

Frederick Poock
Sept. 22, 1935
by Farmer

McAllister Hotel,
Miami, Florida,
Sept. 22, 1935

FREDERICK POOCK 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 please.
A. Frederick Poock, 62 years old, Homestead, Florida. I was acting as office manager and Trust Officer at headquarters of the Veterans Camps, at the Matakumbe Hotel.
2. Q. Are you a veteran of the World War?
A. Yes but not with the American Forces. I was in the Canadian Army, joined in August ~~1918~~ 1914.
3. Q. Did your duties require your presence in the Camps regularly?
A. Yes, at headquarters and I went to the individual camps occasionally, particularly on paydays.
4. Q. At what place were you quartered?
A. At the Matakumbe Hotel.
5. Q. Were you in camp just preceeding and during the hurricane of September 2nd?
A. I left Matakumbe approximately at 2 p.m. on the 2nd. It was some hours before the bridge went out at Snake Creek. I left in an automobile. I offered to stay with Mr Sheldon there at headquarters but he thought it was not necessary as he said the more that left by automobile the more room there would be on the train. He made this statement to me in his office.
6. Q. How long had you been continually in camp before 2 o'clock Monday afternoon?
A. I was away from camp on Saturday and Sunday, arriving in camp on Monday morning about 10 a.m. You see my family had just arrived and I had not seen them for 5 years.

left
at 2 P.M.

Arrived
in camp
10 a.m.

7. Q. Then you were only in camp from 10 until 12 Monday, during the Saturday, Sunday and Monday preceeding the hurricane?

A. Yes, sir.

8. Q. Did you bring anyone out with you when you left at 2 o'clock?

Left in
Wigginton's
car
A. I came out in Captain Wigginton's car, he and I came out together. We called on our way at the hospital to pick up one or two men but they were not ready to go. We did not realize the extent of the storm or how bad things were. My family arrived in Miami on Saturday morning and I had made arrangements to take them to Homestead. I had not seen them in over five years and naturally I was anxious to get back.

9. Q. Are you familiar with any effort made to evacuate the veterans from the camp before the hurricane?

A. All I knew was what I heard when I got back on Monday morning. I realized then that something serious was anticipated. Hotel windows were nailed up and the natives were nailing up their dwellings. At the time I got into the office I had some office detail to attend to in connection with my trust funds, securing the records etc. against what I thought would be a big blow. I then went into the main office. Mr Sheldon was at that time taking telephone messages with regard to the weather. I think he was in touch with the Weather Bureau.

10. Q. Did you hear any of his conversation with the Weather Bureau or anything regarding weather conditions?

A. No, all the information I have is really second hand, and I do not know whether or not it is of any value, but I spoke to Mr Cutler during the morning and he said he had endeavored to get authority from Mr Ghent to act in Mr Sheldon's absence as things looked serious to him. You see Mr Sheldon was in Key West at that time.

11. Q. Did Cutler indicate whether or not he had secured authority from Mr Ghent?

A. It was refused him, that is, I understand that authority was refused him.

12. Q. Tell me just what Cutler said with respect to his effort to secure authority to act from Mr Ghent.

A. My recollection of the conversation was this - Cutler said

to me "I got in touch with Fred (meaning Ghent) on Sunday asking him to give me authority to act in Sheldon's place. He informed me that Mr Sheldon was in charge and I told him that Sheldon was in Key West. Mr Ghent replied that he would be back in time, and I said to him supposing he does not get back in time." and he replied that he knew he would get back in time." Cutler then told me that he said to Ghent, "Well, then you will not give me any authority to act," and Ghent told him he would not as Sheldon was in charge. That is how Cutler related the matter to me on Monday morning at approximately noon. It is also my understanding that a man by the name of E. B. Parker, a native, came in and tried to get some action sometime Monday morning.

