

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Agnes: Pottstown's worst disaster (2)

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 2 of 4).

In Royersford, water poured around the huge blast furnaces of Diamond Glass, one of the nation's largest manufacturers of liquor bottles. Thousand of finished bottles already packed in cartons for shipment were lifted and smashed.

Businesses and industries from Birdsboro Steel in Birdsboro to Phoenix Steel in Phoenixville had similar stories to report. Stanley G. Flagg, Doehlers, and Kiwi Shoe Polish were all underwater.



Commentary by
Tom Hylton

One of my duties was calling the automatic gauge at the base of the South Hanover St. bridge over the Schuylkill River, which had its own phone number and would answer with a clanking sound — one bell for each foot of the river. For a few innocent moments in the early afternoon the question was whether the river would hit flood stage — 13 feet. Late Thursday afternoon, after the water topped 22 feet, the device no longer answered. The Schuylkill on Friday crested at 30 feet, beating an 1850 record by more than 6 feet.

At 4:30 p.m. Thursday the newsroom's teletype machine stopped and the lights went out. We learned later that the water had reached the Moser Road substation. Philadelphia Electric workmen shut down the station, cutting off power to 2,300 customers in downtown Pottstown. The phones still worked, however, and the battery

-powered emergency lights provided enough illumination for the manual typewriters we used. Everyone could keep working. An hour later, 2,500 more Pottstown customers lost power.

Switching to other area stations took several hours, and power wasn't restored until after midnight for some customers. At times it seemed like power outages might prevent the *Mercury* from printing the biggest story in its history.

I can still picture Ellis Rietzel, the publisher, sitting at a desk in the darked newsroom and bawling into the phone at some PE executive, "We've got a newspaper to get out!"

Hundreds of Pottstown residents were frantically trying to remove their furniture to the second story, or better yet haul it away, but the flood water rose so rapidly few were able to save much.

Between 10 p.m. Wednesday and 4 p.m. Thursday more than 6 inches of rain fell in the borough, By dinner time Pottstown had become a peninsula that could only be entered from the north. The Glasgow Street bridge had washed away and the King Street bridge was covered with water. The Keim Street and Hanover Street bridges were also covered. Engineers later determined that floating debris had so weakened the Hanover Street bridge it would have to be replaced.

Boats appeared on High Street, King Street and what used to be the streets of South Pottstown. I walked down Hanover Street to High Street and watched boats floating between Dempsey's Diner and the Elks Club. The 000 and 100 blocks of King Street, Chestnut Street, and Walnut Street looked like Venice The view was in fact quite picturesque. Only later when the waters receded was the ugliness of the devastation evident.

Next week: Navy flyers to the rescue.



BOATS ON HIGH STREET at York Street