

Following is a transcript of a personal letter re. the 1944 hurricane on Ocracoke Island. It was written by the wife of one of the men who was stationed at the Ocracoke Navy Base.

It was transcribed August, 2017, by Philip Howard. Paragraphs, photos, and annotations have been added for easier reading, interest & clarity.

~~Thursday~~

Friday [September 15, 1944]Dearest Benny,I don't know if you heard the radio reports but Ocracoke was visited by a hurricane yesterday. I don't think we got the center of it for the winds there were supposed to be going at 100 miles an hour and here they were only a little more than 80 [later analysis placed the highest wind velocity between 90-105 mph] but that's enough for me. I'll tell you about it from time to time between cleaning because you might be interested. I won't tell mother or anyone the full story because they'll be worried. You know that I can take it and even though things are pretty messed up I'm not discouraged. I'm just thankful I'm alive.The mailboat is up on the beach [this was the narrow beach around Silver Lake] in front of our house, rammed next to another boat, & the P.O. [this was the old store/post office where Captain's Landing is now located] is almost demolished so I don't believe you'll receive this for some time. You can tell the rest of the family anything you wish.

Mailboat Aleta and another Boat on the Shore of Silver Lake:



(Photo courtesy Ocracoke Preservation Society, Mike Riddick Collection)

The rain & strong winds started 4 A.M. yesterday. Martha was here with us because Dan had to be at the Base [the WWII Navy Base where the NPS Visitors Center is today] to send & receive communications in regard to the storm. We stayed up from 4 on to listen to radio reports & prepare for the trouble. The reports said that Beaufort would receive the full impact of the hurricane & we are about 40 miles opposite there. The hurricane had a radius of 100 miles, the winds were traveling around at that speed & the storm itself was moving at 18 miles an hour.

About 6:30 the electricity went off so that's all we heard. The winds had torn the wires down. The tide started increasing rapidly at 6:30. We could see Silver Lake swell, run over and by 8 o'clock it was rushing all around the house and coming in under the doors. During that time we were busy picking up things from the floor & putting them on beds & tables & covering everything with the little newspaper that was dry. By that time every ceiling was leaking like a sieve. We had had coffee & do-nuts about 5. When Bill realized that the tide was not going to recede for a while he went outside & dug a ditch all around the house to

take up some of the water but it was moving too quickly to make a ditch do any good. (We taped the cracked windows so they wouldn't break.)

While Bill was outside he noticed that Murray Tolson's boat (Murray Tolson's house is still standing, behind the Island Ragpicker), the one which was beached by the lake in front of our house was floating & the wind was carrying it in the direction of our house. He shouted for us to get to the back of the house. I looked out front first & saw that it was headed straight for the front porch as fast as if it had had a motor. Then I really got scared. I hadn't been too worried till then. Bill came to the back door & told us to get out in a hurry. We had been dressed & had raincoats on from the time we got up. We didn't think we'd have to leave the house but something told us to be ready. A flood of water came in as we opened the door & it was all we could do to get it shut again. The wind was so strong we could hardly stand up. It must have been 60 by then. We hung on to each other as hard as we could. The water was above my waist but then I'm short.

We went to Carlton Kelly's house [this is the large house with a cupola; the back of the house is visible from Howard Street]. The water wasn't up to his doors yet & we thought we could manage a while there anyhow. Even from his upstairs windows we couldn't see if the boat had hit the house and we couldn't see the boat anywhere either. Blue eyes [a cat] was in the upstairs room & Funny Face [another cat] was on the bed in your room & Sleeper [a third cat] was sleeping on two catalogues on a chair in the same room. After we had been at Carlton's for a little while a rowboat holding about 5 families came over. Some of them had dry clothes. Martha put on some man's shorts & I put on a woman's skirt. Our sweaters weren't too wet so we wore those. Bill got pants & a sweat shirt from somewhere. He doesn't even know whose they are. Everyone was barefooted. About 11:30 Carlton offered us all some apples. We ate those & everyone smoked furiously. Nothing was said. There was nothing to say. We just tried to be patience [sic]. This sounds melodramatic but I'm just trying to tell you all about it.

