

Region .....4  
aries .....6  
er .....7

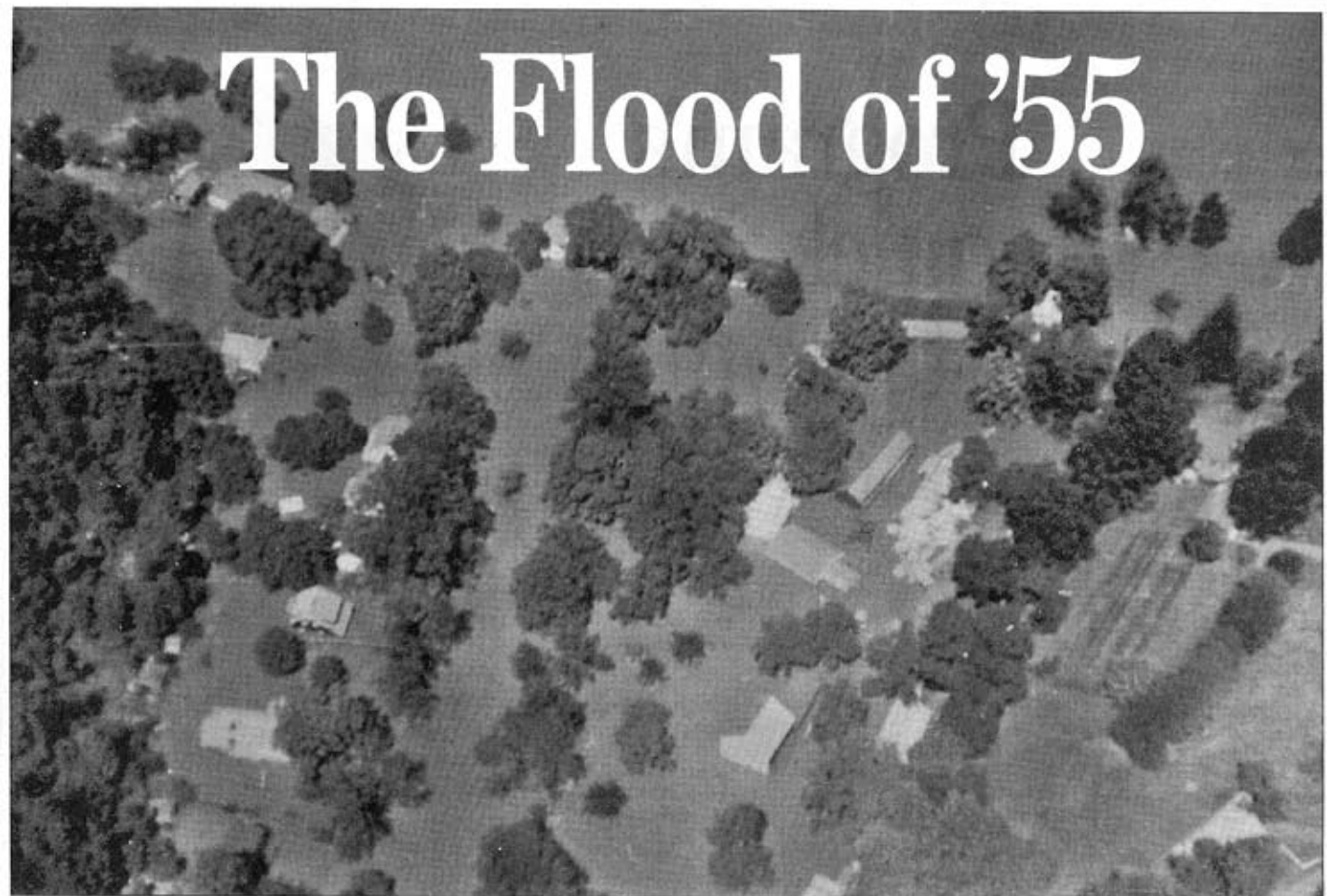
# Local News Bucks County & the Region

AY, AUGUST 19, 2005

Bucks County C

The Philadelphia Inquirer

## The Flood of '55



Courtesy of the Tinsman family

An aerial view of the Tinsman Bros. lumberyard during the flood of 1955, which left 99 people dead and caused \$963 million in damage in today's dollars.

### A book looks back 50 years on Delaware's worst deluge

By Leslie A. Pappas  
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Painted on the side of a gray wooden house,



# A book looks back 50 years on Delaware's worst deluge

By Leslie A. Pappas  
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Painted on the side of a gray wooden house, in the Tinsman Bros.' lumberyard in Lumberville, is a diary of Delaware River floods.

The first high-water mark, partially obscured by bushes: March 12, 1936. Above that, on a piece of blue tape, still awaiting official black lettering: September 2004. Farther up: March 19, 1936; April 2005; Oct. 11, 1903.

The only date not on the side of the house is the river's record-setter of Aug. 18 to 20, 1955; that flood required a plaque hoisted on metal rods several inches above the roof.

"It engulfed us all," said Bill Tinsman, 86, of the deluge that overwhelmed the town a half-century ago, destroying his home and the family business. "It was a mess."

