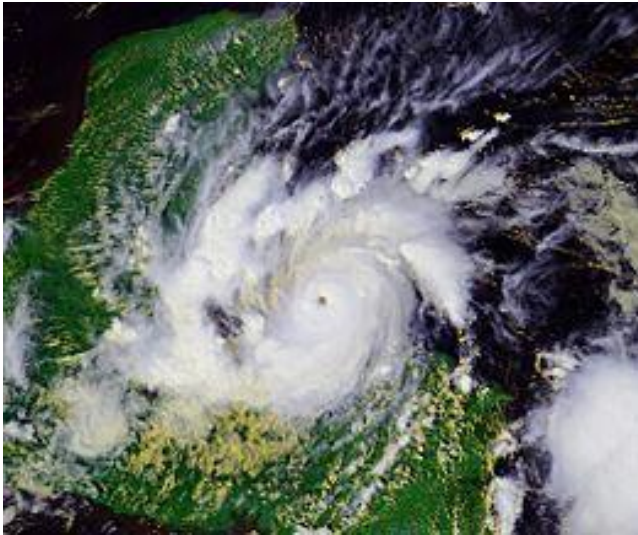
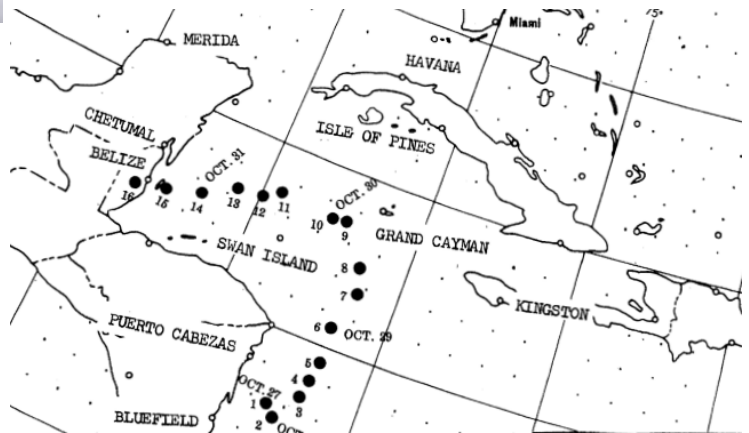


Hattie



On Sunday the 29th October 1961 my parents were at a lunchtime drinks party at the Madisons'. Peter and Marie lived on the Southern Foreshore in Belize in the Stansbury family house: like most of the period, a two-storey wooden building on wooden stilts. Peter was ex-US consul, and Marie a daughter of the Stansbury family, wealthy merchants who owned the largest store, Brodies. Talk at the party was about Hattie, the powerful hurricane which was heading for the south coast of Cuba. Castro had recently shown his communist credentials, and no doubt there was an element of schadenfreude. Two days later there was not a trace of that house except for a few posts.

Later that day Hattie did something hurricanes don't do: instead of continuing on a generally northerly track, she turned West and then Southwest, heading straight for Belize! This was by now a big category 5 storm, with winds well over 100 mph. Red and black hurricane flags were flown on public buildings, BHBS was full of public safety announcements, schools were closed and designated hurricane shelters opened, boats including ours - were moved up the river. People began boarding their windows, while some moved inland. Memories of 1931 (the previous major hurricane which hit the town killing over 2,000) and later smaller storms were still fresh for many people: this was going to be a bad one.



My father had always doubted the ability of our house to withstand anything more than a minor storm. The house had been built of pine, probably half-a-dozen years before we bought it in 1954: a large two-storey clapboard house at 23 Regent Street, midway between Government House at one end and the Courthouse at the other. It was originally two flats, and always looked a bit top-heavy. The foundations (wooden stilts like most houses in the town) were not particularly robust, and he was not sure of the strength of the timber-framed construction. We would go to my Uncle Eric's new office-factory.

