

Flood of 1927, The

In 1927, the Northeast was visited by one of its worst floods. The papers claimed it to be the worst in fifty years. What they didn't know was that there were to be two more dangerous floods in the next eleven years; one in 1936, the other during the hurricane of 1938. As damaging as these three storms were, they paled in comparison alongside the Flood of 1955, which left behind unprecedented devastation. What prompted these thoughts of flooding was brought on by events of March, 2011, when a near record amount of snow, hardly any of which had melted, was turned to liquid by torrential rains and temperatures in the 40s and 50s. In looking over the newspaper accounts of the 1927 flood, here is what turned up:

“Record-breaking rainfall develops devastating flooding; Winsted isolated and thousands of dollars damage. Eleven people were reported dead as a result from the flood throughout New England and millions of dollars damage resulted from the storm and associated high water. The National Guard was called out in many places; railroads were blocked by washouts, bridges without number were swept away, with dams giving way in some places.”

These were the headlines in the *Winsted Citizen* on November 4 1927. That paper went on to copy reports from Boston, which reported as follows: “Unleashed by bursting dams and swollen by torrential rains, raging waters rolled over great sections of Vermont, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, eastern New York and Connecticut today, bringing the worst flood disaster to this section of the United States in 50 years.

By noon the death toll had mounted to 11. Hundreds of persons in the five states were homeless, many persons were unaccounted for, property damage was variously estimated between \$3,000,000 and \$15,000,000 and scores of crack railroad trains with hundreds of passengers were marooned.”

“A great wall of water bore down on the little town of Becket, Mass., when a dam on the West Branch of the Farmington River broke. Three persons were caught in the rush for high ground as the torrent swept down the Westfield Valley, carrying away 20 buildings, including the railroad station, the post office and a general store. A meager message trickled in from Becket, coming via Albany, N.Y., as all telephone and telegraph lines in that section of the Berkshire Hills were down.”

“In northern Connecticut last night, the Farmington, Mad, Still and Naugatuck Rivers burst over their banks, marooning families in their homes and causing damage to property and highways in this section running into tens of thousands of dollars.

Their restless beds, overtaxed by the heavy downpour of rain that had continued practically unbroken since before dawn yesterday, spewed forth the river waters in one of the worst inundations ever experienced in the history of the state.”

“At 9:45 o'clock, Mad River overflowed its north bank here, flooding cellars stored with valuable merchandise in the business district and covering Main Street with more than a foot of water. Rowley St., connecting with the Torrington highway, was under water for a full quarter of a mile. The police blocked all traffic from Rowley Street Bridge, fearing that the abutments might be swept away by the waters of Mad River, which licked at the floor of the span.”

“The flood extended to all nearby towns, doing a great deal of damage and nearly causing loss of life in the village of Colebrook River. Miss Florence Brownell, English teacher at Gilbert School, and Miss Winnian Hylands, public school nurse, who reside in Colebrook River, were rescued from their home, which was entirely surrounded by water several feet deep, by boat. They were taken in a boat owned by Calvin Humphrey to the home of Fred Eurlle.” Charles Gernannt of Colebrook River was stalled in his Essex coach on the flat at the foot of Woodruff Hill, this side of Colebrook River, and with the water halfway up the side of his car, had to be pulled out by means of a rope. The current was so strong that the rescue party, headed by George Palmer, feared that Gernannt would be drowned before he could be removed from his flooded automobile. Allen Clark’s Essex also had to be towed to safety a short time before this from the same spot.”

The account of damages to Winsted’s manufacturing facilities is today more interesting because it recounts the sources of employment to the citizens, almost all of which are now but a fading memory. Here is the special report concerning them:

“While none of the Winsted factories suffered material losses due to the high water, a number of cellars and departments on first floors were badly flooded.

Operations at the Winsted Hosiery were suspended because of water in the engine room. A portion of the flywheel was submerged, making it impossible to start the engine this morning.”

“At the Strong Mfg. Co. this morning, there was still a foot of water covering the entire floor. The employees of the plating, buffing and wood finishing rooms were unable to start work. Between two and three feet of water covered the floor last night when the river was at its height. A part of the footbridge, which spans the river at the Strong plant, is still in place, while another part has floated down stream. Considerable coal was washed down the river.”

“The plating and buffing rooms at the Fitzgerald Mfg, Co, were unable to operate today and the cellar of that plant was badly flooded.

Considerable lumber at the Gilbert Clock Co. was thoroughly soaked. It will require some time to dry it out. All departments however, were able to start work this morning.

The Winsted Manufacturing Co. was closed all day.”

“Employees of the New England Knitting Co. remained at the plant until 11 o’clock last night, but there was no damage, and very little water entered the packing room of the plant.

The plants of the Union Pin Co., Winsted Edge Tool Works, Winsted Hardware Co., the Sweet Wire Co., Empire Knife Co., the Strand & Sweet Co. and Capitol Knife Co. were all undamaged and no water is reported as having entered the cellars and first floors of these factories.”

“Men from the Morgan Silver Plate Co. worked over the gates for a few hours and prevented any damage at that plant. Not more than a few inches of water are reported as having entered the bottom floors of the factory in which the New England Pin Co. formerly operated.”

The flood control dam west of Winsted has prevented recurrences during periods of flooding several times since being built, and I suspect that its cost has been offset by now.