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DAMAGE CONTROL AND THE
1921 TAMPA HURRICANE: BOOSTERS,
BUSINESSMEN, AND BAD PRESS

BY NICOLE COX

Mrs. Jessie C. Rohrer, the wife of Edward P. Rohrer, emerged from her home the morning after a hurricane hit Tampa on Tuesday, October 25, 1921. In her journal, she documented the damage generated by Tampa's worst hurricane in over seventy years, which she described excitedly and underlined for emphasis, "Some storm."¹ The Rohrers owned a sizable amount of land in Tampa and lived in a wooded area close to the water, which provided Mrs. Rohrer with plenty of acreage for her extensive garden and chicken-raising enterprise. Much of her journal, which she kept from 1916 to 1959, focuses on her interests as a gardener and a botanist. However, the brief entry for the 1921 hurricane, written in pencil and now faded on crumbling pages, reinforced the significance of a natural disaster rarely mentioned in Florida history books.

According to Mrs. Rohrer's journal, the tide rose through the woods and came within fifty feet of their house while eight feet of water covered her beloved garden.² Local history books echo this account with reports that the tide rose ten and one-half feet above mean low tide, five feet higher than any hurricane since 1848.³ Although weather reports and more recent accounts of the hurricane described the rising tide as the most destructive feature of this storm, the damage caused by the wind impressed Mrs. Rohrer, and she noted in her entry: "Wind 78 miles per hour in gusts. 68 miles per hour for 3 hours steady blow."⁴

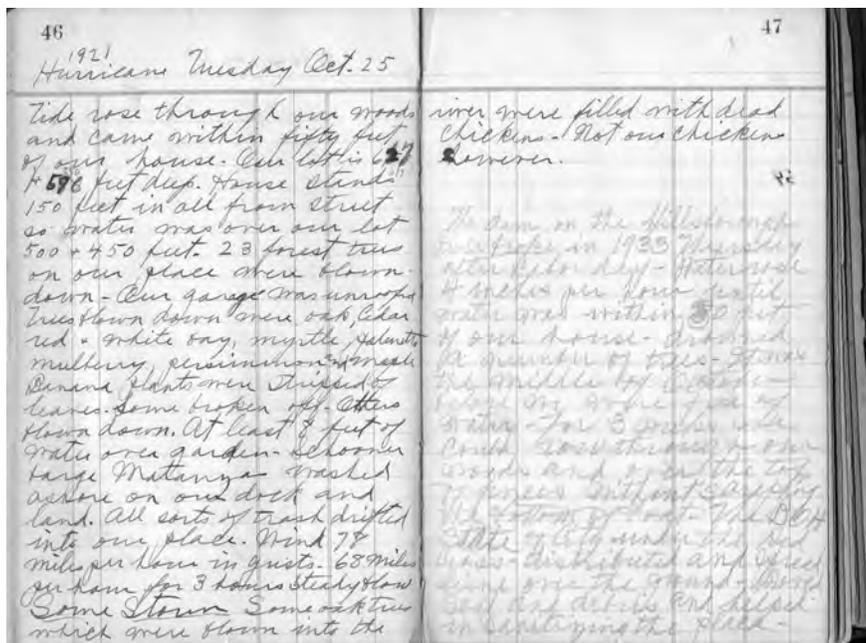
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¹ Journal of Jessie C. Rohrer, "1921 Hurricane, Tuesday, Oct. 25," Tampa Manuscript Collection, Special Collections, USF Library, Tampa.

² Ibid.

³ Karl H. Grismer, *Tampa: A History of Tampa and the Tampa Bay Region of Florida* (St. Petersburg: St. Petersburg Print Company, 1950), 248.

⁴ Journal of Jessie C. Rohrer.



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Page from Jessie Rohrer's diary, dated Tuesday, October 25, 1921. Rohrer vividly describes the storm, including the damage to her property and the extent of the storm surge.

The wind speed barely registered the storm as a category 1 hurricane on the modern Saffir/Simpson scale, which was first introduced to the public in 1975. The classification parameters before the introduction of this system identified hurricanes as "Great Hurricanes, Severe Hurricanes, or Minor, Minimal, Major or Extreme Hurricanes."⁵ However, even the wind from a minor hurricane can produce extensive damage, as evidenced by Mrs. Rohrer's description of the oak, cedar, bay, myrtle, mulberry, and persimmon trees blown down on her property as well as the loss of the garage roof. The hurricane tossed many of these trees into the river, which captured Mrs. Rohrer's attention because the trees "were filled with dead chickens." This entry ended rather abruptly with Mrs. Rohrer's clarification, "Not our chickens however."⁶

General histories of Florida overlook or only briefly mention the 1921 hurricane that affected Tampa and its environs. An obvious explanation for this omission is that

⁵ John M. Williams and Iver W. Duedall, *Florida Hurricanes and Tropical Storms: 1871-2001* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002), 4.

