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A Man, a Time,
and the Deadliest
Hurricane in
History

ISAAC'S STORM

"A gripping account. . . fascinating to its core, and all the more compelling for being true." —*The New York Times Book Review*

ERIK LARSON

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A Man, a Time, and the Deadliest Hurricane in History

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VINTAGE BOOKS

A DIVISION OF RANDOM HOUSE, INC. NEW YORK

For Chris, Kristen, Lauren, and Erin

FIRST VINTAGE BOOKS EDITION, JULY 2000

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The Library of Congress has cataloged the Crown edition as follows:
Larson, Erik.

Isaac's storm: a man, a time, and the deadliest hurricane in history / Erik Larson.

— lsted.

p. cm.

Based on the diaries of Isaac Monroe Cline and on contemporary accounts.

1. Galveston (Tex.)—History—20th century. 2. Hurricanes—Texas—

Galveston—History—20th century. 3. Floods—Texas—Galveston—History—

20th century. 4. Cline, Isaac Monroe. 5. Galveston (Tex.) Biography. I. Cline, Isaac Monroe. II. Title.

F394.G2L37 1999

976.4' 139-dc21 99-25515

CIP

ISBN 0-609-60233-0

Vintage ISBN: 0-375-70827-8

Author photograph © Roseanne Olson Book design by Leonard Henderson
www.vintagebooks.com

Printed in the United States of America 10 9876543

CONTENTS

Atlantic Ocean Map/ix

Galveston Map/x-xi

The Beach: September 8, 1900/3

I: The Law of Storms/17

II: The Serpent's Coil/85

III: Spectacle/135

IV: Cataclysm/173

V: Strange News /221

VI: Haunted/261

Notes/275

Sources/307

Index/317

TELEGRAM

Washington, D.C.

Sept 9, 1900

To: Manager, Western Union

Houston, Texas

Do you hear anything about Galveston?

Willis L. Moore,

Chief, U.S. Weather Bureau

THE BEACH

September 8, 1900

THROUGHOUT THE NIGHT of Friday, September 7, 1900, Isaac Monroe Cline found himself waking to a persistent sense of something gone wrong. It was the kind of feeling parents often experienced and one that no doubt had come to him when each of his three daughters was a baby. Each would cry, of course, and often for astounding lengths of time, tearing a seam not just through the Cline house but also, in that day of open windows and unlocked doors, through the dew-sequined peace of his entire neighborhood. On some nights, however, the children cried only long enough to wake him, and he would lie there heart-struck, wondering what had brought him back to the world at such an unaccustomed hour. Tonight that feeling returned. Most other nights, Isaac slept soundly. He was a creature of the last turning of the centuries when sleep seemed to come more easily. Things were clear to him. He was loyal, a believer in dignity, honor, and effort. He taught Sunday school. He paid cash, a fact noted in a directory published by the Giles Mercantile Agency and meant to be held in strictest confidence. The small red book fit into a vest pocket and listed nearly all Galveston's established citizens—its police officers, bankers, waiters, clerics, tobacconists, undertakers, tycoons, and shipping agents—and rated them for creditworthiness, basing this appraisal on secret reports filed anonymously by friends and enemies. An asterisk beside a name meant trouble, "Inquire at Office," and marred the fiscal reputations of such people as Joe Amando, tamale vendor; Noah Allen, attorney; Ida Cherry, widow; and August Rollfing, housepainter. Isaac Cline got the highest rating, a "B," for "Pays Well, Worthy of Credit." In November of 1893, two years after Isaac arrived in Galveston to open the Texas Section of the new U.S. Weather Bureau, a government inspector wrote: "I suppose there is not a man in the Service on Station Duty who does more real work than he. . . . He takes a remarkable degree of interest in his work, and has a great pride in making his station one of the best and most important in the country, as it is now."

