

KEY WEST IN DARK WHILE KATE HOWLS – DAMAGE MINIMAL

Miami Herald – November 20 1985
Written By Rosemary Harold and Susan Ornstein

KEY WEST

Most Key Westers and Lower Keys residents spent Tuesday evening in darkness, listening to Hurricane Kate howl with gusts of up to 104 miles per hour. The storm knocked out power from the island city northward through Big Pine Key.

About two-thirds of city Electric System's customers – 12,000 homes and commercial businesses – had lost power by 5:30 p.m., CES spokesman Paul Gibson said.

Power was shut off for about an hour at the Boca Chica Naval Air Station after CES workers were dispatched to repair lines reportedly electrifying metal fences on a nearby island, Gibson said.

The Navy's power was restored, but most other customers were expected to be without power until daybreak today.

Authorities driving through Key West, however, said damage appeared minimal. The civil defense headquarters at the Monroe County Courthouse had received no reports of injuries.

The American Red Cross, which supplied food and bedding to the county's 11 emergency shelters, was running out of food and having problems replacing it because stores were closed, coordinator Bill Westray said.

"We're not desperate yet," Westray said. "We just don't have everything we need. We're eating peanut butter with our fingers."

Among the evacuees at the three Key West emergency shelters were six members of the Bahamian Defense Force, the island chain's navy. Coast Guard picked them up on a small island about 120 miles southeast of Key West early Tuesday, Coast Guard spokesman Barry Robinson said. Fourteen other Bahamians also were brought to Key West.

Kate forced a postponement of Key West's city election, among other things. The City Commission is scheduled to meet at 10 a.m. today to pick a new date.

Late in the afternoon in Key West, horrified hurricane evacuees staying at Glynn Archer Elementary School gaped as the wind blew down a series of power lines a block away, triggering loud buzzing sounds and bursts of smoking sparks.

On Sugarloaf Key, a radio tower for WKWF-AM, WAIL-FM blew down.

As Kate's winds intensified Tuesday evening, the 100-mph gusts made slack power lines whip like jump ropes. Gnarled pieces of chain-link fence hung from trees.

Most of the hardy souls who earlier had taken to the streets for the novelty of being outside in a hurricane retreated indoors.

Duval Street was cluttered with tree limbs and debris. Except for Sloppy Joe's Bar and an adult bookstore, the street was shut down and boarded up.

A few shop owners couldn't resist leaving signs of defiance, "Kiss Me Kate" was scrawled on the protective planks of Farrington Gallery's windows, and other stores had similar derisive greetings.

Through thousands left the Keys in the hours before the storm arrived, some South Floridians said they were happy to be in Key West.

Five University of Miami students who drove south through Tuesday morning's darkness for a day of storm watching were planning to ride out Kate in their car.

"We came to see destruction," said UM senior Warren Brown, 22, clutching a beet. "Maybe we might get a buzz out of the deal."

With almost a full house staying overnight, the Pier House battened down the hatches. The hotel's pool looked like an underwater Atlantis: Three dozen deck chairs had been sunk to seek them from becoming wind-launched missiles.

The wind shredded a chain-link fence near the Casa Marina Resort. Some pieces were thrown into nearby trees. Others were wrapped around the fence post like scrolls.

Although Kate did not damage many buildings, it was hard on trailers. One on Rockland Key was blown apart by heavy winds, but no one was inside, the sheriff's department reported.

On Summerland Key, fire broke out in a trailer that had been evacuated Monday night. The fire was touched off by a downed power line, authorities said.

There also was a trailer fire on Conch Key about 2 p.m. William Waganer, 24, chief of Conch Key's volunteer fire department, said wind fanned the flames that gutted a trailer used for meetings of the Marathon Power Squadron a boat club.