

Hurricanes At Isle of Hope

August 2015

(Personal recollections Of Noel B. Wright, Jr.)

At age eleven I moved from Ardsley Park to Isle of Hope in August of 1944. August and September are the months that have the greatest danger from hurricane, and everyone on the island kept a close eye on the weather at that time of the year.

Many of the old timers on the island had a personal memory of the great storm of 1893 and liked to talk about the horrific damage caused by the wind and the 16' storm surge. They all remembered that the storm hit right at the height of a spring tide, and the Skidaway River water came almost up to the road at the intersection of LaRoche and Bluff Drive, but it did not come over the road. Many docks and bathhouses were swept away.

I personally can remember two hurricanes at Isle of Hope. The first was in 1947 when the wind speeds reached 105mph, but the storm surge was not much of a factor. I remember widespread damage to trees and docks. One ancient live oak tree was uprooted in our backyard. The tree must have had a diameter of around 8-10' feet and was much too large for my family, or anyone else on the island, to cut up and haul away.

Fortunately in those days, if you were a friend of County Commissioner Judge Arthur Solomon, the convicts on the Brown Farm were made available for this kind of work. My father and Judge Solomon, our Grimball Point neighbor, were both camellia enthusiasts and both belonged to the Savannah Camellia Society. Our tree was sawn up with manual crosscut saws and hauled off by the convicts very quickly!

The second hurricane in my memory was Hurricane David in 1979. The 90 mph storm struck Isle of Hope late in the afternoon on September 4th. At that time, I had a 30' trawler yacht named Patience. The day of the storm, I spent most of the day on the dock tending to dock lines, thinking that the brunt of the storm was going to miss Savannah. Around 3:00 pm I got word that the direction of the storm had shifted westward slightly, and we were

going to experience the full strength of the hurricane. At this time we were experiencing four foot breaking waves in the Skidaway River, and the wind was blowing from the South at over 50mph.

On this short notice, I had to crank up Patience's engine and leave the dock to avoid the boat being damaged from banging into the floating dock. I anchored with two anchors in the ICW in front of Burnt Pot Island and rode out the 90 mph winds without much difficulty. All power went out in Savannah around 9:00 pm, including power to the radio stations, so no storm updates were available all night.

By daylight the next morning, David was history, and we motored back to the dock, only to find that my floating dock was missing. I tied up to the next-door neighbor's dock and went ashore to find that the damage to trees and buildings had been minimal, but the power was out. It remained out for nearly a week, but we survived by buying ice for Patience's large icebox and cooking on the boat's propane stove. (Here's a comprehensive write-up on the experiences of a few IOH neighbors:

<http://savannahnow.com/accent/2009-09-04/hurricane-david-30-years-after-storm>)

My experience with these two hurricanes had caused me to become complacent about the threat of hurricanes. In September 1999 we were threatened by the approach of category three Hurricane Floyd, and a mandatory evacuation was ordered. Our family made the decision to remain on Isle of Hope.

As Floyd approached Savannah late in the night of September 15th, the winds were estimated to be 150mph. As I watched the radar picture of the storm on TV, it appeared that Floyd was headed directly for us. I feared that we had made a very bad mistake, but it was too late to leave at 2:00am.

At the last minute, around 3:00am, the storm veered ever so slightly to the north, and we experienced winds of only 60mph, which did very little damage to Isle of Hope and environs. Here is a description of the effect that Floyd had on Savannah:

http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1999-09-16/news/9909160148_1_powerful-hurricane-hurricane-floyd-storm

Charleston and areas north of Charleston were the center of Floyd's destruction. Several months after Floyd's visit, Ruthie and I cruised over to Charleston and McClellanville north of Charleston in Patience to view the damage first hand. Here's a photo of the shrimping fleet after the storm:

<http://photos.denverpost.com/2014/09/19/photos-hurricane-hugo-struck-25-years-ago-september-21-22-1989/#1>

It was an eye opener, and I was so thankful that Isle of Hope was not devastated to the extent that we saw in the small fishing village of McClellanville. We would have lost most of our ancient live oaks, and the character of our community would have been completely changed forever.

My neighbor, Jack Lee, recently shared with me copies of several pages the Savannah Morning News dated August 1893 which covered the "Sea Island Storm" that devastated the coast of Georgia and South Carolina. Remer Y. Lane originally compiled these copies regarding the great storm in 1967.

Below is Remer's preface, and following his preface are my excerpts of pertinent articles about the storm relating to Isle of Hope and the surrounding islands.

Remer's 1967 copies are very difficult to read, so I had to type these accounts to make them legible.

Noel

PREFACE

The hurricane of August 1893 in terms of loss of life was perhaps the most destructive one ever to hit the Georgia – South Carolina coast. It moved inland between Savannah & Beaufort on the morning of August 28th at approximately the hour of high tide, which in this case was a spring tide. As a result, all the coastal

islands were underwater, salt water, causing the destruction of the Sea Island (long staple) cotton crop and the deaths by drowning of a high percentage of the estimated 30,000 people engaged in the production of this crop. The commercial rice crop of the tidal areas of South Carolina was also destroyed, as was the phosphate mining fleet in Coosaw River. Even today, this storm is remembered by the Negroes of the low country, for on the Combahee River and perhaps in other communities, nightlong prayer meetings are held every Saturday during the month of August.

