



Caloosahatchee River flood waters, 1936

# EXTREME WEATHER

## FROM FLOODS TO DROUGHTS

A hurricane in 1928 kills thousands of people south of Lake Okeechobee when the earthen dike fails. Zora Neale Hurston describes the storm in her book *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: “The monstropolous beast had left his bed ... the sea was walking the earth with a heavy heel.” In its wake, Everglades Drainage District construction ends. The Great Depression begins one year later, and Florida’s land boom goes bust. By 1931, the Everglades Drainage District defaults on its bonds. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers intervenes to survey the land, and subsequently, federal government participation is required in future development of the region. By 1930, Florida has almost 1.5 million residents. A large number of residents are moving into South Florida, with almost 150,000 residents recorded in Dade County.



Belle Glade Experiment Station, 1928 hurricane

### 1928

**“The Storm of 1928” pushes water out of Lake Okeechobee.** Several thousand people drown in the small farming communities bordering its southern rim. Wind tides on the lake cause such deadly overflows that the state forms the Okeechobee Drainage District to prevent future destruction. Working with the U.S. Corps of Engineers, the Drainage District improves flood control through construction of floodway channels, control gates and major levees along the lake’s shores.



1928 hurricane kills thousands of people

### 1930

**Herbert Hoover Dike is authorized.** The Rivers and Harbors Act of 1930 authorizes the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to build a series of levees, gated culverts and locks to encompass Lake Okeechobee. Constructed between 1932 and 1938, the seven-year public works project boosts the region’s economy during the peak years of the Great Depression.



Lake Okeechobee Herbert Hoover Dike construction

### 1931

**Droughts seize South Florida.** Prolonged dry spells that will last almost 15 years significantly lower groundwater levels. This, coupled with overdrainage, allows salt water to move into freshwater supplies and threaten coastal cities’ drinking water. Land normally under water emerges. Inland, thousands of acres drained dry now ignite, burning off and consuming the precious muck soil.



1928

1930

1931

1935

1936

### 1935

**“Labor Day Hurricane” hits Florida Keys.** Only 40 miles wide, the violent storm reaches a wind velocity of 120 mph with gusts up to 250 mph when it hits the Tavernier-Islamorada area. More than 400 lives are lost — mostly World War I veterans sent to Key West to build the overseas highway. Their intended rescue train is swept off its track by the storm surge, which reaches 18 feet for a distance of 21 miles.



Rescue train swept off the tracks by the 1935 Labor Day hurricane

### 1936

**Congress passes Flood Control Act of 1936.** The personal and financial losses caused by the hurricanes of 1926 and 1928 illuminate the need for more than just routine drainage. Canals performing efficiently during typical rain events are recognized as unable to absorb excess water in extreme weather. The Flood Control Act directs the federal government “to improve or participate in the improvement of waters for flood control purposes, if the populations of surrounding areas would suffer without these renovations.” Flood control joins navigation and drainage on the list of water management problems demanding solutions.