Boat Driven into a House around Silver Lake:



(Photo courtesy Ocracoke Preservation Society, Mike Riddick Collection)

The water reached Carlton's first floor. During all this time the wind was increasing & even Carlton's house (which has stood for 50 years) was trembling. We kept going upstairs to see how the house looked & how the rest of the island was faring. Finally we saw M. Tolson's boat. It was between our house & the Coffee Shop [the Island Inn]. We decided that it hadn't hit our house or it would have been stuck there. The wind changed & turned its direction. We could see that a living room window was broken & the shredded curtain was flying out. The top of the cistern & the pump were gone. The tool shed (in which Mr. Tolson kept things) behind our out house was tipped on its side. We would see boats which had drifted up on land everywhere. One was beside our cistern. A huge black one (4 times the size of [our small boat was in] front of the house next to us & looked as if it had crashed into it. (I am using the only dry paper around.) The pier (with the outhouse on it) was in pieces all around our house & Mr. Kelly's. The pier & the fish house on it (where you caught the pin fish) was completely down. Part of that is in front of our tree (the dead one by the outhouse).

Large Black Boat on Shore (Carlton Kelly House in Background):



(Photo courtesy Ocracoke Preservation Society, Mike Riddick Collection)

About 11:30 A.M. the water started receding & not long after that the winds decreased somewhat. The wind was quite strong all day & all night though. About 12 noon Bill came to the house to see the damage & go to the base. Martha & I came over about one. Two living room windows were broken & of course the curtains and blinds are no more. The screen of the front door is ripped off. The front door had ripped off & was laying [sic] against the piano. It's a good thing [unreadable] that room & there's no telling what might have happened. All the furniture was knocked over & up against the piano. The rug was crumpled in a heap. The backs of the sofa & chairs are ripped almost off & everything is soaked. There is no water line in that room; the water must have rushed through pretty rapidly. The other rooms have a water line which is about half way up my thigh. Both mattresses downstairs are wet & the things in the two bottom drawers are wet but the drawers are so swollen now I can't open them. The bottoms of our long clothes are wet.

There was mud, sea weed & other debris everywhere. Rob came about 3 P.M. & told me the thing to do was take buckets of water (& there's plenty outside) and throw it all over the

floor & sweep it out as quickly as I could to keep the mud from drying. Rob worked on the dining room & kitchen while I did the bedroom & hall. Bill & a boy from the base took out the things from the living room & washed its floor. Martha had gone to the hotel to see what damage she had. A kitchen window had broken. All the dining room chairs had toppled & floated. Nothing was left on the back porch but empty coke cases. We have found potatoes, cokes & 7 up in the water around the house tho.

#### Skiffs Thrown up in Yards:



(Photo courtesy Ocracoke Preservation Society, Mike Riddick Collection)

The water got into the refrigerator, came above the wicks on the stove, ruined everything but canned goods stored under the sink. Pots & pans are rusty but not beyond repair. Yesterday I had to do the floor again with sea water. A lot of mud, etc. was left because Rob & I had to work so quickly. Luckily, after the storm the sun came out & we have had dry weather. Two floors (bathroom & your room) haven't been touched once. That will be a mess. The black boat in front of the house next to us was stopped by the U.S. Mail station wagon so it didn't crash into the house but it ran right over the house at the end of the pier

(which had the outhouse) & there's absolutely nothing left of it. The [unreadable] who live there were on the mainland. Some of her clothes are in my yard. The stove from the house is crumpled so that you can hardly recognize it. Those poor kids will never find all their belongings. The wreckage from their house flew into the house next to us & broke open several rooms.

There are quite a few boards off the front of our house. A post from the side porch is down. Willis' store [the present location of the Working Watermen's Exhibit] is ruined but still up. The dock is gone though. The Base is almost wiped out. Many buildings floated away & the administration buildings would have if they hadn't [unreadable] things [unreadable] so good now.