Belize City is of course at sea level – literally. The road on the Foreshore is no more than six inches above high tide, with Regent Street perhaps two feet higher than that. High tides with a strong easterly breeze regularly flood the lanes: luckily the tidal range is only about six inches! Regent Street was the original “front street” of the town: a slight ridge in the mangrove swamp where the earliest settlers built their first homes. The 50-100 yards of land to the east was reclaimed from the sea in the 19th century, to create the present “Foreshore” with its low sea wall. Imagine what 8-10 feet of storm surge can do!

Bowen & Bowen had been bottling a range of soft drinks in a small wooden factory immediately behind their home for many years. They had recently been awarded the Coca-Cola franchise for the country and had built a new concrete factory on the site, while they continued bottling in a temporary structure behind it: really a large tin shed. The new building was opened by Governor Sir Colin Thornley with due ceremony at the end of September, and finishing touches were being made to the new white automated bottling equipment on the ground floor – when Hattie arrived.

Through Monday we did what we could to board up windows and doors, and then we – my parents, Granny and I – bundled ourselves into our Land Rover and Studebaker to move a few possessions the half-dozen blocks to Bowen & Bowen. The most important was Granny's bed: she was a large, heavy 83-year old

woman who spent most of her time in bed. We set up camp on the ground floor. Above on the second floor were Governor Thornley and his family, Colonial Secretary Porcher's family (he remained at his post), and the Bowens (Eric, Emily and Bruce). We had tried to persuade my Aunts Gladys and Barbara to come with us, but Barbara would not leave her many dogs and cats and Gladys would not leave Barbara.

The weather in an approaching hurricane is eerie. The wind drops, the sky becomes overcast, the birds go quiet, the sea appears to recede, and it begins to drizzle: almost like an English summer's day, just a bit warmer! We had an early supper and locked 23 Regent Street just before dusk, leaving by the back door.

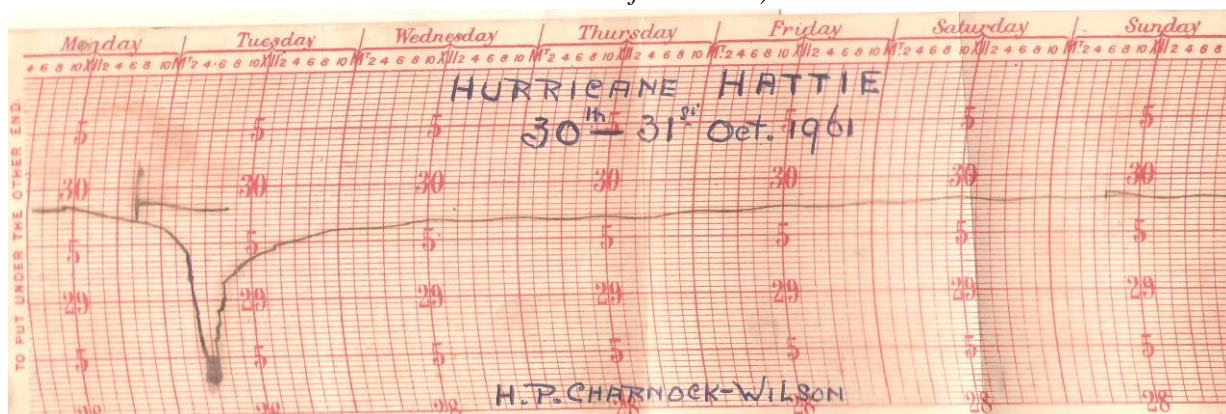
By early evening it had begun to blow, the wind gradually strengthened. By late evening the lights went out. There was the occasional crash of something loose being blown over. Then BHBS went off-air. Roofs began to break up, and sheets of "zinc" (galvanized iron roofing) were flying through the air like pieces of paper. Emily went across to their house to try to rescue the cat, and a sheet of zinc hit the road a few feet in front of her. There was a crack like a pistol shot in the room where young David Porcher was sleeping, and Mollie Porcher screamed "My Baby". A glass louver had smashed. Then my uncle's zinc-clad temporary factory began to disintegrate. The noise of wind and destruction was deafening. In the early hours of Halloween the water began to rise. First there was a trickle under the main door, and then it burst open.

