CHAPTER ONE

I have passed through the most trying, horrible thing in my life.

God knows that on Saturday night at 9 o'clock I had given up all
hopes of ever seeing the light of day and my prayers were on my lips
asking God to take care of you and the little darling there at home
as it seemed that I would be floating with the thousand poor dead
bodies out in the streets at any moment.

CHARLES LAW TO HIS WIFE, SEPTEMBER 12, 1900

"A thousand little devils,
shrieking and whistling"

September 8, 1900

"ANOTHER OVERFLOW" was the way many Galvestonians described
the inconvenience of high water on the morning of September 8,
1900. Given the nearby Gulf of Mexico and generally low profile of
the island, knee-deep water in yards and along alleys was not all that
unusual in the community. Periodically, storms or particularly high
tides forced water up into the streets and people's yards. It was a nuis-
ance, but easy enough to bear. Most Galveston buildings were
raised—built on piers or pilings expressly to prevent the encroach-
ment of rising water. What people did not understand was that to-
day, September 8, 1900, the unusually high—and rising—tides were
harbingers of much worse to come.

Isaac Monroe Cline and his brother Joseph noted the rather
strange weather pattern and surveyed the skies and measured winds
for clues to the approaching conditions. Isaac Cline was the local
forecast official for the Galveston Weather Bureau and section direc-
tor for its parent, the U.S. Weather Bureau. He had established the
Texas section of the U.S. Weather Service in 1889 and was heavily
involved in its expansion, the application of scientific methods to
weather forecasting and climatology, and the upgrading of personnel
at bureau offices. His brother, Joseph L. Cline, was the Galveston
bureau's chief clerk. A third weather observer, John Blagden, tempo-
arily replaced a member of the office who was taking a three-month
leave. These men weighed information from Washington against
their local observations and determined that something—most
likely a tropical cyclone—was taking aim at the island.

Weather forecasting, especially the type that could predict tropi-
cal storm movement, was in its infancy. Connected by telephone and telegraph to other bureau offices and Washington, D.C., Cline and the Galveston bureau both sent and received forecasting messages each day, but following a storm track over water, out at sea, was as yet impossible. Not until the invention of ship-to-shore communication would forecasters have information about weather systems from ships at sea. The first such communication occurred in 1905, but nothing of this sort was available to the Clines.

Coastal weather bureaus relied upon reports from other land-based observers. As early as Tuesday, September 4, 1900, reports from the Washington bureau noted that "[t]he influence of the tropical storm now extends over Cuba and the northwest Caribbean Sea. It has thus far developed but little force, but has caused torrential rains at many places . . . . For the present this storm will probably cause nothing more severe than strong northeasterly winds from the Caribbean Sea northward over the south Atlantic . . . ." On Thursday, the bureau was reporting that "[t]he tropical storm is central this morning north of Key West. It has increased somewhat in energy and caused severe northeast gales over portions of southern Florida . . . . Hurricane warnings are displayed from Cedar Keys to Savannah; storm warnings from Charleston to Kitty Hawk and from Pensacola to New Orleans." By Friday, September 7, the news was increasingly worrisome. The 8:00 A.M. (EST) bulletin placed the storm "central this morning in the Gulf of Mexico south of Louisiana . . . . moving slowly northwestward . . . . Storm warnings are displayed from Pensacola to Galveston."

The Clines and Blagden compared their observations with information they were receiving from Washington and other stations. No ship reports from arriving vessels supplemented bureau station readings, and the weather officials became increasingly troubled. Cline had been posting the storm warnings since the previous Tuesday, and he watched the skies nervously. When warnings were extended to Galveston on Friday, Cline hoisted the appropriate flags atop the Levy Building, at the corner of 23rd Street (Tremont) and Avenue D (Market), the location of the weather bureau. The traditional signal—a red flag with a black
square in the center—alerted islanders to the approach of a dangerous weather system. The white pennant flown above the red flag indicated that winds would come from the northwest.

Part of the problem was that the usual warning signs were not present. A "brick-dust sky was not in evidence to the smallest degree," wrote Cline in a special report after the storm, and in his autobiography he explained that "neither the barometer, nor the winds were telling me." Only the steadily rising tide, despite winds from the north against it, warned of the approaching hurricane.

Galveston's police chief, Edwin N. Ketchum, mentioned the storm warning to his family at dinner Friday night. The Ketchums lived on the west side of the city, in a large house that had been built by one of Galveston's founders, Michel B. Menard. Winds were still light, so the chief postponed precautions; every indication was that the storm would be a mild one.

