

# “WE’RE JUST WATCHING IT BLOW”

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Hurricane Kate shook the lives of people all over Florida’s Panhandle on Thursday. Democrat staff writers, dispatched from Panama City to Steinhatchee, compiled these reports:

## DOG ISLAND

Forrest Granger has about five French doors in his house on Dog Island, About 3:00PM Thursday, the view got real interesting.

Granger and nine other souls huddled together in a ground-level, bayside home and watched Hurricane Kate whip their island around.

Once they had chosen to stay, there was no other option.

No bridge connects Dog Island to the mainland.

“We’re just watching it blow,” Granger shouted at 4:10PM over the static from a crackling radio-telephone. “We were going to leave ...it’s too rough now.”

He reported wind speeds between 55 and 70 mph and tides three to four feet above average.

“I expect we’ll get some flooding,” he said. What then?

We’ll wait ‘till it quits and then clean up the mess.”

If the situation got “serious,” said Granger, the group planned to go to a relative’s house, located on higher ground, on pilings.

But so far, no French doors had blown and no windows, said Granger: “And I sure hope they don’t.

## BAY COUNTY

Panama City – Hazel Littlejohn had run the American Red Cross shelter at First Baptist Church in downtown Panama City during hurricanes Elena and Juan.

But Littlejohn didn’t really feel as if she knew as much as she should about running emergency shelters, so she enrolled in an American Red Cross course. She finished the course just in time to reopen the shelter Wednesday morning.

By Thursday afternoon, 158 people were at the shelter, said Littlejohn, director of the church's women's missionary union.

"Some of them are snowbirds from Canada who came down here to get away from the bad weather," she said.

Meanwhile, Jerry Malone, the church's minister of education, entertained children in the shelter by drawing calm ocean seascapes in chalk, as 60-mph winds howled outside.

Throughout Bay County by early Thursday evening, about 4,161 people filled 16 American Red Cross shelters. An estimated 25,000 had been evacuated from the beach and other low-lying areas. -

## **WAKULLA – FRANKLIN COUNTIES**

High tides and winds spawned by Hurricane Kate battered the Wakulla-Franklin county coast Thursday, an area especially hard hit, this year by Hurricanes Elena and Juan.

By mid-afternoon, waves were crashing across coastal US Hwy 98, flooding about a dozen houses in St James and biting chunks of asphalt from the stretch between Carrabelle and Eastpoint.

"You could be driving along and it could cave in," said Deputy Riley Spell of the Franklin County Sheriff's Office.

Oyster houses trembled as the raging surf swept Eastpoint's streets and sidewalks, power lines fell and pine trees cracked like kindling.

Milton Houseman, the retired police chief of Apalachicola, estimated wind speeds at 70 to 80 mph at his home near Eastpoint.

Sometimes standing at a 60-degree angle, he watched the churning sea bite fresh pavement from US Hwy 98, undermining the repair job that followed Hurricane Elena.

"Look at all the wonderful work they've done in the last 30 days," said Houseman, 60. "It's going away in two hours – just dropping into the water. It's just amazing to see how fast it goes."

At St James, west of Alligator Point, about a dozen houses were flooded by the rising tide. They included the cottage of Harold and Dot Benton, who stayed up all night Wednesday packing their possessions into two U-Hall trailers.

The Bentons had lost all their belongings to Hurricane Elena. On Thursday, they were bidding adieu to their boatshed and garden benches, and fretting about the fate of their television satellite dish.

“I’m just looking at my new antenna,” said Benton, 63 a retired civil-service worker. “I’ve already lost one this year. Labor Day, it completely cleaned us out.”

Next door, 78-year-old James Gurr was nailing plywood over his door and weighing down his possessions with concrete blocks.

“I’ve just about had it,” he said

## APALACHICOLA

Some people in battered Apalachicola spent the remaining hours before Hurricane Kate hit looking for a way out.

C W Ray stood outside the National Guard Armory, shoved his hands into his pants pockets and shook his head.

“I wish I had the latest information,” Ray said, while his family waited indoors while another dozen people hoping to catch the last news report. “I’m not worried.”

“I don’t think too much about it,” he added. “Bad weather don’t bother me much.”

Hurricane Kate wasn’t hampering Dustin Martina too much, either.

While the Gulf slurped along a back road, the 14-year-old Martina sped back and forth on his bicycle through deep puddles. Although only a teenager, Martina showed all the bravado of any crusty coastal veteran.

“Because I’ve been through so many,” he said, when asked why he was still there.

Asked about his parents, Martina gave a guilty grin. “They’ve don’t know I’m out here,” he said, “but they won’t leave. They’ve been through too many. “They can survive.”

Others, however, weren’t quite sure what to do.

Isabelle Nichols and Bonnie Smith both stood outside their Economy Cash Store watching cars plunge into knee-deep ponds. “If they really said evacuate, we’d pack up,” Nichols said.

Before this year, Smith said her first real experience with a hurricane had been in Maine. “We used to get one every 30 years or so,” she said. “I remember one as a little kid in the 50s. I don’t really remember the hurricane but I do remember the aftermath and it certainly wasn’t like this.

The year’s bad weather has taken its toll on the community, Nichols added.

“It’s been rough,” she said. “I really wonder about the oystermen. They’re just trying to get back now.”

Asked if she was leaving, Smith gave an undecided shrug. “Last time, we left, came back and left.” She said. “I just said, ‘the heck with it,’ this time.”

Oscar Medley is another disciple of the stay-as-long-as-you-can school.

“I’ll probably stay,” he bellowed in an effort to overcome the wind’s roar. “I stayed through Elena until it got up to 75 miles an hour, but if it gets much worse, I guess I’ll go. Why risk the misery?”

“I ain’t believing this, four of them in two months,” Medley added. “It’s a little bit too much to believe.”

## TAYLOR COUNTY

Taylor County residents appeared to have escaped Hurricane Kate’s fiercest blows late Thursday, although residents near the beach were ordered to evacuate in anticipation of high tides.

The brunt of the storm appeared headed elsewhere late Thursday, but county officials said they still would be on the lookout for trouble.

“To us, it’s just a rainy day. We haven’t had any problems yet,” said Carl Williams, chief deputy of the Taylor County Sheriff’s Office. Thursday afternoon.

Even so Governor Bob Graham ordered the evacuation of residents in low-lying coastal areas in Taylor and neighboring Jefferson counties at 4:00PM.

Sheriff’s deputies in Taylor County were patrolling the beach areas and telling residents it was time to get out, said Ed Allen, the county’s civil-defense director.

Officials were most concerned about the possibility that tides as high as 7 feet above normal could cause flooding in some areas, Allen said.

Allen added that the 200 or so people affected by Graham’s order could be evacuated relatively quickly. The order to evacuate low-lying areas in Jefferson County would have little impact, Allen added, because nearly all the beach in that area is an uninhabited federal preserve.

Kate appeared to have little impact on Taylor County on Thursday. Schools and businesses remained open. Williams said Thursday afternoon there were no weather-related accidents.