

ADVANCE OF BUCKS COUNTY

Out & About

Remembering the Flood of 1955

by Joanna Wilson

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New book by Ferndale, PA author Mary Shafer narrates the tragedy and heroism that took place along the Delaware River during one of the most deadly natural disasters to hit the Bucks/Mercer County area.

Though weak in comparison to the vicious hurricane and tsunamis that ravaged 3,000 miles of African and Asian coastline, Bucks County once had its own record-setting disaster--the Delaware River Flood of August, 1955. Now those terror-ridden days are revisited by Ferndale author Mary Shafer in her book, *Devastation on the Delaware: the Deadly Flood of 1955*.

The book chronicles true-life experiences gleaned through extensive interviews with 74-plus persons who either survived or had relatives who did. Written in a narrative nonfiction format, she presents facts in dramatic fiction fashion but emphasized that "none of it is made up."

The entire river flooded following Hurricane Connie's and Diane's earlier presence. Shafer addresses both sides of the river between Port Jervis, NY and Trenton, NJ. She interviewed residents, vacationers, and workers in the Poconos, Delaware Water Gap, the Stroudsburgs, and north to New York--and learned how the flood drastically altered their lives. The book should reach stores by late spring or early summer, in time to commemorate the flood's 50th anniversary in August.

Shafer moved to Ferndale from Wisconsin eight years ago. At a rummage sale, she found a book called *Diane Drowns the Delaware Valley*, a photo essay published after the flood. "Being something of a weather freak [Shafer is certified as a SkyWarn Weather Spotter, a volunteer organization throughout the United States that spots threatening weather patterns], I decided to write my own book," she said.

She ran advertisements and sent press releases to newspapers asking for eyewitness accounts, and received somewhere in the neighborhood of 150 responses. Some were wrenching descriptions of people washed away under bridges. From those, she weeded out about half for in-person interviews.

Her research took some two years. She talked to members of official search-and-rescue or rescue-and-recovery operations, fire, police, and ambulance crews, Army troops detailed to rescue campers, Red Cross workers, temporary morgue attendants, nurses, newspaper reporters, and those who shared information on pets and livestock. "Their stories 'blew my mind,'" she said.

One interesting story came from Lumberville. "The town was named after its biggest business--the lumber yard, which has always been owned by the Tinsman family," she said. "Bill Tinsman, Sr. gave me loads of information." They lived on Fleecydale Road, off Route 32, heading toward Carversville. The river came up from the Route 32 side. Crossing the road was Paunacussing Creek, which ends by the Cutalossa Inn. The Creek flooded its banks, and entered their house the same time water from the river surrounded them. They escaped through a second-story window into a rowboat, leaving everything.

Ironically, during this time, they bought the current lumber yard property on which stood a house they moved in to. "It survived because it was on higher ground," she said.

Probably the most dramatic rescues occurred off Pennington Island and Treasure Island. The menacing waters on the 19th placed youthful church and scout campers on these islands in jeopardy. What we know as Emergency Management was then termed Civil Defense. The flood happened ten years almost to the day of the end of World War II, so Civil Defense was still operational. New Hope had earlier adopted defensive measures. The Mayor, Burgess Maple, and the head of the local Civilian Defense, Robert Icelow, organized emergency services, and temporary housing at the high school, knowing the islands' campers had to be rescued fast.

Water levels at the New Hope Bridge reached 28.09 feet above normal by midnight on the 19th. Roads were impassible, made worse by darkness, and telephone lines were dead. Requests for food, water, blankets, and cots came for those rescued from Riegelsville, Kintnersville, Upper Black Eddy, Center Bridge, Point Pleasant, Lumberville, New Hope, and as far south as Bristol and Croydon.

The Civil Defense Headquarters at Doylestown, acting as the Communication and Liaison Center, requisitioned Johnsville Naval Air Station for evacuation assistance. Johnsville immediately dispatched helicopters to rescue the islands' campers. The Tobyhanna Signal Corps, Ft. Dix, and smaller stations also assisted. Life jackets and rafts became available should water inundate the islands before evacuation could succeed. A gas truck at Erwinna refueled the helicopters.

In addition to the Navy craft, seven Piaseke helicopters and Army craft also assisted. By 11:30 p.m. August 20, all personnel had been safely evacuated.

"Understand, this coordination took place without cell phones, mobile units, or NexTel," said Shafer. "They had only land lines and walkie talkies. The Emergency First Responders, Fire Rescue, Police and EMT squads saved many lives. Ninety-nine people died on the Pennsylvania side, eighty-eight on the Jersey side. Without these volunteers, those numbers would have been far greater."

One particularly moving story centered on a butcher shop north of Easton, near Stroudsburg. Shafer said, "The shop's owner, Thomas Miller, had a walk-in freezer. His daughter, Gertrude Miller, said that summer had been especially dry and hot, with a record-setting drought. When bodies were pulled from the river, rescuers commandeered this freezer to prevent decomposition and allow for identification."

"It was about eight months after the storm, and the last body, a blond girl of about six or seven, had not been claimed. Ms. Miller said her father's great sadness, even to his death, was wondering why this 'little angel' had never been claimed."

Eventually, it was believed that the little girl was one of the Inner City children who, as part of a program called "Fresh Air Fund" stayed cost-free at a river camp. Whether her parents couldn't afford to claim her, or even knew there was a way to find her, was never learned.

This storm became a turning point in how the weather service would be perceived. Until World War II, the Weather Service was known as the Army Signal Corps. During the war, it became evident that military operations depended on knowledge of the weather, including D-Day. That translated into civilian life, as well. That's why the National Weather Service is now under the Bureau of Economics. They realized that weather had everything to do with business.

The book is being published by Word Forge Books, in partnership with the Delaware RiverKeeper Network, an environmental group that protects the river's health. Shafer is thrilled that a portion of the proceeds will help fund river health initiatives.

This is her third book. Her first, *Wisconsin--The Way We Were*, came out in 1993. It talked about the state's first century. Her second, *Rural America--A Pictorial Folk Memory*, came out in 1995 and addressed an agrarian America before the Industrial Revolution.

She admitted that she "wrote this book as an antidote to what happened to my soul after 9-11. I needed a story about people's goodness. I thought if I needed it, others did too. You hear a lot about bad, icky, nasty people doing bad, icky, nasty things. But just like someone flies a plane

into a building, someone else puts his/her life on the line to help others they don't know, and might never see again."

Her research proved that "...heroes are people who quietly do what needs to be done. And there were heroes galore during the storm; simple, uncomplicated people who, on an ordinary day, opted to do extraordinary things. My research reaffirmed my belief in human nature."

For further information about Mary Shafer's writings, contact her at 610.847.2456.

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