

Could They Have Known?

lessons ignored from the July 1926 hurricane

written by Joe Knetsch
photographs by Higby
from the personal collection of
Joe Knetsch

1,000 Dead in Florida Storm, 3,000 Hurt: Miami Worst Hit; 60 Mile Swath of Destruction Leaves 38,000 Homeless; Scores of Towns are Razed or Flooded; Shipping Wrecked

If ever a headline were written to kill a boom, the above would do just fine. The follow-up simply added spice:

*Ft. Lauderdale in ruins,
Dead and Injured Strew the
Streets of
Ft. Lauderdale, Miami and
Hollywood and Vandalism is
Rampant it is Reported*

The NEW YORK TIMES' article of September 20, 1926, from which the opening and preceding paragraphs were taken, spread the eyewitness news throughout the land. The story also gave detailed statistics:

*250 dead and 100 hurt in Hollywood,
11 dead in Dania,
100 dead in Ft. Lauderdale and
2 dead in Hallandale*

The official count, however, was 25 dead in Hollywood, 15 in Fort Lauderdale, 9 in Dania, and 3 in Hallandale.¹

The NEW YORK TIMES continued, "at Davie, the writer is told that a church was the only building standing. Hallandale and Ojus were razed." The storm was one of the worst in recorded United States'

history. The NEW YORK TIMES also compared the barometer reading of 27.75 during the hurricane with the 28.40 reading of the killer storm that had struck Galveston, Texas, in 1900. What remained of the Florida land boom was finished by this 1926 hurricane!

The fact that the first estimates were exaggerated did not detract from the ferocity of the storm. It was a killer! It did destroy thousands of homes and it did raze or flood many settlements, if not total cities.

Several questions need to be answered. Was this destruction destined to occur? Did all this death and calamity have to occur? Were there any warnings? Why were the residents so ill prepared?

The question regarding destiny is beyond the scope of this analysis. However, the other issues do implore answers of real proportion. First, let us consider the remaining questions in reverse order by determining why the inhabitants were so unprepared for a storm, any storm, of such magnitude. And, then, let us first consider the role played by the earlier hurricane of July 26, 1926, in demonstrating the force of a hurricane.

According to an article that appeared in the NEW RIVER NEWS,

the summer hurricane "caused almost no damage" and "only a handful of people took hurricane warnings seriously and almost no one knew what to expect."²

In the year 1926 the newspaper accounts did report extensive damage and some loss of life due to the July storm. The FORT LAUDERDALE DAILY NEWS estimated the damage to be in the "hundreds of thousands of dollars" and noted that complete sections of Ocean Boulevard had been washed out.³ The NEW YORK TIMES reported damage to Palm Beach and Miami in excess of, respectively, one million dollars and one hundred thousand dollars. The newspaper also reported that forty yachts sank in Lake Worth and that two people were killed in the Stuart area.⁴ In addition to this widespread damage, the FORT LAUDERDALE DAILY NEWS also reported that 72 of 118 arc lights at Croissant Park were damaged.⁵ Thus, it appears that the July storm just may have lulled people into a false sense of security.

The final word on the July hurricane could come from Lucy Money who, when interviewed by Don Cuddy for the Greater Hollywood Bicentennial Oral History Project, stated

Oh, yes, in July we had a small hurricane here in July before this one came in September and there was a lot of trees blew down and a lot of tents. The tops went off the

tents, you know, they built the buildings up a little ways and then they put a tent over the tops . . . A lot of walls blew away in that July storm, there was just a lot of damage done, but no real houses.⁶

Lucy Money remembered the storm; but Cuddy did interview others who could not recall the July hurricane at all!

The July hurricane, thus, served naught as a warning. It was brushed aside as just another storm and did nothing to prepare south Florida for the big blow that was to follow.

As for the land boom, the July storm may have discouraged some who read the Eastern newspapers, but it was not a major cause for the continuing decline in the sale of land. The embargo by the Florida East Coast Railway Company, the unfavorable press in the North, the notorious scandals, the writings and speeches by Roger Babson and others who denigrated Florida's business climate, and a myriad of other factors already had begun to deflate the economic bubble. The little blow of July would receive scant attention, but the big blow of September 1926 would finish a situation already initiated by other forces.