⁶ Journal of Jessie C. Rohrer.

the 1921 hurricane paled in comparison with the 1926 hurricane, which ravaged Miami and the surrounding areas. In this storm, Moore Haven endured the most severe loss of life when the Okeechobee dike collapsed, sending a tidal wave rolling through the town, killing over three hundred people.⁷ Two short years later, the even more infamous “killer cane” of 1928 brought wind gusts of 150 miles per hour and killed thousands.⁸ In spite of boosters’ attempts to downplay even the catastrophic 1926 and 1928 hurricanes, research suggests that more people died in hurricane disasters during this period than at any other time in Florida history.⁹

Scholarship surrounding the latter hurricanes often identifies the natural disasters as death knells for the Florida land boom and a precipitant of the much greater “bust” the United States would experience in the following years. During the 1920s land boom, Florida’s attributes were sold to thousands of people in magazines, newspapers, movies, and other popular outlets. Mass production and mass consumerism characterized the 1920s, making Florida and the land boom accessible to the flourishing middle class, not just to the upper stratum of American society. Some people were in search of paradise, while others were more interested in the prospect of becoming very rich, very quickly. “Florida fever” swept the nation.

During the early 1920s, real estate business in Florida began to increase at an unheard-of rate, reaching its peak in 1924 and 1925. Historians approximate that between 1923 and 1925, more than three hundred thousand people settled in Florida. During this period, nine of the thirteen new counties created were in the southern part of the state.¹⁰ The 1925 Florida State Census showed a growth rate that exceeded 35 percent in the preceding decade.¹¹ Despite all of the methods employed by boosters, the boom went bust in a matter of years, and the hurricanes did little to improve Florida’s image in the eyes of the nation. In *Mockingbird Song: Ecological Landscapes of the South*, Jack Temple Kirby assesses the effect of these storms and concludes, “The Great Florida Boom of the 1920s was practically silenced by awesome hurricanes in 1926 and 1928.”¹² Thus, it is not surprising that Florida history books immortalize these storms and mention them in the larger context of the state’s boom-and-bust period of the 1920s.

⁷ Charlton W. Tebeau, “Boom-Bust-Hurricane Twenties,” in *A History of Florida* (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1971), 387.

⁸ Robert Mykle, *Killer ‘cane: The Deadly Hurricane of 1928* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002), 170.

⁹ Ted Steinberg, *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 53.

¹⁰ Michael Gannon, *The New History of Florida* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 291.

¹¹ 1925 Florida State Census (Tallahassee: T. J. Appleyard, 1926), 15. Floridiana Collection, Special Collections, USF Library, Tampa.

¹² Jack Temple Kirby, *Mockingbird Song: Ecological Landscapes of the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 7.

However, research on the 1921 hurricane reveals the need to study this less severe and seldom discussed natural disaster in the context of the boom's takeoff. Boosters and citizens expressed determination not to let a hurricane interfere with the image and success of the "Year Round City," as advertisers christened Tampa during the 1920s.¹³ Advertisers' efforts added new meaning to the modern phrase "damage control" in both a literal and figurative sense. As the environmental historian Ted Steinberg explains in *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America*, "Natural disaster has a very shadowy history in Florida, rooted in years of denial for the sake of more hotels and suburban sprawl."¹⁴ By studying different accounts that sensationalize, downplay, and even deny the damage generated by the storm, while emphasizing the significance of the upcoming boom, this research provides a fresh outlook on the relationship between development and disaster. Reactions and responses to the 1921 hurricane paralleled Mike Davis's conclusion in *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster*: "Even the weather (or rather its normative representation) is subject to ideological construction."¹⁵

Before and after the storm, local leaders, businessmen, realtors, and eventually the press sought to cover up the damage caused by the hurricane and rushed to draw attention back to the "paradise" they marketed as Florida. This analysis of the 1921 Tampa hurricane suggests that local businessmen and the press succeeded in their efforts to gloss over the natural disaster that occurred in the early stages of Tampa's 1920s boom. Not only did the hurricane fail to deter the boom, but it actually facilitated the boom's success locally.

Striking Tampa on October 25, the 1921 storm occurred late in the official hurricane season that runs from June 1 through November 30. In *Florida's Hurricane History*, the historian Jay Barnes traces the path of the 1921 hurricane, explaining that August, September, and October are typically considered to be the peak months for Atlantic hurricanes, with September being "the most dangerous month for tropical cyclones in Florida."¹⁶ However, in spite of the statistical analyses performed on hurricanes and the improved tracking, Barnes notes: "Statistics can be misleading in any attempt to determine what to expect in the future. And few hurricane seasons seem average in Florida."¹⁷

The twentieth century ushered in a period of greater public awareness of the existence and approach of weather phenomena. Kirby explains, "Until the twentieth century, however, if nor'easters and hurricanes were recorded at all, they became 'historical' and 'public' only to sparse populations affected and random readers of

¹³ Van Beynum Horn, "City and Community Slogans," *Suniland* 1, no. 3 (December 1924): 41. Floridiana Collection, Special Collections, USF Library, Tampa.

¹⁴ Steinberg, *Acts of God*, 48.

¹⁵ Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998), 159-60.

¹⁶ Jay Barnes, *Florida's Hurricane History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 8.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 9.



