

Galveston in Ruins

The hurricane destroyed thousands of buildings across Galveston. In one-third of the city, nothing was left behind at all—just an empty stretch of sand.

America's Deadliest Dis

Galveston, Texas, was drowning. It was September 8, 1900, and the city was being torn to pieces by a brutal hurricane. Thousands of people were dead.

And in the middle of the terror was 14-year-old Harry Maxson.

He stood at the window of his house. Outside, the wild, **churning** ocean was like a furious beast **devouring** his neighborhood. It was swallowing up trees and barns, tearing apart houses and carrying them



away. Harry's ears pounded with the sounds of the screaming wind and of flying bricks and chunks of shattered wood smashing against the walls of his family's home.

Bam! Bam!

And then Harry heard another sound, a desperate cry rising up over the wind. "Help me!"

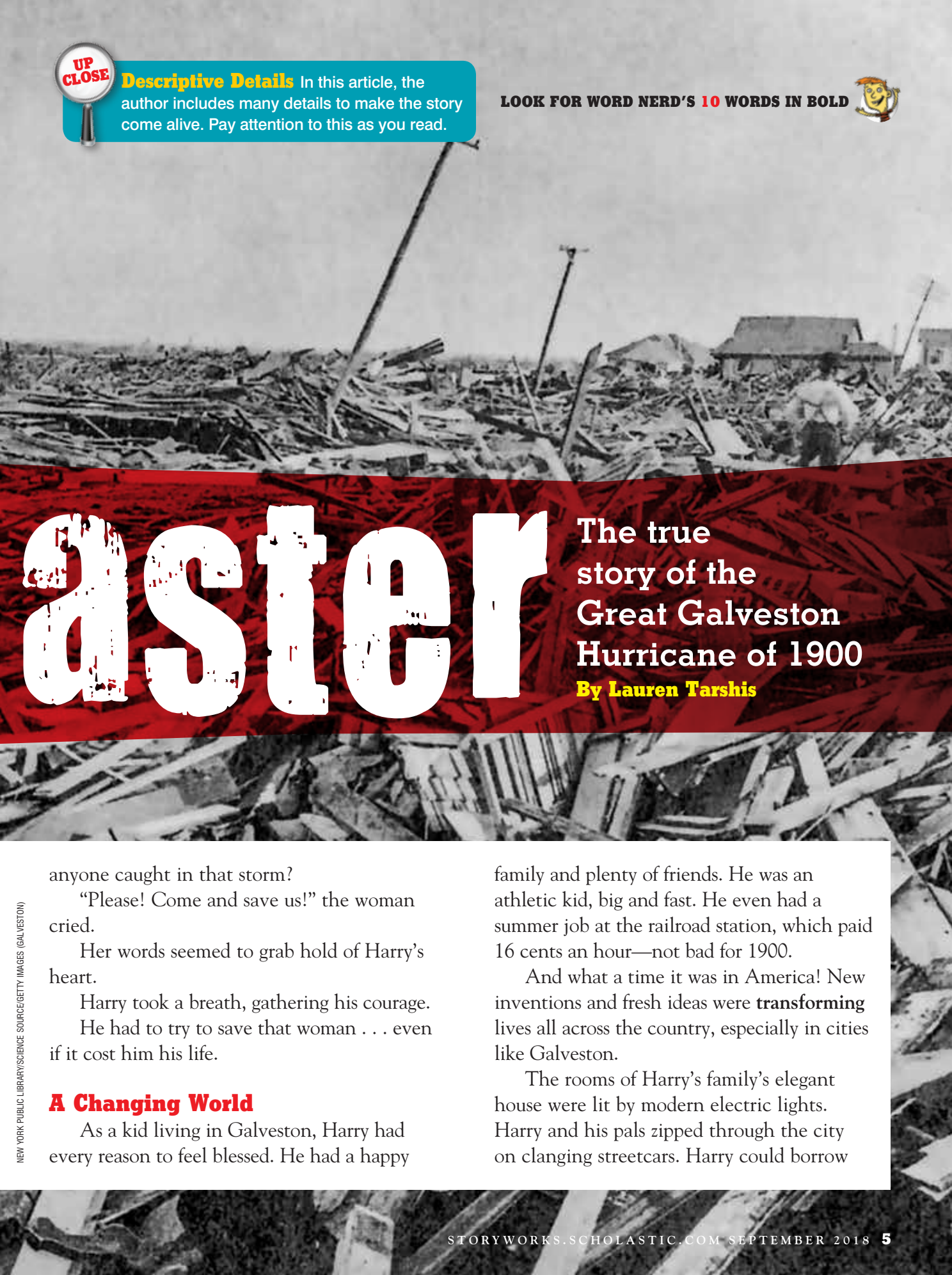
It was a woman, calling from somewhere outside.