There was a flaw in the design of my uncle's new building. The offices on the upper floor were accessed by a stairway on the outside of the building. There was an electric lift for moving materials between the floors – not much use without power – and a ladder between the ground floor production area and the mixing room for Coke concentrate above, but no internal staircase. While the able-bodied among us could easily have used the ladder, my grandmother weighed at least a couple of hundred-weight and could scarcely walk, let alone climb ladders. The water was now at least eighteen inches deep, lapping at her bed. At this moment fate in the shape of two burly men (Arthur Mapp and friend) intervened. Their house had just collapsed and they walked/swam to us. Between them and my father they man-handled Granny up the ladder, followed by her bed and the rest of us.

We spent the rest of the night listening to the chaos outside. At one point, Bruce said "I guess the Halloween party will be cancelled". As dawn began to break the wind seemed to drop somewhat, and we could look out through the glass louver windows. King Street was a river of debris probably six feet deep. A buoy from the main ship channel at English Cay floated by. Governor Thornley described the sight as "like being at sea". Much of the debris came from my uncle's warehouse – under their home immediately east of the office, or the customs warehouses on the opposite side of the river: boxes of candles and bags of flour are vivid memories. A mahogany log was bouncing around in the bottling room below us. As far as we could see, every house had lost its roof, windows and doors, and the harbour was empty.

By late morning the wind had dropped and the water began to recede, and my father decided that he would try to get through to our home and to my aunts on the Foreshore – at the eastern end the same lane, Dean Street. He climbed over debris, much of the way jumping from log to log or along the tops of walls and fences. He reached our house and found the back door open. He went into the kitchen and tried the gas: it lit! From the upper windows he could see across to my aunts' home. They were standing on the upper rear verandah. Their roof had gone, but the house appeared otherwise intact. He made a thermos of coffee and fought his way down the lane.

(This trace is from the only barograph which survived Hattie, I believe. I still have the barograph, which dates from before WW1!)



The old "Foreshore" house was a tribute to wooden construction. This was a large two-storey seven-bedroom house, fifty feet from the sea. It had survived the 1931 hurricane: knocked off its foundations, but had been jacked up and placed on new ones. Now the roof was gone completely. On the ground floor the entire front wall, the front steps and verandah, about a third of both side walls, most internal partitions and all the furniture were gone. The front staircase dangled. But the upper storey was intact apart from some of the shutters and some glass: aunts, dogs and cats were all alive and well, all supported by the rear part of the house. One more big surge and that would have been that!

It was the same story for 90% of the houses and other buildings in the city. Many had simply disappeared, but almost all had lost roof, windows, verandahs, fences, or were knocked off their foundations. Every vehicle in the city was under water and ruined.

23 Regent St was quite a surprise. Everything was intact except the open back door. One broken pane of glass in my bedroom; a piece of pine torn from another house which had pierced our shutters and windows and embedded itself in an internal wall (we have it to this day); and all the carpets soaked where the water had come up through the floor and under the doors to a depth of about six inches. The sea had not reached the top of the concrete vat in the garden, so we had drinking water. The gas cylinders under the house had floated around, but the pipes had not ruptured, so we had gas to cook with. There was still food in the fridge and freezer. We even had the only barograph in the country which survived the storm: the trace is above. We later found that many of the nails in the roof had drawn, presumably due to the pressure inside the house, but not a single sheet of roofing was missing. For a house that we distrusted, it certainly served us well.

JCW's Hattie Pictures

Luckily there was a roll of film in my little Brownie camera, so I was able to take these in the first few days

Rows

1. View from 23 Regent St: Wolffsohn's house, diagonally opposite us; Regent St looking North; clearing Regent St looking south
2. Bowen's Foreshore : most of the front of the house has gone (the fence was put in a few days after the hurricane)
3. Foreshore looking south - Murphy's house is the first; Dean St looking North-East across the backs of Bowen's, Usher's and Murphy's houses; South St looking south – Government House is in the distance and all the other houses between, of which there were many, have gone
4. Harley's store from Regent St; Melhado Building from the bridge; Bishopthorpe on the Foreshore – the verandas have all gone
5. New Rd from Hyde's Lane; clearing Regent St again; Wesley School from our upper balcony – the rubble from Regent St has been pushed there.



