

HURRICANE HAZEL

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Canada's Storm of the Century

Jim Gifford



THE DUNDURN GROUP
TORONTO

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FOREWORD

BY MIKE FILEY



THE YEAR WAS 1954; THE DATE , OCTOBER 15; the weather, wet . . . boy was it wet! Back then I was still just a kid. Well, to be absolutely honest, I had graduated from “kid” to “teenager” just four days earlier. I was living in the family home on Elvina Gardens in North Toronto, and as strange as that may seem, the idea that a hurricane might be approaching the city was totally absurd. Sure there had been mention of Hazel in the previous days’ newspapers, but hurricanes only happened south of the border . . . didn’t they? On that special Friday there had been a lot of rain, but what the heck, there had been lots of rain that entire week. But now, as I made my way home from school, it seemed as if the rain was coming down even harder.

Thinking back a half-century, the idea that a hurricane might be headed our way wasn’t even mentioned on the city’s one television station (CBLT, Channel 9) or on any of the local radio newscasts. At 4:00 P.M. I began my afternoon delivery job at the late Pat Higgins’s place, Mount Pleasant Fish and Chips, where, if it wasn’t busy, I would scrub and peel potatoes. This being a Friday night (and with certain religious beliefs still very much in place) there wasn’t time for that. All of my time would be spent delivering either halibut and chips (at thirty cents an order) or haddock and chips (same chips, different fish, twenty-five cents an order).

The shop wasn’t far from the corner of Broadway Avenue and Mount Pleasant Road, where the paths of the streets met in a minor hollow. As the afternoon turned into evening, that hollow began to fill with water so that by six or seven o’clock, as I wheeled my bike through the intersection to deliver orders on the other side of Mount Pleasant, water would come in over the top of my boots. This was soon a deluge. The day ended and I went to bed, rain still pelting the windows of my bedroom. And still I hadn’t heard the word “hurricane.” And, in fact, didn’t until the following morning, when all of the country learned that this witch called Hurricane Hazel had caused such great loss of life and inflicted tremendous damage to the north and west of the city.

I felt bad that while all of this was going on, my main concern was getting those fish and chip orders through.

MIKE FILEY

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It did not prove easy to gather first-hand accounts and photographs of the aftermath of Hurricane Hazel. Without the participation of those I interviewed and those who trusted me with their photographs I would never have been able to complete this book. Many welcomed me into their living rooms, met me at Tim Hortons, found time for a lengthy phone call, or suffered my flurries of e-mail, including Don Boyd, Al Brierley, Harry Bruce, Michael Campbell, Jack Carson, Nick Chometa, Jim Crawford, Byard Donnelly, Stan Elphick, Peter Ferguson, Mike Filey, Edith George, Ken Gibbs, David Imrie, Dave Iris, Hans Kotiessen, Helen Lee, Don Leslie, Hazel McCallion, Tudi Nuttley, Frank Orlandi, Wayne Plunkett, Roman Tarnovetsky, Mary Jane Thorne-Rees, John Thurston, Norma Vineham, Joyce Walker, and Neil Walker.

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I must single out Paula Elphick, Eva Ferguson, Marj Mossman, Mary Louise Ashbourne, Tina Hardt, and the other members of the Weston Historical Society for trusting me with their precious records and for allowing me a forum to meet their members, many of whom witnessed Hazel's wrath in Weston and Etobicoke.

I thank Beth Crane for her technical advice and for otherwise seeing me through the storm.

For their continued support over the years, I thank my brother, Glen Gifford; Ken and Pat Wright; Michael Wright; Mark Wright; David Bolter, Nancie Im-Bolter, and wee Gwyneth Bolter; Geoff and Mary Bolter; Bill Harvey; John and Liza Harvey; Adrienne Leahey; Craig MacInnis; Steve Beattie; Ted Barris; Aaron Adel; Sarah Williams; Patrick Crean; Alyssa Stuart; Jim Allen; Howard Hewer; Barbara Jones; and my walking partners, Bella and Joe. I mustn't forget Steve Bevan, Dean Tower, Andrew Goodman, J. Bettis, and the others who for so long have met me at the confluence.

Special thanks to Mike Filey, who took time away from his busy schedule to write a foreword to this book.

Thank you, Maria. You have been with me nearly half my life. I can't imagine what my world would be like without you.

Finally, to my mom, Eleanor, who first told me about Hurricane Hazel: I love you and miss you and

wish you were here to see this.