When September came, the residents of Broward County were preoccupied with many local events, although development was slackening. A hurricane was far from their minds. Joseph Wesley Young, the founder-developer of the city of Hollywood, was proceeding with a financial deal in New York. Colonel E. N. Johnston was signing the contract to develop the Bay Mabel port. Horace Stillwell was telling officials of the "extreme fertility, comparable to none in the world" of Broward's farmlands; and the county school board was watching its \$500,000 bond issue pass by a vote of 97 to 13. It appears that little attention was being paid to the September 15, 1926, FORT LAUDERDALE DAILY NEWS'



ABOVE: "Casino and Tea Room, Hollywood." BELOW: "1st reconstructed home in Hollywood. In this wreckage lies the Garfield Theatre, three resturants [sic], grocery store, dry goods, big furniture store and several offices."



headline, "Hurricane Reported Off Bahamas." Broward County residents were looking ahead to a resurgent prosperity, not to the preparations for a major hurricane.

This introduces the second issue of whether or not there had been any advance warning. In a sub-headline on September 16, 1926, the FORT LAUDERDALE DAILY NEWS updated its report of the previous day in an article entitled "Tropical Storm is Reported Moving Toward Coast." Ironically, this article noted that Horace Stillwell, editor and publisher of the FORT LAUDERDALE DAILY NEWS, was hosting fifty New York reporters and giving them the "Truth About Florida."⁷

In a brief story on September 16, 1926, date-lined West Palm Beach, the FORT LAUDERDALE DAILY NEWS reported that

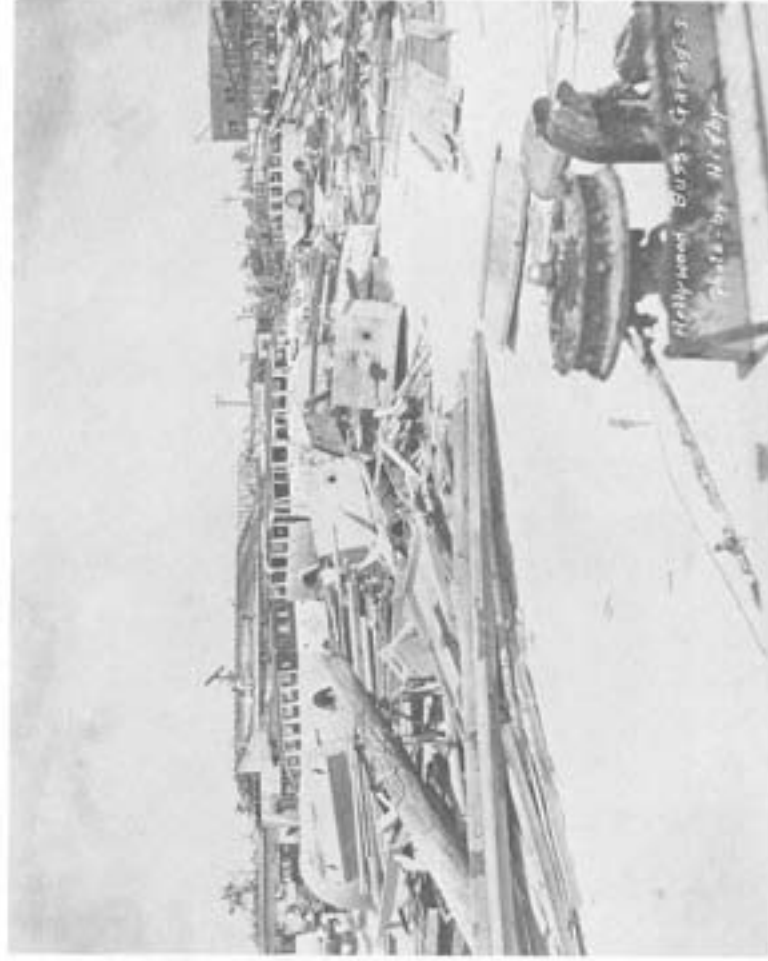
Houseboat dwellers on Lake Worth, who bore the brunt of a devastating hurricane on July 27, stood ready to abandon their floating homes this morning, as a falling barometer indicated the approach of another storm.

