

The BIG STORM: HURRICANE CAROL, AUGUST 1954

In late August 1954 - August 31st, to be exact - Hurricane Carol swept up the Eastern seaboard from her birthplace near the Bahamas and roared into Southeastern New England. Her center crossed the forks of Eastern Long Island and continued up through the Eastern Connecticut - Rhode Island area. By that time, she was a Category 3 storm, the last we have seen in New England.

Because of her track - to the west of the Cape - and forward speed, and due to the fact that her landfall corresponded with the time of Buzzards Bay high water, the damage in the Falmouth area from Hurricane Carol was widespread and heavy, exceeding even the levels associated with the infamous 1938 hurricane. The height of Carol's storm surge has not been exceeded in fifty-three years.

The foregoing is a brief biography of a lady I will never forget. But this memoir has nothing to do with love: it would be good not to see anything like Carol up here again - ever.

I was ten at the time, a blissfully happy city kid enjoying the last days of summer before the return to the city and to - yuck! - school.

My mother, younger brother, and I spent summers in a cottage in West Falmouth, between Route 28 (no "A" in those days) and the railroad tracks. The property was behind (i.e., west of) the location of the present Chapoquoit Grille. My dad came up on weekends and for his two weeks vacation, but for most of the time it was just the three of us and our cocker spaniel.

In 1954 we had no television. There may have been a radio, but it wasn't on constantly. We did not have a phone; if we needed to communicate, our neighbors the Bowmans had one (the number was 1024-W-1, and God only knows how I can remember that and forget so much other stuff). We occasionally received mail via our neighbors, but I don't recall there being much.

In other words, we were pretty much out of touch, and I can't remember giving a darn.

The afternoon of August 30 was cloudy and windy - very windy. I know our cocker spaniel's floppy ears remained pretty much in a horizontal position when she was outside, and our aluminum trash burning thingie seemed in danger of turning into a guided missile until we moved it in back of the house. There was no rain but the air felt funny. And there were waves on the little pond across the tracks from our property, something we had never seen before.

Some time after lunch we had our regular visit from the Giusti's Bakery delivery man - always a welcome event, since there were other tasty comestibles besides Bunny

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Bread in the back of his truck. The bakery was in New Bedford, and he drove the route to our area a few times a week.

As my mother paid for the goodies, the driver asked if we were ready for the storm. It was going to be a real humdinger, he said. As out of touch as we were, my mother of course had heard nothing about any storm, and was naturally concerned. The driver suggested that she check with our neighbors across the way - just in case.

We weren't sure what that meant but it didn't sound too good.

My mother returned from her visit to the neighbors looking more than concerned - frightened would probably be more accurate. Yes, they knew about the storm, and had intended to break the news to us and to offer us the protection of their larger house if such were required. Of course they had been through storms before and were well aware of the respect that any bad weather on the Cape required. But this was a hurricane, something special even to them, and an event definitely not to be taken lightly.

The night of August 30 was not pleasant as the storm continued its approach. The wind was filling the darkness with scary noises, to such an extent that I almost wished for the safety of our nice cozy apartment in Brooklyn, where - as any apartment dweller can testify - odd noises could always be attributed to something going on in another apartment.

But that wasn't the case in West Falmouth. We kids slept poorly, and I doubt my mother slept at all.

The morning of August 31st introduced us to a world at the mercy of a tropical storm.

Of course the first thing you noticed was the wind, and the fact that it was increasing in intensity. But wind is invisible, and kids live in a world of the senses; to us, it was seeing what the water was doing that really frightened us: it was our beloved Buzzards Bay turning on us, spilling over its "appointed limits", and pushing across the railroad tracks in our general direction. The Great Sippewissett marsh - which was clearly visible from our front porch - was an unbroken sea, with nothing green or brown or sandy showing. The little Oyster Pond on the other side of the tracks had lost its identity in becoming part of the storm surge; in an hour or so it would be over the tracks and washing up against the edges of our property.

We had relocated to the relative safety of our neighbors' bigger house, and the men in the family who were fishermen knew that there were still a couple hours to go until West Falmouth high water, so basically the worst was yet to come.

I don't recall having any experience since then that would be comparably as eerie as watching the tide surge that morning as it crept closer and closer to our houses. The

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houses on the other side of the track between the pond and the marsh were halfway submerged; I remember seeing a cabin cruiser - it had to be thirty feet long at least - that had broken from its moorings somewhere now being blown across the marsh into our pond.

Of course my brother and I - eight and ten years old respectively - were not allowed outside at the height of the storm, but there were heavy double-pane windows on the second floor of the Bowmans' house that looked west out over the marsh and the pond, and from this vantage point we could watch the world turned upside-down.

The only time in my life that I have been in the eye of a hurricane was that day. The eastern wall of the eye passed over Buzzards Bay, and I can assure anyone interested that it was exactly as you hear it described - a sudden cessation of wind and rain, sunshine, a sky of unusual color and clarity. We rejoiced, foolishly; half-hour later we were back in the thick of the storm, whose rain and wind seemed more vicious than before.

The tide surge making its way towards our house stopped at an almost imperceptible piece of rising ground maybe fifty feet away, which the water reached at about the same time as the commencement of the slack tide. The sense of relief among those of us observing the steady creep of Buzzards Bay into our front yard can easily be imagined!

The forward speed of the storm mentioned in the opening paragraphs of this essay was undoubtedly the factor that saved the area from further disaster. In other words, Carol, having done her worst, didn't hang around very long to see the results.

The morning of September 1st dawned bright and sunny, but the devastation in the Falmouth area was not to be believed. Power lines down, trees down, roads flooded, houses swept away, boats in every conceivable and inconceivable location ...

But there were other effects of the storm that made a big impression on this city kid: the solid steel of the railroad tracks twisted into pretzel shapes after the roadbed beneath had been washed away; the presence on every surface that had faced the storm wind of a glaze of salt; perhaps strangest of all, the feeling that we could no longer trust our beloved Buzzards Bay - where I had learned to swim - and Oyster Pond - where I had learned to row a boat. Nothing was benign anymore; Nature - all gentle breezes, beautiful sunsets, predictable tides - could turn on you overnight.

To a kid of ten, the world turned upside-down is scary. "Traumatized" would be far too strong a word, but I think the fact that my memories of a day fifty-three years ago are so clear testifies to the fact that living through a storm like Carol made an impression on me. Somewhere I have some pictures that I took with my trusty Brownie during the course of the storm, but I don't need them to recall the experience.

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They did come in handy, however, when we returned to the city - they were great for showing to my schoolmates (and even a few of the sisters) who had heard about the storm. Due to Carol's track and size, the New York area itself had been spared, but everyone in the metropolitan area realized what had happened out east and how fortunate the city had been.

So for a brief period, I was something of a hero at Saint Patrick's grammar school, the brave fifth-grader who had survived The Hurricane. I kept the storm photos in my schoolbag just in case I ran into any doubters.

There have been storms on the Cape since, of course, but nothing approaching a Category 3 storm like Carol. Given the differences between Cape Cod of 1954 and Cape Cod of 2010, I shudder to think what havoc would be wrought by the next big storm taking Carol's track. Hurricanes Gloria in 1985 and Bob in 1991 certainly did their share of damage, but neither was quite the storm that Carol was.

As I said at the beginning of this essay, it would be good not to see any ladies like Carol up here again - ever!

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