

# BUCKS COUNTY **Courier Times**

## **50 years after the big flood**

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On Aug. 19, 1955, the afternoon sky over Bucks County went black and rain poured from thick storm clouds for hours as hurricanes Diane and Connie swept through the area.

As remnants of the double hurricanes soaked the streets with almost a foot of rain, D. Randy Riggs and his mother drove from their Lower Makefield home across the Delaware River span on West Trenton Avenue to a grocery store in Ewing.

The river was about 8 to 10 feet below the roadway on the Morrisville bridge as they drove into New Jersey, said Riggs, who was 9 at the time.

When they traveled back home, about two hours later, a raging torrent was within a few inches of the roadway.

"I remember being scared because the river was very angry looking," said Riggs, 59, who lives in northern California. "I remember it like it was yesterday. Fifty years later, it's still such a vivid memory."

The Delaware River wasn't the only stream on the rampage. In Hulmeville, the Neshaminy Creek was well over its banks.

Along Main Street in the borough, floodwaters reached second-story windows and stranded residents perched on rooftops waiting to be rescued.

Former firefighter Elwyn Smith of Hulmeville remembers the day well.

He joined more than 200 rescue workers from around Bucks County in an effort to save lives and property.

“There was a man on the roof of this house,” Smith said, pointing to a black-and-white photograph of himself and two other rescue workers in a boat fighting the current that had buried Main Street.

“We wanted to get across, but the water was going so fast. The other workers anchored the boat to a tree and we let the current carry us toward the house.”

However, the force of the current was so rough that it caused the boat to slam into a utility pole.

“That’s when the fire chief hollered, ‘Abandon ship!’ and we all jumped off the boat.”

Smith and the two rescue workers eventually made it safely to dry ground. The man they were trying to rescue would have to wait a few more hours.

“We couldn’t get to him,” Smith said. “The current was too rough, so we sent a helicopter to get him.”

“We were really taking a chance, the water was so swift it was flying by,” Smith added. “It was quite an episode. I’ve had other close calls, but this was one of those days.”

The flood was caused by two hurricanes that hit the northeast from the south within a week of each other. Hurricane Connie arrived first, completely saturating the ground and filling the Delaware River and its connecting waterways. A week later, Hurricane Diane dumped more than a foot of rain on the region, causing those waterways to flood.

According to the National Weather Service, the flood of 1955 caused the Delaware River to crest at 28.6 feet, the highest level since 1904 when the Delaware crested in Trenton at 30.6 feet.

[It was the most devastating flood on the river in recorded history, according to Mary Shafer, a Bucks County author who spent three years writing “Devastation on the Delaware: Stories and Images of the Deadly Flood of 1955,” due out in October.](#)

The flood ravaged the Northeast and by the time it was all over, almost 200 people in eight states were dead and damage was estimated at \$831 million.

The aftermath of the flood had its own terrors in Bucks.

It was the day after the heavy rains in Lower Makefield that everything at first seemed to be calm around the home of Claire and William Talone off Black Rock Road.

After days of darkness, the sun appeared and William decided to mow the lawn. Claire, meanwhile, decided to pour herself a cocktail.

All of a sudden, a horrific sound came from the back yard.

"It sounded like a train. Then we saw the water and just rushed to get out," said Claire, 84, who now lives in Morrisville with her husband.

The Talones' home was situated between the Delaware River and the Delaware Canal and the heavy rains caused the canal's banks to break, sending a wall of canal water directly at their house.

They immediately grabbed their two young sons and left the area. When William returned the next day, most of the house was under 7 feet of water.

"It was terrible," William said. "We had nothing but black gook from the canal over our house, our lawn and our porch for years and years."

As the cleanup began, they found that everything in their new home had been destroyed except a refrigerator. Despite a tiny, steady drip for a few months, it worked fine even years later.

Alan Jackson, who now lives in Lower Makefield, was only 2 weeks old when the flooding began, and he likes to call himself "the flood's youngest victim."

The flood destroyed his family's home on River Road in Yardley where he lived with his parents, three brothers and two sisters. Without flood insurance, the disaster almost ruined the Jacksons, who moved to Levittown.

"We lost everything," he said.

Although he was too young to really remember the flood, he said, its legend stayed with him. Jackson is a senior inspection manager at a Newtown-based consulting and engineering firm.

These days, part of his job includes inspecting bridges before and after, of all things, floods.