

# POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

## Agnes: Pottstown's worst disaster (1)

*This week is the 50th anniversary of Hurricane Agnes, which caused the worst flood in Pennsylvania history, including Pottstown. As a Mercury cub reporter in 1972, I helped cover the flood and its aftermath. (Part 1 of 4).*

It didn't rain for 40 days and 40 nights, but for a while it seemed like it might.

June 18, Father's Day, was a washout. Heavy showers fell Monday and Tuesday. On Wednesday Hurricane Agnes arrived. It rained all day. Early Thursday afternoon it was still raining as I drove south on Route 100 to the *Mercury* from Allentown where I lived.



Commentary by  
Tom Hylton

In Bechtelsville my car had to forge a surging stream of water in a low spot in the highway, but I didn't think much of it until I turned on King Street in Pottstown. The Manatawny Creek was a swollen brown river surging across parts of Memorial Park and inching towards the railing of the King Street bridge.

When I arrived at the newsroom, photographers were already out taking pictures of the rising waters.

*Mercury* editor Bob Boyle called the staff into his office. It was clear from the police monitor and incoming calls that a disaster of catastrophic proportions was in the making. Each reporter was assigned a different aspect of the developing flood.

We all gave our most important information to John Thiessen, who

would write the main story. I was assigned to report the damage to the borough's industries, most of which were located along the Schuylkill River.

Just picking up the phone (there were no cell phones then) indicated the growing magnitude of the disaster. There was no dial tone for 15 or 20 seconds. Although the flood didn't affect telephone equipment, thousands of callers were jamming all the lines and overloading the system. Everyone, it seemed, had trouble comprehending the unprecedented deluge of water.

No serious flooding had been predicted. Truckers at Mrs. Smith's Pie Company (where Hanover Square is now located) were feverishly moving tractor trailers from their parking lots, but a few didn't get out in time.

Most of the Mrs. Smith's buildings were inundated with 5 feet of water, ruining equipment and spoiling a half million pies.

One half block from Mrs. Smith's on South Evans Street, water poured into the Lincoln Underwear Company, covering its sewing machines and cutting tables, and ruining thousands of finished packages of men's shorts and T-shirts. (The factory was subsequently demolished and is now a vacant lot).

Years worth of records, as well as heavy equipment, were flooded at the Bethlehem Steel fabricating plant.

"We've got one hell of a mess," Sydney Pollock reported from the adjacent Mayer Pollock Steel Co. "The only thing we got out was a few adding machines."

Shortly before 3 p.m. sirens broke loose all over town. Intense black smoke poured into the air from the direction of Bethlehem Steel.

The rising river had crossed Industrial Highway, lifted oil from the tanks at the U.S. Axle Company, and brought it into contact with hot furnaces, setting off a huge blaze. Firemen were unable to get their equipment to the plant because of the flooded highway. We could only watch it burn.

(U.S. Axle moved to the Pottstown Business Campus after the flood.)

*More Thursday.*

### The Story of a Flood, in Pictures - Pages 23, 25



**HURRICANE AGNES FLOOD of June 22, 1972 contributed to the decline of Pottstown as an industrial town.**