

Hurricane of '38 was a real hair-raiser

By Gordon B. Seavey
Staff correspondent

The most severe storm to hit Westford noted in any records is the hurricane which came from the south in late afternoon 53 years ago. It totally devastated Westford center.

The date was Sept. 21, 1938. The town was cut off from the outside world for a couple of days with no electricity or mail and only a few telephone lines remained in service.

Few were forewarned of the impending danger from winds of hurricane force which struck just as most people were getting ready for supper. Travellers were forced to abandon their cars and resorted to walking over and around the debris. Sophisticated weather advice and warnings were lacking.

By nightfall that day, much of the town was a mass of fallen trees, downed phone and electric wires. The Victorian steeple of the then 50-year-old town hall came down about 6 p.m., blocking Main Street.

By then, many of the ancient trees rimming the Common were either torn up by the roots or had lost large limbs. All over town similar damage was to be found, but it was the center that took most of the fury.

During the height of the storm it seemed that houses would be leveled from the hurricane forces. Nevertheless, chimneys were down, roofs partially or wholly blown off and small buildings moved from their foundations. Shingles were flying in all directions. The winds started lifting the slate shingles on the south upper corner of the

roof of the town hall, ripping them off, shingle after shingle. Repairs made later show where the destruction occurred. Including in the work was a redesigned cupola, now more fittingly of colonial design.

Flag pole toppled

The two-section, 80-foot flagpole on the Common was blown over, landing in the trees. The heavily landscaped lawns of the William R. Carver home next to the Academy (now Roudenbush Center) was cluttered with damaged specimen trees.

Retrospect

At the Otis W. Day Poultry Farm on Graniteville and Cold Spring Roads, the loss was heavy in buildings as well injured birds. At the Marian Winnek home on upper Main Street, a huge tree crashed through the third floor into the old ballroom.

Apple growers suffered greatly. The storm not only blew off much of the ripening fruit, turning them into cider apples, but in some cases trees were uprooted. The winds were fickle. In some instances, trees uprooted faced the north, then shifting winds pushed them back into their original pockets. Early apple varieties had been harvested but the MacIntosh and Baldwins were

scattered all over the ground. At that period, the large growers were Ben W. Drew, William E. Wright, W. Arthur Perrins of the Old Homestead (on the site of Abbot Middle School), Robert Prescott, Oscar Spalding and others.

A grove of mature pine trees near the home of John Fisher at 12 Depot Street was laid flat with the boles tipped in all directions. These could be harvested but the aesthetic value was lost.

Water supply

It was fortunate that the Westford Water Company had just completed filling to capacity its three standpipes. Superintendent Alonzo "Lon" Sutherland asked all residents to use water sparingly until the lines to the electrically operated pumps were restored.

The government stepped in to help. The Works Project Administration sent in WPA workers to help clean up the debris along the highways, the Common and other public areas. Without present day equipment such as chain saws, the workers using hand saws and axes progressed slowly. The fruit growers also received an assist. Although some of the WPA men had never seen an apple tree, much of the fallen apple crop was rescued.

Gordon Seavey was on his front lawn and watched the 1938 hurricane destruction on the Common and the town hall.