

In 1936, still waters ran... and ran, and...

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By George A. Parkhurst

Fifty years ago, on March 20, 1936, the Merrimack River went on a rampage and wreaked havoc in the lowlands of North Chelmsford, Lowell, and the other towns through which it flows.

Swelled by the spring freshets in New Hampshire, the water rose rapidly and quickly overflowed its banks. Tyngsboro Road, Sleeper Street, and Butterfield Street were under several feet of water.

I remember standing just below the junction of Tyngsboro Road and Groton Road, where Tyngsboro Road starts to dip downward, and seeing the water rise to the porch roof of one of the homes and then continue to rise until it flowed into an open second floor bedroom window.

In the evening, after the street lights had gone on, we saw the water rise to a street light bulb about where Duffy's Auto company is today. When the cold river water touched the hot lamps bulb, there was a huge flash.

The Southwell mill at the foot of Wotton Lane appeared to be in the middle of the river and the water came up almost to the buildings on that side of Vinal Square.

All sorts of buildings and debris were seen floating down stream, including several sheds and a barn. The latter smashed to pieces when it hit the School Street bridge in Lowell.

With the river so high, water backed up into Stoney Brook, covering the Middlesex Street railroad crossing and flooding the field where Bob White's Princeton Lounge is today.

Princeton Street was closed to traffic be-

The way it was



cause it was under water between Richardson Road and Mt. Pleasant Street. The railroad tracks along the river were submerged and water completely surrounded the railroad station at the foot of Church Street.

To meet the emergency, all WPA (Work Projects Administration — one of the Federal make-work programs during the depression) workers were taken from regular projects and put to work to rescue persons and property and to help out where needed.

Among other jobs, when the waters had subsided, they pumped out 54 flooded cellars and cleared driftwood and debris from Riverside cemetery.

Many people were evacuated from their homes and given shelter in the North Town Hall and St. John's Hall.

Nurses cared for bedridden patients in the Upper Town Hall and a "soup kitchen" was

set up in the hall where 140 people were fed for 11 days. Food was donated by stores, bakeries, and individuals.

I remember working with the Boy Scouts

packaging and delivering food. Clothing and bedding was collected throughout the town and turned in to the collecting depot in the First Parish vestry in the center.

Members of the American Legion posts went on guard duty and other volunteers worked in shifts around the clock.

The Board of Health gave free typhoid inoculations and inspected and issued occupancy permits for the flooded homes. The legacy left by the flood waters was mud and silt. It was a long time before everything was cleaned up and back to normal.

The City of Lowell, being without water, called upon Chelmsford for help and the

Center Water District ran two hose lines from the last Chelmsford hydrant on Chelmsford Street to the first one in Lowell. Two million cubic feet of pure water were supplied to Lowell. After the flood, 1-1/2 miles of water main had to be repaired in North Chelmsford.

Since then, the Federal government has moved the town of Hill, N.H. and constructed flood control dams to reduce the possibility of flooding in the Merrimack Valley in the future.

Let's hope they work as planned. We can get along without a recurrence of this disaster, but that's the way it was fifty years ago.

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