

# Eyewitnesses: 'I remember seeing a boat up a tree'

Compiled by June W. Kennedy and Gordon B. Seavey

**S**o terrible were the events surrounding the unnamed Hurricane of '38, that voluminous written accounts were recorded for posterity. But some of the most graphic descriptions remained in the minds of those who experienced that granddaddy of all storms and lived to tell about it.

When in her 92nd year, Miss Marian Winnek clearly recalled the '38 hurricane: "I was driving home from Arlington during the afternoon of the storm. I was stopped in Carlisle by a tree across my path. A man from the Wright Trucking Co. of Westford was clearing a path while five or six other vehicles were waiting to pass.

"The other people stood under a tree. Why they did that I don't know, but I didn't want to risk having a tree uproot while I was standing under it. The winds were picking up and I was afraid it might lift my car, as it was a light one.

"I continued through Carlisle Station where debris littered the road. At the bottom of the hill on Boston Road, I met a man taking a wagon of apples to Boston. He told me that the road was impassable, so I drove into the orchard and continued to the Center via the orchard, reaching the Center just in time to see the flagpole twist around and snap off.

"A school teacher came out with his lantern [it was getting quite dark] and told me that a tree had fallen on my house. Also, being informed that the road was impassable, I stayed for what seemed two to three 'mortal' hours.

"When the wind calmed a little, the teacher and I proceeded to crawl on our hands and knees, through leaves and branches to my front door [at 24 Main Street]. I went up to the

third floor to the ballroom. The tree had crashed into the front, putting two holes in the roof where branches poked through. Luckily there was not much interior damage. The day the tree was removed with winch I left, because I was afraid it would fall back onto the house, causing greater damage. It didn't."

Austin Fletcher, now 89, who spent most of his life working in the vicinity as a grocer, watched several of the ancient maples which lined the historical triangle, the picture postcard town common, slowly being uprooted and finally crashing down. The trees carried with them the electrical and telephone wires and blocked three streets — Main, Lincoln and Boston Road.

Fletcher, who is the voluntary custodian of the American flag which now flies from a modern 60-foot fibre glass flagpole on storm-free days, says he watched with anguish when the old wooden flagpole, 80 feet high in two sections, slowly careened into nearby trees.

From his home, which faces the Common, he watched a slate shingle from the roof being hurled across the street, piercing the bark of one tree and remaining there. "If that had hit a person with full force it would have killed him," Fletcher says.

A native of the town, Gordon B. Seavey, now 83, whose home was across from town hall, recalls that the Victorian style tower of town hall crashed down onto Main Street just before dusk. Broken into many parts, it filled the principal thoroughfare for a couple of days.

Loss of this 1870 outdated structure, however, had its advantages. When rebuilding the tower, the architect chose to design the new tower of colonial design, conforming with much of the adjacent architecture and the town's colonial character.

On the little farm across Main

Street, Marden H. Seavey was about to harvest his crop of late peaches. To his dismay, the gale winds blew most of the trees over toward the north. Later, when the direction of the winds changed, the trees returned to their original position, and then fell in the opposite direction.

Another witness to that eventful day was Robert Spinner: "The trees fell like toothpicks on Plain Road. It was just a dirt path then, but it took two weeks to clean out and make the road passable. At our house in Forge Village we lost our power for six weeks.

"My brother and I drove the town school bus. After driving home that day, I tried in vain to close the barn door where the bus was kept. Finally I had to call my wife and cousin to hold one door shut while I latched and barred the other one. Even after putting boards through the latch and tying it with sturdy

rope, the door still managed to blow open."

"I can remember the time of the big hurricane in 1938," reminisced Ben Prescott. "I was working in the store next to the library, the chain store. The wind started to blow and howl and they had predicted that we were going to get an awful storm. It really was a bad storm.

"Many of the trees on the common, I can remember seeing them swinging and swaying and every once in a while one of them would come right up by the roots and very many of them came up that way that afternoon.

"I can remember there was a young fellow with me in the store that used to work for me some. We were wishing it were time to go home, but when it came time to go home we didn't dare. So we stayed there. The wind was blowing against those plate glass windows and we

piled cases of vegetables, canned vegetables and things like that in the window against the plate glass to stop it from blowing in. I don't know if the cans really held it there, but it didn't blow in anyway.

"There was a man who used to work at a poultry farm, about a mile and a half down the street. About half past nine or ten o'clock he came to the store. He lived down near where I did then. He says to me, 'Are you going home tonight?'"

"I don't know, I'm gonna start. I've got a nice axe in the car and I think maybe we can make it."

"So he got in the car with me and we locked the door and started. The tower on the town hall had been blown right off and it was right across the street, so we had to drive up over the curbing again and out onto Main Street. I think quite a few times we had to stop and

just chop the tops off some of the trees to get room to get by. We made it.

"I remember I wasn't home too long when two couples came walking down the road from Chelmsford carrying a kerosene lantern. He stopped into the house. They had been to Lowell or somewhere and had quite a time getting home so I said to them, 'Well, I just came from Westford and I think I can probably take you back as far as the Town Hall.'

"Well," my brother says, 'I'll go along with you.'

"We all got into the old Chevy and we got uptown and dropped them off. Then we got back.

"At Forge Village, the maples were going in circles," recalled George Perkins. "The wind took the water 6' high and you couldn't see across Forge Pond. Hundreds of pines were down. The next morning we were locked in.