

## Community News

# Flood of memories

## Bucks County author chronicles 1955 deluge

By John Monteith

The author of the recently published "Devastation on the Delaware," an account of the Flood of 1955, a defining event in the history of the Delaware Valley, will sign copies of her book at Frenchtown's Book Garden on Sunday from 2 to 4 p.m.

Mary Shafer of Ferndale, Pa., spent three years developing the manuscript, a process that included interviewing more than 100 eyewitnesses, survivors and rescuers. Many of the survivors had never spoken of the disaster that struck on Aug. 18-20 of 1955.

Two hurricanes, Connie and Diane, slammed into the eastern seaboard within five days of each other. Although they had weakened to tropical-storm status by the time they reached the Delaware Valley, they dropped 15-20 inches of rain onto the Delaware River, its tributaries, and a drought-stricken landscape.

The result was a one-two punch of death and destruction that became the benchmark by which all local flooding since has been measured. A total of 99 people perished, 11 of them in New Jersey. Remains were still being found years later. In 1969, construction workers unearthed the skeleton of one of the victims, a little girl whose corpse had been caught up in the foundation of a building.

Meteorology was still a primitive science in 1955, employing World War II-era radar. The deployment of the first weather satellite was still five years in the future. The people of the Delaware Valley simply had no idea of what was headed their way. Lashing downpours led to talk of possible flooding. Rising

waters became a source of curiosity and then apprehension. Finally, terror set in as buildings were ripped from their foundations and vehicles were tossed about like driftwood.

**Mary Shafer of Ferndale, Pa., spent three years working on her book of the Delaware River flood of 1955, a process that included interviewing more than 100 eyewitnesses, survivors and rescuers. Many of the survivors had never spoken of the disaster that struck on Aug. 18-20.**

One particularly vivid account records the devastation of Camp Davis, a Christian family retreat in the Poconos, where 43 people drowned. Describing the destruction of the facility, Shafer wrote, "The Lackawanna Railroad crew can hear the screams, too. They stick their heads out the engine windows...All they can make out is some white foam atop the area where the camp buildings had stood just moments before. The men hear the shrieks and cries of the women and small children. They make a concerted effort not to look at each other. One of them wipes his eye with a grease-embedded finger as they all stare off in the direction of the now-fading din."

With homes and businesses destroyed, and roads, bridges and railroad tracks washed away, "the flood finished the job that the Second World War had begun," wrote Shafer. "It erased the last vestiges of a slower, quieter way of life that had held on even after America had lost its isolationist naivete in that global struggle."

The period of rebuilding after the flood provided opportunity for some. Niece's lumberyard, just to the north of the Frenchtown-Uhlerstown Bridge, had sustained \$40,000 in damage, a considerable loss. Young Howard Opdyke scraped together the resources to purchase the yard, worked diligently, built a strong customer base, and finally relocated to a safer location, on the Milford-Frenchtown Road, where it continues to prosper today. The first edition of "Devastation on the Delaware" was sponsored by the H.J. Opdyke Lumber Co. "in commemoration of its 50th anniversary as a Delaware Valley merchant.

Shafer, 44 years old, a native Pennsylvanian and a Bucks County newspaper columnist, began researching the flood after she came across a photo essay about it at a tag sale.

"I never heard of this," she said. "I couldn't believe I never heard of it. I figured I might as well do a book. If I'd know the tremendous amount of labor that would be involved, though, I probably wouldn't have done it."

Shafer said that she learned, in doing her research, that "true river people" are willing to accept the hazards of living along the Delaware River.

"It's the beauty. A faraway look comes into their eyes when they talk about the river. They need it in their lives. They are willing to live with the consequences. It's a flood plain, a pressure valve for the river, and there's a price to be paid. Then there are those who want the beauty but don't want to pay the price...They want others to pay for the damage when flooding inevitably occurs. River people live 'with' the river. The others only live 'on' the river."

"Devastation on the Delaware," 452 pages, softcover, costs \$19.95. It contains more than 100 photographs and maps. The foreword was written by Jon Nese, a Weather Channel storm analyst.

Further information can be found at Web sites [www.55flood.com](http://www.55flood.com) and [floodbook@thewordforge.com](mailto:floodbook@thewordforge.com).