

Rufus Johnson
Sept. 14, 1935
by H. W. Farmer

Jackson Memorial Hospital,
Miami, Florida,
September 14, 1935

RUFUS B. JOHNSON 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 name.

A. Rufus B. Johnson.

2. Q. What is your home address?

A. Islamorada.

3. Q. How old are you?

A. 73 years.

4. Q. How long have you lived at Islamorada?

A. 53 years.

5. Q. Were you there during the hurricane, September 2nd?

A. Yes sir.

6. Q. How many hurricanes have you weathered down there on the Keys?

A. I can't tell you exactly how many I have weathered. You can count in 53 years how many we have had. I have been there in every one. Didn't miss any of them.

7. Q. How near to one of the camps did you live?

A. I judge about to the head camp I didn't live more than 600 yards.

8. Q. Was it either one of the three camps?

A. That was about in the center of the camp at Snake Creek, the one at Lower Matecumbe.

9. Q. Did you have any connection with the camp?

A. Would meet the boys on the road; used to drive a truck along the road for the man I was working there and would pick up the boys sometimes.

10. Q. Did you know anyone in the camp personally?

A. No sir.

11. Q. What employment had you there?

A.

Fishing guide
Fishing guide and taking care of Louis Lutzenback's estate when he would go away. I would look after it in summer.

12.

Q.

Did you make any barometer readings yourself or secure any weather reports?

A.

I did. I looked at my barometer until she went under water.

13.

Q.

How long before the storm struck did you feel that one was coming your way?

A.

Know storm coming Sunday
I knowed it Sunday by my barometer.

14.

Q.

What precautions did you take to weather the storm?

A.

Sunday evening I had everything under control about 4 o'clock. Everything battenedown, fastened up; could not do any more.

15.

Q.

Did you have a family there?

A.

No sir, all by myself.

16.

Q.

Was your home destroyed in the hurricane?

A.

Yes sir.

17.

Q.

Did you warn anybody else of the approach of the storm?

A.

Yes sir.

18.

Q.

Who?

A.

J. B. Pinder. I didn't want to tell him because he had a barometer himself but I had the radio going all the time. I was getting reports and his radio was out of whack and I would tell just what I would get. And veterans who came got my weather report, veterans coming and asking what I thought about it, I would tell that we were going to have it. That is all. But I can't just recall the names.

19.

Q.

Did you give any warning to any veterans of the camp? Or to the officials of these camps?

A.

Highest tides Oct 2nd
No sir, I didn't. Two weeks before one of the gentlemen from out to the hotel - I don't know his name - came out and was talking with me and told me that he heard I had been living there a long time and asked me what I thought about this camp on Upper Matecumbe and I told him I had not been there to look at it but been by there in a boat and told him it was the best camp they had on the Keys for mesquitos but I told him we had high tides in October, higher than any time of the year. I said in October the tides will put that messhall under water. He said, "You think so?" and I said, "I know so."

19. A. He said how would it be to put a lot of boards and things around it"and I said, "Mister, water has got more power than anything in the world. But I never was flown to the lower camp
20. Q. Did you see any of the preparations members of the camp were making to weather the storm or to avoid injury?
- A. No sir. Never saw anything.
21. Q. You were close enough to the camp to have seen what was going on?
- A. No sir, what I could see on the road to the Post Office, travelling back and forth. Their camp was about half a mile and the boys all scattered.
22. Q. What did the residents, those people who lived there regularly, do when the storm was approaching; did they take any precaution further than boarding up their homes?
23. Q. We just boarded up our homes; that is all. Then boys didn't have anything but tents. I saw them blown to pieces with a common north wind. I saw a big tent for storing things there one night and next morning it would be all to pieces. Were any of them living in tents?
- A. Yes sir; they were not allowed to say so. I saw going by.
24. Q. Near the camp where you lived, were there wooden buildings generally for them to live in?
- A. Some wooden buildings, yes.
25. Q. Do the residents of the Keys come out of there when they know a hurricane is coming?
- A. We generally stay as long as we can and when we find the hurricanes are leaving we go back, but we never had any houses blow down before.
26. Q. Go back where?
- A. In the woods. Take shelter in the woods.
27. Q. Do any of the residents leave the keys when a storm is coming?
- A. No sir, never any one to leave yet.
28. Q. How many residents were on the key on which you lived?
- A. Thirty regular old residents, families, if I count some as come in lately. I don't call regular residents that just come in for about two or three years. Some I don't know.
29. Q. Do you know how these thirty families fared? Did they come through alive?
- A. Russell himself is here. He lost his mother, three brothers,

