

HURRICANE KATE WALLOPS WAKULLA

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Written By Ron Stock

The Gilbert Gowdy farm family decided last Thursday afternoon they had better relocate some 100 cows to an open pasture.

Out in the Gulf of Mexico, adjacent to the county, a ferocious hurricane was making steady progress to a landfall along the Panhandle area of Florida.

“In rainy weather, cows like to get up to the fence and scrub themselves,” said Craig Gowdy. He said if a tree was to fall on a fence line during the storm the cows could get free.

The cows didn't get loose, but all heck broke loose last Thursday afternoon and evening when Hurricane Kate, born in the Atlantic ocean, finally slammed into Florida's northern coastal counties. Wakulla County received a strong hit.

Florida Governor Bob Graham had called for a mandatory evacuation of the coastal areas in Wakulla County when the storm seemed to be moving in.

Many residents evacuated to Tallahassee, which ended up getting hit by ferocious winds as the hurricane's eye passed just west of the State Capitol city.

The storm had earlier hit land at Cape San Blas in Gulf County before moving in a northeasterly direction, a path of travel of great concern to officials monitoring the situation in Crawfordville.

It was a late afternoon storm that hit with very strong winds and rain which increased in intensity into the night. County Commissioner Wright Alexander, who was at the emergency command station located at the Sheriff's Office in Crawfordville, said he feared for the worst as the powerful storm approached.

He mentioned the storm was going to hit at a time when the tide was high and that would surely mean flooding in coastal communities. High tide was between 9:00PM and 10:00PM and his prediction was accurate.

Widespread flooding hit along Ochlockonee to Apalachee Bays. Flooding was not as great as feared in the Panacea area.

Trees fell throughout the storm and many homes were damaged throughout the county, with total losses to some homes at Shell Point, Oyster Bay, and Live Oak Island.

The power to some parts of the county went out as soon as the 4:00PM wind hit. By 8:00PM the entire county was in a blackout. Portable emergency generators supplied power to such places as the Wakulla County Sheriff's Office, the Wakulla Manor Nursing Home and Wakulla High School, which served as the only official American Red Cross Shelter.

As the storm approached, National Guardsmen entered the county for assignment in coastal areas. Lawmen with bullhorns had already urged residents of low-lying coastal communities to evacuate, in line with the mandatory evacuation order which had been issued by the governor.

At the Ochlockonee River Bridge National Guardsman Scott Sullivan estimated wind at 90 miles per hour gusts before nightfall. He said a ham radio operator had just measured it.

Hunters had their deer hunting interrupted and hunt camps closed during one of the biggest weeks in the season. David Mock, of St Marks, and Bobby Dunn and Brent Fletcher, of Crawfordville, retreated to the Sheriff's Office to wait out the storm.

"It messes us up bad," said Mock.

Lt Charles Landrum had come back from his vacation – hunting out of Newport – to assist with emergency communication coordination.

Sheriff David Harvey met early Thursday afternoon with county officials to prepare for the storm and remained at the command station.

As the storm intensified, damage mounted into the millions of dollars in repair cleanup costs.

It seemed like everyone knew of the approaching storm.

CBS News Managing Editor Dan Rather, reporting from Geneva, Switzerland, mentioned St Marks as a site of a hurricane warning when he reported live in a story on the approaching storm during the news broadcast.

When it hit, very rough winds continued until about 10:00PM and then lessened. Gusts were reported to almost 100 miles per hour in areas on the coast.

The church steeple at the First Baptist Church in Crawfordville fell, boats at Shell Point were tossed around like toys.

Propane tanks and furniture floated in the rising tide along the coast.

One home at Oyster Bay floated across a street and a canal. Fences fell all over the county and numerous power poles toppled.

Convenience stores remained open throughout the storm, but there was no electricity. One resident in Crawfordville was concerned that he could not get change back from his food stamps since he didn't have the exact change on him. The cash register drawer of the electronically run register was closed tight, with no power.