Joseph Cline awoke from a restless sleep around 4:00 A.M. Saturday morning to find the tide in his yard. Joseph lived with his brother's family in a house about four blocks from the beach. He quickly woke Isaac, and the two conferred about what was to be done. By 5:00 A.M. Isaac Cline was on the beach, checking the height of the tide and time between swells while Joseph went to the office. They met there later, checked the instruments (the barometer had fallen only one tenth of an inch since the previous night), and Isaac returned to the shoreline. Rain poured by midmorning; both Clines were sure a bad storm was coming. On his second trip to the beach, Isaac Cline drove his buggy along the sand, warning visitors to leave the island. He told residents who lived within three blocks of the water to seek higher ground, to move into stronger buildings nearer the city center. Ebb and flow of the rising tides would destroy buildings on the Gulf side of the island as the city was slowly but surely inundated. Later he sent a telegram to Washington:

Unusually heavy swells from southeast, intervals one to five minutes overflowing low places south portion of city three to four blocks from beach. Such high water with opposing winds never observed previously.

Throughout the day, either Joseph Cline or John Blagden manned the telephone to answer questions and to warn callers of the serious storm threatening the island. By early afternoon Isaac Cline determined that a special report should be sent to Washington. While Joseph checked the instruments on top of the Levy Building, Isaac drove first to the bay side of the island and then back to the beach. What he saw did not allay any fears. "Gulf rising, water cover [sic] streets of about half city," he reported to his brother Joseph. He added that the city was going underwater, a great many lives might be lost, and relief efforts would probably be necessary. Joseph's instrument readings offered no consolation. The rain gauge had already blown away; the wind was from the northeast at forty-two miles per hour; the barometer continued to drop; and a heavy rain was falling.

Isaac Cline set out for home while Joseph waded through the water to the telegraph office to send the message to Washington. Finding that the wires were down, he returned to the weather office and tried the telephone. Joseph asked for the Houston Western Union Office. One long distance line remained to connect Galveston with the rest of the world; thousands of calls were ahead of his. Using all of the federal clout that he could muster, Cline convinced the manager, Tom Powell, to give him the line. Joseph sent the message, and shortly after 5:00 P.M. on Saturday afternoon, the line went dead.

Just as modern coastal residents vary in their responses to storm warnings, so did turn-of-the-century Galvestonians. "Overflows" were nothing new to islanders, and, other than the rising tide, the weather early Saturday morning seemed perfectly agreeable. Years after the event, storm survivors related various reactions to the warnings. James Monroe Fendley commented that "the storm was forecast by the Weather Bureau, but we had had storms before, and most people considered themselves safe in their own houses."

"True, the weather man foretold bad weather & urged precaution," recalled Henry M. Wortham years later, "and while hundreds perhaps thousands thought of the prediction very few heeded the danger signals." "Mama didn't want to leave. She'd been through it be-
fore and wasn’t worried. It never had been that bad,” remembered Jennie Karbowski in 1988. Louisa Christine Rollins recalled that “no one was alarmed more than at any other time when we heard these reports. Everybody went about their business in the same way as on any other Saturday.”

For most people, Saturday was a workday, and they were busy attending to their employment. Until Isaac Cline implored beachgoers to seek higher ground, few took the warnings seriously. Joseph Cline and Blagden entreated those who called or visited the bureau office to seek safe shelter away from the wind and tides, but for many the warnings came too late.

Isaac H. (“Ike”) Kempner went downtown that Saturday for a business meeting with Joseph A. Kemp and Henry Sayles. The men were in town to discuss irrigation plans for land in Wichita County. Sayles was a lawyer from Abilene, and Kemp was from Wichita Falls; they were interested in damming a creek. After the meeting, Kempner noticed the worsening weather and climbed into his buggy for the trip home; the other two men went to the Union Passenger station, intending to catch the next train out of the city. A growing number of people were gathering at the station, many of them hoping to get out of town before the worst of the storm, but ticket sellers had stopped selling by noon. Water covered tracks onto the island, and no trains were running.

The last train left Galveston around 9:00 A.M. the morning of the 8th, bound for Houston. Passengers on the regularly scheduled train from Houston, which usually left that city at 9:45 A.M., arrived on the island around 1:00 P.M. A washed-out section of track required riders to transfer to a Galveston, Houston, and Henderson relief train sent from the island, and riders made a slow trip into the city with railroad workers walking ahead of the engine to clear debris from the track. Passengers approaching from Beaumont (to the east of the city) shortly before noon expected to take a launch across the bay for the last few miles, but the horrible weather made that impossible. The train tried to return to Beaumont, but rising water forced passengers and crew to take refuge with the Port Bolivar lighthouse keeper, H. C. Claiborne, and his family.