JIM GIFFORD

HURRICANE HAZEL



IN OCTOBER 1954, TORONTO WAS A SMALL TOWN . The population had crept up to over a million inhabitants, and families trucked in from across Canada and around the world. Industry boomed. New streets lined with new houses sprouted up everywhere, revitalizing the sleepy suburbs that wrapped around the city's core, connecting them. But for all its growth, Toronto was still a small town.

Long before the CN Tower loomed over the skyline, Toronto was a city of independent neighbourhoods and communities: East York, Weston, Willowdale, Leaside, Don Mills, Royal York, Humber Summit, Lansing, Long Branch, Swansea. Now they have all been swallowed up by amalgamation; the names remaining on road signs identify what were once small villages nestled within a cosmopolitan collective.

In 1954 people knew their neighbours. In the summer, they talked over their back fences and shouted greetings across the street over the squeals of children playing. It was a time when neighbours really did drop by for a cup of sugar, and when someone needed help with something, you gave it.

The Yonge subway line had opened in March of that year. Passengers rattled along, one arm gripping a strap for balance, the other holding a folded *Toronto Telegram* , or perhaps the *Toronto Daily Star*, as they journeyed to their jobs at Eaton's at Yonge and College or at the banks farther south or in the growing number of specialty shops and businesses. Television was just becoming affordable for many. When the Toronto Argonauts played against the Ottawa Rough Riders in the first televised football game in Canada in September, most viewers were treated to their first Canadian Football League game. But when Marilyn Bell swam successfully across Lake Ontario, most still heard about it on the radio or read about it in the newspaper.



Martin Taylor

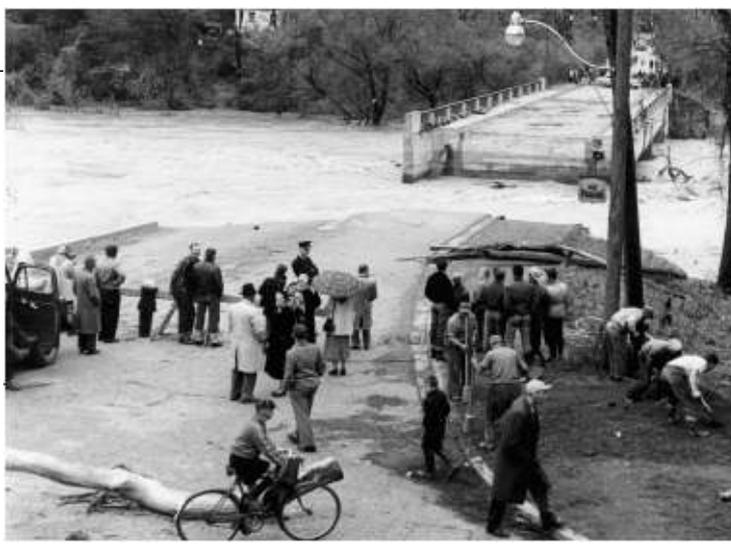
As if in a dream, pavement appears to float near the Lawrence Avenue bridge dividing Etobicoke and Weston. For many, Hurricane Hazel was a surreal experience far removed from the routine of daily life. Martin Taylor was among dozens of engineering students at the University of Toronto who searched the Humber River for bodies after the storm. "Each engineering student was expected to walk the Humber," he recalls. Taylor ventured out from his home near Church Street and Jane Avenue the day after the storm to photograph the destruction.

In Canada the weather makes up much of the news, especially in Toronto, where any major change in the forecast becomes a front-page story. Most often, Toronto's weather is unremarkable: moderate summers with a few blistering days; moderate winters with a few heavy snowfalls. The autumns are cool and dry, for many the favourite time of year. Rarely does the city see severe conditions, and when it does the novelty becomes, for some, a reason to celebrate.



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Curiosity seekers on the Etobicoke side of the Lawrence Avenue bridge look over into Weston. Police monitored the deteriorating situation and closed the bridge shortly before its middle section was washed away.



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Onlookers on the Weston side of the Lawrence Avenue bridge.

Nobody celebrated the weather on the night of October 15, 1954. Later, people would celebrate the heroes of Hurricane Hazel: the men who rowed the streets of flooded neighbourhoods looking for survivors stranded on rooftops; the volunteers who kept the coffee pots gurgling and the sandwiches coming as the rescuers went out once again, hoping that that family was still clinging to the roof of the house at the end of the street; and the firemen, Boy Scouts, and other conscripts who spent long days away from their families when the water receded, walking river valleys looking for bodies.

