

O. D. King
Sept. 18, 1935
by H. W. Farmer

McAllister Hotel
Miami, Florida
September 18, 1935.

O. D. King, made the following responses under oath to questions propounded by H. W. Farmer, Investigator, in the investigation entitled "Re Hurricane, Florida."

1. Q. Please state your full name, occupation and home address.

A. O. D. King, Superintendent of Transportation of the Florida Keys for the FERA. My present address is the Hotel Ritz. I was making my home on the keys until the storm but previously I had lived in Miami about 14 years.

2. Q. Are you a Veteran?

A. No.

3. Q. Tell me briefly what your duties were as Superintendent of Transportation.

A. I had charge of all rolling stock for the three camps. I was under Mr. Ghent with 54 Veterans under me.

4. Q. Were you directly under the supervision of Mr. Sheldon or M. R. Ghent?

A. Ghent and Sheldon.

5. Q. Were the Veterans under your supervision detailed to you from day to day or were the same individuals regularly assigned?

A. The same individuals.

6. Q. What hours did they work?

A. They reported at 8 A.M. and went off at 4 o'clock

with an hour and a half for lunch.

7. Q. Were each of them assigned to a particular piece of motor equipment?

A. Yes.

8. Q. Tell me how many motor trucks or passenger cars you had and how many men each could carry.

A. 11 stake bodies - 25 men in each with safety
8 coaches - possibly 5 men to each
7 pick-ups - 10 men to a pick-up
2 ambulances
1 screen body

8 dump trucks - These could have been used but it would have been a hazard.

9. Q. Are the trucks distributed among the camps or are they held in one central control?

A. They were distributed.

10. Q. Does that include all the motor vehicles in camp?

A. Yes.

11. Q. Does it include those that were used on the bridge project?

A. That includes everything FERA owned on the island.

12. Q. Were they all in good order?

A. All but one were running.

13. Q. How long had you been employed at the Veterans' Camp?

A. Since about the first of January.

14. Q. Were you there during the hurricane of September 2nd?

A. Yes.

15. Q. At what point were you during the hurricane?

A. I was 2 miles south of Islamorada station.

16. Q. Were you there continuously from Saturday evening

until Monday night, September 2nd?

A. No sir. I left Sunday morning at 5 o'clock and came to Miami and returned about 7 o'clock on Sunday night. I was there continuously from then on.

17 Q. Were you maintaining a residence on the keys?

A. Yes. It was 4 miles south from Camp #1, 4 miles north of Camp #5 and 8 1/4 miles north of Camp #3.

18 Q. Was your family there?

A. Yes. My family consists of my wife, sister-in-law and her two ~~year~~old son, A native and one Veteran and myself stayed with them during the storm. The Veteran's name was Everet. I don't know his first name. The native's first name was Gilbert. I don't know his last name.

19. Q. Did all these persons you have mentioned come through the hurricane safely.

A. Yes.

20. Q. Tell me in your own words something of your experiences during the storm?

A. I imagine the hard blow hit us around 6 o'clock. About 7 or 7:30 o'clock the front of the place we were in blew away and we moved back into the kitchen. Possibly an hour after that the water came up on us. The men began fighting the water and kept putting the ladies and the baby up higher each time until the water got above our arm pits. Then the side and the door of the kitchen went away. About that time the water commenced to recede. Then we went over to my home. We had been in my place of business - a filling station. We formed a chain and made it about 10 feet across. It took us a good half hour to get over to the other cottage. While we were in there, it blew away leaving only one room in the rear. We stayed until it broke.

About 3 o'clock a young girl came by. We heard her scream and called to her. She finally made it over to where we could get to her. From then on to daylight we didn't see anything. About

King's
filling station

daylight a man came down and said his family were pinned in their car and he was too weak to get them out and he asked us to get them. We got his wife and two daughters and left his brother who was dead. That was the Williams family. From then on we searched as far as we could go each way between the canals and around noon Tuesday, we had 54 all natives, in the two rooms.

21 Q. Do you know whether or not Mr. Williams or his brother were Veterans?

A. No, they were natives.

22. Q. How long after the water came over the island did it take to reach its maximum height?

A. I don't know - maybe 30 minutes. It is hard to judge time in a case like that.

23. Q. Did the water maintain its maximum height for any appreciable length of time before it began to recede?

A. It seemed like hours. I don't believe we were in water to our shoulder pits more than an hour but it seemed like many hours. The native says that after the water came up his height, I called the roll around 39 times. It was dark and we could not feel or see each other so I kept calling the roll in order to know if we were all alive.

24. Q. How long would you say the water covered the keys?

A. I don't know about that. I think we had water in our house longer than it covered the keys because my place was very low.