Still recovering from two devastating floods in 2004 and this year, river residents this week are marking the 50th anniversary of the 1955 flood, which still holds its place as the worst in the river's history.

Among those commemorating the event is local author

Mary A. Shafer, who has just finished a history, *Devastation on the Delaware: Stories and Images of the Deadly Flood of 1955*, which will be in stores in October. She will present a slide show tonight at the Indian Rock Inn in Upper Black Eddy.

Shafer tells the story of the '55 flood, a result of back-to-back rainstorms from Hurricanes Connie and Diane, through personal tales of 100 survivors, culled from nearly three years of interviews.

"I didn't want to do this dry historical treatise about the event," said Shafer, who believes that society keeps repeating mistakes because most history books are too boring to spark people's interest in the past. "I wanted to write a book that people would actually remember."

See **FLOOD** on B3



Bill and Sue Tinsman, right, recall the 1955 flood. Sue Tinsman remembers spending weeks cleaning mud off everything in their home and business. Their son described riding in a rowboat through the lumberyard, above, amid floating piles of lumber. The high-water marks of floods over the years are indicated on a house on the Tinsmans' property, below; the 1955 flood's peak is marked on a board extending above the eaves.



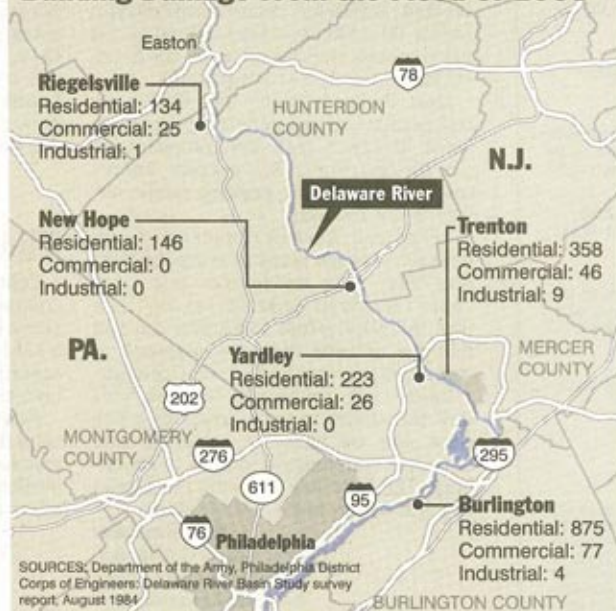
JOHN SLAVIN / Inquirer Suburban Staff

## Remembering the Great Flood

Mary A. Shafer, author of "Devastation on the Delaware," will commemorate the flood of 1955 by giving a free slide presentation at 6:30 tonight at the Indian Rock Inn, 2206 River Rd. (Route 32) in Upper Black Eddy. For information, call 610-982-9600.



## Building Damage From the Flood of 1955





JOHN SLAVIN / Inquirer Suburban Staff

The Delaware River, seen from a footbridge in Lumberville, looked placid earlier this week, 50 years after its most devastating flood.

# Recalling the Delaware's worst flood

## FLOOD from B1

The lessons she says people should learn:

"If you live in a flood plain, you are going to get flooded," she said. "It's not a nice piece of real estate that God cleared off all nice and flat for you to build on or plant on. It's a pressure valve for the river."

In numbers, the '55 flood cost 99 lives and more than \$963 million in damage in today's dollars.

But it is through the words of survivors that the event comes to life.

Tinsman's son, also named Bill, was 7 years old when the waters submerged the family's house. He remembers riding a rowboat through floating piles of lumber, and climbing through his second-floor bedroom window to salvage some clothes. "We just pulled up on the porch roof like it was a boat dock," he recalled.

His mother, Sue Tinsman, 83, remembers weeks upon weeks of wiping mud.



The Tinsman Bros. lumberyard on River Road in Lumberville was swamped by the 1955 flood. "It engulfed us all," Bill Tinsman said.

"Literally on everything. You couldn't touch anything without it being in goosh."

The calamity also touched those who didn't live at the river's edge.

For D. Randy Riggs, then a 9-year-old in Lower Makefield,

the flood left images of muddy waters raging within a few feet of the grate of the Yardley bridge as he and his mother drove back from a shopping trip in Ewing, N.J. The bridge partially washed out hours later.

He remembers cages of

dead canaries on the second floor of a friend's house in Yardley, after floodwaters rose within two feet of the ceiling. He watched his father, a plumbing and heating contractor, pump out basement after basement, and learned how it needed to be done slowly so foundations wouldn't collapse.

Now living in Marin County, Calif., Riggs says those lessons remain vivid.

"I'll carry it with me my whole life," he said. "I just saw firsthand how these people's lives are turned upside down ... and I always thought to myself, that's one place I'd never buy a house."

"I love the beauty of the Delaware River," he said. "But I've seen the other side of that river. And there's no way I would ever live by it."

Contact staff writer Leslie A. Pappas at 215-702-7622 or lpappas@phillynews.com.