

FLORIDA'S STORM OF THE CENTURY

by Ronald J. Benice

Research into the origin of a small specimen of recently discovered Veterans Work Program paper scrip from Islamorada, Florida uncovered the story of a disastrous ending of a well-meant government program.

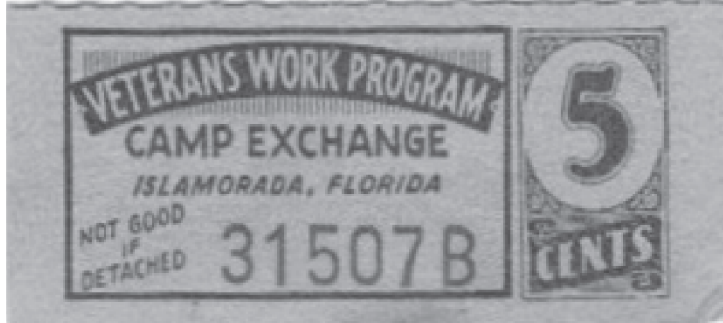


Figure 1: Islamorada Scrip, 51 mm x 23 mm blue ink on tan card stock, red serial number; blank back.

PROLOGUE

In May of 1932 some 17,000 to 22,000 veterans of World War I along with friends and family created tent and shanty campgrounds in Washington D.C. as a demonstration to urge Congress to pass legislation that would immediately redeem their bonus certificates. These so-called Bonus Army owned certificates had been issued in 1925 to World War I veterans to compensate them for wages lost while they were in military service. The certificates were worth \$1.25 for each day of service abroad and \$1.00 for each day served in the United States. Although they could borrow (at 3% interest) half their money anytime, the balance was not payable until 1945. Given the hardship of the Great Depression, the veterans wanted all of their money immediately. The legislation to release the money passed the House of Representatives but failed in the Senate. The camps became unsanitary and unruly and riots ensued. On July 28, 1932 President Hoover ordered Army troops led by Douglas MacArthur to evict the demonstrators and their camps.

In 1933, when many of the veterans returned to Washington, President Roosevelt offered them jobs around the country in the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), so a second confrontation was avoided. In 1934 more veterans arrived in Washington but there were no additional opportunities in the CCC. The solution this time was to send them to Florida to work under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) for various projects to benefit the public. With cooperation from the Veterans Administration, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration and the Florida Emergency Relief Administration, the Veterans Work Program got underway. The veterans would build roads, bridges and tourist facilities in Florida.

THE FLORIDA VETERANS CAMPS

Construction of the veterans camps began in November 1934 in Islamorada with the arrival of 250 men by train to occupy a tent city designated as Camp One on Windley Key. The second camp, housing 300 men, inexplicably designated Camp Three, was started in December

1934 on Lower Matecumbe Key. A third camp, number five, was established in 1935 on Lower Matecumbe Key. Veterans pay was \$30 a month plus food, clothing, shelter and medical care.

The Florida Emergency Relief Administration headquarters, a camp commissary and hospital were set up in Islamorada on Upper Matecumbe Key. Limestone quarries on Plantation Key and Windley Key provided materials to build roads and bridges. In August 1935 there were approximately 700 veterans plus supporting state employees on the Upper Keys.

The newly discovered scrip for the camp commissary at Islamorada illustrated above is in pristine condition. This issue of scrip was in use for considerably less than one year. No information is available as to how much was issued or whether other denominations were issued. The only other example I have been able to locate is a water damaged five-cent chit found in an attic in the Keys and now in possession of a Keys historian.



Figure 2: Veterans Camp 3, February 1935. Photo from State Archives of Florida.

THE 1935 HURRICANE

The camps were neither warned nor prepared for the first Category 5 hurricane known to have made landfall in the United States. The Weather Bureau erred in predicting the intensity and location of the storm.

At 9:30 PM on Saturday August 31 storm warnings, “probably gale force,” were issued for the mainland north of Miami -- at least 80 miles north of Islamorada. At 4:00 PM Sunday September 1 the forecast was for a probable hurricane in the Florida Straits south of the Keys -- over 80 miles south of Islamorada. At 9:30 AM on Monday September 2 they indicated probable winds near hurricane force over a small area of the Florida Straits. At 1:30 PM the weather forecast was for hurricane force winds, but the predicted location was still erroneously well south of the Veterans Camps. Unfortunately, there were no ships in the area to provide better weather information and radar, satellite and aerial weather reconnaissance hadn’t been developed yet.

