

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

*A Current Too Strong*

**P**awleys Island has been inundated by floods and ravaged by winds, but still the people who love the island return and rebuild. Acting as a buffer, South Carolina's barrier islands help protect the mainland from the force of winds and waves.

In 1768, the first known map of the area shows a slender sea isle about three miles long and a quarter of a mile wide. The map also identifies a creek behind the island as a long, continuous channel with one bend labeled Cat Fish Hole. Plats made between 1770 and 1858 show the location and depth of the channel, as well as the north and south ends of the island. By 1822, houses were built on the island and weathered a major storm that same year. In 1845, the South Causeway was built under the direction of Robert F.W. Allston. The causeway provided a fast, safe escape from rising waters and powerful winds that indicated an imminent storm. Legend has it that shortly before a storm, the Gray Man appears to give warning and protection. Variations of this tale are often told, and many whose homes have been spared from damaging storms credit the Gray Man. In 1893, newspapers widely reported the loss of thousands of lives from an August hurricane on the lower South Carolina coast and in October from a sudden and violent hurricane on Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>. A series of storms between 1893 and 1911 were the death knell for rice cultivation and altered the local economy.

Rebuilding after 1893, a few planters continued agricultural pursuits but welcomed the lumber mills that harvested timber downed by the storm. In 1902, Atlantic Coast Lumber Company created train tracks from the Waccamaw River to Pawleys Island across Allston's Bank, later called the South Causeway. In 1904, the North Causeway was built, barely surviving a hurricane that year and again in 1906, when a category three storm destroyed rice crops and ruined the tracks.

The storm of 1906 arrived with little warning. Alberta L. Quattlebaum remembers her grandfather Frank W. Lachicotte saying, "Nothing ever comes of winds that form in the west." She recounts that his family went to bed that night at *Tamarisk*, their house on the island, and realized upon awakening that the wind had shifted. As the other children prepared for rising waters, Belle rushed upstairs and changed into her finest dress. When asked the reason, she responded, "If I'm going to drown, I at least want to be a good-looking corpse!" She later saw bodies that washed ashore.

A three-year period of storms and heavy rainfall followed and forced bankruptcies for rice planters. In 1911, a catastrophic hurricane ruined the rice industry with finality and closed Waverly Rice Mill, the last one in operation in Georgetown County. Loss of income and of family fortunes meant that simple pleasures became simpler and island vacations from May to October were a source of solace. Summer homes, minimally furnished and offering a healthful retreat from heat and malaria, were among the last vestiges of the rice planters' lifestyles.

Weather records include storms in 1916, when a great deal of flooding occurred; in 1926, when buckets of fish were caught due to onshore winds; and in 1933, 1940, 1945, 1947, 1950 and twice in 1952. In 1954, the U.S. Weather Service began to name hurricanes and on Oct. 15, Hazel, a category four storm,



Kay Thomas can't help but draw attention to this danger sign in 1957. Part of being a resident or vacationer on Pawleys Island is being aware of the changes in weather that warn of a flood, tornado, nor'easter or hurricane.

became the sixth named storm in history. Hazel crashed ashore between Myrtle Beach and Little River at 9 a.m. after cutting a wide swath through the Caribbean. A hurricane of gigantic proportion, 9,000 square miles, Hazel caused \$922,000 damage on Pawleys Island alone. The storm surge was 17 feet with 40-foot wave crests that traveled 200 feet inland. On Pawleys Island, 75 percent of houses were severely damaged in the surge. Only two of 29 houses remained standing on the south end, where the island was breached at its narrowest point. The *Georgetown Times* reported, "Summer homes irrespective of style from the modern, gaily painted pink and green houses, some of concrete blocks to the quaint, wide, rambling summer homes of fifty years ago were shattered. Some were dumped into the ocean, some so completely destroyed that how and where they went may always remain a mystery."

Hurricane Hazel was the most damaging storm to strike since 1893. People came quickly to check on their houses and discovered entire blocks of homes missing and neighborhoods unrecognizable. Fourteen-year-old Bill Otis drove from Columbia and lied to National Guardsmen when he said, "I live here," to access the island.

