

**MEMORIES AND RECOLLECTIONS
OF THE
FLOOD OF 1955
FARMINGTON AND UNIONVILLE, CONNECTICUT**

by Patty LeBoutillier

I am writing to share my memories and recollections of the devastating flood that struck Unionville and Farmington on Friday, August 19, 1955.

To start, what caused the flood? It was August, late summer, the beginning of hurricane season. Diane was first called a hurricane, and then downgraded to a tropical storm that traveled along the Hudson River and into the northwest part of Connecticut dropping fourteen inches of rain. This caused the Farmington and Housatonic Rivers to overflow their banks and begin to flood all the towns along the way. Along the banks in these towns were large and small factories, houses, garages, outbuildings, piles of wood, lawn furniture and anything else you may have stored outside. Then it all began to float downward towards Unionville first then Farmington.

The bridge in Unionville had been replaced after the terrible hurricane of 1938 so it was very strong. But it proved to be so strong that all the debris floating down the river began to get stuck against the bridge forcing the fast-moving water to find a new path. This ultimately caused the destruction of more than 100 homes in Unionville. The water continued down Route 4 along the river into Farmington completely destroying every home in River Glen, a tight cluster of around 50 homes. The railroad overpass on Farmington Avenue (now known as the Big Bird Bridge) was knocked down and many other houses and businesses along the way were damaged.

Now for my memories and recollections. It began the night before, Thursday August 18th. It had been raining pretty hard for days and the river was beginning to get dangerously high, but we had all seen that before. That evening I remember standing on the bridge looking down at all the debris floating down, barrels, trash cans, lawn furniture, large pieces of wood, etc. But still we weren't alarmed. We went to bed, and then at 2 a.m. the next morning the sirens went off and police came by to tell us to evacuate immediately. My girlfriend and I were 16 at the time and my mother told us to go down Railroad Ave. to make sure people had heard the warning. Then there was complete confusion, everybody running around trying to gather as many belongings as they could carry.

My house was located on the corner of Railroad Avenue and South Main Street – the area now occupied by the parking lot for Parsons Hardware. It was a large three-family house and when I look at the piece of property today, I just can't believe a house that size was there. Although it survived the flood, a big maple tree on the

corner was uprooted and fell on it so it finally had to be condemned. I lived on the second floor with my parents and younger brother. They did not allow us to get anything out. When we left, the current was already so strong we had to go out holding onto a rope – pretty scary for everyone. People began to gather at the top of Depot Hill which was where the water stopped. It was pouring rain; people watched as their own houses literally floated by and broke into pieces. Furniture, appliances, and bedding were just hanging out of what was left of their homes. We stood there all day watching and crying, horrified at what we were seeing. As dusk came, people began to make plans with friends and family, arranging for places to stay.

The Red Cross was set up at the Lake Garda Club House. Families gathered there to eat and sleep. Everyone had to have a typhoid shot because of the contaminated water. The Red Cross gave out clothing, bedding, food, and other necessities. Later they helped flood victims to purchase new homes and furniture - for which we were all very grateful. School opening that year was delayed for several weeks. Some of my classmates had to live out of town temporarily and were bused to the Farmington High School. Town officials did their best to get help for the cleanup from President Eisenhower, Gov. Ribicoff, and others who met in Hartford and toured the area.

By the time it ended many homes and businesses were destroyed, thirteen lives were lost including a girl in my class who lived in the River Glen area. Today you can see a park on Route 4, called Yodkins-Morin Memorial Park that marks the spot where twelve homes once stood that were completely washed away. The park is named in honor of Police Officer Charles “Charlie” Yodkins and UConn student Joseph “Jackie” Morin who lost their lives trying to rescue others.

What follows are photographs of areas of Unionville and Farmington showing how they were impacted by the flood. It was a devastating experience for the town and its people. May it never happen again!

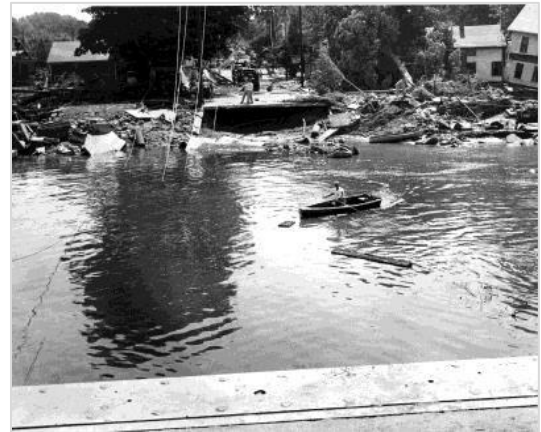
The author, Patty Bouthillier, currently serves as president of the Board of the Unionville Museum. Patty was one of the founders of the museum and has served on its Board since the museum opened in 1984.

