

# The Grand Dispatch

A brief history of Beckley Beach and the surrounding area

## Where were you when Hazel Visited

### Where were you when Hazel Arrived?

To a six-year-old child it was just a normal day in October. That is to say as normally as a six-year-old could expect in his first few weeks in school. The date was October 15, 1954. This would be one of those days that when someone says to "where were you when . . .," you would always remember exactly where you were. So, where were you? What were you doing that afternoon and into the night leading to Saturday

Before reaching Canada, Hurricane Hazel had cut an extremely wide path of destruction through North Carolina, the Allegheny and Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania then centered between Buffalo and Rochester NY it swept over lake Ontario, taking direct aim at Toronto. She dumped 7.2 inches of rain on her victims and took fifty-two lives in the United States. Her real anger was only now coming out and Toronto would receive the bulk of it. In the evening of October 15<sup>th</sup> and the morning of the 16<sup>th</sup>, one

hundred and twenty-three residents of Toronto and the immediate area would drown or have their lives cut short by some other storm related cause.

The Grand River water shed was receiving an 8.5 inch water fall. The Grand was experiencing very severe flooding from Grand Valley through Kitchener and Cambridge where

devastating destruction occurred, then on to Paris and Caledonia where significant flooding and



morning of the 16<sup>th</sup>?

damage were recorded.

About 2:00 p.m. on Friday the 15<sup>th</sup>, we received a knock at the school house door at S.S. # 3 Sherbrooke in Stromness. One of the parents came to warn the school that Hurricane Hazel was bearing down on us and that all the children should return to their homes and the safety of their parents.

I was driven home by a parent, (now deceased) of one of my school chums. When you look back at what happened then and take into account how we think today, you would suggest this parent was about to make a very serious error. As I think of it, he was only a young man and I am sure became much wiser. I will not embarrass his family by telling you his name. He helped me and meant well and that is all that matters now.

I was let out of his car at the corner of Grand River Line as it is now known and the feeder canal where the boat launch is today. There is a slight depression in the road as you head toward Beckley Beach. At one time this drop was considerably greater than today. The road has been built up a couple feet since 1954. I headed home, down the road toward safe ground! Immediately I found myself facing a road covered in water and blanketed with all kinds of debris. Funny how you remember some things and forget others. I recall the logs and the dead cattails and bulrushes covering the surface as if in a stormy, soupy cocktail. I do not recall the temperature of the water. Was it cold? I just don't recall! It was very rough and dirty and getting deeper with every tender footstep. When reaching the driveway of Carroll Kenney's (lot five), I could go no further and went up or more likely was forced up the driveway toward the cottage. Only then do I recall the fierce wind and hearing my mother Irene, frantically calling my name. I had boxed myself in between the cottage owned by Dr. William Bachman (lot six), on one side and the Kenney driveway which had what seemed to me at the time With the road out of Beckley Beach closed we began making our way out using whatever high

a high embankment inclining toward the canal. My mother and I must have shouted back and forth for a time, but after all, I was only six years old and frightened to death and cannot recall all the details. Finally she seized a hold of me and hauled me out of the water that was trying to take my young life.

This was only the beginning. A much more interesting and even dangerous adventure still awaited this youngster. Soon I was home (lot eleven), only to be quickly dried off and redressed for an adventure overland to Siddall Side Road and finally the safety of the home of Harry and Ethel Siddall. My older sisters, Lallee and Margo had already wisely stopped to stay at Harry and Ethel's. I do not recall what came of my oldest sister Maurene.

My older brother Maurice (Skip) and my cousin Billy Reid were in high school at Dunnville and were let off the school bus near the abandoned lock on the feeder canal and were forced to make their way home, getting there via a route they would have to retrace, showing us the way to safety.

I recall the anxiousness of my aunt Etta Reid (lot twenty-three). She was insistent that we had to get out. She was right but we would pay a price for taking her advice!

My mother with the help of my aunt, cousin Jo-Anne, Skip and Billy, packed up my five-month-old brother David, in a laundry basket and taking me by the hand commenced what was to be a long and risky walk out of Beckley Beach.

To this day, when I hear the story of Moses I think of that laundry basket and when I think of hurricane Hazel, I think of the story of Moses!

ground that could be found. As I recall, we crossed the ball field to the hill where Fr. John A.

O'Reilly had a cottage (lot twenty-six A). From there, we went down the other side, once again finding ourselves in water! The next few hundred feet were particularly dangerous as we crossed behind the cottages then owned by Frank Linnebern, (lot thirty-two A) Edward and Evarista Farrell, (lot thirty-six A) Val and Edith Springstead, (lot thirty-eight A) and Florence Denman, at (lot forty A). We found ourselves on the top of the hill at Jim Grightmire's (lot forty-two A), a relative of sorts, but that's another story.