Some latecomers arrived at the First Baptist Church in Crawfordville after deciding their homes were not safe. The church was not an official haven, but was opened.

Winds were fierce. It seemed there was not as much rain as there was when Hurricane Elena pushed past the county in the Gulf of Mexico during the Labor Day weekend.

Four-year-old Audra Jones, daughter of Mr And Mrs Gibbs Jones, of Crawfordville, stopped by Floyd Roberts' boiled peanut stand north of Medart with family and friends the day after the hurricane.

She readily had her assessment of the storm: "You know what?" she said excitedly. "Hurricane Elena was fast but Hurricane Kate was faster."

And county officials who monitored the storm in Wakulla County, while many of the residents were out of the county, couldn't have agreed more.

Eric Hindle, Director of Civil Defense for the county, said that very high winds of the storm caused most the damage, mixed with the high tides estimated at five or more feet above normal.

During the storm, Hindle said it was the night condition which also hampered emergency services.

Portable oxygen tanks were rushed to a few residents dependent on them for reasons of health. One man stopped by the Sheriff's Office to complain of chest pains.

County Commission Chairman Murray McLaughlin had brought his portable television to the command center to watch the storm's progress. Candles were lit around the department where electrical lights were not available.

Teletypes from the Florida Department of Law Enforcement and the office of Disaster Preparedness were sent to the department informing officials of the storm's location.

It is estimated that 40 percent of the county's some 12,000 residents evacuated before and during the storm. Some 90 percent of the coastal residents cleared out.

Just before the power went out, some transformers on power poles exploded like fireballs in the dark night storm, creating an eerie sight to late leaving evacuees.

There were some traffic accidents reported in the county in the last-minute rush to get out. All through the night cars with families could be seen moving out of Wakulla County with residents who decided to make a run for it. Falling trees trapped some of them.

Marine Patrol Officer Larry Cook helped with the earlier evacuation of Sopchoppy and low lying areas of the Ochlockonee River. "It was late at night Thursday when we were down there. What few people that came out of their homes had already packed up and were ready to evacuate. It seemed like we had real good cooperation from people in that area," he said.

The cooperation was said to be just as good in other parts of the county.

During radio communications between law enforcement officers, tension entered voices as the huge storm hit.

Clerk of the Court Carlton Tucker remained in the county with his family, stopping by to make a check of the courthouse and also to stop in at the emergency command station.

"I feel just as safe in the house that my daddy and uncle built than any house in Leon or Wakulla County," he said.

School board member Mike Falk remained at his home on Bottoms Road, which at one point was cut off by rising tide water. His family, like many of those which remained in the county, huddled in a common room to listen to storm progress from battery powered radios. Candles and fireplaces provided light.

Some residents felt the impact of the storm in different ways. Mr and Mrs Claxton Vause Jr were at their home in Sopchoppy, with two other families – the Deloziers and some of the Kraton family – when a tree crashed into the home about 8:00PM. They eventually evacuated to the Sopchoppy Baptist Church as rain water started pouring in.

At Shell Point, the Williams' home was damaged seriously. It is a vacation home. Bettie Williams said she had more concern for those who lost their primary homes.

Richard Crook said he was one of the last to evacuate Shell Point. "The tide was coming up. Roads were becoming impassable."

Deputy Victor Crook, Tom Kinnebrew and Richard Crook made sure everyone was gone before they left. The storm fury was approaching fast.

Peggy Fulton manned the convenience store at Medart. She said the customers were pretty steady as the storm approached. She monitored the storm from a portable radio.

Rain fell heavily at times during the storm. Fear of possible tornadoes seemed conformed with citizens calling in reports of twisters hitting areas of the county.

At 10:30PM Lena Lamb and Brenda Rouden were still manning a convenience store in Crawfordville.

“It’s incredible,” Rouden said. “I am a Georgia girl and I’m not used to this kind of stuff.”

Winds and rain roared around the building. Flashlights provided the only light.

Lamb said she was surprised at how many people came into the store to buy bread, ice, and cigarettes. “Everyone is telling us to go home,” she said. “If we do, they won’t be able to get these things for their families.”

