

Conrad Van Hyning
 Sept. 24, 1935
 by Kennamer & Farmer

McAllister Hotel,
 Miami, Florida.
 September 24, 1935.

Conrad Van Hyning made the following responses under oath to questions propounded by D. W. Kennamer and H. W. Farmer, Investigators, in the investigation entitled "Re Hurricanes, Florida."

1. Q. Please state your name and address.
 A. Conrad Van Hyning. Home address 425 Williams Street, Tallahassee, Florida.
2. Q. Are you connected with the Florida Emergency Relief Administration?
 A. I became the Administrator of the Florida Emergency Relief Administration on July 1, 1935.
3. X Q. You have had the supervision of all Florida Emergency Relief Administration work?
 A. Yes.
4. X Q. Were the Veterans' Camps under your supervision?
 A. Under my general supervision, yes.
5. X Q. Who had direct supervision?
 A. Mr. Fred Ghent was the supervisor of the 6 or 7 veterans' camps - 6 and one being built.
6. Q. How long had these camps been in operation in Florida?
 A. Well, the first started about November 1934 at

1,400 men
in 6 or 7
camps

(cont'd) the Keys. Just how rapidly they developed after that I do not know, but men were sent down steadily from time to time and by the time I took them over on July 1, 1935, there was supposed to be 1400 men in the camps.

7. X Q.

Was this a State project or a Federal project?

A.

I think technically it was a State project.

8. X Q.

Had the Federal Government issued any instructions to you as to how these camps would be operated?

A.

No, they had not issued what might be called definite instructions. The instructions issued were that the men were to be paid \$1 a day, the same rate as the CCC camp was getting, to perform a full day's work for services in return for that pay. They were to be treated as civilians rather than - that is there was not to be an army system - CCC rules did not apply and they were set up as a sort of a cross between a CCC camp and a Transient Camp. The general plan was to approximate the CCC program without giving them the same official status.

Camp cross between
CCC & transient

9. Q.

Are you a native of Florida?

A.

No, I am not.

10. Q.

You are not familiar with the storms that visit this section?

A.

No, only as I have talked with the people here about them - what happens in a storm etc.,

11. X Q.

From the beginning of the camp on the Keys was anything done or said about the protection of the veterans in case of a hurricane?

A.

Yes. There had been a discussion about 2 or 3 months before the hurricane season. The only definite thing that I can refer to is the conversation I had with Mr. Ghent at the camps on the Keys probably 6 weeks or two months before the storm hit. At that time we discussed plans to anchor the houses the men had. We went back of Camp No. 5 and looked at the 2 x 6's, the men had put them crossways - that was the plan we

(cont'd) intended to carry out. At that time we discussed the probability of moving the veterans out during the storm season or in the event of a hurricane. Mr. B. M. Duneau, Engineer at Lower Matecumbe talked about the saving of his equipment there and discussed the proposition of having a crew of veterans or a crew of civilians to protect the equipment. It was decided not to use veterans and he was authorized to hire a crew of civilians because of the plan for evacuation of the veterans in case of a storm.

12. X Q. Just relate what understanding you had about evacuating the veterans in case of emergency.

A. We did not discuss any definite plan as to how long before a storm, or the details of the situation but we had planned - Mr. Ghent and Mr. Sheldon, Director of the Camps, had made some tentative plans for the set up of a camp at Homestead or further up. I don't remember whether the Hollywood location was mentioned previous to the storm. What we had planned to do was to establish a temporary camp.

13. X Q. Had any arrangements been made with the railroad company relative to getting the veterans out?

A. Not that I know of. I assumed that Mr. Ghent and Mr. Sheldon being on the grounds would make this arrangement. Means of evacuation had been discussed but no definite plan had been made.

14. X Q. You don't know whether Mr. Ghent had completed any plans with the railroad or not prior to the hurricane?

A. Except previous to the hurricane - which you already know - just what Mr. Ghent said - he called up the railroad around 2 o'clock Monday afternoon.

15. X Q. Mr. Ghent didn't tell you that at any time he had been in touch with the railroad officials or had discussed it with them relative to the time required to get the train?

A. No. I do not remember that I discussed that. I never raised the questions myself with him.

16.

X Q.

In view of the fact that this section is frequently visited with hurricanes, don't you think definite arrangements should have been made with the railroad and an understanding reached as to how much time it would require to have a train available?

