

Peak Hurricane Season Arrives On N.C. Coast

The 1989 hurricane season, which began June 1 and ends Nov. 30, has entered its peak months of August, September and October, according to Joe Myers, director of the N.C. Division of Emergency Management.

"Historically, the most severe hurricanes occur from the middle of August through the middle of October," Myers said. He added that Hurricane Chantal, which struck the eastern Texas coast last month, and Hurricane Dean serve as reminders that the next three months are prime months for hurricane activity.

"The hurricane is the most dangerous of all

storms," he advised. "They destroy more property and threaten the lives of more people than any other storm."

Hurricanes can cause extensive flooding in coastal areas and inland areas as well. Even though a hurricane weakens in force as they move inland, the storm can produce six to 12 inches of damaging rains. In 1969, Hurricane Camille killed more people in Virginia from flooding than died in Louisiana where she made landfall.

Preparedness and proper planning are the best ways to minimize the damage done by hurricanes. "The completion of the three-year Eastern North Carolina Hurricane Evacuation Study and the success-

ful hurricane exercise in June have given us the tools we need to protect our coastal residents and visitors," Myers noted.

The greatest single loss of life from a hurricane in North Carolina history occurred during the "Racer's Storm" in early October 1837. An estimated 90 people died when the steamboat "Home" encountered the storm off the coast and was destroyed.

Hurricane Hazel is regarded as the most destructive hurricane to have ever struck the North Carolina coast, making landfall in Brunswick County. Hazel roared ashore on Oct. 15, 1954, killing 19 people. Damage estimates exceeded \$125 million.

A result of massive flooding, more than 90 percent

of all hurricane-related deaths are caused by drowning. Devastating seas rise ahead of the storms and can push the water level to over 25 feet in some areas.

This enormous wall of water—called a "storm surge"—crashes against the land in a rapid and unpredictable manner. The surge acts as a huge bulldozer and can destroy everything in its path. The stronger the hurricane, the higher the surge will be.

"The role of the Division of Emergency Management is to alert citizens of potential dangers that can result from hurricanes and consequential flooding," Myers said. For more information on hurricanes and flooding, contact the Brunswick County Emergency Management office at 253-4376.

Weather Watchers Of All Types 'Track' Tropical Storm Moves

"The more I feel threatened, the better record I keep. I like to know where they are, because it threatens our livelihood."

—Selene Robinson
Supply Resident

BY RAHN ADAMS

When a tropical storm or hurricane is brewing in the Atlantic, more than a few people around Brunswick County have more than a passing interest in it.

From professional meteorologist Al Hinn at the National Weather Service office in Wilmington, to local weather watcher Jackson Canady of Shallotte Point, to individuals like Supply resident Selene Robinson, the weather—particularly the severe variety—isn't just a topic of casual conversation.

Hurricanes, the most powerful of storms, have made their marks on Brunswick County and the southeastern North Carolina coast, even though the storms are relatively infrequent occurrences here. The last major storm to threaten the coast was Hurricane Charley in August 1986.

But in the backs of many people's minds is the idea that the area is long overdue for a severe hurricane like the devastating Hurricane Hazel of October 1954 or even powerful Hurricane Diana of September 1984. And the potential exists every hurricane season. For that reason, tropical storms and hurricanes are serious business for many individuals, whether on a professional basis or not.

Meteorologists like Hinn and Canady agree that this should be an active hurricane season similar to last year when 11 named storms formed in the Atlantic Ocean, although none of them seriously threatened the North Carolina coast.

"In looking at the season, it would be an average season," Hinn said last week, basing his prediction on information from the country's most renowned hurricane expert, Dr. William Gray of Colorado State University.

Hinn indicated that an average season consists of 100 to 120 storm "impulses" forming in the Atlantic near the coast of Africa; at least 10 named tropical storms; five or six storms that reach hurricane status (74 mph winds); three hurricanes that threaten the United States; and one that is a severe hurricane.

He emphasized, however, that hurricanes making landfall in the Cape Fear region can be considered "rare events," since only eight have hit this area since the turn of the century.

Hazel's Legacy

But long-time local residents like Mrs. Robinson, wife of Supply farmer Harold Robinson, remember all too well how destructive those rare events can be. The



SUPPLY RESIDENT SELENE ROBINSON stands in her back yard beside the oak tree that she said served as her "barometer" during Hurricane Hazel in 1954.