SOUTH MAIN STREET, SOUTH SIDE OF THE BRIDGE, UNIONVILLE

Here a group of evacuees anxiously watches the rising water. Also seen is the amphibian duck used to rescue people and the National Guard that was dispatched to help with rescues and crowd control. The large white multi-family house on the right was repaired and still stands.



This photo shows the large gap in the road created by the raging waters of the river. Row boats were used to go back and forth to the other side of town until the roadway was repaired.

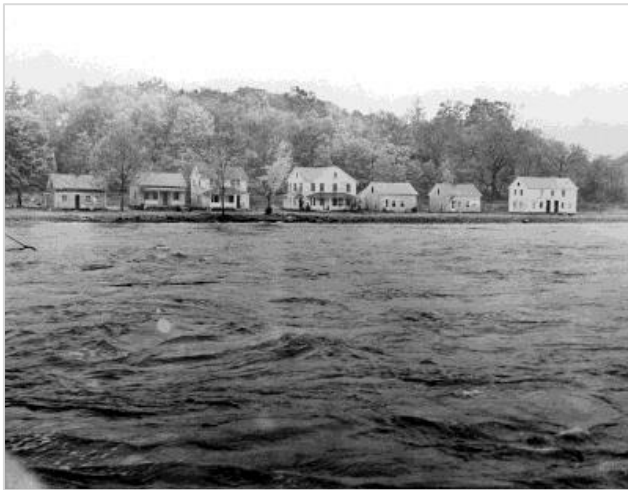


Here's another view showing the amount of damage and debris left in the wake of the flood. The wooden building on the left survived. This building was occupied for years by Parsons Hardware. It is currently occupied by Liquor Square.



RAILROAD AVENUE, UNIONVILLE

This is the present location of Liquor Square's parking lot on the corner of South Main Street and Railroad Avenue. These two large multi-family homes were extensively damaged and had to be demolished. The one on the right literally crashed into the front one. It is hard to imagine that there was enough room in that spot for both of these houses.



The photo on the left shows the homes still standing on the south side of Railroad Avenue. What you don't see is the ten homes that once stood on the river side and were washed away as their owners stood in horrified silence and watched them float by, crashing into one another before breaking apart and spewing their contents into the raging river.

It was a miracle that the home in picture on the right survived. It was the last house on Railroad Avenue's western end and sustained the direct impact of the surging water. It was repaired and still stands today.

NEW BRITAIN AVENUE, UNIONVILLE

Here is an aerial view of the Unionville bridge over the Farmington River in Unionville center. This photo shows clearly that the bridge was still intact after the flood but the road on the south side was washed away, thereby disconnecting the two sides of town. The north side along the river (on the left in the picture) shows the present-day location of River's Edge Plaza and the former location of Water Street. The large building on the corner of Mill Street opposite was later demolished. There is a new building there that was most recently occupied by Walgreens. Further down along Mill Street are the Pioneer Steel Ball (originally Upson Nut) factory buildings, some of which still stand today.



Bob Matava was quick to rebuild Edward Motor Service on the south side of New Britain Avenue, after the original building was reduced to a rubble of cinder blocks and debris. This business is still operating today.



This multi family dwelling on New Britain Avenue was heavily damaged during the flood but was saved, repaired, and is still standing today. This picture shows the amount of devastation and the challenges people faced trying to save what they had. Here we see Red Cross workers, assessing the damages. The Red Cross was helpful in many ways to people affected by the flood.



This picture shows the force that the water had, lifting, and tossing these large multi-family dwellings onto their sides. A man living in the house on right refused to leave and eventually had to be rescued by helicopter.



SOUTH MAIN STREET BRIDGE, UNIONVILLE

This is another view of the South Main Street Bridge over the Farmington River. The former Myrtle Mills building is seen to the right. On the left we see the repaired part of the road at the end of the bridge. Throughout the entire flood this bridge did not break down anywhere.



Here is a view of the bridge, totally intact, but the road on the south side is completely washed away.



Another example of the debris that built up on the bridge and the amount of abuse it sustained during the flood.