Harry wanted to turn away—he could barely swim. How could he possibly help



Descriptive Details In this article, the author includes many details to make the story come alive. Pay attention to this as you read.

LOOK FOR WORD NERD'S **10 WORDS IN BOLD**



aster

The true story of the Great Galveston Hurricane of 1900

By Lauren Tarshis

anyone caught in that storm?

"Please! Come and save us!" the woman cried.

Her words seemed to grab hold of Harry's heart.

Harry took a breath, gathering his courage.

He had to try to save that woman . . . even if it cost him his life.

A Changing World

As a kid living in Galveston, Harry had every reason to feel blessed. He had a happy

family and plenty of friends. He was an athletic kid, big and fast. He even had a summer job at the railroad station, which paid 16 cents an hour—not bad for 1900.

And what a time it was in America! New inventions and fresh ideas were **transforming** lives all across the country, especially in cities like Galveston.

The rooms of Harry's family's elegant house were lit by modern electric lights. Harry and his pals zipped through the city on clanging streetcars. Harry could borrow



books from Galveston's public library, the first in Texas.

Cities all across America were booming. But few had grown as quickly as Galveston. Perched on an island off the southern coast of Texas, Galveston had been founded in the 1830s. By 1900, it was Texas's richest and most important city. Every day, ships loaded up with American cotton and wheat steamed from Galveston to countries around the world. Arriving ships were crowded with **immigrants**—people coming to America to start new lives.

And imagine what those newcomers saw as they came ashore. There were the white sand beaches and elegant mansions built by Galveston's millionaires. Gardens spilled over with sweet-smelling flowered plants called oleanders. The streets, paved with crushed oyster shells, sparkled like they'd been sprinkled with diamonds.

True, this glittering city was **prone** to flooding. It was sandwiched between the Gulf of Mexico and Galveston Bay. During big storms, water rose up from both the Gulf and the Bay, turning city streets into rushing streams. This is what was happening on the rainy and windy morning of September 8, when Harry was heading to work at the railroad station.

But Harry wasn't worried, and neither were most people in the city. As the winds

grew stronger, thousands of people gathered excitedly on the beach to cheer the wildly crashing waves.

What nobody understood was that this was not just a regular storm. The city was about to be slammed by one of the most powerful forces of nature on Earth: a hurricane.

Within just hours, most of Galveston would be gone.

No Escape

For as long as humans have been living on Earth, they have faced extreme weather. And





A Glittering City

Before the storm, Galveston was one of the liveliest and most glamorous cities in the country, famous for its fine restaurants, elegant concert halls, and picture-perfect beaches. Some called it “the New York City of the Gulf.”

in no place is the weather more extreme than here in America. Frozen blizzards. Fiery heat waves. Wildfires. Tornadoes. And the most dangerous of all: hurricanes. These massive, swirling storms have killed more people in America than any other natural disaster.

Hurricanes form over oceans and can explode to shore with as much energy as 10,000 nuclear bombs. A powerful hurricane can pack winds of more than 180 miles per hour—strong enough to shatter buildings and lift trains off tracks. Trillions of gallons of rain can fall.

But the most devastating part of a hurricane is the “storm surge.” This is the

flood of ocean water, pushed by hurricane winds, that can swallow entire cities.

Cities like Galveston.

In the days leading up to the Galveston hurricane, the U.S. weather bureau knew a bad storm was swirling in the Caribbean. The storm was heading north, toward the U.S. But there was no way of knowing where it would hit. Back in 1900, the science of weather—meteorology—was still young. Weather scientists lacked knowledge and tools that could enable them to track storms. Not surprisingly, most of their **predictions** were wrong. Just a few years before, one respected weather forecaster had written

How Hurricanes Form

Hurricanes are born when strong wind meets tropical ocean water. The wind causes warm, moist air near the water’s surface to rise, forming giant clouds. As more air rises, the clouds grow, and the winds spin faster and faster. When the winds hit 74 miles per hour, the storm is officially a hurricane.



that the idea of a hurricane striking Galveston was “absurd.”

This is why the people of Galveston had no idea that a powerful hurricane was barreling toward their city—until it was too late.

A Raging Sea

Harry left work at 4 p.m. and ran home through the flooded streets. He dodged flying roof tiles and branches. He watched in horror as the wind tore the entire roof off a house and carried it through the air.

He came home to discover that his house, the biggest and best-built in the neighborhood, was crowded with terrified neighbors. His mother had opened their doors to anyone in need. His father finally arrived home from work wearing his new raincoat, which had been shredded by the wind.

As the hours passed, hundreds of houses and buildings were destroyed and sucked down to the beach. A 30-foot-high wall made of broken buildings and furniture and beds and carriages stretched across the beach for miles. For a time, this wall of wreckage actually helped protect the city from the furious ocean waves.