Salters McClary checked on his family's beach house and their cook Marie Brown. He sent a telegram to his mother that stated, "Marie OK. House totally destroyed."

The Pawleys Pier lost more than 500 feet, and the black resort on the mainland, McKenzie Beach, lost its pavilion and 15 houses. The Lafayette Pavilion, built on Pawleys in 1935, miraculously survived, and according to Bill Doar in his book *The Magic of Pawleys Island*, word soon circulated that the Lord saved Pawleys Chapel and the devil spared the Lafayette."

Subsequent storms continued to rake the island as Connie struck on Aug. 11, 1955; Diane on Aug. 16, 1955; and Flossie, which brought 5.5 inches of rain, in September 1956. Helene struck in September 1958; Cindy in July 1959; Gracie in September 1959; Brenda in July 1960 and Donna in September 1960.

Eight named storms in the 1960s and 1970s caused minor damage and then in September 1979, Hurricane David, a category two storm, forced evacuations on the South Carolina coast. Tornadoes caused power outages, and 88 mph winds eroded the north tip of the island, shifting the inlet's ebb channel parallel to the north end.

In September 1984, Hurricane Diana prompted a voluntary evacuation but only caused erosion, as did Hurricane Bob in 1985. On Dec. 1, 1986, a northeast storm hit the Grand Strand, north of Pawleys Island, took more than 10 feet of sand from the beach and toppled oceanfront houses in what their owners called "the December flood." One month later, "the New Year's Day storm" struck and was reported on national television as "the syzygy." The rare alignment of the earth, sun and new moon resulted in nine-foot tides, and 12 hours of northeast winds, blowing at 30 mph with 50 mph gusts, which peaked at high tide. Taken by surprise, island residents and New Year's revelers were trapped when the ocean and the creek met and covered the island. Sixty cars were destroyed, dunes were leveled, 91,000 cubic yards of sand were lost, and damages of \$1.7 million were reported on Pawleys Island. While the losses were staggering, Hurricane Hugo, known as "the storm of the century," was two years away.

Hugo formed near Dakar in Senegal off the west coast of West Africa on Saturday, Sept. 9, 1989. The storm was closely tracked as it crossed the Atlantic. Meteorologists predicted that the hurricane might strengthen to a category three as it approached the southeastern United States. On Wednesday, Sept. 20, S.C. Gov. Carroll Campbell ordered a mandatory evacuation of the coast to be completed by noon on Thursday, Sept. 21. Georgetown County Civil Defense Director Eddie Carraway said, "People did evacuate. They moved when we said move."

Evacuation began Wednesday, and by Thursday noon, the island was cleared, and power was shut off. After dark, the storm unexpectedly strengthened to a category four, and county deputies canvassed the Waccamaw Neck, urging people to move to higher ground. "As people in Columbia, Spartanburg, Greenville and Charlotte huddled in front of TVs, little did they know Hugo had them in its sights too,"

wrote John M. Burbage in the *Post and Courier* of Charleston. Small towns like McClellanville, Kingstree, Manning, Orangeburg, Sumter and Moncks Corner were brutalized during the night.

Hugo was the biggest natural disaster South Carolina has ever known. Causing \$6 billion worth of damage, with \$2 billion of that amount uninsured, the hurricane destroyed 150,000 homes, left 60,000 people homeless and 850,000 customers with no electricity. It destroyed 40 percent of the state's timberlands. On Pawleys Island, nearly 100 houses were destroyed, and of the remaining 400, more than half were damaged. National Guardsmen were in place by sunrise. County deputies, the Coast Guard and game wardens patrolled the area and assessed the damage. Mayor Jack Bland, County Council member Glenn Cox and State Rep. Linwood Altman were key people in local recovery efforts. Gov. Campbell responded quickly, but frustration with federal officials led U.S. Senator Fritz Hollings to announce on national television in 1989, "FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) is just a bunch of bureaucratic jackasses."

