

The Second Section

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Grove Beach, Clinton: the end of summer '38

Great Hurricane was “the end of the world”

By MABEL DALE

With contributions from staff writers H. Philip Dudley, Margot Beattie and Meg Noyes. Story and pictures continued on pages 2-A, 3-A, 7-A, and 27-A.

On September 21, 1938, New England experienced the effects of a hurricane of such ferocity that it was later described as the worst natural disaster in American history. In terms of loss of life, property destruction and injuries it surpassed both the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 and the Great Chicago Fire in 1871.

Although our shoreline was so badly battered that practically no waterfront property escaped damage, and most cottages were either blown out to sea or reduced to kindling, the death toll was mercifully light.

Most of the summer cottages from Branford to Old Saybrook had been closed for the winter. It was estimated that about 30

shoreline residents died from injuries or drowning. Thousands who were in the path of the storm survived through individual acts of heroism, or through facing the challenge with incredible courage and physical endurance.

At the height of the hurricane, in mid-afternoon, Mrs. Mildred Leete looked out of the window of the family farmhouse on Leetes Island Road in Guilford, and said to herself: “This is the end of the world.”

The salt meadows were flooded, and the waters of the Sound were lapping against the barnhouse walls. Lawrence Leete was fighting to get his 40 or so head of livestock to safety on higher ground — a feat he achieved single-handed.

The hurricane shattered the coast from New York to Boston,

and spawned a tidal wave that carried with it most of the storm's victims in Rhode Island and Cape Cod. Winds of up to 130 miles an hour were experienced along this shoreline, but 186 miles an hour was officially recorded at the Harvard Observatory at Blue Hill.

Because transportation and communication lines were almost completely disrupted, it was weeks before the tragic story could be fully told. Finally, the Red Cross set the death toll at 682, with property damage estimated as high as \$500 million.

Madison's shoreline was completely changed. Only five cottages were left at Circle Beach, but these were badly damaged. Even substantial homes on the waterfront at East and West Wharf were either

moved bodily or smashed into matchsticks.

Mr. Hessemeyer's 20-ft cabin cruiser, moored at the Highlands, East River, was carried by the force of the hurricane over the railroad tracks and deposited on the salt marsh near the Sea Shell Grille on the Boston Post Road — a distance of more than a mile.

Branford, Stony Creek and the Thimble Islands, all particularly vulnerable to the onslaught of wind and water, reported several deaths from drowning.

Further east, in Clinton, Westbrook and Old Saybrook the tragic devastation was repeated, with two drowning victims reported in Westbrook. Three large docks were destroyed at Saybrook Point, and in Essex two captains were lost while

trying in vain to save the sailing fleet.

As well as deeds of heroism, there were ghoulish outbreaks of crime. After reports of looting, prevalent in Clinton and Westbrook, Governor Wilbur Cross ordered out the National Guard to patrol that area.

"But no one who did not actually see it, could envisage the dreadful sight on the Green. The following Sunday we had team of volunteers working on the Green, sawing, chopping and removing the debris. I was somewhat surprised to read an editorial in the Shore Line

and three giant maples all but uprooted in his own garden. "We somehow patched those old trees and got them standing. Just this summer, I thought of the hurricane when I had to pay \$800 to have those maples removed!"

At the farm on Leete's Island Road, Mildred Leete was most concerned about the safety of her two children — Lawrence junior, who was five, and Alison, 18 months.

"When two windows, complete with frames, blew into the house, I put the children in the dining room, barricading the windows with the dining table.

"Everything was going all around us. I saw 10 cottages on Shell Beach disappear one after another. The waves must have been 20 ft. high, since they were well above the buildings. Although we were quite a distance from the shore, I began to fear that we would be swept away, and I started packing the children's clothes so that we could escape to higher ground on Moose Hill."