I remember it was then that my mother seemed to become most worried and began to cry; this being one of the few times I was to see that happen. We were stuck! The lot of Reg and Grace Wheeler's (lot forty-four A) below the hill was flooded and I recall it being full of logs and dead cattails just like the road was when this ordeal began. We could not go back. The water was even higher now than when we had come through it. We could not stay on the hill. Today, I am afraid that cottage, now owned by the Robert and Sally Creighton, would have found a window broken and tenants for a night! But I was six, what did I know? It seemed like hours to me before we ventured to the next hill then owned by Jim and Josephine O'Neill the great-aunt and uncle of the present owner Bill Dermody (lot fifty-five).

It was only October, but it became very cold and it began to snow. The wind was near hurricane force and the snow drove right through us. The wind factor must have pushed the temperature down very low. We were dressed warmly, but not nearly enough to withstand what we were now experiencing. Darkness had set in, no one knew where we were. My uncle Bill Reid had made arrangements to meet us on the Siddall Side Road, but he could not have expected us to be so late. Even if he decided to track in using the same route we were on, all he needed to do was go as little as fifty feet to one side or the other and we would not see him. It would be like two ships passing in the

night!

My memory fails me through what was likely the most frightening part of the trip. It is that part that took us from the present day cottage of Bill Dermody, along the lakeshore to the cottage of John J. Carey (lot sixty-seven). It must have been horrendous. I simply don't recollect it. It's gone; there is nothing!

This is a good time to put my story on hold for just a few paragraphs and tell of yet another life threatening experience taking place at Beckley Beach during that horrific day. Another drama had ironically been played out at this very spot only a few hours prior to our arrival. We found safety here while another nearly found her end.

Some of the old-timers may still remember John Carey. John is a world renowned nature film maker with many prestigious film awards to his credit. You would often see John and his children, cameras in hand or mounted upon a tripod photographing birds, rabbits, and plants, or some of the many insects we have come to enjoy at Beckley Beach.

On this occasion John and his sister Dorothy Carey, both of Burlington, was spending a few early fall days at the cottage. Dorothy became very ill with a potentially fatal blood disorder and needed to be rushed by ambulance to the Dunnville hospital. Once she was stabilized, she then needed to be moved to Hamilton. Dorothy would recover from this illness and live for many more years. Dorothy passed away on April 13, 1996.

John tells me that he recalls little about the storm as his every attention was devoted to his sister's health. He does recall the terrible never ceasing rain and the awful wind. Fortunately, the ambulance trip must have taken place early enough in the day to precede the flooding which

would have prevented it from reaching her where she would have been trapped and surely have died. It was interesting to hear John recall what memories he had of the ambulance. Ambulances have changed considerably since those days. In 1954, the three funeral homes in Dunnville all offered ambulance service. The ambulance was simply the body wagon. It was convenient as it was already set up with a stretcher. Maybe Howard Ballard from Ballard Funeral Home or Alvin Bullock from Bullock-Clark Funeral Home or Tom Hasler from Hasler Funeral Home, would bring their body removal wagon/ambulance out and transport you to the hospital. Of course, you know who was last one on that stretcher don't you! This was expected by the locals but I wonder how the city folk felt when they discovered the driver/attendant was the local undertaker and the last person to occupy that stretcher may have been a dead body!

Though John does not recall the details of where he went for help, I would suspect that our lives had crossed paths earlier in that day when he likely went to either our home or my aunt Etta's to use the phone. We were the only homes at Beckley Beach at that time to have phones and ours often served as somewhat of a public phone for the cottage community.

From John Carey's cottage we stayed on high ground, crossing the lot I believe was then owned by Leighton Down (lot sixty-eight). From there we continued over high ground through the remaining Beckley Beach lots to the Siddall Side Road and Niece Road where my Uncle Bill wisely and patiently waited those long hours with his car. The car was so deep in water that the water ran over the rocker panels and into the car when you opened the doors. We made our way out and spent the night with Harry and Ethel Siddall's.

Our trip began at roughly 4:00 p.m. and it was nearly 10:00 p.m. by the time we reached safety. It took nearly six hours to travel the distance from our house to Harry Siddall's home which is less than a half mile using the regular route.

