

Storm tested N.J. Ability to meet disaster

At eight-second intervals on March 7, the seismograph of John Carroll University in Cleveland, registered earth shocks resembling underground nuclear explosions.

Because the shocks continued for hours, the Rev. Henry F. Birkenhauser, director of the observatory, diagnosed the earthshaking force as the Atlantic storm was battering the East Coast and not a series of nuclear tests (which he monitors for the U.S. government).

But the resemblance was there. And it was there, too, on Long Beach Island off the New Jersey coast, one of the worst-hit areas in last week's onslaught of killer tides.

Apart from the brutal destruction, the residents of Ship Bottom, on this 18-mile island, were confronted on a minor scale last week with the kind of human emergency a nuclear explosion might cause.

SHOW TOUGHNESS

A force beyond man's control first cut off towns from the outside world, and then destroyed them. Hundreds fled to the countryside. Telephone lines, power, water and streets vanished. Small pockets of people remained behind, utterly isolated, temporarily cut off from civilization, but determined to survive.

Out of it all came the clear message that the American of 1962 is tough and resourceful.

The story of survival on Long Beach Island, a cross-section of typical Americans 65 miles from Philadelphia and 85 miles from New York City, provides a living blueprint for civil defense. This is the story:

There was no warning as such on Tuesday, March 5, that a seasonal northeast gale would coincide with high spring tides and that the ocean's full force would be hurled against the slender coastal island (and others like it from Long Island Sound, to Miami Beach. The sea just rose up.

A lineman radioed Tuesday night from his truck at Harvey Cedars on the north end of the island: "We are being swamped. There go two houses floating by." The first stage was shock.

"The bulkhead in the front of our house started to go," said John V. Boots, 43. "We got out."

"Furniture, mattresses, a beautiful kitchen set all came floating by my window," said Mrs. Sam Crossley. "I started crying."

RESCUE EFFORT

Then came Phase Two, the rescue effort, Bob Van Meter and his buddy swam and waded down the island to the main where they reported Harvey Cedars was washing away. Boats put out from Barnegat Light on the north end of the island and carried dozens to the mainland. The only link with those who remained behind was the radio in a police car, and the third tide buried it.

Those who could, drove or hiked to the fire house in Surf City, to the township hall in Long Beach Twp., to the fire house at Barnegat Light, then rode on to the mainland. In all, about 2,000 of the 3,000 residents were removed Tuesday night and Wednesday morning.

Ralph Parker donned duck-hunting gear and a white sea captain's hat and took over as township Civil Defense director. A call to the State capital started Phase Three: Outside help.

NAVY CAPTORS

From Lakehurst, 40 miles inland, the Navy dispatched a squadron of helicopters to complete the Harvey Cedars-Barnegat Light evacuation.

The few phone lines still operating brought dozens of calls from the throughout New Jersey, many Pennsylvania towns, New York, Washington, offering help.

Collingswood dispatched its entire department of public works with bulldozers. Willow Grove, Pa., sent its rescue squad with four trucks. The Westinghouse plant at Eddystone, Pa., sent four fire-fighting and pump units. Three mobile kitchens arrived from the Salvation Army at Philadelphia. Chester, Pa., and Hartford, Conn. Offered equipment.

But the islanders weren't sitting still. Mrs. Elena Synder, a 65-year-old widow set up a kitchen in the Surf City fire house and started cooking. Wives took over the telephones and police radio at Ship Bottom so the policemen could carry on rescuing. Bruce Beisel, 15-year-old son of a township policemen, became a desk sergeant because he knew departmental routine. Former FBI agent Trevor Mathews, who lived in retirement in Surf City was drafted to run the town's CD operation.

CRISIS ON CRISIS

Crisis piled upon crisis and each was met.

When damp wiring set off dozens of fires, state forest fire trucks got through flooded, sand-clogged streets.

Bud Palmieri, assistant manager of an A&P supermarket, opened up the store, loaded up \$700 worth of food on a CD truck, told Director Parker: "When that's gone, come back. No charge."

There were many rumors-of bodies being found, of wholesale looting, of typhoid fever, of a new storm getting ready to strike. None was true. One of the lessons of the Long Beach story was to ignore rumors.

NO TIME TO REST

Tuesday and Wednesday the storm was battering the island and the rescue operation was in full tilt. Without so much as an intermission for rest, the battle of recovery, Phase Four, began Thursday.

The first step was restoring power and telephones. Crews of Atlantic City Electric Co. and New Jersey Bell Telephone Co. worked around the clock. Where streets had washed away, bulldozers and earthmovers were chained to three or four utility trucks and pulled them bodily out along the island like trains.

Almost simultaneously the reconstruction equipment began arriving.

By Saturday morning 500 pieces of equipment-earthmovers, tractors, dump trucks, bulldozers (including the biggest one in New Jersey) had gone to work.

The first order of business was clearing the streets of sand-up to three and four feet of it.

SET UP NEW DUNE

Then bulldozers were switched to an emergency assignment. The Weather Bureau reported a storm center moving up the coast Friday night. Dozers by the dozen went into action shoveling a new protective sand dune up out of the sea, to hold back another high tide.

Saturday the storm passed, and U.S. Army Engineers joined volunteer crews in restoring a land link to the north end of the island where about 70 persons had sat out the storm. One deep-water channel 75 feet wide cut the island in two.

By late Saturday, streets and light and power and water had been restored to most areas.

Permanent residents who had been evacuated Tuesday were permitted to return-if they still had homes.

Typical: A school bus pulled up at the end of one street in Beach Haven Park and Paul Gallant, 7, jumped off with his mother. After four days in the high school at Manahawkin on the mainland, they looked fearfully for their home.

“It’s still here, mom,” he said, “See, its still here.”

300 HOMES VANISHED

But for many, there were no homes. An estimated 300 to 500 had been washed away or shattered (the greater portion, of course, belonging to summer residents who had permanent mainland homes).

In the midst of rubble, civilization had returned by its own bootstraps.

“Move off the island?” asked Elena Synder, who has lived all her 65 years in the same house at Surf City. “Certainly not. Why, we just won the battle. Why quit no?”

Father Birkenhauser also derived significant conclusion from the killer storm after examining his seismograph records at Cleveland.

“It is comports to note there was vastly more energy in that storm Wednesday than in any atomic blast,” he said. “And the world has been surviving such storms for eons.”