southern Florida Flood Control District (now the South Florida Water Management District).*

*Marjorie Dickey Parsons, former executive director of the Fort Lauderdale Historical Society, presents the story of the 1947 storms and their aftermath from two perspectives. First, she outlines the background of post-World War II Fort Lauderdale and recounts the history of the 1947 hurricane season and flooding problems as detailed in contemporary newspaper accounts. Second, she recalls her personal experiences during the October 11-12 storm and in the days which followed. Mrs. Parsons, a longtime Fort Lauderdale resident and graduate of Fort Lauderdale High School, currently resides in Kingsland, Georgia.*

There were no satellites to assist the U.S. Weather Service in predicting weather conditions and hurricane movements. Most people had barometers in their homes which were watched closely. Weather forecasters relied heavily on barometric pressure readings. When pressures began to drop, storm and hurricane warnings were issued and last-minute preparations began. Tropical storms were not given names. In fact, by today's standards, the storm on October 11-12, 1947, was not even a hurricane.

Most south Floridians were hurricane-conscious in 1947, and they demonstrated that awareness. People kept extra canned foods, sterno stoves, batteries for flashlights and radios, etc., on hand during the "storm season." Many homes were designed with decorative window shutters which could convert to storm shutters easily. The Burdines store, advertising for new employees in September 1947, had been completed at the corner of Andrews Avenue and Southwest Second Street. It had an innovative feature: the permanent marquee around the store had metal underliners which could be released, dropped over the plate glass windows, and then hooked in place to protect the glass and merchandise. (Near the Burdines ad was that of a grocery advertising a one pound can of coffee for thirty-nine cents.)

Nineteen forty-seven was a wet year. On August 8, 1947, an article datelined in Titusville reported forty to forty-five inches of rain for the year, versus an average of twenty-eight inches.<sup>2</sup>

An item titled "Floods Cause 250 Families to Flee Camp," with an October 4, 1947, Miami dateline, reported frequent deluges since the mid-September hurricane. Miami reported ten inches of rain the prior week, and a total of 13.6 for September versus a normal fall of eight inches. The article stated that children were wading to school in Davie, and a trailer park had to be evacuated. Heavy losses of citrus crops were reported.<sup>3</sup> Sheriff Walter Clark of Broward County was quoted as saying, "Fifty miles of water from the Everglades to the north is moving this way." Further, street damage was reported to be heavy at that time. Hundreds of people in Fort Lauderdale had been inoculated against typhoid. In Fort Lauderdale the Naval Air Station was set up as a refuge station.

Some meteorological research was in progress on hurricanes, and experiments were being developed which would, hopefully, diminish the devastation from the unusually heavy rainfall which normally accompanied such storms.

On September 7, 1947, this headline was found:

"Scientific Attempts to Break Hurricanes Await Next Storm."<sup>4</sup> The United Press story was datelined at Miami on September 6, and states:

"Hurricane Hunters" are awaiting the opportunity to . . . use "hurricane busters."

The next great tropical storm to whirl through the Atlantic, the Caribbean or the Gulf of Mexico will be dusted with carbon dioxide (dry ice), silver iodide or some other crystal which — perhaps — will condense the water vapors, cause a record-smashing rainfall at sea, and dissipate the great swirling mass.

It will be a cautious experiment

graph the effects of "seeding" by the weather-science plane.

Only a little of the chemicals will be fed into the storm the first day, then photographs and observations will be analyzed before a heavier attack is made. The "busting" efforts will be progressively heavier until scientists and Navy men know what the effect will be . . .

What will happen if all or part of this energy were released at once by a hurricane buster? It would dump 20 inches or so of rain on the surface beneath the storm, but . . . the effect isn't yet known. That is why Navy men and scientists are proceeding cautiously.

(It is not known whether the above



Flooded citrus groves in the Davie area, 1947.

at first, because nobody quite knows what will happen when the tremendous energies stored completely in a great hurricane is tackled. A special B-17 weather-science plane is on the ground at Schenectady, N.Y. awaiting the word that a hurricane has formed. The plane is especially equipped for "seeding" chemicals into a cloud, like a farmer planting wheat.

