



THE 1944 HURRICANE

Hurricane Opal delivered some blessed, soaking rain to us as she passed by--the first meaningful moisture for Dennis since Hurricane Allison in early summer. This has been an extremely dry summer for us and had we been hit with a major hurricane our plant life would have been in serious trouble. Most of our trees could not have survived a drought followed by the assault of a hurricane. We should count our blessings considering the large number of storms this year. In earlier times Cape Codders called them "line storms" or "green corn storms" and said you could count on them showing up at Barnstable Fair time--late August or early September.

Watching the damage from this years storms on television reminded me of the 1944 hurricane. Reams of material has been written about the 1938 Great New England Hurricane but the one in 1944 passed with little but local coverage because we were in the midst of WWII.

The hurricane roared up the East Coast doing damage along the way and arrived here Thursday night, September 14th on a high tide. The mid and lower Cape had sustained minimal damage in 1938 but took the full force of this storm.

In West Dennis the near 100 mph winds pushed a wall of water up through the marshes across Lower County Road and into the West Dennis Cedar Swamp flooding it all the way to Route 28 where Christine's now stands. The salt water killed most of the cedar trees and other growth in the swamp and in the ensuing years the bleached tree trunks were a mute reminder of that storm. Meanwhile, permanent structures on or near the beach were taking a beating. The new Lighthouse Inn dining room built of cinder blocks the previous winter was decimated block by block. The next morning revealed one piece of moulding attached to the main building swinging in the breeze. Many of the dining room chairs came to rest on the old Weir creek bridge, recently rebuilt and named the Robert and Mary Stone Bridge, and the cinder blocks were--everywhere. Two of the cottages were knocked part way off their foundation and the stand of pine trees called "The Grove" east of the Inn was demolished. Prudently, Bob and Mary Stone had taken refuge in an employees driveway on Upper County Road in South Dennis and rode out the storm in their automoblie.

Just east of The Grove in South Village about every house was damaged, demolished, or relocated. West Dennis grocer Bert Smith found his house in bits and pieces--a total loss. A couple of homes washed off their foundations, floated across Lower County Road and came to rest against Allie Howard's barn. In one house a bowl of eggs on the kitchen table made the journey without so much as one cracked egg!

Another wall of water pushed up Swan River. On the way up--and probably also the receding waters--left the bridges intact but washed away sections of the connecting roadway. O. Thomas Murray was on Upper County Road returning to his Dennis Port home from duty at the Fire Station on Main Street, South Dennis. He dodged a large number of downed trees and on arriving at "Deb's Bridge" the road vanished. Daylight revealed his car hanging with the front wheels down over the edge and a six-foot gap to the bridge.

The Glendon Road area in Dennis Port was hit hard. Many summer cottages were reduced to piles of lumber. Some were washed off their foundations and floated across the street. These were later moved back to their original sites. Many are still standing--none the worse for their adventure. Large sections of beach were washed away all along the shore. Many houses that once had a large front yard leading to a wide beach now found themselves with water at the front door.

Further east in the Inman Road area--another low spot--a personal drama was being played out. My father kept his cows at Finnegan's meadow--now the Playland golf course but earlier known as Pound Pond. The water pushed up the old river way until eventually eight feet of water covered Lower County Road just before the Harwich town line. Father had tried to get to the barn from the Dennis side but couldn't get through the water. He went around to the Harwich side, walked along the bank until he was near the barn then swam over and released the cows. Unfortunately, he was unable to reach the bull which was staked out in the meadow, and it drowned. Daylight found the cows roaming around the village, but safe.

While this was transpiring Mother and I had our hands full at home. The kitchen ell shuddered with every blast of wind and Mother decided it was about to let go, so we moved everything, by lamplight, into the main part of the house. Even the Hoosier cupboard which was full!! The only thing left in the kitchen was the iron cookstove and the kitchen sink. I will say the adrenalin was flowing.

The next morning revealed that the ell had moved two feet off the foundation, the barn roof had lifted very neatly off and sailed over to land intact on top of the trees in the swamp, and we had a black house shutter with carved white sailboats that had blown in through the kitchen window. Father and Harold White moved the ell back into place and made the necessary repairs, the barn got a new roof, we drove around for days and couldn't find the house that had lost the black shutter, and it took two men to move the empty Hoosier cupboard back into the kitchen!

The next morning also revealed tremendous devastation everywhere. Huge trees were down across the roads, on houses, and had taken down the wires. Every home seemed to have sustained some degree of damage. The Army from Camp Edwards was pressed into duty to help where it was needed. It was days, or in some areas weeks, before power was restored and months before the clean-up was completed. After all, most of our able bodied men were away at war. Although the first few days after the storm found everyone rather stunned it quickly wore off because we had not sustained any loss of life and "things" can always be replaced. Our main thoughts returned to the war. The tide had turned in Europe and the Pacific. Optimism was making itself felt and we Cape Codders surely couldn't let a "line storm" get us down.