We have pin fish, minnows & other sea things swimming around & where the water has gone down they are dead. The kittens are all right but their eyes were as big as saucers when we got back. They were quite uncomfortable for a while because they could find no place to go to the bathroom. They weren't the only ones. We couldn't either. We resorted to the pot. You can imagine the kind of condition the john is in. Bill threw lime all over everything out there. The washing machine looks wrecked. All the windows out there are gone. I had a box containing Gulfspray, Clorox & other heavy things on the floor of the "laundry [unreadable] [page missing].

Damage to Electric Poles around Silver Lake:



(Photo courtesy Ocracoke Preservation Society, Mike Riddick Collection)

[unreadable] base blew down and the same change of wind which saved our house from Tolson's boat saved hundreds down the base because the water tower just missed the Administration Bldg. by inches & as the wind had been blowing - would have fallen right on it. The men down the base & many of their families were in it.

Got to get some cleaning done; will continue tomorrow. One more thing though. Some fishermen came down from Hatteras yesterday & said we're lucky. There's very little left up there! They must have had the center of the storm. Many towns are completely gone. There is very little left standing. This may be bad at Ocracoke but it could [unreadable] worst. I'm really not discouraged. I'm having a little contest with myself to see how quickly I can get this place livable & pretty again. I was even able to cook a nice meal for us last night.

Monday

Things are a little discouraging now. Saturday night we took in the living room rug for it



was dry & we figured that on Sunday most of the other furniture & a lot of our clothes would be dry but on Saturday night we were awakened by a very hard rain. It has been raining ever since.

The Navy has been taking care of the mail so I'll send this letter off soon. Bill wrote to mother & Heavens knows what he told her. He sent it off so there's nothing I can do about it. If you hear from her & she [unreadable] could a cheerful letter from me. I really think Bill is more disturbed by all this than I am. Things really aren't too good down the base. There are about 25 cases of dysentery. They are boiling salt water to drink. Both our tanks are full & have no salt in them so we are lucky. We have a pan of ice in the refrigerator that was made before the storm. Of course the ice plant can't make anymore but when this is gone we'll just eat canned meat.

The [unreadable] didn't fare as badly as we did. The water didn't come up as high there . They say that the walls on Martha's side had to be roped together to keep them from falling down. That sounds impossible to do during gales like we had. Many of the shingles blew off. A few did here too. With the aid of Navy [unreadable] being put into water again.

All the floors are clean now. Gosh I'm glad that job is over. Since it's raining there's no need to wash anymore clothes. Today's job will be washing walls & windows. Poor Bill has to wear un-ironed clothes to the Base but he says everyone else is too. Some of the ivy was killed but I've saved most of it. I was concerned about that because you had taken such good care of it.

The papers don't mention Ocracoke. I suppose no one knows it exists. The Carolina coast didn't get much of the storm. The paper stated that "it went out to sea" and that was Ocracoke. The latest reports on Hatteras say that the damage there wasn't as great as Ocracoke. The first reports were from aerial observation & [unreadable] making it look bad but their water & electricity wasn't ruined. The winds were stronger here too. I gather from all I hear we got the most of it. The strongest gales were out at sea I suppose. We certainly couldn't have had 100 mile winds or there would be nothing left of us. The thing that records the winds or the communication which told them of the speed of the winds stopped functioning after 80 down at the Base so we don't know what it was. I don't really care. It's over now. All I want to do is get this mess cleared up. You should see the fish around here, sheep head, trigger fish & lots of others I don't recognize.

Rob's boat drifted away & he hasn't found it yet. Mr. Willis is going to hold an auction on his store. I guess it's too [unreadable] bother with.

I'll tell you some good news now. Around Labor Day we had beautiful weather & I went swimming every day for a full week. It was wonderful, you know that. Gee I had a good time. Quite a few times we managed to catch a ride.

I've come to the end of this book-length letter. Please tell the rest of the folks I won't have much time to write letters. Tell them we are okay. When the sun comes out & things get dry I will be in order in no time.

Lots of love to you all,

Dot & Bill  
and Funny Face, Blue Eyes & Sleeper

P.S. Lots of poor little kittens drowned. I'm so glad mine are okay. Sleeper just found a sand crab here in our kitchen. I wonder what else [unreadable].