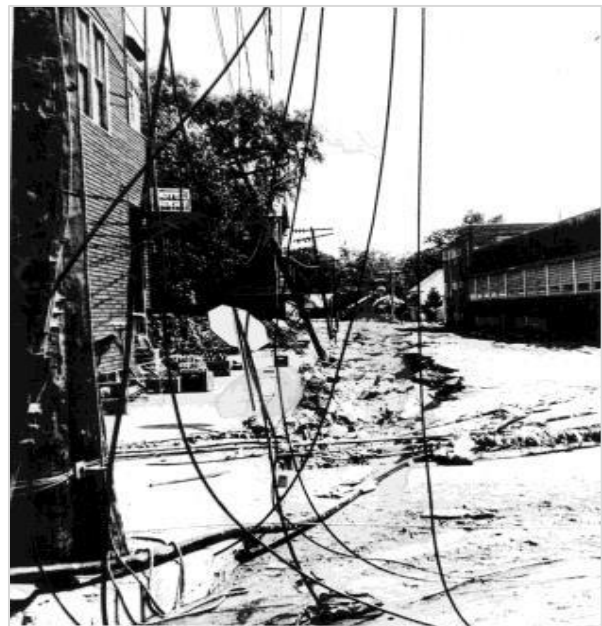


This photo shows the Army Corp of Engineers, with one of its men suspended above the water on a rope line. The Army Corp of Engineers was called in to help rebuild the road.



WATER STREET, UNIONVILLE

This is a view down Water Street with the Myrtle Mills building on right (present day River's Edge Plaza) and the Hotel Worthy on the left. Further down on left side (but not visible in this photo) was the Luxor Movie Theater. All these buildings survived the flood, but many were demolished during the town's 1970s Unionville Redevelopment Project.



This photo shows the back of the Myrtle Mills building and how close it was to the river. If you stand on the Unionville Bridge today and look at this building you can still see this very spot.



This large brick building which housed Parson's Hardware and family dwellings above was damaged during the flood but quickly reopened for business to serve the people in town desperately doing repairs. It was razed during the Redevelopment Project and Parsons moved to 92 South Main Street where was located for many years before closing in 2018.



MILL STREET, UNIONVILLE

Here, a view of South Main Street looking south towards the Unionville Bridge at the corner of Mill Street to the right and South Main Street to the left. The building on the right was originally Broadbent Mills then later Myrtle Knitting Mills and J. Baker Shoe Outlet and lastly the Myrtle Mills Toy Annex. It was demolished in the 1980s and the property stood empty until 2014 when a new building was put up and originally occupied by Walgreens .



Looking further down Mill Street, we can see the other half of the Broadbent building and several others which were part of the Pioneer Steel Ball complex. The one in the middle of the picture has recently been restored.



The building you see lying in the middle of Mill Street is gone, along with the two towers. However, several of the other buildings in this picture still stand. The buildings in this area are among the last remaining from Unionville's manufacturing past when the factories were powered by the waters of the Farmington River and its many canals.



UNION SCHOOL, UNIONVILLE

Union School is located in the heart of Unionville, near the present-day gazebo. The flood left nearly six feet of muddy water and debris on the ground floor of the school. The rooms on the lower level could not be used so kindergarteners when school started in September were taught at the Congregational Church for the first part of the school year. This view is across the school playground as the water receded.



This is a simple but very telling picture. In the foreground we see the Union School gymnasium completely void of the vegetation that had previously surrounded it. In the far background the water has replaced a large multi-family dwelling that was completely swept away by the flood. A home to many people - simply gone.



Here we see three children looking unsure of what was to come next. This area between the gym on the left and the kindergarten on the right is currently "The Readers Garden". A book called "Flood Friday" was later written by well-known children's author Lois Lenski, about how the flood affected the students of Union School.



PERRY STREET, UNIONVILLE

This shows the bridge leading to Collinsville at the end of Perry and Main Streets which was demolished by the floodwaters. The large building on the left is the Lawton Miner Company. Both the large white house and the Lawton Miner building survived the flood with damage and remain today.



Here is a view of the damaged Connecticut Light & Power Company's transformer tower at Huckleberry Hill Road and Orchard Street.



This is the Connecticut Light & Power Company hydro generating sub-station on Perry Street in Unionville. The dam and canal that generated the power, along with storage buildings were completely destroyed by the flood.



SOUTH MAIN STREET, UNIONVILLE

Here, the intersection of South Main and Water Street again. The large building on the right was the Myrtle Mills Discount Store.



This is a view, taken as the water was receding, is of the many shops that lined South Main Street. Even though these businesses were damaged the buildings would stand until they were demolished during the Redevelopment Project.



Here, the other side of South Main Street with the water nearly gone as the shop keepers begin to clean up.



