

WM. R. THOMPSON 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 name, age and address.

A. Wm. R. Thompson, 40 yrs. old, 342 Madison St., Brooklyn, N.Y.

2. Q. What close relatives do you have?

W.R.P. A. My sister and <sup>aunt</sup> brother, Ida McKinney and J. D. Noble, same address as mine.

3. Q. Are you a veteran of the world war?

A. Yes.

4. Q. What outfit?

A. 27th Div., New York.

5. Q. Were you a member of the veterans' camp on the Keys Sept. 2nd?

A. No. 5

6. Q. How long had you been a member of that camp?

A. Came down April 13th from Clearwater.

7. Q. What kind of work were you doing?

A. I worked at headquarters, Matecumbe Hotel.

8. Q. Were you injured during the storm?

A. Yes.

9. Q. What injuries did you receive?

A. Large splinter in the lower part of my back. They have it out now. Minor injuries such as cuts and abrasions.

10. Q. Give me in your own words your recollections of the events that lead up to the time of the storm, anything that happened or that you saw during the storm.

A. Saw so much I don't know how to condense it. We were expecting Monday morning the train would be there by noon time. I got away from camp No. 5 late that afternoon.

Some other fellows I asked if they wanted to come; they didn't but another fellow and I came away Monday at four o'clock. I got up the tracks to No. 3 away from No. 5.

11. Q. That is, you went toward Key West from your camp?

A. Yes, I figured a better chance in 3 than 5. No. 5 is only a little strip of land; ocean and bay come together. The water was up to the company store when I left. One other fellow and I came away. His name was Cunningham; he was not hurt and is in Jacksonville now.

12. Q. Were you with other veterans in No. 3 camp?

A. Yes, I was on the water tank but when the waves came up, I was in the water.

13. Q. Were you there all the time you were in No. 3 camp?

A. First part, I was among the huts and a splinter got in my back. I lay on the ground and someone picked me up and helped me down to the water car from there. Stayed there all night.

14. Q. How did you finally get rescued from the camp?

A. Some boat picked us up Wednesday noon. Doctors came up and dressed us best they could and carried us on to the boat and brought us here.

15. Q. Then you were at that water tank for two nights and a day?

A. No, I stayed there that night and next day and two or three other fellows here like me. Someone had pulled the splinter out of me; don't know the fellow's name even who did it.

16. Q. Did the water come way over the top of that tank car?

A. I was on the second or third rung and it came to my chest. My head was not at the top; it didn't go over me.

17. Q. How high would you say the waves were?

A. Tracks are 15 feet above sea level and water 8 or 10 ft. above that. I was 5-4 up on the second rung of the ladder and it came to my chest. Must be 20-22 ft. high, above sea level. I didn't see any water come over the water tank.

18. Q. When did you first get a warning that a storm was expected?

A. Hooks is my canteen boss. I came down to Matecumbe Friday

afternoon and went back Sunday because I had some work to do on the canteens Monday morning. That is why I went back Sunday. Sunday I saw in the paper about the hurricane but little minor preparation made Sunday morning in camp No. 5. That afternoon the canteen was wide open, selling beer as if nothing was the matter. Monday morning different altogether.

19. Q. When did the weather first indicate to you a storm might be expected?

A.

It was fine; I had a little puppy dog I had ever since I was there, brought it from Clearwater. It was restless; would not stay in the hut. We had two pups, 6 or 7 months old; usually they would run and play; they would not play or anything. Didn't think it was going to be like it was. I had a feeling about the storm myself. It began to rain and the wind strong enough and by two o'clock Monday I really began to be scared.

20. Q. You began to think at that time it was time to get away?

A.

I began to think of going away very seriously; I didn't want to wait for no trains or anything after that. Between 5 there is only a road where the trucks go and the ocean and water from the gulf was right up on the road. I started up the road and the water was up to my knees and I went back on the railroad track.

21. Q. When did you first notice the ocean was rough?

A.

Early Monday morning. At our camp water up to our tent but high tide over at No. 5 only a foot above sea. Our bath houses out in the ocean and we had to cross a platform out on the ocean even at low tide.

22. Q. How high were the waves Monday morning?

A.

Choppy and rough without even much of a breeze. Blowing from the northeast and water back to our tents. Sun barely shining and we didn't think of it as a hurricane really seriously.

23. Q. You worked in the canteen?

A.

I worked for the canteens at headquarters. I used to run the one in camp No. 5 and gave it up for a better position in headquarters.

24. Q. Is that canteen operated by PERA?

A.

I could not say; disagreements and dissatisfaction. Supposed to get two percent commission, the men that work in the canteens. Ghent never gave us a cent. Had a row with the Company Commander and Ghent told Sheldon it was not necessary

to give any money at all to the canteen workers.  
I went to work as bookkeeper at headquarters for the canteens.  
Knowing what was going on in the canteens, I knew more than anybody outside of Hooks.

