

Hubert C. Nichols
Sep. 17, 1935
by Farmer

Homestead, Florida
September 17, 1935

HUBERT CAMPBELL NICHOLS made the following responses under oath to questions propounded by H. W. Farmer, Investigator, in the investigation entitled "Re Hurricane Florida."

1. Q. State your full name, age, occupation and address.

A. Hubert Campbell Nichols, Civil Engineer, *most of* Homestead, Florida, age 38 years. For the past twelve years I have been project engineer with the State Road Department, connected with the Bridge Department. *RM*

2. Q. Are you a veteran of the World War?

A. No, sir

3. Q. Were you employed on the Keys prior to the hurricane on September 2nd, 1935?

A. Yes. I transferred down here last October, latter part, and I was to make the location to No Name Key for the bridge; that was my first job, and I made it as far as Marathon; had a survey party and made the location as far as Marathon and when they got ready to start construction Mr Duncan sent me back to take charge of the engineering on construction and since that time that is what I have been doing, handling engineering work on construction of the bridge under direction of Mr Duncan.

4. Q. Did you have charge of any employees?

A. None except sufficient men for the survey party.

5. Q. Tell me how many.

A. I would say I had twelve men on my payroll at Marathon on that location party and we continued that location, under my direct supervision, after I came up on construction

6. Q. Were veterans detailed to you for duty?

A. No. There was one veteran I used around there for a few days. All my work was so irregular. I had to go off in a boat and be gone at lunch time--had to take our lunch with us, and they were very strict about the veterans; we had to have them back at 11:30 and again at 3:30 and I just could not make it you know. Just impossible to use them because I could not get to my work sometimes--if I started before daylight, sometimes I would not get to start work until nine or ten on account of rough weather, having to get in a slow boat, etc. I could not get them in at noon and they would not stand for them not being there.

7. Q. Where were your quarters with respect to the veterans camps?

A. I was living on the Sarasota Dredge there in the slip.

8. Q. How close was that to one of the camps?

A. At camp No. 3, tied to the bulkhead

9. Q. Did you come in contact with the veterans frequently?

A. Yes, always around with them and talking to them

10. Q. Did your duties carry you into the Camps?

A. No, I didn't go to their cabins or where they stayed. I saw them cutting rock and clearing and talked with them *there* ^{Key}

11. Q. Were you on the Keys during the hurricane?

A. I was here in Homestead.

12. Q. How long before the hurricane did you leave the Keys?

A. I came Friday night and I was going to work down there Monday but they told me everyone else was taking Labor Day and for me to take it. I said I had a lot of work to do and I better work Saturday, Sunday and Monday; I was getting a little behind and we were trying to get up some plans for the arches. They said to go ahead and take Labor Day and I would feel more like getting them out. I had been working hard

13. Q. You were not called back to assist in securing the machinery against the hurricane?

No, that was not in my line at all. That is Captain Sheeran's. If I could have been of help, I would have helped if they had called on me.

14. Q. Did you have occasion to observe the construction of either of the three camps?

A. Yes, I saw them all, just to see. Didn't have any supervision over them at all.

15. Q. State whether you saw them under construction?

A. Yes, I saw them all under construction.

16. Q. Have you had any experience with buildings?

A. Very little

17. Q. Would you know whether or not these buildings were sufficiently well built to resist an average hurricane such as you might normally expect on the Keys?

A. Yes, except part of the buildings in Camp No. 5, those which had tent tops, they would not. They were being replaced right along however.

18. Q. Were the buildings anchored in concrete or in the ground at all?

A. No sir, they were put on short piling - piles not driven - just set down on mud sills and we came in with the dredge on the low ground after the building was up and pumped sand in around them so they had something to hold them down, pumped sand with the suction dredge, but they were not built to resist hurricanes; nothing in this town or anywhere except structural steel buildings

19. Q. Were the buildings in all the camps constructed as you have just described?

A. In the first camp, No. 1--they sent fifty veterans in and had to have quarters ready for three hundred more they said were coming in the next few days and at that time they had to rush to get up tents of any description they could get hold of - circus tents, squad tents - and try to get lumber and get it as soon as they could to start to build shacks for them. That was December, after the hurricane season, and no danger at that time of hurricanes.