When the time comes, it will fly into one of the great storms, accompanied by one or more "hurricane hunter" planes from the Miami Naval Air Station. The Miami plane will fly above the storm to photo-

described experiment was tried during the September 17, 1947, hurricane which came into Broward County.)

During the ninth hurricane of 1947, a dry ice experiment was attempted in an effort to dissipate the hurricane. This fact was well publicized. After the deluge which took place October 11-12, there was much local discussion as to why the results of the experiment were not released. Perhaps it was not widely known that the Weather Service had stated it only hoped that the heavy rainfall would occur over open waters. Such experiments were discontinued in the 1960s.

The excessive rain and water in the

It will be very difficult to predict the exact amount of the damage that will be done by the storm. It is expected that the damage will be heavy in the vicinity of Broward County. It is expected that the damage will be heavy in the vicinity of Broward County. It is expected that the damage will be heavy in the vicinity of Broward County.

Smile In The News. Smiling pictures of people are a feature of the news. It is a feature of the news. It is a feature of the news. It is a feature of the news. It is a feature of the news.

# STORM HEADS TOWARD FLORIDA

## Dike Repair Fund Granted

### DAVIE AREA EVACUATION PREDICTED

Flood waters continue to rise steadily. Wholesale evacuation of the Davie area, even by many of the old time residents, was predicted today by Walter Scaring, pioneer grower, as flood waters continue to rise steadily in the vicinity of the city.

### \$5,000 Allotted By Army

Extra \$10,000 Expected To Dredge River. Some measure of almost immediate relief from flood waters in Broward county is expected to result from approval today by Col. Willie Tracy, district army engineer, Jacksonville, of a program to dredge the river.



BLOODY WARNING

### THE WORLD TODAY

NEWS BULLETINS

#### FLOOD WATER DIVERSION REFUSED

At 1 p. m. The Daily News was advised by C. Kay Davis, engineer for the Broward drainage district, that Lamer Johnson, engineer for the Everglades drainage district, had refused to divert flood waters pouring down the north New river canal from Palm Beach county. Davis said the water could be diverted by putting boards in the locks at 25-Mile bend.

#### FIRST INDICATION OF STORM

First indication that the present storm had passed over Cuba and was headed for Florida's mainland arrived at noon today when a driving rainstorm drenched the downtown area and soaked the already waterlogged streets. The storm, at 12:30 p. m. was located about 80 miles southeast of Key West, the weather bureau advised.

#### ARAB STUDY MILITARY MEASURES

### DISTILLERY SHUTDOWN APPROVED

#### Action Planned To Save Grain For Europe

WASHINGTON (AP)—President Truman's citizens food committee said today that a clear majority of the nation's major distillers has agreed to a 30-day shutdown to save grain for Europe.

Of 30 companies represented here Wednesday, union representative Charles Luskman proposed the shutdown, "if you agree on the spot. A spokesman for Luskman reported later that his own firm voted their approval yesterday.

One of the managers here under protest, J. A. Scullion, announced the shutdown would include all manufacturers representing 50 percent of the industry, warned that the wheat market

### Tropical Blast Expected To Hit Near Fort Myers

Top Winds Of 60 Miles An Hour Reported In Disturbance Loaded With Heavy Rain

A small tropical storm with top winds of 60 miles an hour and loaded with rain moved slowly across the Florida straits today and is expected to enter Florida in the Fort Myers vicinity tonight, the weather bureau announced. Chief Forecaster Gray Norton said the storm would pass between Key West and the Dry Tortugas islands this afternoon.

### 'Be Prepared' --If Hurricane Happens Along

Northwest storm heading west from Darwin, South, will probably avoid the peninsula to Florida and, with warning, may be headed for the entire peninsula.

fall of 1947 was well publicized. The Fort Lauderdale Daily News headline on October 10, 1947, proclaimed that the West Dixie Highway was proposed as the "Last Stand." Engineer J. O. Brenda of the Old Plantation District said it might become necessary to abandon and evacuate all Broward County lands west of West Dixie Highway (now U.S. 441). He is quoted as stating, "Most of the dikes west of West Dixie Hwy. are already broken and useless . . . although Road 84 is still holding thus far." And, the worst was yet to come!