In only twenty-four hours in October 1954, more than eight inches of rain — millions of gallons of water — fell on the Humber River watershed alone. Toronto saw its worst flooding in two hundred years. Nearly four thousand families were left homeless, and eighty-one people lost their lives. Many more would have been lost were it not for the efforts of dozens of brave men and women, some of whom lost their own lives trying to save others.



Gordon W. Powley/Archives of Ontario/E 5-2-2-22-1/10002913

Surveying the damage along the shores of the Humber River in Etobicoke. At the turn of the millennium, Maclean's magazine ranked Hurricane Hazel as one of the top fifty nation-building events of the twentieth century.



THE FORECAST CALLED FOR "RAIN TONIGHT," WHICH DID NOT seem unusual, as it had been raining for three

days straight, and the ground was sodden from an unusually wet summer and fall. What was a little more rain?



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For days, buried in the back pages, the newspapers had been describing the destruction caused in Haiti and the Dominican Republic by a hurricane called Hazel. It was a busy year for hurricanes, with seven female-monikered monsters having already crawled up the East Coast. This one seemed no different. For Torontonians, hurricanes were nothing to fear. They rarely reached southern Ontario. Hurricanes often take a direct route north from the Caribbean to the Golden Horseshoe, but long before they ever reach Ontario they curl away back out into the Atlantic Ocean. Hurricanes often lash the Carolinas, smashing houses and boats and submerging coastal towns from Myrtle Beach north to Wilmington. The great storms push inland north towards Pennsylvania, losing steam as they encounter the Allegheny Mountains and are pushed offshore, scattering fishing boats and other vessels before they peter out over empty waters.



Eric E.H. Taylor/Toronto Port Authority/PC 11 125



Eric E.H. Taylor/Toronto Port Authority/PC 11 128

Sunnyside Beach resembled a clear-cut after Hazel unexpectedly moved north across New York and cut a swath directly through Toronto. Debris surged onto the beaches, covering them with driftwood, refuse, and remnants of lives from the northeastern United States and Ontario.

Hurricanes are the most awesome force on the planet. Swirling masses of wind and rain, they can grow to more than one hundred miles wide. Their winds can reach 175 miles per hour, with gusts up to 200 miles per hour. Over the centuries they have killed hundreds of thousands of unsuspecting people, many in their own homes.



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Few possessions remained when the Humber River poured through doors and windows of homes in Weston.



Gordon W. Powley/Archives of Ontario/C 5-2-2-33-2/10002914

This woman seems remarkably upbeat as she trucks some of her belongings around in a hamper.

Hurricanes are formed in the warm, moist air that lies over the ocean. At first they exist as small disturbances, their winds slight, with a barometer reading just lower than normal. But they grow quickly. In only a few days the winds jump to 50 and then up to 150 miles per hour. Fuelled by the tropical waters, the storms move northward, where the water becomes cooler and they often deteriorate and fade away. But sometimes a storm finds a way to push farther west and north, where it chooses its path: the Caribbean, the Gulf of Mexico, or the Carolinas.

Hurricanes kill in many ways. The wind picks up and throws whatever is in its path, ripping up signs and fence posts and hurling them around suburbs like spears. Roofing tiles whiz through gale force winds like giant blades. The winds knock over houses and marinas. Sudden surges shove cars off roads and into ditches or other cars, the drivers blinded completely when the wipers are torn away. Many drive straight into rivers, unaware that the approach has been washed away.



Weston Historical Society

Boatloads of volunteers scan the river for bodies.

Hurricanes mostly drown. The volume of water that pours down during a hurricane is beyond belief. It rains so hard that while you are taking the time to marvel at just how much, the water rises around you. Within only a couple of hours the water can rise past your knees. It squeezes under the front door of your house, then knocks the door down and gushes up the stairwell. Rivers swell beyond the banks, turning streets into streams, backyards and town squares into lakes. Everything in the path of the rushing water becomes a deadly weapon. The detritus of everyday life gnashes and spins in a lethal, swirling tangle that knocks down houses and drowns and crushes those who have failed to escape to higher ground.

