

Hurricane Hazel

Life Experience

Brenda Loy Wilson

HURRICANE HAZEL

Nine years old

On October 14, 1954 the U S Weather Bureau, now the National Weather Service, reported that Hurricane Hazel had intensified into a Category 4 storm with maximum winds of 135 miles per hour. It was predicted to be the deadliest storm of the season. Landfall occurred with an eye that was 40 miles wide, a central pressure of 938 millibars, the lowest reported in a hurricane to ravage our state so far. Hazel hit the North Carolina/South Carolina border, between Myrtle Beach and Calabash, with winds up to 150 mph. A storm surge as high as 18 feet coincided with lunar high tide. Massive flooding washed out bridges and over 11 inches of rain fell in some areas of the state.

Citizens were warned to seek shelter from powerful winds, flying debris. Hazel moved inland rapidly and wreaked havoc, cut wide paths of devastation. Tall pines soughed, scraped together; some bore down, nearly touching the ground. Saplings made perfect arches. Wind speeds increased, emitted sounds like a freight train barreling through a tunnel.

While other people in the state hunkered down, Daddy, my brother and sisters and I were tying leaves of tobacco onto wooden sticks to hang up into the barn to cure. The man hanging the five to six hundred sticks had to be extra careful as he stood on the wooden tier poles and reached up to the rafters.

We all worked as quickly as humanly possible. Wet hair clung to our faces; we'd shake our head to loosen the wet strands that covered our eyes. That was an act we repeated over and over. Our noses dripped as though we suffered severe head colds or full-blown fall allergies. Garments clung to our bodies in need of being fed through the wringer washer that Mama used on the back porch.

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Daddy would not let any of the family leave until the job was complete. Most of the hired workers left before all the sticks of tobacco reached the safety of the barn.

This experience was such a contrast to the night when I was six and Daddy let me spend the night at the barn while he stoked the wood burning furnace made of rocks and daubing dirt. It was imperative that he keep the fire to a precise temperature so that the leaves would cure golden. Of course, he didn't sleep much.

For supper he'd roasted ears of corn in their shucks, baked a potato and cut up a cantaloupe from the garden. Even before dark, I climbed into the narrow tobacco sled and laid on the homemade quilts. The sides were made of burlap and stained with the juice of green tobacco leaves pulled earlier that day. My only fear was that a big green tobacco worm was hiding somewhere inside the sled and would crawl on me during the night. I tried counting stars but there were so many that I fell asleep not long after naming what I believed were the Big Dipper, Little Dipper and the Milky Way. Had it rained that night I could not have stayed at the barn as Daddy slept on an old car seat under the attached shed. After stacking the wood to keep it dry for the fire, there would have been no room for me.

We finally arrived home in Daddy's pickup truck and raced onto the back porch where Mama waited with towels. Our arrival marked one of the rare times that Mama displayed anger with Daddy. The peacemaker, Mama usually admonished him gently, quietly. Even if that approach made no difference, didn't douse a flicker of his volatility, she tried. This time she didn't tiptoe around the matter. She vehemently disagreed with his decision to put the crop, the money, before our safety. Daddy's moods could escalate into gale force at the drop of a hat.

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Mama was angry, frightened for the safety of her family as the eye of Hazel tracked across North Carolina.

Supper that night consisted of heated leftovers. Mama was so out of sorts that she didn't even warm the biscuits left from breakfast. After a silent meal, we listened to radio broadcasts from the local station until a powerful wind took down the tower.

The number of people killed from Hurricane Hazel reached nineteen people and several hundred more were injured. The National Guard was mobilized to prevent looting and on October 17, President Dwight D. Eisenhower declared the Carolinas a major disaster and offered immediate and unlimited federal assistance. Daddy would never entertain assistance of any kind; he was too proud and believed that a real man took care of his own, even during a hurricane.

The tobacco barn's thick logs with extra chinking withstood the winds and rain.