

Good Day to all! Did you know the first “named” hurricane to strike this area was Donna? As stated in my previous column, the U.S. didn’t begin naming tropical storms and hurricanes, using only female names, until 1953.

That practice was modified in 1978 when men’s names were included for Eastern North Pacific storms. Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico storms started receiving male names in 1979. Initially selected by the National Hurricane Center, names are now chosen by the World Metrological Organization.

Due to very active seasons in previous years, and once before in 2005, the Greek alphabet had been utilized to name storms after the standard 21 selected names were expended. However, due to potential confusion, that practice was discontinued for the 2021 season, with a second list of 21 supplemental names selected.

Anson Gaskill, born May 21, 1912, in the community of Charlotte Harbor, recalling the 1921 storm, was awakened at 3 am by his Dad. The family quickly evacuated from their home near the bay on Bayshore Road close by the foot of Oakley Street, to the new school a short distance away due to rising water. The Charlotte Harbor School had been completed the year before and was located just off King’s Highway where Schoolhouse Square Shopping Center is today.

Constructed of brick, it was two stories high. After two nights and a day on the second floor, the water had receded enough that they could return home, discovering water had reached two, and two and a half feet deep in the school and their home respectively.

The Great Hurricane of 1926 made land fall on September 17 at Miami, travelled across the state and reached this area on September 21. Although weakened, it was still strong enough to lift the Church of the Good Shepherd, then at the corner of West Virginia Avenue and Cross Street (U.S. 41 south), off its foundation toppling the bell tower. Rising water also severely damaged the new City Dock at the foot of Sullivan Street and flooded streets. This is the storm that killed hundreds, if not thousands, when water was blown out of Lake Okeechobee over its southern bank.

September 11, 1960, saw the arrival of Hurricane Donna. Still the only storm of record to produce hurricane force winds in Florida, the Mid-Atlantic states and New England. Being eight years old, I remember it “fondly” since

opening day at the just completed St. Charles Borromeo School was delayed a week. Sort of like snow days in the north I suppose.

Like the Great Hurricane of 1926, Donna's strong winds blew out of the northeast until only the harbor's channel contained water and flooding occurred when the wind shifted. This time it was the First Presbyterian Church, then on Harvey Street across from City Hall, that lost its bell tower. Sanctuaries of the Bethel A.M.E. Church at the corner of East Olympia Avenue and Wood Street and Saint Mark's Missionary Baptist Church at East Virginia Avenue and Dupont Street were also badly damaged. The former's wood frame building had to be replaced with the current sanctuary of concrete block construction. When the storm re-entered the Atlantic Ocean later that day near Daytona Beach, sustained winds still exceeded 100 miles per hour.

The most interesting occurrences to a then 8-year-old, besides no water in the harbor, were the "eye" passing over us, we went outside in the calm and roofs of newly constructed General Development homes strewn all over Edgewater Boulevard in the Gardner Avenue area. Our 1926 home on the bay lost only one piece of tin off the back-porch roof.

Historically, the Charlotte Harbor area feels the full impact of a major storm every 18 years. The most recent, many of us remember, was in August 2004 and there's been enough written about Charley. Unfortunately, my childhood home did not fare as well that time around. Donna, along with Charley, Frances, Ivan, Jeanne, Irma and Michael are among the 94 names that will never be used again due to the storms' severity. Retirement of storm names for a 10-year period began in 1955, but became permanent in 1969.

Visit Charlotte County's website to view photographs showing the effects of several area hurricanes and the signal tower mentioned in my previous column. Select "Community Services", then "Libraries and History." Click on "Physical Items." then "Archive Search." Enter the subject of your search on the "Search" line. Photographs can also be viewed on the Punta Gorda History Center's website. Select "Online Collection," then "Keyword Search" and enter the search criteria.

Check out History Services' year-long project, "Telling Your Stories: History in the Parks." It began in January 2021 with placement of the first interpretive sign "Charlotte Harbor Spa" at South County Regional Park.

The last was dedicated December 15, 2021 at Centennial Park featuring Florida postcards. All dedicated signs can be viewed at online library resources. Select “Programs and Services,” then “History Services” and “Virtual Programs.” Visit the same site and select “History Exhibits,” or phone 941.629.7278, to find out what history related programs and videos are available.

“Did You Know” appears, typically, every other Wednesday, courtesy of the Daily SUN newspaper and the Charlotte County Historical Society. The Society’s mission is to help promote and preserve Charlotte County’s rich history. We are also always looking for volunteers and interested individuals to serve as board members. If you believe our area’s history is as important as we do, please visit Charlotte County Historical Center Society online, or call 941.613.3228 for more information.

June 22 column