Hattie – HPCW's account. *My father wrote what follows, presumably soon after the event. I came across the MS after writing what appears above and below it. It clearly differs somewhat from my own account, which is based on my memory and on anecdote.*

Saturday 28th October saw 'Hattie' travelling very nearly due north, and on Sunday with her movement north of Swan Island still moving NNW, British Honduras breathed a sigh of relief.

By Sunday evening the unprecedented had happened. Hattie had done a hairpin turn and was travelling WSW, and was expected to enter the land area at the South of the Yucatan Peninsula and the Corozal area. However by Sunday morning the first hurricane warning flag was flying at the courthouse, and within an hour the second warning flag was up, indicating that the hurricane was a threat to Belize.

The news indicated that Hattie would hit Belize District & South of Belize in the early hours of Tuesday 31st October, with the 'eye' passing just south of Belize about midday.

Monday was spent in boarding up windows and reinforcing doors, and by evening many had sought accommodation in the various shelters at their disposal. These shelters consisted of buildings considered the strongest in the city: two catholic convents; schools; churches; and the public buildings.

Early in the evening of Monday my son John and I moved a bed for Grannie Wilson [my mother] and some chairs for ourselves with some few possessions to the new Crystal Bottling Works, a new concrete building with new machinery and equipment, especially installed but not yet in operation for the production of Coca Cola, the property of my brother-in-law Eric Bowen.

Eric & I had moved our two boats, my 26 ft. cabin cruiser, up river to what has always been considered a safe anchorage in a backwater by the electricity works.

About 7 pm Monday 30th we moved Grannie to the bottling works and put her to bed, John staying with her, whilst I returned to finish fastening up the house and to collect my wife Olive.

By 10 pm we were all installed at the bottling works, where we found that HE the Governor & family, with the wife of the First Secretary Porcher, had also taken refuge with Eric and his family.

By 11 pm the wind increased and by midnight the full force struck at 150 mph with gusts up to 200 mph blowing from the NW.

The building seemed strong and unshakable, but the noise of the rattling steel shutters on the ground floor made sleep impossible and the periodic crash as some neighbouring building fell against them kept nerves on edge.

About 1 am violent hammering on a door on the leeward side produced Arthur Mapp and friend who had left their house as it has started to move, whilst a little later Bill Bowman and his aunt sought refuge as Harley's store, their shelter, had crashed about them.

At about 6 am on the 31st Oct just as a murky dawn began to show, the wind changed to SW with the same velocity and the water started to rise.

About this time a sectional plate glass window on the first floor gave way with a terrific crash, under pressure from the wind.

The water rose so rapidly that by the time we had moved Grannie Wilson across the main floor to the stairs, the water was ankle deep and the staircase to the first floor, being more in the nature of a ladder, made her progress very slow and difficult and necessitated considerable man-handling of her, to which Arthur Mapp rendered valuable assistance, although the man-handling caused considerable grazing to her legs and bruising to her body.

The tide continued to rise, bringing with it very imaginable form of flotsam – a huge channel buoy, a 60 ft. coastal boat, cylinders of butane, sacks of flour, children's toys, dolls, furniture, cases of unopened merchandise, mahogany logs which acting as battering rams demolished all before them.

The steel shutters on the ground floor crumpled with a crash under the weight of water and debris, and the new modern factory was a shambles.

It was not before 10 am that the tidal wave, some 10 feet or more above sea level, started to subside and the wind eased to gale force.

By 11 am it was possible to get out, and I waded waist deep, clambering over the debris, one minute on top, the next falling through, taking 30 minutes or more to travel the short distance to our own house, and nearby on the foreshore, to that of my sisters-in-law, who had weathered the storm alone with their five dogs.

