



# CUTTYHUNK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## Hurricane Carol - August 31, 1954

A first hand account by Frank E. House

*Last summer was the 50th anniversary of Hurricane Carol which struck on August 31, 1954 and left a major wake of destruction along the New England coast. Stored away in the Historical Society's files were two eye-witness descriptions by Frank E. (Skipper) House who first came to Cuttyhunk with his family in 1927. He and his wife Mary, known to all as Mame, watched the storm from Household, their summer cottage, purchased in the '30s from Cornelius Wood.*

*Household is situated just above the cemetery on the south side of the island and overlooks Vineyard Sound. I thank Flora House Fairchild, Frank and Mame's daughter, for help in editing and interweaving these two accounts.*

*Ethel Twichell, Editor*

It was six days ago that Carol fell upon us in all her fury. Now that we've done what we could with the other folk here to pick up the pieces and stack 'em, I'll try in my feeble way to give a little idea of what happened.

Last Friday afternoon and early evening were fine, the sea and sky scrubbed clean blue by a stiffish blow out of the northeast. A few boats, the usual at day's end, made into our little port under shortened sail. By nightfall the anchored visiting fleet numbered around a dozen and a half sailing craft and a half dozen motor cruisers. At the Fish Pier the pros' [guides] high-powered bass boats were on moorings or tied up at wharf pilings.



Mame and I turned in about nine-thirty, aware – but not apprehensively – that the wind was building to substantial force, normal for winds in that quarter at this season. (The last radio mention of Carol was that she was far out at sea, off Long Island.) Twice in the night the noise outside woke me, to let me know we had a rip-snorting northeast gale with rain added and beating into windows and shingle-siding with a noise like a lot of snare drums. It was the way of many previously known northeasters. I remember thinking, “If this were Carol, which of course it isn't, it would wind up coming at us from the southwest.” That's the way of a hurricane, you know, it spirals counter-clockwise. When the van of it touches you, it blows from the northeast, and when it passes over and gives you its final kick, it comes from the southwest.

In the morning, eating breakfast in the kitchen, the speed of the rain plumes between us and Avalon looked to me about eighty miles an hour. The wind seemed, and sounded at full gale force. I got into oilskins for a go at the porch furniture. The iron table and three wooden chairs which had been on the lawn were plastered onto the picket fence and halfway through it. I didn't make a try for these because I doubted I could keep on my feet. But on the porch I could hold onto the railing



*While the Houses watched from inside, the storm was creating chaos in the harbor.*

while I folded chairs. I got them wedged under the fixed table.

About ten-thirty Mame and I were reading in the old living room under electric light. The wind slackened appreciably. I thought it was a lull until I went onto the porch and found that leaves and debris in the air were circling in a sort of indecisive spiral. I wondered if this was the so-called “eye” and, if so, was Carol indeed with us. Then rather quickly the wind had hauled west and from there, building up fast and fiercely, it was southwest and on us with a savage roar that made the northeast gale seem puny.

For a little while we tried staying with our books in the living room. But now Carol was giving Household the real shakes. We could see the heaves of the floor and the lamps were dancing, so we kept our noses against the salt-encrusted windows, seeing little and waiting for what might happen.

Noises from the kitchen – so I went there and found the windows taking a beating from the old catalpa tree which, you know, is almost espaliered on the southwest side of the house. It was clear the windows couldn’t long take the hammering so, into the oilskins again and a sally forth with the saw. Sawing on that jumping-jack of a limb had to be in little sharp thrusts because, if pushed to its full length, the saw would bend to a sharp curve in the wind, like cardboard. When the saw got through that limb – a piece weighing, I would say, about three hundred pounds – it whisked out of sight like a feather.

Now, with Carol pouring it on full southwest, Mame and I had enough lee on the side porch to get a good look at the ocean. It was awesome. Giant waves, separated by cavernous gray valleys, towered until their tops were snatched away into ragged

white streamers. Each sea, as it smashed on the cliffs, shot plumes of water skyward and the wind sprayed these onto Household, our fences and the Jeep (windshield smashed by a flying brickbat) until heavy salt encrusted everything.

About two o’clock the rain stopped. A half hour later came the first drop in the wind, from the shrill wild high note to a lower wail and moan. Skies lightened and there was the sun, in and out of flying clouds. Mame and I got slickers and took to the road, the wind blowing us down it on tiptoes.

