

The Labor Day Hurricane of 1933

Norman Rozeff, February 2006

Until the year 2005, the year 1933 held the dubious honor of recording the most hurricanes to occur in the Atlantic Ocean. In that year the twenty-one storms which arose were not yet given names. The Labor Day storm which was to hit the Lower Rio Grande Valley was simply Hurricane # 11, 1933. On July 22 the area had been swiped by a tropical storm south of Matamoros near Tampico. On August 4 a minimal storm whipped Brownsville. With winds of 75-80 mph it caused \$75,000 damage in Brownsville. To qualify as a hurricane sustained winds must average 74 to 100 mph. A tropical cyclone with winds of 101 to 135 mph is categorized as a major hurricane and with winds of 136 mph or more an extreme hurricane. The odds of a tropical storm or a hurricane striking the area from the mouth of the Rio Grande to the south edge of Baffin Bay in any one year are 1 in 7.

From David Roth of the Lake Charles Weather Bureau office who compiled *Texas Hurricane History: Early 20th Century* we learn that before August 28, 1933 a depression had formed and strengthened in the Atlantic Ocean east of the Bahama Islands. Passing ships and boats had alerted the U. S. Weather Bureau to the storm, so it was tracked from its inception until landfall. On August 30 it passed over Turks Island in the Bahamas and registered the very low barometric pressure of 27.47", a compelling indication of its intensity. It advanced towards Cuba and with 94 mph winds struck Havana in the late afternoon of September 1. Seventy-five miles east of Havana, the north coast city of Cardenas, Cuba, famed for its Havana Rum, saw the storm kill 30 people and injure more than 100. The ferocity of the storm ruined its piers and caused millions of dollars in damages not only to the waterfront and boats, but also to its sugar cane factory and distillery. A large red harbor buoy was deposited inland into a city park by the tidal surge. It was later mounted on a foundation and remains to this day as a reminder of the fateful storm.

In other areas of Cuba an additional 30 persons were killed by the storm. From Cuba the hurricane now moved over the completely open waters of the Gulf of Mexico in a west northwest direction toward the South Texas coast, approximately 950 miles from Havana. A ship in the eastern Gulf reported that as the storm passed it had registered a pressure of 27.99".

The Valley was not unaware of this storm, for one of the two first page headlines of the *Valley Morning Star* of 9/2 read "Tropical Storm Strikes Havana, Injuring 16 Persons" with the sub-headline "Six Reported Killed and Damage Mounts". The following day the headlines proclaimed "Hurricane Loss 60 Dead in Cuba".

As it proceeded westward the movement of the hurricane's eye averaged out to just under 10 mph. Once on the same latitude as Brownsville it turned west. On the Labor Day weekend and September 4 the impending storm made known its presence with increased wind velocities. The next day it made landfall on South Padre Island, just north of Brownsville. In a quirk so common with tropical storms, its heretofore westerly course now changed into a slightly southwest path. This brought the eye of the storm directly over San Benito and Harlingen. An imaginative, but totally erroneous map, of the hurricane's track was published in the VMS 9/9 paper. It showed the eye coming ashore

at Freeport then following the coastline inshore all the way to the Valley before turning west.

The wind's velocity was recorded by one anemometer, before it was blown off its anchorage, at 106 mph. An estimate of the wind peak was subsequently reported as 125 mph. The wind average for a sustained period was around 80 mph. Barometers measured the storm's low pressure at 28.02 inches or 948 millibars at Brownsville at 1 am on Monday, the 5th. These figures characterize the hurricane as a Category 3 one. It is listed as #31 of 65 of the most intense storms to hit Texas.

The elements created a tidal surge of 13' along Brazos and South Padre Islands. All dunes on the latter were flattened. South Padre Island had over 40 overflow channels cut in it to the Laguna Madre. The marginal ranching on the south part of South Padre Island was abandoned forever after this storm.

The total Brownsville rainfall for September 1933 was 13.58" of an annual rainfall this year of 38.96". The historic annual rainfall total for this city is 26.75". Harlingen incurred even higher amounts, and this led to considerable flooding in the community. Its September total was 18.25" out of its 1933 total of 41.75". Harlingen's historic average rainfall total is 25.75".

Based upon later-reported damage the eye of the hurricane likely came ashore at the north end of Brazos Island. This occurred around 3 pm. By 9:30 pm the electricity was out in Harlingen and many other areas and all streets were flooded.

