

Sheldon's statement
9-4-35

STATEMENT OF RAY W. SHELDON, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
VETERANS WORK PROGRAM IN FLORIDA
ISLEMORADO, FLORIDA.

September 4, 1935.

From four o'clock, Sunday afternoon, up until the time the radio and telephone circuits were broken, we were in constant communication with every available source of information regarding the storm.

At twelve o'clock on Monday, in order to satisfy myself, I inquired of the Weather Bureau in Miami just what conditions were.

(1) The Weather Bureau stated there was absolutely no danger, from the reports they had received, to the Florida Keys.

Shortly after One O'clock, Mr. Sam Cutler answered the telephone and the exact latitude and longitude of the center of the storm was given; which when plotted on our map, showed that the storm had turned right angles. This information was to the effect that we would receive winds of gale force.

I immediately got in touch with Mr. Ghent, and informed him that I thought that we should have a train started to Matecumbe. On completing my conversation with Mr. Ghent, who informed me that he would immediately get in touch with the F.E.C. Officials at St. Augustine, I called the Operating Department of the F.E.C. in Miami, and told them that we needed a train; that the order had gone through to St. Augustine, and to call me concerning this, immediately, as to verification of the order. The person answering the telephone told me to hold the telephone, as this order was coming in at that time from St. Augustine. In a few minutes he told me the order had been confirmed, and that a train would be at Matecumbe at 5:30 P.M. (2)

I explained to him how essential it was that he use every possible means to expedite this relief train. Mr. Ghent then called me and told me he had ordered the train out.

(1) This just isn't true.

(2) Check this against F.E.C. testimony

(3) Should he have been alarmed by 29-4-35?

(4) Haycraft says wind blew train to Islemorada.

(5) Proposals, Everett & Carver for relief aid.

(6) Only 2 survivors straggling on U. Matecumbe.

B3

(2)
My barometer at that time was 29.68, which did not appear alarming.

I immediately contacted Hollywood and Ft. Lauderdale, asking them if they would make arrangements to receive the Veterans, in so much as they would have to provide sanitary facilities and water supplies for these men.

I directed the Superintendent of the various camps to have their men ready to entrain at 5:30 P.M. At 2:45 P.M., every arrangement had been made at Matecumbe Headquarters to start loading the men at 5:30. The Administrative Personnel was instructed to take the cars that were then available to Hollywood. The hospital informed me they had removed all patients in their charge.

About 3:45 P.M., we received a weather report over the radio that we would have high tides and wind of gale force on the Florida Keys; and that the storm was located about two hundred miles Southeast of Key West.

I immediately called the Operating Department of the Florida East Coast Railway Company and asked them if our relief train had started, and was informed that it was already on the way.

At 5:30, those remaining at the Office in Matecumbe, went to Islamorada, where we were told that the train had just left Homestead. The wind was then blowing about 50 to 60 miles an hour, not sufficient to cause me any effort in standing outside. In a very short time it had increased enough to cause us to leave the station office and go to a box car. About 8:15 P.M., I noticed a flashing of a light, and I left the box car and had to struggle against a head-wind for about fifty (50) feet, in order to reach the relief train.

When I left the box car, the ground was dry and traveling this fifty (50) feet, the water raised to my waist. Getting into the cab of the engine, I instructed the engineer to start the train to Camp No. 3.

(4) The Engineer informed me that the wind had blown the train down that far, without the use of steam. In looking out of the cab

the water was going so fast by the step of the cab, that I thought we were going at a dangerous speed, and ordered the engineer to slow up. In attempting to put on the brakes, he found the air-brakes had locked. The engineer thought he had lost a car and a broken air-line had caused the brakes to set.

Mr. Perdue immediately left the locomotive cab to disconnect this car. When Perdue left the cab, the water was half way between his waist and arm pits. At that time the water was so high, it extinguished the fire in the engine. It was then 8:20 P.M.

Upon inquiring from the engineer and fireman, what time they had left Miami, I was told they were asked to report at 4 P.M.; and had not left Miami until 4:25 P.M. I understand from the engine crew they stopped at Homestead and picked up a Section gang and Section motor power hand car and its crew; and swapped their engine end to end.

As the train passed by the quarry where we were removing rock for the bridge, a guy line from the Stiff Leg Derrick had fallen across the track and had hooked onto the locomotive cab, and caused a delay of one hour to remove the wire.