Ghent
told Cutler
H Sheldon's
in charge

13. Q. Was Mr Cutler critical of Mr Sheldon's failure to evacuate when you talked with him Monday morning?

A. Yes, he seemed to think the train should be on the way, that is he expressed that opinion to me. Cutler was formerly with the State Safety Department and his mind naturally would go to things of that nature, the safety of property and individuals.

Cutler was
E Safety
dept.

14. Q. Does Mr Cutler enjoy a reputation for reliability and good judgment with the FERA?

A. I should say yes.

15. Q. Any information you have as to telephone conversations between Mr Sheldon and the Weather Bureau on Monday morning, were as I understand it, second hand. Did you see him calling the Weather Bureau?

A. No. I was in his office Monday morning and he was getting various barometer readings. Everything seemed to indicate to him and to me that we were in the valley of the storm. I could not say definitely but I would say that two or three calls came through from the Weather Bureau when I was in his office about eleven o'clock. I do not recall any information that came through regarding the proximity of the hurricane at that time. I think the conversation was confined totally to barometer readings.

16. Q. Did Mr Shelton initiate any of these calls himself?

A. Not to my recollection.

17. Q. Do you know whom they were from?

A. No, but I assumed by his answers that they were from the Weather Bureau

18. Q. Aside from those telephone conversations what, if any, preparations did you see Mr Sheldon or anyone else make looking towards the evacuation of the veterans?

A. None

19. Q. Were you aware of the fact that Mr Sheldon had called for a train about 2 o'clock?

A. I gathered at around 11:30 a.m. that the train had not been called. At that time Mr Sheldon and Mr Patterson were trying to decide about calling a train and were endeavoring to locate the direction of the storm. Of course I only assumed that they were trying to decide about calling the train from what I gathered from their conversation. I assumed that if the direction of the storm called for it that they would call the train.

pardon me here, I wish to make a correction in a previous statement I have made. I recall that Mr Patterson who was in the office at the time made an alteration in the course of the storm on a map they had in the office. They were thumb-tacking the course of the storm on the map.

20. Q. Did that alteration indicate that the storm had changed its course?

A. It indicated to me that the storm was pointing more directly to the Keys.

21. Q. At what time was that alteration made?

A. I could not say but think it was about 11:30 or 11:45.

22. Q. On what information was it based?

A. I do not know

23. Q. How were Mr Sheldon and Mr Patterson occupying themselves when you saw them Monday, other than as you have already indicated?

A. They were passing the time by playing cards between calls

24. Q. What game of cards were they playing?

A. Penny ante poker

25. Q. Where?

A. In the office

26. Q. Who was engaged in the game?

A. Sheldon, Patterson, Perdue (Perdue is watchman connected with the Hotel and employed by the FERA) and several others. I had a hand or two myself but got out of the game as the occasion was not fitted for card playing and I was anxious and could not settle down. Also, I had other work to do in connection with my duties. It seemed to me to be on the order of the idea of Nero Fiddling while Rome was burning. There were five or six there altogether but I cannot recall their names.

27. Q. Was there any drinking at that time?

A. No, I did not see any drinking.

28. Q. Do you know how long that card game continued?

A. No, I do not but I do not imagine it continued very long.

29. Q. Was there a telephone in the room?

A. Yes. Everyone I think was more or less on edge and I think they were playing cards to break the waiting spell between calls. It was really a pastime and not a real poker game. One and then another would come up and take a hand just to pass the time away.

30. Q. Explain your duties as Trust Officer.

A. I was on the staff of the original Camp No. 1 when they came from Washington to Keystone Heights where they were conditioned for three or four weeks before proceeding to the Keys. Their first payday on the Keys was in the first week of November. After the payoff a number of the men came to me and asked me if I would take care of certain monies as they did not want to have the money with them in the camp. This money I kept on my person for a day or two until it amounted to a sum that justified better care and protection. I therefore opened an account in the First National Bank of Homestead and deposited between five and six hundred dollars in my name as Trustee. I designated Trustee underneath my name to separate it from anything else. From time to time withdrawals were made by the men but the next payday increased the amount of savings considerably. I endeavored to persuade the men to save their money and was fairly successful. At the time of the hurricane there was approximately \$5600.00 in the Homestead Bank to the credit of

