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## “The Hurricane of ‘28”

For Jupiter, it was the big one. Local pioneer Bessie DuBois, who lived through it, called the hurricane that hit on Sept. 16, 1928, "the hurricane of the century."

It was a Category Four storm, said Senior Hurricane Specialist Gil Clark of the National Hurricane Center in CoralGables. The power of hurricanes is ranked by categories one through five. A five is very rare, and so is anything on the border line.

### **Approach**

This particular storm was not unnoticed before it struck Florida. Ships at sea recorded its movement and strength, beginning on Monday, Sept. 10, when the developing low pressure area was still halfway between Africa and the U.S. — slowly but inexorably making its way westward. Two high pressure areas, indicative of fair weather, dominated the Eastern U.S.

More ship reports came in as the storm reached hurricane strength just east of the Leeward Islands on Wednesday, the 12th. That day, the unnamed ‘cane passed over Guadeloupe and took dead aim at Puerto Rico. Thursday afternoon and evening, that island felt the storm’s power, and many deaths and much destruction were reported by officials in San Juan.

Friday morning, the hurricane veered slightly to the north, on a direct line with South Florida, and maintained a steady forward movement at 14½ miles per hour.

In those days, there were no television weather reports, TV bulletins or hurricane sections of the newspaper. There weren’t even any radios in the 3-year-old town of Jupiter, DuBois remembered. As for telephones, there were only five or six, said Roy Rood, who was 10 at the time.

The community of some 300 people did have a couple of ways to learn about approaching hurricanes.

There was a naval radio station, which received weather reports, near the lighthouse. It flew flags and shot flares to warn of bad weather. And the McKay commercial radio station, with two towers near today’s Toney Penna Drive, received information by Morse code. From there, it was word of mouth.

Saturday night, the 15th, the Weather Bureau advisory stated: "This hurricane is of wide extent and is attended by dangerous and destructive winds ... Storm warnings are now displayed from Miami to Titusville, Fla."

The next morning, the hurricane's center passed slightly north of Nassau and was about 200 miles from Jupiter — still on course. The Weather Bureau issued another advisory: "Hoist hurricane warnings 10:30 a.m. Miami to Daytona ... Indications that hurricane center will reach the Florida coast near Jupiter early tonight. Emergency. Advise all interests. This hurricane is of wide extent and great severity. Every precaution should be taken against destructive winds and high tides on Florida east coast, especially West Palm Beach to Daytona."

In Jupiter, where there had been two or three days of wind and rain, people were getting the word. "We had warnings but of course we didn't have any radio or telephone," DuBois remembers. She said her boys went from their home on the south side of the inlet to the station near the lighthouse, and came back with reports. "The last one was so chilling; they expected a tidal wave."

Harlow Rood, who was 20 at the time, recalls that a neighbor, Ben Holmes, came by the Rood home on County Line Road shortly after noon, to spread the news.

At around 2 p.m., the wind started blowing hard from the east. A man at the lighthouse told the husband of Georgia Fortner, "If you have any way of getting out of here, get out."

Ann English later recalled that her family got word from the government radio station. Shirley Floyd remembered getting only one hour's warning before the wind started blowing hard.

Young Carlin White was getting off the train, coming back from a visit to his father's Oregon ranch, and saw "everyone in town (few as they were) ... busy gathering nails, boards and other necessary materials for the shoring up of their homes. "Although we had ample warning," from a friend of a telegraph operator on Turks Island, he said, "none of us were prepared."

### Preparations

Some people, though, were fortunate.

"I always had plenty of food on hand, so they all congregated at my house," DuBois said of her 11 family members. As strong gusts of wind began, her father, two brothers and a sister arrived at the house built by

DuBois' husband, John. Her father wanted the family to ride out the hurricane in a reinforced concrete building on the government reservation, but John said his house would hold.

An ice chest was filled (there was no refrigerator), and food was cooked — bread, potatoes and a ham. Concerned about the reports of high water, DuBois took a basket of supplies up to the old vacant house on a

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nearby hill, where John was born — today's DuBois Museum — just in case the family had to move to safer ground.

Nearby at about 4 p.m., White — accompanied by his uncle — took his movie camera to the beach in the area of today's Jupiter Inlet Park. Waves reached almost to the road as the hurricane churned the sea. "The wind was so strong, we had difficulty standing," White later remembered. "In spite of this, I was able to get some motion pictures of the surf doing its utmost to destroy the beach dune line. I do not think I have ever observed such natural fury before. Little did I know this was quite mild in comparison to what was in store for Jupiter."

Farther up the river, at her riverfront home on Palm Point Drive, Anna Minear recalled, her family prepared to ride out the hurricane on the ground floor of their three-story house.

On County Line Road, the Roods didn't know exactly when the storm would hit, but they were busy boarding up with wood left over from a fern shed. Mattresses were put on the floor, for the four or five people in the house, recalled Harlow Rood. "Nobody had any plans made. We were just learning," Roy Rood said.