Tampa Bay History Center Collection

Tampa's Bayshore Boulevard is completely covered with water in this image, taken as the 1921 Hurricane made landfall. A row of palm trees and power lines, which stood along the roadway, can be seen in the background.

weather records thereafter.”¹⁸ This greater public awareness resulted from population growth, new technology, and an expanding government. The U.S. Weather Bureau, which operated under the aegis of the Department of Agriculture, issued an official report in the hurricane's wake that provided insight into the efficacy of the 1920s warning system. According to the report, advisory messages indicating “formation and movement of hurricane had been received Friday and Saturday.”¹⁹ A brief mention in the Sunday, October 23, edition of the *Tampa Morning Tribune* explained that on October 22, the Bureau reported that a tropical storm of “considerable intensity” was moving northward, over the northwestern Caribbean.²⁰ As the storm strengthened and moved over the Caribbean, the Bureau took observations at 1:00 p.m. and 4:00 p.m. on October 23 and telegraphed advisories. On Monday, October 24, at 10:40 a.m., the Bureau issued northeast storm warnings that quickly changed to hurricane warnings by 12:34 p.m. the same day.

According to the report, as the Bureau received advisories and observational updates, it telegraphed these to “displaymen” and contacted persons on an emergency

¹⁸ Kirby, *Mockingbird Song*, 6.

¹⁹ Weather Bureau U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Hurricane Report Tampa October 25, 1921*, 1. Floridiana Collection, Special Collections, USF Library, Tampa.

²⁰ “Hurricane Rounding Swan Isle for North,” *Tampa Morning Tribune*, 23 October 1921.

list.²¹ The description of the warnings issued during the 1921 hurricane suggests that the national Weather Bureau efficiently dealt with the situation. However, an examination of the local response indicates a lack of concern regarding the storm's approach. In Barnes's description of hurricane preparedness in the 1920s and 1930s, he explains that advance notice, if it came, was usually short. Remote areas might have no idea of an impending storm.²²

The local response to these official warnings and advisories did not indicate the same level of preparedness or apprehension as the U.S. Weather Bureau report. Although the report claimed to widely publicize the advisories, an article in the *Tampa Morning Tribune* suggested local skepticism and a general lack of concern regarding the approaching storm.²³ The article, "Yucatan's Blow Is Headed into Gulf," reported the official weather bulletin from Washington but included a section titled "No Storms Here." W. J. Bennett, who served as head of the local government weather bureau, reported on the storm's current location, but he seemed to dismiss the potential threat. "It was about eleven years ago that Tampa experienced its closest acquaintance with a hurricane," he explained. "On Oct. 18, 1910, one passed so close that the barometer reached 28.94, and the wind was forty-eight miles per hour. No great damage was done locally." He neglected to mention that ten people perished during the 1910 storm.²⁴

Clearly, Bennett's report was designed to quell any rising fears about the hurricane. Meanwhile, the rain had begun to fall on October 23, "and continued with scarcely a break until 9:15 P.M. of the 25th," resulting in a total rainfall of 8.53 inches, 6.48 of which fell in a twenty-four-hour period between October 24 and 25.²⁵ Bennett later disputed the official total and claimed that the rainfall exceeded this amount, but wind during the hurricane blew rain out of the gauge.²⁶

The headline in the October 25, 1921, edition of the *Tribune* blared, "Barometer Falls as Hurricane Heads in to Florida's Coast." This article emphasized the storm's imminent approach, but both the writer and meteorologist Bennett remained hopeful that the storm would not affect Tampa. In fact, below the main headline, the writer included the note, "May Pass Tampa By as in All Past Instances." Nevertheless, Bennett urged, "Every precaution should be taken in expectation of winds with a velocity of forty miles an hour or more."²⁷ The *Tribune* did not resume the paper until October 27, 1921, as the hurricane hit on the afternoon of October 25, eliminating communication with the outside world and probably providing little

²¹ Weather Bureau U.S. Department of Agriculture, Hurricane Report, 1.

²² Barnes, *Florida's Hurricane History*, 33.

²³ Weather Bureau U.S. Department of Agriculture, Hurricane Report, 1.

²⁴ "Records Property Loss Are Smashed," *Tampa Morning Tribune*, 27 October 1921.

²⁵ Weather Bureau U.S. Department of Agriculture, Hurricane Report, 1.

²⁶ "Yucatan's Blow Headed into Gulf," *Tampa Morning Tribune*, 24 October 1921.

²⁷ "Barometer Falls As Hurricane Heads in to Florida's Coast," *Tampa Morning Tribune*, 25 October 1921.

opportunity for citizens to heed Bennett's warning in the morning paper. In the midst of the deluge, the *Tampa Daily Times* released a special "Storm Edition" using the publishing office of the *Plant City Courier*.²⁸

In his 1950 history of Tampa, Karl H. Grismer summarized the storm's path: "The hurricane developed in the Caribbean, swung around the western end of Cuba, proceeded northward to the latitude of Tampa Bay and then swung inland."²⁹ The official weather report determined that the eye of the hurricane passed over Tarpon Springs, located on the Gulf of Mexico northwest of Tampa.³⁰ This area also experienced the lowest barometric pressure during the storm and peak wind gusts of over 100 miles per hour.³¹ It should be noted, however, that the official weather report did not mention these extreme wind gusts.