The October 11, 1947, Fort Lauderdale Daily News carried this bold print on its first page:

### TROPICAL BLAST EXPECTED TO HIT NEAR FORT MYERS

Top Winds of 60 Miles an Hour Reported in Disturbance

Loaded With Heavy Rain

A prominent article on the front page was titled "Be Prepared — If Hurricane Happens Along."

That day Fort Lauderdale residents listened for the latest forecasts. The early evening radio news contained no indication that the storm might be veering eastward across the state. News had not been sufficiently omi-

nous for homeowners to begin the chore of boarding up their homes, drawing extra supplies of water, and making other last minute preparations.

In the absence of a warning of imminent danger, I blissfully headed toward the Warnor Theater, 122 East Las Olas Boulevard, to see Joan Caulfield and William Holden in "Dear



The Warnor Theater on Las Olas Boulevard in the late 1940s (above), and a newspaper advertisement for the movie "Dear Ruth," which played there the night of October 11, 1947.

# Warnor

Open Daily 12:45 P. M.  
Mat 44c, Eve. 50c, Kids 20c  
Including Tax

**TODAY and SAT.!**

JOAN  
AULFIELD  
WILLIAM  
HOLDEN

Dear  
Ruth

MONA FREEMAN



ALSO LATEST NEWS

SUN. THRU TUES.

BARBARA STANWYCK    DAVID NIVEN

— in —

**"THE OTHER LOVE"**





jalousie shutters protected the front porch screens. The torrential rains made the job more difficult. Before he finished, he was soaked to the skin and *the pockets of his coat were filled with water.* The front porch had a very wet floor from his soaked garments.

Winds did not achieve high and devastating velocities, but there was widespread damage to shrubbery. The rains ceased by the following day. Fort Lauderdale had been called the "Venice of America" — in the glamorous sense of that term. But, there was little glamor in seeing streets under water the next day.

The *Fort Lauderdale News and Evening Sentinel*, for Monday, October 13, 1947, had this headline in one and one-quarter inch letters.

### DAVIE, FORT LAUDERDALE HANDED STAGGERING BLOW BY BIG STORM

#### Damage Bill Totals Millions in County

#### 12 to 15 Inches of Rain Hits Area During Weekend Flooding City, Adding to Davie Woes . . .

*The heavy rainfall, whipped by violent gusts of wind, came as all sections of the battered county were cleaning up debris from the Sept. 17 hurricane and were attempting to stem the flow of high water pouring in from the Everglades. New River overflowed its banks at each high tide.*

*No accurate estimate of damage was compiled. The \$10,000,000 estimate of citrus, vegetable crop, dairy and cattle herds compiled 10 days ago may be doubled. Up to 90 percent of the Davie citrus groves are lost, new beans planted in the rich Pompano Beach-Deerfield Beach farming section were drowned out, water rose higher and higher around weakened dairy cows and cattle.*

*Property damage from the flood will far exceed the loss from the Sept. 17 hurricane.*

...

*The tropical storm which developed into a hurricane late Saturday afternoon and swept across south Florida came after little warning. Very few places were boarded up. Even then little good was accomplished.*

...

Principal damage was from the water not the wind. I do not recall how long the city was without electricity or

telephone service. Our family made no attempt to drive anywhere for several days. Florida storms, then as now, receive wide publicity, and distant loved ones are anxious. So, it was decided to wire relatives that we were safe. The Western Union office was on Southwest First Avenue about a half a block north of New River.

An old pair of shoes with heavy wedged soles was selected for wading to the Western Union. There were some very deep places, and the murky waters prevented seeing what one might step on which would penetrate a thinner sole. There were no injuries, however, as I made the trip slowly and cautiously. That trip was the "last mile" for those shoes.

On October 19, 1947, a cousin of my father and his family, from Harlingen, Texas, came to Fort Lauderdale as previously planned. The accompanying picture was taken by them, and only came into the writer's possession recently.

