

John Russell
Sept. 14, 1935
by Kennamer & Farmer

Jackson Memorial Hospital
Miami, Florida.
September 14, 1935.

JOHN A. RUSSELL made the following responses under oath to questions propounded by D. W. Kennamer and H. W. Farmer, Investigators, in the investigation entitled "Re Hurricane Florida."

1. Q. Please state your name and address.
A. John A. Russell, Islamorada, Florida
2. Q. What is your business or occupation?
A. I was the Post Master, and lime grower.
3. Q. How long have you lived in Florida?
A. Forty-seven years - all of my life. It is my birthplace.
4. Q. Is that near where the Veterans were located prior to the storm?
A. No. The Veterans were on the islands above and below us.
5. Q. You were between the camps?
A. There was one on the east and one on the west of lower and one on Windy Key - that left us between them. *Matacumbe*
6. Q. Were you acquainted with the officials in charge of this project?
A. Quite a number. They changed so often that before you got acquainted with one fellow, another was in charge. Mr. Hinchman came first and when we got acquainted with him, they moved him and then Mr. Ghent came. When he got acquainted, he left Jack Little in charge. When Jack Little left, they sent Mr. Sheldon who was in charge during the storm. *JAR*
7. Q. Were you in that area from the time you first received warning of the storm until the storm passed?

- A. Yes sir. We thought there was no danger because we had weathered all storms during my life and my father's back to 88 years ago and our people dated back very nearly one hundred years on the keys.
8. Q. How long before the storm occurred was it that you thought you were going to have a storm?
- A. Well, we read barometers very carefully. That has been our life study because we lived there in the days when we had no warning other than the barometer and everyone is accustomed to study them very carefully. We were under the impression that the storm was going through the Straits. It was so close to us when it made that angle. The thing to do is to take warning in time and when your barometer indicates hurricane weather, to prepare and not to wait until the hurricane comes. We had everything secure, tightened and battened up. There was nothing left undone that we could do to save from destruction.
9. Q. When did you start securing everything?
- A. Monday morning.
10. Q. You thought the storm might reach there any time after that?
- A. Yes we were afraid because it was in our area and because it is the custom of these storms to make a turn. We were afraid it would turn and we had not wanted to wait until the last moment.
11. Q. Had you received any warnings from the Weather Bureau?
- A. There were reports all during the day. We got a report which made us think more than ever that we were going to get it. We got the barometer readings at Key West and Miami. It showed we had the lowest barometer which indicated the storm was close to us.
12. Q. Had storm warnings been put out at the various light houses prior to that time?

- A. I hadn't noticed the light houses but it was reported there was a flag on the light house. At such times it is hard to see for any distance and it is a job to tell whether or not there is a flag out.
13. Q. How were the warnings sent out by the Weather Bureau?
- A. Over the radio and the East Coast also sent warnings by wire to the operators. One of the operators was at Islamorada near the post office where I work.
14. Q. Were you acquainted with Captain Sheldon?
- A. Yes.
15. Q. Do you know if he got the weather reports as they were sent out?
- A. That I couldn't say because I hadn't seen him during the day. We were very busy taking care of our own business and very few people came around the post office that day because every body was doing the same thing - taking care of what they had.
16. Q. Do you think all the natives started Monday morning to make preparation for the storm?
- A. Yes even before that because they put the boats in the creek on Sunday.
17. Q. Had there been some indications that the storm might hit before Monday?
- A. The barometer showed the storm was coming our way.
18. Q. Did Captain Sheldon or any of the officials of the FERA communicate with you or ask your opinion as to whether or not there was any danger?
- A. No they did not. They didn't ask me anything about it at all.
19. Q. At what time do you think it became unsafe to leave the Veterans in the camps there in order to get them out with safety?
- A. In my honest opinion they should not have left

them there later than Sunday. They should have been moved out on Sunday. The indications were there would be a storm. When there is a storm in the straits we always get a heavy wind from it.

20. Q. Do you think there was sufficient indication to put any prudent man on notice that there might be danger in leaving those men there after Sunday?

A. Yes, I do.

21. Q. Do you think any prudent man would have taken steps on Sunday to get them out?

A. Yes. If I had been in charge of the camp, I would have moved out every man from the camp. You see, their situation was different from ours. Those in Camp #1 were in a very low piece of land, right open to the sea. Any sea at all would sweep it. There was nothing to shelter them in their little huts at all. No anchorage - they were just set up on piers and I told them some time ago when they first built them that they had better tie them down or if we had a storm they wouldn't have the huts when the storm was over.

22. Q. Were all the men in huts or were some in tents?

A. They had discarded the tents and had built houses for them - at first with a canvas top. Then they put roofs on the houses. Some of them had not yet got around to the roofs but I don't think these were occupied.