30. A. all his sisters, all his children and his wife. Some families wiped out altogether. I was unconscious when I came here.
31. Q. When you leave the hospital, are you going back there?
- A. I am going to stay in town a couple of days. They tell me the Government is going to rebuild our homes and that is the only place I got. I am going to stay with Mrs. Louise Brown, 1129 N. W. 5th St., Miami. Never saw her before but she is going to take me from the hospital. You can get me by calling a neighbors telephone and ask for her. Number 2-3097.
32. Q. This strip of land from the mainland of Florida to Key West is known as the Keys, Florida Keys?
- A. Yes.
33. Q. How long is that strip of land?
- A. They claim it is 90 miles from where we live to Key West and 90 miles to Miami.
34. Q. What is the Key you live on?
- A. Upper Matecumbe.
35. Q. What towns or villages are there between the mainland and Key West?
- A. A place called Marathon. That was built after the railroad went down. Folks came in and settled down and built a place called Marathon. Another place called Pine Key.
36. Q. Are these islands rather narrow?
- A. Yes.
37. Q. How wide are they on an average?
- A. Not more than two miles. I am poor at judging things like that, but not very wide. I mean the distance across.
38. Q. Have you ever had tidal waves that swept clear across the island before this storm?
- Never had tide to his house*
A. No sir. Never knew a tide to come to my house in 53 years.
39. Q. Have you any lighthouse near your place?
- A. Right in front of it. That is all I had to go by the night of the storm. I saw that and tried to work by that. It

29. A. is called Alligator Light.
30. Q. When did the wind first start blowing hard to indicate a hurricane was at hand?
- A. 7 o'clock Monday.
31. Q. Had there been any high winds before that?
- A. Just a little before. Quarter after seven my barometer and myself went under water.
32. Q. What was the condition of the ocean preceeding the storm; was it rough?
- Ocean wind rough*
- A. No sir, not before dark. The wind was touching to the north and that gave us kind of warning.
33. Q. Other than the drop in your barometer and general indications, there was nothing to put the people on notice a storm was approaching?
- A. They all knew it was approaching except these veterans. All the natives knew. Every native has a barometer; they all knew.
- Natives knew; didn't let a thing*
34. Q. Were you apprehensive about the veterans before the storm occurred? You knew their living conditions; did you think they were in danger?
- A. I did but they told me they had a train coming in for them.
35. Q. When did they tell you that train was coming in?
- A. That evening about four o'clock. When the weather cleared us is when I found out. I saw a light; that was the first light I saw. That was the first thing I put my mind on--there was the train. I got to hear it when it came in and I knew it had not gone out and a while after that I saw Alligator Light and I worked between them two lights to get out. But I found out afterwards it was the car at headquarters that someone there had lighted the car, found out after they brought me out. Them veterans should have been away from there Sunday, Monday anyhow by 12 o'clock.
36. Q. Do you think anyone familiar with storm conditions in this country or even one not familiar with it would have taken steps to get them out of there Sunday or Monday morning?
- A. Well, I think if they had listened to me, but we can't go and say, "Let's get out of here". We heard train was coming for them you know.
37. Q. During the storm did a big tidal wave sweep over the island?

37. A.

My house was sixteen feet long. Wind northeast and just swept across the house, the end of it and it started to rise on end, kept getting worse. My bed slid down. I put my foot on that. When that got into the water and I found it was going over I rolled over and three seas took me and first thing I caught was a tannin tree. This lady, Mrs. Brunswick, she came by me and I grabbed her and told her to hold on. She held on and a big roof - I don't know whether floor or broadside of a house came along and I told her to get on that and she got one leg up on it and could not get the other. I tried to get her there and her dress was tore. It was a sea coming and when that went over us and I got out of it - I was pretty near lost -- and I hollered but I never saw her or heard from her since.

*It is
storm
explosion*

38. Q.

Why do you feel the veterans should have gotten away Sunday or early Monday when the residents themselves were not going out?

A.

We had been living there all these years. We had protection, our homes. We always fastened them down and put bolts up through them and screwed them down and have been there for years.

*Natives could
handle storm.*

39. Q.

Were they able to withstand the storm more than the quarters of the veterans?

A.

Sure. They were only stuck up, not built.

40. Q.

Do you think it is safe to maintain a camp for veterans on the Keys during the months of September and October?

A.

I do not.

41. Q.

Do you think it would be reasonably safe there other months?

A.

Yes. Far as I saw, they enjoyed pretty good health.

42. Q.

Do you have most of your hurricanes down there during the months of September and October?

A.

Never knew but one in June. First year I went down there. We had one in June from the north but not very hard.

43. Q.

You do think the protection afforded the civilians living down there was much greater than that of the veterans?

A.

Yes, I would not have wanted any one of them in a stern.