This same paper also recorded that the National Weather Bureau in Washington, D.C., had reported three active storms in the Atlantic Ocean which had the potential to affect south Florida. On Friday, the 17th of September, the FORT LAUDERDALE DAILY NEWS' headlines had blared that "Hurricane is Nearing East Coast." The paper continued with "Signals Warning of Storm Given Between Key West and Jupiter." A companion article, "Miami Struck the Chord," stated that

Rising waters in northwest section of Miami and portions of Hialeah due to heavy rains and overflow in the Everglades occasioned petitions of aid from Governor Martin. Sections of the town of Davie were under water, it was stated by Carson Kemp.



ABOVE: A professional building in Hollywood. BELOW: Garages for Hollywood buses.





ABOVE: Ice plant in Dania. BELOW: The Ford Garage, Fort Lauderdale.



On September 17th not only did the MIAMI NEWS warn of the storm's threat, but the NEW YORK TIMES reported the existence of three storms, one off Cape Hatteras, one off Turks Island, and another 100 miles southwest of Bermuda. The high water even prompted the cancellation of an anti-high water meeting in Pompano! Among other planned activities, the Daughters of America bake sale, scheduled for the 18th of September, would have to be postponed. At about two o'clock in the morning on September 18, 1926, the big blow came ashore.

It appears that ample warning had been given. However, recorded memories tell a different story. Myrtle Anderson Gray recalled

We have little storms every now and then and I can tell you that the 1926 storm was thrown right in our lap without any warning.⁸

And according to Anthony "Tony" Mickelson

There was no storm warning, no indication of anything that I recall that night or just previous to that 'cause we had beautiful moonlight, beautiful weather.⁹

Lucy Money remembers that she knew nothing of the storm until eleven o'clock on that night of September 17th, when the winds started to blow hard.¹⁰

Former Florida State Senator William "Bill" Zinkil recalled, "Everyone took it kind of lightly 'cause none of us knew what it was going to be like."¹¹

According to Philip Weidling and August Burghard, even the old timers were "almost equally undisturbed" by the hurricane warnings.¹² Memories of the last hurricane had all but faded.

The remaining questionable issues now concern the reasons why the warnings were ignored and why the quoted Hollywood residents are unable to recall any warnings at all.



ABOVE: Intersection of Arthur Street and Dixie Highway, Hollywood. BELOW: Destruction along the Dixie Highway.



Bill Zinkil's recollection that "everybody took it kind of lightly . . ." offers insight into what some people had been thinking.

In addition, it is not known how many of the people living in Broward County were recent to the area and even knew anything about the force of a hurricane. There were no accurate census figures for such a rapidly growing area, there were only estimates. Robert "Bob" Anderson made special note of this during his Bicentennial interview and, no doubt, he is right.¹³

One indication of the growth may be gleaned from the following figures. In July 1924 the City of Hollywood granted \$48,500 worth of building permits. One year later it recorded \$1,182,150 worth, representing an increase of 2,237 percent.* Such a quantum leap in construction implies a similar increase in population. Thus, the ignorance surrounding the possible ramifications of a hurricane were great. Because the storms in July and early September had passed with a minimum amount of damage, it is not surprising that people took the warnings lightly.

Why so few pioneers can even recall any warnings at all is a perplexing issue which might be explained in part, at least, by considering the state of the communications network in Broward County during that period. Although it is not possible to determine accurately either the availability and circulation of the previously cited newspapers or if the newspapers were read from cover to cover, one could venture to say that the real estate advertisements received more attention than the first page. And so far as radios, "everybody, if they were lucky, had a one tube radio receiver. You know, it was just not the communications we have now."¹⁴ However, it also is possible that the memories of the

*Stockbridge, Frank and John H. Perry. *FLORIDA IN THE MAKING*. NY: DeBower Publishing Company, (1926), p. 309.

interviewed subjects are faulty, even though so many old timers share the same recollections. In truth, this issue may never be resolved in a satisfactory manner.