On October 18, 1947, another article appeared, datelined October 17, from Fort Lauderdale reporting that the county engineer said that four days of bright sunshine was the longest sunny spell since the September 1st hurricane.<sup>5</sup> It was reported that the city commission met with civic leaders and agreed to employ a qualified engineer versed in flood control work to protect the health and property of the city. William J. Kelley was serving as flood control coordinator then.

The deluge which fell October 11-12 was not one isolated downpour during a hurricane to which the resulting devastation can be attributed. In fact,

the fifteen or so inches of rain on October 11-12 compounded the already existing flood conditions described by Sheriff Walter Clark a week earlier as "Fifty miles of water from the Everglades to the north moving this way." I recall talk of boring wells in the Davie area of the county to what was said to be "ocean current" to help drain the area, but with no positive results. Orange groves stood in water until their roots rotted.

The Fort Lauderdale City Commission ordered the reopening of the old New River Inlet (in today's Bahia Mar area) on October 14. The inlet channel had silted closed after the opening of the Port Everglades channel. The inlet had been filled completely, and a bonded road was built to provide the only access at that time to the new Harbor Beach subdivision where houses were under construction. There were those who believed the reopening of the inlet would be ineffective because of the direction of the ocean currents, and such proved to be true.

Water stood in Fort Lauderdale streets for so long that the roadbeds were soaked, and traffic seemed to beat the streets to a pulp — more potholes than smooth surfaces. City funds with which to finance the rebuilding of the streets were non-existent. Hence, a utilities tax was imposed which has been continued to this good day.

A news release from Washington, D.C., on October 29, reported actions which were being taken to try to relieve the flood situation in south Florida.<sup>6</sup> It reported that Senator Claude Pepper had asked President Truman to recommend that a forthcoming special



Photo of flooded Fort Lauderdale streets, taken by a relative of the Dickey family in late October, 1947 (photo courtesy of Marjorie Dickey Parsons and the Fort Lauderdale Historical Society).

session of Congress appropriate \$3,000,000 for flood control and relief. Pepper had written:

*This is on behalf of myself and the Florida delegation; ... it is requested that you undertake steps to formulate plans for a comprehensive flood control program so that we may seek assistance from the Congress...*

*The time has come when we have got to deal with the flood situation in the Florida peninsula as a whole.*

The long, wet summer and fall of 1947, capped off with the October 11-12 deluge and its resultant problems, accelerated action on long-talked-about flood control. The Central and Southern Florida Flood Control District was authorized in 1949.

Forty plus years "down the road" the creation of a flood control project in south Florida can be viewed as one reason for the enormous growth in the Broward County area, particularly west of U.S. 441. Without the flood control measures which were taken, few people would now be living in the fringes of the Everglades. The effects of attempting to harness the Everglades may be good or bad — depending on the individual's point of view. A final judgement can only be rendered by future generations.

History does repeat itself! Should there be another wet year such as 1947, climaxed with a devastatingly wet hurricane, agriculture-related losses in the Broward County area will be minimal. People have replaced agriculture. There is a large population west of U. S. 441 today which is totally ignorant of hurricanes, floods, and even the past history and soil structure of the area in which they chose to locate. It appears almost certain that losses of residential and commercial developments which have "flooded into" the area west of U. S. 441 to serve the current population residing there will far exceed the dollar value of the agricultural losses suffered in 1947.

Fort Lauderdale and Broward County has not suffered the devastating winds and waters of a major hurricane since the 1960s. A very real danger in the next "big blow" is the failure of newcomers to be aware of the fact that "it can happen here" again. It probably will. The question is: when?

South Florida's current water shortage is well known. A wet year such as 1947 would relieve the water shortage, but at what cost?



Seal of the Central and Southern Florida Flood Control District.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Marjory Stoneman Douglas, *Hurricane* (New York: Rinehart & Co., Inc., 1958), 290.
2. *The Florida Times-Union*, Jacksonville, August 8, 1947.
3. *Ibid.*, October 5, 1947.
4. *Ibid.*, September 7, 1947.
5. *Ibid.*, October 18, 1947.
6. *Ibid.*, October 31, 1947.



Aerial view of a portion of Broward County along the Florida Turnpike, April 1974, showing dense population and construction.