

# The 1928 Okeechobee Hurricane—The Last Eyewitness?

By Keith Propst, with special thanks to my sister, Nancy Propst Payne

As the child of a father who was born in Lake Worth and a mother who moved to the town in her early teens, I have enjoyed many stories about life in Lake Worth in the 1920s, 30s, and 40s.

You may have read my article published in October 2020 about my father, Neil Propst, and his friends seeing a freighter sunk by a U-boat right off the Boynton Beach inlet. This article is based on Dad's memories going much further back—to age four.

Dad's mother's family had moved to Lake Worth in 1912, before electricity was brought to the town, and his father's family had arrived about 1920. My father was born in his home at 311 North Lakeside Drive on September 5, 1924, and he lived in Lake Worth until he graduated from Lake Worth High School in 1942 and headed north for Purdue University. My mother's family moved to Lake Worth in the late 1930s, and she graduated in the same LWHHS class as Dad before attending Indiana University. My parents returned home for a few years with their children. Our family lived in Lake Worth from 1955-1961, ages 4-10 for me.

Over the years, our family has enjoyed many stories from Dad and Mom about their years in Lake Worth. For example, we have heard all about Dad's love of cars and how he bought and sold them and came up with ingenious ways to keep them running. We have marveled at the tale of him learning to drive at age 12 so that he could take his mother on her shopping trips and errands, since she never learned how to drive. We've laughed at stories of our parents' childhood hijinks, and we listened soberly as they recalled hearing about the attack on Pearl Harbor and wondering how their lives would change.

One of my father's most remarkable stories is how he and his family survived the 1928 hurricane that roared across Lake Worth and Palm Beach County and wreaked devastation and death on the settlements around Lake Okeechobee. Dad has always had a prodigious memory, even now at more than 96 years of age, but it is amazing that he has such clear memories of events that occurred just 11 days after he turned four. As I thought about this article, I realized that he could very well be the last living eyewitness to this notable event in the history of Lake Worth.

The 1928 hurricane—usually referred to as the “1928 Okeechobee hurricane”—is well documented. Here's a short recap for readers who may not be familiar with the details. The storm was born off the west coast of Africa about

September 6, 1928. Over the next 10 days it chugged across the Atlantic, gathering strength each day. It hit the Lesser Antilles as a category 4 hurricane and then strengthened to category 5 as it devastated Puerto Rico. Hundreds of thousands of dwellings and buildings were destroyed in the Caribbean islands, and deaths were estimated at more than 1,000. The storm skirted the north coast of Cuba and then roared directly over the Bahamas, inflicting more cruel damage and death. On the morning of Sunday, September 16, the storm took aim at Palm Beach County as a category 4.

Without storm tracking and forecasting tools that we now take for granted, the determinative prediction for where the storm would hit Florida was not issued until after the morning papers were delivered on that Sunday. Word spread slowly during the day, but as the winds and rain picked up, residents did what they could to prepare for the coming weather onslaught. The hurricane made landfall on Sunday evening, and the next few hours were a nightmare of death and destruction. Some reports contend that the eye of the hurricane was so large that the leading wall of the eye crossed over Lake Okeechobee even as the trailing wall was just crossing the coast. This allowed the storm to maintain and even gain strength over the warm waters of the shallow lake.

In the town of Lake Worth, estimates were that 50 percent of dwellings were destroyed or damaged, and 75 percent of businesses were impacted. The property damage was worse in West Palm Beach and Palm Beach. Thousands in the coastal communities were left homeless, but the loss of life was relatively light along the coast. The ocean storm surge overran much of the barrier islands, and the waters of Lake Worth were pushed up and over parts of the mainland all along the lake shore.

The most tragic impact of the storm was inland around Lake Okeechobee. Thousands of farm and migrant workers lived around the lake during harvest season, and many of these residents had little warning and few defenses against the storm—plus no means to evacuate. The low mud levees on both the southeast and northwest parts of the lake failed, and a storm surge reported to be as high as 20 feet in places rolled implacably through the communities surrounding the lake. Buildings, livestock, and human beings were swept away as the waters raged in the early hours of September 17.

Reports of the death toll around Lake Okeechobee have varied over the years,



but the current estimate is that at least 2,500 Americans perished in one night. My mother's mother, Ruth Hoffmann, used to have a booklet about the hurricane in her guest room. I don't remember the exact title of the booklet, but it had a garish red and yellow cover with large black lettering that proclaimed something like, “5,000 Perished in One Hour!” The booklet was filled with sad photos of devastated buildings and homes and bodies washed up by the storm surge. Many of the victims had been covered with lime to forestall decay. The loss of life overwhelmed the resources of the county and towns around the lake. Many of the dead had to be buried in mass graves in various locations. As the days wore on and the September heat returned, other bodies were burned to prevent contamination of water sources. A historical marker in West Palm Beach documents a mass grave for 69 white victims and a separate grave containing the remains of 674 black victims.

Of course, at age four, my father was not aware of the full tragedy resulting from the storm.

Nonetheless, his experiences were surely frightening for a young child, resulting in clear memories going back more than 92 years. Fortunately, like most Lake Worth residents, he and his family were spared death and injury, even as their property was severely damaged.

Dad remembers that his mother, Helen Wilson Propst, was in Chicago visiting her sisters and brother on the day the storm hit. His maternal grandmother, Helen McKenzie “Nellie” Wilson was staying with Dad and his father, Dwight Propst, at their home on North Lakeside Drive. Dad remembers that they were eating dinner on the evening of Sunday, September 16. The wind and rain were

picking up, and suddenly they heard the brick chimney blow over onto the roof of the house. He remembers that this chimney was on the north side of their roof, away from the storm approaching from the south, an indication of how strong the wind was becoming.

