

THE WORST OF YEARS

The hurricane seasons of 2005 and 1893 may have been the worst for Louisiana. But how do they compare?

1893 was an important year for Louisiana in ways other than hurricanes. Huey Long was born that year. It was also the first time LSU played Tulane in football. But this 1893 hurricane season was a memorable one also for the nation.

New York was hit in August with an 85 mph storm, and then on August 18 Newfoundland was hit with a storm packing 90 mph winds. August 1893 ended with a hurricane striking the area from Tybee Island, Georgia to Charleston, South Carolina killing an estimated 2,000 people.

On September 7, 1893 a storm hit Louisiana with 95 mph winds. But it was the Oct. 1, 1893 storm which makes this storm season special to Louisiana.

Cheniere Caminada, across the pass from Grand Isle, with its population of 1,700 had only half as many people alive the day after the hurricane. The storm took over 2,000 lives and is still, to this day, the deadliest storm ever experienced in Louisiana.

This storm is personal to me. My grandfather was born in February 1893 at Cheniere Caminada and was one of the few lucky children to survive the night of Oct. 1. But his mother's family, the Bonamours, all died.

In other fishing villages throughout the massive Mississippi River estuaries of South Louisiana, the hurricane destroyed the entire fishing hamlets of 40 to 50 people leaving no survivors. But the people of south Louisiana who did survive migrated north, or up the Bayou, to establish new fishing communities further from the coast.

As we compare the 2005 season to 1893, Chris Landsea, a researcher at the National Hurricane Center, offers that we know of every storm of the 2005 season because of our weather satellites. All hurricane seasons prior to our eye in the sky may have had storms which were never documented. In my recent discussion with Mr. Landsea, I asked about articles relating to global warming and hurricane frequency and intensity.

Was the 2005 hurricane season an anomaly? Or had we experienced a profound change affecting hurricanes which would alter all coastal communities from Texas to Maine? His response was that with increased temperatures, we should have seen a slight increase in intensity, but not to the explosion of strong storms like we experienced in 2005.

With many researchers ready to pin all extreme weather on global warming, and with the weather we had in 2005, it would appear an obvious truth. Yet, with the tragic year of 1893 and others in between, it appears that many other unpredictable factors need to be considered. The 2006 and 2007 hurricane seasons are not comparable to 2005, yet we still have a planet as warm as it was in 2005.

Another comparison between the 2005 and 1893 seasons is the ability to observe all of the hurricane activity of the entire Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico. Science is based on observation. With a greater population to impact in 2005 and much more technology, there is no chance of any hurricane activity going unnoticed. With far fewer people to observe, and the only dependable technology, the barometer, it is obvious that 1893 was terrible and that its true fury will never be known. The hurricane season of 1893 may or may not have been as bad as 2005.

So are we, or are we not experiencing more storms and more powerful storms?
Chris Landsea may choose Bob Dylan's words, "don't speak too soon, for the world's
still in spin...for the times they are a-changin'".

And as far as Louisiana is concerned, we may still debate which disaster was
greater in 1893. Was it the Cheniere Hurricane, or the birth of Huey Long?

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