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## Anniversary of Hurricane Diane is a time to learn from historic flood

by Carol Smith  
Of The Chronicle

Amateur meteorologist and Ferndale, Pa. emergency management volunteer Mary Shafer has first-hand knowledge of how hurricanes can destroy lives and property.

Shafer helped her neighbors pick up the pieces after the Sept. 18, 2004 visits of Hurricanes Ivan and Frances.

She and fellow emergency volunteers logged the rising of the Delaware River at the Riegelsville-Roebing Bridge.

The Delaware River crested at 31 feet – a few feet below the 1955 landmark flood.

It's one of life's ironies that her flood duties stopped work on her soon-to-be-released "Devastation on the Delaware: The Deadly Flood of 1955." The book commemorates the 50th anniversary of Hurricane Diane's visit on Aug. 18, 1955.



Contributed photo

This was the scene along Route 611 in Riegelsville, Pa. on Aug. 19, 1955, after Hurricane Diane caused record flooding in the area. A new book by author Mary Shafer tells the story behind the devastating events.

The Ferndale writer and resident says that as far as nature's cycles go, Ivan and Frances are a repeat of 1955's Connie and Diane.

It's just the benefits of ra-

dar, satellites and Mega Doppler technology that prevented the 2004 flooding from taking more lives than the estimated 200 men, women and children who died

along the East Coast when Diane surprised them in 1955.

The U.S. Weather Bureau on Aug. 18 reported that Hurricane Diane was no longer a threat.

By noon on Aug. 19, Phillipsburg and Easton, Pa. residents knew the weatherman was wrong.

They watched from high ground as the Delaware River crested at a historic 43 feet and the rebuilt steel center span of the Northampton Street Free Bridge was knocked out by a piece from another bridge.

So were communications and power lines between the two border cities.

Shafer decided to write a narrative, nonfiction book about Hurricane Diane after she realized through research that the 50th anniversary of the 1955 flood was coming up.

Not much material was available about the weather

forces that led to this landmark event.

"History is about our story and it's important. This event had changed life in the Delaware Valley," she said. "There are lessons to be learned."

Besides leaving an indelible mark on the memories of all those who experienced it, the 1955 flood destroyed several bridges that were never replaced, cut communities in half and left widespread devastation.

It also changed the way local residents and land-use planners approached floodplain building and sparked a debate over damming the Delaware River.

Hurricane Diane dumped nearly a foot of rain on parts of eastern Pennsylvania and western New Jersey.

About 70 people staying at a summer camp upriver were washed away by a 40-foot wall of water. Bodies were still being recovered years later and miles away.

Just days before, Hurricane Connie soaked the parched, drought-stricken Delaware Valley.

By the time Diane had spent her force, the storm

dreds of millions of dollars of damage and killed between 184 and 200 people, including young children staying at Camp Davis in Anomink in the Poconos.

"This will be a must-read in communities all along the Delaware," said Foster Winans, Writers Room Executive Director. "No less so because of heightened interest by the recent flood triggered by Ivan."

Shafer is a consummate storyteller with a knack for making history come alive. She is also a self-described 'weather weenie,' fascinated and engaged by nature's fury, drama and history.

The 1955 flood book is filled with eyewitness accounts of what it was like to live through this tragedy.

But Shafer also provides readers with an understanding of how hurricanes behave and makes an environmental appeal – pay more attention to how land development projects affect our water supply and impact the destruction from natural disasters such as hurricanes and floods cause.

Shafer's research on Ivan and Diane indicates the

ment. Flood waters cannot run off under cement and concrete but they can under dirt.

With too much development, the ground water erodes and the aquifers, a level of porous rock, cannot recharge naturally.

"These events will happen again. The Indians knew better than to build in flood plains. We can't prevent another flood, but we can prevent loss of life, if we don't rebuild in these areas," Shafer said.

In one of its first publishing efforts, the Writers Room of Bucks County in Doylestown, Pa. will produce Shafer's book.

The oral and pictorial history of the 1955 flood should be available in time to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Hurricane Diane's visit.

The writer's account of this historic event will fill more than 200 pages with never-before-seen photos and interviews with witnesses and survivors. It will retail for about \$15.

Profits from the book will benefit The Writers Room's programs and a portion of

Delaware Riverkeeper Network, a Washington's Crossing-based nonprofit that is devoted to protecting the natural balance of the sprawling Delaware watershed extending from the Catskills to Delaware Bay.

Shafer's Web site, [www.55flood.com](http://www.55flood.com), provides contact information on the book and her availability for speaking engagements.

The interactive Web site will also allow others to share their Diane memories.

After Hurricane Ivan, many new sources and some long-lost records of Camp Davis in the Poconos were found that will be incorporated into the soon-to-be completed historical narrative.

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