A.

I think that the fact that there were railroad representatives there at Islamorada and they had constant contact with the railroad and that they knew, according to their statements, that a train could be secured on 3 or 4 hours notice that plans ahead of the storm warnings were not necessary. Trains were always available in a reasonable amount of time.

*A. Release Plans
not needed*

17.

Q.

Was the prior understanding with the railroad to the effect that the railroad would get a train down there in 5 hours with 3 hours notice?

A.

I don't know-- it was reported to me that on Monday the arrangements were made to have a train on hand in 3 hours.

18.

X Q.

When did you first learn that the storm was forming in the Atlantic?

A.

I couldn't tell you definitely. My impression is that I read a notice in the newspaper a couple of days before that and the first notice when it became of any concern was on Sunday - previous report was that it was then some hundred miles away. Sunday's report was that it was at least 3 or 4 hundred miles away. There was nothing then to indicate that there was any immediate concern. Based on reports that I had had concerning the habits of these hurricanes that they travelled at a speed of from 8 to 15 miles an hour, and that the weather bureau charted the course very satisfactorily I felt we could tell sufficiently long ahead to know what the direction was and what to do. On Monday morning when the newspapers carried the story that the storm was proceeding in the same general direction I tried to get Mr. Sheldon at the camp on the telephone and while I was trying to get Mr. Sheldon, Mr. Perry fellows, Chief Engineer of the F E R A and the W P A

*Perry fellows
was Chief Engineer
of F E R A & W P A*

(cont'd) telephoned me from Washington around 10:00 in the morning and his conversation was generally that he wanted to know what provision we had made to evacuate the veterans; that he had lost friends on the bridge when it was built and was concerned.

Follows lost friends on bridge

19. X Q.

Was he connected with the Federal Government?

A.

He was Chief Engineer, W P A and F E R A, Washington. He told me he had just talked with Mr. Aubrey Williams, Assistant Administrator, F E R A and that they both felt that proper precautions should be taken and that they were checking to be sure the veterans were gotten out on time. I was unable to get Mr. Sheldon on the telephone direct - I learned the reason was that the phone was busy. I did get Mr. Gilfond, F E R A Administrator in Key West. I got him around 11 o'clock and asked him what he knew of the situation and asked whether he had talked to Mr. Sheldon. He gave me information at that time that the storm was still some 200 miles off and reports they had were that it wouldn't hit there until the following mornings; the direction then was such that it would pass below Key West. He said he talked to Mr. Sheldon, and Mr. Sheldon said they could have the train brought down within 3 hours after they had given notice. I asked him to get in touch with Mr. Sheldon again and get me further information as to what they were doing. Then in about another hour my call to Mr. Gilfond or his report back to me somewhere around 12 or 1 o'clock came through and at that time I told Mr. Gilfond to have Mr. Sheldon bring the train to Islamorada and have it stand by on the Keys rather than to take a chance on the 3 hour wait. That was the only definite instructions I gave to bring the train down immediately and not wait for the 3 hours notice. That was about 1 o'clock.

Sheldon says train arrived in 3 hrs.

*Van Hyning
Gilfond says
bring train now*

20. X Q.

Did Mr. Gilfond in any of his conversation with you tell you that the train was standing by?

A.

He told me it was standing by in Miami. Mr. Sheldon reported to him that the train was standing by in

(cont'd) Miami ready to leave and it would take just 3 hours to bring it to Islamorada.

21. Q. Did you try to communicate with Mr. Ghent Monday morning?

A. I did not try to reach Mr. Ghent because I did not know where he was and I knew the direct way was to get to Mr. Sheldon.

22. Q. Do you know if Mr. Gilford got in touch with Mr. Sheldon after you told him you wanted to get the train?

A. Yes, Mr. Gilford told me - not only told me over the 'phone he had reached him (I talked to Mr. Gilford later in the afternoon, somewhere around from 5 to 5:30 P.M. the last time) Mr. Gilford told me since the storm that he had reached Mr. Sheldon and this information further checked the telephone conversation.

23. Q. It is very probable that Mr. Sheldon requested the train on instructions from you?

A. I think that is a pretty definite conclusion because of the fact some of the men said around 1:30 that Mr. Sheldon had orders from Washington to order the train and get it right there.