20. Q. Were the veterans' quarters constructed as well as the homes of the civilian population?

A. Better I would say, that is on an average. The best buildings on the Keys in my opinion were the Post Office at Islamorada (all natural stone) and two more of natural stone, one they called the Rock House. The natives said that is where they would all go in case of a hurricane. All were total wrecks.

21. Q. You said you were not on the Keys during the hurricane. I assume you know nothing about the events that occurred after you left there Friday until after the hurricane was over?

A. Nothing except what I heard. I know what happened from hearsay but you do not want that.

22. Q. When did you return to the Keys?

A. Thursday morning.

23. Q. What did you do while you were there?

A. Mostly just hunted for bodies over in the weeds and swamps where nobody else had gone.

24. Q. Will you tell me in your own words how many bodies you found and whether or not you identified any of them in any way or saw anything that you can recall that might help us to identify them?

A. I found twelve that had not been found; nobody else had found them. Lot of others I found where somebody had been there first - a lot of tracks around there. Of course these twelve that no one had found, they were across the creek opposite that water car that was on the spur track and they were pretty well unrecognizable because their faces were pretty well decomposed, their noses gone, and just their tongues kind of stuck out. There was one big fellow I had seen around camp so much I recognized him but I do not know his name. I know he was in Camp No. 3 I had seen him around there so much. Had left arm off just below the elbow. He was a large fellow. He was just hanging with his feet in a tree and head down in the mud; two other fellows close to him holding on to each other. The twelve I found had come off that car evidently where so many were trying to hold on. The waves coming across would take them away. Just kind of survival of the fittest on

that car I imagine. Just laying around in the mud and everything; didn't get close enough to them to try to make any identification on them because I figured when they brought them out they would have someone to do that that was supposed to do it; I was just trying to help out. Mr Duncan told me I could help ^{that day} I tried to locate veterans in the swamps because no one else ~~would go to~~ look for ^{him} them then. I was first to find the big fellow with his arm off. He worked around camp No. 3. I believe he was detailed around the kitchen, but I am not sure of that. I would see him around the messhall at No. 3 so much.

25. Q. Did anyone make note of identification marks or personal effects on the twelve that you found?

A. I don't know. I had to get some of the P.E.R.A. workers in there and build a little bridge across the Creek there for them so they could get across and they had to take matchettes and brush hooks and cut a path to each individual one in order to carry them out because it is so thick, (the mangrove roots) that you can hardly get through without cutting your way through. They brought them out and laid them on the road and I did not pay any more attention. I figured that was the time they were going to do any identifying they had to do but I did not see anybody. That was on Friday after the hurricane that I found these 12. On Friday they had a bunch from Key West that the PERA had come up and get these fellows out. They would not do it, only one on two. I got mad at them trying to get the bridge built. I don't know the foreman who had charge of the work. They went off and left. Looked like everybody wanted somebody else to go ahead. I am pretty sure these 12 were burned because they got some out Friday. They got the rest out next day and they lay there Sunday and Sunday night I believe they started burning them

26. Q. Do you know why they were not removed as they were taken out to the road?

A. No, I do not, but I believe it was on Saturday that they sent this bunch back to Key West in a boat because

they would not get the men. Probably they did not want to pick them up and carry them in the boats. Then they got the National Guard boys from Key West and Major Albury took personal charge of them and he just made them go in and get the rest of them. Those boys did mighty well doing the job they had to do but they didn't carry out and load in the boats. They carried a bunch to the ferry slip and no boat came to get them; I don't know why. Then they took them back up the road and burned them.