When the October 27, 1921, issue of the *Tribune* appeared, the front page declared, "Loss through Storm Severe; May Total \$5 Million for South Florida; \$2 Million Loss in Tampa & Vicinity; Only Few Lives Lost." This damage assessment paralleled the official hurricane report that detailed Tampa's destruction. Estimates varied as local insurance agents tried to approximate the total loss. The *Tampa Daily Times* described the difficulty of this task due to the "absence of cyclone insurance policies here, the adjustment of which might have furnished appraisers with a working basis for estimating the loss."³² Only a handful of Tampans possessed insurance that had such a policy, which emphasized the lack of hurricane preparedness in 1921.³³ Local businesses were especially hard hit. Tampa Electric Company experienced significant damage, estimated at \$200,000, as a result of power plant flooding and falling wires. The Peninsular Telephone Company and the Oscar Daniels shipbuilding plant experienced moderate losses. Residential and commercial destruction totaled \$300,000. Downtown stores and waterfront residences fared the worst, especially in the suburbs of Palmetto Beach, Edgewater Park, and De Soto Park. In these areas, the damage was complete, with "some houses being totally destroyed, and practically all damaged."³⁴

The collapse of the Bayshore Boulevard seawall and the flooding of prosperous neighborhoods in the city generated much concern as water invaded Tampa's premier homes. An account of damage in Edgewater Park compiled a list of "sufferers" that identified the owners by name and gave the addresses accompanied by brief damage reports. For example, the *Tribune* identified Mrs. J. H. Tucker among the sufferers and noted, "house totally wrecked and floated three blocks away."³⁵ One of

²⁸ "City Held in Dismal Grip of Gale Twenty-Four Hours," *Tampa Daily Times*, 25 October 1921.

²⁹ Grismer, *Tampa*, 248.

³⁰ Weather Bureau U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Hurricane Report*, 1.

³¹ Williams and Duedall, *Florida Hurricanes and Tropical Storms*, 15.

³² "City Loss to Exceed \$1,000,000," *Tampa Daily Times*, 26 October 1921.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Weather Bureau U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Hurricane Report*, 3.

³⁵ "Citizens Busy Righting Things after Big Blow," *Tampa Morning Tribune*, 27 October 1921.



Tampa Bay History Center Collection

The damage brought on by the 1921 Hurricane is evident in this photograph of the sidewalk, seawall and roadbed along Bayshore Boulevard. Water flooded most of the homes on Hillsborough Bay from Ballast Point to De Soto Park.

the most compelling features in this damage report is the description in parentheses that followed the entry for the Ferrara family, whose home at the foot of Flagler Street, overhanging the water, was a “total loss.” *Tribune* writers deemed it necessary to clarify that the Ferrara family was Spanish, which provided insight into existing ethnic divisions in the city.³⁶ This qualification raised a question about whether or not neighbors in the “prosperous development of Edgewater Park” viewed the Ferraras as outsiders in their white enclave.

Loss of life totaled eight on the west coast of Florida, with five deaths occurring in the vicinity of Tampa. Two individuals drowned, and falling wires electrocuted three people, two of whom the *Tribune* described as “Negro children.” A falling tree knocked wires onto the porch of a black family in Hyde Park. According to Mrs. W. G. Squires of the Red Cross, who reported on the “affair,” “The children ran out to

³⁶ Ibid.

remove the wire. In so doing their death immediately followed.”³⁷ Compared with the sensational stories described below, the deaths of the two black children, who were not even named, garnered only a mention in the newspaper report.³⁸

The October 27 and 28 *Morning Tribune* editions provided a combination of sensational survival accounts and tragic stories that contrasted with the confident reports about recovery efforts. For example, the story about J. D. Wilder of Rocky Point and his “night of terror” depicted the tragic side of the disaster. The elderly Mr. Wilder clung to a palm tree all night with his eighty-five-year-old wife, only to lose his grip on her hand and witness her being washed out to sea.³⁹ The dramatic tone of this account varied greatly from the front-page story about repair efforts, whose author flippantly claimed, “Tampans awoke yesterday morning after a fitful night’s sleep to find the greatest hurricane that had visited this section since 1848 had blown itself out and it was time to take stock of the damage.”⁴⁰ Mr. and Mrs. Wilder definitely experienced more than an innocuous, fitful night’s sleep.

Another fantastic story recounted the “harrowing experience” of Mrs. C. W. Greene, the wife of a prominent Tampa businessman, who tried to assist her husband in securing their boat. While Mr. Greene struggled with the boat, Mrs. Greene sat in the couple’s ten-foot skiff, which suddenly came loose from its mooring, sweeping Mrs. Greene into the bay with only one oar. Using what the *Tribune* proclaimed as “a display of seamanship which has perhaps never before been equaled in Florida territory, she managed to guide her boat by shifting her weight from side to side, as necessary” and safely arrive onshore.⁴¹ Like the *Tribune’s* October 27, 1921, headline that noted, “Only Few Lives Lost,” the Weather Bureau’s report assessed that the loss of life “was remarkably small, due to warnings, and to fact that storm came in day time, when escape was possible from dangerous localities.”⁴²

In spite of the damage, the *Tribune* summarized the losses throughout South Florida and concluded on October 28, 1921, “Everyone is accepting the storm as an incident and all are going to work to rebuild the devastated areas, with the firm conviction that there will not be another storm of such severity during the life of anyone now living.”⁴³ Society events continued uninterrupted, and the *Tribune* publicized the details of these gatherings. By dismissing the storm as an isolated “incident” that would never occur more than once in a lifetime, the writers brushed aside the hurricane’s significance and the regularity with which these natural disasters plagued the state.