With a strong premonition of the probable dangers as the eye of the hurricane reached the city, Harlingen attorney Claude Carter tried to find someone to send for assistance. He latched upon Lawson Anglin, a Cameron County highway patrolman from Harlingen. The enlisted cyclist was told to go to Alice and contact the Governor, Miriam "Ma" Ferguson, tell her about the storm, and seek aid from the state. Carter was sure this request would succeed because he was a friend of Ma's husband, former Governor Jim Ferguson.

Anglin took off in the nick of time, since falling utility poles became his backdrop and along parts of the highway the water depth measured 12-18". He received the expected concerned response from the Governor and a pledge to act on the matter.

The *Valley Morning Star* did not publish its 9/4 through 9/6 issues. It dated its 9/7 paper 9/5-6-7. In this edition it headlined "Valley Counts Hurricane's Toll" and "Relief Headquarters for Valley Established in City". Reported were the comforting information that the Red Cross had set up in the Montgomery Ward Building located at First and Monroe Streets, that a relief train from San Antonio had arrived on Wednesday the 6th, that a hospital unit from Fort Sam Houston was here, and that a labor pool headquarters had been set up in a domino parlor on North A Street. The army medical unit consisted of 177 enlisted men, 12 officers, 5 nurses, 2 ambulance companies, and a hospital company. The mayors of San Antonio and Houston had acted expeditiously upon learning of the turn of events. The former organized a train by Tuesday afternoon and rode along with it. The consist had six baggage cars with supplies and food, coaches carrying 60 nurses and 50 doctors, and even a tank car with drinkable water in anticipation that the municipal supplies would become contaminated. The train organized by Houston's mayor had ten coaches with doctors and nurses and a carload of supplies. At Robstown another car was picked up. It carried 18 nurses and 18 doctors. Soon two train cars from Dallas and one from Austin were on the way.

Airplanes were sent aloft to survey the prevailing situation. Immediately after the storm had subsided Attorney Carter organized scouting parties and relief care. Initial hurried relief was provided in an improvised hospital on the second floor of the Reese-Wil-Mond Hotel. First aid was given in the first floor lobby. Thousands were fed. Guests and others at the Madison Hotel under the management of Harry Nunn were given free meals. Later the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC) and the Red Cross distributed a week's supply of food to 2,500.

The cost to lives was found to be devastating. All told 40 individuals were to perish from the storm, with 24 of these deaths occurring in Cameron County. Five hundred people were injured. When put into perspective by the fact that the Valley's population at the time was relatively low, Harlingen, for instance, having only between 10,000 and 12,000 individuals, the human loss was considerable. Property damage was set at \$16.9 million by one estimate. Possibly in an effort to garner state and federal funds the Cameron County tax assessor put the Cameron County losses at \$22.9 million and total Valley losses at between \$50 and 60 million. On 9/15 Cameron County losses were reported to total \$29 million. Insurance adjusters said only an estimated 20-25% of property losses were insured.

The fickleness of the storm is indicated by Brownsville's losses of only \$1.75 million. It did lose its bakeries and also its flour supplies when a warehouse storing it was exposed to the elements. The Brownsville Airport where Pan American Airlines had its Latin America office was so badly flooded that the firm moved its headquarters to Corpus Christi for a while. This all occurred even though Brownsville was likely in the hurricane's calmest quadrant—the southwest one.

San Benito was as crushed as Harlingen. The entire block occupied by the Hinkley Building was destroyed and few downtown businesses escaped with minor damages. The small town of Rio Hondo was especially hard hit during the 15 hour siege of the storm. Out of a population of 900 there were seven deaths. As was the case elsewhere casualties resulted from flying timber and sheet metal, collapsed structures, and drownings.

Harlingen was the hardest hit large community. The \$125,000 Municipal Auditorium, a source of great pride to the city and constructed in 1927, was nearly destroyed. The stage half of the structure was completely torn asunder and left open to the elements. It would take until 1936 until the cornerstone was laid for the building's reconstruction. Valley Mid-Winter Fair exhibition buildings in Fair Park were also leveled. The second story of the Lozano Building shifted 13" east due to the strong winds and its roof lifted.

Another victim was the relatively new high school between Tyler and Polk Streets at Sixth Street. This building with its two ornate towers had been erected in 1922 at a cost of \$45,452. In 1926 it had hosted the 50th Convention of the State's Firemen and Fire Marshals' Association. Together with families 4,000 people had come to Harlingen for the event. Structural damage to it was so significant that it had to be demolished.

Obviously its architects hadn't given much thought to its ability to withstand the forces of nature.

