

Hurricane 1938

Emily T. Potter

Taken at height of the hurricane at mouth of Buzzards Bay, not far from Bassett's Island. 1938 *Hurricane Pictures*. Published by Reynolds Printing, New Bedford, Massachusetts. Photo by Hans Radan.

When the nameless and unforeseen horror of September 21, 1938, struck New England, Mrs. Potter was alone with her three children on Bassett's Island off Pocasset. This is her story, printed with permission of her grandson Roger Hardon. His mother was "young Nancy, age 10."

The morning of the hurricane dawned bright and clear at Pocasset and was hailed with joy by the children and me as it promised one more happy day out of doors in that last, precious week of vacation.

"Too much wind for sailing, Mother," said John. "Let's drive over to the long beach in the old truck."

And so it was that the three children and I with "Beau Geste", the poodle, left the house at ten o'clock with full beach and sketching equipment for a long day on the sandy point of Bassett's Island. We hung onto our hats as the ancient truck—our only means of transportation on the island—rounded the curve facing Scraggy Neck and the South, and we exclaimed at the force of the wind which was throwing the dry sand in clouds over the waving grass of the dunes, leaving long stretches of once smooth beach stripped down to a foundation of uneven rocks and stones. We staggered against the wind and felt thoroughly sandpapered before we reached the beloved picnic spot under the cedars and were glad to sink down in the warm lee of the trees on the high, dry sand, so miraculously quiet in this strange, rushing world. It wasn't much fun to swim as the tide was exceptionally low and the gale so fierce and squally above the surface of the water, but we did get a dip before lunch.

It was while we were eating that one of the girls pointed out the signal flags flying from the flagpole by the lighthouse over on Wing's Neck. Just too far away to be identified, they later proved to be the hurricane warning, raised for only the third time in 17 years—two square red flags with a black center, flown one above the other.

We watched a large freighter come up Buzzards Bay and wondered as, instead of going on through the Cape Cod Canal, she swung around and headed up into the gale. Little did we realize how her cheerful lights were to reassure us in the fearful night to come!



Blowing leaves and flapping paper made sketching a struggle after lunch, and I soon gave it up to watch the children, with towels tied around their waists and held high in the air, sail down the beach before the wind.

It was nearly three o'clock when we noticed that the spray was being lifted from the waves and carried for some distance above the water, a driving, white mist which made us think of blowing snow. This, I remembered, begins to happen when the wind reaches a velocity of 45 miles an hour and we felt with some excitement that we were in the midst of a gale of unusual force.

Glancing to the South, the first chill of dread struck me at the sight of the black clouds looming there, so fearfully grim and filled with dark foreboding. Springing to my feet I shouted to the capering children that we must start for home at once, but had to call again and again before they heard me. Rain seemed close upon us and we gathered our things together hastily, wrapping the sketch carefully against the deluge which seemed so imminent. Down the length of the beach we flew, with the sand cruelly sharp on our bare legs and poor "Beau" a most hustled and bewildered escort. On the drive home we stopped at the

cliff's edge, the high point of the island, so soon to be under water and to feel the full power of the raging surf. Through driving spray and spume we gazed across the frothing bay to Scraggy Neck, and I urged the children to remember this extraordinary sight. Home at last at 3:30, just as the first squall of rain hit us, we began to think of the safety of our small sail boat. Fifteen-year-old John, so tall and strong, went forth with an extra anchor and rope. The little girls and I followed him to the shore, equipped against the rain with bathing suits and caps, and were so filled with the thrill of the storm that we had another dip then and there, gazing in dreadful fascination across the surface of that foaming water which was just a bit too black and wild to be really tempting.

Over on the Wing's Neck beach, groups of men were dragging up small boats and taking them away in trucks, and we noticed that the diving tower and chute were missing from the fine new float.

Back in the house once more, feeling cozy and protected and in the comfort of dry clothes, we pitied the men working out there in the fury of the gale and the lashing rain squalls. We had thankfully settled down to books and writing when John burst in with the extraordinary information that the tide had come up so

high that the water was pouring in a waterfall over the seats on the crest of the small beach behind the house. We leaped for rain coats and the camera, and out in the storm once more, were dumbfounded to meet the water halfway up the path to the house, bringing with it the remains of a bonfire and much of the wood pile.

Breakers were rolling toward us through the cedar trees on the shore facing Wing's Neck, and we took pictures frantically in the murky, fading light, hoping to record this strange scene before our unbelieving eyes.

In front of the house, and beside it, the towering surf had topped the strong sea wall, and with each surge was streaking with good brown earth the raging waters of the Narrows. The seas had entirely submerged the breakwater and we rushed to save the wooden steps leading down to it but they were swept away, even as we grasped the railing.

To our horror, no beach was visible on Wing's Neck, and the bath houses were being bowled over, one by one, before our very eyes, while against the runway to the pier the surf flung high white geysers.