849

\$5,600 in
Homestead
Bank

various veterans in the three camps. There were at that time approximately 150 accounts. When I left the Keys, not realizing the seriousness of the situation, I left my records in the office, but left them secure. After the storm I worked at Homestead for three days and nights without sleep, evacuating and doing everything I could to help. I did my best to relieve congestion and do all I could. There was no chance to get back to the Keys until Friday after the storm. I went down on Friday but dark came on just about the time I got to the Matacumbe Hotel and the place was locked up so that I could not get in. So Saturday I went to Snake Creek and got a speed boat and got within about one hundred yards of the Matacumbe Hotel. I went in and got my records. They were water-logged but practically intact. Every man discharged from Camp Foster who had money in the Trust Fund has been paid off 100%. I am now awaiting a ruling on the disbursing of these funds to men who are in the hospitals in Miami, Bay Pines and Lake City.

Returned
for
HCO rds

31. Q. From whom will that ruling come?

A. Mr Redkey told me not to pay off any men until they were discharged, so that when they went out they would have all that was coming to them. In the interest of discipline it was expedient to withhold payment until the man was discharged.

32. Q. I am wondering if you will turn your list of depositors and a list of those paid off, over to us to check against our unidentified list and permit us to make a record of this, and a record of these who have not been paid off.

A. Yes, sir, I will be glad to do so. I will have to send to Jacksonville for the list but will get it for you. I wish to say here that I have only had one man try to chisela in on the Trust Fund. His name is Wadie Esau. While at Homestead after the hurricane he came to me and represented that he had placed \$55.00 in the Trust Fund, while I and the veteran (Mr White) who was keeping track of the Fund with me, were positive that he had never made a deposit. At that time it was not generally known that my records had been saved and Mr Esau insisted that he had deposited \$55.00 and wanted it. However, when Esau's statement was taken at Camp Foster he indicated in reply to a question that he had nothing in the Trust Fund. I know this, - the trust fund will show 100% accounted for.

33. Q. Were deposits in the Trust Fund made entirely voluntary?

A. Yes.

34. Q. Was it understood that withdrawals might be made at any time?

A. Yes. It was always my endeavor to check withdrawals as much as possible but there was nothing to prevent them drawing it.

35. Q. Did you identify any of the dead veterans?

A. No

36. Q. Do you know any who left the camp before the hurricane?

A. Yes, there were quite a few. If I could see the list I might be able to tell.

37. Q. Here is a list and I would be glad for you to give me any information you can

A. Here is the name of E. L. Cash. I am satisfied that he is living. I saw him at Homestead after the hurricane.

This man Dempsey I am also sure is living but Polly Huau can tell you for sure about him.

E. B. Evans had left the camp previously. He checked out approximately a month ago. I know this through the office routine. I think he joined the CCC's.

I am sure Monte French is living, as I saw him at Camp Poster while I was there this past week.

William H Frost is living - he was in Miami at the time of the storm. He was a canteen man and I have seen him since the hurricane.

Robert Preston passed through Homestead while I was there. He was hurt and I think he died since but the hospital records will show that. He was injured and I know I saw him as I recall that definitely.

I think Walter Raleigh is living. Inquiry at Camp Poster will show whether or not he was there. I am not positive of this.

F. Griset died before the hurricane. He was killed in a railroad accident. I have money in the Trust Fund belonging to him

Clyde Boyce was my largest depositor, \$230. He was killed alright, I have met boys who have seen his body.

38. Q. Do you recall the names of any who have seen his body?

A. No, I do not

Mr Poock continues looking over the list -

There was either a C. M. or a W. M. Phillips passed through Camp Foster while I was there. A check on the Camp Foster records will show which it was

T. Y. Riley - he left camp on Thursday or Friday before the storm and went to Miami. I know the person who took him in to Miami. He got his discharge from the Camp and was taken in by J. T. Hooks. Mr Hooks had charge of canteens on the Headquarters Staff.