The assistance of Mr. Patrick Nolan of the Review Co., Mrs. Lilla Hawes of the Georgia Historical Society, and Mr. David Barnes of the US Weather Bureau is acknowledged.

Remer Y. Lane

March 1967

THE GREAT HURRICANE OF 1893

Savannah Morning News

August 29, 1893

(Excerpted and transcribed August 2015 by Noel Wright)

Isle of Hope & Thunderbolt badly damaged

Reports from the suburban places were meager. People who came in early had to walk, as the roads were impassable.

The destruction of bridges made any but pedestrianism impossible, and those who had business in town stood not on the order of their coming, but started at once. Bankers, brokers, lawyers, merchants, mechanics, clerks and others made good time. The roads were lined with people footing it to town. Electric railways, fast horses, and other means of speedy locomotion had not made suburbanites forget how to walk. Possibly when some of

the walkers got halfway, a lift from the “Bonaventure Limited” would have been greatly appreciated.

A night of anxiety

Mr. R. S. Siday, of Isle of Hope, walked in on the City and Suburban Railway track. He says that place felt the full effect of the storm, and the inhabitants were up all night, many of them out on the Bluff up to their arm pits in water trying to secure their boats, fencing, and other belongings that were liable to float away. The waves rolled up to the freight depot.

The roof of Gallmard’s house and bakery was blown off. Mr. Scott’s new house was lifted off its foundation and literally dashed into a shapeless mass of stick wood. These places are near Mr. Siday’s house. He did not know how much damage was done elsewhere, but says there is general destruction of fences and trees. At midnight the bath houses he saw were nearly submerged by the flood, but how many were swept away, Mr. Siday could not say.

The Tracks Filled With Trees

Mr. Siday makes the same statement of the Herb River Bridge as Mr. Barbee. He also reports the tracks from Sandfly to Second Avenue obstructed by trees. About fifty trolley arms were broken off, rails bent by fallen timbers, and the wires generally broken and out of shape.

Later advices from Isle of Hope reports the demolition of nearly every bath house south of the rail depot; Lilly’s. Askew’s, Reynold’s, Ward’s, Lafar’s, Guerrard’s, and Estill’s.

The combination wharf, dancing platform and bathing houses belonging to the railroad company was swept away.

Part of the roof of the residence of Maj. C. S. Hardee was blown off.

The wreck at Thunderbolt

Parties from Thunderbolt reported heavy damage along the Bluff. Every bathhouse and Ambos’ and Sawyer’s wharves were destroyed. Ambos’ wharf was a substantial structure.

The steamer, Camusi, which left Thunderbolt Sunday for Warsaw, had not returned, and was reported to be ashore below Wilmington Island.

The railroad bridge and the Shell Road Bridge over Timber Landing Creek were badly damaged. The latter was rendered impassible.

The storm at Bonna Bella and Casey Park was particularly severe. Massive oaks and other trees were uprooted and broken off like pipe stems. Fences, bathhouses, fruit trees, and grape vines came in for their full share of general wreckage. Mr. H. F. Graham's arbor, which bears usually each season about 100 bushels of grapes, is totally destroyed. At least 50 bushels were blown on the ground from his young arbor. With destruction to fencing, corn, platform and grape vines, his total damage will be over \$500. Other parties along the front suffered more or less. R. D. LaRoche's stable at Bonna Bella was destroyed by a tree falling on it. Mr. LaRoche's horse was killed. The servants' quarters were over the stable, but the servants had sought shelter in the house and were saved.

Caught By The Storm

Mr. A. M. Barbee, Jr., conductor of the Isle of Hope branch of the City & Suburban Railway, had a rough experience during the storm. He started from Isle of Hope at 6:15 Sunday night to make the usual run into the Second Avenue Depot, but owing to the track being obstructed by trees, the car went to Thunderbolt, where the passengers were transferred for the city. Mr. Barbee started to return to Isle of Hope, where he lives. He was anxious to get there because of a report that there was a fire raging. The report, however, proved not to be true, the fire being on Skidaway Island, opposite the village.

The Bridge Under Water

Mr. Barbee's car was #16, a double motor. Things went smoothly until the car reached the Herb River Bridge, which was covered with water when the car passed over it a short time before,

but as it had been recently overhauled, Mr. Barbee supposed the bridge was safe. He crossed safely, but the embankment beyond was covered with water and marsh grass, and he concluded to examine the track. He had not gone far when he felt the crossties giving way under him. Just then the wind increased so that it was impossible to stand up, and Mr. Barbee had to lie down and pull himself through the water back to the car. He decided to return over the bridge, as he could not get further.