It was astounding to find that our house had suffered little damage, except for water which had seeped through the floor and been driven through chinks in the shuttered windows.

The Foreshore house was a shambles, roof gone and the whole front of the building missing, one bedroom seemed intact with the back staircase leading to it. However, other than being badly shaken, my sisters-in-law seemed little the worse for their ordeal in person, although all their furniture and worldly possessions were no more. Having talked with them I returned to my family to inform them that their sisters were safe.

The destruction, without being seen could not be believed. Certainly 90% of houses and buildings were damaged in some form or another, with a probable 60% irreparable. All streets were blocked and mud 4 to 6 inches deep lay everywhere as the water receded.

Looting was rampant, even whilst the water was still two or three feet deep, and most of the larger stores were cleaned out. In several instances tear-gas had to be used to disperse the looters.

Hurricane Janet, 29 Sept 1955 – Belize Hurricane Relief HQ (Militia HQ, Belize)

Hurricane Janet hit the northern part of the colony (mainly Corozal Town and district) on the 28th Sept 1955. My father was asked by the Governor to take charge of the relief operation in Belize for those who were evacuated from the disaster area. This is his account, found in MS at the same time as the above account.

On Thursday morning the 29th Sept Red Cross HQ was warned to be ready to receive between 200-300 evacuees from the north of the colony, to open Militia HQ as a receiving centre, to house, clothe, and feed as necessary.

At 3 pm 6 arrived from Corozal, and that night about 60 arrived from Sarteneja by MV Patricia [the Governor's launch]. Arrivals were more-or-less continuous night and day until Wednesday 5th October, when some 502 had been received at HQ. At this juncture sea traffic eased off and arrivals by road became more numerous. A road block at Tower Hill Ferry to prevent people coming south by road to seek help at this HQ proved ineffective, and it was not before Thursday evening the 13th that the steady trickle ceased. By 5 pm on the 13th 746 refugees had passed through this HQ. Of these 94 received medical attention at the HQ clinic under the care of Mrs Ashcroft [Lord Ashcroft's mother] and her willing helpers, with Dr Clarke in daily attendance and on call when new arrivals were expected, many others being treated as outpatients. Feeding arrangements at HQ were in the hands of Mrs Henriquez, who will no doubt make her own report on this subject, the greatest number being fed at any one meal was 230 Sunday lunch the 9th. The greatest number living and sleeping at HQ was 127 persons on the 6th Oct.

Of the administration staff of which I can speak with first-hand knowledge, and if any distinction should be drawn, I would especially mention Mr McFall & Mrs Gutierrez, who have worked tirelessly and continually throughout the operation, but in mentioning them I would in no way wish to detract from the value of Mrs Lizarraga, who has turned up cheerfully in the middle of the night on many occasions and generally given valuable assistance.

Of the clinical staff I would like to give special; mention to Mrs Ashcroft, who with Mrs Sabben & Mrs Urwin carried the brunt of the hard work night and day for the first few days until other nurses came forward.

Mrs Ashcroft & Mrs Henriquez will no doubt furnish reports on their sections.

As far as I am aware all parties more than pulled their weight and the organization has run very smoothly. I would like to draw attention to the absolute cooperation all Govt Depts have given me throughout the entire operation.

The valuable assistance rendered by the scouts is worthy of mention, and the few member of the VG left at HQ have given every assistance.

It has been a pleasure to observe the grateful thanks of 99% of refugees for the relatively meagre assistance we have been able to render.

Admin Staff: HPCW; O i/c Mr McFall 2 i/c
Mrs Gutierrez & Mrs Lizarraga; interpreters & liaison
Mr Searle Jr Mr Bennett (tailor) Scouts

Health Staff: Mrs Ashcroft; O i/c Nurses Mrs Sabben, Urwin, Mullings, Kieffer, Cadle; Red Cross
Personnel

Feeding: Mrs Henriquez; O i/c et al.