³⁷ “Two Negro Children Killed by Live Wire,” *Tampa Daily Times*, 27 October 1921.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ “Aged Man Clinging to Tree, Sees Wife Lost” *Tampa Morning Tribune* 27 October 1921.

⁴⁰ “Citizens Busy Righting Things after Big Blow,” *Tampa Morning Tribune*, 25 October 1921.

⁴¹ “In Rowboat for 11 Hours at Mercy of the Storm,” *Tampa Morning Tribune*, 27 October 1921.

⁴² Weather Bureau U.S. Department of Agriculture, Hurricane Report, 3.

⁴³ “Storm Damage General over Southwestern Part of State,” *Tampa Morning Tribune*, 28 October 1921.

A glowing report by meteorologist Bennett pronounced Tampa's response to the hurricane to be nothing short of perfect. He acknowledged the importance of the wide distribution of storm warnings in saving lives. A highlight on the front-page coverage featured Bennett's discussion of the storm's damage to his own home on Bayshore. Nevertheless, in a weatherman's version of boosterism, Bennett declared, "But I have confidence such a storm will never come this way again and I have started repairs like my neighbors, for we know Tampa still lives, and this storm will not check its growth."⁴⁴ Citizens like Bennett grew adamant that a hurricane would not detract from the burgeoning promise of the state's boom.

In Bennett's final evaluation of the city's response to the "great storm," he asserted, "The destruction of property could not be prevented by any human effort."⁴⁵ This explanation absolved humans of having any role in the damage and emphasized the idea that these sorts of disasters were unnatural, an example of the "act of God" approach that the historian Ted Steinberg rails against in his analysis of the 1935 hurricane that devastated the Florida Keys.⁴⁶

Along similar lines, the *Tampa Daily Times* writer Con O. Lee compared this "uncommon" side of nature to a "sweet little girl who has never said an unkind word suddenly going on the warpath and wrecking furniture and committing wholesale crime."⁴⁷ This idea supported the premise that nature was unpredictable and vengeful. Lee also suggested that nature, and more specifically a hurricane, had a female personality. This sort of rhetoric used to describe the 1921 storm added fodder to Florida's long history of gendering hurricanes, which the Weather Bureau made official in 1950. Steinberg notes, "Transforming what had once been known across America as 'Florida hurricanes' into female storms served to naturalize further the destructiveness of these calamities."⁴⁸

Steinberg also evaluates the "Do-It Yourself Deathscape" Florida created, and condemns the idea that humans do not play a role in these disasters. Steinberg poses the question, "Why is South Florida a disaster waiting to happen?" He attributes much of the problem to private developers building in areas vulnerable to natural disasters, including hurricanes and flooding. After examining the state's natural disaster history while looking toward the future, Steinberg concludes, "Private-property-driven economic development helped to sow the seeds of future destruction, while Florida's business community sought to deny the very real risks involved and, where possible, to blame nature or God when disaster did occur."⁴⁹ The relationship between the public's response to the 1921 hurricane and the land boom foreshadows Steinberg's

⁴⁴ "Weatherman Optimistic for Future," *Tampa Daily Times*, 27 October 1921.

⁴⁵ "Storm Damage General over Southwestern Part of State," *Tampa Morning Tribune*, 28 October 1921.

⁴⁶ Steinberg, *Acts of God*, 64.

⁴⁷ Con O. Lee, "Aftermaths of the Storm," *Tampa Daily Times*, 27 October 1921.

⁴⁸ Steinberg, *Acts of God*, 68.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.



Tampa Bay History Center Collection

Because of its position at the northern end of Hillsborough Bay, the neighborhood of De Soto Park, located just south of Ybor City, received the brunt of the storm surge created by the 1921 Hurricane.

portrayal of South Florida's natural disaster history.

An article about a weather event that occurred on the opposite side of the United States emphasized another maneuver designed to draw attention away from the recent storm in Florida and focus readers' attention elsewhere. The October 27 edition of the *Morning Tribune* informed readers that Florida was not the only state to experience natural disasters: "California Gets a Bit of Storm Too: Tornado Swings into Sacramento." The writer reported, "Scores of houses were unroofed, hundreds of windows were broken out and other damage, the full total of which cannot be estimated tonight." This account suggested extensive damage, possibly on a greater scale than damage reports of Tampa's hurricane.⁵⁰

The city's desire to divert attention from the recent storm to a different type of natural disaster far away diminished the hurricane's significance. This technique also raises the question of whether or not Florida writers seized on the tornado to shift negative attention to a rival tourist destination. Davis notes the frequency with which "natural disasters on several famous occasions have decisively influenced the Darwinian competition among American cities and regions" —notably the competition between South Florida and California in the wake of the 1926 and

⁵⁰ "California Gets a Bit of a Storm Too," *Tampa Morning Tribune*, 27 October 1921.

1928 hurricanes.⁵¹ The example from October 27, 1921, emphasizes the idea that this competition was gearing up as early as 1921.

