

Great Storm of 1886

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THE GREAT STORM OF 1886: A DAY OF AGONY AND DEATH AT SABINE PASS, TEXAS

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Sources: Galveston DAILY NEWS, October 14-21, 1886.

As is apparent to any visitor to the Sabine Pass Cemetery, Tuesday, October 12, 1886, was not a day of ordinary significance. That date is etched all too frequently on the numerous markers in the ill-kept cemetery.

On that fateful afternoon a century ago, hurricane winds and a massive tidal wave quickly engulfed the seaport community, and by midnight, the town had been washed away. Entire families were drowned, and the survivors were left too dazed and incoherent in most cases for communication.

Some days afterward, a Galveston "Daily News" correspondent recorded that, "Sabine Pass was once a port. Sabine Pass is (now) nothing but a trackless and barren waste."

Although the storm raged across Southeast Texas with force sufficient to destroy the D. J. Williams and R. W. Snelling sawmills at Kountze, Beaumont suffered only very moderate damage, mostly just a few sawmill smokestacks, and Orange lost only its new Catholic church.

Many earlier and subsequent hurricanes have damaged Sabine heavily, but in each instance the town has refused to die. Oftentimes many survivors had given up and moved away, but always a nucleus of nestors remained or returned to rebuild from

the debris.

Already the community was only a shadow of its antebellum self. By April, 1861, the population had reached about 1,500, and four major commission merchants were shipping 20,000 bales of cotton annually and importing the necessities for frontier living. But the fall months of 1862 would change that panorama of serenity. Within three months time, 100 residents and Confederate soldiers were dead of yellow fever, as many more survived, but three-fourths of the town fled to inland points and never returned. In addition, detachments of Union sailors came ashore, destroyed all Confederate fortifications, burned the sawmill industries (the largest in Texas) and residences, and threatened to return and burn the entire town. As a result, Sabine never fully regained its pre-Civil War eminence as a seaport city.

By 1886, Sabine Pass had grown back to contain about twenty business houses, three cotton gins and about sixty families. An equal number of farm families were scattered along the two 7-mile marsh ridges, known as "Front Ridge," where the present highway is located, and "Back Ridge," which began at Keith Lake and intersected the Front Ridge at its western end.

After the 1886 storm had subsided, all that remained intact was Gus Higby's store and the residences of Dr. J. J. L. Gilliland and W. F. McClanahan, the town's publisher and printer. On the Front Ridge, Moise Broussard's three story mansion, built in 1877, survived, but the cattleman lost a herd of 1,100 steers.

Before the hurricane arrived, Sabine's neighbors to the east, Radford and Johnson's Bayou, Louisiana, were very prosperous farm communities, with four large stores, several cotton gins and sugar mills, and 1,200 inhabitants. Their mail, export, and import requirements kept two steamboats, the "Emily P." and "Lark," engaged for much of the year and the schooner "Dreadnaught" occupied full-time in the Galveston trade. The storm flattened both settlements with an appalling loss of life and wiped out several entire families.

The day of October 12 began as most other days, with no indication of any offshore disturbance. The wind blew slightly from the southeast. Schools and stores were open, men were at work as stevedores on the waterfront, and others labored in the gins or cotton fields, for all of the cotton grown in Jefferson County came from the Sabine Pass ridges. By 3 o'clock P. M., the waters of the Pass began to rise rapidly, and the first gusts of storm winds swept onto the shores. By 7:00 P. M., the lower floors of houses were filled with surging waters, and a full-blown hurricane was battering in the doors and windows. These were the beginnings of the night of death and destruction.

No knowledge of the disaster reached the outside world for the next 48 hours.

Johnson's Bayou was totally isolated except by water, and the telegraph lines and rail tracks of the Eastern Texas Railroad to Sabine had been washed away.

On October 14, the schooner "Andrew Boden" left Orange en route to Galveston. Upon reaching Sabine Lake, the vessel witnessed the handiwork of the winds and waves -- floating houses, furniture, and all manner of debris -- and soon rescued two brothers, Fred and Reuben Pomeroy, who were clinging to the wreckage of a capsized yawl boat. Their story, which left no doubt about the extent of death and destruction, follows in part:

"There were 45 women and children at the Porterhouse Tavern in Sabine Pass, and some 15 or 20 men. They remained in it until half of it (the building) was swept away. A yawl (a one-masted sail vessel) was hitched to the house, the water having risen about four feet, when the end of the house was blown off. The yawl was manned and loaded down to the water's edge. The sea was terribly rough, and during one of those spasms, a wave struck the yawl and nearly half-filled it. All of them rushed to one side, the boat capsized, and some of them were never seen again."

Among the victims of the shipwreck were Mrs. Edsea Pomeroy, Mrs. Laura Pomeroy and four children, Mrs. Mary Whiting, Homer and Lucy King and their two children, Mrs. Wilson A. Junker and son Carlisle, Mrs. Sarah Vondy and four children, Mrs. B. F. McDonough and daughter, and many others.

