

State

Texas coastline is vulnerable hurricane target

United Press International
The Gulf of Mexico provides an ideal caldron for brewing a hurricane. Warm water, shallow depths and east-to-west winds. The Texas coast, crowded by Sunbelt growth and so low in elevation that some areas are below sea level, makes especially vulnerable target.

Hurricane Allen, ballyhooed as the storm of the century, may have complicated Texas hurricane protection problems by gathering complacency among coastal residents. Allen bashed through the Caribbean last August, killing more than 270 people, but its impact on Texans was

diluted. The storm had weakened and much of its damage was in unpopulated areas and the loss of life (five were killed) was minimal by hurricane standards.

"There are people who have read these accounts about how Allen was not so much and fizzled out and the next time they'll stay put," said Bob Sheets, forecaster at the National Hurricane Center. "But they were just lucky it hit an unpopulated area. It made over 100 cuts in Padre Island. In Corpus Christi people certainly are underprepared for a hurricane but if the same people were to go out and see what happened on Padre

Island, they might see what kind of force there was even for an average-to-strong storm."

The six-month hurricane season opened last Sunday (although it was preceded by an "off-season" tropical storm) and it no doubt will be an expensive one. Forecasters say coastal areas are so developed that the next major hurricane will do at least \$1 billion in damage.

"Each year we have a hurricane press conference and people think we're crying wolf," Sheets said. "But you have to be prepared."

In the last month federal agencies, Civil Defense leaders and municipal and county govern-

ments have been organizing their hurricane plans — plotting evacuations and working with the media.

"We're trying to improve our information gathering process and getting the information out to the people," said Phil Lohee, Galveston's Civil Defense director. "We had a seminar and had a TV reporter from Houston, talking about the media's needs. They're in the news gathering business and we're in the news dissemination business."

Willis Clark of Texas A&M's Sea Grant College Program said seven county extension marine agents of

the Sea Grant Marine Advisory Service also will soon begin conducting regular hurricane awareness workshops along the coast through Oct. 31. The sessions deal with past storms, safe and unsafe structures, evacuations and attitudes toward evacuation.

With an average elevation of 20 feet above sea level, Galveston presents a special problem. Unlike Corpus Christi, it has no barrier island to absorb the initial blow and there is only one way out of Galveston — Interstate 45, which can be flooded by as little as 4 feet of water.

In a Sea Grant brochure, re-

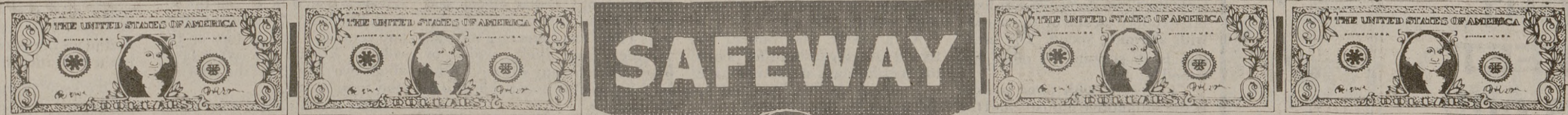
searchers Carlton Ruch and Larry Christensen say only a quarter of those interviewed on Galveston Island, where 6,000 people were killed in the 1900 hurricane, knew of the small tidal rise needed to block escape.

Almost a third of Galveston residents polled said they believed the entire island could be emptied in six hours or less when a minimum of 12 hours seems more realistic, the researchers said.

Hurricanes' chain reaction of violent weather can be far-reaching. Heavy rains triggered by Hurricane Carla in 1961

flooded parts of North Dakota more than 1,200 miles away, said Texas A&M meteorologist Walter Henry, coauthor of "Hurricanes on the Texas Coast," a Sea Grant publication outlining the history, effects and responses to hurricanes.

Henry said Texans suffering from severe flooding in the Hill Country three years ago learned about far-reaching weather from Tropical Storm Amelia the hard way, and that some Atlantic Coast hurricanes had even prompted heavy rains and flooding in Pittsburgh.

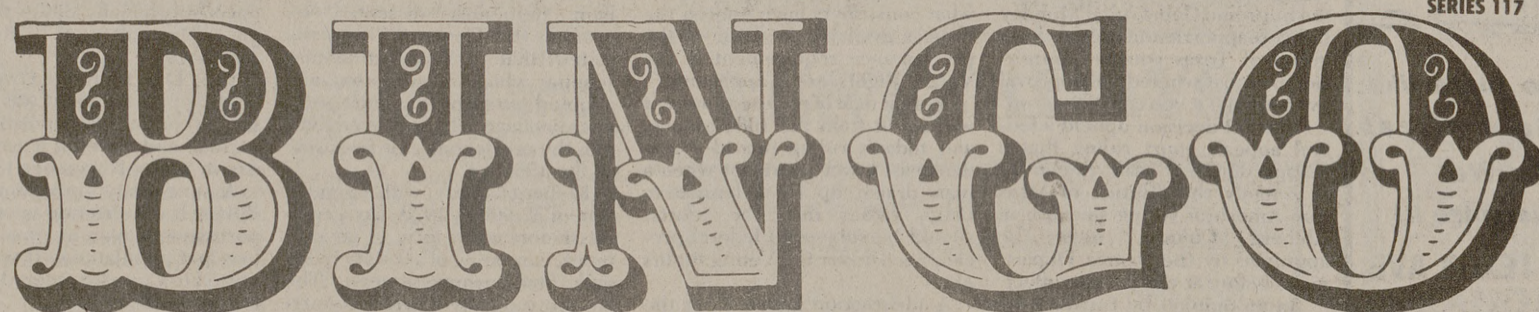


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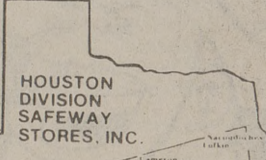
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