By October 28, the tone of the articles in the *Tribune* changed, and writers, businessmen, and citizens pronounced earlier damage reports to be exaggerated. Headlines including such phrases as “Damage Estimates Diminish” and “Few Traces Are Left” covered the paper’s front page. Journalists declared that the storm was no more than a memory, and matter of factly explained, “Any person walking or driving through the downtown section of the city last evening would have been hard put to find a trace of storm damage.”⁵² Electric company crews and workers speedily removed all signs of storm debris in an effort to return the city to normal as quickly as possible and put the storm behind them. Boy Scout executive Roy Bachman issued an edict for all Tampa Boy Scouts “to put on their uniforms and start out at once to clear the streets of fallen limbs and also to help those who are in distress from the storm.”⁵³ Almost all the reports, including a special message from Tampa’s mayor, Charles H. Brown, urged citizens not to “feel discouraged but look bravely ahead to the future.”⁵⁴

However, not everyone benefitted from this citizen response. Tampa City Council reports from the October 31, 1921, meeting described the damage control the city needed to perform after the storm. The city’s response included debris clearing and assisting the people who had lost their homes in the storm. Unfortunately, the city’s annual budget had no appropriation to cover this type of emergency. Resolution 172A solved this problem with the transfer of \$12,000 for emergency cleanup funds that the council previously allotted for the Spanish Town Creek sewer project.⁵⁵

The rapidity of the citywide response brings up the question of why Tampa was so eager to underplay the effects of the hurricane and bury all evidence of the damage. By October 28, 1921, reports relating to the storm focused on recovery efforts. Businessmen who returned to Tampa from the Northeast and other parts of the country expressed concern about the “wild rumors” circulating across the nation that Tampa suffered mightily in the storm. Travelers professed relief that their business interests fared better than expected.⁵⁶ Concern about the city and the state’s image in the hurricane’s aftermath resulted in a barrage of booster reports about Tampa’s welfare.

Peter O. Knight, vice president of the Tampa Electric Company, categorized the storm as a “temporary setback” instead of a “disaster.” Knight professed dismay and regret that “some very exaggerated stories have gained space in the newspapers

⁵¹ Davis, *Ecology of Fear*, 53.

⁵² “Damage Estimates Diminish,” *Tampa Morning Tribune*, 28 October 1921.

⁵³ “Boy Scouts Are Called Out for Clean Up Duty,” *Tampa Daily Times*, 26 October 1921.

⁵⁴ “Mayor Commends Public for Conduct during Trying Storm,” *Tampa Daily Times*, 26 October 1921.

⁵⁵ Tampa City Council Minutes, 31 October 1921, 332. City of Tampa Archives.

⁵⁶ “Temporary Setback, Not Disaster, in the Storm,” *Tampa Morning Tribune*, 28 October 1921.

printed in other cities, stories having only the slightest basis in fact, or no basis at all, and in some cases being wild imaginings.” Knight blamed other cities for spreading these inaccuracies, which suggested eagerness on the part of overzealous reporters to malign Tampa and disparage the state. He acknowledged that these “yarns” would be harmful to business, but remained confident that the rest of the world would quickly come to its senses. Knight employed booster images of Florida as a disaster-free paradise and denied or glossed over the state’s natural disaster record:

One should recollect that this state is freer from disasters than any other in the country. Take the history of the past seventy-three years. There was the hurricane of 1848 and the big freeze of 1894. Seventy-three years of the state’s history and only two setbacks. We have no floods, we have had no great conflagrations, no epidemics of disease. We have a climate that cannot be duplicated in all the world; it can’t be bought, yet is ours without price.⁵⁷

Knight’s complaints about the hyperbolic press led to questions about the veracity of his claim. The press clearly and unsurprisingly sensationalized stories about the hurricane. However, the combination of sensationalism and understatement implied that the press suppressed the storm’s actual significance. Knight’s response proved to be a dress rehearsal for trivialization of the far more powerful and destructive 1926 hurricane. In 1926, he complained that the Red Cross should be wary of doing more harm than good in their efforts to raise money for the devastated coast.⁵⁸ Clearly, hurricanes threatened Florida’s image as a paradise.

Florida’s realtors echoed Knight’s concerns at the weekly luncheon of the Tampa Realtors’ Association. Members decried the inaccuracy of newspaper reports in Tampa and elsewhere. This group adopted a long list of resolutions, culminating in a demand that the local and Associated Press “be requested to use its columns in correcting the erroneous impressions that have gone broadcast to the great detriment of the city and south Florida.”⁵⁹