The Bridges Give Way.

The car passed over safely, but just as it cleared the bridge, the structure gave way. Mr. Barbee left the car near Sandfly station and tried to make his way to the Isle of Hope by the causeway, but after a long and tedious trudge through the driving storm, he arrived at the bridge only to find it gone. Nothing was left for him to do but to return to his car, which he did and remain in until daylight, when he succeeded in getting to his home by walking across the wreck of the railroad bridge. He came in yesterday morning in his car to Thunderbolt, but had to walk to Savannah because the track was obstructed. He had a night experience that he will never forget.

The Yacht Fleet Wrecked

The yacht fleet at Thunderbolt suffered heavily. Three of the private yachts of the Savannah Yacht Club, which were moored or anchored there, were torn from their moorings and anchorages and thrown into the marsh or high on land. Many of them are wrecked. No positive information as to the loss, however is as yet obtainable.

Three of the fleet of the five naphtha launches owned by the members of the club lie wrecked in the marshes. All five of the yachts were anchored at the clubhouse Sunday night. Mr. Hal Bacon's yacht, the Ruby, was the only one which held to her moorings. Mr. George Baldwin's yacht, the Dixie, was thrown in the marsh was rescued yesterday only slightly damaged.

The yachts of Mr. J. A. G. Carson, Mr. Frank Lathrop, and one other, whose name was not learned, were torn from their mooring

and sunk in the marshes. All three were reported yesterday to be complete wrecks.

A Night On Warsaw

The Bellevue's Excursionists Have A Thrilling Experience

The passengers on the steamer Bellevue, which went down to Warsaw Sunday, had an experience which they do not care to repeat. The Bellevue left the city about 8 o'clock Sunday morning with about 100 passengers aboard, including a number of women and children. She stopped at Thunderbolt about 10 o'clock, where a few of the passengers, who became frightened at the threatening appearance of the weather, went ashore. There were many who were sorry later that they did not follow the example of the others.

The steamer had a rough trip down, but reached Warsaw at two o'clock without accident. The weather had become so rough by this time that only a few of the passengers returned across to the pavilion, and they soon returned. There was a brass band aboard and the excursionists spend the day in as lively a manner as possible under the circumstances.

Ordered His Passengers Ashore

There was not much to complain of until 9:30 o'clock at night when Captain Garnett noticing the increasing strength of the storm, ordered all of his passengers ashore, fearing the boat would sink at the wharf. When the passengers stepped from the gangplank to the wharf they found themselves in two feet of water. And when they left the wharf for the pavilion, they found the water waist deep. The women and children were taken across to higher ground by the men.

The trip to the pavilion in the darkness, with the storm howling around them, was by no means pleasant. The plank walk leading to the pavilion is narrow, and many an unlucky member of the party stepped off into the darkness into water waist deep.

A Night Not To Be Forgotten

The night at the pavilion was by no means a pleasant one with the water all around, the wind howling through and the waves dashing their spray over the building.

At five o'clock yesterday morning Capt. Garnett concluded that the storm was over and gathering his passengers started for home. A quick and easy return trip was made. The Bellview passed Thunderbolt at seven o'clock on her way to the city. At Lazaretto Creek the Tybee Railroad was found to be a wreck and the steamer was compelled to retrace her course to Thunderbolt, where she landed her passengers about 10 o'clock.

The passengers were so eager to get back home that they did not wait for the electric railroad to open up communications, but started for home on foot, some taking the railroad tracks, and some the Shell Road. Men, women & children footed the distance to Savannah with as much alacrity as possible as if they had not spent a sleepless and trying night. They were so glad to get back home again as their relatives were to have them back.

Tybee Almost A Wreck The Village Nearly Destroyed And Three People Drowned

There was a great anxiety for the people at Tybee, and the first news from there was learned when the steam tug Paulsen, Captain Rogers, which went down in the morning, arrived with about 75 passengers who had spent the night on the island. Those who remained there Sunday night experienced the most terrific storm and the greatest fright of their lives. The first storm commenced about four o'clock and lasted until 11:00, after which the wind changed and blew at a fearful rate in an opposite direction. Nearly every building on the island was more or less damaged and three lives were lost.

Had Tybee Island been washed away, the demolition and destruction could not have been much worse than it was. Houses there were blown down, burned, washed away and otherwise

demolished. The railroad track was blown from the ground and parts of it stood up along the line like a fence. Rails were twisted, spikes were pulled from the crossties, and the Tybee train which stood there like a monument to tell the story of the demolished railroad, could be moved neither forward or backward on account of washouts both in front and behind.

The railroad track was a complete wreck, part of it being blown several hundred feet from where it was lying over into the woods. To get that train up from Tybee an entirely new track will have to be built over almost the entire distance. Washouts are not a circumstance to the wretched condition into which the tracks were twisted by the wind as if they were wisps of straw. Little is known of the condition this side of Lazaretto Creek, but if it is as bad as it is on the island, the work of building the Tybee railroad will have to be done over again.