Upon first meeting Isaac, men found him to be modest and self-effacing, but those who came to know him well saw a hardness and confidence that verged on conceit. A New Orleans photographer captured this aspect in a photograph that is so good, with so much attention to the geometries of composition and light, it could be a portrait in oil. The background is black; Isaac's suit is black. His shirt is the color of bleached bone. He has a mustache and goatee and wears a straw hat, not the rigid cake-plate variety, but one with a sweeping scimitar brim that imparts to him the look of a French painter or riverboat gambler. A darkness suffuses the photograph. The brim shadows the top of his face. His eyes gleam from the darkness. Most striking is the careful positioning of his hands. His right rests in his lap, gripping what could be a pair of gloves. His left is positioned in midair so that the diamond on his pinkie sparks with the intensity of a star. There is a secret embedded in this photograph. For now, however, suffice it to say the portrait suggests vanity, that Isaac was aware of himself and how he moved through the day, and saw himself as something bigger than a mere recorder of rainfall and temperature. He was a scientist, not some farmer who gauged the weather by aches in a rheumatoid knee. Isaac personally had encountered and explained some of the strangest atmospheric phenomena a weatherman could ever hope to experience, but also had read the works of the most celebrated meteorologists and physical geographers of the nineteenth century, men like Henry Piddington, Matthew Fontaine Maury, William Redfield, and James Espy, and he had followed their celebrated hunt for the Law of Storms. He believed deeply that he understood it all.

He lived in a big time, astride the changing centuries. The frontier was still a living, vivid thing, with Buffalo Bill Cody touring his Wild West Show to sellout crowds around the globe, Bat Masterson a sports-writer in New Jersey, and Frank James opening the family ranch for tours at fifty cents a head. But a new America was emerging, one with big and global aspirations. Teddy Roosevelt, flanked by his Rough Riders, campaigned for the vice presidency. U.S. warships steamed to quell the Boxers. There was fabulous talk of a great American-built canal that would link the Atlantic to the Pacific, a task at which Vicomte de Lesseps and the French had so catastrophically failed. The nation in 1900 was swollen with pride and technological confidence. It was a time, wrote Sen. Chauncey Depew, one

of the most prominent politicians of the age, when the average American felt "four-hundred-percent bigger" than the year before. There was talk even of controlling the weather—of subduing hail with cannon blasts and igniting forest fires to bring rain.

In this new age, nature itself seemed no great obstacle.

ISAAC'S WIFE, CORA, lay beside him. She was pregnant with their fourth child and the pregnancy had entered a difficult stretch, but now she slept peacefully, her abdomen a pale island against the darkness.

The heat no doubt contributed to Isaac's sleeplessness. It had been a problem all week, in fact all summer, especially for Cora, whose pregnancy had transformed her body into a furnace. Temperatures in Galveston had risen steadily since Tuesday. The heat broke 90

degrees on Thursday, and hit 90 again on Friday. Moisture from weeks of heavy rain concentrated in the air until the humidity was unbearable. Earlier that week Isaac had read in the Galveston News how a heat wave in Chicago had killed at least three people. Even the northernmost latitudes were experiencing unusual levels of warmth. For the first time in recorded history, the Bering Glacier in what eventually would become Alaska had begun to shrink, sprouting rivers, calving icebergs, and ultimately shedding six hundred feet of its depth. A correspondent for The Western World magazine wrote, "The summer of 1900 will be long remembered as one of the most remarkable for sustained high temperature that has been experienced for almost a generation." The prolonged heat had warmed the waters of the Gulf to the temperature of a bath, a not-unhappy condition for the thousands of new immigrants just arrived from Europe at the Port of Galveston, known to many as the Western Ellis Island. Some camped now on the beach near the Army's new gun emplacements, steeling themselves for the long journey north to open land and the riches promised them by railroads intent on populating America's vast undeveloped prairie. In a pamphlet called Home Seekers, the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe described the lush land of the Texas coast as "waiting to be tickled into a laughing harvest." The railroad come-ons painted Texas as a paradise of benign weather, when in fact hurricanes scoured its coast, plumes of hot wind baked apples in its trees, and "blue northers" could drop the