

LeRoyans Decline Hurricane Experience

by Lynne Belluscio

We've been reading through the LeRoy Gazettes from 1934, 1935 and 1936 for a research project about the Main Street dam and gatehouse. Every time I open one of these bound books, it's hard not to want to just sit there and read. There is so much information. We use a special research sheet that helps to record the date, page and column of the stories. Those notes will be transferred to 3 x 5 cards and inserted alphabetically in a card file of topics in the Gazette. I couldn't help but notice an article on the front page of the November 6, 1935 Gazette. The headline was "LeRoyans decline hurricane experience. - - - Mrs. Donald Woodward of East Main Street received a wire from Mr. Woodward Monday evening advising her that he and Stuart J. Johnson had left West Palm Beach in the early stages of the Caribbean hurricane, where they were remaining until the blow was over. Press dispatches indicate that Miami about 40 miles south of West Palm Beach felt the brunt of the storm which took five lives and did property damage estimated at upwards of \$3,000,000 in Dade County. Whether or not Mr. Woodward's property at West Palm Beach or the extensive place of his sister, Mrs. John Vietor at Palm Beach were damaged by the storm is not yet known here. Mr. Woodward and Mr. Johnston left LeRoy about two weeks ago for Florida. Mrs. Woodward and Mrs. Johnston left this morning by motor to join their husbands. "

A quick google search came up with the story about the 1935 Labor Day hurricane that hit Florida. (What is curious, is that the hurricane hit Florida the first part of September, and this article doesn't appear until November.)Some accounts indicate that winds reached 200 miles per although other accounts put the winds at 185. Never the less, it was the first measured Category 5 hurricane to hit Florida. The barometer plummeted to 892. Other category 5 storms to hit Florida were Camile in 1969 and An-

drew in 1992, Wilma in 2005 and of course the recent Category 5 hurricane, Irma. The 1935 Labor Day hurricane formed as a weak tropical storm east of the Bahamas on August 29 and slowly proceeded westward and became a hurricane on September 1. High seas prevented rescue attempts and the storm continued northwest along the Florida west coast. It made a second landfall on September 4 at Cedar Key. Storm surges were 18 to 20 feet high and completely destroyed Islamorada in Monroe County. There were over 400 fatalities (although there are discrepancies in many of the records). The worst tragedy occurred when the storm hit the Federal Emergency Relief Administration's veteran's work camps in the Florida Keys. The camps were built in low lying areas and housed WWI veterans who had been sent to build roads to connect the Key islands. A month before the hurricane, President Roosevelt had decided to close the camps. A lot of these veterans were "down on their luck" and didn't have jobs, so they were put to work at the CCC camps and the WPA projects. But the program had run out of money, and there were still almost 700 men still living in the tents. The camps, it was said, were not run well, and there was little concern for the veterans - - many of them suffering from what we today would call post traumatic stress disorder. When the hurricane hit, a train was sent down to bring the men to higher ground, but it was delayed, and it was too late. When the 50 foot wall of water hit, and the 200 mph wind gusts blew in, there was no hope for survival. All the cars of the train were thrown off the track. Only the engine remained upright. The tent camps were completely destroyed. There were 257 confirmed veterans dead. Their bodies were to be returned to Washington for burial at Arlington Cemetery, but the bodies decomposed so quickly in the water and the heat that the wooden coffins were quickly buried, and others were piled together and



Don Woodward in center in West Palm Beach (this photo was taken in 1941)

burned for fear of the spread of disease. The famous author, Ernest Hemmingway, who lived in the Florida Keys, two days after the storm, filled his boat with supplies and headed back to the Keys to give out supplies. All he saw were dead bodies. He was hired to write an article to expose the horrendous situation that became a deadly event which many believed was being covered up by the government. His first-hand account "Who Murdered the Vets?" was published on September 17, 1935. Subsequent hearings in Washington, determined that there was no blame on the part of the government, that the tragedy was strictly an "Act of God." In 1937, a large stone marker was erected near the graves of some of the veterans. As recent as last year, the local American Legion was trying to get the Federal Government to place markers on the graves. Apparently it is still tied up in volumes of government paperwork.

I am assuming that

the Woodward houses in Palm Beach were not severely damaged. I could not find any newspaper accounts that mentioned what happened after the hurricane.

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1 Church St. • LeRoy, NY 1482

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