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Hurricane Hazel

Our History

They called it 'Hazel'

by Michelle Fuselli

Strange things happen all the time and on October 14, 1954, Hurricane Hazel, a foreign event for this area, tore through Ajax-Pickering and left destruction in its wake. But local residents at the time believed that they got off lightly from the storm.

According to reports from the *Pickering News*, high-powered winds were responsible for fallen trees and downed phone and power lines. Firefighters, police and residents also worked together to rescue several families on the west side of the Rouge River from being swept away.

As well, tow trucks were kept busy saving stranded motorists from some of the roadways that were flooded. In Whitevale, the mill dam and bridge on Conc. 5 went out; traffic from Hwy. 2 was re-routed to Hwy. 401 when Duffins Creek overflowed.

Roads were not the only problem though. High winds and rain also caused one C.N. train to derail. When local resident David Callaghan Sr.'s train did just that near Markham, he managed to escape by climbing through a coach window to safety.

The Town of Pickering was fortunate in that no one perished in the storm, but some came dangerously close to it when the Rouge Valley was flooded. Homeowners were being evacuated in two small boats with four or five passengers in each when one overturned, throwing everyone into the swirling waters. Luckily, Vernon Disney speeded to the scene in his motor boat and rescued everyone from the water.

Many rescuers went unnamed for their assistance during the hurricane, but the fire chief

of Dunbarton expressed his thanks to Disney and Fred Stork, another boat rescuer, for their help in the valley.

Along with property damage, businesses and farmers also lost much during Hazel's fury; Ajax Lumber was reported to have lost several thousand dollars worth of lumber from their plant.

A relief fund was set up for Ontario residents and contributions were requested. A staggering figure at the time, the damage exceeded \$25 million according to The Metropolitan Toronto and Region Conservation Authority.

Since then, the MTRCA has been able to drastically reduce the potential for loss of life and property damage through a watershed management program. A watershed is used for any and all land that drains into a river and ultimately into Lake Ontario. The Rouge River, Petticoat Creek and Duffins Creek are just some of those included in the program.

To the Original Bay News:

In response to Mr. G. Colm's letters of Dec. 1989 and Sept. 1995 regarding W. Mackay's *The Pickering Story*, I am pleased to inform you and your readers that hardback reprints of Dr. Mackay's excellent history of our former township and town are available for sale.

Dr. Mackay has very generously allowed the Pickering Public Library Board to publish further printings of his work, with any profits going to the library. It is available at \$35 at the Central Library in Pickering.

Sandy Cameron
Chief Executive Officer

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