24. Q. Will you refresh your memory as best you can and see if you didn't call him about 11:30 in the morning and have Mr. Sheldon order the train?

A. Well, I didn't reach Mr. Sheldon direct on any occasion but I couldn't tell you whether the call that I made around 11:00 or around 1:00 to my memory was the time I told him to definitely order the train. I am fairly sure it was the second time because I was under the impression that from the story Mr. Gilford gave that there was no need to be concerned; that they knew the whole story; that Mr. Sheldon had been thru hurricanes; all the boys knew the story and that they would be taken care of. My memory is that in view of Mr. Fellows concern, I considered the situation and decided that we had better make it definite.

25. Q. You did understand that definite arrangements had been made to get the train on short notice?
- A. I understood from Mr. Gilfond and had not doubt that the train was standing by in Miami ready to go.
26. Q. You have made some inquiry about the matter since then?
- A. The only inquiry I have made is from discussion with members of the staff.
27. Q. Did you find that arrangements had been made for the train?
- A. The only story I have that seems to check on that side of the picture is a report from one of the men that he had been working with Mr. Sheldon right by the telephone and that the railroad man at Islamorada told Mr. Sheldon the train was standing by. That is the only thing I have that covers that.
28. Q. You have never heard Mr. Sheldon say that he had no information to the effect that the train was standing by?
- A. I have not discussed it with Mr. Sheldon. I have not made any attempt to go into it or to straighten it out with Mr. Sheldon or Mr. Ghent.
29. Q. Did you communicate with Mr. Unkrich?
- A. Between my 2 conversations with Mr. Gilfond I telephone Mr. Unkrich. I was leaving the house for an hour after lunch and I telephoned Mr. Unkrich at Cherry Lake that I would be out; that I had been in touch with Mr. Gilfond; told him to take any calls and instructions, also left instructions with the girl that lived there in the house and she called Mr. Unkrich and gave him further information.
30. Q. Did Mr. Patterson tell you he had talked to the agent and said the train was standing by?
- A. I am sorry, I can't tell you who it was because of the hectic days after that.

31. X Q. Did Mr. Ghent have full authority to act to get the men out of the area?

A. Yes, there was never any doubt as to his authority to do what was necessary; I don't know however whether the railroad would have accepted his order although I don't see any reason why not; his title and position was definitely known. I think that Mr. Ghent would have been considered to have full authority.

32. X Q. Did the railroad accept Mr. Ghent's authority to send a train?

A. I heard one report that they did not accept it and that they checked around trying to find authority, however, that is only hear say. The actual order given to St. Augustine was cleared around 2:00 o'clock and that seems to have been from Mr. Ghent.

33. Q. Do you know any other facts about this matter which you have not related; is there anything you want to add to your statement?

A. I had talked to several different people about the hurricane: Mr. E. Pyncheon, Deputy Administrator, W.P.A. who had been on the Keys for 1 1/2 years and who had spent 15 or 20 years in this section of Florida, and I believe I relied more on his statements as to the general habits of these hurricanes as to the average speed, et cetera, and on the theory that the storms could be charted. My feeling of security was largely because of my arithmetic on the distance reported by the Weather Bureau of these storms away from the Keys and the speed at which they travelled, which checked pretty much with what Mr. Gilford said about the time they might arrive. My conclusions are that while looking back it seems certainly we should have gotten the veterans out before we did but I do not know what I would have done if I were right there on the grounds; the fact that the Dixie went around the point in the face of the same weather reports still remains. There must have been residents of the Keys who must have had information by radio of the storm locations, et cetera and the fact that they stayed there seemed to indicate that if the Weather Bureau reports were reliable that Mr. Sheldon had sufficient reason to believe that there was time to get the men out. I think the only point that bothers me is that the train was not at Islamorada instead of in Miami. I would like to have known that the train situation had been checked a little more closely.

*David knows
what he'd have
done in same situation.*

34. XQ.

Do you feel that Mr. Sheldon and Mr. Ghent were negligent in checking the train situation?

A.

