

Florida's forgotten storm: The Hurricane of 1928

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They are in their 80s and 90s now, much of their memories fogged by time, but even 75 years later, the details come flooding back.

The sting of the wind whipping their faces. The look of terror in the eyes of their parents. The desperation that held them to broken planks or fallen trees as entire buildings tumbled in the raging floodwaters.

But it is the bodies that haunt the survivors of the worst storm in Florida history. Too many to count, too decomposed to identify, rotting so quickly that none got a decent funeral. The black migrant workers, making up three-quarters of the dead, didn't even get so much as a marker.

In modern-day South Florida, it is the 61 killed and the \$26 billion destruction caused by **Hurricane Andrew** in 1992 that serve as the benchmark for how ferocious weather systems can get.

But the survivors of the Great Okeechobee Hurricane of Sept. 26, 1928, know better. They know that whole towns can be washed away in a matter of hours, wiping out generations of families with no one left to identify the dead. They know a storm that killed half the population of western Palm Beach County and left every corner of the county tattered and broken.

They know a hurricane that exacted \$16 billion in damage in today's dollars, enough to pitch South Florida into the Great Depression a year before the rest of the country. But it is the loss of life that separates this storm from almost any other. Between 2,500 and 3,000 county residents died that day, making it the second-deadliest natural disaster in U.S. history, behind the Galveston, Texas, hurricane of 1900.

"I don't know if I ever really completely got over it," said Frank Stallings, 95, who thinks often of the horror of that summer day. "It was a harrowing thing."

Today, though, so few are aware of the devastation inflicted that the 1928 hurricane is known simply as the Forgotten Storm.

Forgotten, historians and survivors suggest, because politicians at the time downplayed the storm's severity, fearful of dampening the tourism keeping the region afloat. Forgotten because officials failed to adequately document the destruction for future generations. Forgotten because the vast majority of those who died were black migrant workers, segregated in life and abandoned in death.

Their graves, unmarked and untended for generations, more than reflect the racial climate of the times. They expose a shameful chapter in Palm Beach County history, one public officials are only now working to repair.

To survivors, white or black, history's indifference to so seismic an event is offensive, whatever the reason.

"We didn't have great, big buildings like they have now," said Alice Forbes Mutchler. "All we had was dead people, and people don't count."

Mutchler, 98, can't forget. To her, the howl of the wind, the screams of the drowning, the sight of sheer devastation live with her still.

Such detail is the legacy left by survivors, historical accountings and area natives who grew up on the lore of the storm, resurrecting with each retelling a lesson South Florida will never outgrow.

To them, the Storm of '28 will forever be remembered as Black Sunday, the night when death blew down Palm Beach County's back door.

Landfall Even before the unnamed storm, packing 150 mph winds, slammed ashore in West Palm Beach, it had killed 1,500 in the Virgin Islands, **Puerto Rico** and the Bahamas.

Within moments of making landfall on a Palm Beach County shoreline, its fierce winds left a trail of destruction from Pompano Beach to Jupiter. Sailboats were thrown from their moors, buildings in downtown West Palm Beach splintered and popped, choking Clematis Street with debris. The Episcopal Church on Swinton Avenue in Delray Beach was flattened, and in Boca Raton, railcars were blown off their tracks and a third of the buildings were demolished.

The first hit by the violent weather, the coastal communities paid dearly. Four people died in Jupiter. In seaside Lake Park, then called Kelsey City, Fred and Ana Nelms were escaping their falling home when the vicious winds swept the couple's infant from the new father's arms, killing the baby instantly. But as the Category 4 monster raged westward, it saved its most crippling blow for the small farming communities that lined **Lake Okeechobee's** southern shore. Between Clewiston and Canal Point, 6,000 people lived and worked, and nearly half would perish before the light of day.

It was not the wind, said Roy Rood, 9 at the time and hunkered down in relative safety under an upright piano in his family's Jupiter home. It was the water that devastated the people of the Glades.

A 5-foot muck dike, built to hold back Lake Okeechobee's waves during summer rains, crumbled in the frenzied waters, unleashing a storm surge with the fury of a tidal wave.

"Nobody seemed to be too much alarmed," said Stallings, 20 then and boarded up with his family in their Belle Glade grocery store, "until the water started coming in."