Hurricanes are given people's names — Camille, Andrew, Floyd, Carol. Originally only women's names were used. At the end of the nineteenth century, Clement Wragge, a meteorologist for the government of Queensland, Australia, named hurricanes after women and local political figures he particularly disliked so that Australians could put a face to the howling, insane creatures that threatened the shipping lanes. Some speculate that it became the practice to name the storms after women after the publication of the novel *Storm* by George R. Stewart, in which the protagonist bestows women's names upon hurricanes without the knowledge of his superiors. At various times the American military has given the storms women's names, has used the phonetic system "Able, Baker, Charlie," or has labelled them with the storm's latitude and longitude. Today, every other storm bears a man's name.



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Martin Taylor

We remember the worst storms, but quickly forget the tempests that hover offshore on satellite weather maps only to dissipate long before they make landfall. We remember Hurricane Andrew, of course, which demolished Florida in 1992. We remember Hurricane Floyd, which careered into North Carolina in 1999. Thanks to Erik Larson's book *Isaac's Storm*, we read, fascinated, about the nameless storm that turned Galveston, Texas, into a modern Atlantis in 1900, killing approximately eight thousand people.

Florida, the Carolinas, Texas — prime targets for Atlantic storms. But Ontario? The chances of the province seeing the serious effects of a hurricane have been calculated at 1 percent in any given year. A few storms have threatened to follow Hazel's path to Toronto, most recently Isabel in 2003, which battered around a few lawn chairs and garbage tins and disappointed thousands who looked forward to the novelty of a northern hurricane. The newspapers hailed Isabel as the return of Hurricane Hazel. Reporters combed coffee shops and malls for those who remembered the night of October 15, 1954.



Gordon W. Powley/Archives of Ontario/C 5-2-2-33-1/10002916

Most remember Hazel as a bad rainstorm. They went to bed and woke up to a changed city. Some spent the night pumping out their basements or driving towards higher ground to weather the storm in front of a roaring fire far from the flood water. For hundreds of others, however, it was a horrific night: houses being torn from their foundations to become sinking boats, neighbours floating by clinging to what was left of their roofs. When the call rang out for volunteers, many left the relative safety of their homes and families and ventured out into that dark, terrible night.



BORN IN EARLY OCTOBER OFF THE WEST COAST OF Africa, Hazel drew its power from the heated waters of the Atlantic and blazed towards the Caribbean. On October 5, the storm roared fifty miles off the coast of Grenada, and on October 6 it passed between the islands of Grenada and Carriacou. From there Hazel sidled west at 15 miles per hour, with the barometer reading a low of 29.44 inches and winds reaching 110 miles per hour. On October 7, the pressure dropped to 29.12 inches and winds whipped up to 125 miles per hour as Hazel neared Haiti, curling around the western tip of the island nation but not sparing its inhabitants her wrath. Nearly one thousand people were killed as houses were flattened and landslides buried island residents. On October 13, Hazel began to turn north, with winds reaching 100 miles per hour, and the great storm increased its speed as it raced towards the Atlantic seaboard.

Early on October 15, North and South Carolina residents were warned that Hazel was on the way. At 9:25 A.M., when most Torontonians were just settling in at work or beginning their daily chores, Hazel battered Myrtle Beach, the barometer dropping to 28.47 inches. Over the next few hours the barometer dropped steadily, Hazel's winds screamed at 125 miles per hour, and the storm moved at 60 miles per hour north overland. At one point, Hazel was 120 miles wide, and her gales reached a width of 200 miles.



Map by John Lightfoot



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Typically, hurricanes lose steam and dissipate after having made landfall, but Hazel was no ordinary storm. Fed by a cold front that had moved east across the Rockies, which on its own could have produced a severe storm, Hazel picked up speed and moved north through North Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia, and Washington, D.C., setting records for rainfall and high winds, which ranged between 130 and 150 miles per hour, taking many lives and wreaking unfathomable damage. At Long Beach along the coast of North Carolina, Hazel left behind only 5 of the 357 buildings along the shore. After the storm, survivors found palm fronds and wooden bowls inscribed “Made in Haiti” along the Carolina coast.

“It took the whole side of my house out,” said Dick Ford, who was building a new home in Maryland. Hazel tore off the roof and chimney of his neighbour’s house and flung it three hundred feet into his. Ellen Ford remembers the wind picking up her father’s skipjack and dropping it in the front yard. “The anchor cut a trench in the road.”