The water had risen so, that from the light available, it appeared to be on a level with the cab floor; and from 8:20 P.M. on, the engine could not be moved. The waves were of such height they beat over the heads of the engine crew who were in the cab of the locomotive. We remained in this position until dawn of Tuesday morning, when we found that the cars of this train had been bodily lifted from the tract and set to the West; a distance of fifty (50) feet to seventy-five (75) feet. The engine was the only part of the train remaining on its track.

There was a personnel in the three camps of approximately 670 Veterans; of this number, from information which I received on Monday, there were 73 in jail in Miami; and assuming that at least half as many more were in or on the streets of Miami and 100 in Key West, I cannot see where over 300 men were in the camps at the time of the blow.

These camps were not constructed as permanent camps, but simply as a housing proposition.

If we had had only to combat the winds, I firmly believe that the loss of life would have been very small; but due to the tidal wave which swept across the Keys and lifted every structure off its foundation, the greatest loss of life can be contributed to the high waters.

Tuesday morning, as soon as it was light enough to enable us to pick our way, a group of six of us started North to secure aid. On reaching Whale Harbor, we found the ocean had cut a channel through to the Gulf and I forbid the party, due to the dangerous condition of the water, to attempt to swim across.

We were completely isolated on Matecumbe Key, the Highway and Railroad fill to the South, having gone before the force of the tidal wave.

This crew of men immediately returned to the Hotel at Matecumbe, and from information gained at this point we found we could not travel more than half a mile South. The washout between that point and lower Matecumbe is a distance of four or five miles; and it has been impossible for us to effect any means of communication with lower Matecumbe Key on which was located Camps No. 3 and 5.

I wish to personally recommend that Mr. Everett and Mr. Caruso, two veterans, receive letters of appreciation from the Administration for their efforts in locating and assisting in the rescue work. (5)

We found whole colonies of houses were swept in to one point by the current of water; sometimes causing a pile of debris to the height of 20 to 25 feet. Land marks and houses which were pointed to with pride by the natives as being storm resisting, were swept from their foundations. From Snake Creek to as far South as Carribee, there are only two buildings remaining; namely, (6)

the lower floor of the Matecumbe Hotel and a Filling Station owned by Mr. O.D.King, who turned his place into a first aid hospital. Mr. King deserves all the appreciation possible.

Ray W. Shelton

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MR. JOHNSTONE: I want to ask Mr. Sheldon a few questions.

MR. WORLEY: He has been previously sworn; haven't you?

MR. SHELDON: Yes, sir.

STATEMENT OF: RAY W. SHELDON.

RAY W. SHELDON, was recalled, and having been previously sworn, and being still under oath, further testified as follows:

EXAMINATION BY MR. JOHNSTONE:

Q Captain Sheldon, it has been reported, by what authority I do not know, that the Weather Bureau at Key West, advised you at 4:00 A. M., Sunday morning, September 1st, to get these men off the Keys, and that they were in danger. Is that true?

A Mr. Johnstone, I did not talk with the weather bureau until 4:45 Sunday morning, and as near as I can recollect, his report was to this effect, that the storm had headed south, that there was no immediate danger to the keys, but that he would advise me to leave Key West on the morning ferry if I wished to get back to Islamorada that day, because there might be a storm which would prevent me from leaving Monday morning.

MR. APT: From leaving Key West to get to Islamorada?

A Yes, sir; Monday morning. This statement was made by him, because I had told him at eleven o'clock Saturday night that I had come down to Key West anticipating staying until Monday.

Storm
night
went to
K. Sheldon

Ray Sheldon
of Johnson

Q Well, is it a fact that the danger was expected in Key West instead of on the upper Keys?

A They were indefinite as to where, or what direction the storm would travel to, to be sure, due to the difficulties of getting out of Key West, it was advisable for me to leave Sunday morning. There was no definite location of that storm given to me any time from Saturday night until the 1:30 report Monday noon.

Q Well, that 1:30 report Monday noon didn't indicate the hurricane was going to hit the Keys, did it?

A No; but as the latitude and longitude were given, I considered it close enough to Florida to cause us to evacuate the camps.

Q Did these barometer readings disturb you?

A Very little, due to the following reasons, that on Sunday night the barometer rose from 7:00 o'clock until half past ten, from 29.81 to 29.87. On Monday morning the barometer had only dropped to 29.76, and by one o'clock had only dropped eight (8) points, or only to the point of 29.68.