Fortner's family decided to leave the area. They piled into a Ford touring car and headed inland for Sebring (where the hurricane still found them.)

English's husband told her to take refuge at a two-story concrete grocery store off Alternate A1A on Eganfuskee Street, where about 20 people sought safety. He said he would stay at a silo on the Pennock Plantation, one of the community's major employers, on the south side of the river near Pennock Point.

Still other shelters occupied by various people included a chicken shed and the back seat of a car. A number of black residents occupied a concrete school building in West Jupiter.

Another school, today's central building of Jupiter Elementary, was the community's main shelter. One recollection says 25 people gathered at the newly constructed building. The first arrivals came in the afternoon, and were joined by others as the hurricane strengthened.

#### The Hurricane Hits

"By dark, the storm was upon us with what I thought was its full strength," White remembered of the evening he spent in the dining room of his family's Carlin House Hotel, just west of the DuBois home. "I could not imagine it getting worse. But it did. Much, much worse." "We spent most of the time with our eyes glued to our three barometers. Our light came from two kerosene lanterns. We watched the barometers pulsate with every gust. Their needles dropped lower and lower."

At the weather station in West Palm Beach, the barometer was plunging. From a reading of 29.17 at 5 p.m., when the wind was 40 mph, it dropped to 28.54, with 60 mph winds, at 7:48 p.m. Eventually, it reached 27.45 — the lowest ever recorded in the United States until then.

And the wind rose.

"That roar, that continual roar while it's going on is like having an express train going at 100 mph in your ear," Minear said. "It's just awful." "It has a very high-pitched kind of a whine to it," DuBois recalled. "The sound effects are what's scary," Roy Rood agreed.

In their various shelters, residents endured and waited. People lay on the floor for protection at the elementary school.

The late James Bassett, who was 5, remembered being protected when "dad rolled a younger brother and me

in a mattress."

"Our house came off the blocks," DuBois said. "The water came in under it, the waves were breaking in the yard." A chimney and cement block porch "was all that was holding our house together." Foam from the waves blew against the window and "cabbage palms went down like grass," she later wrote. As a joke, her father

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and brother-in-law shaved and got dressed, so they'd be "handsome corpses."

"This house shook," Roy Rood said. Sand was blowing and debris was flying. When tarpaper came off the roof and water came inside, Harlow drilled holes in the floor, so the water would drain out.

At the Carlin House, "The howl of the winds plus the noise of the rain hitting the east side of the hotel made conversation impossible," White said. "We had to shout at each other. Needless to say, no one slept."

At the Minear home, Anna Minear's sons did sleep — on top of the dining room table. That was in case the water came in, which didn't happen.

"I have never seen so much rain in my life," Mittie Bieger Bassett later remembered. "The wind blew our house right off the foundation. Then it set the house back down after rotating it 45 degrees. It was very strange, but not a dish or a window was broken." Her family went to another nearby home, at Indiantown Road and Pennock Lane. Just after they arrived, a large pine tree blew down across the path they had taken.

The experience of James Bassett's grandmother was even worse. Her back was broken when her home collapsed, and her husband carried her on his back as he crawled through the storm to Jupiter Elementary. "They almost couldn't hear him outside when he got there, but they let him in," Bassett said.

Lottie May Hay and her family huddled in her father's Model T Ford. During the storm, they heard something banging over and over against the car. Her father left the vehicle to check, she recalled, and "the first thing he saw was a bright light. It seemed to spring up out of the ground. Then it started bouncing up and down like a ball. It scared him half to death. "It's believed to have been St. Elmo's fire, a discharge of electricity that occurs during storms.

On Center Street, at Evelyn Dressell's house, the water came so high that the living room furniture was floating. In other places, boat houses were lifted off cement blocks and scattered. Shirley Floyd wrote that her house "rocked so badly I got seasick."

At Pennock Plantation, English's husband didn't take refuge in the silo after all — which was fortunate for him. "The silo was the first structure to be blown over," she said. Where she was, at the store, men went up to the second floor to brace the window frames.

How high the wind reached may never be known. At 8:15 p.m., the anemometer cups at the West Palm Beach weather station blew away when the wind reached 75 mph. By 9 p.m., with the barometer at 27.87, officials estimated the velocity had doubled. Shortly after 10 p.m., the bureau estimated a wind speed of 160 mph.

Other estimates were even higher. "That was a bad one — almost 200 mph winds," Minear said.

### **Harrowing Experiences**

The lighthouse keeper, Capt. Charles Seabrook, had a big problem. The beacon recently had been modernized from a mineral oil light to an electric lamp, and the rotation mechanism also had been connected to power lines — and now the electricity was out. Seabrook tried to start the emergency diesel generator, but it wouldn't respond. The 68-year-old lighthouse was dark in this vicious storm.

Seabrook found the old mineral lamps, but the light would have to be turned by hand — and Seabrook's hand had blood poisoning, with red streaks running up his arm.