Winds pushed billboards down around the county and twisted traffic signs around. Debris blew main streets of communities.

Commissioner McLaughlin was standing on the front porch of the Sheriff’s Office watching the storm in Crawfordville. It was about 10:00PM when Emergency Medical Technicians Greg Moran and paramedics David Brittin and Allen Cohen heard what they thought was a church bell ringing.

It was then they feared the steeple had been blown off the First Baptist Church in Crawfordville.

Sgt Jim Whittaker drove to the church and found that was a correct assumption.

At Bayside Marina the wet storage and docks blew away though no boats were tied to them. At Spring Creek water had risen to Stuart Cove Road. At Panacea, water was across U S Highway 98 into Mineral Springs. Flooding caused damaged to some 60 homes in St Marks.

Whittaker, who was the shift sergeant on duty during the storm, said officials had prepared for a direct hit of the hurricane. However, “we still were in the fringes of the eye,” he said. The northeast section of the storm is said to be the worst.

Everyone was waiting for the storm to pass. However, it was not until after midnight that the winds began to die, with periodic strong gusts.

The road department personnel were working in the midst of the storm clearing down trees. Steve Harrell and his crew had been moving around the county working against fierce conditions to open roadways for emergency vehicles and evacuees.

But the storm conditions had become so severe that Commissioner McLaughlin made the decision to pull personnel off the roads until the worst of the storm passed.

In one case during the storm, deputies were asked to move their road block back from the Bayside area of Panacea to the intersection of U S Highway 319 and U S Highway

98 to escape rising tide water and get in a safer area in the pitch black dark environment.

The deputies assisted by the Florida Highway Patrol and Florida National Guard, stopped all cars going into the coastal areas to see who was wanting to drive around.

One Panacea family wanted to go back home because of the loud children at the evacuation shelter.

There were concerns of possible looters entering the coastal area. Other deputies and highway patrol officers patrolled the county, assisted by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission and the Florida Marine Patrol.

Two young men from Gainesville were stopped in the Panacea area by a deputy during the storm. They were summoned to the Sheriff's Office in Crawfordville where Sheriff Harvey gave them an ultimatum: leave the county or be arrested. They quickly left the county.

Harvey said officers are still checking for possible looters this week. The Florida National Guard, which had arrived the afternoon of the hurricane, left by Sunday. A curfew had been imposed Friday and Saturday night from 7:00PM to 7:00PM along the coastal communities.

Volunteer fire departments were manned throughout the county during the storm. Ham radio operator Richard Tolli and his son, John, were on duty at the command station to help relay communications of the weather service and the American Red Cross.

The storm brought back memories of other major disaster. Native Wakulla Countians, gathered at the Sheriff's Office, swapped stories as the storm raged outside.

Wakulla County once was a county of much dissention between communities. Time has changed much of that. However, it was not that way in the late 1950s.

When the Talquin Dam broke and flooding was expected in Sopchoppy, Leon County sent a civil defense director to alert Sopchoppy residents.

Reddick Lawhon was rocking in his chair with his eyes closed in a downtown business. He reportedly didn't even open his eyes as he rocked on and answered the civil defense official.

"I'd rather drown sitting right here in Sopchoppy than evacuate to Crawfordville," Lawhon reportedly said.

James Taylor, County Commissioner, told stories recalling a hurricane in 1928 when Ace and Raff Vickers drowned off Jacks Island. Clerk Tucker recalled when Mr Kid

Raker and two others were victims of a 1928 hurricane when they were blown off a bridge walking out of an Ochockonee area fishery.

No deaths were reported in Wakulla County as a result of Hurricane Kate.

Some injuries to residents were reported after the storm and during ongoing cleanup.

Back at Floyd Roberts' boiled peanut stand at the Bloxham cutoff, weekend business was brisk.

"They don't have anything to eat," said Roberts, a local entrepreneur. "I'm selling the h--
- out of these boiled peanuts" he said with a smile.