Well, not from the stories that I have heard. I have believed from the information I had up to this time that Mr. Sheldon had good reason to believe that the train was on the siding. I do not feel that Mr. Ghent was particularly negligent there because Mr. Ghent was not assigned to the camps on the Keys and must have been somewhat in the same situation I was; that he probably accepted the report that the train was there. If Mr. Sheldon did not have information that the train was ready or could be made ready in a few minutes I would say that he was negligent. I would say he was negligent if he didn't check the facts sufficiently so that there would be a safe margin to get the men out; if he had allowed the train to be unchecked for a period of 10 hours before they expected the storm to hit, but if he had checked it, had felt safe about it and felt they had a period of time to get out, then he could've been considered negligent.

35. Q.

Had you seen the weather advisories as they were sent out?

A.

I have not had a chance to look at them.

36. Q.

From the storm warnings would you say a prudent man should have taken some action before 1:30?

A.

That is a hard question to answer. I would say that the bulletin of 3:30 A M does not give any definite information. If I had had that bulletin when computing distance from the previous bulletins or the bulletin of 10:00 A M, it would still give 200 miles as the distance.

37. Q.

Granting that it was 200 miles away would you have taken some action to get out before that time?

A.

I think 20 hours, which would have given them until the next morning was plenty of time and I think that it was pretty definitely established that they expected to be out of there 7 or 8 hours later at the latest - in Miami at any rate. You have to consider their problem in the light of handling the men. Also whether or not some of the equipment might have been used to have gotten some of the men out. They had the

(cont'd) problem of handling 700 men, providing food and shelter. They knew these men were not welcome in several places. That is why they arranged for Hollywood. But if they felt the situation was emergent then moving them out by train in an orderly fashion was, the thing to do.

Knew men not welcome in some cities

Not

38. Q. Please examine the bulletins issued at 2:50 and 10:00 A.M. Sunday and state if you had received these if you would not have completed arrangements with the railroad for receiving the train.

A. I think if you check those 2 bulletins, at 2:56 and 10:00 A.M. granting that you knew something about the storm and had distances and directions you might draw a conclusion. I should think that probably they should have felt in their own minds that arrangements were not a particular problem. It was not a difficult thing to get the train. They had used the train before.

39. Q. You found that they acted in accordance with what they believed and did not take into consideration the things that might happen?

A. You might put it that way. I assume that they had every reason to believe that getting the train was not a problem.

1st. getting train what is a problem

40. Q. They used poor judgment and little foresight?

A.

41. Q. Did you personally select Mr. Ghent the Director?

A. No. Mr. Ghent had been given notice by me that his services would not be required after the transfer of the camps to the CCC, which was to have been accomplished within the next month. I had gone up to Washington following my trip to the Keys about 6 weeks before the storm with Mr. Ghent and Mr. Unkrich. We went up there particularly to arrange for the transfer of these camps to the CCC. We felt that the bridge had not turned out to be a practical project for their work on the Keys but the camp situation was not satisfactory. The camps

*① Ghent was being asked.
② Bridge const. against practical
③ Camp sit'n. would be satisfactory
④ Vets who were happier in CCC Camps*

(cont'd) themselves didn't provide sufficient recreational facilities and a normal outlet for the men and to make those things available was to expense and they would be happier in the CCG camps. The whole general plan was not particularly satisfactory and we were told by F E R A, Washington, that a transfer would be made to the CCG and they would get in touch with the proper officials and try to arrange a transfer within the next month. Mr. Ghent, I thing, was selected sometime in March.

X 42. Q. Who selected him?

A. It was my understanding that he was selected by one of the representatives of the F E R A in Washington, a special representative for the camps.

X 43. Q. Do you know anything about his training, experience or background?

A. I do not know, except that he was a Director of the Safety Division of the F E R A and C W A. I did not feel that he was a satisfactory man for the job. If the camps had gone on how knew he was to go out and it didn't seem that there was any use in hiring a new director.

X 44. Q. Mr. Ghent knew he was likely to lose out?

A. Yes, but I don't think that had any effect on Mr. Ghent's interest in the men. He was probably too sentimental on the whole proposition.

X 45. Q. Did you find he was slow to make decisions?

A. No, I couldn't say that. I felt he was the nervous type and likely to jump at decisions.

X 46. Q. Do you know anything about Mr. Sheldon?

A. He was Operations Director in the F E R A, Volusia County. Mr. Ghent selected him for that job. Just when he was selected I am not sure. Mr. Sheldon had been at the camp a short time before I went down on an inspection trip and I was rather well impressed with him but I don't know much about his back ground.

