

Eugene F. Provenzo, Jr., Asterie Baker Provenzo. *In the Eye of Hurricane Andrew.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002. xv + 184 pp. \$24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8130-2566-7.



Reviewed by James Holton

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Building Community out of Disaster: Hurricane Andrew and Its Consequences

Hurricane Andrew's landfall in August 1992 demolished more than buildings and vegetation. The Category 4 (now reported as Category 5) hurricane destroyed complacency and a sense of benign ignorance toward hurricanes among South Florida residents. The region had not seen a storm of such awesome power in decades. The preponderance of recent arrivals to the region retarded a strong collective memory of hurricanes. Many residents either assumed that they were safe, or did not prepare until too late. The costs of Hurricane Andrew were staggering: forty people dead, in excess of 100,000 homes damaged or destroyed (half of them left uninhabitable), more than a million people left without electricity, and twenty to thirty billion dollars in damages. Much of South Florida's sensitive vegetation was severely damaged.

This book is twenty-second in a series about the study of Florida history and culture by the University Press of Florida. Eugene Provenzo is a professor of education at the University of Miami

and Asterie Baker Provenzo comes from a career in family, community and local history. *In the Eye of Hurricane Andrew* is based on interviews conducted by students at the University of Miami during the 1992-1993 school year, in collaboration with the Provenzos. Secondary research comes from newspaper accounts and local reports.

In the Eye of Hurricane Andrew takes readers from the development of Hurricane Andrew in its Atlantic breeding grounds to the ongoing effort of survivors to cope with its effects. Quotes from interviews are interspersed with the authors' narratives. Most of the narratives concentrate on the area impacted most devastatingly by Hurricane Andrew--i.e., southern Dade County, including Homestead.

By way of observation and not criticism this work is less an oral history than a contemporary, street-level community history. *In the Eye of Hurricane Andrew* reaches out to impart a sense of how the storm altered South Florida's economic, sociological and environmental landscape. Chapters 1 and 2 discuss the storm's development and landfall, and they are chilling in their detail. Later

chapters discuss the days, weeks, months and years after the storm, with a conclusion that summarizes how Hurricane Andrew was a turning point in South Florida history.

The authors do not hide that this is largely a personal story, one that combines catharsis and history. *In the Eye of Hurricane Andrew* is essentially an account of survivors, not the storm. As stated in the introduction, "interviewees were selected, to some degree, from the friends and acquaintances of the students." The interviews are neither wide-ranging nor comprehensive. Nevertheless, the attempt underscores how much more oral history needs to be done on how natural phenomena affect human history. The tapes and transcripts are available at the Archives and Special Collections Department, Otto G. Richter Library, University of Miami.

One of the book's central themes is the shared sense of camaraderie engendered by Hurricane Andrew. Many of the oral histories are centered on how neighbors pulled together and looked out for each other during the post-storm chaos. "Each of us who survived Hurricane Andrew and its aftermath will always view the episode as a signature event in our lives" (p. 161). Another theme is how the storm echoes today in altered perspectives--shattered lives, strained relationships and hair-trigger nerves. Some survivors were very philosophical. "I look at things totally different now. Personal property--cars and objects and my home--are all replaceable. I think more now about how what I do is going to affect other human beings" (p. 140).

The book has a charming strength in how it uses individual experiences--for instance, price-gougers who get their come-uppance at the hands of thieves, and are quietly laughed at by policemen. What does one do when taking shelter in a closet with one's husband, mother-in-law, and Labrador Retriever? How does a community respond when disaster punctures civilization's ordered margins? Attention is given to storm prepa-

rations and recovery at the local zoo. Interestingly, the authors rarely mention the number of people killed by Hurricane Andrew. Local meteorologist Bryan Norcross is hailed, even lionized, by the authors and the interviewees for recognizing and responding to the sociological implications of the hurricane.

In the Eye of Hurricane Andrew also contains an impressive bibliography on hurricanes in general and Hurricane Andrew specifically. Future researchers will find this a boon.

The book has minor shortcomings. It needs more information on local government's failure in responding to the crisis's magnitude. The dog that didn't bark deserved more attention. Mayor Steve Clark is described briefly on one page--"Metro Dade Mayor Steve Clark failed to provide leadership" (p. 52)--and in meager terms later Clark is described as "[doing] nothing after the storm, remaining holed up in his house in the north part of the county and insisting that directing the relief effort was not his job" (pp. 89-90). This is an incredible allegation--unproven here--and vindictiveness seems evident. The statement "as many people have said, Hurricane Andrew brought out the best, and the worst, in all of us" amplifies this bias (pp. 89-90).

The authors have faint praise for official relief efforts, especially the federal government's through the Federal Emergency Management Assistance Agency. The Provenzos also seem skeptical and cynical about outsiders (this reviewer's word) capitalizing on the aftermath. President George H. W. Bush's brief visit to the region is portrayed as perfunctory and perhaps insincere. It seems in this case that the authors' familiarity with the subject have bred contempt. Again the authors may not be wrong but their emphasis on "bottom up" history leaves their claims unproven in this work.

Overall, this is a strong book on the human consequences of natural disasters. The lessons of Hurricane Andrew include a testament to human-

ity's vulnerability to mother nature's impersonal grip. The Provenzos have done a good job at putting a natural phenomenon into sociological perspective.

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