



The Galveston Life-Saving Station, September 1900: The Anatomy of a Super-Hurricane and the Perils of Working for the United States Life-Saving Service

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In September of 1900, with little forewarning, a hurricane of tremendous force struck the Gulf Coast. The storm made landfall at Galveston, Texas, in the early evening of Saturday, September 8th. The death toll for the Galveston Hurricane was far worse than any domestic man-made, environmental or weather-related event in American history. Estimates for those killed in Galveston by the 1900 Hurricane range from 6,000 to 8,000 and, it is believed, that the storm killed another 4,000 in the rest of the Gulf Coast region. This number equals more than the combined casualty figures for the 1941 Pearl Harbor attack, Hurricane Katrina, the terrorist attacks on 9/11 in addition to Hurricane Ike, which struck Galveston in 2008. Rescue efforts associated with the 1900 Galveston Hurricane resulted in at least six Gold Lifesaving Medals and a similar number of Silver Lifesaving Medals.

What follows are the Galveston Life-Saving Station's daily journal entries for the day of the storm and the two weeks that followed. Despite the destruction of all records and documents housed at the station, U.S. Life-Saving Service Station Keeper Edward Haines recreated from memory the events that occurred during the hurricane and wrote them down on September 18th in a weekly journal post-dated to the event. Haines's eyewitness accounts, recorded while still fresh in his mind, speak more effectively than any historical article about the station's experiences, so the remarks are transcribed below with only minor grammatical changes. I have inserted only the information enclosed in brackets "[]" and the date and time framework to provide a sense of the storm's development, aftermath and the station crew's activities. All of the narrative text, including wording and minor grammatical errors, comes from the Galveston station's weekly journal report.



Fort Point LSS rebuilt after the hurricane.
 Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Galveston Station, District Number Nine
Entry for Saturday, Sept 8th, 1900.

All records lost from September 1-st
 [Morning:]

Crew employed keeping floating debris from station and securing boats during forenoon.

[1:00-4:00pm:]

About 1 o'clock P.M. Keeper and two surfmen with dinghy tried to rescue the people from Fort Point Lighthouse, it being thought that that building would be washed away in a very short time, but they could do nothing, the wind taking the oars out of the row-locks and sweeping the boat on the jetties. They got back to the station with great difficulty. [The Fort Point Lighthouse was located only 200 yards from the Galveston Life-Saving station. That evening, elderly Lightkeeper Charles Anderson and his wife managed to ride out the storm by staying in the upper levels of the flooded screw-pile lighthouse.]

[4:00-11:00pm:]

Keeper then got Race Point surf boat under the lee of the station (the wind being Northeast). Between 4 and 5 o'clock P.M. decided to abandon station, and all hands got in boat. The sea at this time was heavy, and immense quantities of wreckage (stringers on which the track was laid) [probably from nearby railroad tracks] was being swept by the station, and it was thought that the boat could not live a minute, but would be stove to pieces. The water at this time was about three feet from the top of the gallery station, and seemed to be stationary, and keeper and crew thought that the station would stand and determined to stand by the Station a little longer. Station crew then got out of the boat

and worked for some little time cutting holes in the floor of building, when the wind suddenly shifted to the southeast and all doors and windows on that side of [the] building were bursted open by wind and sea. Keeper then saw that the only hope of escape was by taking to the lifeboat (which was in boat-room) and then tried to open the doors on north side of building in order to get the boat out. While thus engaged a sea broke through the boat-room, lifting the life boat from the carriage and throwing it against the beach cart, breaking a hole in [the] Boat. The crew then took axes and tried to cut the doors open, while some of the other members of the crew got into the life boat. The boat at this time was lying broad-side again the doors, and it did not seem possible that it could be gotten out, and there was great danger of the building falling and crushing the people in the boat. Keeper saw that nothing more could be done, and told the crew, who up to this time had been carrying out orders, that he could not tell them what to do; that if they could think of any plan to save themselves to try and do so, and that he with his wife was going to stay in the life-boat. Some of the men appeared to think that they would have a better chance for their lives in the upper floor of the building, and three of them gained the stair way and got up there, passing down ropes on the out side of the building for the others. Up to this time keeper and his wife were in the boat, but the sea was breaking over them, boat was on its beam end, and keeper's wife begged him to try and get her up into the upper story. Keeper and wife gained gallery way of station from which keeper attempted to get his wife to upper story by trying rope around her body, lifting her as high as he could and having men above hand her up over roof. While attempting to do this, gallery way on which keeper was standing gave way, and keeper was swept off. Simultaneously the life boat was swept out of station and keeper was swept to bow of boat. Keeper had just time enough to shout to men on roof of station to do all in their power to save his wife, when the boat was swept away from station.

A few seconds afterward keeper discovered surfman Mart[in] Monson clinging to boat. About five minutes afterward heard a voice and discovered Surfman W.D. Davis also clinging to boat, and he was pulled in.

