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Yankeetown and Inglis suffer from hurricane



The Levy County Public Boat Ramp at the west end of Levy County Road 40 in Yankeetown continues to show use. Thursday afternoon there were at least a half dozen boat trailers there. The gate to the county park was closed, though.

Story and Photos By Jeff M. Hardison © Sept. 9, 2016 @ 12:37 a.m.

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LEVY COUNTY -- Between 75 and 100 homes in Yankeetown and four houses in Inglis suffered from flood damage as a result of rain, wind and storm surge from Hurricane Hermine, Yankeetown Mayor Debra Weiss and Inglis Mayor Drinda Merritt said on Thursday (Sept. 8). There was no life or serious injuries reported so far, but the damage to structures and property was significant.

The Salvation Army was awesome, Mayor Weiss said. That group wrapped up its helping hands at lunchtime on Thursday, but they were extremely helpful, she said.

If anyone wants to volunteer, there are gatherings at the Yankeetown-Inglis Woman's Club in Yankeetown each morning at 9 a.m., and then people go out from there.

Helen Ciallella is said to be leading the volunteers in the Yankeetown area.



The start of this bonfire behind the Yankeetown General Store includes wooden items from the residence and from the store. House and store owner Tammy Simmons is standing near the fire that was lit late Thursday afternoon (Sept. 8).

Mayors Merritt and Weiss said people who receive assistance from the government for food (food stamps or EBT cards) can fill out forms at either City Hall in Inglis or Yankeetown if that is needed.

"We tell people that they must evacuate," Mayor Weiss said. "They don't."

Mayor Merritt said she and Mayor Weiss were part of a tabletop exercise for disasters some

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time ago. In that practice, Yankeetown was flooded and Inglis had been struck by a tornado, she said.

Merritt said they learned from that work with the Levy County Emergency Management Department that the two cities were not very well prepared. The mayors and cities' staff members worked to create the Inglis-Yankeetown Disaster Plan.



This old stone structure has been through some storms. Now abandoned and damaged, the building is in an area named Crackertown -- in the Inglis-Yankeetown area along Levy County Road 40.

To adopt this, both Town Councils would have to approve it, Merritt said. The municipal leaders in Inglis adopted it, despite Mayor Weiss endorsing its adoption. The Yankeetown City Council members wanted a lot of changes and it was never adopted, Weiss said.

Mayor Weiss said she had planned to bring it up again, but Hurricane Hermine struck before that. Weiss was out of time when the hurricane hit, but she was able to get things done via telephone calls to Tommy Sholes, who was the incident commander in Yankeetown for this event.

She returned to Yankeetown after the storm had passed through the area.

Mayor Merritt said her town went into action with the plan that had been created.

On Wednesday (Aug. 31), Inglis implemented its plan, and at 9 a.m. town staff members had their first meeting. The second meeting was at 9 a.m. on Thursday (Sept. 1), she said.

They also met at noon, 3 p.m., 6 p.m. and 9 p.m. on Thursday as they watched the depression become a tropical storm. The mayor told her husband that she would not be home until after the storm, because she wanted to watch how things unfolded from the Community Center.

When he asked why, she told him the Community Center had a generator in case the electricity went out.

Sheriff Bobby McCallum dropped by on Thursday afternoon, Mayor Merritt said, and she told the sheriff that if the wind became too strong, deputies could stay in the Community Center.

The Community Center is not an official hurricane shelter, she said, but it worked on Thursday night and through Friday morning.

As the storm hit its peak in the wee hours Friday, there were 11 deputies in the Community Center, she said.

Officers with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission pulled people from a car that had been swept off the road from water flowing across it into a ditch, Merritt said. They had attempted to evacuate when the water in their home was waist deep, and the water just took the car off the road.

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They stayed at the Community Center that night.

Another man, wife and their dog took shelter in the Community Center, she said.

Everything west of U.S. Highway 19 was supposed to be evacuated, Merritt said. She was in the Community Center to monitor the storm – even though it is west of U.S. 19.