Dad's father and grandmother decided that it was time to move to a safer shelter. Fortunately, they had a place to go. Elvin E. Greene, Sr., the father-in-law of his aunt, Roberta Propst Greene, owned one of the more substantial houses in Lake Worth. The Greene house at that time was a two-story structure on 5th Avenue South, right where South Lakeside Drive makes a little zig-zag at South Bryant Park. This house faces south and is roughly across the street from the Reed house, which also still stands.

Dad remembers that his father carried him on his shoulders as they left their home, made their way over to South P Street (now Palmway), and then walked two-thirds of a mile south to the Greene house. The rain was pouring by that time, and they were quickly soaked to the skin.

They arrived to find that other families had also taken shelter in this solid building. The children and women were taken to the upper floor, which had a balcony overlooking the front entrance of the home. Dad remembers looking over the railing to see the men nailing the dining room table across the doors to hold them shut. The entrance to the house consisted of two doors separated by a thin wooden center strip. With the hurricane-force winds moving onshore from the south, the men were concerned that the doors would not hold and needed reinforcement.

The Greene house withstood a harrowing night of pounding rain and relentless wind. The men used towels to keep the water

from blowing under the doors. The next morning, Dad and his father and grandmother walked the eight blocks back to their home on North Lakeside, only to find that the hurricane had taken the roof right off their house. Everything in the house was soaked. Dad remembers that he had left his teddy bear in his bedroom, and he found it in their backyard, soaked through. The bear was filled with sawdust and could not be dried out properly, a terribly sad discovery for a 4-year old. Dad once told me that someone in West Palm Beach returned papers from their house that the winds had picked up and carried for miles.

Years later Dad's mother helped write a history of their church, the First Presbyterian Church of Lake Worth, from 1916 to 1952. In this document, after describing how the church was destroyed in a matter of minutes, she added, “All of Lake Worth suffered great damage... My own home on Lakeside Drive was a total loss; part of the roof was found on H Street and the rest was never found... Folks losing their homes were allowed to stay temporarily in any house standing.”

Since their house was unlivable until the roof could be repaired, Dad and his family made their way to the house of friends on the 300 block on North Federal Highway, then known as N Street. They spent a couple of nights at this home but realized that it was too crowded with others taking shelter to be suitable for a long stay. Dad's mother and father knew the Halbert family, who owned a winter home on the east side of the 200 block of North Lakeside. The Halberts had not yet made their annual trip from southern Illinois to Lake Worth, so the house was empty and, more importantly, had survived the hurricane. Dad recalls that Dr. Halbert was a dentist. Dad's father broke the lock on the Halberts' house, and his family stayed there until the roof on their house could be repaired.

Dad remembers that his grandmother wrote to the Halberts explaining what they had done and why. My sister, Nancy Payne of Lexington, KY, has found a copy of this letter. Dad's grandmother wrote the following on September 19, three days after the hurricane hit:

*“You probably have read of our terrible hurricane. It was the worst ever. Lake Worth and West Palm Beach seemed to have been the center on the East Coast. It looks like it although it seems there were more people killed and injured further West. I am writing for Mr. Propst at 311 N “Q” across the street and a little North. Our roof blew off and everything we had is gone. Mrs. Stokes' house is also unroofed. In fact the*

*town is pretty badly used up. Your house is pretty well off. The police told Mr. Propst to get in for the present. He thought you should know and probably would rather know who was in it and that they were neighbors [rather] than strangers and maybe people who would not take care of it. We only want to stay until we can get our home fixed up and will leave it as we found it. If we have to stay a while we will make some arrangement about rent. The chimney blew over on the roof [of our house] and the roofing paper on the front north corner blew off and the plaster is wet in that corner. Mr. Propst will repair it as soon as he can get hold of roofing and we will not use anything of yours like dishes, bedding and will keep the front room rug covered. You had your house well fastened up and it must be well built to have stood up at all. The wind blew 130 miles an hour and the lake came up to our front door right over the street in fact the ocean came right over to the lake we are told. Both ends of the bridge are out. Mrs. Wheeler's house is a total wreck. We do not like the idea of entering other peoples' homes but I am sure if you knew the conditions here you would not blame us. Have you any storm insurance? If you have, Mr. Propst will look after it if you wish. He should look to hear from you.*

*“Respectfully yours,  
“Mrs. J. I. Wilson  
(Mrs. Propst mother)  
Mrs. Dwight Propst”*

In spite of their material losses from the hurricane, Dad and his family, like many Lake Worth residents, were relatively fortunate. There were, of course, injuries and a few deaths recorded in the town, but nothing like the tragedies around Lake Okeechobee. Based on deaths in the continental U.S., the 1928 hurricane is the second deadliest storm on record, surpassed only by the Galveston hurricane of 1900, which killed more than 8,000 Americans. In 2005, as the full tragedy of Hurricane Katrina unfolded, the day the New Orleans levee broke was described as the deadliest day for African Americans since the 1928 Okeechobee hurricane.

September 16, 1928 stands as one of the most significant dates in the ongoing story of Lake Worth. The recovery from the storm's damage took months. Sadly, thousands of individuals across the county, including entire families, had no chance to recover. Even as a four-year-old, my father knew that his family and community had lived through harrowing events and had suffered significant losses over one terrifying night. It is no wonder that his memories remain vivid after more than 92 years as possibly the last living eyewitness to this hurricane.