

Remember the great Hurricane of '38?

SEPT. 22, 1988

The way It was

By George A.
Parkhurst



Any Chelmsford resident, if asked on Sept. 20, 1938 about hurricanes, would have replied, "Hurricanes? They're those big wind storms they have in Florida. We don't have them up here." By 6 p.m. the following evening, that same person would have had a somewhat different and much clearer understanding of hurricanes and the destruction they can cause.

Although it was 50 years ago, the present writer clearly remembers the evening of that September 21 as if it were only yesterday.

I had driven to the home of my friend, Gilbert Perham, at 76 Westford Street in the late afternoon and found him busy milking his herd of cows in the barn across the street. Somewhere between 5 and 6 o'clock, we noticed that dark storm clouds had blotied out the sunshine and there was a very strong wind blowing. Soon, a few slate shingles flew off the barn roof. Gilbert decided to stop his milking temporarily and check to be sure that everything was O.K. at his house where his mother was preparing supper.

As we fought our way across Westford Street against the wind, we looked up just in time to see the chimney on the Perham house topple and fall, the bricks going through the roof into the bedroom below. I decided I had better start for home on the other side of town.

A few small branches fell off the trees as I drove down Westford Street but I encountered no major problem until just before I reached the Central Baptist Church. There a large tree had fallen, completely sealing off the roadway. Possibly I could have detoured over Worthen Street and North Road but I found the storm too exciting so I drove back to my friend's house to tell him what had taken place.

After a brief chat, I decided to use Dalton Road as an alternate route. However, just beyond what is now Hornbeam Hill Road, the street was blocked by fallen trees. Just then another tree was torn out of the ground a few hundred yards behind me. Obviously, I would not be driving anywhere until men with saws and axes cut away the obstructions so I pulled into the open field away from all possible falling trees and left my car, certain that no one would steal it and drive it away. I then walked to Central Square.

By this time, the storm had knocked out



THE GREAT HURRICANE of '38, as it has come to be known, left destruction in its path throughout New England, and throughout the Greater Lowell area. Above, at Chamberlain Corner in neighboring Westford, an elm fell on the Fletcher home, carrying with it a utility pole with both electrical and telephone wires. Scenes were similar in Chelmsford.

power lines; there was no electricity — with one exception. Kidder's garage, in the brick building next to the Town Hall, was the only bright spot in the center of town thanks to a gasoline-driven electric generator "Ross" Kidder had installed for just such an emergency.

Many motorists driving through town (the present Route 3 hadn't even been conceived in 1938) found themselves trapped by fallen trees and wires and sought a place to eat. It just happened that Post 212 American Legion had scheduled a chicken pie supper at the Legion quarters in the old railroad station that stood on the site of the filling station across Littleton Road from the First Parish Church. It looked as if the Legionnaires were stuck with a lot of food and no customers because of the storm. But as soon as they set up a few dozen candles, the stranded motorists moved in and saved the day (or evening) for both groups.

Most tradesmen would have shut up shop until power was restored but one man demonstrated true Yankee fortitude and commitment to promises. Mr. G. Thomas Parkhurst, who operated the *Parkhurst Press* on the second floor of the building at Eriksen's Corner, had agreed to have several printing jobs ready on Thursday morning. With only the light of a kerosene lantern, he set up a

press that could be operated by a foot treadle as well as electricity and ran off the scheduled items. I am aware of this because I was one of the customers who were deeply appreciative of his extraordinary devotion to meeting a delivery date.

That evening the local Grange served food and coffee at the Town Hall to stranded motorists and those working to clear the storm damage.

A tour of the town the next day showed the extent of havoc wrought by the storm. Wires and light poles were down, trees uprooted, buildings damaged, corn fields flattened, streams overflowing their banks. It was reported that part of Tyngsboro Road was under four feet of water.

The Special Town Meeting scheduled for Friday evening was recessed, by candlelight, to the following Monday.

Clean up continued for weeks and months.

And that's the way it was when Chelmsford was visited by its first, and unpredicted, hurricane.

George Adams Parkhurst is a Chelmsford historian whose family has lived in town since 1654.