

Introduction

In 1986, as a 35 year-old college student, it was a requirement that I interview someone and back it up with descriptions and historical data. I chose to interview my dad. We could have discussed many aspects of his interesting life, but I wanted details about his encounter with the hurricane of 1938. Having been born in November of 1920, he was 17 years old at the time.

As a kid, I had heard bits and pieces of this account. I accepted it as an amazing and significant truth. There are more questions that I should have asked, but it is too late now. Ernest Walter Parker died in 1991.

I have wanted to and been encouraged to preserve this information with Enfield's historical society for many years. It seems appropriate to do it now, during this time of celebration and reconstruction in the aftermath of Hurricane Irene, August 28, 2011. I offer this to the Enfield Historical Society before my procrastination causes it to be lost forever.

Margaret Seamans

September 12, 2011

“I Was The Last Person To Drive Across Shaker Bridge
Before It Went Out In The ‘38 Hurricane”.

Mascoma - In the comfortable, familiar kitchen of a large, ten-room house on Payne Road in Mascoma Village, the topic of conversation turns to experiences and memories from the past.

“I was the last person to drive across Shaker bridge before it went out in the ‘38 hurricane.” I was talking to Walter Ernest Parker, known to others as Ernie, Walt or Ernest. I call him Dad, as I have since 1956 when he married my mother. At sixty-five years of age, he is a healthy, active man of short height and wiry build with gray hair cut in a short, army style crew cut. He speaks louder than normal conversational level, a habit acquired during the twenty-four years that he worked for Blacktop Inc., in West Lebanon, as their chief mechanic and part-time heavy equipment operator. Wearing his habitual green work clothes, he moves about the kitchen in the quick, nervous movements of a person that is several hours behind schedule; even though, being retired since 1984, his time is his own. Even while sitting and talking, he seems to be in constant motion. His deeply lined, animated face and work-worn hands add to his colorful descriptions.

On Saturday, September eighteenth, at seven o’clock in the evening, he left his parents’ house in his 1929 Model A Roadster.

“It had been raining all day. The wind was blowing when I left Enfield Center, but I didn’t think much of it. It was just the wind. I had no idea what was coming; there were no TVs in those days, and only one house in ten or fifteen had a radio. Ninety percent of the radios were battery powered, so you only turned them on when you wanted to hear a special program - to save the battery. They didn’t have regularly scheduled

weather broadcasts like they do today, because they couldn't predict the weather like they do now."

"When I left Enfield at eight-thirty, the wind was really howling. I couldn't get to Shaker Bridge because a limb was down across the road, so I went back to town and bought a pulp saw and an axe. I moved the limb out of the way, and when I got to Shaker Bridge, Daniel Ibey - the road agent at the time - was setting up a barricade so cars couldn't go across. I walked part way across the bridge and told Ibey that I could make it. He refused to ride with me. He had to get to the other side, but he walked. I couldn't see where I was going; the wind was driving the rain straight through the car. Roadsters didn't have windows; and the headlights, just a bulb behind clear glass, were almost useless. The other end of the bridge had started to wash out so I bounced through a wide hole, about two feet deep, and made it to the other side. Ibey made it across several minutes later. He told me that he had to keep stopping to grab the rail or be blown into the lake. He said that a section that had been there when I went across had washed away before he got there. There was just half the width of a vehicle left. I later found out that the wind was averaging one hundred miles an hour and gusting up to one hundred and twenty miles an hour. The waves in the lake were five feet or better."

"I fought the remaining three miles home by cutting limbs out of the way and dragging trees out of the road with the Roadster and a chain that I had with me. When you're standing under a swaying sugar maple, three foot on the stump, to cut a limb out of the way, and the ground you're standing on is rising up two feet and going back down, you don't know which way to go!:

"When I got to LaSalette's fields, I couldn't go any further on the road. The big

rock maple trees that lined the fields every thirty to forty feet - fifty percent of them went down with the storm - were blocking the road. I couldn't move the trees, so I cut through the fields; it was the only choice I had. I got stuck in the mud first thing and had to cut limbs to put under the wheels to get out. When I got to the other end of the fields, I had to crash through a deep ditch full of water. I don't think that anything but a Model A could have made it across".

"When I got closer to the Crystal Lake turn-off, I knew that I couldn't go any further. I parked the Roadster far into T.C. Pearly's field - out of the way of falling trees, and took a short cut across the field. It was still pouring rain, but the wind had let up. When I got to the brook that runs through the field, I could see the lights of my parents' house, but I couldn't get across because the water was so high. I followed the brook to where the bridge should have been, but it had been washed away. There was one four by six timber, with the railing still attached, across the brook, so, I shuffled sideways across it. When I got in the house, it was two o'clock in the morning. It had taken me over five hours to travel less than four miles."

Ernest Parker remembers the hurricane of '38 as having occurred on the eighteenth of September. The Lebanon based Granite State Free Press stated that it happened on September twenty-first; after three days of heavy rain that had risen Upper Valley water-ways to flood stage level. The combination of continued heavy rain and raging winds tore individual trees and whole stands of timber from the water soaked ground, and severely damaged highways, bridges, railways, dams and utilities that were already in a weakened state. The weekly newspaper reported that roofs were blown off barns, silos were blown over, and some buildings, especially camps and boat houses near

the larger lakes, were blown to bits. There was heavy structural damage to many houses resulting from wind-thrown trees. The destruction to Shaker Bridge, according to Enfield's town historian, was a blessing in disguise for Enfield residents and the Shakers that had built it in 1848. It was a cribwork of forty to fifty foot hemlock trees that had been spiked together and filled with boulders, rocks and dirt. Maintenance of this bridge - the Shakers' responsibility by contract - was costly and time consuming because it tended to flood and partially wash out frequently. Four years after the hurricane, a new structurally sound bridge - the one we know now - was built.

Remarkably, there were only three storm-related deaths reported in the Upper Valley area. Being on the road during the worst of the storm, Ernest Parker could easily have been injured or killed. He could have been drowned in Mascoma Lake or crushed by a falling tree. Now, older and wiser, he looks back on the experience and considers himself lucky to be alive.

