

Hurricane Hazel still remembered after 60 years

By Bill Rea

Hurricane Hazel devastated southern Ontario 60 years ago this week.

Schomberg and the Holland Marsh area were particularly hard hit, not so much by the winds, but by the massive amounts of rain that fell on already saturated ground.

And people who were around Bolton at the time have memories.

And ironically, Hazel really had no business being here. Art Chamberlain, writing some 21 years later, referred to her as 'a meteorological oddity.'

Hazel was a powerful storm, having already caused considerable grief in the Caribbean and Carolinas on her sweep north. But conventional wisdom pronounced her dead in New York state. That should have been the end of the story.

As Chamberlain pointed out, Hazel was no longer a hurricane. 'What had been Hurricane Hazel, a terrible storm that ripped through the eastern United States in 12 hours, died in the Northern Appalachian Mountains, between New York City and Buffalo,' he wrote. A new storm centre formed on the west side of the mountains, south of Buffalo, and that became the dominant system in a tropical storm.

Another oddity was the timing of the storm. It hit the Carolina coast at the perfect time, at least from Hazel's point of view; at high water during a full-moon tide in the fall.

Bill Foran was a 13-year-old student at Schomberg Public School at the time, and he recalled thinking they were just enduring a crummy autumn day, one of several that year. He remembered, around the time of the 50th anniversary 10 years ago, that it had rained a lot in the days leading up to the deluge. 'The land was really almost at a super-saturation level,' he said.

'We really didn't realize we were at the tail end of a hurricane,' he said. 'They just thought it was another dirty, rotten, rainy mid-October day.'

Although Bolton received heavy rains and flooding, the effects weren't quite as pronounced as some other areas to the north and south.

Isabelle Bottoms was working at the Rewxall Drug Store on Queen Street in Bolton (now Bolton Milk and Variety), while the man she would marry about 10 years later, Ray, was working at his first job, at Reeves and Leavens Canning Factory on what is now Old King Road.

'The water went through one door and out the other,' he said. 'It was quite a mess.'

Mr. Bottoms said he was living on the family farm in the area of what is now Mount Pleasant Road and Castlederg Sideroad. He didn't have a car in those days, so he had to hitch hike to and from work.

He also remembered his family having to put up some people for the night who had been trying to get home from Schomberg.

They both remembered it had rained steadily for about three days prior to the big downpour, meaning the ground was saturated.

'The ground couldn't take it,' he said.

He also recalled Bolton had no sewers in those days.

'That's why the water wouldn't go away,' he observed.

Mrs. Bottoms recalled working the 7 to 9 shift that Friday evening, adding her mother walked to the store to meet her at the end of work, carrying her rubber boots to walk her home.

The power went out, meaning she recalled the store doing a brisk business in candles, batteries and flashlights that night. She also remembered the store had two Aladdin lamps, which gave off a lot of light.

'The cash register was the hand-crank variety, so you didn't need hydro,' she reflected.

There was room for a lot of concern that night.

Mrs. Bottoms said her father worked for Avro in Malton, and he had trouble getting home.

'I'm sure my mother was having 50 fits,' she said, adding her father finally made it home at about 3 a.m.

Mr. Bottoms said several area roads, bridges and culverts were washed out in the storm.

He also recalled going out to a two-acre field on the farm to check on the cows the next morning. 'All I could see was water,' he said, adding the cows had somehow got to the barnyard during the night, getting through a creek that was up to six feet in depth from all the rain.

Mrs. Bottoms recalled going out the next morning to see what damage had been caused.

She said she walked to Sunkist Valley and saw a mess at the northeast corner of King Street and the Townline. There had been a snack bar there. 'It got jammed into the bridge,' she said, adding Cold Creek had been blocked, resulting in it overflowing and

causing a lot of damage.

"I don't think they expected it to be that bad," she commented. "When was the last time we had a hurricane prior to that? There wasn't one."

She recalled not being too frightened during the storm, recalling she was in bed, asleep. She did say there was a bit of water in their basement, but not a lot. She also pointed out she was living just north of the Humber River. Buildings to the south got it worse.

"It took months and months to get that all fixed up," Mr. Bottoms recalled.

Caledon resident Fay McCrea said she had been living in Toronto (around Rogers Road) at the time, her family having emigrated from the United Kingdom a couple of months before.

"I vividly recall watching all the little kids in their bathing suits playing in the puddles of the Dominion store parking lot, and thought 'what a strange country we had come to,'" she recalled.

"We had never seen rain like this," she added. "It just kept coming."

McCrea said being in the city, they had not realized the extent of the damage until they went to Weston Park. "The cars, parts of houses, boats, appliances, furniture, etc. in the Humber River was quite devastating," she said.

Her husband Bill was living in Brampton at the time. As a mechanic, she said he was kept busy for weeks, cleaning cars from the mud and gravel.

"It was not possible to get to downtown Brampton because the Etobicoke creek had taken its natural course," she said.

According to material from the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, hurricane hunter planes found the eye of Hurricane Hazel about 50 miles east of Grenada.

"It was the beginning of a storm that was to spread death and destruction from the Caribbean up through the Carolinas, the middle of the Atlantic states and into Canada."

Hazel crossed Haiti, leaving a death toll that was estimated as high as 1,000 people. By Oct. 14, its winds accelerated to 150 mph, then moved through the Bahama's, leaving six dead.

By 11 a.m. that day, Hazel reached North Carolina, its winds sustained at 150 mph.

In the 12 hours after Hazel struck the Carolina coast, it traveled with extreme speed, passing through suburbs of Washington, D.C. and spinning across Pennsylvania and New York into Ontario, maintaining its intensity all the way. In the U.S., it is estimated that Hazel caused \$1.5 billion in damages and killed 100 people.

At 9:30 p.m., according to TRCA, the final official forecast on the storm was issued by the Dominion Weather Office

"The intensity of this storm has decreased to the point where it should no longer be classified as a hurricane," it stated. "This weakening storm will continue northward, passing east of Toronto before midnight. The main rainfall associated with it should end shortly thereafter, with occasional light rain occurring throughout the night."

TRCA maintains there are varying opinions on whether or not the forecasts were accurate or given in sufficient time.

"It is clear, however, that if more people had taken the warnings seriously, lives would have been saved and damage to property would have been less severe."

According to TRCA, 81 people in Ontario lost their lives in the flooding, and 4,000 families were left homeless in Southern Ontario (1,868 in Toronto).