

R. G. Unkrich
 Sept. 17, 1935
 by Kennamer

Jacksonville, Florida
 September 17, 1935

R. G. Unkrich, Assistant Administrator of the Florida FRA, made the following responses, under oath, to questions propounded by E. M. Kennamer, Central Office Investigator, in the case under investigation entitled:

FLORIDA STORM

1. Q - What is your name, address and position?

A - R. G. Unkrich, Jacksonville, Assistant Administrator of FRA, meaning Florida FRA.

2. Q - How long have you been connected with FRA?

A - Since October 1933, although the CMA program intervened, and I am not sure which payroll I was on during that time.

3. Q - Are you Mr. Van Hyning's Assistant?

A - Yes, that's right.

4. Q - Does Mr. Ghent come under your supervision?

A - I would hesitate to say that he comes directly under my supervision. He does come under my supervision in the same sense that all department heads or subordinates do.

5. Q - Is he under your supervision in regard to the men on the Keys?

A - In the same way that any other subordinate employee is.

6. Q - You recall Monday, September 2nd, the day the hurricane visited the Keys - did you communicate with anyone, did anyone communicate with you or did you issue any instructions on that day regarding the Keys?

A - I do. I issued no direct instructions and none were given me. The messages which I received were for my information and confirmation that other had been issued.

7. Q - Who first communicated with you about the matter?

A - It just happened that I was spending the day at Cherry Lake Farms in Madison County. I had gone to the administrative office and intended to leave a call for Mr. Van Hyning (I believe I had already spoken to a operator about placing the call a little later) to talk to him about the storm, but before I could get in the call, one came to me

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from him in which he said he was concerned about the storm which was reported headed for some point on the Florida Coast. Mr. Van Hyning said in the course of the conversation that if the weather did not appear bad he would go on to Birmingham by airplane.

8. Q- What time was this conversation?

A- I do not know. It would have to be checked with the telephone company. It was probably about eleven o'clock but I do not remember. There were several calls, all of which were before one o'clock because I went to dinner at one o'clock and all of these conversations were before that time. About eleven thirty is as near as I can guess the time. It may have been a half an hour either side of that.

Mr. Van Hyning said he had a call from Perry Fellows in Washington who was concerned about the possibility of the veterans being caught in a storm and Mr. Van Hyning put in a call for Mr. Stelder at the Census, but for some reason was not able to get the call through so he called Mr. Gilford at Key West, who was to call Indianapolis and report back. Mr. Gilford told him that the veterans could be covered out on a special train. I believe Mr. Van Hyning suggested that I call Mr. Chent so see that the veterans were ordered out, saying that he would have in touch with me at Cherry Lake. At that point I attempted to put in a call for Mr. Chent but the operator of the exchange at Cherry Lake said that the exchange in the FBI office was closed because of the holiday. That turned out to be immaterial, however, because Chent called me almost immediately. Before Mr. Chent's call came in I had a call from Tillamoose. I do not know who called. It was presumably Mr. Van Hyning's maid, somebody or someone who stays with his family, I don't know if any have been for Mr. Van Hyning. I first had difficulty in leaving what was being said. I first thought the operators were arranging the call and that they were talking back and forth. I heard the word "Makeup" and when I did I said, "I'm sorry I can't hear you, you'll have to start over". The message I got was to the effect that Mr. Van Hyning had had the call from Mr. Gilford that he was waiting for. Apparently Mr. Van Hyning was not at home or he would have talked to me himself. However it was that called did so at his instruction and the report was that the train was standing by ready to leave at an hour's notice and that an order had been given for it to proceed and that everything was under control, to the general effect, at any rate, that everything was taken care of as planned.

9. Q- Did you receive this call before you went to lunch?

A- Yes.

10. Q- Was it before you talked to Chent?

A- Yes. All of these calls were before I went to lunch. I assume that can all be checked. There are several people who might have heard the conversations. Mr. Gray, an engineer who I was working with on the telephone plans, electricity system, the water, and other systems they were installing on the project, might have heard my end of the conversations.

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Mr. Rickard, Assistant Administrator of the WPA Shop, Incidentally, has no interest or responsibility in connection with this at all, was speaking in general terms also, and I remember telling him that I was concerned about the veterans, saying that sometime these little travelers travel to be near their loved ones. At the time, however, the train had been ordered and I really felt that it was an unnecessary excruciating trip that we should do it to be safe. I do recall referring to Mr. Richard that I was concerned about the veterans and that I was going to call Ghent. Later when we were at lunch, I told him that all the arrangements were made.

11. Q - What was your talk with Ghent?

A - I tried to put in a call for Ghent and was told that the exchange in Nashville was closed and before I decided where else to call, he called me. I do not remember whether he was calling Mr. Van Hyning or not but presumably he had (or Mr. Van Hyning had reached him). At any rate, he gave the report that the train was standing by ready to leave at an early notice. Not because they told me, but because I assumed it, and which proved to be an error in my judgment. I thought, at the time, he meant that the train was standing by at the keys. However, when I recounted that part of the conversation to Mr. Richard later, he did not draw a like conclusion.