Hattie: the aftermath

British Honduras, though the size of Wales, had a population of about 80,000 when Hattie struck. Of these about 30,000 lived in Belize town and a few thousand more in the towns and villages destroyed by the storm. The town was the administrative, cultural, commercial and communication centre: the only port and the centre for distribution of virtually all imports and exports. In fact the town and country were synonymous for most people, so it is no surprise that "Belize" was the chosen name for the new country. Hattie therefore paralysed the entire country.

She was one of the worst storms ever recorded in the western Caribbean: winds of 150+ mph, 8-10 feet of storm surge. She destroyed half the buildings in Belize town and damaged most of the remainder. She wiped out most of Stann Creek town, and villages up and down the coast. Most of the Cayes east and southeast of Belize were wiped clean, and some disappeared: one house out of over thirty remained standing on St George's Caye, which was cut into three islets. About 300 people died – a tribute to the warnings and preparedness. About 20 bodies were found clustered around the altar of the "Scots Kirk", which was left a pile of bricks.

Every street in the town was a river of debris piled high. The swing bridge, then the only connection between the north and south sides of the town, had been partially opened by the storm and was impassable for cars. Every shop had been flooded: perishables were of course ruined instantly, but tinned goods, dry goods, medicines, etc were soaked in filthy water and therefore unusable. Everywhere there was a thick layer of stinking mud, which gradually baked in the sun: first a hard fly-blown crust then a fine dust which got into everything.

Most of the population of the coastal towns and villages, rich and poor alike, were homeless. Those who could afford to sent their families away as soon as they could, the men staying behind to salvage what they could of their homes or businesses. The poor were both homeless and hungry.

At first people picked up what they could on the streets, but soon turned to looting the few remaining stores and warehouses which were intact. The local police seemed unable to control this, so the company of British soldiers at Airport Camp was drafted in to maintain order, soon joined by sailors from HMS Troubridge, and curfew was imposed. Shots were fired into the air. I remember witnessing a lone British soldier maintaining order on the swing bridge: there was a tradition that people would rush across the bridge on foot or bicycle as soon as it opened, but he would have none of it and gently waved them back.

Thankfully the Public Works Dept had the foresight to send all its heavy equipment up-country, so was immediately able to start bulldozing the streets clear of rubble. US medical teams flew in from Panama, and British and US aid arrived by air and sea. Feeding stations were established, and shelters made available.

We must have been one of the luckiest families in the town, with our home intact, food and water and clean beds, etc. My father volunteered to help where he could and was put in charge first of requisitioning transport and then of controlling building supplies. Belize had only recently introduced partial self-government, and the new ministers were finding it hard to know where to begin. He was given an office in the police station, and I cycled through the mud at lunchtime to take his sandwiches.

Both our cars were of course useless: there was a large wooden coasting boat sitting on top of them, and one day my father found a couple of REME squaddies dismantling the Land Rover for spares: he protested and was duly compensated. We also found our boat "Revelation" where we had tied her up on the river bank, holed and not worth repairing: I think we got a few dollars for her.

I was lucky to have a roll of film for my little Brownie camera, so as soon as I could I got out and took pictures of the destruction. Three or four days after Hattie I was sitting on our front verandah, when Jim Leslie came into sight carrying a heavy load on his shoulder. It was the little generator from our smallholding at Sandhill: he had managed to find a truck coming to town. It only produced about 250 Watts, but enough to run our two small fridges in turn during the day, and give us electric light in the evening.

A shipment of new Minis arrived from England just before Hattie, and they had wisely been stored near the airport. Dad grabbed one as soon as he could.

Granny had been badly bruised and shaken by being dragged up the ladder on the night of Hattie, so she remained in bed at Bowen & Bowen for the first week or so, occasionally making rude comments to whoever was listening: she was as deaf as a post and quite disorientated. There was no question of bringing her back to Regent St until the roads were clear and a car could be found. Her legs turned all colours of the rainbow and my father feared gangrene, so he persuaded one of the US army doctors to have a look at her. Once she established that he knew what he was doing, they got on well together and he told her she was good for another 10 years – she lasted another nine, dying of a broken hip and subsequent gangrene.