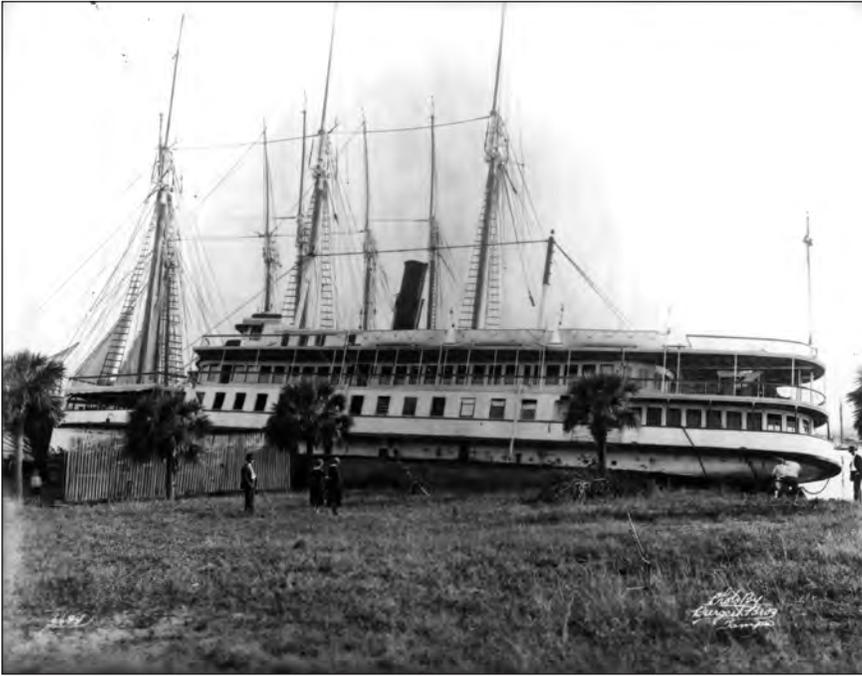
These sources, studied in conjunction with the exaggerated reports in the newspapers, highlight a conflict between the press and other groups that seized this event as an opportunity to profit from the disaster, and the business class in Tampa, which was determined to downplay the effects of the storm for fear that business would suffer. In *Acts of God*, Steinberg analyzes a similar dispute in the aftermath of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. As he explains, “The battle to interpret the San Francisco disaster began even before the smoke had cleared.”⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Ibid. Florida cities including Pensacola, Key West, and Tampa experienced severe yellow fever outbreaks throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (see Eirlys Barker, “Seasons of Pestilence: Tampa and Yellow Fever, 1824-1905” [master’s thesis, University of South Florida, 1984]).

⁵⁸ Steinberg, *Acts of God*, 53.

⁵⁹ “Realtors State Reports Overdrawn,” *Tampa Morning Tribune*, 29 October 1921.

⁶⁰ Steinberg, *Acts of God*, 26.



Tampa Bay History Center Collection

The steamer *Favorite* was torn from its moorings on the east side of the Hillsborough River and carried onshore near Plant Park, on the west side of the river, by the storm. The boat returned to service within a few weeks of the storm's passing.

The *Tampa Morning Tribune* reprinted some of the most compelling statements regarding the hurricane in booster editorials from newspapers around the state and the nation. For example, in "Sunshine Is Breaking through Storm Clouds," the *Jacksonville Metropolis* declared, "It can be truthfully stated Florida is less exposed to storms and cyclones than the majority of states in the Union." The author compared Florida with the Midwest and the Far West, where residents expected tornadoes and earthquakes to occur. Moreover, in the writer's opinion, "These violent experiences come under the heading of 'Acts of Providence' and the only way to take them is philosophically, because they are beyond the control of man." Nevertheless, Floridians did not need to worry about their future, even after the storm, because their land was one of "enviable prosperity, illimitable resources and an admirable citizenry."⁶¹

Similarly, the *Louisville Courier Journal* published a piece that distinguished between a gale and a hurricane. According to the writer, the recent storm was nothing

⁶¹ "Sunshine Is Breaking through Storm Clouds," *Tampa Morning Tribune*, 30 October 1921.

more than a gale, which is a “wind between the speed of a stiff breeze and the speed of a hurricane. It is a steady dependable sort of storm. The native knows what to expect of it.” Furthermore, Tampans had restored everything in the city. Then, the writer lapsed into purple prose to describe the aftermath in Tampa: “The sun shines. The sky is again glorious. The mockingbird greets the dawn from the top of the magnolia.” In case readers did not grasp the “gale’s” insignificance, the *Louisville Courier Journal* provided a meteorological comparison between these minor storms and the dreaded cyclone in the Midwest, the foreign typhoon, and the likelihood of contracting pneumonia in the cold North.⁶²

Thus, these articles about dreadful natural disasters in other parts of the United States and the world diverted attention from Florida and minimized the regularity and significance of hurricanes in the state. Although the editorial in the *Louisville Courier Journal* did not dismiss the possibility of a storm affecting Florida in the future, the writer confidently concluded, “The worst storm since 1897 and such other storms as Florida may experience in the future, will not affect the flow of settlers or tourists to that singularly blessed state.”⁶³ By this point, the press refused to describe the incident as a hurricane and instead preferred to use watered-down terms such as “gale.”