The North and South Ward Schools withstood the storm much better and escaped with only minor damages. However, the west side Harlingen school for Negroes was totally destroyed. Board President Frank Davis announced that the start of the school year was postponed until September 25; this was later set back again to October 2.

Joseph M. Chance, UT-Pan American history professor, received a first-hand account from his 92 year old father who, then in his 20s or 30s, was dispatched to the Valley by the Texas Department of Public Safety. From Austin, C. L. Chance, later Judge Chance, and 10 other officers took off in a chain-driven Mack truck. Upon reaching Falfurrias near nightfall, they had to stop overnight because of the debris-strewn obstacles on the highways south along with the flooded portions. These would have made further travel perilous in the dark.

Reaching Harlingen the next day they witnessed a scene of utter devastation. To quote "Power poles were all snapped off at ground level. Store fronts had all been blown out exposing goods and merchandise to the elements and to possible looters. Citrus fruit had been blown off the trees and drifted into the fence rows in the water-filled fields. Water was knee-deep in many of the streets and the Arroyo Colorado was so far out of its banks that I could not see the other side. The Arroyo lapped up to where the Harlingen Airport is now located. I have never seen such destruction in my life."

Chance later went on to San Benito where the Stonewall Jackson Hotel had been commandeered to serve as an emergency hospital for the injured. In this town a 24-hour curfew was instituted. Apprehended breakers of the curfew were put to work cleaning up street debris. Chance gives due credit to the Salvation Army. He notes that they were on the scene early, furnishing simple meals and sandwiches to the hard-pressed doctors, nurses, and security personnel. The Army also asked nothing in return. Some days later the Red Cross officials arrived by train to much fanfare.

Chance related that the Rio Hondo community was especially hard hit and had no potable water. In McAllen, a relief train was made up with a tank car of drinkable water and in this consist were also several boxcars of cots and blankets. After traversing San Benito and turning north, the conductor placed a flatcar in front of the locomotive. This precautionary measure was to test the track ballast which might have been saturated and undermined by the flood waters lapping the embankments.

It wasn't until Saturday, the 10th, that 30 families were discovered to be in dire straits in the San Jose Ranch and Al Parker subdivision area 15 miles south of Rio Hondo. With downed lines and impassible roads they had been isolated until someone reached the San Benito-Rio Hondo rail line to the west of the area and communications were made. A special relief train was dispatched to pick up the survivors who had to trek to the rail line through the deep mud.

Cameron County Judge A. W. Cunningham declared an emergency to exist in the county on Thursday 9/8 and appointed Sheriff Frank Brown as executive officer of this emergency. At this point 8,000 persons in the county were said to be homeless. The county was under semi-martial law. Tourists were barred from the area, as well as unscrupulous sales people. In Harlingen 600 people were left homeless.

At the Valley Baptist Hospital on F Street two large tents containing cots were erected in the landscape area in order to accommodate the less severe cases and make room for the more serious ones within the hospital itself. Doctors were to treat fractured skulls, cracked ribs, broken arms and legs, and a number of deep gashes. Fearful that a typhoid fever epidemic might ensue typhoid inoculations were commenced. A total of 19,892 shots were administered.

The Rio Living sections of the *Valley Morning Star* of 7/28/05, 8/4, 8/11, 8/18, 9/1, and 9/8 carry first-person accounts by individuals who experienced the storm. These convey the human drama which mere statistics fail to reveal.

Families, such as that of then 18 year old Consuelo Arriaga Salazar, along West Harrison Street, Harlingen were being flooded from their homes. A truck managed its way through the water and its riders distributed ropes to residences. The residents then secured the ropes to create a human chain as they waded east to the somewhat higher ground and shelter at the Harlingen Bakery in the 400 block. After several days in a shelter Consuela's family was able to assess the results of the big blow. Neither their home nor any of their possessions was to be found in the C Street area.

Julie Gallaher Uhlhorn noted that her doctor father George didn't come home for three days because he was so busy attending injured patients. His office in the Baxter Building on Jackson Street was centrally located to all the activity.

One of many storm heroes was VMS linotype operator, Alfred Jones. He left the A Street office after midnight and wearing a bathing suit fought the elements for ten blocks. He rescued his wife and baby just before the house disintegrated. He then brought them through the howling winds and rains to the Reese-Wil-Mond Hotel and safe refuge. Remembering the neighbors behind his home he returned there to find the E. B. Howell family huddled under the structure whose roof had fallen in. Able to start a nearby vehicle with water up its running boards, he drove them to the hotel and shelter. Many other families had similar stories to relate.

