

The 50th Anniversary of Hurricane Hazel

With the Hurricanes battering Florida and the Caribbean this season – Charley, Frances, Ivan and now Jean – residents may be thinking about Ontario's own brush with a hurricane, back in 1954.

Fifty years ago, Hurricane Hazel swept into Southern Ontario, confounding the meteorologists who were predicting little more than the usual "tail end" of the storm, and days of moderate rains. Instead, residents were buffeted by hurricane force winds and heavy rains that caused severe flooding – especially in the Holland Marsh.

On Thursday, October 14th, there will be a special session at the Bradford Public Library, 100 Holland Court, at 2 p.m. Hurricane Hazel survivors are invited to come out and share their memories of the storm, which set benchmarks for Regional Storm and 100 Year Storm flood levels.

Can't make it in to Bradford on the 14th? Please send in reminiscences and stories to:

Hurricane Hazel, c/o Bradford West Gwillimbury Times, 74 John St. W., Box 1570, Bradford ON L3Z 2B8, or drop off at the Library. Stories will be read aloud, and shared.
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Looking back 50 Years to 1954... A Resident remembers the impact of Hurricane Hazel

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By Dorothy Cilipka

Friday, October 15th, 1954 began as a typical, busy harvest day on the Holland Marsh, with few hints of anything unusual.

It was not until late afternoon that a sudden and severe rainstorm occurred – but the growers were used to these unexpected showers. Usually, heavy rain falls for only short periods. This time, the rain did not stop. Severe winds broke out so that the rain did not seem to be falling from above, but rather horizontally. By this time, it was evident that something

extraordinary was happening.

Of course, the first concern was for the crops. Nothing could be done about the crops still in the fields, but a few vegetables could be salvaged, if they were stacked high above the ground, before the floodwaters reached them.

That year, our onions were all topped, and neatly arranged in huge piles not far from the house. We quickly removed the uppermost bags and brought them into a storage building which was on higher ground. We worked quickly, as the floodwaters were

rising, until the tractor could no longer be used. Later, my father rented a small row-boat from Riverview Inn on Hwy. 11, and a few more onion bags were laboriously transported to safety.

We never knew that we could do this very heavy work so quickly and efficiently. In ordinary times, we would have done half the work in double the time!

The rains and winds continued for about 3 days. At one time, it seemed as if the storm was abating and everyone breathed a sigh of relief. However the furore returned shortly; it had been only the passing of the eye of the storm. When it passed, hurricane force winds and rain returned.

Of course, at the time, nobody was analysing the events of the day. And nobody had any experience with hurricanes in this area, within living memory.

Hurricane Hazel was the 8th hurricane of the year, named using the 8th letter of the alphabet. She originated in the Atlantic Ocean, in the doldrums, and grew into an intense low pressure system, encompassing huge waves, clouds, winds and heavy rain, at least 400 miles across.

It had not occurred to anybody that the months of August, September and October constitute hurri-

cane season in this part of North America. When the gravity of the situation was realized, via radio reports, Marsh residents were in fear of their very lives. One life was indeed lost here; John Naggi's body was found in the canal, the week before Christmas. Homes and other buildings were lost. Property was damaged or destroyed.

And while Hurricane Hazel brought out the best in many people, it also brought out the predators, eager to plunder and steal from those unfortunates who had lost their homes and possessions, and barely escaped with their lives. It was necessary for the roads to be closed to all traffic, except those who actually lived on the Marsh. Every vehicle was stopped, every driver questioned, and only residents were allowed in.

Thwarted, some of these "do-badders" then were off to the Town of Bradford, to see what they could get for nothing – and they got much. In all of the excitement, there was no time to screen applicants for charity. They received free

meals, free lodging, and when the Town Churches opened to distribute free clothing and supplies, one saw all sorts of unfamiliar faces – faces one had never seen on the Marsh. They must have come to Bradford from miles around to see what they could take, thus depriving those in actual need. All of the donated clothing was of good quality – much of it was new. Those who donated to the clothing drive obviously had done so at no little personal sacrifice.

The Red Cross sent vast quantities of blankets and clothing, much of it handmade. It was via the Red Cross that farmers in the Netherlands aided growers victimized by Hurricane Hazel. They understood better than anyone the dangers of farming in areas prone to flooding.

Those really in need were grateful and took the first garments they saw. It didn't matter if the shirt was too big, as long as they could wear it. That coat looked warm, and that was enough for them. But the predators examined everything: This

was too small, that was too large, this a color they didn't want, that was out of style. It was as if they were in a store – but everything was free.

In the midst of all this chaos, one could not fail to be impressed by the majestic fury of the hurricane. Perhaps it caused a few people to realize that in spite of Man's somewhat feeble attempts to "conquer nature", he will never be able to do so.

In the midst of the ravaged Holland Marsh, there was beauty too. Where there had been green fields, there was now a huge lake. The marsh had returned, if only temporarily, to its pre-historic state – resembling ancient Lake Algonquin, as it had been 70,000 years ago. Those adjusting most quickly to the new topography were the beautiful seagulls. Within hours, their graceful forms were flitting over the waters of the resurrected lake.

Written July 26, 2004.
Dorothy Cilipka is author of "The Holland Marsh: Heart of Canada's Vegetable Industry."

...Hurricane relief efforts, in Caribbean

A group of Grenadians has formed the **Grenada Hurricane Relief Organization**, working with the Consulate General of Grenada in Toronto. Donations can be

local companies and private donors to ship supplies of non-perishable food, drinking water, mattresses and building supplies to Jamaica, Barbado and Grenada.

To donate funds call 1-800-SAL-ARMY (725-2769) or visit www.salvationarmy.ca, specify "Caribbean Relief Effort."