DISASTER STRUCK without warning at the Louisiana coast 65 years ago during the opening days of October, leaving some 2,500 people dead and millions of dollars in properly destroyed. Yet the incident has been all but forgotten in history.

It was the worst hurricane ever recorded in the story of Louisiana.

Sunday, Oct. 1, 1915, broke calm and clear, but during the day, the air was heavy and still. Along the coastal marshes and on the islands of the Gulf, fishermen and trappers complained of the heat and humidity, only vaguely aware of the ominous character of the day. In the early afternoon, sea birds were seen scurrying inland. Their frightened cries offered no warning of what was to come.

AS EVENING approached, coastal residents were startled by the unusually high tide. The wind, blowing from the southeast, came in gusts, pushing clouds of dirty, gray clouds before it, and soon it began to rain, hard. Darkness fell early—very early—and the people prepared for a blow. They were not frightened—yet—for the night veiled the true character of the storm. It would be a severe squall, at the most, they assured themselves.

From the Vermillion Bay to the area miles east of New Orleans, the Gulf waters suddenly rose an estimated five feet, covering settlements along the shore, the bays and the bayous. Before midnight, the winds shifted, and at Grand Isle, it was estimated that they raged at well over 100 miles per hour. Huge tidal waves were driven inland, battering houses and other buildings into masses of broken timber. On ground too high for the waves to reach, the wind took a hand, crushing the fishermen's shacks like match boxes and blowing apart the more substantial structures, piece by piece.

People who did not drown in the raging tidal waves were killed beneath the timbers of their homes. Many died with the collapse of bigger buildings where they had taken refuge. Others, struck by flying debris, were decapitated, or lost arms and legs. And those who had taken to their boats found them impossible to control. Death rode at the helm of the tiny fishing schooners, tossing them in the turbulent waters like egg shells before ripping them apart and drowning the occupants.

IN NEW ORLEANS that night, no one suspected what was happening. Telephone and telegraph lines to the south had been destroyed early, and the city had no warning of what was to come. Later, Capt. Robert Kerckem, chief of the Weather Bureau there, said, "The early history of this storm ... is almost entirely unknown to us ... It was a complete surprise to me, and there was nothing on Sunday morning to indicate that it was raging in the southern part of the state. The wires connecting us with Port Eads were all blown down, and we did not know of the storm's approach until it was upon us in all its fury. It came upon us unheralded and unlooked for." He said that all weather gauges were destroyed during the blow.

One of the first indications of the extent of the disaster in New Orleans was the collapse of the Soraparu market on Soraparu St., near Tchoupitoulas. The "Daily Picayune" reported that the block-long structure was caved in at 1 a.m. that night. "The broken timbers and wreckage were mixed into an inextricable mass," the paper said.

FALLING TREES broke telephone lines and electric wires, paralyzing the city. Streets were quickly flooded in the torrential rains. Signs were blown down, corrugated tin from the roofs of buildings flew through the air like giant knives. The newspaper reported that "... pedestrians were hurled to the ground by the gale. Large pieces of lumber and other debris flew through the air. Steam tugs constantly sounded their signals. Electric wires in all parts of the city were damaged or blown down. The fire alarm system suffered the most, for all the circuits were so badly damaged as to render the system useless."

Trains outside the city were trapped by the winds and rising waters. One trainman reported that the wind was so strong, it was impossible to proceed. "I never experienced such a night," he said. "It was simply terrific. So great was the roar of the wild winds as they swept over the black marshes that when I'd given a signal for brakes they could not hear it. You could not see your hands before your face, and the wind simply made it impossible to walk a car. The marsh country was a jet black wilderness of howling winds."

PLAQUEMINES PARISH was hardest hit. There, the little settlement of Bohemia was completely wiped out. "Ceases to exist," said the "Picayune." Rice, sugar cane and orange crops were a total loss throughout the coastal parishes. Shell Beach was greatly damaged, as were Pointe-a-la-Hache, Port Eads, Buras and other communities along the river. To the east, the bridges at Bay St. Louis and Biloxi were washed away, and to the west, as far as Bayou Grand Caillou, the country was devastated. The oyster settlements at Bayou Cook and Cheniere island were destroyed. Every house was blown to atoms, and it was estimated that 800 people were killed in this area, alone.

Afterward, one observer, George Jurgens, said, "The stench from decayed vegetable matter, dead cattle and possibly dead human beings, has become most offensive." He reported that the bodies of 700 people died. and again in 1972 with a toll of 350 killed.

BUT THE STORM of 1898 was the greatest of them all. No one ever knew exactly how many persons lost their lives. Bodies—and later skeletons—were found for months afterward. Hundreds of others were missing without trace, washed out to sea or buried in the mud of the endless marshes.

Death struck without warning that October night, but time has eased the pain, and the incident is only a vague memory, all but forgotten in history.