On Brazos Island some Valleyites had constructed summer cottages of wood on pilings. They were in residence because of the holiday weekend. Coast Guardsmen boated over to Boca Chica Beach to warn them of the coming storm. Some fled immediately while others chose to ride out any storm. In a VMS 8/4/05 account Lorene Valdez Meyners related what transpired. Battering waves soon struck the beach houses and started to tear them apart. The occupants then began a trek five miles south to Del Mar Beach and the shelter of its bathhouse. Many ended by cowering behind sand dunes and moving as one by one they were eroded by tidal action. Fortunately all survived as the strongest part of the storm edged into the Valley a little more to the north.

Their neighbors had not been so lucky. Young Jose Longoria saw his 18-year old sister Concepcion hit on her head by a beam, then swept by the winds out of the beach house only to be impaled on a spiny shrub. She succumbed to her injuries.

The Coast Guard ferried some of the harrowed survivors to Port Isabel. Sam Robertson related that his Del Mar complex was not inundated by the high waters but that a large channel had been cut in the north end of the island.

For treasure hunters the effects on the beaches were a godsend. Long-covered artifacts were revealed. Not only were shipwrecks unearthed but also former Mexican and Civil War army camp sites gave up bottles, bullets, inkwells and other memorabilia.

Numerous Valley families, fearful for their safety and lives fled their homes to what they considered more substantial shelters. Billie Bingley Palmer provided one account of what happened to her family in Los Fresnos. Rationalizing that the town's structures might become airborne hazards, her family embarked for the rural residence of her uncle, Russell Bingley. Before departing Billie's father George, owner of the Chevrolet dealership in town, opened the doors to the garage building to townspeople in need of shelter. Upon returning to town after the winds had subsided, the Bingleys concluded

that they had made the right decision because most sheet metal structures had been completely torn asunder. Some homes were even dislodged from their foundation blocks. Citrus orchards lost 90% of their fruit. Dislodged fruit was found to be unsalvageable since it was too green or immature. Those on the trees, especially grapefruit, soon turned yellow from bruising and the twisted stems. The marketing order would not allow the sale of this substandard fruit. Occurring about a month before the citrus harvest would normally have commenced this meant that a great number of Hispanic fruit pickers would be out of work for the season. Some left the Valley in search of other employment.

The cotton harvest was well on its way to winding down when the storm hit. The price of 9 cents a pound for this season's crop was well above the 5 cents/lb. received the previous year. The 1933 crop reached 55,000 bales, but this total was estimated to have been reduced by 20,000 tons due to untimely rains.

In the aftermath of the storm the Missouri Pacific Railroad (Mo-Pac) brought in six water tank carloads from Kingsville and later transported bread and milk to the Valley at no cost. Telephone cablemen were soon on the scene after coming from all over the state. In view of the recent controversies related to Hurricane Katrina an interesting footnote to the Hurricane of 1933 must be added. Corpus Christi residents still remembered the deprecations of the Hurricanes of 1916 and 1919 to their city. In the latter storm 284 persons had lost their lives. This loss was second only to the Galveston Hurricane of 1900. With 110 mph winds the city sustained more than \$20 million in physical losses. When word of the impending 1933 storm was made known, Corpus Christi city officials declared Martial Law. All residents in low-lying areas were to evacuate, and the city was to "provide shelter for all citizens who wanted to flee their homes."

Being the Labor Day weekend and with considerable tourism expected, businesses projected large losses in revenue by shutting down. When it made landfall near Brownsville the storm just gave the Corpus Christi area a relatively glancing blow. Boats and piers were damaged by surging tides generated by the low pressure in the Gulf. The four principal business streets had three feet of water in them. The Municipal Pier lost 150' of its length while the pleasure boat *Japonica* was stranded inland. The Don Patricio Causeway connecting Flour Bluff to Padre Island was destroyed. Due to the wave action, the barrier islands in the Corpus Christi vicinity sustained numerous large cuts, one at least a mile wide.

Some disgruntled Corpus Christi businessmen, now angry over their loss of business due to the early warning, commenced a letter writing campaign to Washington. They demanded that the Meteorologist-in-Charge of the Corpus Christi Weather Bureau office be disciplined or worse. The Weather Bureau Headquarters in Washington dismissed their criticism, indicating that the weatherman had performed his duties well in ordering an evacuation that saved lives. He subsequently remained in his Corpus Christi post until 1946.

The quick and adequate response to the Valley's plight was undoubtedly conditioned by the experiences Texans had encountered with deadly hurricanes over the decades. Brother helping brother had become the norm not the exception.