

Wilton Lindsey Smith
Sept. 10, 1935
by Farmer

McAllister Hotel
Miami, Florida
September 10, 1935

WILTON LINDSEY SMITH made the following responses under oath to questions propounded by H W Farmer, Investigator, in the examination entitled "Re Hurricane Florida."

1. Q. State your full name, age and address.
A. Wilton Lindsey Smith. Born October 24, 1893.
Islamorada, Florida. Home address Spartanburg, S.C.
2. Q. Where were you employed?
A. I was employed at Lower Matecumbe, Overseas Bridge Project, F E R A, Col. Sheeran. I was not a member but was known as a civilian employee. I was cook for the civilian mess composed of about, that is, we were feeding around 25 men at the time of the storm. I have been employed since 3/14/1935.
3. Q. Were you ex-service.
A. Yes. I was Mess Sgt., 8th Trench Mortar Board Battalion, 7th Company, Nat'l Guard. My service records show I was drafted 6/31/1916, discharged 12/6/1918 Fort Moultrie S. C.
4. Q. Do you have a claim with the Veterans' Administration?
A. No.
5. Q. Were you personally on the keys during the recent hurricane?
A. Yes.
6. Q. Tell me in your own words just where you were, any conditions experienced, mentioning names of any known dead veterans and any other observations you made.
A. We were ordered by Col. Sheeran Sunday Sept 2 to prepare and put all machinery in the hurricane slips. Col. Sheeran told me on Sunday we were all getting out. Col. Sheeran kept check with the weather department, radio and wires Sunday and Monday and he told us that the storm was coming. He came to me Sunday and said "I am not going out unless the veterans are moved."

WILTON LINDSEY SMITH:

And I said, "Colonel, I will stay with you then", and he said "I will certainly appreciate it if you will", so I asked him where we would stay and he said "We will stay on the dredge boat "Sarasota" and so I put on a supply of food and the storm hit us around quarter of five. I went aboard and I found quite a number of fishermen, one of them had his wife; three veterans aboard. One was Lieut. Myers -- I forget his initials. One was named Pete. That is all I knew and the other one I never did know his name, but they rode the storm aboard the Sarasota.

I went to Blackie Pugh, who is first sergeant of Camp #3. Blackie had given orders for all the boys to pack up everything they owned and get ready to catch the train, which would be there in two hours. This was around 2:30 or 3:00 o'clock on September 2nd, and I said to Blackie "Now, if that train gets in and you need any help whatever to get the boys aboard the train, you please call on me."

7. Q. Why did you think you might have difficulty in getting the boys aboard?

A. The reason I thought we would have trouble I went aboard the dredge boat Oriente and found one veteran whose name I do not know, who did not know they were ordered out to catch the train. He and two other boys, namely: one was named Perdue and the other's first name was Hank and his home was in West Virginia. Perdue and Hank were both in Miami during the storm.

Tuesday morning, September 3d, after the storm had died down considerably, I made the boys some coffee and a hot breakfast and talked to them to get out and help the wounded and do whatever they could do. They worked that day, Tuesday, helping the wounded

and dead. We found the dead floating under trees, in trees, in the swamps, under railroad track and during Tuesday we put 37 dead bodies at the boat slip at Camp #3. We cared for wounded the best we could as we had no facilities for taking care of them.

On Wednesday morning about eight o'clock a coast guard plane came in, but did not land. The next plane came in brought Mrs Bradford, whose husband was in the storm -- he run a store at Camp #3, Ferry Slip. Finally we did have a coast guard plane that did land, telling us that there was a coast guard plane on the way.

We saw the following dead bodies, which I identified as follows:

One body-- a fellow they called the shoemaker at Camp #3

Harry Rice was wounded and sent to the hospital His ribs and they thought his back, was broken

A one-armed veteran-- I do not know his name

A little spanish fellow, who was working in the kitchen at Camp #3

8. Q. Have you seen any veterans from either of the camps here in town since you left?

A. Yes, I have seen quite a few last night. I saw Capt. Davis of Camp #3. I saw a little short fellow named Pete, who took care of the linen at the Wilson cottage. I saw a number of them last night. I couldn't tell you the names. I saw another fellow from Camp #3, but I think he was in charge of the lumber. I am positive that he was in charge of the lumber. I saw him in town last night. I saw Mewshaw.

On Wednesday afternoon a coast guard cutter came in and we sent 37 dead bodies and 67 veterans, some of whom were wounded. One who was wounded to my knowledge was Blackie Pugh, first sergeant at Camp #3; Harry Smith, mess sergeant at Camp #3; another Smith, cook at Camp #3; another by the name of Jimmie who was barber in Camp #3; Art Newshaw, Camp #3. Pete --

That is all the bossy I could say. O. S. Sain, Timekeeper, Camp #3, was wounded.

9. Q. What veterans, did you say, who were at the camp as civilian employees at the time of the storm?

A. Capt. Burruz, myself and W. L. Smith, Capt. E. H Sherran, a swede named John -- I can't think of his last name, and I can't say whether Mr Burruz was a veteran or not.