23. Q. Do you usually have storms in that area during the months of September and October?

A. August, September and October are the three months that we fear.

24. Q. Do you consider it dangerous to keep a large number of men quartered in temporary buildings in that area during those three months?

A. Yes because it is subject to storms from year to year. Some times there would be a period of time between the storms and then I have known them to follow one another. The first I remember was in 1894. We had a very severe storm at that time and then we went to 1906 before we had another.

It was a very dangerous one and the East Coast lost a lot of people simply because they didn't take warning. Then in 1909 we had one and in 1910 we had another. In 1919 we had another.

25. Q. Do you usually have storms in that section every year during those three months that might destroy temporary buildings?
A. No. They were all safe except there came a hurricane. A hurricane is something that is very apt to come at any time, however, because we are so close to the origination of them.
26. Q. Are you acquainted with the men in charge of the light houses?
A. Yes, personally. That is, at Alligator which is the one right off our island.
27. Q. What is the man's name?
A. J. A. Purvis is the keeper's name.
28. Q. Did you see him or have occasion to talk to him from August 31st to September 2nd?
A. No. They get off once a quarter and I didn't happen to see him when he was on leave. I hadn't talked with him for quite a while.
29. Q. Do you know if he sent out any warnings?
A. No. The light houses from our angle is about seven miles off shore. Directly off it is about four and a half miles.
30. Q. Were warnings of the approaching storm published in the papers?
A. Yes.
31. Q. Do you know what day the Dixie was grounded?
A. No I don't remember. She was grounded the night of the storm.
32. Q. What was the condition of the sea two or three days preceeding the storm?
A. The sea wasn't so high.

We could tell because the wind seemingly moderated. North by northeast didn't make the water rise so high but kept the water off shore. I imagine the reason we got such a wall of water was because we got the wind directly from the north which forced the water out and the sudden change bringing it back seemed to wall the water up.

33. Q. Was the water very high during the storm?

A. Yes. It is a hard job for me to tell you how high it was because I was underneath some times and on top some times but from what I saw the next morning of wreckage in the trees, it must have been not less than 10 feet over our portion of the island.

34. Q. Did any of the natives leave that section?

A. No. As I said they believed they could weather a storm.

35. Q. The natives believed they could weather the storm?

A. Yes. I was prepared for it. I built a special house of very heavy timber and bolted it into the ground and cemented it in with heavy rods which I thought would stand most anything. It stood the wind without trouble but when the water and the wreckage came, they beat it to pieces.

36. Q. Did you get injured in the storm?

A. Yes, I was punctured in my side. I lost all of my family except one. My wife and three daughters.

37. Q. At what time did relief come to you after the storm?

A. The first notice of any relief was Tuesday evening. The wind was very high - almost a hurricane - and they were very brave to even attempt to come. A plane came over and sighted us and I suppose they must have taken pictures of the conditions. Early Wednesday morning there was a force down there. They moved some of the Veterans on Tuesday during that heavy wind.

38. Q. Do you think it was impossible for rescue to come from the mainland of Florida before Tuesday afternoon?

A. Yes. It was impossible. No good could be done

because fills were out and nothing but small boats could be used and the water was too rough to even attempt that.

39. Q. You think it would have been exceedingly hazardous to attempt rescue or relief before Wednesday morning?

A. Yes.

40. Q. You have no criticism to make as to the efforts made to render aid to the victims.

A. No criticism.

41. Q. Mr. Russel, do you feel there was carelessness or negligence in getting the Veterans out of there?

A. I do. I think they should have been moved on Sunday and they had plenty of time on Monday morning with continuous warnings. Even mid-day Monday they could have taken them. When they sent the train the storm was on us and it couldn't pass Islamorada. She was wrecked right there.

42. Q. Do you feel that there was sufficient indication of trouble to have caused any prudent man to get the Veterans away from there on Monday morning?

A. Yes. I do.

Mr. Thompson was with the State Road Department and he came in and asked me if I thought it was necessary to secure and I told him "Yes by all means." He was there in a house car and he asked if he could put his house car behind our building where he thought it would be sheltered. I said "You can put it anywhere you think it will be secure" and he immediately moved it. That was on Monday morning.

43. Q. Can you name any of the Veterans that you know lost their lives.

A. No I can't because I didn't see anybody. I was wounded and couldn't move at all. When they got me from the woods, they brought me here.

44. Q. Do you know of any Veterans who left there a short time before the storm who might be reported missing? I have in mind that you are the Post Master and they might have left forwarding addresses with you.

