

A Brief History of Portville's Flash Flood in 1942

"Will it ever stop raining?" was the question the Portville neighbors asked each other Friday evening, July 17th, 1942. It seemed that the cracks of thunder and the bolts of lightning would never cease. On and on through the night the rain came – a swift forceful rain.

The first reports of the flood to truly arouse the Portvillians to the approaching danger was the fire bell. Harold Austin, a young fellow working at the Ice Cream plant was trapped in the boiler room. It was an hour and a half before the firemen were able to rescue Harold. He was later taken to the Olean General Hospital.

Then came the tale of water in the houses above the Pennsylvania tracks. Het Carr, Ward Lewis, Mark Johnson, Howard Brooks, Acre's Store, Walt Sikes and others.



Harold Austin was marooned in the boiler room of the Jersey Ice Cream Plant for one and a half hours. – Mrs. Dora Baker



Boys view the scene in front of the Rowe and Pearson Grocery. – Miss Elizabeth Collins

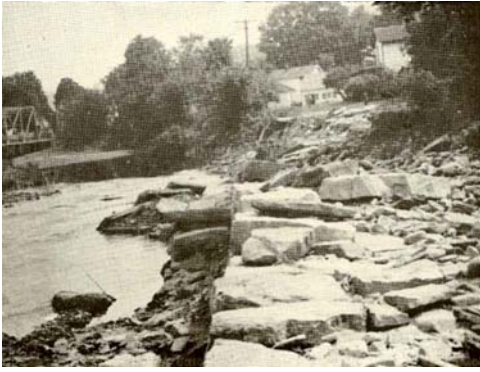
Late in the morning as we rode and then walked a distance to the end of Temple Street we saw the ravages wrought by Dodges Creek – the swing bridge collapsed, the road entirely washed out in front of Ed Johnson's house on Brooklyn Street, and the Bedford Corners bridge out and the school house at this point lodged on the edge of the road.



Dodges Creek along Fairview Avenue. – Betsey Keene



"Road Out" in front of Ed Johnson's home on Brooklyn Street. This was undermined by the Creek. – Thomas Pollock



Fairview Avenue at its worst – Mrs. Dora Baker



Bedford Corners Schoolhouse occupies the edge of the highway when it is moved from its foundation. – Mrs. Letha Baker

During the morning the dyke broke near Anderson's Court, completely swamping that street and bringing the first water onto Main Street, crossing from the Trenkle homestead to the home of Miss Lillian Rogers. Rapidly the water spread down Main Street to a point near the front of Caneen's drug store. Lumber from Harry Swanson's lumberyard floated across Main Street, lodging here and there.

The water was also across the road near the Livingston home – Lillibridge Creek having become a virtual raging torrent. Word began to come in from Westons that the Haskell Creek was likewise not to be outdone by her neighboring streams. It too, was taking its toll. Little Donald Larabee, five and a half year old son of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Larabee had drowned, when an automobile driven by his mother plunged into the current from a washed out bridge on the Haskell road. The Pennsylvania Railroad bridge was washed out also. This was only one of the many pieces of track out on the line between Olean and Emporium. More than a thousand men worked for two weeks before train service was restored on this line.



Pennsylvania Trestle at the Haskell where the bridge was completely wiped out. – Garden Inn



Looking towards Westons from the Haskell. – Garden Inn

About noon the water receded only to start rising again within a few hours. About three o'clock people began to realize we would have some high water – at least higher than for some years. Word came down the line that Austin, Coudersport, Port Allegany, Eldred and Shinglehouse were all experiencing high water. On and on, higher and higher it came as people began the work of saving what they could. No one seemed alert to the fact of what this might reach to, so did not start soon enough to save what they might. You could not realize that it would rise to such a height. People continued to work as the water rose higher and higher. Storekeepers put their goods to a height they thought the water would never reach – likewise household goods were put up to a place that was thought to be out of the waters reach.

From Saturday afternoon until eleven o'clock Sunday morning, the water continued to rise from *four to five inches an hour*. **It reached a height of ten feet in front of the schoolhouse and some places reported as high as fourteen feet of water.** The only house on Main Street that was not flooded was the home of W. A. Percival. The water reached a peak of 3 feet higher than the Johnstown flood.