27. Q. How many were on the ferry slip?

A. I do not know. I heard someone say there was 20 there but I don't know. I did not follow around any more as I had done all I could

28. Q. Are you able to give me anything further that would help identify anyone of them?

A. No, I don't know. Some of them I felt like I had seen around camp three. Of course all this bunch belonged in camp three; that is where they were found, but as to identification I just don't know anything

29. Q. Do you know how many dead bodies were found around
Camp No 3?

A. No, I do not

30. Q. Did you see any bodies other than veterans there as far as you could tell?

A. A woman up the road. I think she is a veteran's wife.

31. Q. How many bodies would you estimate that you saw at camp three?

A. I don't know; that is kind of hard to say; I don't guess I saw over 25 or 30.

32. Q. Were they all cremated?

A. No, they took some of them out in boats; when I first got there, they were taking some out in a coast guard boat.

33. Q. How many of the 20 you say you saw from Camp 3 were cremated?

A. You just want me to make a guess? Well, all those I saw I believe were cremated. I forgot about that load in the coast guard boat; they were just laying there; that was on Thursday afternoon. I think they were taken to Snake Creek, just left Camp 3 and that is where we figured they were being taken. I imagine there must have been twenty-five from Camp 3 that were burned.

34. Q. While you were there?

A. I didn't go to the burning. I saw No. 5 when they were burning a lot of them.

35. Q. How many were burned up there?

A. In one pile they said 14 and another pile 5 and then they had another pile that no one said how many. They were covered with brush and you could see one here and there where they were being burned. They would burn an individual when they found one.

36. Q. Did you see any bodies that you could recognize there or that had any identifying marks?

A. When I was at camp it was too late to recognize them. I did not try to recognize anybody.

37. Q. Did you see any looting or evidence of looting?

A. No.

38. Q. Is there any further statement you wish to make that would have any bearing on this situation at all? Anything you want to say as to responsibility for loss of life or opinion as to what should have been done to save life?

A. The only thing I could say in that respect would be that from the first start of the camps down there the question came up of the hurricane season and everybody said that when hurricanes were reported they would take the veterans out of the Keys and there was never anybody, I don't think, that thought of keeping them down there to go through a hurricane or even to take a chance down there on going through a hurricane. As to why they did, I don't know. Don't see much excuse for it.

39. Q. What hours did the veterans work?

A. They did not do much work but they were supposed to work seven hours a day, I believe it was. The ones that worked on the bridge job - we would send out a boat - had to keep two tug boats there - sent out the civilian crew at 8 when they were supposed to go to work, in time to get them on the job at 8, and have the other boat held for the Vets and come out whenever they got there, which would be some time after eight. We usually got them on the job at 8:30 most of the time and then they had to get back to dinner at 11:30 or a lot of talk about it. Sometimes didn't get them back till 12, but had orders to get them in because they were very strict about that. Then the other boat would go out with the civilians a little before 1 to get on the job at once, and the other boat would wait for the veterans, whenever they got there, usually pretty soon after 1, not over 15, 20 or 30 minutes late. Then we sent them on out and had to bring them in at 3:30. There was a few of them that worked fine and there was plenty of them would have worked under different conditions but lots of them that

really wanted to work and would rather work than sit around camp but they could not do it because if they stayed there and worked and they were willing to work with the civilians and stay with their boat and they really wanted to do it, but they were afraid to do it because they had an organization in the veterans that required them to live up to the rules they set down and these rules were mainly not to do anything useful. The whole trouble with getting work out of the veterans came from higher ups. This Capt. Robertson is one; he evidently had some orders from Washington to not let the Veterans build the bridge. He at least worked against it, the building of the bridge. They could work in the camps if they felt like it; if they didn't want to, the government would take care of them. I guess that is right but they would not let the ones work that wanted to do something useful; they were against it, against the Bridge Project.

40. Q. Who else besides Robertson retarded the work?

A. The fellow that retarded the work more than anybody else was a fellow named Hinchman that came down here. He caused more contention between everybody and more trouble than I thought one man could cause. I don't know who he was or where he came from. I think he came from Washington and he certainly was against the bridge job. He would make a speech and tell them, "Now we don't want a bridge. I want you fellows to get to work and build your camps; we don't want to build a bridge."

41. Q. Do you know in what capacity he was?

A. He came down from Cincinnati on some kind of inspection and then he had charge of the veterans, took charge of them first. He was succeeded by Ghent. But he didn't stay long, just long enough to cause a lot of dissatisfaction that they never did outgrow.