Unlike most, we had no pressing need to leave Belize, but as the weeks went by living conditions did not improve, and there was a real danger of disease epidemics. There was no school, and most of my friends had gone away. It was decided that my mother and I would go to Guatemala for a month or so to stay with the Prauns, a Polish family we had known in Belize, and that my father would come up when he could leave his voluntary work and Granny: of course there was no question of putting her on an airplane. We therefore spent a month with the Prauns, and Dad a fortnight, returning to Belize in time for Christmas. Guatemala was an eye-opener for me: my first exposure to TV “*Este es Canal Tres, de nuevo en su hogar. El siguiente programa: caricaturas*”; being under the same roof as a girl my age – Alexandra Praun; living in a “big city; learning a bit of Spanish...

Life in Belize began to return to some sort of normality by Christmas, families began to drift back, and schools reopened in January. By then, however, the decision had been made. Belize was no longer a suitable place for us, and we would return to England for my education. It had always been planned that I would come back here to school, but Hattie helped to crystallize the decision. Leaving Belize in April 1962 was a wrench for me: I was a fairly mature almost-thirteen-year-old; I knew nothing of England; I was in love with Sandra Tattersfield; I was leaving all my friends and the free-and-easy life in Belize, which I was just beginning to enjoy properly....



Not sure where this is, but utter devastation!



The Bowen family home on the Foreshore



Russell Grant's on Barrack Road



Wolffsohn's, diagonally opposite ours

Remembering Hurricane Hattie – 56 Years Ago

October 23 10:00 2017 [Print This Article](#) *(I found this browsing on the internet one day and include it as found for interest)*

Hurricane Hattie struck Belize on October 31, 1961, killing more than 400 people and leaving thousands homeless. Almost half of Belize City was demolished by the storm.

The storm that would become Hattie had formed two weeks earlier in the Atlantic Ocean and then moved slowly west toward Central America. When it reached the coast of Belize, known at the time as British Honduras, it was a Category 4 hurricane with sustained winds of 140 miles per hour and gusts reaching 180 mph. It was the strongest storm to hit Belize to date. With accurate weather predictions still in their infancy, an attempted evacuation was only partially successful.

The barrier islands of Turneffe and Caye Caulker were totally submerged by the storm surge. Hattie then brought a 12-foot surge to the mainland, flattening all buildings near the shore. Stann Creek, a small fishing village on the coast near Belize City, was completely destroyed. Following the hurricane, a village was built on the outskirts of Belize City and named Hattieville.

Due to the devastation of Hattie, the government chose to construct the new capital city 50 miles inland on high ground and safe from tidal waves. Because of the severity of the hurricane, the name “Hattie” was retired and will never be used as the name of an Atlantic hurricane again.

Below are some amazing photos of the destruction in Belize City caused by Hurricane Hattie 53 years ago.

LOOKING BACK TO 1961



Hattie victims line up at Department of Housing and Planning: Office of Central Authority, and Department of Information and Communications.



Old Market in Downtown Belize City



The building in the center was the Royal Bank of Canada, today the Belize Bank. At the rear left of the photo you can see the Supreme Court building with its signature architecture.



The large building on the right with the sign was Belize Estate and Produce Limited.



Not sure where this building was or is in Belize City. Someone has suggested it may be the Peace Corp building... but I really can't say. Any clues anyone?



Not sure where this one is.



The panoramic scene at the Old Swing Bridge, a crossing still in action...



This building, says CBA engineers Philip Waight and Paul Satchwell, fell down off its posts and ended up partly in the street. Waight's family home also fell off its posts, he said on The Adele Ramos Show.



This photo is smack downtown in Belize City. The building to the right is Hofius Hardware – to the left is the present-day First Caribbean International Bank on Albert Street.



These men were discussing disaster relief efforts 3 days after Hattie.



On the Barracks... how our ladies did it back in the day and they looked uncomplaining!



HELICOPTER DROPS KITFULL OF FOODSTUFF AT NORTHERN END
OF MEMORIAL PARK BOY. 1961.

Relief via helicopter airlifted to the Memorial Park in Belize City.