

Storm Survivor Recalls Hazel's Devastating Wall Of Water

BY SUSAN USHER

October 1954. The latest in a series of strong tropical waves moves off Cape Verde, on the west coast of Africa, and begins to slowly cruise across the Caribbean.

Off the coast of Venezuela the wave intensifies to become a tropical depression, and on Oct. 5, reaches hurricane strength. A killer is born.

For three days it travels slowly in a steady, westerly direction along the coast of South America. Then, on Oct. 9 it slows, shifts sharply northward. On Oct. 10, it turns again, toward Cuba. The narrow island barely slows the growing she-devil. Doubling her forward speed, Hazel churns in a gentle, wobbling S-curve toward the East Coast of the United States.

Along the coast of the Carolinas, local officials were on the alert. Hurricane Carol had swept by the Outer Banks in August, followed by Edna in September. Would this storm spare the Tar Heel state major damage as well?

The eighth named storm of the hurricane season, Hazel was poised to strike.

"It was expected to come in somewhere between Charleston and Pamlico Sound," recalls Johnny Browning of Shallotte, one of the last people to leave Ocean Isle Beach before the ferry was shut down sometime after dark the night of Friday, Oct. 14.

He had crossed over to the island from Shallotte to warn Sherman Register and his family that the U.S. Coast Guard had said everybody should leave the island. Browning visited until "about 9 or 9:30," he recalls, and left.

Register had recently built a second-row cottage on the eastern half of the island. He was living there with his wife, Madeline, 10-year-old son Buddy, and daughter Sonya R. Bellamy. Sonya's husband, Robert "Bunky" Bellamy, who had just turned 21, happened to be there that night. He had just finished basic training with the U.S. Army and was home on leave.

At the time there were about 33 homes on the island, only a few of them permanent residences. Dunes as high as 20 feet to 30 feet weren't uncommon on the island and its strand was wide.

"As far as I was concerned no one had the beaches we had," recalled Bellamy.

Sometime in the night, the storm began pounding the coastline.

"The winds and the tides were up," recalled Browning. "It was really getting bad here way before day."

The only people still on the island were the Registers, the Bellamys and, in a cottage on down the beach, three couples from High Point—Mr. and Mrs. J. Elwood Cox, Mr. and Mrs. Frank Armfield Jr. and Mr. and Mrs. J.H. Hart.



STAFF PHOTO BY SUSAN USHER

ROBERT "BUNKY" BELLAMY considers himself a lucky man. He floated from Ocean Isle Beach to the mainland on a piece of roof during Hurricane Hazel. He hasn't forgotten the devastating winds and deadly storm surge of Oct. 15, 1954.

"We decided to stay the night. We said we'd get up in the morning and go across," recalled Bellamy. "You remember, this was really the first hurricane where there were any homes on the beach, anyone living there. Nobody had ever seen anything go over the island."

After sunrise, around 6:30 a.m. or a little after, they drove to the ferry landing. They

were too late.

"The ferry was sunk," said Bellamy. By now the tide was beginning to come in fast. Waves were crashing higher and higher, closer and closer to the house.

The two families piled into Register's old Dodge pickup and, battling the wind, torrential rainfall and a waist-deep tide, headed toward high ground.

"We went as far as we could, to a little hill on the beach. It was as high a point as

we could drive to, just past the cottage where the High Point couples were staying.

"We parked on it and put the women and children inside the cab. We (men) stood around it, each of us facing a different direction.

"That's when everything broke loose."

Bellamy was facing east. "I had no warning from the others that much water was coming."

Hazel made landfall in Brunswick County at 10:42 a.m. under the worst possible conditions. The storm came in during daylight on a dead high tide and full moon. Accompanied by pummeling winds of up to 140 mph, the great dome of water—Bellamy estimated it was 20 to 22 feet high—swept everything in its path like a giant bulldozer.

"It scattered everybody. I held onto the truck. When I saw the water wasn't going to recede, I let go. It turned the truck part-way over.

"I saw a house break up and I got on that. I saw one of the couples from High Point on a piece of the same house."

The water picked up a Chrysler and another car and slung them 300 feet across the beach "like you'd spin a top."

Sonya and the Registers were nowhere in sight as the storm tide carried Bellamy away.

Back on the mainland Friday morning, Browning and Maitland Bellamy, Robert's brother, had plans to rescue the family stranded on Ocean Isle Beach. Browning was living at White's Landing at the time, on the Shallotte River.

"We tried to put a sea dory in; we were going to try and rescue Sherman," recalled Browning. "But we couldn't even hold the dory up in the wind and the tide."

Abandoning that effort, Browning went on to the Brick Landing area, to the point known as "the Brickyard," where the ferry crossed to Ocean Isle Beach.

"I was standing there when I saw the big sea come in. It went up over the light pole. That's one time I seen Odell Williamson cry. He was sitting at the top of the hill in his car, crying."

Williamson's sister—Madeline W. Register—was among those who chose to stay on the island that later became synonymous with the name of its developer. Williamson and his brother-in-law were co-owners of the hardware store Register operated in downtown Shallotte.

"We didn't think it would be that bad," Browning recollected.

While area residents had experienced hurricanes before, he said, "It had been a while since we had had a bad one. We had just about forgotten."

Browning, Maitland Bellamy and Hubert Bellamy were just three of the large

group that gathered to search for the victims of the storm.

Bellamy floated with the wind and the tide.

"I had no idea what direction. Ten feet was about as far as you could see between the rain and the wind blown by the sea. The light poles had grass hanging from the wires where the lights had been."

"I came ashore when the eye hit," he recalled, near Brick Landing on front of Dr. M.H. Rourke's cabin. "Then the storm hit again with even greater force."

Afterward friends brought Bellamy to Shallotte for a change of clothes. "That's when they told me had found Sonya and one of the couples from High Point alive."

Sonya Bellamy was one of two women who washed up at the old Spencer place, on the loop road that runs along the back side of what is now Brick Landing Plantation. She was unconscious, but alive. Rescuers took her limp frame to the Spencer house and began slowly reviving her.

It was too late for the other woman, who was found still clinging to a "myrtle" or wax myrtle bush. She had drowned.

The bodies of Sherman Register and Buddy Register were found almost together. Bodies of the other two High Point couples were found.

Even after extending their efforts once the tide receded, searchers never found any trace of Madeline Register.

The other couple to survive was the Harts, who had also clung to a floating section of cottage.

Hazel's death toll at Ocean Isle Beach—seven—was the highest of anywhere in the Carolinas.

A Category 4 storm, Hazel remains the most intense hurricane to ever strike the coast of North Carolina, according to the National Weather Service, though it is neither the deadliest nor the costliest. It also set the record for the highest recorded storm tide—18 feet at Calabash.

"It's scary if you look back," reflects Bellamy, who describes himself as the kind of person who doesn't allow himself to get excited when things happen. "But at the time things were happening so fast."

Bellamy's leave was first extended. Then, when he returned to active duty, he found the Army already processing his discharge for reasons of family hardship so that he could return to his wife, who had lost her entire immediate family in the hurricane.

His and Sonya's marriage ended less than a year later. In 1956, Bellamy was drafted for a second time.

Today Bellamy works for a dredge company, is happily remarried and living on the mainland at Boone's Neck, across from Holden Beach.

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