

## CHAPTER VIII

### FLOODS AND HURRICANES

"That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm."

—SHAKESPEARE

Floods and hurricanes have disrupted Jaffrey life at intervals during the period covered by the present work. One of the most devastating floods was that of March 18th, 1936. The preceding January the town was blanketed by a sixteen-inch snowfall that completely paralyzed traffic by five o'clock on the evening of Sunday, the 19th. The hotels and inns were filled by guests from Massachusetts who were forced to stop and remain here until Monday. The heavy snow started on Saturday. It packed down so hard that tractors and dozers had to be pressed into use to move it, but Highway Agents Philip M. Grass and George A. Adams made Jaffrey one of the first towns in the region to have all roads opened for travel. Few people then realized that the worst was yet to come.

#### THE MARCH 18, 1936, FLOOD

The melting of the winter's snows in the warm rains during a sudden mild spell in March, 1936, brought one of the greatest floods in the history of Jaffrey. The warm rain storm started on Tuesday, March 12, and continued until Friday, March 20, leaving unprecedented devastation in its wake. There was water, water everywhere, and on Wednesday, the 18th, the usually quiet Contoocook River changed into a raging torrent, rising and reaching out on to Main and River Streets. By seven o'clock that night it became necessary to rope off Main Street bridge and to detour all traffic through Little Canada where the bridge by St. Pierre's mill held strong. The rushing waters poured over Main Street bridge, gouging deep gullies in the ground surrounding White Brothers' mill, carrying away the mill coal pile and filling the boiler and other rooms at the mill with water, some of them containing expensive machinery. Soon after the sidewalk and a half of Main Street bridge were swept down into the river below.

All lines of industry were crippled and property damage ran into thousands of dollars. Railroad traffic and all incoming vehicles were halted early in the day on account of the washouts and deep gullies on all the town and state roads. Some, like the Squantum Road, were inundated in several places, with many washouts. The cause-

way on the Rindge road was under several feet of water. It was several days before travel from Jaffrey to Boston was possible by way of Winchendon, Gardner, and Fitchburg, Massachusetts.

When the flood waters subsided, nearly one hundred men were employed in rehabilitation work, including fifty-five CCC boys from Camp Annett and forty WPA workers. The town's share of flood repair work amounted to \$5,084.47. The State's was much greater. Food stores reported a brisk business Thursday morning, the 19th,



THE 1936 FLOOD

*(Background shows Peterborough and Main Street corner before Dillon Block)*

as people were stocking up on their food supplies, and bread was one of the first items to disappear from their shelves. In every section of the town the story was the same, inundated roads, washouts, and collapsed bridges, with foot travel replacing automobiles.

One of the first bridges to go downstream was the wooden bridge below the dam in Cheshire. Damage to the dam precipitated the sale of the Cheshire mill two years later. Here a washout at the end of Cheshire Pond prevented further passage on the Peterborough Road, along which other bridges also collapsed. But in every disaster there is a saving feature. This time in Jaffrey it was the so-called Red Dam up the river. It held fast against the onslaught of waters and saved the village from greater damage, with the waters backing into the Mountain Stream. There was not a road leading out of Jaffrey that did not become either impassable or dangerously pass-

able. Railroad service was disrupted and not restored for some time, so long, in fact, that the selectmen were obliged to inquire about its resumption.

Heroism, too, played a part in the flood drama, with 72-year old Frederick LaPlante piloting a boat amidst the ice floe above Main Street bridge while his son, Joseph Laplante, busied himself loosening the ice jam and sending the "icebergs" shoreward where other employees of A. M. Deschenes directed them down the river. The elder LaPlante came naturally by his skill as a boatman, for spring floods were usual occurrences in his native riverside St. Francois du Lac, in the Province of Quebec, Canada.

### THE 1938 HURRICANE

Hardly more than repaired and relegated to its place in history was the devastation caused by the 1936 March flood, when a greater destructive force hit Jaffrey and the section of New England along the Connecticut River and the central part of the six-state area. This was the 1938 hurricane. For years afterward any late summer storm, accompanied by a high wind, sent chilling memories racing through people's minds. And even today persons here maintain a hurricane watch as storms are born in the tropical regions during the hurricane season.

