

THE PANHANDLE BEGINS PICKING UP THE PIECES

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Written By DEMOCRAT STAFF WRITERS

The task of cleaning up the mess brought by Hurricane Kate began for weary Panhandle residents Friday. Democrat staff writers filed these reports of that story:

APALACHICOLA

Apalachicola – Taking in the view of a crumpled Apalachicola water tower Friday morning, he shook his head with wonder.

“This town’s hurting pretty much,” he said without bitterness, just simple truth. “There ain’t much left.”

The speaker, who didn’t give his name, said he’d probably be leaving town. And he has been, and soon will be, joined by others.

“People are moving out,” added Father Charles Roland. “The young people and the oystermen – they’re people desperately looking for jobs.”

And yet, for those who will remain, the rebuilding spirit was already returning.

Take Vernon Crotts and George Patrenos, co-owners of The Hut Restaurant west of town. Much of their business was in the bay Friday morning.

Patrenos said the damage was going to run at least \$250,000. And when asked about insurance, he gave a bemused smile before saying “Yeah, but that isn’t gonna cover much.”

Patrenos said the two would start anew, but would probably keep a little bit of the old front of the building.

“Just so there’s something attached,” he added.

“This place has been here since ’39,” added Crotts. “And that’s a long time. ...I saw Biloxi swept clean and they rebuilt. They thought about it, but they rebuilt.”

A block closer to town, Lucretia Siprell shrugged off the blown-out windows, water-ruined interior and smashed garage at her home.

“It’s just something you can’t do anything about,” she said. “No sense in getting worried about it. I wanted these trees cut down anyway.

“I wouldn’t give this up for anything in the world. We got the storm first. Nobody else can say that.”

Along the river, both Joe Barber and the engine to his boat, the Doronette, coughed a few moments and then sputtered into action.

“Well, it’s all over now,” Barber said as he took a gulp from a yellow coffee mug. “I guess I got the luck I needed. Coulda been sitting up on that marsh.”

“I still got my boat. Now I guess I’ll go home and see what else I got left.”

His night of riding out Kate on the Doronette had been rough, but predictable, he added.

“I was all right,” he said. “But it gave my boat a little trouble. It grabbed hold of her and shook her like a little toy.”

“I’ve worked on the water all my life and this was a pretty good blow.”

“This is the way I was raised and I guess everybody’s got to live like they was raised ... You got something, you got to stick with it.”

Back at the water tower, some were beginning to feel better.

Norman Maddox lives right next to the 80-to-90 foot tower, but didn’t find its fall too dramatic.

“I heard a thump, but, gosh, there was so much going on, it didn’t make a difference,” he said. “I didn’t know a thing about it until later, there was so much shaking and breaking going on.”

Maddox had just finished getting his roof fixed from Elena’s pummeling, but now it would be back to the carpenter again. Yet Maddox said he’s hardly on to give up.

“Too late now,” he said, “I’m too old.”

Young and old will return, adds Apalachicola Mayor Roger Newton.

“We’ve always come back – for the last 150 years,” he almost shouted. “And we ain’t gonna quit now.”

WEWAHITCHKA

Charlie Loveless, “chased” across the Panhandle by falling trees, sat on the roof of his mobile home and sawed through an oak trunk Friday. He said he felt lucky.

Loveless, a telephone-cable repairman who lives outside Wewahitchka, said he was in Thomasville, Ga., when Kate blew ashore Thursday night. He said it took him two-and-a-half hours to get from the Georgia line to this home where his wife sheltered their three small children without electricity in 70-mph winds.

“It had you scared, I’ll tell you that, like being chased,” said Loveless. “You had to keep moving to stay ahead of the trees coming down.”

His wife, Vetta Loveless, said she spread a bed for the children under the dining-room table, but was not terribly frightened when the big tree fell across their home.

“There were a lot of people a lot worse off than we are,” said her husband. “I think we were lucky. I went through Donna ... and that storm last night was worse.”

In Apalachicola, Harriette Kennedy swept broken glass out of the window of her drug store, where she also sells antiques. The small white-haired woman said the National Guard posted sentries in front of her store, built in 1905, when flying debris smashed the window. “We came ut beautifully,” she said. “we are very blessed and very thankful.”

Asked how many hurricanes she’d lived through, she smiled and said, “This year? Or this week?”

WAKULLA COUNTY

SPRING CREEK – Hurricane Kate’s visit to Wakulla County was a hit-and-miss affair.

It missed Cheryl Henrichs’ mobile home on the water near Panacea.

It hit Betty MacKenzie’s trailer home near the water in Spring Creek.

But both women were taking Kate’s fury in stride as they moved back into their home Friday.

The Henrichs packed up their two children and headed for Tallahassee when the storm began to blow. They had practiced the same drill two-and-a-half months earlier when Hurricane Elena tormented the Gulf Coast.

Henrich and her husband, Bill, returned Friday expecting the worst.

“Last time, we lost our floor, our electric, our sewer lines, our plumbing and everything,” Cheryl Henrichs said. “The way they were talking on the TV last night (Thursday) and

they were showing pictures of Apalachicola. I just knew I was going to come home to nothing”

Instead she came home to running water and a phone that worked.

Although she was thrilled, she said she was tired of the hurricane routine.

“We couldn’t believe we were getting another one,” she said. “I’m so mentally tired. The thought of having to pack and move your family ...”

MacKenzie and her family didn’t do any packing. They decided to ride the storm out in Spring Creek, a fishing town on the water. The water rose and they watched.

At about midnight, they decided to retreat, MacKenzie said. It was a good decision. Before the storm passed, it filled the trailer with a foot of water.

“The only way to get to this place would be to swim, hard,” she said.

When the water started threatening their home, the family hopped in the car and drove down the road to higher ground., When the water crept up higher, they drove farther down the road.

When they returned, they found their trailer coated with mud inside and many of their belongings floating around in the yard. Still, they were cheery.

“We got to ride in a boat on the highway,” chimed Marianne and Heather Smith, MacKenzie’s daughters.

Added Mon: “The clothes can be washed. The floor is going to be flushed as soon as the water is on.”

But two hurricanes within three months was enough for both Hernich and MacKenzie.

MacKenzie said that after Elena blew by, the family raised their trailer two feet off the ground.

“We’ll jack it up another two feet and see what happens next year,” she sighed

Said Henrich: “As soon as they said evacuate, we left. We just got to put the pieces together this time, but we’ve had a lot of practice.”

QUINCY

Residents along Quincy’s North Adams Street tried to bring order to a series of downed trees, broken windows and fallen bricks Friday.

“(The falling objects) sounded like we were at the end of the Tallahassee airport runway,” said Clay Van Landingham. “Wed ran into the bathroom, the center of our house, and it got quiet again....It is amazing how the houses survived.”

Van Landingham, a Tallahassee-based real-estate appraiser, said his wife and two children went outside this morning to find a toppled pecan tree resting on a neighbor’s garage. It looked as if a tornado had struck.

Along Highland Street, downed trees and lines looked impenetrable. “We were wrecked,” said one resident.

Not everyone was so shaken.

On a street not far away, the Reverend Terry Dyer, of First Presbyterian Church, said he slept through the entire storm.

PANAMA CITY

Bay County escaped most of Kate’s wrath, and by early Friday the area was already beginning to return to normal.

Some scattered power outages were reported, but electricity was largely being restored to the county. Schools and most business remained closed.