HURRICANE TRACKING CHART

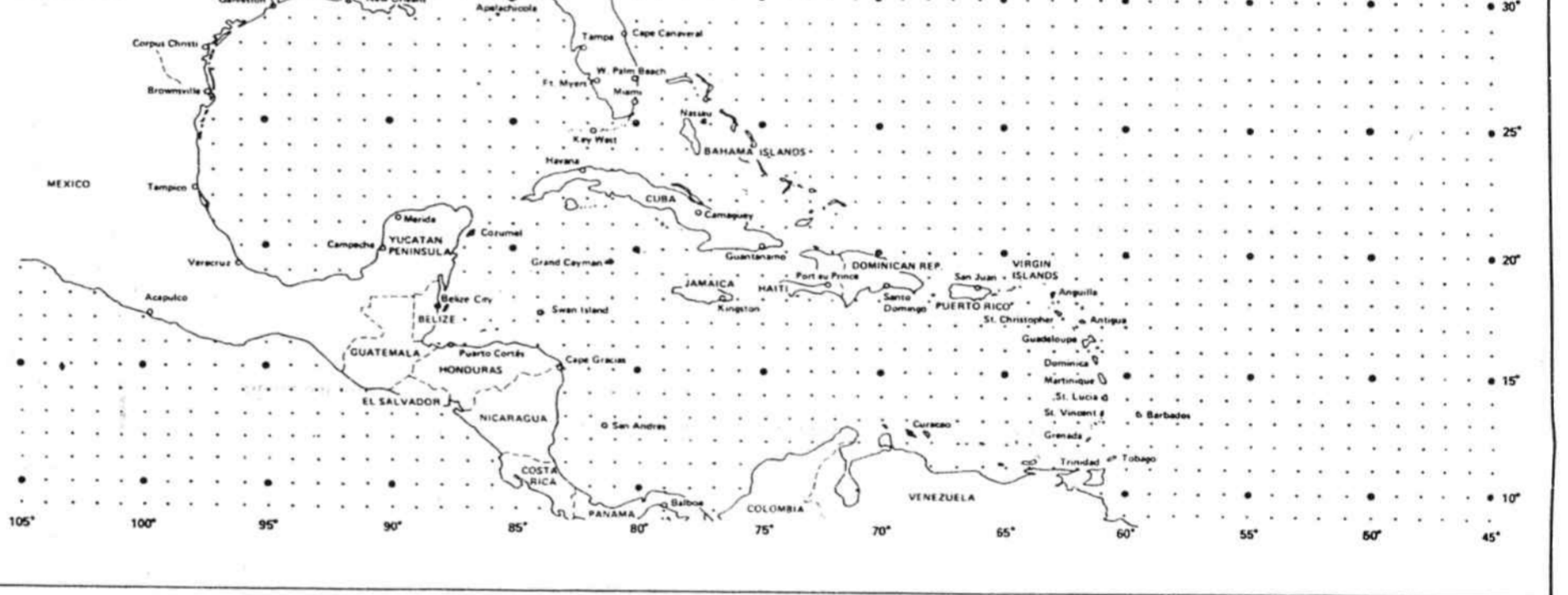
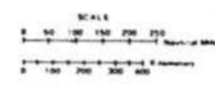
REMEMBER, hurricanes are large powerful storms that can suddenly change direction. Check frequently on the storm's progress until all Watches and Warnings for your area from the National Weather Service are canceled.

HURRICANE WATCH: hurricanes may threaten within 36 hours

- Be prepared to take action if a warning is issued by the National Weather Service.
- Keep informed of the storm's progress.

HURRICANE WARNING: hurricane expected to strike within 24 hours

- Leave beachfront and low-lying areas.
- Leave mobile homes for more substantial shelter.
- Stay in your home if it is sturdy, on high ground, and not near the beach, but if you are asked to leave by authorities, GO!
- Stay tuned to radio, NOAA Weather Radio, or television for hurricane advisories and safety information.



TRACKING MAPS such as the one above help coastal residents stay up to date on the movement of a hurricane or other tropical cyclone. The National Weather Service issues consecutively numbered advisories at regular intervals stating the storm's position, intensity, speed and direction of movement. The hurricane center position is given by latitude (such as 20.5 degrees North) and longitude (such as 65.0 West), which can be plotted on the map.

Robinsons lived here in 1954 when Hazel swept the Brunswick County coastline clean.