One family strapped the children to a fallen tree. Some in Belle Glade rushed up the water tower, kicking at anyone who got in their way. In the farming communities surrounding South Bay and Pahokee, thousands of field workers hunkered down in flimsy homes, many doomed to drown.

In South Bay, Ed Forbes, a boat captain, got a call on the town's only telephone, saying a deadly storm was headed his way. He and his sons alerted as many of the community's 400 residents as they could, knocking on doors and corralling 200 to the safest spot Forbes could fathom: a construction barge moored in a nearby canal.

"Nearly all the people who didn't get on the barge, some part of their family was lost," said Mutchler, Forbes' daughter. "One woman floated as far as Belle Glade, five miles away. She was alive but the waters beat her up so badly, it beat all her clothes off and beat her black and blue."

On the barge, Mutchler, five months pregnant, held her 7-month-old daughter above the knee-deep water, as her father and brothers feverishly bailed out a waterlogged bilge system with pots.

Miles away, Mutchler's cousin, Vernie Boots, was hanging to a broken plank. His family had taken shelter in a two-story home in Sebring Farms, west of South Bay. The house flooded within minutes, reaching the group's perch in the rafters and forcing them to cut a hole in the roof with an ax.

Boots, 14 at the time, was thrown to the surface of the water just as the house broke into pieces. Clinging to a piece of the roof during a tormented, hours-long ride, Boots and his brother survived.

His mother, who couldn't swim, his ailing father and a younger brother didn't.

Recovering bodies Just as the killer storm had caught the people of the Glades unprepared, so too did the sheer volume of the dead it left behind.

Armies of volunteers built pine boxes to bury the bodies. Large trucks were commissioned to carry the dead to gravesites on higher, drier ground. And Frank Stallings and his father, whose grocery store was flattened but whose family lived, joined others in recovering the dead.

"We were hauling bodies out of the water two and three at a time," said Stallings, recalling the faces he recognized in the lifeless piles. Sickened by the sight and, even more so, the stench, he couldn't eat for days.

The task proved more than anyone could handle. By the fifth day, the bodies were rotting in the heat, causing a health hazard.

"The Health Department instructed my father to build a fire and destroy the bodies because they were getting too far along," Stallings said.

The experience haunted his father until his death, he added, especially the memory of a birthday bracelet he recognized on a toddler girl.

"She had proudly shown it to him two months before," Stallings recalled. "He said the hardest thing he ever had to do was throw that little girl's body on that fire."

The burned remains, along with those of many others -- 1,600 in all -- were trucked to Port Mayaca on the lake's eastern shore. Makeshift graveyards in roadside ditches from Pahokee to Sebring contain the remains of

scores of others. Sixty-nine white people were buried in pine boxes at Woodlawn Cemetery in West Palm Beach. Another 674 black people were dumped, unceremoniously and without a sign to mark the spot, in a 20-foot hole in the city's pauper cemetery, forgotten for more than 70 years.

The number of known graves approaches 2,500, but more bodies were never found, swallowed whole by the **Everglades** muck or left to the elements after the government called off the search for lack of money.

Recognition It was a hurricane that scared the **U.S. Army** Corps of Engineers into its first major flood-control effort in South Florida, one that pushed the Hoover administration to build a towering, 40-foot-high dike where the modest, earthen barrier lost its battle.

But only now, 75 years later, are authorities recognizing the enormous toll the hurricane took on the people of the Glades.

This summer, the **National Hurricane Center** increased the death toll from 1,836 to 2,500, with an asterisks suggesting the total could be 3,000. The long-neglected West Palm Beach pauper cemetery is finally getting its memorial monuments. And after so many years passed without notice, the storm's 75th anniversary will be honored with remembrance ceremonies, photo exhibits, even a re-enactment of the burial procession, throughout this month.

For Vera Farrington of Delray Beach, whose mother died in 1993 -- long before authorities took notice of a storm that wiped out most of her family -- the recognitions are bittersweet.

"I'm so sorry that they weren't doing this when my mother was around to see it," said Farrington, who was born a few months after the storm. "That [experience] weighed heavily on her. I think this would have been some closure for her."

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