24. Q. I want to know if this canteen was operated by PERA or private individuals?

A. Was not private individuals. Supposed to pay money.

25. Q. Were you working at the canteen at the time of the storm?

A. No, I was working at headquarters but I had access to canteens.

26. Q. You got the papers daily?

A. Yes.

27. Q. Did you get weather reports?

A. Yes sir, even Sunday morning we knew a storm was coming up; read it on the front page.

28. Q. Where did you see these weather reports?

A. I read Sunday morning 250 miles southwest. The Herald we got.

29. Q. You read that?

A. Yes, I read it.

30. Q. You didn't read regular reports Sunday about the weather?

A. No sir but we had barometer at headquarters. Man detailed to take care of that every day under Mr. Cutler. Supposed to read it three times daily. No one took care of it Saturday, Sunday or Monday because I was down there myself Monday morning to headquarters.

31. Q. Did the man who took care of that merely have to go three times a day and read it?

A. No, he was supposed to work at headquarters; part of his duty to read and mark it down.

32. Q. You do not know it was not read Saturday, Sunday or Monday?

A. I was there and I know the fellow who worked there was drunk.

33. Q. Who was the veteran?

A. I don't know; only know his face.

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34. Q. Who had charge of headquarters?

W.R.?

*Back  
right.*

A. Sheldon was the real man in charge and Cutler next to him.

25. Q. Under whose direct supervision did you work?

A. Hooks.

36. Q. What kind of work did you do?

A. Mostly clerical work, bookkeeper.

37. Q. What salary did they pay you?

A. Thirty a month but supposed to pay two percent. on canteen, which I never did get for three months.

38. Q. Were you around headquarters Saturday night?

A. No sir.

39. Q. Were you around headquarters Sunday?

A. No sir.

40. Q. Were you there Monday morning?

A. Yes sir.

41. Q. Did you see Sgeldon?

A. No sir; the only man I seen was Pooch giving out money to the veterans.

42. Q. Where is Pooch now?

A. Supposed to be in Jacksonville; that is the information I got last time.

43. Q. He is the finance officer?

A. He had charge of all veterans' funds, yes.

44. Q. Now you say you know there was not a man there to read the barometer?

A. A veteran supposed to read it but he was not there; when I seen him he was here in Miami Saturday night. I also saw him Monday morning. Unless Cutler read it. D. B. Woodward had that job in headquarters. And E. B. Evans.

45. Q. Of your own knowledge you don't know whether anyone read the barometer?

A. Could not say for sure but the place looked so deserted Monday morning, I was under impression no one doing business but Pooch.

46. Q. Did you see Sheldon Monday morning?

A. No sir. Only stayed half an hour myself.

47. Q. When did you last see him before the storm?

A. A week before. He very seldom came down to the department where I was. His office was upstairs and I worked downstairs.

48. Q. Was there any other way for the men to get away from the Keys other than on the train?

A. Oceans of trucks No. 5 camp if the commander, Geo. Robertson, who was one of the first killed, - killed before I left-- there was a large truck and pick-up and could have gotten ten or fifteen there and forty in the big truck.

49. Q. Was any notice given the men that arrangements were being made to take them out and they would be taken out at a certain time?

*Photo  
Salad  
for lunch  
Monday*  
A. Monday noon time we only had potato salad for dinner. The men were told- we had things packed 10 o'clock in the morning. Everyone had their personal belongings done up on their bunks with expectation of being entrained Monday noon time.

50. Q. Had someone ordered you before that time to pack up?

A. Our company commander. And first Sergeant Buck - he is alive, No. 5 Sergeant. He was here two or three days ago. Not a scratch. He is the last man that talked to Robertson. He got out of camp; he didn't take anyone else with him. I imagine in a little pickup. His wife living down a ways. Last word I heard him say was, "try to save yourself, sergeant; you have a wife down the line; try to get down to her." He took a pick-up, whether Robertson's or Parker's the sanitary man. He got out in a pick-up; that was Monday afternoon.

52. Q. Were there any natives down in that section?

A. Plenty of natives. Yes. We had an old sea captain tell us early Monday "you fellows ought to been out of here two hours ago." That was ten o'clock. The sanitary inspector did because he

worked at headquarters, one of the civilians that worked there. He saved himself and whole family. He has been out to see us. He told Robertson in No. 5 he should be out. We were in the worst situated camp. Only a small strip of land maybe 2 1/2 miles wide. You could not go either way in case anything happened. #3 had boats and bridges and motor cars and everything else there but nothing at No. 5.

53. Q. Has anyone cautioned you as to what you should say or not say about this matter?

A. You are the first man to talk to me since I was here. No one has asked my opinion or said anything about it. In fact yesterday was the first I got around; had no temperature yesterday and I got out of bed.