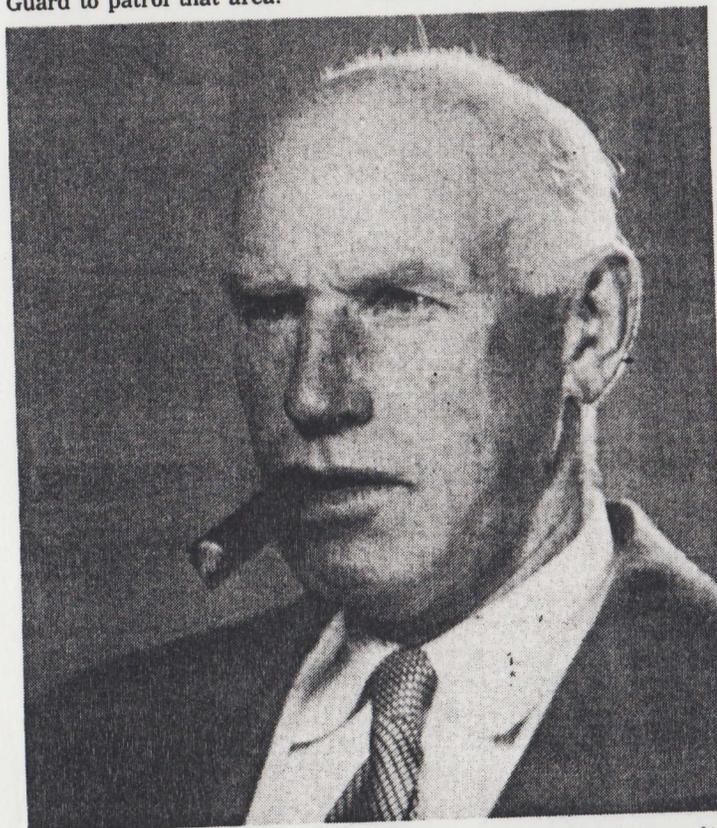
Mrs. Leete remembered later that a house guest of her mother's had pointed out earlier a newspaper paragraph that a hurricane down south might veer north. "But everyone treated it as a joke."

The Leete family had been farming there continuously since the early 1700's, and in living memory and in recorded history, nothing like this had happened on the shoreline. "There was a hurricane reported in the early 1800's, but it was a minor affair."

Mrs. Leete remembers seeing live wires sparking, and for three or four days with the railroad tracks torn up and the roads flooded, their only access to the town was on Moose Hill Road.

Mrs. Leete has one especially vivid memory. "There was a weathered barn, which was the Garden Club building. The next day I was astonished to find it had been painted bright green. Actually, it had been colored by chlorophyll from the trees."

As far as the Leetes and two of their neighbors were concerned



Former First Selectman Leslie Dudley: "I knew it was going to be like nothing we had ever seen before."

By the weekend, sightseers from inland towns were arriving in droves to see the damage, but they were turned away by police or National Guardsman unless they were victims of property damage, or could prove they were there to help clear the debris.

No one could have been prepared, since there was no warning of this storm. The hurricane had been expected to blow itself out in the Atlantic off the Carolinas. Instead, it suddenly turned northward, racing more than 600 miles in 12 hours.

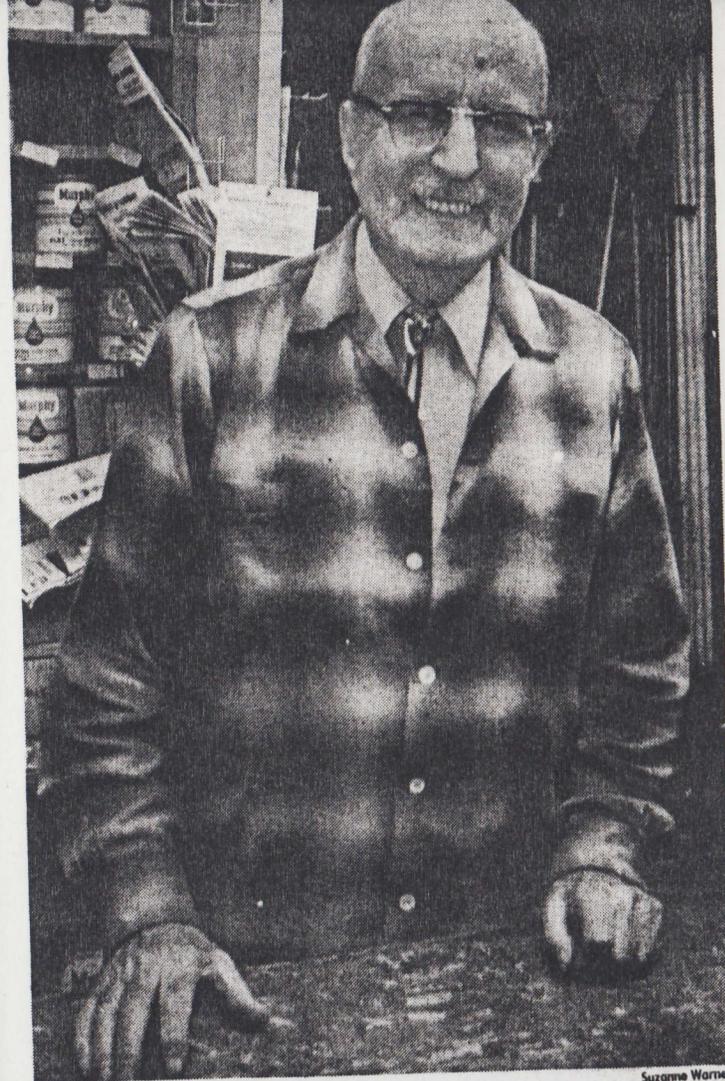
First Selectman Leslie I.