Throughout the afternoon, Galveston residents came to terms with Cline’s warnings and readied for a blow. Most people within a few blocks of the shore did go to higher ground, and thousands of lives were saved in this way. The Friday afternoon before, schoolteacher Daisy Thorne had decided not to go to the beach because of the ugly brown water and waves crashing on shore. Instead, she remained in her apartment on the northwest corner of Broadway and 6th Street where she lived with her mother, sister, brother, and aunt in number 5, Lucas Terrace, a large three-story brick apartment building. Saturday morning the water had already reached the section of Broadway near Lucas Terrace. Thorne took photographs of the pounding surf from the building’s front porch as others walked toward the beach for a better look. Water had covered that end of Broadway for hours, but she wasn’t worried. Overflows were part of life in Galveston, and she had played in them as a child. Some neighbors arrived at the Thorne’s, afraid to stay in their less substantial dwellings, and Daisy’s mother welcomed them with coffee and biscuits.

Another Galveston resident, Walter Grover, also tried to carry on as usual. He walked to the real estate office downtown where he worked, noting the massive waves breaking on the beach not far away, and stayed in his office until noon. After a meal at the Elite Restaurant—where he watched the wind batter nearby buildings—he walked to the wharves, which were almost under water. When he returned to the office, Grover met John Adriance, and the two braved the worsening weather in a buggy bound for Grover’s house. At home, Grover’s sister wanted to venture out for a glimpse of the storm’s effects. They attempted to drive the buggy toward the beach, but conditions threatened horse, carriage, and passengers. After taking his sister home, Grover and Adriance went a few blocks to the Adriance home in order to stable the horse. Not yet convinced of the storm’s severity, the two men left to explore on foot.
Mrs. Charles Vidor, mother of future filmmaker King Vidor, packed up King and two young visitors from Fort Worth to go to the beach to see the breakers. Years later, Vidor wrote a story for Esquire magazine, "Southern Storm," in which he used the experience:

As we looked up the sandy street the mile to the sea, I could see the waves crash against the streetcar trestle, then shoot into the air as high as the telephone poles. Higher. My mother didn't speak as we watched three or four waves. I was only five then, but I remember now that it seemed as if we were in a boat looking up toward the level of the sea. As we stood there in the sandy street, my mother and I, I wanted to take my mother's hand and hurry her away. I felt as if the sea was going to break over the edge of the bowl and come pouring down upon us.

Vidor's mother recalled a large bathhouse being pounded by the surf. When it began to rain, the woman and three boys took refuge in the nearby home of George W. Boschke on 23rd Street and Avenue N. Boschke was a Southern Pacific Railroad official and host to the Fort Worth visitors.

Some islanders were even less prepared. Phillip Gordie (P. G.) Tipp left town on Wednesday, September 5, by sailboat with two other men—Will Jay and Christ Meyers—to fish and hunt in West Galveston Bay. Equipped with provisions for several days and with five fish cars to hold the catch, they sailed briskly through the bay and set anchors in the mouth of Taylor's Bayou. That night they lit flounder torches and split up to catch fish. Tipp had great success until the small shell island he was working around was completely covered by water. He returned to the boat, deposited his fish in the first fish car, and made coffee in the cabin while he waited for his friends.

On Thursday morning the fishermen tried to return to Galveston before the bad weather turned worse, but they were forced to return to the bayou. They anchored again, fixed dinner, played cards, and hoped the storm would pass. All day Friday they continued to wait while the skies darkened, the water rose, and the wind howled. Tipp described the night:

The wind got way up, and the sea just whipped the boat all evening, and we sat wondering all kinds of things. As midnight it finally happened. The wind just picked us up off the top of a wave and slung us down on the island, upside down. All hell broke loose, none of us was hurt, just upside down trapped in the cabin... we figured we'd get the railroad iron we kept for ballast and weight the cabin down so it wouldn't blow away... We sat around the cabin all day Saturday... we didn't think of it to get worse and we had already discussed how we were going to right the boat, and so we just sat there all day Saturday and let come what would.

Nearby but unbeknownst to Tipp and his friends, Gid Scherer was encamped twelve miles out from the city with the U.S. engineering Department on the shores of West Galveston Bay. "We were warned that a storm was coming but like every body else did not pay any attention to it," he wrote later. "Next morning we awoke to find water coming [sic] in our tents but we are breakfast with out the least bit of fear." As the water continued to rise, the men moved onboard the sloop Fever Island, and Scherer recounted their travails:

We, eleven in number, said [sic] in the cabin all that day, looking for some break in the storm. Late that evening it got worse and the boat began to drag her anchor which compelled us to chop out our mast to keep from capsizing. We went this way and that way all night, expecting to go to pieces every minute. Every one of us was so sick as any mortal ever got to be could not open any of the windows for fresh air as the water was all over our decks and would have filled her in a short while.

Activities at the port continued routinely. At the east end of the island five vessels floated at anchor in the Bolivar Roads waiting to enter the city. Three of them, the Taunton, Hilarious, and Mexican were British steamships in quarantine prior to entering the port. The City of Everett was also moored in Bolivar Roads, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers dredge boat, the General C. B. Comstock,