54. Q. Do you know anything other than you have stated that might indicate carelessness or negligence on the part of anyone?

A. I would like to voice my own opinion. I know a lot clinging to the water tank who had the same opinion. Ghent could have got us out; that is my opinion. I only blame Ghent. He would come down there when there was no need and walk around, unconcerned; he didn't have so much as a scratch. But when we needed him, the worst time, seemed like he could have got that train on Monday morning.

55. Q. What time were there sufficient indications that a storm was approaching and might hit in that section?

A. Monday noon. We always had a wind off the ocean, at camp No. 5 specially.

56. Q. At what time was there sufficient indication of a storm that officials could have taken steps or started making preparations to get you out of there?

A. You mean warnings we had or other orders?

57. Q. You felt yourselves?

A. We felt before noon; everyone getting restless.

58. Q. If you had been in charge of the camp, what time would you have started making arrangements to get a train?

A. If I could not have gotten a train, I would have arranged to get out in trucks noon time. You know how animals get restless; that is the same with the men. Half of them slightly under the weather. Some of them had wanted to get the train to stop in front of No. 5 but it would not stop. They even threw a stone and broke one of the windows in that train. It went by quarter to eleven. That is how restless they were; they tried to flag that train. Wanted to get on it.

*Tried to  
stop train  
at 10:45 a.m.*

59. Q. You say some of them slightly under the weather?

A. From payday. Effects had not worn off yet.

60. Q. Tell in your own words what conditions were in respect to the veterans.

A. You know how it is down here; payday is sort of holiday; most of them had a hangover, headaches, and saying why the hell don't they get us out of here.

61. Q. When was payday?

A. Friday. Paid a day ahead on account of labor day.

62. Q. Do you know whether or not any of them actually left the camp and came in to Miami before the storm?

A. No way they could have got to Miami that I know of unless they got in a truck on the highway and someone gave them a lift.

63. Q. Do you know any reason for not using the trucks that were in camp to bring the men out?

A. The only reason I see is that they could not take 183 in one truck and a pick-up without partiality.

64. Q. Did the trucks have chauffeurs assigned to them?

A. Two men to each truck.

65. Q. Were they around there before the storm?

A. Both in camp. One of them even wanted to come to Homestead with the truck; said he could have made three trips if they would let him make it that morning. Greenberg is the name. Don't believe he is alive.

66. Q. Do you know why he didn't do that?

A. Company Commander Robertson would not allow it; he said a train was coming and no use for excitement or using the trucks or anything else.

67. Q. Were the men afraid to leave camp if they had a way to go?

A. The men who walked over the tracks, no one threatened to lock them up like it said in the paper. I walked out of camp four o'clock in the afternoon and got in No. 3 camp.

68. Q. Did you identify anyone you knew as being dead?

A. I was not in No. 5 organization. I got to No. 3 when the tidal wave came. Wednesday morning I saw some; I know the faces but not the names.

69. Q. Do you know of anybody leaving the camp who might now be reported as missing?

A. Fellow left with me by the name of Cunningham. Don't know where he is to-day. He got to No. 3 from No. 5. Didn't see him leave No. 3 and don't know whether he got drowned up there or not. He is the only man that left No. 5 with me.

*W.R. I have heard that he is at Jacksonville*

70. Q. Do you know if any train left that section coming north Monday?

A. Just what I have seen in the papers. The passenger train went west that morning.

71. Q. Freight of any kind coming north?

A. I didn't see any.

72. Q. At what time did the wind quit blowing after the storm?

What time did it become reasonably calm after the storm?

A. Forty minutes lull between the two storms when they thought it was over. The stars were shining.

73. Q. I mean when the whole thing was over?

A. Wednesday evening. I got picked up Wednesday noon and brought up in a boat; still breezy.

74. Q. At what time did conditions become such that people could come from the mainland?

A. Wednesday.

75. Q. You don't think it would have been possible to come before?

A. Tuesday impossible. The way it rained and the wind, 60 or 70 miles all day Tuesday and a blinding rain.

76. Q. You think it would have been impossible to rescue the injured before Wednesday?

A. I know so because we were almost praying it would let up so someone would come.

77. Q. No criticism?

A. Not a bit; they came as early as they could Wednesday.

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78. Q. You have been well taken care of since?

A. Yes, no complaint to make. I am satisfied. I just believe a train could have been gotten down Monday morning when we were waiting.

79. Q. The only criticism you got to make is that they didn't get you out?

A. Even want without dinner; all the stuff packed up.

80. Q. No further statement?

A. No,

I, WM.R. THOMPSON, 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.

William R. Thompson

SUBSCRIBED AND SWORN TO before me, H. W. Farmer, an Investigator for the Veterans' Administration this 16 day of September, 1935.

H. W. Farmer  
H. W. FARMER, INVESTIGATOR.