“I know of no Inglis resident who evacuated,” Merritt said.

Overall, Inglis fared much better than Horseshoe Beach, Steinhatchee and the Town of Suwannee in Dixie County, she said, and better than Cedar Key, Rosewood and Yankeetown in Levy County.

Yard debris left on the right-of-way will be collected in Inglis, she said.

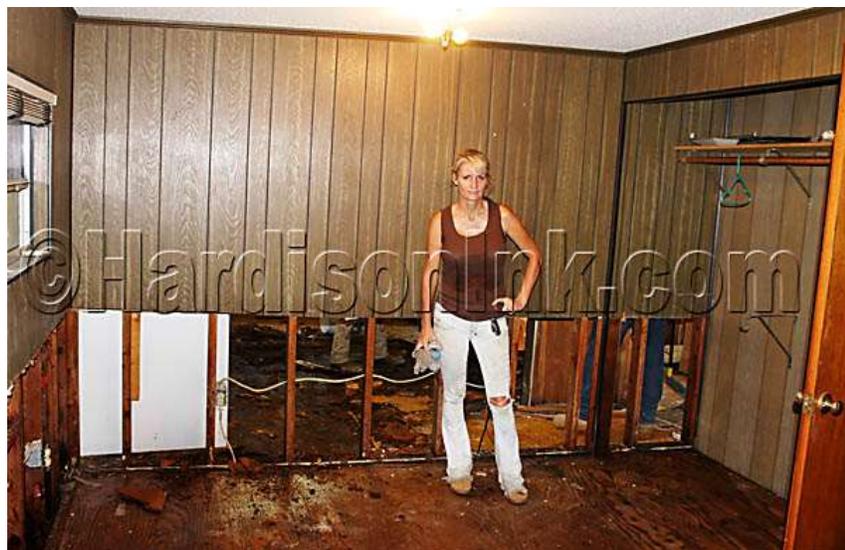
Yankeetown had pile upon pile of household furniture as well as debris along every road.

“Some people lost everything,” Merritt said of her neighbors in Yankeetown. “One older couple lost their cat. It got out of the house, and they cannot find it. I feel really bad for the older people. There is a 98-year-old woman who lost everything. What is she going to do?”



This used to be Tammy Simmons' living room. Flood damaged parts of the house are being removed by Baptist men who volunteered to help people in times of disaster.

One of the two bedrooms of the house shows the bottom part of one wall is completely gone now.



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Tammy Simmons holds up a floor vent to show there is no duct work connecting to it under the house now.



The whole set of Tammy Simmons' personal belongings now sits on the back of a truck, waiting to go into storage. Everything else is gone.