At 7:00 PM on Monday a Category 5 hurricane struck the Upper Keys where the Veterans Camps were located. The wind gusts reached 200 mph. The barometer dropped to 26.35 inches (892.31 millibars), the lowest reading ever recorded in the United States. The storm surge was 18 feet above mean high tide. What the wind or pressure differentials didn’t

destroy, the water stripped clean as if had been bulldozed. After the storm passed there was a resurgence of water from Florida Bay that had been swept over from the ocean.

Earlier that afternoon the staff in Miami realized that evacuation of the Upper Keys was necessary. Since it was the Labor Day holiday, it took a while to assemble a train and crew to send to the Keys. The evacuation train arrived too late. The storm overturned the railroad cars. Miles of track were washed out.

The three camps were demolished. Bodies were strewn over the land and in the surrounding water. Many bodies were never identified. There were mass cremations. The exact total of fatalities is unknown. The best available reconstructed figures are that 260 veterans and 225 civilians died in the hurricane.



Figure 3: Veterans Camp 3, September 1935. Photo from State Archives of Florida.

Ernest Hemingway arrived at the scene of the tragedy two days after the storm by boat from his home in Key West. He helped with the rescue effort but mostly it was recovering bodies from water, mangroves, trees and railroad cars. He wrote a scathing essay which appeared in *New Masses* magazine on September 17, 1935 under the title [chosen by the



Fig 4: Remains of bridge foundations off Florida Keys, 2013

editor, not Hemingway] "Who Murdered the Vets?" He was critical of sending people to work in the Keys during hurricane season and the failure to order an earlier evacuation. The article was widely quoted in newspapers. Subsequent Congressional hearings found no negligence.

All that remains today of the camps are three completed piers and a few unfinished piers that were to support a bridge intended to eliminate the need for a car ferry. The finished piers eerily appear like coffins.

MEMORIAL

On November 14, 1937 a monument and crypt were dedicated by the American Legion and Florida officials near the site of the destroyed Veterans Project Headquarters in Islamorada. The monument consists of a 65 x 20 foot platform of stone quarried on the Keys with an 18 foot obelisk featuring a carving of palm trees being blown in a strong wind [in the wrong direction]. On the platform in front of the obelisk is the crypt containing the remains of approximately 400 of the veterans and civilians who perished in the 1935 hurricane. The top of the crypt bears a mosaic map of the Florida Keys.



Fig 5: Islamorada monument in memory of the hurricane victims

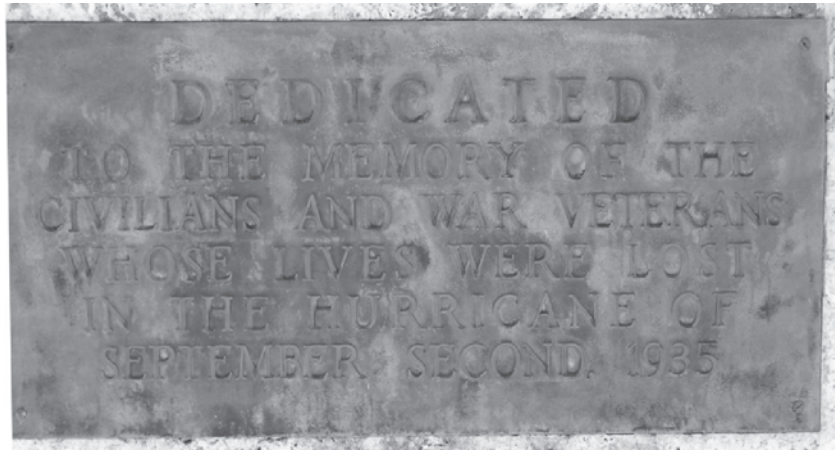


Fig 6: Memorial inscription on Islamorada monument

EPILOGUE

The death toll would have been worse if the storm had come through on a workday. Fortunately, half of the veterans were in Key West or Miami for the Labor Day weekend. Presumably the illustrated scrip belonged to one of these veterans.

The veterans received their full bonuses in 1936 when Congress overrode President Roosevelt's veto.

REFERENCES

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