The "Andrew Boden" returned to Orange, and soon afterward, the steamboats, "L. Q. C. Lamar" and "Emily P.," and a relief force of 150 men left Orange for Sabine and Johnson's Bayou. A youth named David King rowed a skiff 30 miles to Beaumont to bring the first news of the disaster to that city. Men and supplies were dispatched to the stricken areas from Beaumont aboard a schooner and the steam tug "Scherffius" and its barge, a part of the largest rescue operation that either Beaumont or Orange had ever engaged in. When notified by telegram of the disaster, Galveston citizens sent a relief expedition aboard the revenue cutter "Penrose" and the tug "Estelle."

The Galveston "Daily News" observed that "Beaumont and Orange vied with each other in sending relief parties and assistance to the stricken towns....Were it not for their prompt aid, those who escaped the storm would have perished for want of food and water."

Within 24 hours, each city was caring for between 200 and 300 destitute refugees, those left with only the clothes on their backs, a figure which would soon swell to 1,200 persons.

The scenes of devastation which greeted the rescue workers were sufficient to melt

the most callous observer. Some survivors were still in a state of insensibility, although physically unhurt, and others scrambled about the area in search of relatives. The largest group of survivors were those who had taken refuge in Higby's Store. Dr. Gilliland and Felix McReynolds had already organized a relief committee to search for stranded survivors and bury the dead.

The force of the gale was especially visible at the lighthouse, where the walls had sustained large cracks and fissures from winds estimated to have exceeded 150 miles per hour. The walls of the brick lightkeeper's cottage were shattered to bits of rubble. A three-acre tract of high land in the inundated marsh adjacent to the railroad was shared by the carcasses of 300 cattle, countless snakes, wolves, rabbits, foxes, muskrats, and raccoons, all of the latter that still lived being in a stupified state. The Galveston newspaper noted that:

" . . . Buzzards are the only members of the feathered family now in the air, while the surface of the water and land is covered with dead birds and animals."

Gradually, the tales of death and heroism began to unfold. Parents had striven valiantly to save their families, often slipping into the tide only when their last strength had ebbed or their children had drowned. Young R. A. McReynolds carried his bride of only a few months in chest-deep water until a wave swept her away. Fourteen members of the Johnigan and Clark families died when the walls of their house collapsed. Otto Brown and his wife clung to debris for 22 miles before being rescued in the Sabine River marsh, but all of their children drowned during the storm.

Mrs. John Stewart and daughter Frederika floated across Sabine Lake to Aurora, present-day Port Arthur, surviving by clinging for 12 hours to a mattress and a door frame. Columbus Marty, his wife and three children floated across Sabine Lake on a roof top. After watching his family slip one by one into the water, Marty was eventually cast ashore on a Sabine River shellbank. The final death count at Sabine was 86 persons.

The situation at Johnson's Bayou was equally as bad or worse. No member, or no more than one, of the F. Dalton, Sam Brown, E. Fanchett, Joseph Luke, Frank Tanner, William Ferguson, George Smith, Alfred Lambert, Shell Wagley, James Hawkins, Henry Johnson, and Robert Hambrick families survived the storm.

Between 30,000 and 40,000 Texas and Louisiana cattle drowned in the flood. Seven thousand carcasses dotted the Johnson's Bayou ridges alone, and countless thousands more floated in the inundated marshes. The stench became unbearable for the relief workers. The few surviving cattle were soon crazed for lack of fresh water

and fodder and most of them died as well.

Many vessels were tossed about like corks. The large schooner "Hercules," dragging three anchors and loaded with 300 tons of Mexican mahogany, grounded two miles inland in the marsh. The schooners "Silas" and "Henrietta" lay five miles from the beach. The raging tides swept the Sabine Pass waterfront clean of all docks, warehouses, and pilings.

Remarkable incidents and sights resulted from the wiles of the winds and waves. An unbroken plate glass window was found ten miles inland. A piano floated for 30 miles to a point in the Sabine River marsh. A chicken coop, grounded near present-day Port Arthur, contained seven dead hens and four live ones. A canary bird, whose cage floated across Sabine Lake, suffered only "badly ruffled feathers." The body of a Negro man was found "more than 20 miles from Sabine Pass, still closely hugging his banjo."

Beaumont's Relief Committee, consisting of B. F. Edwards, Leon Levy, W. C. Averill, William Wiess, and S. F. Carter, began a nation-wide appeal by telegraph to raise funds and supplies for the destitute refugees. Similar committees at Galveston and Houston sent shiploads of supplies and \$7,000 in cash. Other Texas communities responded as well, for each coastal resident assumes the role of "his brother's keeper," if the need arises, during the hurricane season.

Beaumonters responded again during Galveston's hour of agony in 1900, and as recently as 1957, when hundreds of Louisiana residents drowned in Cameron Parish during Hurricane Audrey.

Radford, Louisiana, was never rebuilt, and Johnson's Bayou never regained its pre-1886 eminence as a satsuma orange and cotton-producing community. There were some widespread predictions that Sabine Pass would not be rebuilt. Although some families soon resettled at Beaumont and Orange, many others returned to the seaport city and began sifting through the debris, seeking the wherewithal with which to reconstruct their homes and their livelihoods. Within one year, ships were docking again at Sabine's new wharves, and the churches were reorganizing in the town that refused to die.

The one exception was Sabine's Masonic Order. The Grand Archives at Waco reveal that Tyrian Lodge, established in 1855, did not reorganize after the storm of 1886. Apparently, a majority of the membership either drowned or moved away, and Tyrian Lodge has remained a defunct chapter to the present day.

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