

Hunkering Down

We were good. No. We were great. Like little soldiers, we *knew* what to do in case of an emergency. Well-trained and obedient, we responded without question to dad's alarm. When the weather service posted a hurricane warning, the Schafer Family leaped into action.

Fill the bathtub! Find the oil lamp! Bring out the canned food, the camping stove, the emergency batteries, the candles and matches! Board the windows! Crack open the car windows! Set up the portable radio! We Schafers were ready for Hurricanes Carol, Hazel, Dora or Esther. Bring 'em on!

Hurricane Carol 'visited' our beach community in 1954. Like a relative who overstays her welcome, Carol overstayed hers, too, but we children really didn't think about that. The welcomed shift from our lay-back beach existence to a life of living on the edge was reward enough.

Hurricanes provided a feeling of 'coming together'. My family operated as a team and when a storm actually struck, we huddled together for security and companionship. By the light of the hurricane lamp we ate our leftovers of canned beans and hot dogs. Card games were played while listening to the radio announcer's voice cut through the gale force winds howling outside. As torrential rains flooded our streets, we tried to read by the light of the hurricane lamp.

We hunkered down together; one for all and all for one.

During Hurricane Carol and uncharacteristically throwing caution to the wind, dad tethered his three kids together with ropes around our waists. Dad was at the head of the line while Bill was the anchor, his sisters in between. Bravely, we four buffeted the high winds and torrential rains just to witness the ocean's ferocity from our 'across-the-street-neighbor, George King home.. We watched, awe-struck, by the unleashed fury of natural forces.

Our once friendly playmate now pounded and crashed against the houses along the ocean front. Twenty foot high waves pounded the beach where we used to play. Purple with rage, the ocean scooped the sand dunes reclaiming them as its own. The wind howled. Cars rocked in the driveway. Trees uprooted and shrubs were flattened. Streets flooded. Electric wires came down. Not recognizing the ocean as our own, we were mute as we witnessed the power of the sea.

Cut off from communication with anyone else, the family waited out the raging storm. Stories of the 1938 Hurricane were told and retold by the elders as we children dragged our blankets out to the living room to camp out together for the night. We learned of the family whose house was torn from its foundation as they climbed to the roof and 'sailed' across the Quonochontaug Pond to a new resting place in our Central Beach. We heard tales of heroism and defeat; lives saved, lives lost. Hurricane '38 offered a continual source of real-life adventures.

And then the rain let up and the wind died down. In time, the ocean's waves became less and less threatening so we ventured outside and hurried to the beach to see the teenagers surf the waves. We checked out hurricane damage to the ocean front cottages, too.

Returning our hurricane survival kit to the attic shelves, we knew it was just a matter of time before the hurricane drill would be re-created once again. This special time of family closeness were shelved, also. We all returned to our individual lives and pursuits; Bill to his friends and Anne to hers, Ruth's gladiola sales, blackberry picking, beach play and socializing. Once again, dad picked up his newspaper. Mom returned to her knitting and baking. And, we all retreated to our familiar corners of our own private worlds.

But, deep inside I couldn't wait till the next hurricane came to our shores so we could hunker down once again.

Ruth Schafer Hopkinson

© Quonochontaug Historical Society and Ruth Schafer Hopkinson. All Rights Reserved.