### **Let us Survey the Damage**

Saturday morning would reveal much. Almost every lot at Beckley Beach except those that held very high ground was covered in every kind of debris imaginable. There were tons of dead and dying fish, and clumps of bulrushes torn from the marshes both up the river and along the lake, tree roots and enough drift wood to fill a football stadium. The garbage was everywhere with parts of docks and cottages smashed by the fierce winds and high waters of the lake. There were broken and twisted remains of small boats. At the foot of the pier stood what remained of Bill Culp's cottage, much of it ripped away and clearly gone. This property now belongs to Bills daughter Bev Zon. I chuckle today when I recall my childhood thoughts about where this once seemingly (to me) large cottage, now reduced to rubble could have gone. I imagined it floating undamaged on the lake until it reached the brink of Niagara Falls, then falling over the brink only then to be smashed into pieces.

The Curtis Bros. Store, owned by Wilf and Ruby Curtis, (lot thirty-two) was destroyed when water came so high coolers and any store furniture that could float smashed against one another demolishing the interior

of the store.

Until I had a conversation with my sister Margo, one of the amusing aspects of the night had totally slipped my memory. She reminded me that when we returned to our house and Hurricane Hazel took many Ontarians lives on that night in October and did millions of dollars in damage, especially in the Toronto and Holland Marsh area. No one died that night at Beckley Beach, and to my knowledge no one locally was injured as result of Hurricane Hazel. She tried and failed, but I will always remember just how very hard she tried and how she imprinted on me this once in a life time experience.

In the first issue of the Grand Dispatch I told you, "These articles are not designed to stand the test of documented accuracy. The information comes mostly from people's memories and different people remember the same thing in a different way." I repeat this to you again because I am now telling you about Hurricane Hazel as I recall it. Once I began to confirm some details with others I was genuinely surprised with how similarly others remembered these events while at the same time, others don't recall it at all like I do. So, this is my story with some contributions of my siblings and friends, both with similar and dissimilar recollections.

### **Grand Dispatch Celebrates Birthday As it Prepares to Fight Takeover Bid**

Recently, an important milestone in the history of publishing was celebrated. It was the first birthday of the Grand Dispatch. All employees were given time off to drink

went into our basement, there swimming in the water not yet drained away were numerous fish that had come in during the highwater and were trapped when it receded. We had our own very large built-in aquarium!



champagne with the editorial, circulation, and advertising staff. Their pride of achievement can be clearly seen in the accompanying picture as they join the publisher around the birthday cake.

The publisher, Mr. Bill Warnick, thanked the staff for their loyalty and dedication and pointed out that unlike most similar publications who struggle continuously to maintain their market share, the Grand Dispatch has 100% distribution in its geographical area. As a result it is the envy of the newspaper industry, and hostile takeovers are threatening. The Thompson

chain and Conrad Black are both coveting the Dispatch, and an historic battle for control is feared. Mr. Black has indicated that he will stop at nothing to acquire the Dispatch, and has made no secret of the fact that he is prepared to make



### Who is that Baby?

Last issue I told you I had received a suggestion that I start a “Who’s that Baby” quiz. I am going to repeat last months baby as the quality of the photo was so poor “Very small hint!” If you want it done right, she is the one to go to.

### Financial Support

Thanks again to Paul Dermody, of P. X. Dermody Funeral Homes in Hamilton for your continued financial support of this historyletter.

### In Memoriam

**June Nightingale;** died October 10, 1998. June is the daughter of the late Wm. and Etta Reid formerly of lot 23. June spent her teenage years living at the Maitland Arms Hotel and then at Beckley Beach.

**Jo-Anna Nightingale;** died November 9, 1998. Jo-Anna is the daughter of the late June and Doug Nightingale. (See above notice).

a generous offer to continue the services of the present publisher, Mr. Warnick. He insists, however, that a name change would be in order, and his offer to Mr. Warnick would be conditional on a legal name change to William Peacenick. Will family pride or financial gains win the day? Only time will tell.

Special to the Dispatch by  
Cub Reporter  
R. J. Côté

**Eugene (Gene) Scheublein;** died December 4, 1998. Gene is the husband of Geneva, and father of Linda and Jim. The Scheubleins’ were owners of lot 66 from 1948 to 1994.

**Robert (Skip) Purdy;** died May 26, 1998. Skip, is the Son of Robert and the late Alberta Purdy, owners of lot 17 from 1957 to 1964.

### I am still in need of your help!

As you can clearly see this was a very text heavy issue as opposed to photos. I would much rather show you more pictures. Mind you, maybe the subject didn’t support many photos and who knows, maybe I go on to much!

The next issue, if all goes according to plan will be about those from Beckley Beach who have been directly or indirectly involved in sports and have become just a bit famous for that involvement. Please let me know some names and if you have any pictures and a story, please share that with me as well.

If you have any pictures of Beckley Beach, its people and events that took place here, please share them with me so I can share them with

others.

If you have no further use for them I will be glad to accept them and credit you. On the other hand I will also be most happy to borrow them and make copies. Please Help?

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