Q Sheldon, did the attendant weather conditions, the wind and storm there Monday, disturb you any?

A No, sir; not a bit.

Q Mr. Johns, a reporter for the Miami Daily News, stated in this record on Yesterday afternoon, that on Tuesday morning following the storm he asked you what you had to say about the failure to evacuate these veterans, and you told him

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Barometer
(Ash
(in hand))

that you had had two trains ready to move out of Miami, and that the reason they hadn't been ordered was that you had gotten in touch with Washington, and Washington told you not to order them until further instructions. Is that true or not?

A No, sir. Now, there was a newspaper reporter called me Monday morning, I believe it was, asking me about conditions on the keys, and I told him there was nothing alarming, and he said, "In case there is a hurricane there, what provision have you made?" and I said, "To the best of my knowledge, there are trains in Miami which we can obtain on three hours notice".

Q Did you say "trains"?

A I don't remember whether I said "train" or "trains". On Monday night, when the wind was blowing, the trainmen told me we would have first hand information, that a newspaper reporter was on the train. I did not see that reporter until Wednesday noon, or Wednesday we will say at 10:00 o'clock, when I gave him a list of the survivors as I was able to name them over, and he headed for Miami.

Q Was there any occasion for you to get in touch with Washington?

A No, sir.

Q Did you hold any such conversation as that with Mr. Johns?

A No, sir; I didn't.

MR. JOHNSTONE: That's all.

MR. APT: To the best of your recollection, at

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Daniel's
John's
statement

Word
words

what time did the telephone conversation between yourself and Mr. Gaddis occur on Sunday?

A There is no way of me stating it closer than within an hour of the time that I talked to him, but it was just before supper, or just following supper. That would make it between half past five and half past six.

MR. JOHNSTONE: Who was that?

A Mr. Gaddis, the railroad man.

MR. APT: If Mr. Gaddis says that at the time your telephone call came in, he was already in bed and it was about ten o'clock, and as your call came in he heard the train coming in from Key West, pulling into the Miami station, with that in mind, would you change your mind about what time the call was made?

A No, sir.

MR. APT: You said yesterday that your recollection was that Mr. Gaddis told you it would take three hours to prepare the train and get it down to the Keys?

A Mr. Gaddis' statement to me, as I recollect it, was that within three hours from the time he was notified, he could have the train at the Keys.

MR. APT: Are you sure that was three hours and not four hours?

A Yes, sir; three hours.

MR. JOHNSTONE: Did you only talk to Mr. Gaddis once on Sunday?

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*Disputes
Gaddis
testimony*

A I endeavored to get Mr. Gaddis on Monday, but was told Mr. Gaddis was in Key West.

MR. APT: On Monday or Sunday?

A Monday. I talked with him at his house on Sunday, in Miami.

MR. JOHNSTONE: When did he go down to Key West?

A Sunday night -- Monday.

MR. JOHNSTONE: No -- he went to Key West Monday morning. He was in Key West when this storm took place. That's all.

(Witness excused).

(At this time, there being no further witnesses to be called, an adjournment was had until the afternoon, at which time statements were taken at the Miami hospitals from veterans who had been taken there after the storm).

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(3) ...
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Ray M. Jackson

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MR. APT: From leaving Key West to get to Islamorada?

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Compare
Williams

Storm
might
prevent
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KW Monday

Ray Sheldon

by Johnstone

Q Well, is it a fact that the danger was expected in Key West instead of on the upper Keys?

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Q Well, that 1:30 report Monday noon didn't indicate the hurricane was going to hit the Keys, did it?

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Barometer
(Ask
Unbarged)

that you had had two trains ready to move out of Miami, and that the reason they hadn't been ordered was that you had gotten in touch with Washington, and Washington told you not to order them until further instructions. Is that true or not?

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Q Did you say "trains"?

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Q Did you hold any such conversation as that with Mr. Johns?

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MR. JOHNSTONE: That's all.

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MR. JOHNSTONE: Who was that?

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A Sunday night -- Monday.

MR. JOHNSTONE: No --- he went to Key West Monday morning. He was in Key West when this storm took place. That's all.

(Witness excused).

(At this time, there being no further witnesses to be called, an adjournment was had until the afternoon, at which time statements were taken at the Miami hospitals from veterans who had been taken there after the storm).
