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Looking Backwards

BY NANCY SOLOMON

Memories of storms and hurricanes have long been part of Long Island's oral narratives, most recently, Superstorm Sandy. Yet other storms have struck the region for much of its history. The most famous of these was the 1938 "New England Express" that barreled through Fire Island and Westhampton Beach, exiting through the North Fork, and eventually crossing Long Island Sound to hit Rhode Island and Massachusetts. There are several people who still remember the storm, along with hundreds who heard stories of the now infamous hurricane. One of those people is Chip Duryea, a resident of Montauk, whose family has been there for many generations:

Prior to the Hurricane of 1938, the entire village of Montauk was located on the shores of Fort Pond Bay. There were pound nets all around the perimeter of the bay. That was where my grandfather bought into the fresh fish business that was owned by Captain E. B. Tuttle. And the Hurricane of 1938 came along and rearranged the landscape. The commercial fleet gradually relocated to Montauk Harbor, where it is today, and the village of Montauk moved over to the south side, on the ocean side, where it is today.

Betty Adie of Fire Island also has memories of the infamous storm:

My grandparents came here in 1922. They found out about this place through my great-grandmother—she had a daughter-in-law who sailed on Great South Bay with friends as a teenager. My great-grandmother got a hold of someone and rented a house on Evergreen Walk. At that time it was called the Bermudian. My grandfather fell in love with this place. Within a week, he bought a house, which is on the corner of Midway and Denhoff Walk—we were in that house for eight years.

When the 1938 hurricane was approaching, Captain Robinson had the



The Duryea Lobster Pound before the 1938 hurricane. Courtesy of the Montauk Public Library.

boats running. We stayed in the house here, and my mother said before it all came, they had about three or four days—around September 13th—and then she said things got worse. She went up to the beach at the height of the storm, and at the time the ocean was coming down every walk except Cottage. Cottage had two sets of stairs and a pagoda at the top. And it had a very high dune at that time. She went

up and looked at the ocean and had to hang on to the railings, because her legs almost went out from under her when she saw that ocean.

She gradually managed to get herself down the stairs. George Stretch, Sr., was emptying out his house, and she said to him what are we going to do? He said, "Lady I don't know." She went back and gave my grandmother the report. In the meantime,



The Adie house was built c. 1930. Photo by Nancy Solomon, 2014.



The Van Wicklen-Byrne bay house. Photo by Nancy Solomon, 2010.

it's flooded down in the village. At the low end, when the eye of the storm went over here, they decided to leave and go down to Sis Narsis, now called The Landings. She got everything together, but she forgot her pocket-book. She left everything here. She just grabbed me and my grandmother and two dogs.

The water was midway almost to her hips. My grandmother had to carry the dogs. I can't imagine how they would have managed to get down to Sis Narsis without somebody carrying them. But they got down to Sis Narsis. Everybody that was here was there. Then at night Mr. Seaman, who owned the grocery business and lived on Cottage, took my mother and grandmother and the two dogs and myself down to their house and stayed there for the night, even though it was flooded—but it must have receded.

I cannot believe we stayed there. In the meantime—my father came home from work. And turned on the radio, and he heard absolutely nothing from Fire Island. He got on the phone to my uncle and my grandfather—he said pack your bags, I'm coming down to pick you up, we are going out there. He drove out to Bay Shore. They couldn't find anybody to take them. Finally, he did get this one person to

take them. It took them five hours to get across the bay, because of all the debris. They finally got there. We were all at the house. The two dogs were missing. Found the two dogs behind the couch in Seaman's living room—they were frightened. We had no damage here. This house had no damage whatsoever.

In 1944, another hurricane struck Long Island, one that would travel from the south shore to the north shore, as most storms do. Rich Van Wicklen of Freeport remembers the storm, from when he was a young boy living with his family in Merrick:

The hurricane knocked out the electricity. I was three years old. We got our water from a well, which had an electric pump that pumped water into the house. Had running water but had no water main. A German family on the corner had a big piece of property that had a garden. In the garden was a pitcher pump that had the sweetest water. All the neighbors would go over there with pots and pails. They would pump water and bring it home to use for their house. When you have to carry water, you learn how to use it. I was really little, so I didn't have to

carry water, but I remember that was my memories of that storm.

My parents had a lot of folk tales. They used to think that the first snowstorm of the year, when snow accumulated—if that happened on the second of the month, there would be two storms that year. If it happened on the 10th of the month, there would be 10 storms, if it happened on the 15th of the month, there would be 15 storms. That was their old folk story. It was amazing. Sometimes it was pretty close to accurate.

As the owner of a bay house, Rich and his co-owner Ed Sheehan learned how to keep their house from moving off its foundation during Hurricane Gloria in 1985:

1985 was a wakeup call. I saw houses float away in '85. In the bay. That is where I got the idea of cutting blow-holes in the floor so that water could get in the house and it would not float. Water could get in the house and get out of the house. In the main room, three feet long, five foot wide. One in front porch, one in back bedroom. When the house is closed up, it's closed up in compartments. Every compartment had a hole for the water to get in and out. Nothing more than a piece of ply wood with a piece of Styrofoam underneath it so that when the storm surge hit, the thing would float up and the water can get in and the house is still there.

The bay house was one of the 14 bay houses that survived Superstorm Sandy and is considered eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. ▼

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