- A. Not many had left. There were quite a few in town that day owing to the fact that Friday was pay day and they didn't work Saturday at all. Sunday they didn't work and Monday being a holiday, there were quite a number away and it was very fortunate that they were in town because had they been there, the deaths would have been that much greater. There were only a few forwarding addresses left there.
45. Q. Do you recall the names of any of the men who left before the storm?
- A. No I can't remember them.
46. Q. Were you familiar with conditions in the camp relative to the behavior of the men, disciplin, etc.?
- A. Well to a great degree I was. I often thought that it was almost a crime to allow so much drinking in the camps. It seemed as though the Government would have had some disciplin over it and should have controlled it. There should have been an allowance made, in my estimation, and not permit a man to drink as long as he wanted to. Private business was set up for that purpose and went so far as to credit the men and the condition in that respect was awful.
47. Q. Do you think most of the Veterans drank to excess?
- A. The greater portion of them but there were some very nice men too like we find among every bunch of men but yet there was a great portion of them that were very heavy drinkers.
48. Q. Did they drink regularly and continuously or only during pay days?
- A. Whenever they had money. When they got paid they would drink until it was gone. Then they would wait until their allowances came again to get more.
49. Q. Could you see drunken Veterans around the camps almost any time?
- A. At any time, you could find a few.
50. Q. Is there anything else you would like to add to this statement or if you know of any facts that would be of value, it is requested that you state them.

A. I'll tell you frankly I don't believe that we would have had the loss of lives had there been openings in those creeks and channels instead of solid fills made by the railroad. They built the grade so much higher than the land that when the water came it flooded the land before it broke through those high embankments. When the embankments broke through, the water went down just like that. (Sharp motion with hand downward.)

I was in the water and struggling when the embankments went through and the water went out just like pouring it out of a bucket. I have often said that some day the East Coast fills would drown the people if we ever got a very heavy storm which would bank the water up. Naturally anyone knows the water must find a level somewhere and will bank and bank until it goes over. Naturally they graded up at both ends where the camps were and that is where they got the great damage. At places where the railroad had come down to the land there wasn't such damage or so many lives lost.

I do hope they will never be put back there again. It is my home - my birthplace and where I lost my family. I still have a yearning to go back there but if they ever re-fill it, I don't believe I will go. I hope the recommendation will be given to the Government so that they will never be put back. Somebody was responsible in the beginning to have those fills put in without an investigation. Today you can't build a dock extending into the water unless the permission of the War Department is obtained and those wide fills were allowed to be filled without a word being said about it.

The natives were not asked whether they would protest it or not - just went ahead and did it - and that's the reason I don't believe our losses would have been over five percent had those passes been open so the water could have swept through. The question was asked in the papers as to who was responsible. Of course for the Veterans being moved, the officials - those in charge of the camps - were responsible. For the civilian lives, you might trace back to the headquarters and find out the man who gave permission for those fills to be made in the beginning. Then we could locate him and they will know who is responsible for the loss of life. We had several investigations to try

and open them but, of course, we being a community of poor people had no chance with a corporation and never were able to get that over. We proved without a doubt that the fill had damaged the livelihood of many. The sponge fishing grounds in that locality were the best in the state. Many thousands of dollars were made from that industry and when those fills were closed, it stopped the water and the tide and naturally the sponges died. It made it awfully hard for the natives at that time to find some other livelihood.

We also proved it was a detriment and a damage to property and dangerous to life should there be a heavy storm like this has been; also that it was damaging to commerce as those channels were deep enough for boats to go to and fro. To my way of thinking the responsibility for a big portion of the damage must be placed on the War Department and those responsible for allowing those solid fills to be made.

51. Q. How large was the island on which you lived?

A. Five and a quarter miles.

52. Q. How many families or people were there on it?

A. We had the largest population. *Luckenbach JAS* We had about 240 residents and we had a number of winter people. Mr. Luckenbach of the steamship company, Mr. George Branch a business man in New York, Mr. Ed Church the soda man. The Matecumbe Club which consisted of about 28 members - all wealthy New York people including Mr. Richardson, the manufacturer of Vicks Salve.

53. Q. Do you know how many of the residents came through alive?

A. No, I haven't had an opportunity of looking for them. I would have been able to if I could get out. It will be a hard problem to get at until he can get facts. Mr. Henry J. Howell is also a winter resident of Islamorada.

54. Q. Have you been questioned by any other officials regarding this matter?

A. No. They came from the Rod and Reel Club and

wanted me to go out and talk and I told them I had no statement to make at that time. There were some people just snooping around to try and get you to say something. I didn't think it wise to say anything then.

55. Q. Do you know if there has been any effort made to prevent people talking about this matter - that is, on the part of officials?

A. No. I don't know of any.

I, John A. Russell, DO DOLEMNLY SWEAR that the statements made herein in response to questions propounded by D. W. Kennamer and H. W. Farmer, Investigators, have been read by me and they are true and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief, so help me GOD.

John A. Russell

SUBSCRIBED AND SWORN TO before me, H. W. Farmer, and investigator for the Veterans' Administration, this 19 day of September, 1935.

H. W. Farmer
H. W. Farmer,
Investigator.