Franklin, 17, his oldest son, volunteered to make the perilous climb up the lighthouse, which was swaying as much as 17 inches. The boy started up and was blown

back four times as he tried to climb the steep winding stairway. But finally, he reached the top. And for four hours in the height of the hurricane, as glass was shattered and wind threatened to tear the mechanism away, he rotated the light's mantle by hand.

Farther south, a home on a sand hill west of today's U.S. 1, north of Juno Beach, blew away. Its occupants, a couple named Marcinski, "went through nearly the

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entire storm crawling on their hands and knees along the old Celestial Railroad right of way," White later wrote.

From about 7 p.m., when the hurricane was reaching its peak, until 5 a.m. the next day, the couple slowly made its way — traveling 3 miles to a gas station near the Carlin House. "Both were badly bruised from being tossed around by the wind," White wrote. "Many times they became separated and had to grope around to find one another."

### **Aftermath**

The ship's bell on the DuBois' back porch was ringing, and that was good news. It meant the wind had changed and the storm was passing.

Sunrise revealed a new world to the residents of Jupiter.

"There wasn't a home ... that escaped damage," Mrs. Bassett later remembered.

"Mother found only one dry room in our whole house," George Mae Walker recalled. "The house was tilted to one side, but we managed."

"Britt Lanier's brand new stucco house was blown down flat and all of the new furniture ruined," English wrote.

DuBois wrote that her father, brothers and sisters went home to find their house "had done a merry-go-round about the central chimney. The stairs were at odd angles, dishes broken and the house off the blocks." Her own home "hung from the chimney and porch in a sad posture," she wrote. "All the underpinnings had been washed about like chessmen scattered with a careless hand."

The windows on the second and third floors of Minear's house had broken, letting in the wind and sending the dormer into the middle of the river.

Although their home stood, the Rood property was a mess, with all the fern sheds down. After getting the water out of their house, Roy Rood's mother found one dry spot in the building, put a mattress there and went to sleep.

Boathouses had been ripped off cement blocks, and the weather station was severely damaged — later to be completely removed. At the naval radio station, two 300-foot towers had been uprooted and the concrete footers torn out. A pavilion located where Beach Road now meets the ocean was washed away.

Telephone poles were knocked down, cars turned over and 17 windmills destroyed at the Pennock Plantation.

Flooding was extensive, waist deep in places. Center Street was under water and after the storm, people used rowboats to get around. One motorist put a blanket in front of his car to push a wave ahead of the vehicle. East of the railroad bridge, a boat was floated out of a boathouse by the high water, and the river rose 8 feet to the railroad trestle.

In West Jupiter, six people who had taken refuge in the school building were killed. Only those who stayed under the oak and metal desks survived. And a girl less than 1 year old had been killed when she and her father, who was holding her, were blown into some debris. People "were just stunned," DuBois said.

Residents checked on one another. And many people who had not taken refuge in the school on Loxahatchee Drive now gathered there — "almost the entire population," White remembered — bringing the total to around 300. "Just about everybody in town was there, both blacks and whites," Hay recalled.

The school became the community's center for

dispensing help. A Dr. Strode, who was driving through the area with a load of vaccine and chlorine tablets, went to the school and inoculated residents. White, who assisted Strode, later said that doctor deserved much of the credit for preventing an epidemic.

Some people continued to sleep in the building, and the Red Cross served meals for several days there. The Red Cross provided other aid, as well, such as rolls of

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tarpaper to residents whose roofs were damaged.

Despite the destruction and deaths in Jupiter, that community was lucky. After crossing the coast, the hurricane had ravaged its way to the Glades, where it created a night of horror. Lake Okeechobee overflowed its earthen dike in the Belle Glade, Pahokee and South Bay areas. More than 1,800 people were killed.

The Red Cross phoned Henry Pennock in Jupiter and asked him to send a truck to the Glades. He didn't know what it was for, but sent a vehicle. The driver learned it was to haul bodies to Miami. The trip was all right, the driver later said, as long as the truck kept moving to avoid the smell. After making one trip, however, the driver told Pennock the next day he didn't believe he could make another such journey. Nothing more was said.

After traveling northward through the center of Florida, the hurricane had hugged the coast through South Carolina, then turned inland — making its way through the mountains of North Carolina and Virginia, passing over Pittsburgh, crossing Lake Ontario, and reaching oblivion in Canada.

Total damage in the U.S. was \$26.2 million. "If we had something like that now," said forecaster Clark, "we estimate the damage along the Southeast Florida coast would be \$5 billion."

"It took us awhile to get over it," DuBois said. "It was rather depressing." "I thought it triggered the whole recession" in this area, she said. "That put the end to the real estate boom, without a doubt."

Still, Roy Rood noted, the residents were strong. "Most of the people who came to Florida were pretty hardy people," he said, and visitors still came in the winter.

"Anyone who was tough enough to stand the mosquitoes wasn't worried about a hurricane," said Troy Wood, another veteran of the storm.

And one week after the hurricane, at Sunday church services held at the school, DuBois said, people were singing God Will Take Care Of You "like I've never heard them sing it."

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