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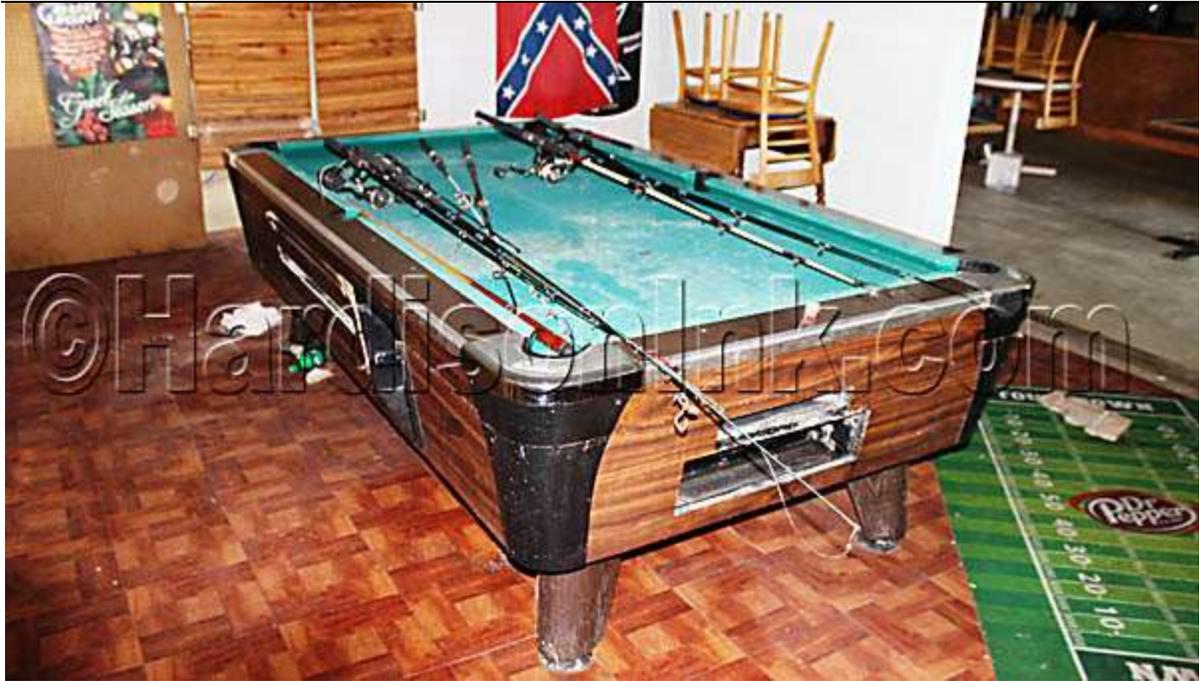


The line of spots running at about waist height shows the level of the flood on the outside of the grocery store.



The main front part of Yankeetown General Store is now a damp floor.

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The pool table.



Part of the kitchen shows equipment turned over from the force of water in the building.

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One business owner in Yankeetown was visited Thursday (Sept. 8) and her losses exemplify the degree of damage that is causing heartache, sorrow and sadness throughout most of Yankeetown and elsewhere along the Gulf Coast of Florida, from Pinellas County going north.

Tammy Simmons, 44, bought the Yankeetown General Store a year ago.

This little grocery store was also a place to get meals and play a game of pool.

Simmons has had a rough first year in her business. Her two-bedroom, two-bath house is connected to the store. She has had her house burglarized and was robbed in her store.

And then Hurricane Hermine brought a storm surge that decimated her house and her business. The dumpster and a bait freezer were found a couple of days afterward – washed into some nearby woods.

Simmons said she is glad that her grandparents Robert and Juanita Chilton of Kentucky are “snowbirds.” She is able to stay in their house during this time of possible rebuilding.

Simmons said she lacks wind and flood insurance.

“These Baptist church people are wonderful,” she said. “I don’t know what I could have done without them.”

She was making reference to the volunteers who are part of the Florida Baptist Convention Disaster Relief.

Six men started working on removing material from her house, starting on Tuesday and they are leaving at noon on Friday. However, it is anticipated that a relief crew from this group will continue to help this victim.

The men working Thursday were Pastor Tim Folds of First Baptist Church of Graceville; Pastor Brian Taylor of Damascus Baptist Church of Graceville; and Austin Dearing, Adam Smith and Josh Wilson, all of Graceville; and Michael Terry Johnson of Pleasant Hill Baptist Church. Pastor Folds is a graduate of Bronson High School from the 1970s.

Simmons said she was at the Food Ranch Grocery Store and she saw a truck with “Disaster Relief” written on it. She accepted a card and called a number from the man.

The Florida Baptist Convention Disaster Relief had set up a command center in Crystal River and they were accepting calls for help, and evaluating what they could do for people.

On Thursday, Simmons said she has been focusing only on her house. She walked through the

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Yankeetown General Store, mentioning that she had not really even looked at it much, because of the enormity of what had happened to her.

She said she really does not know anyone in Yankeetown, and that these Baptist strangers were her only help so far. She hopes to fill out a form and see if FEMA will help her recover her home and business.

Simmons could not say enough how much the Baptist group had meant to her at this time of distress.

“We’re here on behalf of Jesus,” Pastor Folds said.

Simmons said she believes that people are put into other people’s lives for a purpose.