The final issue addresses the inevitability of all the destruction and loss of life. Given the "tin can" tourist camps, the tent cities, the jerrybuilt houses by fly-by-night operators, the penchant for tarpaper shacks, and the trend to roof new houses with corrugated iron which rips through the air like chain-shot out of an old cannon, it is remarkable that many more did not perish.

Another factor that contributed to the loss of life was the ignorance surrounding the significance of the calm eye of the hurricane. Many believed that, when the eye had passed, the storm was over. Newspaper and personal accounts tell of the many people who were caught outdoors when the winds returned from the opposite direction and exposed them to whatever debris was airborne.

Stories about the fury of the storm fill volumes. For example, T.B. Ellis rode out the storm in a barge. It was being used in the construction of the never completed Johnson Street bridge, designed to span the Intracoastal Waterway in east Hollywood. Ellis survived to tell about his experiences.¹⁵ Another incident involved Duck Lake, described by Tony Mickelson as measuring 300 by 900 feet, and how the storm filled it with sand and debris!¹⁶

In conclusion, it would appear that the warnings for the September 1926 hurricane were ample for those who were informed and wise enough to follow them. That so many people did not heed them is a reflection of a naivete born of those optimistic boom times. The milder storms had dulled their senses to the reality of a hurricane's destructive nature.

If such complacent reactions recur, another and potentially more

brutal lesson will have to be learned anew. Such hurricane warnings cannot be ignored in the future. With state-of-the-art methods to forecast weather and to disseminate information, naivete would not be the factor to cause a tragedy, but stupidity would!

FOOTNOTES

1. Wiley, Eugene. *OUR COLORFUL HISTORY*. Fort Lauderdale, FL: Fort Lauderdale Area Chamber of Commerce and Fort Lauderdale Historical Society, INC., (1978), p. 22.
2. Hobby, Dan. T. "The 1926 Hurricane," *NEW RIVER NEWS*, Fort Lauderdale, FL: Fort Lauderdale Historical Society, INC., (summer/fall 1980), XIX, 1 and 2, p. 3.
3. — "Hurricane Sweeps East Coast: City Property Suffers Heavily," *FORT LAUDERDALE DAILY NEWS*, (July 27, 1926), section 1, p. 1.

4. — "Storm Hits Florida," *NEW YORK TIMES*, (July 28, 1926), section 1, p. 1.
5. *op. cit.*, *FORT LAUDERDALE NEWS*, NEWS.
6. Cuddy, Don, Interviewer. "Lucy Money and Sarah Helton." Hollywood, FL: Greater Hollywood Bicentennial Oral History Project, City of Hollywood, (August 19, 1976), pp. 9-10. Tapes and transcripts on file at Broward County Historical Commission office, 100-B South New River Drive East, Fort Lauderdale, FL 33301 (305-765-5872).
7. — "Truth About Florida," *FORT LAUDERDALE DAILY NEWS*, (Thursday, September 16, 1926), section 1, p. 1.
8. *op. cit.*, Cuddy. "Myrtle Anderson Gray," (August 24, 1976), p. 20.
9. *ibid.*, "Anthony 'Tony' Mickelson," (August 10, 1976), pp. 36.
10. *ibid.*, "Lucy Money," (August 19, 1976), p. 11.
11. *ibid.*, "William 'Bill' Zink," (September 9, 1976), p. 2.
12. Weidling, Philip J. and August Burghard. "CHECKERED SUNSHINE: The History of Fort Lauderdale 1793-1955." Fort Lauderdale, FL: Wake Brook House, (1974) p. 125.
13. *op. cit.*, Cuddy. "Robert 'Bob' Anderson," (August 18, 1976), p. 22.
14. *ibid.*, p. 18.
15. *ibid.*, p. 17.
16. *ibid.*, "Anthony 'Tony' Mickelson," p. 34.

The Maxwell Arcade, southeast corner of South Andrews Avenue and South New River Drive, Fort Lauderdale.

