

# POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

## Agnes: Pottstown's worst disaster (4)

*This month 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 4 of 4).*

As the flood waters receded, a new problem arrived: sightseers.

The *Mercury* and WPAZ warned people to stay away from the flooded areas so the cleanup efforts could begin.

President Nixon declared Pottstown and other parts of Pennsylvania a disaster area. That made area flood victims eligible for substantial benefits, including money for temporary housing, unemployment compensation for flood related layoffs, low-interest loans, and outright grants.



Commentary by  
Tom Hylton

It was the only good news for hundreds of homeowners whose standard insurance policies did not cover flooding. One particularly stingy insurance company refused to pay for shingles blown off a roof by the whirling blades of a passing helicopter. The company argued the helicopter wouldn't have been there if it hadn't been for the flood, which wasn't covered in the policy. After the *Mercury* brought the incident to the attention of outraged insurance commissioner Herb Denenberg, however, the company changed its mind.

The receding water revealed the disaster was even worse than imagined.

Upstream at Douglasville, 1 million gallons of used oil was lifted by the flood from the storage lagoons of Berks Associates, an oil reclamation firm, and carried down stream. The oil equivalent of a half-inch rainfall was deposited in homes, factories, yards, shrubs, trees, and every other object touched by the flood.

It was the worst inland oil spill in U.S. history. William Ruckelshaus, director of the Environmental Protection Agency, said the spill was an act of God compounded by an unfortunate decision of local government a long time ago to allow storage lagoons to be built.

A week after the flood, the EPA and the Coast Guard set up headquarters in the Washington Elemen-

tary School (now the Pottstown School District administration building) to direct the most massive cleanup of the era.

For years afterward, the oil was a reminder of exactly how high the flood had risen. Black lines could be seen on buildings, telephone poles, trees and the few shrubs that survived.

Nearly everyone knew someone whose home was devastated by the flood.

Mercury staffers like Dolly Smith helped clean up the South Pottstown home of Becky Beidler, the editor's secretary, whose first floor was coated with black goo.

Lumber yards did a booming business in paneling, which most people found was only way to hide the water-damaged walls.

High school and college students from both outside and inside the area organized teams to help people fix up their homes. Donated food and clothing poured into the area.

The Pottstown Area Food Relief Fund was organized and given official sanction by Pottstown and North Coventry governments. *Mercury* publisher Ellis Rietzel was chairman. More than \$125,000 was raised and distributed to 426 flood victims.

Using federal funds, the Chester County Housing Authority bought and demolished scores of houses in South Pottstown.

The Blue Marsh Dam was built in Berks County to lessen the chance of severe flooding in the future.

But with climate change, another "350-year flood event" may return much sooner than we expect.



**FLOOD WATERS RIPPED** the side off a South Hanover Street home. Clothes can be seen hanging in a second floor closet.