47. Q.

You say trains were ordered for these men. What were ~~the~~ occasions when trains were ordered before?

A.

I do not know that special trains had been ordered. It is my impression that when they had a large shipment of these men they sent them down by a special train. That may be wrong. It may have been a regular schedule. There are some impressions but I do not know from where they came.

I, Conrad Van Hyning, DO SOLEMNLY SWEAR that the statements made herein in response to questions propounded by D. W. KENNAMER AND H. W. FARMER have been read by me and they are true and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief, so help me GOD.

Conrad Van Hyning

SUBSCRIBED AND SWORN TO before me,

H. W. Farmer

an Investigator for the Veterans' Admin-

istration this 25 day of September 1935.

H. W. Farmer

INVESTIGATOR

MR. AUBREY WILLIAMS QUESTIONING.
MR. CONRAD VAN HYNING TESTIFYING.

Q. When did you first hear of this storm?

A. I don't remember exactly. It was probably when I read the reports in the newspaper. The storm was reported about a week before. I read the daily papers. Up until two days before the storm we paid no particular attention to where it was going.

Q. What was the date when you became concerned over it?

A. Well, I was concerned over it on Friday night. I discussed it with the Jacksonville office, with Unkrich, my assistant there, on Sunday. I didn't get in touch directly with anybody at Key West or at the camp until Monday morning but the reports came from Gilfond and from Sheldon through Gilfond to our Jacksonville office and I didn't have any contacts there. We were simply not much concerned about it until Monday morning because all of the weather bureau reports were to two effects -- that we had lots of time and that it would not come any where near the Keys.

Q. On Monday what official orders did you give on that to delineate it?

A. Perry Phillips called me about 11:00 or 11:30 in the morning. I had had a call in for Sheldon before Perry Phillips called and got the report shortly afterwards that we couldn't get in touch by telephone with Islamorada so transferred my call to Key West and got in touch with Gilfond and Gilfond told me that he was taking all precautions at Key West as the storm was expected there and that he would phone Sheldon to take all precautions though the storm was not expected to strike north of Key West. He told me that we could get through and that conditions were rather serious. Said that I had better give orders to get the veterans out at once.

Q. You talked to Gilfond about 11:00?

A. Somewhere between 11:00 and 12:00. I talked to Gilfond and he said the storm was still south of Key West and would not come anywhere near the Keys but Sheldon had had the train on the side and the train would be ready on three hours notice but he would get right hold of Sheldon and if he thought it best, Sheldon would get them right out. Gilfond called me right back. He had reached Sheldon and Sheldon said the situation was well in hand. He had planned far ahead for this. He had special boarded planks against all of the shacks and they were fixed up for any winds. Gilfond

said that Sheldon was quite sure that the situation was well in hand, that they would get the train down just as soon as there was any danger and I told Gilfond that if it took three hours for the train to get there that they shouldn't wait but should get it right down so that they could leave immediately, they shouldn't take any chances. I got in touch with Gilfond again. The second time I told them they had better move, that I would have to leave the decision of the time to the two of them there but not to take any chances there. They had no arbitrary order from me. I had confidence in Gilfond particularly. Gilfond probably knows first hand more of the actual situation there. He was constantly being informed. I had in the meantime gotten in touch with Unkrich who was at Cherry Lake Farm so that they could get in touch with Unkrich if they could not reach me. Unkrich was fully informed and able to give orders too. Unkrich had gotten in touch with Ghent so that Ghent cleared there.

Q. Ghent said that no one talked with him.

A. I thought Unkrich talked with Ghent. He called Tallahassee that time when I was out and was referred right to Unkrich so that worked all right. Unkrich is my assistant.

Q. It really isn't true that he didn't get in touch with anybody?

A. Yes. Unkrich gave him authority.

Q. Why didn't you talk to Ghent?

A. I didn't know where to reach Ghent.

Q. Who was in charge of the work on the keys?

A. Sheldon.

Q. Completely?

A. In charge of the camps.

Q. Was not responsible to you?

A. Responsible to Ghent.

Q. Ghent is responsible to you?

A. I went over Ghent's head, not knowing where he was.

Q. You merely used Gilfond as a convenience?

A. Yes.

11-1-8

Q. Where were you in Tallahassee that you couldn't be reached?

A. I went out with the family from about 1:30 to 3:00. Went out to the woods and had a picnic. Came back a bout three.

Q. But you had left somebody in charge with full authority to act?

A. I left Unkrich in charge.

Q. In your estimate why was it -- have you any information that could give you any certain knowledge why the railroad did not move that train after it was ordered at 1:30?