Turning again to the back of the house, I felt a second chill of foreboding. A large pine tree had fallen and over it I could see that the water had now surrounded the garage and tool house and was creeping on toward the pump house which controlled our supply of drinking water. The flood came steadily up at the rate of a slow walk—on and on.

John had paddled our precious kayak from its former secure resting place on the shore, up the path to the house and was making it fast to a tree when I drew his attention to the garage. In an instant he was wading into the building, intent on saving the truck, which, happily, started quickly and was driven through ever deepening water close up behind the house.

At this point the full force of our predicament struck me. This situation was without precedent and who could estimate how much farther the water might come? We might need a means of escape. I had seen a large Gloucester dory in the garage and the reassuring thought of it came to my mind with a rush. Knee



A gaunt chimney standing against sea, sand and sky is the only vestige of a West Falmouth summer home. *Sept. 21, 1938 Falmouth, Cape Cod.* A. N. Thomson and A. M. Fuller, p. 36.

A Bourne railroad bridge washed away. *1938 Hurricane Pictures.* Published by Reynolds Printing, New Bedford, Massachusetts. Photo by Ralph L. Small.

Searching for victims among the debris at Silver Beach following the hurricane. *Sept. 21, 1938 Falmouth, Cape Cod.* A. N. Thomson and A. M. Fuller, p. 35.

deep in water, pressing the boards of the garage floor down with each step, John and I freed our precious "Ark" and floated it out into the back yard.

The little girls at this point had, with humane zeal, been busy with the rescue of small creatures on floating bits of wood. Two mice were carried to dry land but a snake and some wicked looking spiders were allowed to float on.

The children were now pressed into service to carry pitchers and pails of water from the now nearly surrounded pump house to the kitchen until, at last, outdoor activity was at an end, the depth of the water making further trips impossible.

With the dory's anchor firmly in the flower bed and a stern line to the back door, our retreat was not cut off, and I felt better, knowing we could ride out the storm in it, if worst came to worst. The height of the waves coming in the Narrows at this time would make it impossible for us to row out from behind the shelter of the house in an attempt to get to the mainland, but my plan was to anchor the boat or tie it to some tree if need be.



Now for the proper clothing! A bathing suit for me and life jackets for the children. With money pinned securely inside my suit and a duffel bag filled with flashlights, food and warm things, I was busily piling blankets by the door and trying to be calm, efficient, and cheery, when young Nancy, age ten, said in an agonized voice, "How can you smile Mother?"

"Don't you think this is thrilling, Nan?" I cried with a prayer in my heart.

From the front windows the surf could now be seen rolling up the lawn toward the house, bending the small trees beneath it and rushing up to the door, while out in the channel, great murky green mountains were rising higher, ever higher.

I counted the number of piazza steps still above the water and then rushed up to the second story to see whether we *could* get out of the small windows up there, if necessary. Then down again to get everyone busy carrying matches, water, food, lamps, etc., upstairs. The girls refused to take off their slickers and sou'westers, and staggered up and down, bearing armfuls of teddy bears, clothing, shells, and what not to safety.

I heard small, six-year-old Emily say to herself, "Here are eight pennies. I am saving them because money is valuable."

Another dash to the front door showed water and sea weed to be coming in under it, so we caulked it as best we could, in frantic haste, piling the big leather mattress from the sofa, pillows and rugs on top of all.

Again, at the window, the hammock under the trees was seen to be washed by the oncoming waves, while across the Narrows, the roar of the great breakers dashing up among the pines on Wing's Neck was terrifying.

John and I together watched the waves strike the front of the house and felt the impact as solid water poured through the cellar windows and roared below into coal bins and around the furnace, filling up the space there so quickly. Each oncoming wave would ricochet off the house to meet the next breaker with a dash of spray, close, so close, before our eyes, while

around the corner of the house, the great surges rushed and my heart sank to see one splash across the dining room window. Looking out I thought, "This is surely the end of the world. All the wickedness in it will be washed away. But what a waste! These fine children of mine would surely have grown up to make some splendid contributions. And how to protect them from the horror of it all? Soon I must decide between going upstairs and getting into the boat. How thankful I am for the deep cellar and firm foundation beneath us, built with care and sparing no expense, 25 years ago."

We gathered at a back window, and I, secretly, could no longer bear to gaze into that wild and terrifying world out in front of us, watching for some sign of the tide's turn.

It was Nancy's eager voice that announced, "The water isn't going up on the truck any further."

And then I noticed that the water was pouring *out* instead of *into* a back cellar window. We were safe!

In that long night which followed, the wind and subsiding waters still raged around us, but the cluster of lights, which was the freighter out there on the Bay, glittered on, small reassuring sparks of good cheer. Next morning, in a blaze of sunshine, we gazed in awe upon the dreaded waters, once more within normal bounds, bearing to our devastated shores pitiful evidences of human tragedy from which we had so miraculously escaped.