Electricity was restored to 75 percent of Waccamaw Neck residents by Wednesday, Sept. 27, only five days after the storm. County officials reopened schools after three weeks, and the 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. curfew was lifted. Emergency workers remained in the area for six weeks. Panic set in when nor'easters were predicted to pummel Pawleys, unprotected without primary or secondary dunes. The South Carolina Coastal Council approved requests from officials in Horry, Georgetown and Charleston counties to allow the creation of manmade dunes. For two weeks, bulldozers operated day and night to re-nourish the beach and produce a line of defense. Looking out at the frenzied work from the empty spot where her beach house once stood, one woman said, "We shouldn't be building in God's sandbox." The \$1 million dune restoration project proved to be successful, but recovery from Hugo was lengthy in other ways. The editor of the *Coastal Observer* wrote, "A wave of shock surged through the community. Gone were homes, property, cherished belongings and an innocence nurtured by nature for thirty years. It may be impossible to put a value on the damage to our sensibilities."

During the decade of the 1990s, the island's residents built houses that were well fortified to meet new state and federal wind codes. To help control erosion, repairs were made to groins, and boulders were piled up on the north and south ends of the island. Sand scraping and dune building also were accomplished to protect more than property. While fighting the force of winds and waves, town leaders sought to preserve a lifestyle of observing sunrise over the ocean and sunset over the creek. Even the threats posed by Hurricanes Bertha, Fran, Bonnie and Floyd, whose flooding devastated areas adjacent to the Waccamaw River and coastal North Carolina, have not been enough to cause homeowners to abandon the barrier island enjoyed for two centuries by vacationers and residents. The manmade structures may have to be rebuilt, but nature's gifts remain to attract another generation.



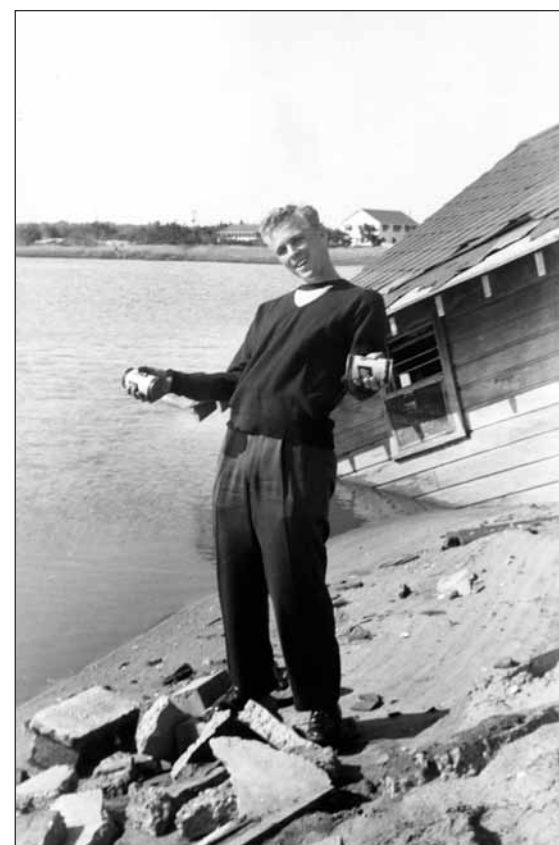
In 1954, Hurricane Hazel's tide was 11½ feet above mean sea level, and 10-foot-high waves pushed houses on the south end from the oceanfront and the Bird's Nest section to the middle of the salt marsh. Owners recovered their homes on the first full-moon high tide after Hazel by floating them out of the creek with cables and restoring them on their properties. These two are the *Hiller Viller* and the *Michau* house.



In a century defined by storms, Hurricane Hazel in 1954 was the mid-century mark. The two photos, taken as a whole, are a view looking east from the intersection of Doyle and Pritchard streets on the south end. Only 2 of 29 houses in this area were still standing after Hazel. On the left is the Ralph Ward house; on the right, out on the spit, is the Roost and to its right is the Heinemann house.



Hurricane Hazel picked up the Michau house on the south end and carried it to the landing on Pritchard Street. The house blocked boat access. Note the loblolly pines, on the right, planted by Joe Havel after he completed his house nearby in 1947.



Cobb Bell finds two perfectly good beers a day or so after Hazel at the Groverman House on the south spit. The houses in the background face Pritchard Street. The morning of the storm, water covered the causeway by 8:30 a.m. At 9:12 a.m., wind gusts of 180 mph in the storm's eye wall hit the coast.