A. I have nothing but the reports of Ghent and Unkrich -- nothing that reports the staff members that were there. Sheldon put in order before 1:30. Ghent checked with Unkrich at 1:30.

Q. Have you any incidents that happened in the past where the railroad people or any other concerns have insisted on Washington's approval of any orders before they would accept it?

A. I never heard of such a situation. We have paid our bills. There has been no question of authority.

Q. But before this was any administrator required to give his personal approval that you knew of?

A. Not as my experience as administrator in Florida.

Q. What is the condition of your obligations here now -- all paid?

A. All paid and we have had an adequate balance.

Q. I have heard rumors that they were trying to reach you and Washington.

A. No. I have a very competent girl in the house. She was there all the time I was gone, near the phone. She is a maid and has had stenographic training but unable to get a job, and could take short hand notes.

Q. Have you any reason in your mind as to why when that train was ordered out that the train didn't get there until 8:00?

A. I can't see any satisfactory explanation given yet as to why the train was not cleared much earlier. The final instruction reached them at 1:30. I don't see why within half an hour they shouldn't have been able to leave. I don't understand the delay. I can understand the delay after they got on the road.

Q. How far is it to the point where they were going?

A. I think it is about 90 miles to Islamorada.

Q. 90 miles?

A. From here. About a two or three hour run.

Q. Is it that far? And it took them on this occasion from four to eight o'clock to get there?

A. Yes.

Q. That's understandable?

A. No, it is understandable only from the engineer whom I have seen -- that he was delayed an hour because of an obstruction on the track and another hour because of a derrick.

Q. Once they were there was it still possible for them to have gotten out and saved a number of the people?

A. Not from the report given to me by the men at the hotel at Islamorada. The report is that when the train whistled they left, went down to the train and got aboard and that the water had already started rising. Within 15 minutes after that the engine started rising. Within the meantime the train had started but had stopped and that some of those boys had gone back to the engineer men. From the information I have, the water hit there within 15 or 20 minutes after the train got into Islamorada station. The thing happened so quickly when they got to Islamorada that they couldn't do a thing.

Q. Is there any evidence that you know of that the men had been drinking very heavily and were difficult to handle at the time?

A. The report I have by way of Gilfond of Sheldon was that this being a couple of days after pay day that a number of the men were drunk and that they had some difficulty with them but the camp superintendent had the situation well in

hand and that they would be able to get them on the train. That is a monthly occurrence.

Q. Is it true that those people have an opportunity to get off the keys on Sunday?

A. When they have money, there is no restriction on their coming or going. They can take the train that goes through there -- one train a day. They frequently go week-ends to Miami and week-ends to Key West.

Q. You received these weather reports, didn't you? Based upon those weather reports, do you feel that there was justification for the decisions that were made as the day proceeded?

A. I think that if there was reason to have confidence in the weather reports and in the fact that those hurricanes proceed slowly and that the direction is always ascertained, that therefore it is always possible to know six to eight hours ahead of time where these things strike. Gilford at Key West was in contact with the weather bureau. He said that they would know just when to move and what to do. He was the only one that I talked to during that time. He said they were getting regular reports and would know eight hours ahead of time where the thing hit and what to do. My opinion, based on the weather bureau information, the actions at the camp were particularly justified. They had confidence in the direction the hurricane was proceeding.

Q. Is there anything in your estimation where our organization was derelict in the performance of its duty?

A. No. I can't say that, but I do have this one feeling that perhaps I should have anticipated and perhaps others should have anticipated -- a possible situation which would not conform to what was reported, that perhaps to be on the complete safe side we should have pulled those boys out in the morning. I didn't feel that until afterwards. At the time it seemed that everybody knew what was going on.

Q. Is it your feeling that our agents all along the line acted in accordance with good judgment and did all within their power to meet this situation?

A. I think that is true. I think, however, that the men on the ground all may have their opinion on that which may have more weight than mine.