Even though Hazel's 109-mph winds were considerably less powerful than Hurricane Diana's 132-mph winds here in September 1984, Hazel was more destructive because she made landfall at high tide, causing a higher than normal storm surge. Diana hit at low tide.

"It was no picnic," Mrs. Robinson understated about Hazel. "It just cleared the beaches, and many of those (people) that wouldn't evacuate (the beaches) were killed." Ninety-five deaths in the United States were attributed to Hazel, which retained her destructive intensity through the Middle Atlantic States.

The Robinsons, whose farm is well inland near Supply, did not evacuate during Hazel. Mrs. Robinson chuckled as she recalled using an old oak tree in their back yard as a "barometer" to measure the storm's severity. "I figured that if it took the oak tree, it would take the house," she said. The gnarled oak still stands.

For at least the past 10 years, Mrs. Robinson, like many other local residents, makes a standard practice of tracking tropical storms and hurricanes that form in the Atlantic. She uses an ordinary hurricane tracking map and gets her storm data—such as coordinates, direction and speed of travel, and wind speeds—by listening to a weather radio.

"The more I feel threatened, the better record I keep," she explained. "I like to know where they are, because it threatens our livelihood."

She said one of the worst hurricanes she has ever tracked here was Diana. As a result of high winds and heavy rain in the storm, Robinsons lost half of their tobacco crop and a shed that housed about 1,000 bales of hay.

"Weather to most people—if it's not too severe—is just a nuisance," she said, "but to a farmer, it's his livelihood."

Tracking Dean

Before Hurricane Dean changed its westward bearing near Puerto Rico and headed north toward Bermuda, Canady kept close watch on the storm, since he knew it was following the "classical track" of hurricanes that can end up threatening the southeastern United States.

Canady's interest in weather is on a different level from Mrs. Robinson's. An engineer at Atlantic Telephone Membership Corporation, Canady records local weather data in his spare time and has served as a local weather watcher for the Beacon, a Wilmington television station and various government agencies.

In tracking tropical storms and hurricanes over the past few years, Canady has learned that they are highly unpredictable—Hurricane Diana being a good example of that unpredictability, because she passed the Brunswick County coast, then circled back and made landfall here.

"Diana was probably one of the most frustrating hurricanes to predict," Canady commented, also noting, "Each one is an individual storm."

He emphasized that coastal residents should always be prepared for possible evacuation during hurricane season. "I think we have to be aware that this is going to be a fairly active season," he added.

Like Hinn, Canady also predicted that at least 10 named storms will occur during the current season, which began in June and lasts until the end of November. The heart of the season is late August and September.

Canady observed that weather patterns this year are similar to those last year, when slightly more tropical storms and hurricanes than normal occurred. Hurricanes require ocean water temperatures of at least 80 degrees to form and maintain their strength; tropical storms can exist with water temperatures in the 70s, he said.

The local weatherman also pointed out that four

named storms already have occurred early this season and that two of them have made landfall, both on the Gulf Coast.

Getting Ready

In preparing for the possibility of a visit from Hurricane Dean, Hinn said the National Weather Service office checked all of its equipment, including a wind-measuring station at Holden Beach. That device was not working properly, he said, and parts were ordered to fix it immediately. Spare parts for equipment in Wilmington also were ordered.

Besides taking care of equipment needs, Hinn said his office gets ready for tropical storms and hurricanes by adjusting the 11-member staff's work schedule. For example, electronics specialists go on duty around the clock when the office is in a "hurricane scenario," so that they would be on hand to fix any equipment that might malfunction. Hinn said.

He also urged local residents to stay informed about the approach of storms by using weather radios and tracking maps, as Mrs. Robinson does. "We encourage people to buy a weather radio," he said. "They're very inexpensive."

The weather service transmits on a frequency of 162.550 MHz from the WWAY television tower near Wainbow. Hinn said residents throughout Brunswick County can pick up the weather broadcasts, although the signal is weak from Shallotte to Calabash because the antenna is not pointed in that direction.

Still, he assured that the same basic weather information can easily be received in southwestern Brunswick County from the Myrtle Beach (S.C.) weather service office, whose frequency is 162.400 MHz. Other weather stations can be received at 162.465 MHz.

"I think the key is we've got some good communications capability out there, and the public can stay informed," he said. "But the important thing is having those resources" to receive that information.

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