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Kayes Garage early in the flood. Water completely covered cars here by the end. – Harley Monroe



Men shove the Portville Fire truck on Saturday afternoon from the Club House to a place of safety at the Portville Mills – Harley Monroe



Looking South on Main Street from Monroe's Barbershop Saturday afternoon. – Harley Monroe



This view shows boys wading and rowing on Main Street Saturday afternoon in front of Townsend Block and the Portville Review office. Everett Eldridge sits on the porch saying "The water won't rise any higher." – Howard Compton



A view at the tracks at Spring Hill Farm. Eugene Newburg sits on the roof of the porch. – Floyd Newburg



Alfred Holmes, near Trenkle homestead on Main Street Saturday afternoon, was on his way to New England Kitchen to serve Chicken in the Rough. – Harley Monroe

When the water was at its peak there were cars buried in the streets with motorboats passing over the top without ever touching the car. Trucks at the Kayes Garage had only the tops in sight. Only the roof of the New England Kitchen was visible. Bill Richmond had to be taken out through a hole chopped in the roof of his building. Stores on Main Street were filled nearly half the way to the ceiling and those in the Townsend block had water to the top.

Evacuation started on Saturday night and continued all day Sunday. It is estimated that some fifteen hundred people were evacuated from this community and not one life was lost. Rowboats and motorboats were brought in from Cuba Lake, Lima Lake and Allegany State Park, Wyoming County and those owned by individuals. The majority of the people were being taken from second story windows. On and on, men from our neighboring towns worked, until not one person was left in the danger zone.

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When the water was at a peak at the Post Office and Fireman's Club – Rev. J. V. Gowney



A corner of B & C Grocery (Buckles and Carr on right), Parish Hardware, Orr's, and Pool Room at the crest. – Miss Agnes Fiedler



Water didn't go any higher in these two houses – former home of D. E. Page and the Chas. Bauers home. – Mrs. Chas. Bauers



Water at its peak at the Portville Liquor Store. – Floyd Newburg



Water wasn't any higher at the Methodist Church, either. – D. H. Wing



Library from Barrett St. showing back of Parish's. Taken on Sunday morning when we really had water. – Mrs. John Carpenter



Ed Weinman paddled around the views "things" on Sunday morning. He also paddled milk from house to house. – Floyd Newburg



Had this been a "school day," lessons would have been forgotten. – Floyd Newburg

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Where did all these people go you say? Every house near the water's edge was filled, some housing as high as forty. The Portville Red Cross established a center at the home of Donald Dusenbury. Cuba, Westons Mills, Belmont, Little Genesee and other towns brought in food and water. Also these neighbors took some off our people home to feed and house them.

The water began to recede Sunday afternoon but it was not until Tuesday and Wednesday that the majority of the people returned to their homes to find most of them in ruin.



The water as viewed from the rear of homes of Mrs. Hattie Marsh and Mr. And Mrs. Kenneth Marsh. - Mrs. Elizabeth Collins



Reuben Hatch sits on the veranda of his home as the water reaches the porch level. - Mrs. Elizabeth Collins



Kenneth Marsh and Cliff Connors "bringing home the bacon" to eat during the flood. But Cliff didn't stay home to eat the bacon. - Mrs. Kenneth Marsh



Cars parked on Brooklyn St. near the P.R.R. crossings for several days to avoid getting damp. - Mrs. Kenneth Marsh



Upper Brooklyn Street near the Bethel Lutheran Church. - Mrs. Eulalia Lewis



Fred Connor views the water from the roof of his summer kitchen. - Mrs. Elizabeth Trenkle



The dial system of New York Telephone, shown at left, did not say "Number Please" for some days. - Mrs. Elizabeth Collins



The Portville Funeral Home before the water was at its crest. - Floyd Newburg



Rowing was good on Temple Street near the home of John Peckham. - Howard Compton



Dr. Wormer wasn't dishing out pills all the time; he had furniture, etc., to move. - Floyd Newburg



Temple St. "at its best" - boats in front of the former Chas. Lewis And George Myers homes, and now owned by Louis Anderson and Bob Bartley. - Mrs. Elizabeth Collins



View of the water between Temple and Maple Streets. This shows the rear of the houses of Caryl Marsh and Thomas Wiles. - Miss Agnes Fiedler



Rev. J. V. Growney goes for a morning boat ride near his home on Maple Street. - Miss Agnes Fiedler



Home of Mr. & Mrs. Donald Wing, the former Dr. McCarey residence on Maple Street. - D. H. Wing