Times, referring in somewhat critical tones, to the fact that we were working on the Sabbath. The Rev. Moe said to me later: 'I guess they didn't see me working alongside you that Sunday!'

For Mr. Leland Hull, a native of Madison, the hurricane was the second disaster that occurred to him on Tuesday, September 21, 1938.

"I had had my teeth out that morning," he said the other day in his hardware store. "That should have been enough for one day.

"When the storm really blew



Suzanne Warner

Two disasters in a day for Madison's Leland Hull.

Miss Davis has kept a daily diary since girlhood, and on this occasion she recorded that "our house was full that night with friends from Sachem's Head who were stranded in town."

She recalled that the post office in 1938 was in the northern part of the Monroe Drug Store Building. "A temporary telephone line was installed for emergency calls. I remember seeing a long line all the next day of residents anxious to reassure friends and relatives inland of their safety."

There was one silver lining to this day of death, destruction and terror. The effects of the Depression were still being felt, and jobs were hard to find.

In the wake of the hurricane, there was a severe shortage of skilled labor, and shoreline building firms were hiring all the masons and carpenters they could find. One Madison firm of contractors reported that it was employing three times as many hands as usual at that time of year.

Rail tracks washed out

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First Selectman Leslie I. Dudley of Guilford began to think, during the morning, that this was an "unusual storm". He has vivid recollections of the worst disaster he encountered in his 31-years as a selectman, recounting them the other day in his home on Pearl Street.

"We had had continuous rain for several days, and I was out with Harry Butch Page putting out warning road signs for flooding. We were standing in the doorway of Page's Hardware, when I saw a huge elm on the Green, waving.

"Some instinct told me that this was going to be more than an 'unusual' storm. I knew it was going to be like nothing we had ever seen before."

Acting on his premonition, the First Selectman went into the store and bought up every cross cut and bow saws and axes in stock.

"As it turned out, we needed everyone. Four hundred trees, including the 80 or so on the Green, came down. Volunteers came from all parts of town, but many of them needed equipment."

The First Selectman was praised after the hurricane, not only by Guilfordites, but by state officials, for getting men out onto the roads even while the storm was raging.

"I could not have coped without the co-operation of so many individuals, who risked their lives. Down at the Marina, boatmen worked as a group, tying, re-tying and stretching the craft. As a result only one launch broke away."

As the storm abated, Dudley and his volunteers realized the full extent of the damage. "We lost all the roadway at Mulberry Point, Indian Cove and Shell Beach.

The second disaster that occurred to him on Tuesday, September 21, 1938.

"I had had my teeth out that morning," he said the other day in his hardware store. "That should have been enough for one day.

"When the storm really blew up, there was no time to be frightened. Nothing had happened like this before." Mr. Hull made sure his children were safe by picking them up, and some of their friends, in his van and taking them to the Hull home on Grove Avenue. For the next 24 hours he saw very little of that home.

"What a sight there was along the shore! Three big cottages next to the site of the present Beach Club had disappeared. At East Wharf there were women wading in water to their waists, and people still marooned in upstairs rooms." Mr. Hull and fellow volunteers commandeered boats and rowed through the streets on their rescue mission. We shouted "to make sure that we had rounded everyone up and carried them to safety."

The next day, Mr. Hull took in the tree devastation in the town — the Green in shambles: 30

vidid memory. "There was a weathered barn, which was the Garden Club building. The next day I was astonished to find it had been painted bright green. Actually, it had been colored by chlorophyl from the trees."

As far as the Leetes and two of their neighbors were concerned, there was one happy ending to the disaster. Two of the Shell Beach cottages remained intact, although they were lifted by the wind and dumped some distance from the shore. That winter, Farmer Leete hitched his horses and pulled both buildings over the ice, to leave them, unharmed, on their original sites.

Miss Elizabeth Davis was also a witness to the destruction of Guilford's historic Green. At her present home in North Street, she said that she and her sister were then in the family home at 1 Boston Street.

"I suppose we were among the few property owners who had insurance at that time. There had recently been a tornado in North Guilford, which prompted us to take out the insurance on our house and also our summer cottage at Mulberry Point. Fortunately, we had no serious damage except for fallen trees."



Mrs. Mildred Leete: "everything was going around us."

phone line was installed for emergency calls. I remember seeing a long line all the next day of residents anxious to reassure friends and relatives inland of their safety."