As Torontonians were preparing to pack it up for the weekend, Hazel pushed over the Allegheny Mountains and through New York State towards Lake Ontario. At 6:00 P.M., with the eye of the storm nearing Lake Ontario, the winds lessened to 70 miles per hour. In Syracuse, New York, Hazel tore down the marquee of the Elmwood Theater. It had read, “Now Playing: *Gone with the Wind*.”

There is much dispute about whether the residents of Toronto and the surrounding areas were forewarned about the hurricane. Many people do not remember having heard an announcement on the radio, and certainly not on their televisions.

On Friday morning, Fred Turnbull of the Malton Dominion Public Weather Office watched Hazel closely. The office released a forecast at 9:30 A.M. calling for continuous rain throughout the day. Turnbull believed that the rainfall over the next twenty-four hours could exceed the heaviest on record. The office released a second statement:

The present Northerly motion of the hurricane centre is causing considerable apprehension in Southern Ontario areas . . . the Allegheny mountain range lies between us and the storm centre. The mountain range may break up, or materially weaken, the storm’s intensity, or cause it to veer off towards the Northeast. Just what effect the Allegheny mountains will have cannot be stated at the moment, but a further bulletin will be issued by noon today.



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Houses resemble flattened packing crates in Weston, shot through with telephone poles and tree trunks.

That noon forecast suggested that “in crossing the Allegheny mountains the hurricane will decrease markedly in intensity with winds not expected to exceed 50 miles per hour on the open water of Lake Ontario.”

At 9:30 P.M., as many huddled with the wind and rain howling at their windows, this forecast was issued: “The intensity of this storm has decreased to the point where it should no longer be classified as a hurricane. This weakening storm will continue northward, passing just east of Toronto before midnight. The main rainfall associated with it should end shortly thereafter, with occasional light rain occurring throughout the night.”

Though Turnbull, the officer in charge of the weather office, had predicted possible record rainfall with analysis from his colleague Norman Grundy, and despite two warnings that Hazel had made over the Alleghenies, the official reports did not alarm the residents of Toronto. Many assumed that the city was in for a rocky, though safe, night.



AS COMMUTERS CRAWLED UP THE CITY’S ARTERIES TOWARDS their homes on the outskirts or rode the streetcar or subway in anticipation of a quiet night in front of the television, people started to notice that this was not just a bad rainstorm.

At its worst, Hurricane Hazel was a category four storm on the Saffir-Simpson scale, which ranks it in select company with the past century’s most vicious storms. But as Hazel’s eye moved over Lake Ontario, the storm was downgraded from a hurricane to an extratropical cyclone. The winds eased as Hazel mixed with the much colder storm heading east. Technically, the hurricane that has lived in the

memories of Canadians from Niagara Falls to Uxbridge to Timmins was no longer a hurricane when it crossed the border. But no one remembers the storm that hit southern Ontario in October 1954, Extratropical Cyclone Hazel.



Weston Historical Society

“At six o’clock the sky was black and there was two inches of water on the ground,” remembers Nick Chometa, then a fourteen-year-old boy living in Toronto’s west end. “I couldn’t see more than a few feet in front of me, couldn’t see the sides of the road. I drove down a ditch into a culvert and became stuck in the bumper of my dad’s new car, then backed up and went home. My father wasn’t too angry about my getting into an accident in his car because you just could not see in the storm,” he recalls.



Archives of Ontario/RG 14 B-10-2 #422, 6

Sheets of rain blinded drivers as they approached damaged bridges and washouts. Cars were washed downstream or, like this one, hit an earth wall and were crushed.

“I sat at my desk and looked out the window at the rain coming down. It was almost five and we could go home. I left the office at Bay and Front and took a streetcar home. Leaving the centre door from the streetcar, I stepped down into what I thought was a big puddle. I made my way to the curb but where was it?” recalls Joyce Walker. “I remember a man took my hand and led me to the sidewalk. The water was so deep that it went right over the curb. That night we listened to the news on the radio. Little did we know of the tragic events that were to follow that night. A big puddle on Bloomsbury Street seems so small compared to the loss of so many.”

Mary Jane Thorne-Rees, who was on her way home from a piano lesson near Avenue Road and Davenport, will never forget the storm. “The neighbours across the road were hosting a bridal shower. I was a drowned rat by the time I got home. I couldn’t join my mom and grandmother as they went to the shower. We sure got much more than a shower that night.”

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