

Deep Roots: The Great Flood of Aberdeen

by Wilma Heberling

We in Texas think we have cornered the market on floods, and some in Louisiana might say we have nothing on them, but Scotland has had her share too. I remember when I was about twelve years old, and living in East Lothian, there was a flood that left its mark ten feet up on walls of the City of Haddington. It completely flooded a woolen mill that was there. One of Scotland's most memorable storms, however, happened fifty years ago in Aberdeen.

It was Wednesday, January 20th, 1937. A low, angry-looking cloud began blowing in from the southeast. About noon, the rain began. By mid-afternoon a full gale was driving water horizontally along the streaming streets. People huddled in shop entrances for shelter. Those who ventured into the street were bent over struggling with torn and useless umbrellas. At the harbor, it was chaotic. The port was quickly closed by the authorities because huge white caps were bearing down upon the pier. The sea was striking the Abercrombie Jetty with such force that the spray was shooting ninety to a hundred feet in the air. The steamers, 'Aberdonian' and 'Lochnagar' snapped their moorings and were sent adrift. The storm raged on through the night.

It was no better the next day. The lifeboat, Emma Constance, had to be launched to search for a missing fish trawler (larger than shrimpboats). Of course, in those days the lifeboats—even the most modern—had no radio. So the lifeboat, without 'ears' or 'voice' went out in the pitch dark to find a missing boat in the middle of a raging storm. Over 100 relatives of the missing crew waited for news. Twenty-five hours later, the Emma Constance re-entered Aberdeen harbor with the good news that the trawler had put in at Buckie, along the coast. She was storm-battered, but intact.

By Saturday, the storm seemed to have blown itself out, but such a volume of water had fallen that the rivers Don, Urie, and Deveron had all burst their banks. Many roads were completely submerged. In the City of Aberdeen, several streets were completely closed to traffic. More than fifty sheep drowned on the outskirts of the city. Farther out, about a mile from the Old Bridge O'Dee, Mr. James Yule was not unduly concerned. There had been high waters before, and his house had been flooded by about three feet of water before. But the rain didn't let up. It resumed its rant, and by 9 p.m. the house was cut off by the river. By 5 a.m. water was lapping at the back door and the family moved possessions upstairs—past the mark on the wall where the great flood of 1920 left its mark. Three hours later, the first floor of the house was completely engulfed.

Neighbors on the other side of the river called police for help. They feared for the Yule family's safety. A lifeboat was launched and made its way to the Yule's home. Oars were useless against the current so they had to kick in the motor. Their pathway was littered with uprooted trees, dead animals and other debris. They had to negotiate around fences, outhouses and haystacks floating in the water. Finally they reached the Yule house and rescued the family. James Yule reportedly asked his rescuers, "Why did ye no come by the river?"

George Flett, the captain replied, "I thocht this *was* the river!" "Na, Na," said James, "You're in the middle of ma neep field (turnip field)!"

Back in Aberdeen, the main lighthouse was still knocked out of commission, seventy-five yards of sea wall had been torn down by the storm, and at Peterhead, the breakwater was completely UNDER water. But the worst was yet to come.

On Friday, January 30th, the rain was replaced by snow. High winds caused drifts to cover the landscape. Blizzard conditions blocked the already sodden roads.

Finally, it all ended. Although there was residual flooding from the thawing snow, there was hope that the end was in sight. People started to reclaim their lives. The damage was so bad, however, that in midsummer of the following year repairs were still being carried out on roads, bridges, and homes.

These sturdy people of the north-east, although they had no means of knowing it at the time, had just lived through the worst storm to hit their area in the entire twentieth century.