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DONNA WAS THE WORST STORM WE EVER HAD

We who were here on Saturday, Sept. 10, 1960, always thought Hurricane Donna was the worst storm ever. Just how bad was it?

In its 5,000 mile sweep from the Leeward Islands through the length of Florida and north to the Gulf of St. Lawrence she did one billion dollars damage and killed 143 people in the U.S., fortunately none in this county but four in Lee County to the north and 10 more in Florida.

"The most destructive storm ever to hit the United States" said the county Civil Defense report, concluding she had a peak energy equal to a hydrogen bomb fired every eight minutes.

To Naples she brought 13 inches of rain, tides nine to 12 feet deep that swept three miles inland, and winds up to 180 miles an hour. Other areas reported 192 mph winds.

After careful preparation and hard work by dozens of public workers and volunteers there were no deaths and few injuries in Collier County but my conservative estimate from underwriters' claims and city and county building permits was a total \$25 million loss "of record" but much was never listed.

That loss was equal to one sixth of the county's 1960 total \$152,623,277 taxable value, which compares with today's \$12,799,152,534 total tax roll, according to Property Appraiser Sam Colding.

Donna didn't sneak in. Her progress was checked so well that the Civil Defense Council was activated Sept. 8. United to operate the county were the county commission, mayors of both cities, the school superintendent, and the sheriff and police

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chief. They ran the county for 10 days, with after-storm help from the National Guard and Broward and Dade County sheriff and fire groups.

Continuing broadcasts from Radio Station WNOG, until it was destroyed, gave confidence to local people as Sheriff E.A. Doug Hendry, Commissioner Dick Goodlette, radio man Bill Ryan and Walter Donovan, CD director, told of the storm progress, shelter plans and evacuation orders.

Evacuation wasn't a perfect job. A city policeman couldn't get a lady to leave Gordon Drive. "What can I do?" he queried by radio.

"Just ask for her next of kin," he was told, and it worked.

The Friday night gusty winds brought a CD meeting at Naples city hall where one official proposed sending school buses 37 miles across the open, wind-whipped Tamiami Trail to evacuate Everglades.

"You go over in that corner and sit down and hush," Sheriff Hendry politely ordered and the official obeyed.

By Saturday morning the steady 60 mile northeast winds were making problems. The 200 black residents of McDonald's Quarters had been evacuated from their homes or the Carver School shelter to the ACL depot at 4:30 a.m. and fled from there at 9 a.m. when the roof started lifting. They made it to safety in a nondescript straggling parade of police and private cars to the bowling alley five miles north in Pine Ridge.

One of those lucky people, Mrs. Verdleen Williams, recalls after they got inside the alley she looked out and saw the car

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of her father, James Williams, "spinning like a top" in the parking lot until it fetched up against a tree and stopped.

Their refuge^{was} almost a disaster area when the wind turned southwest and workers had to reenforce the weak west wall, led by Norbert O. Siegfried, a Port Royal resident.

Radio station WSUN was then reporting 129 mile winds at Sanibel and Captiva but it didn't seem that strong in Naples.

The combination of a low tide at 8:59 a.m. and the wind blowing into the gulf pushed the water out to empty Naples Bay and bare the bottom offshore at distances estimated up to six miles. Then came the eye of the storm and blissful silence at 11:45 a.m. that lasted until 1 p.m.

The barometer had dropped to 28.18 inches as the wind swung southwest and pushed the water back with a rush that filled downtown Naples in a solid sheet from the gulf to the bay, pouring through beachfront homes and even a few inches into Fifth Avenue stores.

It was incredibly worse at Everglades where no eye came in 13 hours of storm winds, clocked at 140 miles an hour when the gauge blew away, and an 11 foot tide flooded every home and store. Blacks occupied the courthouse "first floor" nine feet above ground and whites were on the floor above.

"As the water rose, we integrated," joked one survivor, but that was about the only laugh in the area for Everglades was a soggy mass of grey river bottom mud that would take weeks to clean. Smashed trailers and truckloads of debris were hauled out and dumped at the Trail crossing at Carnestown. Luckily

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there were no fires for the city fire truck was buried under the collapsed timbers of the big garage.