Boosters and businessmen recast publicity about the storm in a positive light as they described reconstruction and damage control as heralds of boom days to come. At the end of Knight’s 1921 article, he described Tampa as “prosperity untouched” and urged readers, “Look ahead and see what is coming!”⁶⁴ The Florida frenzy known as the land boom had begun, and no hurricane could stop it, or rather Tampa would not allow a hurricane to halt the boom’s promise. In fact, evidence suggests that the hurricane contributed to boom-time prosperity. At least some individuals wanted citizens to believe that even a natural disaster could bring good fortune. In the midst of the chaos generated by the storm, the *Tampa Daily Times* reported that the increased building in Tampa served as a sign of boom days to come. Lumber, roofing, and construction companies profited in the storm’s aftermath as citizens struggled to rebuild as quickly as possible. Some of these articles alluded to profiteering during the rebuilding as carpenters accused lumber companies of unfairly raising prices and merchants increased the cost of survival necessities such as candles and lamps.⁶⁵ While Tampans eagerly looked ahead to pie in the Florida sky, the storm dissipated from the citizens’ collective consciousness. Steinberg refers to the machinations to describe, deny, disassociate, and forget natural disasters, regardless of scale, as the “politics of forgetfulness.” This phenomenon would not benefit Florida or the United States in the future. In 1926, 1928, and 1935, the state faced a series of frightful

⁶² “A Florida Gale,” *Tampa Morning Tribune*, 30 October 1921.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ “Building Is Showing Sign of Boom Days” *Tampa Daily Times*, 27 October 1921.

hurricanes that were made more tragic by the efforts to diminish and forget earlier natural disasters.⁶⁶

In a special editorial that appeared just days after the 1921 hurricane hit, the *Tribune* posed the question, “Can Tampa Ever Be Second Los Angeles?” Woodward F. Barnwell, a booster and businessman, outlined a plan for Tampa’s progress that would elevate the city’s status above that of Los Angeles. Barnwell touted the endless possibilities that Tampa offered: “Our geographical location, fertile soil, mining possibilities, perfect climate and other natural advantages cry out to every man, woman and child in West Florida for development.”⁶⁷ Barnwell neglected to mention the recent hurricane or the likelihood of another storm affecting the state because the disaster did not fit the image of progress, even though parallels existed between natural disasters and the public responses in Los Angeles and Tampa. The writer emphasized what he believed to be the necessary role of humans in reshaping the environment to create cities that would suit their own needs: “Cities like children must be trained intelligently; proper growth, physical, mental and moral cannot be gained in a haphazard manner. There must be a force with knowledge and experience leading, teaching, educating and forever striving for a definite end.”⁶⁸

In Tampa after the 1921 hurricane, boosters, businessmen, city officials, and the press united in their reaction to the natural disaster, and they remained fixated on progress, profit, and prosperity—definite ends. Tampans would not allow a hurricane to interfere with the land boom’s promise—at least not a category 1 hurricane. In fact, they used the rebuilding process to boost development. However, the 1926, 1928, and 1935 hurricanes that later desolated regions of Florida proved more formidable opponents in man’s contest to control both nature and popular perceptions of its meaning.

Both historians and contemporary observers have advanced a variety of explanations for the outcomes of these storms. Analyses of the 1926 hurricane determined that lax building codes and an absence of construction inspections proved disastrous.⁶⁹ It seemed unlikely that building codes would have been better five years earlier. Nevertheless, Tampa’s small area, which totaled 8.6 square miles, and the limited amount of development, provided other explanations for the storm’s reported lack of damage.⁷⁰ The historian Raymond Arsenault emphasizes the role of “demography and nature,” not scientific or technological advancement, in challenging the traditional natural disaster discourse. He concluded, “Beginning in 1926, a series of powerful hurricanes disrupted the Great Florida Boom, causing extensive damage

⁶⁶ Steinberg, *Acts of God*, 201.

⁶⁷ “Can Tampa Ever Be Second Los Angeles,” *Tampa Morning Tribune*, 30 October 1921.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Tebeau, *A History of Florida*, 387.

⁷⁰ R.L. Polk and Company’s *Tampa City Directory* (Tampa: R.L. Polk, 1921), 64. *Floridiana* Collection, Special Collections, USF Library, Tampa.



Tampa Bay History Center Collection

Tampa's streetcar system sustained heavy damage during the hurricane. This view, taken near Ballast Point, shows a streetcar that was caught in the storm, becoming stranded after losing both power above and tracks below.

and loss of life in an area that had been all but uninhabited a generation earlier.”⁷¹

While Floridians in the twenty-first century might feel more secure with construction regulations and hurricane tracking, the concept of disaster inflation raises an interesting question. How would Tampa fare in 2008 if a hurricane of similar strength to the 1921 storm hit the now much larger metropolis and its areas of urban sprawl? Dick Fletcher, the former meteorologist for WSTP St. Petersburg, predicted “property damage would be about \$25 billion to \$50 billion higher.”⁷² As Mike Davis explains in his study of Los Angeles: “Vulnerability to disaster has

⁷¹ Raymond Arsenault, “The Public Storm: Hurricanes and the State in Twentieth-Century America,” in *Paradise Lost?: The Environmental History of Florida*, ed. Jack E. Davis and Arsenault (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005), 210.

⁷² Scott Taylor Hartzell, “The 1921 Hurricane: Death Comes Calling,” in *Voices of America St. Petersburg: An Oral History* (Charleston, S.C., Arcadia, 2002), 51.

an inflationary dimension. Uncontrolled horizontal growth of the megalopolis relentlessly undermines existing infrastructures.”⁷³ Floridians have been fortunate during the recent hurricane season. However, on the eighty-seventh anniversary of the 1921 storm, we must question the degree to which economic motivations dictate a natural disaster’s damage and influence our efforts to control modern Florida’s image.

⁷³ Davis, *Ecology of Fear*, 53.