[11:00pm, September 8, to Daylight, September 9:]

About 11 o'clock P.M. the boat stranded and about 1 or 1 ½ hours later when the moon came up keeper and surfmen named above found that they were in Texas City. They went to the nearest house where they found some 20 or 25 other persons who had taken refuge there from the storm.

[Sunday, September 9, 1900:]

The next morning at daylight keeper with Surfmen Monson and Davis searched the beach for any survivors from station, and found that John Haugland, W.A. Reed, and Roscoe Burrus had been saved. These men stated that immediately after lifeboat was swept away the station collapsed, they drifting ashore on boats and other floating matter. Keeper then divided the survivors of the crew and made a systematic search along the beach for miles, but could not find any trace of the other persons who were in the station. Keeper and crew found shelter for the night on the [beached] steamship "Kendal Castle", which had drifted to the shore during the storm.

Keeper's judgment is that if all hands has remained in life-boat five minutes longer all would have been saved.

Station was totally destroyed, all property and effects belonging to station lost, except boats, but their whereabouts are unknown except that of life-boat, which was saved but is badly stoved and is lying about a mile and a half back from the beach at Texas City.

Keeper's watch stopped at 7.30 o'clock P.M., and he was wet some considerable time before that. He judges it must have been about 6 o'clock P.M. when station was swept away.

Had the people at the Light House been safe, Keeper would have left station early in the afternoon, as the folks at the Light House were the only ones that could have been saved east of station, and it was the opinion of everybody that the Light House would go before the Life-Saving Station.

Edward Haines
Keeper

Note[:] The point where the men, and Life-boat drifted ashore at Texas-City is about nine (9) miles W.N.W. of Station.

Sunday, September 9th, 1900. [largely the same as September 8th entry]

No patrol kept

At daylight, Keeper with surfmen "Monson, and "Davis" searched the beach for any survivors from station, and found that John Haugland, Roscoe Burrus, and W.L. Reed had been saved; they having been washed ashore about one mile N.E. of where the Life-Boat landed.

Keeper then divided the Crew, and made a systematic search along the beach for miles, but found no trace of the other persons missing from Station. Although various parts of the building were found. Keeper, and crew obtained shelter for the night on the Steamship "Kendal-Castle" which had stranded at Texas-City during the storm.

Edward Haines
Keeper

Monday, Sept 10th, 1900.

No patrol kept, crew employed in general relief duty

This day; Keeper with surfmen "Haugland, Davis, and Monson" went to Galveston on a Tug, arriving there at 10-A.M. Keeper leaving surfmen "Burrus", and "Reed" to continue the search for the people missing from station, and also leaving the Life-Boat at Texas-City, there being no way of getting her afloat.

As soon as possible Keeper secured a boat, and volunteer crew, and they proceeded to Station, also taking provisions to the Keeper of the "Fort-Point-Light-House" which were badly needed.

The piling[s] on which the Station rested were entirely swept away, hardly anything remaining to show where the Station stood;

Top of Station wharf was swept off, but the piling[s], and braces remained. The "Lyle"-Gun was found on the Jetty, and brought to City in boat [the] crew returning at 2-P.M.

The rest of the day crew were employed in picking up the bodies of persons drowned along the wharves [Haines's term], and water front, they finding eleven (11) which were towed to sea that night, there being no other way of disposing of them.

This day "John Haugland, and W.D. Davis" who were badly bruised when they were swept away from [the] Station were sent to the hospital.

Louis Larsen, Albert Matson, and Patrick Powers were engaged as temporary surfmen.

Edward Haines
Keeper

Tuesday, Sept 11th, 1900.

No patrol kept Crew working in conjunction with Relief-Committee

This day; Keeper, and crew with the "Monomoy" Surf-Boat from "San-Luis-Pass-Station," searched "Pelican-Island" for the people missing from Station, also for Station property; finding the "McLellan" Beach-cart with whip on reel about 2 ½-miles N.W. of Station; Cart was considerably damaged.

Finding no trace of the missing persons Keeper proceeded with boat, and crew to Texas-City (having some messages to deliver to persons in that city) at which place they camped for the night.

Edward Haines
Keeper



Galveston's streets under water.
Courtesy of the Library of Congress

Wednesday, Sept 12th, 1900.

No patrol kept, Crew working in conjunction with Relief-Committee

This day Keeper with crew, and boat resumed the search for the missing People, all along the beach through Texas-City, "Dollar-Point", North-Galveston, "Pelican-Island", and back to where the Station stood (a distance of probably forty (40) miles) but could find no trace of the missing persons, and returning to Galveston at sunset.

Keeper brought several messages from the people from the main land to city.

Edward Haines
Keeper

Thursday, Sept 13th, 1900.

No patrol kept; Crew working in conjunction with Relief-Committee

This day; Keeper with Crew, and boat went to "Bolivar-Point" where Keeper secured a team, and at seven miles from the "Point" found the grave of Mrs. Haines (Keepers wife) and the surfman "J.P. Ferwerda" they having been buried on the 10-th.

Keeper, and Crew with boat returned to Galveston at 3-P.M. taking several messages from the people at "Bolivar" to the city.