Summer was within a few days of passing into autumn in 1938 when warm tropical rains fell for two or three days and pelted down all day on Wednesday, September 21st, with an even harder down-pour shortly before five o'clock in the afternoon. By Tuesday morning flood conditions had been reached and places normally holding seven feet of water were cresting at fifteen. It was fifteen feet at Main Street bridge when the coffer dam let go and waters went rampaging, causing greater damage than ever before. Early the same morning it became evident that trouble lay ahead. Main Street bridge was blocked and all traffic over it was detoured through Little Canada. And that evening people living along the river bank and Old Peterborough Road below St. Pierre's mill were advised to evacuate their homes as waters were filling their cellars. With a creaking and groaning of the piling, Main Street bridge gave way at about 10:30 Wednesday morning. With the onrush of waters, the channel by St. Pierre's mill no longer could contain the flood waters. They gouged across the Old Peterborough Road and for two days there was no passing from one side of the river to the other, save by foot, until Friday afternoon when a temporary bridge was completed at St.

Pierre's mill. Estimated damage to White Brother's mill alone was placed at about \$75,000.00, and the damage to roads and highways during the flood and hurricane exceeded the \$26,000.00 damages of the March, 1936, flood.

With the torrential downpour about five o'clock Wednesday afternoon, September 21st, Jaffrey residents began noticing a high wind half an hour later and all they could do was sit and wait. As trees began falling all around, it became evident that this was something more than an ordinary rain storm. There was nothing like it within anyone's memory and no one knew what to expect as the winds continued their destructive blow. The violent storm continued for about three hours and meanwhile darkness settled down so that the full picture of its havoc and destruction could not be observed until the following day.

Everywhere beautiful shade trees were uprooted or limbs broken off and hurled across lawns, houses, and streets. Buildings were damaged and nearly every road in town was blocked by fallen trees. Electric and telephone lines were out. There was no news from outside. It was complete isolation, with devastation at every hand. Hardly a timber lot was left standing anywhere and partially decayed trees that were felled by the hurricane are still to be found scattered about town as it was impossible to salvage all woodlots at the time. But time has now healed the scars and new forests are growing up again. The railroad was washed out for miles and all rail service suspended.

There was no contact or communication with the outside world until Thursday afternoon when John J. Evans and William B. Winslow, Jr., were able to return from Winchendon, Mass., by way of Fitzwilliam and Troy. Their concern for the welfare of their fellow townsmen became evident when it was learned that they brought back with them two pouches of mail, nine cases of bread, and dozens of yeast cakes. They brought back also two copies of the evening papers which were divided between O'Neil's and Duncan's drug stores and posted in each, where hundreds of persons gathered to read about what had happened elsewhere.

The large barn of the former Prescott Tavern was blown down by the hurricane, killing a cow belonging to Fred Davis. At the writer's parents' farm a strange behavior of cattle was noted about midafternoon as they ran about aimlessly around the fences as if trying to escape from something they knew not what. However, al-

though trees were blown down all around, the cows were found the next morning safe and unharmed.

Telephone and electric company crews began rehabilitation work immediately. The Derry Electric Company crews worked twenty hours a day and were augmented by out of town help. Electric service was restored by Wednesday, September 28.

The restoration of telephone service took longer. The total cost of restoring telephone service in the six-state area came to over \$8,000,000, which was far in excess of what the smaller local companies or subsidiaries could afford. The Bell Telephone System took over the rehabilitation work. Trucks and work crews from Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, arrived on Sunday, September 25, and, although they had been on the road for forty-two hours, commenced work immediately upon arrival. The following Tuesday trucks and work crews arrived from Scranton, Pennsylvania. Subsequently, work crews and equipment came here from Arkansas, Missouri, Michigan, and New York State. Much of the distant equipment was shipped to New England by freight, with Keene and Walpole as the nearby unloading points. Jaffrey's veteran telephone man, Maurice McPhie, recalls working with men from all these places, and how he had to walk the seven miles to Peterborough where his truck was located to begin his day's work.

Traffic over U. S. 202 Highway was not resumed until October 12. Not only had the highway to be cleared of fallen trees but three temporary log bridges had to be built to span the Contoocook River. Up to that time, until U. S. 202 reopened, going from Jaffrey to Peterborough was like going around Robin Hood's barn, following some of the back roads in Sharon.

Work on a foot bridge across Contoocook River over the former dam was started on November 3, at which time it was disclosed that a new Main Street bridge would be ready for traffic in three months. The delay was occasioned by the state officials in clearing land titles and making satisfactory terms with the abutters. The gates controlling the supply of water to the mill was fixed at seventy feet up the river from the former location. The dam was built away from the bridge to allow room for a spillway. The new bridge was built forty feet wide, with an underspan of thirty-three feet.