

Bell Acres History...

1936 St. Patrick's Day Flood

Bell Acres resident Harry Lavelle was a young child when he and his family were rescued by boat from their Center Street home in Glenfield. They were among hundreds of borough residents affected by the 1936 St. Patrick's Day Flood that inundated river towns. Numerous garages and sheds as well as four houses were swept away as flood waters reached the second floor of many Center Street homes [photo].

For two days, on March 17th and 18th, heavy rainfall and melting snow caused flooding over much of the Northeast, including Western Pennsylvania. In Pittsburgh, flood waters peaked at 46', 20' above flood stage, before surging down the Ohio River and causing damage as far as Wheeling.

In the aftermath, over 3,000 displaced persons were cared for in private homes, schools and public buildings throughout the Sewickley Valley. Four hundred Glenfield residents were fed in the borough's fire hall, while shelters were opened in Leetsdale and Fair Oaks schools. Area churches and the Red Cross provided food and clothing to families in need. Desperately needed clean water arrived via Atlantic gasoline company tankers. Residents were inoculated against typhus and for a time, beer and liquor sales were banned within eighteen Western Pennsylvania counties. In Sewickley, the beer ban lasted about a week, while liquor could only be purchased with a doctor's prescription. Before the arrival of 100 National Guard troops, looting was rampant in Leetsdale as gangs terrorized the town.



(Harry Lavelle Photo)

Only after the water receded was the full extent of damage revealed. Twelve hundred Works Progress Administration [WPA] men were assigned to clean-up efforts in communities between Ben Avon and Sewickley.

In the disaster's aftermath, lawmakers passed the Flood Control Act of 1936, which allowed for dam and reservoir projects that would prevent or lessen future flooding.

"At Glenfield, a woman wouldn't leave her cow when the rescuers came to take her away and had the cow up on the second floor of the house with her. When the rescuers came back the third time they had to shoot the cow before they could get the woman to leave."

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This Bell Acres History article also appeared in the **Sewickley Herald**.