39. Q. Do you know where Mr Hooks is now?

A. I heard he went to Ocala

I cannot account for any more men on this list.

40. Q. What can you say of moral conditions in the camps among both the staff and veterans, with particular respect to drinking?

Drinking A. Drinking around monthly payday with the veterans was undoubtedly excessive. They used to issue a dollar advance on salary three times a week. That was discontinued in August and a check on the canteen was issued in the amount of \$2.00 every Friday. That cut down the drinking considerably and at the same time boosted the deposits in the Trust Fund. Of course they drank on payday just the same.

41. Q. Was beer sold at the Canteens?

A. Yes

42. Q. Were the canteen checks used for the purchase of beer?

A. Yes

43. Q. Now then, did their issuance cut down the drinking?

A. Because they were only issued once a week and \$2.00 instead of three separate dollars

44. Q. Did you note any appreciable amount of drinking while you were in the camp Monday September 2nd?

A. No, I just came straight through from the Station to Headquarters, was not in the camps at all.

45. Q. To what do you ascribe the failure to evacuate veterans before the hurricane?

A. Lack of appreciation of the seriousness of the situation.

46. Q. On the part of whom?

A. Mr Ghent and Mr Sheldon

47. Q. In your opinion was that lack of appreciation due to neglect?

A. I could not say that

48. Q. Has any other Government Official taken a statement from you on this subject?

A. No, sir

49. Q. Has anyone cautioned you to be in any manner guarded in your remarks if you did make a statement?

A. No, sir

50. Q. Having in mind that you may speak as freely as you please and it is our desire to have you relate any fact or opinion having a bearing on the cause for the loss of life, it is requested that you make any further statement you desire.

A. This is just an opinion but I think that had Cutler been given authority to act, the train would have been called in time to evacuate the men to points of safety. I feel that Mr Ghent's attitude to Mr Cutler at the time he made his request for authority was reprehensible, in view of the fact that he was some hundreds of miles away from the scene and Mr Cutler was right there pleading for authority to act, in view of Mr Ghent's representative, Mr Sheldon, being absent in Key West

Ghent
"reprehensible"

51. Q. Where did Mr Ghent maintain his headquarters?

A. Principally in Jacksonville

52. Q. Were his duties confined solely to the three camps on the Keys?

A. No, sir. He was in charge of all Veterans camps in the State.

53. Q. How frequently was he present on the Keys?

A. Very seldom in the past three or four months and then only for a few hours.

54. Q. Are you aware of any advice Mr Sheldon was given relative to the approaching hurricane by officials of the Bridge Project?

A. No, I have no definite knowledge.

55. Q. Do you know whether or not he sought information from these officials or from responsible natives?

A. No, sir, the only instance I know of his contacting a responsible native was when Parker was reported to have spoken to him early Monday morning with a view to expedite the arrival of the train.

56. Q. Do you know whether or not Mr Cutler advised him of his opinion that the veterans should be evacuated as early as Monday morning?

A. No, I cannot answer that question except by recalling the fact that I was advised that Mr Cutler was endeavoring to get authority Sunday, and I can only assume that he took the matter up with Mr Sheldon on his return. It is my understanding, as I have said before, that Mr E B Parker, a native, did come to Mr Sheldon and try to impress upon him the need for early evacuation.

57. Q. Is there any further statement you wish to make?

A. I do not think so.

I, Frederick Poock, DO SOLEMNLY SWEAR
that the statements made herein in response
to questions propounded by H. W. Farmer,
Investigator, have been read by me and they
are true and correct to the best of my
knowledge and belief, so help me GOD.

Frederick Poock.

SUBSCRIBED AND SWORN TO before me

H. W. Farmer, an Investigator

of the Veterans' Administration, this

23 day of September 1935.

H. W. Farmer