

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, July 20, 2015

1938 Flood on Red Clay Creek: While sudden floods on Red Clay Creek come as surprises and some do tremendous damage, they, like cold winters in this area, seem to come in cycles. In August 1937, about a week after the Yorklyn Trapshooting Tournament, high waters of the creek washed out Benge Road near the bridge over the raging stream and damaged several mill dams up and down the Red Clay Valley. For many years, my father had clear weather for his August "shoots," but in 1937 his luck ran out on Saturday, the final day. That year he had erected a canvas awning on wooden framework to shield the front porch of the clubhouse from the afternoon sun. The high wind and rain on Saturday demolished this improvement. Showers continued almost daily for another week or more until the ground could hold no more water.

Late spring and early summer of 1938 featured clear weather with seasonal temperatures. The Delaware, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania Trapshooting Championships benefitted from this in May and June. At the end of June, my parents and I left Yorklyn in my dad's new '37 Packard Twelve (still in our collection) for the Annual Maplewood Tournament in New Hampshire's White Mountains, with stops at the New York State Shoot at Johnsonville, northeast of Troy, and at Poland Spring, Maine, where my father wanted to show us where he had visited his father (Israel) in 1910. As we crossed southern Vermont and New Hampshire, the rains came, followed by unseasonably cold weather. This continued through our time at Maplewood, not nice at all for shooting at clay targets. There was a lot of rain in the northeastern United States during July.

About July 25, I was still in bed about 8 A.M. when my mother aroused me and told me to get up quickly as a "terrible roar" was being heard upstream from Auburn Heights. Indeed, a wall of water was coming down the meadow from the paper mill dam at the state line. I ran to get closer and was standing on the bank of the mill race across from my mother's rock garden. My father shouted for me to come back up the hill. Within a few minutes there was at least 10 feet of fast-moving water covering the meadow between the race and the creek. This condition with all the debris it brought along lasted in intensity for two or three hours and then started to subside. The normal flow of water in Red Clay Creek is about 10 million gallons per day. In floods like this, it is estimated to be nearly 10 million gallons *per minute!*

There was measured 63" of water on the first floor of the National Vulcanized Fibre mill, and many mill dams were severely damaged. George Pusey's Ashland Flour Mill dam, under the railroad where Sharpless Road meets Route 82, was washed out. The covered bridge just below Ashland (next to the railroad's steel truss bridge) was toppled, and Route 82 was closed until the end of 1939, when a new bridge was finished. The Sunday after the flood, Pusey himself held forth at Ashland, explaining the damage to curious spectators who came to inspect the destruction. I'm sure many of the B & O Railroad's wooden trestles, of which there were nine crossing Red Clay Creek, were damaged, but they were quickly repaired, so freight service on the line to Hercules, Yorklyn, Hockessin, and Landenberg could be restored. About 10 days later, the annual Marshall Trapshooting Tournament at Yorklyn took place with beautiful weather as if nothing had happened.

This was the greatest flood in the Red Clay Valley during my lifetime, until it was surpassed by the one caused by Tropical Storm Henri in 2003. In 1938, much of the problem was blamed on farmers for not implementing contour plowing on their hillsides; now the blame is placed on too many houses, too much black-top, and too many dams. But if heavy rains keep coming every day or two as they have recently, plus a downpour in Kennett Township, look for another Red Clay Creek flood in 2015. It may be cyclical.

Back to 1938: On September 21, a major hurricane made landfall on Long Island, and all of New England was seriously affected. Over 700 people were killed, and water from Narragansett Bay left a high-water mark 10 feet above the streets of downtown Providence. Whole forests were toppled in the White Mountains, over 200 miles inland. A. H. "Bud" Chapman, a trapshooter from Pawcatuck, Connecticut, on the border with Rhode Island, who had recently attended the Yorklyn tournament, spent 24 hours atop an electric pole near his home before he was rescued. Wind velocity was believed to have been nearly 200 M.P.H.