

Hurricane History

By Olivia Bissell

In 1938, my family lived on a dairy farm in Hillsdale, New York. I was a ten year old 5th grader at Roeliff-Jansen Central School. Morning and afternoon, my younger sisters, Mary and Veola, and I rode the school bus for an hour, with Mr. Joe Rogers driving.

One day in late September, riding home on the bus, my sister, Mary, nudged me, saying, "Lib, look! The water's almost up to Jones's Bridge." We pressed our foreheads against the window as our bus rumbled over wide wood planks.

Rivulets of rain wavered on the glass. We peered down. Flooded by foaming waves, only the brown tips of cattails showed above the brook's banks. In the middle, roots, grasses and branches tangled, swirled, then plunged into a whirlpool. We looked back; grey water covered half of Jones's pasture while his cows huddled under a tall elm tree near the barn.

When we hopped off the bus, our yellow slickers and black rubbers kept us dry as we splashed along the muddy path. "The elm trees are drooping," I said. "And the ivy looks black on the chimney."

"I hate rain. No playground recess. Four days in a row. When will it stop?" Mary said, while we hung up our school clothes.

“And it’s raining too hard to go riding,” Veola said, pulling on her sweatshirt. In old sneakers and overalls, we were ready to feed the chickens and fill the kitchen stove woodbox.

What none of us knew on September 21, 1938 was that a hurricane smashed across eastern Long Island at 2:30 p.m., just about the time we climbed into the bus to ride home.

In New York City, west of the eye, the top of the Empire State Building recorded winds of 120 miles an hour. East of the eye, coastal Connecticut, Rhode Island and Massachusetts suffered catastrophic damage from wind, fire, floods and tidal surges. Hillsdale was 100 miles north of Long Island.

That morning, Mother packed our lunch boxes and hurried us out to the bus. “Still raining,” she said. Then she started her daily drive to deliver our dairy milk at the Hillsdale Creamery Co-op. She noticed the drag as the Chevy pickup tires plowed along the softened dirt road. “It was easier on the way home,” she said. “The truck was lighter without the milk. It didn’t feel like quick sand. More like floating. And I tried to stay away from your bus tracks. Too deep and wide.”

As the hurricane raced northward at 50 miles an hour, an atmospheric low pressure trough provided a warm moist pathway along the Connecticut River Valley. Our farm lay dead-center of the storm’s monsoon. That Thursday afternoon in Hillsdale, New York, two inches of rain fell per hour. And in the Northeast, 17 inches of rain had fallen in the previous four days.

Usually, after school, my sisters and I stuffed apples and carrots into our overall pockets, then raced to the pasture gate where our riding horses, Queenie and Peggy, waited. Once we'd curried, brushed and saddled them, the riding began. With three riders and two horses, we bartered and traded those hours astride, often riding double on Queenie, so we came out even.

Along the dirt road, maybe up into the woods on Texas Hill, we trotted, then turned and cantered back to the barn in plenty of time to do our chores.

But that day, my mother said, "The horses aren't at the gate. I'm worried. All this rain. We've got to get them into the barn." She told us that Marie, the family au pair, needed a helper.

"I'll go with Marie," I said.

Mother nodded. "All right, Olivia. You and Marie hurry up. It'll get dark early."

Each of us carried a small bucket of oats and a halter, slogging through the barnyard mud toward the pasture wagon road. "Queenie, Peggy," we called.

We shook the oat buckets, squelching through puddles. Rain sluiced off our visors. No horses trotted into view. No whinnies answered our calls. We reached the brook and stopped. Everything smelled swampy.

"Shake the oats harder," Marie said. "Maybe they're close."

I stood looking into torrents of muddy water, watching the waves wash over my sneakers.

“The brook looks deep,” I said. “There goes a fence post.”

“C’mon, Olivia. We have to cross. They must be up in the woods. Go slow. Like this.” Arms outstretched, Marie waded toward the far side, holding the oat bucket and halter above the water. “Just take short steps. Ready?” she said.

“O.K.” I heard myself say. I started taking baby steps deeper. The current pushed me sideways. In the deepest part, I stepped on the gravel bed of the brook and I thought of the minnows flashing through a clear summer stream.

Marie and I climbed toward the sodden woods. We shook the oats. Marie stopped.

“Olivia, look,” she said, pointing ahead into the gloom. A pale blotch. We stepped closer. Our horses stood, heads down, like dripping statues. We shook the oats again. Their heads lifted, ears pointed. “Go slow,” Marie said. “Keep the halter behind you. Oats in front.”

Once the horses’ noses plunged into the oats, we slipped on the rope halters. “Let’s go,” Marie said, yanking on Peggy’s lead rope.

“Heads up, Queenie.” I pulled, she followed. We slipped and slid down toward the furious water. Marie waded in but Peggy yanked her head up, reared and splashed backwards, wheeling uphill.

“More oats,” Marie said. “She’ll come back. You start Queenie.”

One short step at a time, I backed into the flood and Queenie followed. Midstream, the water surged against my waist and Queenie’s belly. I clung to the halter rope almost falling with each step. Finally, Queenie and I sloshed out of the water. On the muddy bank, I held the oat bucket to her muzzle. Queenie munched. “Good girl,” I sobbed, stroking her wet ears.

“Olivia, look at us,” Marie said. Riding Peggy through the maelstrom, Marie told me that Queenie and I led the way. “Besides, Peggy needed to be ridden. Made her feel safer. Now let’s head for the barn.”

We led the horses into their stalls, rubbed them dry and filled their mangers with hay before latching the barn door. “Time to get supper ready,” Marie said. “And it looks like maybe the rain’s letting up a little.”

In 1938, the U.S. Weather Service made a big mistake when they forecast the hurricane’s path. Instead of brushing the southern coast and turning out to sea, our storm slipped into a northern low pressure path, ravaging Long Island and flooding western New England. Marie and I brought in the horses during the hurricane’s heaviest rainfall.

Later, at the kitchen table, we told my mother, sisters and brother about our adventure. “I was so scared when Peggy reared back,” I said. “Then I had to get Queenie across by myself. But she held me up.”

“You and Marie are a brave rescue team,” Mother said. “Now, how about a piece of chocolate cake to celebrate?”

We all savored our cake, knowing Queenie and Peggy were in their stalls, dry and munching hay.

1217 words