44. Q.

If you had been there as a veteran, would you have remained?

A.

If I knew as much as I do now, no; those boys didn't know.

Myself, I went eleven o'clock at night and asked the men to get out, when they were building the railroad there and the bosses

*Tried to
warn workers?
of 1906*

44. A. said, "You don't know anything". But the storm next morning killed 600 men, drowned those boys; they didn't know. Do you think I would have stayed if I knew that tide was coming? This is the first time water ever come up there.
45. Q. Do you think it would have been unsafe for the veterans if we had not had a tidal wave?
- A. They would have suffered some in a common hurricane; the tents could not have stood up.
46. Q. Do you think there would have been the same loss of life?
- A. Might have been things falling around; you take at a time of storm and things blowing around, the way them things were built.
47. Q. What I am driving at, you don't think their living conditions were sufficient to protect them from ordinary hurricanes?
- A. I do not. I will stand up to it till the last.
48. Q. What were the conditions immediately after the storm, the weather conditions and the condition of the sea?
- A. Well, they took me out just about as day was breaking and they carried me to this hut and laid me on a cot and gave me first aid. *My eyes were stopped with glass and different things.*
49. Q. Was that the following morning?
- A. Yes.
50. Q. Who gave you this first aid and assistance? Veterans?
- A. Mr. Buttis, yes.
51. Q. What time did the people come from the mainland to the area?
- A. I could not tell you that.
52. Q. Did you see any there the following day?
- A. I didn't. All I saw or heard, I heard someone say, "You are going to have to help this old gentleman here and Mr. Buttis came back to me and said, "Johnson, we can't carry you but we will have a boat down by to-morrow" but the veterans came up and one said, "that is old Pop. Let's take him along" and they said, "How we going to take him?" and they wrapped me in a blanket and toted me. I am only judging this because I could not see. They toted me from there to Snake Creek on this blanket and put me in a little bit of a boat, outboard

*Blinded
during storm*

*Vets Carried
him out*

52. A.

motor, and brought me to Snake Creek and these two toted me till they got where they could go no further and put me down and said, "Pop, we are going to see how we can get there; don't worry, we will come back". They were not gone long before they came back again. They picked me up and toted me I can't tell how far. Then they came to another place. I heard them say, "this is the creek; how we going to get across here?" and I heard the fellow say, "Well, we will get him across". They got me across. A while after that I heard them sing out to someone to come here and someone came and they said, "help us with this old gentleman". They said, "How can we carry him?" and someone said, "I saw an old cot up the road a bit, no canvas on it" and one of the boys said, "we will get it" and so they did and toted me on that, the four of them toted me in that blanket till I don't know how far they carried me in that first thing I knew just before we got to Tavanier there was a car rushed up and a man jumped out and said, "Get in; it is worse". One of the veterans recognized me yesterday. I felt bad yesterday and thought I would see him again, he was one that helped to tote me. They come with me till they put me in Homestead. I have not seen them since, only that one yesterday.

*Voted him
carried him
to Tavanier*

53. Q.

Was that Tuesday or Wednesday they did that?

A.

That was Wednesday morning.

54. Q.

Were you unconscious after this hurricane?

A.

Sometimes I think I was and sometimes I think I remember it.

55. Q.

Do you think or know whether it would have been safe for people in Florida to go to the keys on the following morning?

A.

Yes sir.

56. Q.

You think they could have gotten there?

A.

Yes.

57. Q.

How could they have reached you?

A.

By boat or plane. Plane flying over there all day Tuesday.

58. Q.

Could they have landed; was the water such they could land?

A.

Boats could come down and pick them up.

59. Q.

Was there any place they could land?

A.

In the water; that is all.
Sea-plane could have landed.

60. Q. The water was not so rough but they could have landed?

A. Yes.

61. Q. And you could have taken boats?

A. I saw a plane; they can't land here.

62. Q. You saw water from where you were?

A. No sir. If I had good eyes, I could not see the water, from where I was. I saw a fellow at No. 1 they were carrying out on this boat. I think if boats had been there, and the storm had not come, the boys would have enjoyed good health. They had no protection from any good wind.

63. Q. Was the wind much stronger in this storm than usual?

A. Yes, this was the strongest we ever had.

64. Q. Where were you born; in England?

A. No sir, born sixty miles east of Nassau. Came to this country when I was ten.

65. Q. You still carry the English accent.

A. But I am American, every bit of me. If you want to know any more, more, see Johnny Russell, Postmaster; he can give it to you.

I, RUFUS B. JOHNSON, 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.

SUBSCRIBED AND SWORN TO before me, H. W. Farmer,
an Investigator, this ____ day of September 1935.

H. W. FARMER, INVESTIGATOR.