25. Q. When did you first realize that a hurricane was approaching the keys on which the camps were located?

A. About 5 o'clock Monday afternoon. That's when I made up my mind it was going to hit. Our reports all the time indicated only gale force

26 Q. What caused you to make up your mind at that time that the storm was going to hit the keys?

A. The wind blew the car I was driving off the road.

- 27 Q. Were you closely associated with the Veterans for a few hours before 5 o'clock and were they apprehensive that a hurricane was approaching during that time?
- A. I only talked with one man who had any idea that it was coming and he was half drunk. I picked up 3 families off the water front before the blow came, between 3:30 and 4 o'clock and they were very calm - even the ladies.
28. Q. Were those Veterans and their families?
- A.
- 29 Q. How were the Veterans occupying themselves on Monday morning if they were not apprehensive about the storm?
- A. I saw only a few around the camps but there were quite a few hanging around and they didn't have much on their mind about the blow. It wasn't discussed with me at all by any of them until about 3 o'clock when I discussed it with the head mechanic in #8. I asked him if he had enough drivers sober to take the men out. I had received orders at 3:30 in the morning to oil and gas all trucks and to stand by. That order was from Mr. Sheldon.
30. Q. With what officials were you in contact from the time you returned to camp on Sunday until the storm actually struck?
- A. With Mr. Sheldon. There were a lot of fellows in the office there but I was contacting him all of the time.
- 31 Q. Did you receive any instructions from him other than to have the trucks filled with gas and oil?
- A. Yes, I was under orders to report to him every hour on account of the weather reports. I did that and reported to him every hour to get the weather reports until 3:30 which was the last report we had.
32. Q. Did you get the weather reports from him every hour?
- A. Yes. Two or three times I was in his office when he called.

*3pm - enough
sober drivers and
to take them
8 a.m. - Sheldon
says gas up trucks*

*He checked
Sheldon every
hour*

33 Q. Do you know from whom he was getting the weather reports?

A. One time he called Miami - Canal 33 - if I am not mistaken. The next call was to Miami but I don't know the number. Those calls were in my presence.

34. Q. Do you know what, if any, action Mr. Sheldon took looking toward the evacuation of the Veterans other than his instructions to you to have the cars and trucks in readiness?

A. I heard him call the train about 1:30 Monday afternoon he called East Coast officials and asked that the train be sent and also asked that the officials confirm his order through Mr. Ghent in Jacksonville. I heard him make this call. He re-called this train about 3 o'clock because he hollered down to me and asked me to contact the camp superintendents and have all men ready to catch the train at 5 or 5:30 o'clock. There was a general understanding about this. I know that it was discussed in March with Capt. Hinchman - about evacuating the Veterans. I made up my own mind that such arrangements had been made but I don't know that they actually were.

35 Q. You have indicated that you asked the head mechanic as to whether or not he had enough sober drivers to take the trucks out. What was his reply?

A. He said that he thought he had.

36 Q. Was there any further verification of that fact on your part?

A. No

37 Q. Do you know why the motor transportation was not used to evacuate the Veterans before the train came?

A. No.

38. Q. Why did you remain on the keys? You had private transportation, did you not?

A. My car was not in running order.

39. Q. Had you had your own transportation would you have left the keys with your family before the hurricane?
- A. I would have attempted to get out when I was blown off the road with my car.
40. Q. Do you know whether or not any of the Veterans left camp prior to the storm?
- A. Yes.
41. Q. Will you tell me the names of any you know who left camp?
- A. Mr. Freese out of #5 and Joe Dubosky. Freese left in a stake body and Dubosky in a pick-up.
42. Q. Under what authority did they leave camp?
- A. Their own.
43. Q. How did they secure possession of the trucks?
- A. Freese was a truck driver at #5 and had possession of the truck 24 hours. How he made out I don't know.
44. Q. Have you seen either or both of these men since, and did you recover the trucks?
- A. Yes. They turned in the trucks but to whom I don't know.
45. Q. Where can they be located?
- A. At Camp Foster I imagine.
46. Q. At what time did they leave camp?
- A. I don't know what time Freese left. Joe was at my house between 4 and 5 o'clock.
47. Q. Did either of them ask for permission to use the trucks?
- A. Joe is the head mechanic I talked to about sober drivers.
48. Q. How do you account for the fact that these men took the trucks without authority?
- A. I wouldn't account for Freese at all.

I think Joe left because he was afraid.

49 Q. Did he have authority from anyone?

A.

50 Q. Had he asked anyone for authority to use the truck?

A. Capt. Davis gave him authority to take the truck out after he found he (Capt. Davis) would have to ride the train. This was at my suggestion. Davis had intended to drive his private car and pick up my wife and sister-in-law. Then his orders were changed that he must ride the train with the men so he turned his car over to George Pepper who never got by for my wife. I suggested to Mr. Davis that he let Joe drive the camp pick-up and lead the men because he was sober and reliable and could be depended upon in the event that we evacuated.

51. Q. Have both of these men told you they used the trucks?

A. I saw Joe. The other man told me he used the truck. I recovered the truck here in Miami.

52. Q. Were any of the Veterans instructed to remain in camp preceeding the hurricane or prohibited in any way from leaving?