42. Q. You refer to an organization among the Veterans? Do you speak of an organization of veterans within the camp?

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R. M. Nichols

A. Yes, the veterans themselves had meetings and decided this and that and sent petitions to Washington and different representatives and senators and everyone else that they knew the name of, about various things, the food they were getting, the treatment they were receiving and the mosquitoes they had to endure and just anything they could think of - you know. I find these veterans, a big percentage of them are a class of men that want to be rehabilitated and if these good ones had been separated from the bad, if they had had two camps and gave them a chance to work if they wanted to and gave them something to work for. I always contend that if you had a Communist or Red in the bunch, he would get a high rating every time. You can verify that if you look over the records, I imagine.

43. Q. Did they have Communists in the camp?

A. Sure, they had plenty. I can't name them but they had some. I will not call his name to say that he is a Communist for I might have to prove it. Somebody sent down there would be radicals sent down, not vets.

44. Q. By whom were they sent?

A. That is something else I can't prove. I just know they picked up a couple of them and took them to Key West jail; one day as I went down in the train, they had them. They had been there making a speech, around all the town they were making their speeches. They would get off with the veterans themselves. I didn't get to hear much of it except afterward; I would hear it second hand from other veterans. I am not in a position to prove anything but I just know it. I don't want to be called on to prove it. You can put this in the record.

Every pay day was just a big spree, 30% I would say would get drunk and they would get just as drunk as they could on whatever they could get hold of and stay as long as they could get hold of it. Lot of fighting among the men and

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everything but nobody was killed or anything. Would see maybe a dozen at a time throwing beer bottles at each other and hitting each other over the head. It looked like they would kill each other but they always came through all right. Friday before the hurricane I believe was payday. There were lots of them under the weather and I imagine that is why lots of them were drowned; they could not save themselves. They were still on that spree. Of course the circumstances and everything, I don't blame them for getting drunk. Never did hold that against them. They sure were a rough bunch down there. They drank whatever they could get. A lot of liquor found its way down at first but they got the National Guard and about stopped that for a stretch and got them drinking beer and it was not nearly so bad on payday after that. On payday a lot of them would get just as drunk on beer, but things were not as bad as before. The National Guard moved back out and liquor began to show up again. I don't know where it came from but there has always been liquor on the Keys. Mostly lots of them would not drink liquor if they could get rubbing alcohol; they would say so themselves.

45. Q. How many veterans had families would you say?

A. I didn't know but about three personally. There were some but I can't name them, can't call their name but could point out where they stayed. There was one ~~substantive~~ boy that stayed at Tavernier; he was a school teacher and his wife was a school teacher, mighty nice couple. There were two more that were down there; I was talking awhile ago about that woman up in the road, that I saw her body in the road.

46. Q. Do you know anything of the responsibility for the loss of life among the veterans during the hurricane?

A. I do not know who was responsible, but somebody was certainly negligent because it was never the intention of anybody in direct charge to keep the veterans down there during the risk of a hurricane. Mr. Ghent of course was

in charge of the veterans but whether he could order the train or whether he had to get authority from somebody else, I don't know. That was separate from our work, the vet's set-up.

47. Q. Did the veterans seem to be free to come and go as they liked or were they restricted to camp at times?

A. No, I didn't see any indication of them ever being restricted in any way to camps.

48. Q. Did many of them have their own automobiles?

A. Very few of them had any way of getting out of there unless they had taken that bunch of trucks down there, but I understood -- this is some more hearsay -- that down at camp 3 at the time they were figuring on the train coming to get them, just before the hurricane struck, they ordered every man to report in to camp and of course that was the natural thing to do to try and corral the drunks and everybody outside and get them in there together but they went a little bit far with it, it seems like, because they said that anybody that didn't stay with them there would be considered a deserter and Mewshaw, the boy that worked in our office, he didn't want to go over; he wanted to stay on the Sarasota with Capt. Sheeran and the rest of the civilians in there that were going to try to ride it out on there, but when they sent word he would be considered a deserter, he went over and mustered in with them, but Pete that was acting as janitor around there -- we all paid him every week to make up our bed and everything -- he made extra money that way, being janitor, -- he said he would desert right then and there and he stayed with this bunch of fellows that I was talking about. He stayed and rode it out on the Sarasota. That is only hearsay; I was not down there but I know it is as I say.