What a shambles we observed! The chimney on The Poplars [former Allen House – now the Porter house] to which a TV antenna was anchored, had been torn off the roof and lay on its side on the porch roof. A window pane had blown out of one of the second story windows of Roland Snow’s house [now owned by his granddaughter Beverly Snow] and a lace curtain was standing straight out into the wind and rain.

Looking up the street we saw that the front piazza roof and railing had been torn from Charles Tilton’s house [now the Brodeur house] and a great hole had been torn in the side of the house where the roof had been ripped away.

Later we found that several windows were broken on that house. Somewhat later we saw that the roof of the church steeple was off and that the Bosworth House [now Pete Spengler’s] was missing its back porch.

Looking toward the pond [harbor] we counted seven beautiful yachts, and a houseboat belonging to James Gatenby, an Allen House guest, that were ashore on Copicut Neck beach along with many smaller boats. It tore the heart. High on the bank, once lovely yawls, sloops, schooners, ketches, their sails flying in rags, lay in shocking abandon. Seven



*The remains of boats and houses lie scattered on Copicut Neck beach.*

buildings had been swept away, some of them were in various positions on the Neck beach and some had disappeared entirely amid a jumble of kindling which had once been dinghies, skiffs, town wharf and what not.



*The hurricane left unusual side-by-side neighbors on the Neck.*

The dwelling belonging to Alice and Arthur Thoresen had been washed away and, blown away by the gale, had crashed into the Fish Dock and been demolished. Another building belonging to the Thoresens and rented by them was standing almost upright on the Neck beach. Also swept away were two cottages belonging to Paul Bangs which had been rented to Edith Morss and Bob Smith for the season. They lost all their effects.

The building belonging to Mildred Potter on the East shore which had stood on the same site as the cottage which had been washed away in the 1938 hurricane was entirely gone, as was the bathhouse and boathouse belonging to Cornelius A. Wood. The main dock with its building and all its top planking was washed away and the road leading to it from the village washed away in several places.

The roof was blown off a building belonging to Albert Ashworth and Morris Quint and the roof on the kitchen and bar of the Seabreeze [now the Conway house] was blown off. The building on Copicut Neck belonging to Donald Owler and



*The Coast Guard boathouse survived, but the Main Dock suffered serious damage.*

LaVerne Matthews [the Zimbone house] lost part of its roof and its big picture window. This building had been used as a refuge for the occupants of the yachts when their boats went ashore, but when the roof went, the refugees retired to the cellar. There were some thirty people there.

The Fish Dock was awash and all its buildings were swept clean of gear some of which somehow clung to the dock although the roof and doors were badly damaged and the board runway leading to the dock from the land was swept away. Coot Hall lost one of his bass boats and Chick Warr's bass boat sank, another boat was thrown up onto the landing stage connected to the main part of the dock.



*Islanders gather to inspect the damage at the Main Dock.*



*Gear belonging to island guides litters the Fish Dock.*

Frances Veeder lost her cottage near the Fish Dock and many houses on the island lost shingles and windows. However, there was no loss of life. The Thoresens, the Bob Smiths, Edith Morss and Mildred Potter lost all their housekeeping gear and clothes and barely escaped with their lives. Mrs. Potter was doubly injured by Carol as her apartment in New Bedford on Rodney French Boulevard was inundated with water.

[Later] Wednesday morning we could get to the Fish Dock where all the Fish Dock gang were at work like beavers, pulling and pushing at the mess. We stopped at Grande Maison [a small cottage also belonging to the House family] and at first saw no change. Then closer scrutiny showed it had shifted slightly. According to Flora Fairchild, her father later said that he had wound 800 feet of clothesline



*A few days later workmen assess the damage and begin repairs on the Fish Dock.*



*Spectators eye a significant problem.*

around the handrail, one tree and a huge boulder. It became clear that it had been afloat, but his last minute precautions had worked, held mostly by the handrail affixed by 4 nails. A freak, and a lucky one!

Chief Moor at the Coast Guard station told me that he believed Carol's three highest peaks hit 150 miles per hour. The mainland clocked 125. Moor says that she outpaced two Pacific typhoons of 130 which he had experienced.

The island looks drab indeed - no greenery - everything wind-burned black or brown. Roots aren't killed, though, and next year all will be fine again. We understand there will be state and government aid for those who are hard hit. Personal injuries were minor and few despite the stuff that flew everywhere. It was a blessing it didn't hit in the night. Reports are in the papers now of quite general resentment over the absence of warning from the weather professionals.

*The photos in this monograph - from David Frothingham, Wally Ketcham and the Allen House - are all part of the CHS collection.*