A. I don't think so.

53 Q. I want you to tell me in your own words if you have made positive identification of any dead Veterans.

A. I don't think I could identify any of them because I was too dopy when I came out of there. There were one or two which I thought I identified but they showed up alive.

54 Q. You would not be able then to say of your own knowledge that any particular veteran was dead?

A. No. Not from my view coming through. I didn't identify any bodies.

55. Q. I want to show you a list of missing veterans and to ask you whether or not you have seen any of the persons listed thereon since the hurricane or if

you can give me any other information regarding any veterans mentioned thereon.

A. After looking at the list I wish to say that the fellow Joe McAdams isn't dead because he stole a station wagon on Friday noon and he has been seen in town with the wagon since then by myself. I didn't contact him. He was driving and I was walking and he was approximately a half block from me. He was in the station wagon and I recognized him by his uniform and his glasses. Naturally I recognized the station wagon from its numbers.

56 Q. Have you recovered the station wagon or notified the police, or do you know anything about where it is.

A. No.

57 Q. Were you sure before the hurricane that this man had taken the station wagon.

A. Yes. I reported it on Saturday and again on Sunday. He is the only one on the list I have seen.

57 Q. Did you say the police had been notified about the theft of the station wagon?

A. Yes

58 Q. Do you know if anyone left camp with him in that wagon?

A. No, I do not know.

59 Q. I have heard several rumors that a group of veterans left camp in an official truck before the hurricane and went to Washington. Is there any truth in that?

A. No, they might have left there in a group on the wagon but Freese brought them in. But he didn't go to Washington unless he has gone within the last 2 or 4 days.

60 Q. Was there any more transportation missing except the station wagon which was taken Friday and the two pieces of transportation which were taken before the hurricane struck?

A. One dump truck which was located at the Opa Locka Transient Camp. It was taken some time Tuesday

morning after the storm. Sgt. Nables crossed the switch on it and I understand used it from Snake Creek up and down until they got ambulances. Incidentally, Nables told me that he had crossed the switch and turned it in to the Opa Locka Camp. It was turned back to the garage in town. It was in Camp #1 garage when the hurricane struck That is right at Snake Creek on this side.

61 Q. In your opinion, did Mr. Sheldon the camp director, or assistant camp director, take all action that a reasonably prudent man would have been expected to take looking toward the evacuation of the Veterans?

A. I believe he did.

62. Q. Did he have full authority to order the train or to adopt other means of evacuating the camps?

A. I don't think he had full authority to order the train without confirmation from Mr. Ghent but he had authority to order the trucks out.

63 Q. Was he restricted or did he lack instructions in securing a means of evacuating the men by any one in authority over him?

A. A confirmation of his order came in at the same time he was putting in the order for the train.

64 Q. When did you leave the camp for your home preceding the storm?

A. About 4:30 o'clock.

65 Q. Do you know of any other veterans who has been reported missing?

A. I know Mr. Pittman. Mallie Pittman stayed with me on Tuesday night and Wednesday morning after the storm. He came in with me and I kept him at my brother-in-laws' home until he got some clothes and so forth. I got him a job with the Fixit Plumbing Company. He was a member of Camp #1 and was in camp during the hurricane. His pay roll number was 392. Pittman stayed in the train that came into camp. He caught it when the train went through Camp #1 and rode it Islamorada before it turned over. Some time Tuesday morning he came to my house and stayed

through Wednesday morning. I kept him with me until he got a job.

- 66 Q. You do not seem inclined to speak very freely in answer to my questions. I want to ask you if anyone has taken a statement from you before or if anyone has cautioned you about telling what you may know.

A. No sir.

- 67 Q. I would like to ask you to make any further statement that in your opinion has a bearing on either the responsibility for the loss of life or that will assist in the identification of the Veterans listed as missing.

A. I don't believe that I could give you much more information, Mr. Farmer, than you have asked. I don't think the blame is entirely on any certain one for this reason: I was well acquainted with all the natives there and if they had had any idea the storm was going to get in there 12 hours before, they would have gotten out. They all have from one to three barometers and all they do is sit and study them and not one of them left. As far as I could find out the officials were contacting everyone they could about weather conditions and getting weather reports. One time Key West was called to get their barometer readings to compare with Miami reports were doubted. It would have been easy enough to have brought the boys out on Sunday but if you had brought them out and nothing happened you would have been censored. Even Monday morning as far as that goes, but if nothing had happened that would have been just a bad error. The man would have been crowned and no mistaking it. I know, myself, if I had any idea it was going to be so bad I would have gotten out. I didn't want my family to suffer or myself either. I aged ten years that night.

I. O. D. King, DO SOLEMNLY SWEAR that the statements herein made 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.

I. O. D. King

SUBSCRIBED AND SWORN TO before me _____
an investigator for the Veterans' Administration,
this ____ day of September, 1935.