UNIONVILLE CENTER

Here is a picture of the First Church of Christ Congregational in Unionville Center during the flood. This picture shows how far the flood waters came up, pretty much stopping in the Center.



Unionville Center as seen from the Masonic building at Lovely and Main Streets. The 1902 Unionville Town Hall (another redevelopment casualty) is seen in the background. In the foreground of the picture, Paul Flynn whose flooded pharmacy stands to the left of Town Hall.



This picture of the intersection of Farmington Avenue and South Main Street was taken as the water began to recede. Traffic in those days was controlled by a rotary, not a traffic signal which is what is there today.



FARMINGTON AVENUE, UNIONVILLE

This is the section of Route 4 where the present day Stop & Shop is located. These homes survived the flood but were demolished during redevelopment. Notice the many trees that lined Farmington Avenue in 1955.



This well-known store, Sanford & Hawley, is still in business in the same location today. The water is from Roaring Brook, a direct tributary of the Farmington River.



Here's what the banks of the Farmington River looked like on Farmington Avenue in Unionville, after the flood. The reason there was so much damage to both sides of the river bank is because the river swerved around the ends of the bridge in Unionville Center, cutting a new channel and sweeping away everything in its path – including houses on both Farmington and New Britain Avenues and in the River Glen.



This photo is of the Charles Young house on Farmington Avenue in Unionville, as it was left after the flood. This picture became a symbol of the disaster for the world media.



Further east on Farmington Avenue, are the homes that were located just after the thirteen that were swept away or damaged beyond repair and had to be demolished. The area previously occupied by those homes was not rebuilt and is now the Yodkins-Morin Memorial Park, a permanent reminder of the Flood.



RIVER GLEN, FARMINGTON

This section of town was located off of Farmington Avenue just before the railroad bridge and what is now Big Bird Bridge. It is now the Farmington Little League Fields. Hundreds of people lived there in homes like this one. They were built in the forties and were all small and close together. The whole area was pretty much destroyed leaving almost nothing.



Of the countless pictures taken during the flood, this one shows the heart of the tragedy like no other. It appeared on the front page of the Hartford Courant August 20, 1955. It shows Viola Bechard, a resident of River Glen, clutching one of her daughters just after they were rescued. Tragically another of her daughters, 7-year-old Patricia, drowned when the boat rescuing the family capsized.



Officer Charles Yodkins holds an infant he has rescued from the raging waters in River Glen. Later that day he would drown along with volunteer Joseph Morin and the Frey family – Robert and Mildred Frey and their 16-year-old daughter in the same area.



FARMINGTON AVENUE, FARMINGTON

Although Unionville bore the brunt of the property damage and all of the deaths from the flood, it also devastated parts of Farmington. It inundated the “flats” between the two villages along Farmington Avenue and across the river, which had always been prone to spring flooding and was occupied mostly by farms. Some areas on the south bank were also affected by the Pequabuck River which joins the Farmington in that corner of town.

This was a well-known restaurant and bar called the Oasis, halfway between Unionville and Farmington centers. The other building shown is the roof of R & R Woodworking. Both were located in the area of the present-day Dunkin Donuts.



Shown here is the Round Hill Service Station owned by Ernest Holcomb. Notice that the gas pumps are not visible which shows how high the water rose.



This building had the unique architecture of 1950's ice cream establishments. Called "Dari Delite", it was similar to today's "Dairy Queen" and was located near the present-day Cugino's Restaurant.



FARMINGTON CENTER AND BRIDGE

These people are being rescued from their homes along Farmington Avenue, in the vicinity of the Farmington Bridge over the Farmington River.



In the background of this picture, looking west from the area near Garden Street, the Farmington Bridge is completely under water. A variety of vehicles were used for rescuing the folks along Route 4 including amphibian Army vehicles. One of which can be seen in this picture.



These people have been rescued from further down Farmington Avenue by the many firefighters and volunteers who helped. The Essex Fire Department was one of the many departments who came to assist.



In 1955, Farmington Avenue was a very different place. There were homes but also fruit stands with gardens and farms with cows. The cows had to be rescued too. As you can see, they were very resistant.



MEADOW ROAD, FARMINGTON

Meadow Road in Farmington off of Route 10 (commonly known as the flats) looking towards the location of today's Tunxis Mead. This is the Pequabuck River which often overflowed its banks in this area.



Here, the bridge over the Pequabuck River on Meadow Road in Farmington. Two Farmington police officers, standing in the flood waters, are assessing the situation.