People sheltering in the beachfront Naples home of Dr. Daniel Langley at 20th Avenue and First Street, South, now Gulfshore Boulevard, wondered where the gulf went before the eye. "After the eye, we knew, it was in our living room" one said.

In Port Royal a 65 foot grouper boat was safely grounded on one of the many vacant lots. At the beach the 1,000 foot pier had only a few staggered piling left and mullet draped the city hall shrubbery and were caught in the Cambier Park baseball backstop where the war memorial now stands.

All over the county houses with roofs stripped to bare boards were a common sight, their asphalt strip roofing often seen to have lifted and flown away in one piece like a big bird.

The school system, just completing a massive expansion, was rudely shoved back into old buildings and double sessions. The new Shadowlawn Elementary in East Naples lost eight classrooms when the roofs folded back and left them open to the sky.

Naples High, just moved into its new home Sept. 8, went back temporarily to Gulf View Middle School.

Damage was heavy all over Naples, beginning at Gordon's Pass where tides swept away the fishing camp and trailer park, a settlement dating to 1874.

Countywide there were 1,722 homes damaged with 50 badly damaged but fixable and 50 more that couldn't be repaired. In the city 10 of the 22 worst damaged places couldn't be fixed, including the charming Welkin-by-the-Sea home of J. Wells Kincaid

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at 32nd Avenue, South, on the curve in Gordon Drive.

The most complete loss was up north where my personal check showed severe damage to every one of ^{the} 43 structures between Vanderbilt Beach and Naples Park including 38 homes, two motels and two marinas. A real estate office at the beach disappeared along with the west 50 feet of the Vanderbilt Beach Road.

The furniture of the Vanderbilt Beach Motel ended up in a vacant lot in Naples Park a mile away.

Sparsely peopled Bonita Beach was even worse off. The month-old home of Marian Buchanan of Naples was gone, as were several others, and 26 new trailers at the Mobile Homes Village washed across the bay and smashed into the mangroves. Another beach frame house floated two miles inland and dropped on a road.

There were three storm deaths at Bonita, where gulf waves flooded one and a half miles inland. A.A. "Lindy" Lindeau, 75, chose to stay in the trailer behind his restaurant and George Brainerd, 54, went back to check his general store during the storm's eye. Their buildings were destroyed and their bodies were found two days later close together a mile from shore. Just after the storm on Saturday C.J. Doell, 70, died of a heart attack. A truck driver also died at Fort Myers as his semi was swept off the Edison Bridge.

While 80 per cent of Naples main Fifth Avenue business area was damaged, there were exceptions. Former Mayor W. Roy Smith's real estate office at Eighth Street lost no windows even though they had been left unboarded, and the Church of God on 10th Street, North, lost only one pane out of its new stained glass

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window.

All over town coconuts and other trees were down but many were saved, propped up by city crews. The pier would be rebuilt with \$104,000 from Dellora and Lester Norris, a small part of the \$29 million they gave our area over the years, which included the Norris Center in Cambier Park and DelNor Park's land.

The Red Cross sheltered 1,350 people in Immokalee and 200 at Everglades and provided \$105,198 in help for 618 needy families in a county whose population then was 15,753 with 4,655 in Naples. Today's population, according to the 1989 figures of the Chamber of Commerce, is 20,625 in Naples and 144,721 in the county.

It was a sidelight that made national news wires when Gov, LeRoy Collins flew in to survey the damage and joined City, later Circuit, Judge Harold S. Smith, to free Willie Boyd and Bobby Otis McNeal from their jail terms for being drunk and disorderly. The two black men had swum through chest deep water to save six women and children who were trapped on the city fire truck when it drowned out while evacuating city hall at the height of the storm.

It was 30 years later that James Lorenzo Walker, former county commissioner and later state representative, recalled a graphic Donna memory.

"I looked out of my North Trail office window and saw a refrigerator tumbling across the road, four feet off the ground," he said. "I don't know where it went."