*Ghent
says train
standing by*

12. Q - How are positive that Mr. Ghent told you the train was standing by and that this conversation took place before one o'clock?

A - Yes, and that he was going to order the train to proceed.

13. Q - Did Ghent have full authority to order the train?

A - Yes.

14. Q - Mr. Ghent had not placed an order for the train at that time, so his statement to you to the effect that the train was standing by was incorrect, was it not?

A - I do not know. He may have made some arrangements with the railroad people previously and they may have told him that the train was standing by waiting for orders. I do not know.

15. Q - If Mr. Ghent did not have such information and had not been advised by the railroad people that the train would be ready at an hour's notice, how would you interpret his statement?

A - I would have to give that more thought before answering. I am wondering if it was from Mr. Ghent or if it was from the conversation I had with Tallahassee before I talked with Ghent that I got the impression the train was standing by. I am sure Mr. Ghent did say that, however, since that conversation I followed the other one and since we talked the thing over and I specifically told him that we had a call from Gliford. I also told him that we did not want to take any chances and that the train should be ordered.

*Take
no chances*

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16. Q - You know that if the train was ordered that Mr. Ghent was the one to order it. If Mr. Ghent had not told you that the train was standing by, would you have taken any steps?

A - Yes. I would have gone to it that the train was ordered.

17. Q - Did you have any telephone conversation with Mr. Gilchrist?

A - No. The only connection I had was from Tallahassee to the effect that he had been in touch with Mr. Purdison. It may have been that call that gave me the impression that the train was standing by.

18. Q - What arrangements had been made with the railroad to furnish a train?

A - I do not know. Mr. Purdison may have done something about it as he has some responsibility there. I do know that there has been a general understanding for some months that a special train would evacuate the cases if it appeared necessary.

19. Q - Do you know whether there was any correspondence between Ghent and the railroad concerning any to the effect that it would require five hours to get the men out of the keys after three hours' notice?

A - I do not know what correspondence there may have been.

20. Q - At the time you talked to Ghent did you have any doubts in his mind that you or any other official of the F.B.I. felt that the train should not be sent?

A - I hesitate to say that I was worried about the matter but frankly I did seem to be so when going out of our way to keep from taking any action. The report was that the storm was going to pass south of Key West. That report presumably came to me from Key West by way of Tallahassee. I believe that was the point at which I learned the storm was going south of Key West.

21. Q - After you talked to Mr. Ghent do you think there was any reason in his not ordering the train right away?

A - I do not know. It seemed that the plan was to order the train and the that step would have been to go ahead and do it.

22. Q - Conditions were such that all of you were alarmed or you would not have been telephoning back and forth.

A - I think we really felt, and you can really see why, that it was something over which we were concerned all right. We felt we had better move the men, though it was going to cost us a little money. At the time it may have even seemed we were taking unnecessary precautions. I suppose, in the light of what followed, it would be hard to explain that point of view, but it is the way I believe reasonable thinking men would feel about it.

(S)

...unnecessary
presumption

David S. Florida Storm

23. Q - You did not receive any telegrams from Washington?

A - I was not here.

24. Q - Do you know whether any came in on the subject or not?

A - I could probably find out. I do not remember any and I do not think there were any.

25. Q - As far as you know, the only inquiry was from Perry Falloss to Mr. Van Dyke?

A - Yes, and that must have been early as eleven o'clock on Monday morning.

26. Q - Is there anything else you would like to add to your statement. Are there any other facts which you know about this matter which you would like to relate?

A - I hesitate to say anything without knowing what is wanted. Most of the information I have is second hand. I am not consciously withholding any information which I believe you want, it that is what you mean.

27. Q - Have you developed any facts which show conclusively that the great loss of lives was due to carelessness, negligence, incompetence, or indifference on the part of any of the employees of this organization?

A - I have not, but I might make this further remark. - Mr. Ghent did not call me for permission to order out the train. The information I received was in the line of keeping me informed of developments as far as the practice among the officials of this organization. It is also true that it is understood that when Mr. Van Dyke is away, I am in charge.

I, R. C. Vernon, DO HEREBY solemnly swear that the answers made herein to questions propounded by D. S. Kenauer, Central Office Investigator, are true and correct, with such limited corrections as may be necessary, to the best of my knowledge and belief so help me God.

R. C. VERNON

CONCORDED AND RETURNED TO THE 10th day of September, 1946, before
D. S. Kenauer, Central Office Investigator, Veterans' Administration, under
 Authority: Veterans' Administration, Form 4-056a.

A Paul 7-74
Kenauer
Van Dyke

D. S. KENAUER, Investigator.