



A Herald Exclusive

It's Been Fifty Years: Remembering the Deadly Flood of 1955

August 18 will mark the 50th anniversary of the beginning of one of the Delaware Valley's most destructive weather events ever: the Delaware River flood of 1955. Starting this week and ending with our August 18 issue, the Herald is recognizing this anniversary with an exclusive, five-part series about how this disaster happened and the lasting effects it had on our area.

The series is written by Herald columnist and freelance writer Mary Shafer. She has written a book about the event, *Devastation on the Delaware: Stories and Images of the Deadly Flood of 1955*. The book is due to be published on October 1, but can be pre-ordered now at the book's website, <http://www.55flood.com>.

Devastation on the Delaware: Part I

Anatomy of a Disaster

by Mary Shafer

In August, 1955, Americans were fully a decade past the horror that had been World War II. Most areas of the country were prospering as never before in the robust post-war economy. Detroit was churning out huge, impressive-looking automobiles to

take our newly mobile society out on the thousands of miles of new roads being built to connect growing cities.

Another phenomenon was also making its debut: the suburb. Urban flight was beginning, as growing families moved to the more wide-open spaces of the country. These spaces rapidly produced their own kind of crowded, as developers sought to pack the most possible dwellings into the smallest possible area in the first “planned communities.” This building was happening all over, but the most famous of these now-ubiquitous developments is Lower Bucks County’s own Levittown.

Sprawling over 5,750 acres, the development would eventually, by its completion in 1957, house 70,000 residents. At the time, it was hailed as an engineering and design marvel, making modern, convenient housing affordable (at less than \$10,000 each for the basic Levittowner model) to the burgeoning middle class. It was our answer to the huge demand for new housing as servicemen returned to civilian life. Specifically, it met the needs of employees at the new U.S. Steel Fairless Works plant.

What these developments also did was increase exponentially the paved surface area of our land. This decreased, in directly inverse proportion, the amount of permeable surface that could absorb excess storm water runoff. By the end of the summer in 1955, no one was worried about any excess runoff, because Bucks County was in the middle of one of the deepest, most sustained droughts in memory. At that point, any storm water—excess or otherwise—would have been welcome.

So, when the remnants of Hurricane Connie made their debut in the Delaware Valley on August 12, everyone—especially farmers—greeted the drenching downpours with nothing less than delight and a huge sigh of relief. Farmers rejoiced that they might

yet be able to save their season's crops, and the average homeowner looked forward to the end of water restrictions that had choked them all summer long.



Hurricane Connie dropped a wide range of rain totals, all of them high, in our area. The majority fell in northern Pennsylvania and New Jersey, between August 11 and 14. The Philadelphia Airport logged 60-m.p.h. winds and five-and-a-half inches of rain. Doylestown got just under eight inches, and parts of the Lehigh Valley reported just under five. Mt. Pocono received almost 10 inches, but no one was complaining.

Due to the previous dry spell, waterways rose and there was some flooding, but it was minor and short-lived. Had that been the end of the rain, the summer would have had a happy ending. Unfortunately for many in the Valley, Connie's little sister, Diane, was following closely on her heels.

Next week: The Poconos – From Paradise to Purgatory