Edward Haines
Keeper

Friday, Sept 14th, 1900.

No patrol kept, Crew working with Relief-Committee

Keeper with Crew, and boat took a Metallic-Casket to "Bolivar-Point" and brought the body of Mrs. Haines to Galveston at 3-P.M.

Edward Haines
Keeper

Saturday, Sept 15th, 1900.

No patrol kept, Crew working with Relief-Committee

This day; Keeper, and Crew worked all day getting the bodies out from along the wharvies, and water front, taking them to Pelican-Island and burning them; getting 44 in all.

7-Women, 5-Men, 7-Negro men, and women; 11-cows, 7-horses, and 6-mules.

Edward Haines
Keeper

Sunday, Sept 16th, 1900.

No patrol kept

Keeper, and Crew employed all day searching for the bodies of the person[s] drowned along the wharvies, and towing them to "Pelican-flats", and there burning, and burying them. Disposing of six bodies, and one animal. All that could be found along the water front.

Edward Haines
Keeper

Monday, Sept 17th, 1900.

No patrol kept

This day Crew pulled with Surf-Boat to "Pelican-flats", and resumed the task of burying the bodies of the drowned persons, and animals; Burning, and burying twelve (12) persons; and ten (10) animals; Crew returned to City at 5-P.M.

Edward Haines
Keeper

Tuesday, Sept 18th, 1900.

No patrol kept

7-A.M. crew pulled to "Pelican"-flats, and resumed the work of burying the dead; they buried ten (10) bodies, and nine (9) animals. Crew returned to City at 4-30-P.M.

Surfman "W.D. Davis" who had been sick since the 10-inst, reported for duty at 5-P.M. and "Patrick Powers" temporary surfman was dismissed.

Edward Haines
Keeper

Wednesday, Sept 19th, 1900.

No patrol kept

Crew employed with relief committee burying the dead

Crew pulled to "Pelican-Island" with Surf-boat at 7-30-A.M. and resumed the work of burying the dead; burying seven (7) bodies, and six (6) animals. Crew returned to city at 5-P.M.

This day Mr. Davis of Hitchcock, Tex. reported that the "Race-Point-Surf-Boat" was at his residence, a distance of fourteen, or fifteen miles from Galveston; it having drifted there during the storm; he reported that the boat was but slightly damaged.

Edward Haines
Keeper



**Picking up the dead in the aftermath of the 1900 hurricane.
Courtesy of the Library of Congress**

Thursday, Sept 20th, 1900.

No patrol kept

7 A.M. Crew pulled to "Pelican-Island" with Surf-Boat, for the "McLellan" Beach-Cart, whip-line, and Reel, and returned with them to city at 1-P.M.

Crew employed during the afternoon covering the roof of "Masonic-Temple with Tarpaulins (roof having been blown off during the hurricane of the 8-th, inst)

This building is sheltering and providing sustenance for hundreds of people at the present time.

Edward Haines
Keeper

Friday, Sept 21st, 1900.

No patrol kept

Crew employed in relief-duty during forenoon

Early this morning the Crew stretched tarpaulins over the roof of a House, which was partially wrecked by the storm, and which is sheltering a number of people at the present time.

11-30 A.M. Crew pulled with Surf-Boat to Texas-City for the purpose of getting the Life-Boat; found the boat was very badly damaged, and no means at hand to float her; Crew returned to Galveston at 8-P.M. and reported the facts to the "District Supt."

Keeper is incapacitated from duty from having a badly bruised hand, having hurt it on the night of the hurricane (Sept 8-th).

Keeper was unable to engage a temporary Surfman in his place, owing to the immense amount of work going on in this city, and to the scarcity of men.

Edward Haines
Keeper

Saturday, September 22nd, 1900.

No patrol kept

Crew employed in relief-duty

Crew took the District Supt, with Surf-Boat along the water front looking for site for temporary quarters for Life-Saving-[illegible] equipment.

In afternoon crew were employed getting tents for temporary shelter, and cleaning, and drying Whip-Line (found on "Pelican-Island" 20-th, inst) also cleaning Boat, and other equipment.

Keeper suffering with a bruised hand, but was able to instruct the crew, and attend to things in general, until a temporary surfman can be obtained.

Edward Haines
Keeper

Keeper Edward Haines remained at work throughout the period documented by these journal entries, despite the loss of his wife and the injuries he sustained during the hurricane. After two weeks on the job, he finally took leave to recover and take care of his personal affairs. Two of his surfmen, John Haugland and W.L. Davis, were

hospitalized after the storm due to injuries they sustained. Davis returned to work after a week in the hospital, but Haugland remained hospitalized for weeks.

The Gulf Coast had been devastated and Galveston would never fully recover from the blow, but survivors and relief parties from across the country helped to rebuild the city as best as they could. History repeated itself on September 13, 2008, when the dangerous Hurricane Ike made landfall at Galveston. With modern weather forecasting and emergency response systems, casualties numbered in the hundreds, only a fraction of the losses suffered in the 1900 Galveston Hurricane.