Rail tracks washed out

Niantic was certainly not spared by the cruel winds of the hurricane of 1938, which left in its wake some \$350,000 worth of damage, although there were apparently no fatalities.

Over a mile of double railroad track belonging to the New Haven Railroad was completely washed out, and waves rolling in from Niantic Bay dumped countless tons of roadbed on Main Street. The roof over the railroad station also landed on Main Street.

Bayview Hotel, the Hotel Morton and the Niantic House lost their roofs, and Proctor and Son Fish Market simply vanished. Many houses in the Black Point area also lost their roofs, and the pond behind Crescent Beach resembled a log

jam, filled with debris and surrounded by cottages which were twisted, torn, and ripped from their foundations.

In the Flanders area, 40 WPA workers were at work in the Walnut Hill section of town when the storm broke, and it took them over four hours to cut their way through fallen trees and debris to the center of town.

Barns and chicken coops were the hardest hit, and much livestock and poultry was destroyed.

In the Golden Spur area, a large tree fell through the home of Mary Weaver, neatly cleaving off the south side.

From Flanders Four Corners to Old Lyme, 47 trees lay across Post Road and nearly half of the light poles were also down.

Martial law in Clinton

The hurricane of '38 accompanied by torrential rains in less than two hours caused a scene of devastation in Clinton never seen before. Almost every tree on High Street was blown down and Commerce Street and the lower green were completely blocked by fallen trees. The figure of the soldier on Soldier's Monument was toppled from its pedestal and broken, the Post Office entrance was blocked by toppled elm trees and the flag pole. Grove Street was denuded of its trees and trees surrounding the Andrews Memorial Town Hall were felled like reeds.

Three cottages on Cedar Island floated up the Indian River and four others floated across the harbor to Waterside Lane. One family remained marooned on the island.

Three residences on High Street were crushed by falling trees, while chimneys toppled in every direction.

At noon the terrific rush of water coming from Chapman Pond washed away the embankment of the state highway bridge over the Menunketesuck river and stopped all traffic.

Every building at the foot of Commerce Street except the coal shed at the dock was gone and every yacht sunk or driven ashore. The boat shop on Waterside was swept away and demolished. Clinton beach was a shambles and governed by martial law.

Damage was estimated to exceed \$500,000 in addition to the great tree damage.



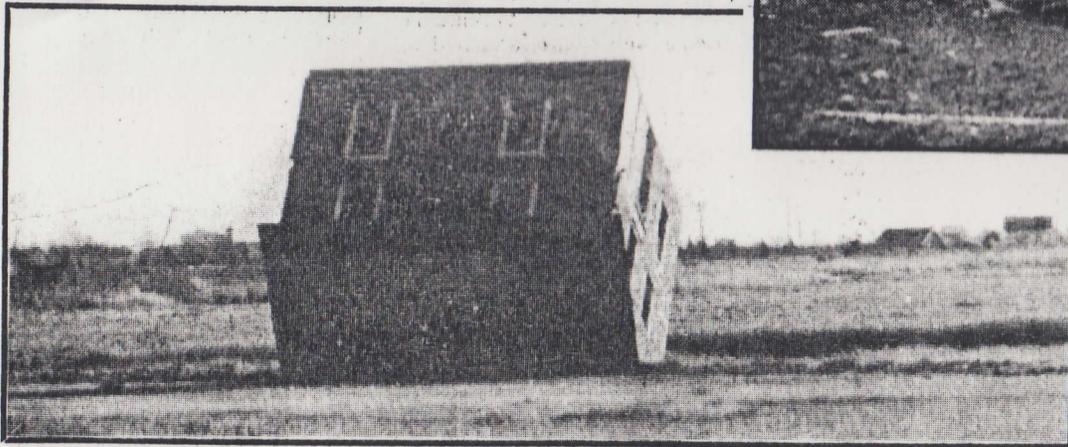
A page from Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence Leete's picture album: Roddie climbs a tree stump on Guilford Green while sister Alison watches adoringly. Christ Church is in the background.



All that remained of a summer home at Circle Beach, Madison.



church is in the background.



An upside-down house at Old Saybrook



Hurricane '38 leaves this bizaare sight at Hartford Beach, Madison.



The hurricane leaves its mark at the house on Guilford Green now the home of Dr. Elisabeth Adams.



Horses help to clear the debris on Madison Green



Guilford's historic Fair Street was in shambles.

These Guilford scenes are from the album of Miss Elizabeth Davis of Guilford.

FROM THE ALBUM OF MISS ELIZABETH DAVIS

THE PHOTOGRAPH BY MISS ELIZABETH DAVIS