But then, around 7:30, the winds shifted. And the storm surge—a wall of water 15 feet high—came rushing in from the Gulf. In minutes, the entire city was transformed into a raging sea, filled with **debris**. Houses, schools, and churches crumbled. Telephone poles flew like spears. Parents turned mattresses into rafts and tried to save their children.

The Galveston Daily News.

50TH YEAR—NO 173 GALVESTON, TEXAS THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, 1900 ESTABLISHED 1842

STORY OF THE GREAT DISASTER AT GALVESTON



Torn to Pieces

The day after the storm, survivors crawled out of shelter to find a scene of total ruin. The city's grand homes and buildings had been toppled over, ripped to splinters, or completely wiped away.

By midnight, Harry's was the only house in his neighborhood that hadn't been washed away. “The house was so full, and there was so much worry and distress,” Harry wrote. “There were plenty of people praying on their knees, silently and out loud.”

Daring Rescue

Harry's father told Harry to go into the kitchen, open the window a crack, and listen for voices of people needing help.

That's when Harry heard the woman calling. “Something had to be done,” Harry wrote. “I decided to get some good swimmers and go

out and rescue her.”

He told his father his plan but not his mother—he didn’t want to worry her. And then he and a neighbor set out into the churning water. They floated on a downed telephone pole and rode the wild waves, following the sound of the woman’s screaming voice.

They finally found her standing on top of the roof of a house. Inside the house were 36 people, including 13 children and babies.

The house was floating in the water. The wind was ripping it to pieces. Soon it would be torn apart and carried away.

Over the next hour, Harry and his neighbor managed to lead these terrified survivors through the raging waters and back to Harry’s house. They made two trips, back and forth until everyone was safe.

His mother welcomed all of them with hot coffee and fresh biscuits.

By 1:30 a.m., there were 140 people at Harry’s house, plus dogs, cats, and birds. People huddled together, crying, praying, waiting for their city to be freed from the hurricane’s devouring jaws.

Lucky to Survive

“By Sunday morning the sun was shining,” Harry wrote. “But the water was still three feet deep in the streets. What a wreck it left.”

Galveston had mostly disappeared. For miles around, there was nothing but ruin. Silence hung over the city as dazed survivors searched for their families and friends. Bodies were everywhere.

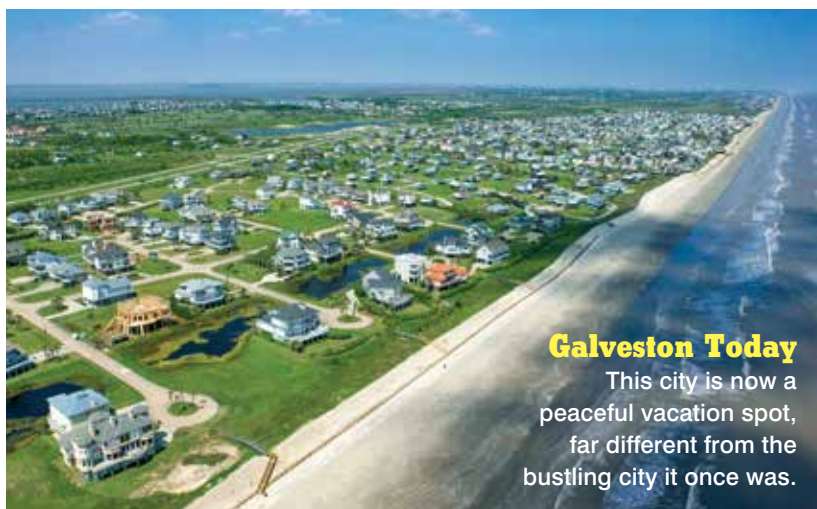
At least 8,000 people were killed—out of a population of just 40,000.

Harry knew how lucky he and his family had been to survive.

It took more than a year for the storm wreckage to be cleared. Bit by bit, the city was rebuilt, and a huge wall was put up to protect it from future storms. Galveston slowly recovered. Today, it is a charming resort city, famous for its beaches. But it would never **reclaim** its place as the richest and most important city in Texas. The Great Galveston Hurricane, to this day, is the deadliest natural disaster in American history.

As for Harry, he grew up to become a business leader with a family of his own. He died in 1967, at the age of 82.

Harry’s grandson Peter says his grandfather led a happy and successful life. “He was very involved in the community and was a great believer in family,” Peter remembers. But Harry never forgot the 1900 hurricane. “He told his story every Thanksgiving,” Peter says. ■



Galveston Today

This city is now a peaceful vacation spot, far different from the bustling city it once was.

WRITE TO WIN

Imagine you are Harry. Write a journal entry describing what you did during the Great Galveston Hurricane. Include plenty of descriptive details! Send it to “Galveston Contest” by Nov. 1, 2018. Ten winners will receive copies of *Extreme Weather* by Thomas Kostigen. See page 2 for details.

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ACTIVITY
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