10. Q. Do you know anything of the storm warnings that were sent or any effort that was made to evacuate the camps?

A. I know Capt. Sheeran, who has been through every hurricane, including the 1906 and 1909 hurricanes, through Kelly, who was telephone operator, was checking Ft. Myers, Titusville, Miami and Key West. We knew, through their check around 9:30 or 10:00 on September 2d, that we were in the direct path of the hurricane. I know that Capt Sherran left Camp #3 in the morning to go to the Veterans Headquarters at the Matecumbe Hotel and again in the afternoon, to warn them about the hurricane and to get the boys out. Capt. Bob Combs, a civilian, was in Camp #3 Monday morning and warned us that all the old timers, including himself, and from the weather reports, they expected the storm to hit us and was warning everybody about it.

11. Q. Do you know whether or not the veterans were expecting to get out?

A. Yes, the veterans were expecting to get out and were nailing up and working and expecting the train would come in any minute. They had been told by Capt Davis and Blackie that the train was on the way to take them out. They were packing up their suit cases when the storm hit. At Camp #3 Lower Matecumbe, at quarter of five Monday they were all ready to leave.

12. Q. Over what period of time did the hurricane extend?

A. It got bad around 7:00 o'clock Monday evening and it was bad from then until 9:10 P.M. Then we had a lull of 55 minutes; stars came out and it was calm. It had been raining. The storm came back on us directly out of the East and it was twice as bad as the first. When the storm returned, the tidal wave started. It lasted from around ten o'clock until something after three A.M. Sept. 3d. All day Tuesday we had such hard rain and wind that it was almost impossible to give any assistance to anyone that was wounded or hurt.

13. Q. Do you know the whereabouts of any of the officials of these three camps during Sunday, Monday or Tuesday?

A. The only thing I know is what I have heard. Mr Sheldon was in Key West and came home Sunday on the Ferry, which arrived between four and five. Mr Ghent's offices are either in Jacksonville or Miami. I saw Capt. Davis at 5:30 Monday, Sept. 2d. Capt Davis rode the storm out with his boys on a tank car at lower Matecumbe. Blackie Pugh, first sergeant, also rode the storm out on a tank car. Capt. Davis came in about three o'clock Sunday afternoon. The mess sergeant was on duty at Camp #3. The ambulance driver -- a big good looking fellow, I know was killed. He had a big 2 x 4 run through his stomach. I saw that myself. Elmer was his first name. I know that. The boys in charge of the infirmary were on duty. I don't know their names. Capt. Sherran, who had charge of working the boys on the Overseas Bridge Project, was on duty all day ~~on the Overseas Bridge Project, was on duty~~ Sunday, Sept 1st, Monday Sept 2d, Tuesday Sept 3d. and Wednesday Sept 4th. Mr Sherran's instructions were Sunday, Sept 1st, that we were all going to leave Lower Matecumbe, including himself, providing the veterans were taken out.

14. Q. Do you know why the veterans were not taken out?

A. The only reason I know is that the train didn't get through. They were all ready to go for hours.

15. Q. Have you any information as to whether the train was asked for?

A. I know the train was asked for and was wrecked on its way. I only know Mr Sheldon was the man

who was supposed to ask for the train -- that is only heresay on my part.

16. Q. Is there any further information you would like to give?

A. I would like to give Capt. Sherran a little praise. Capt. Sherran refused to leave Camp #3 until the veterans were taken off. After we thought they were going to be delayed in getting out, he decided to stay and ride it out with them. All food supplies of Camp #3 were destroyed. By foresight of Capt. Sherran, I had stored several days' supply aboard the dredge boat Sarasota. In doing same we were able to feed veterans who were alive, fishermen and civilians who were there on the bridge project, Tuesday and Wednesday.

I want to say something for Capt. Davis. When the first coast guard cutter reached Camp #3 around 1:30 in the afternoon, I believe Wednesday, Davis got us and told us that all the boys that wanted to get out, to get aboard this cutter and he asked for volunteers and he said he was going to stay there and the only men he wanted to stay there were those who were willing to get out and help him get all the bodies they could. The National Guard came in Thursday morning. Capt. Davis was still bringing out dead bodies, with twelve other veterans. They were ordered by the National Guard to go to the quarters where they had been staying - that was on the Sarasota. Capt. Davis had quite a bit of trouble with his boys, because they had been run out by the National Guard and the next coast guard cutter coming in the Capt. came to me and asked where he could find the rest of the veterans. I carried him to Capt. Davis and they talked it over and Davis decided that he would leave and carry the 12 men with him.

Doc. Griffen and the men who had charge of the infirmary, whose names I will try to remember and furnish you with list.

I Nilton Lindsey Smith 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, (with the exception of such initialed corrections as may appear therein) to the best of my knowledge and belief, so help me GOD

Nilton Lindsey Smith

SUBSCRIBED AND SWORN TO before me H. W. FARMER, an Investigator
of the Veterans' Administration Sept 12, 1935

H. W. Farmer
H. W. Farmer Investigator