49. Q. From whom did you get that information?

A. Our men told me that. Boy names Cooper was one that worked in Bagley's office. He was there during the hurricane and stayed on the Sarasota. Several others said it too but I

am not sure which ones they were.

50. Q. Was that information purported to come from any official in authority?

A. Well, they didn't say, just said they would be deserters if they didn't muster in with them over there.

51. Q. Have you been asked by any government official or any other person for a statement concerning your knowledge of the hurricane or things that took place during that time?

A. No, I have not.

52. Q. Has anyone questioned you about making a full and complete statement if you were called upon for it?

A. No one said anything at all.

53. Q. Anything you wish to say in addition to what you have already stated?

A. No, I don't think of anything you would be interested in.

54. Q. You were here in Houston when the first of the veterans were evacuated to this point?

A. Yes.

55. Q. Can you tell me something of how effectively they were cared for?

A. They were cared for as good as the people around here could care for them without any help from anybody else except people who volunteered some of their own clothes. You see the first night, Wednesday night, we didn't have any outside help and it was kind of hard on everybody to take care of them, but they opened up the schoolhouse over there, a couple

of rooms, and they started bringing them in and the ones that were hurt of course they took them to Post-Graduate Hospital here in Homestead until it was full; then they took some to somebody's house and then they opened up the Baptist Sunday School and got some doctors and late in the night a bunch of doctors and nurses come in from Miami and somebody that represented the Red Cross came in and started making lists of everything there was at the schoolhouse. I was over there myself Wednesday night and stayed with them. The first that came in were civilians from Plantation Key and Tavernier. When we set down to our supper, my wife made the suggestion that if we only had a coffee pot large enough we might take over coffee and start in making soup and coffee and kept that up for several days.

56. Q. Are they both on this side of Snake Creek, this Plantation Key and Tavernier?

A. Yes.

57. Q. When did they get across Snake Creek?

A. They did not get across Snake Creek until Wednesday afternoon.

58. Q. How were they cared for in Homestead when brought in?

A. I thought they were pretty well cared for over at the schoolhouse. Of course, the different stores made up a box of stuff, the A&P and other different ones, and sent them to the schoolhouse, to take care of them. Someone sent out a little oil stove and then that stuff was just set out there and the ants were all over and someone got hold of some army blankets and pillows - I don't know where they came from -- but Wednesday night I stayed over all night. Tuesday night I didn't stay all night. My wife was here and she made up ten or twelve gallons of coffee and that much soup or more and I would come and get some of each and take it over and gave it to them as they came in, and gave a blanket and pillow

and they put them on the floor. That is all we could do and they went to sleep. They were all soaking wet.

59. Q. Do you know of any record that anyone kept of those cared for here?

A. The Red Cross is the only one I think that came down and started keeping a record.

60. Q. From Homestead or Miami?

A. Miami, and someone - Marshall's wife - at Florida City was in charge of the Red Cross here. But she did not seem to be keeping any records of it. She was just going ahead and doing what she could to help. A bunch came from Miami and they started talking about who was going to pay for all this -- to charge Monroe County. That was about all they did, wanted to keep records of everything.

61. Q. Are you speaking now of any particular organization?

A. Red Cross.

62. Q. Did any of the people die while they were here?

A. I don't know; I didn't hear of any.

I, Hubert Campbell Nichols,

DO SOLEMNLY SWEAR that the statements

made by me in response to questions

propounded by _____

Investigator, have been read by me and

they are true and correct to the best of

my knowledge and belief, so help me GOD

*Witness:
Wm. J. Selvey
Field Examiner
Veterans Administration*

H. C. Nichols
H. C. Nichols

SUBSCRIBED AND SWORN to before me

_____ an Investigator for

the Veterans Administration, this

24

_____ day of September 1935.

Signed before Mr. Selvey as the witness appeared during my absence and said he was leaving the City

H. W. Lamm
Investigator,