

Pigott, Leila: An Angry God ^[1]

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Leila Pigott: An Angry God

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 8/8/1999. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

Leila Pigott and her husband, Dallas, owned a fleet of shrimp trawlers and a shrimp packing house in Southport where [hurricane Hazel](#) ^[3] struck Brunswick County on Oct. 15, 1954. With 150 mph winds, Hazel was the only category 4 hurricane to hit the North Carolina coast this century. By comparison, Fran, which wreaked such havoc in 1996, was a category 3 hurricane with maximum winds of about 125 mph.

Hazel's winds made forests look like they had been scorched by fire. The storm killed more than 600 people from Haiti to Canada, including 19 in North Carolina. Nearly every building on the Brunswick County beaches was destroyed - 352 of the 357 buildings at Long Beach.

At her home in Southport, only a stone's throw from the Cape Fear River, Pigott recalled the day before Hazel made landfall.

In **Leila Pigott's words**:



Leila Pigott. Photo by Chris Seward, 1999. To request permission for further use or to purchase a print, please contact the News & Observer.

That morning the sky was full of pelicans, sea gulls and egrets, all the sea birds. They were flying all over the town. When there is a bad storm out in the ocean, the sea birds come ashore.

I began watching the weather. It would start raining and blowing real hard, then the sun would come out. The air began to stifle. We all sighed a great deal. We were short tempered. We just weren't right. I know now that was the barometric p

I stayed awake all night listening. I walked, I prayed, I cussed. The lights blinked off and on all night. The house was shaking. Five o'clock the lights went out. When I roused my husband, he hit the floor, started dressing and barking orders. T

We did the best we could. My husband and a friend went down to our shrimp house on the waterfront. People from all over town were down there helping. There were lots of shrimp houses - I think there were 17 shrimp houses, plus canning

He was loading up all our records, piling them up in shrimp boxes, but the waves tore the runway up. There was no way to get a truck down there. The first thing that went was our roof. It went onto a restaurant that was on shore. Dallas had t

Then we had to battle the boats that were tied up down here in the old Yacht Basin. There's one house between me and the Yacht Basin. There were dozens and dozens of boats, all the way to the river. The trawlers were 45 to maybe 60 fee

Everybody had tied down as best they could, and the captains and the crews were on board with life jackets on. The wind was coming out of the northeast. The water was coming up. The water was already up to our knees.

The storm hit 10 o'clock in the morning at high tide. It was the October lunar high tide, the worst possible time. We had an 18-foot tidal surge. I was sitting in this house watching the fresh water come down meeting salt water come up in the w

I watched my husband go from here, swimming, down to the boats. He would yell instructions about what to do, but I kept begging him not to go.

The wind shifted and got to the stern of the boats. That was horrible. The men had to jump overboard and swim over here and abandon the boats. There was nothing on Earth they could do. One did manage to get out, the Royal Flush. She n

The owner and his cook had left the restaurant across the street in a pickup truck, and a wave drowned the motor out and they had to get out. They swam over here to my house. I watched our boats break loose and go and crush that truck. T

I was looking in horror because I thought those shrimp boats were going to come straight on in to my house, but the electric wires caught their masts and the wind shot them over there toward that house.

I watched a yacht, the Stardust 5, break away loose. She knocked the garage completely down and part of the porch of the house next door, and was headed straight for my windows in there. I went into shock. I couldn't move. Dallas happen

My husband kept going down there. He went out that way and went down the bulkhead. I was watching him from my house, and all of a sudden I lost him. I couldn't see him. I died a thousand deaths. Then his head popped up and I saw him :

He swam and I called the men in the house. When we opened that door, I don't know how to describe how much water came in. But it came in and he tumbled in with it, and it took every one of us to get that door closed. When he stood up, h

I never shed so many years in my life, out of sheer absolute fright. If you can imagine what it would be like to be sitting in a house with water all underneath you and all around you as far as you could see, and it not stopping, and the wind blo

There wasn't anything left then but just to sit here and wait. I finally settled down on the bottom step of my stairway, and I was watching the water slosh up on the windowpane. My daughter said, "Mother, why is the water so high and the wind

Finally, by 3 o'clock it was perfectly calm. The neighbors next door came over here. We got together and we started walking and stopping at each house. We cried every time we saw each other. On the waterfront there was not a single buildi

This is an excerpt from the "[Listening for A Change](#) ^[4]" project of the [Southern Oral History Program](#) ^[5] at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Additional Resources:

[Audio Recording](#) ^[6]: Interview with Leila Hubbard Pigott by David S. Cecelski, 26 July 1999, K-0263, in the Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. <http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/sohp/id/13390> ^[6]

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