

The Storm of the Century: Fifty Years Later

By Graelyn Brashear

Cars half-buried in sand. Houses teetering on what remained of their pilings. A Naval destroyer run aground in Beach Haven Inlet, its 2,000-ton hulk a stone's throw from wrecked homes.

Such were the iconic images captured in the aftermath of the great storm that wreaked havoc on Long Beach Island and much of the Atlantic coast 50 years ago this spring. This article focuses on the impact on Long Beach Island. The March 1962 nor'easter, officially named the Great Atlantic Storm, brought with it a week of high tides that covered the island, causing damage and destruction not seen since.

Margaret "Pooch" Buchholz, a Harvey Cedars native, celebrated local author and former publisher of the island's Beachcomber newspaper, co-authored Great Storms of the Jersey Shore, in which the '62 disaster is featured. In her March 30, 2012 lecture at the New Jersey Maritime Museum in Beach Haven commemorating the anniversary of the storm, Buchholz presented many of the photographs and personal histories collected in the book.

In the early spring of 1962, Buchholz was living in Philadelphia with her husband, and traveled back to LBI when the storm had passed. Her father, then-mayor Reynold Thomas, met her at the Route 72 causeway. Police escorted them north, but they barely made it to Harvey Cedars, where the destruction at the island's narrowest point was total.

"We had to walk all the way in," Buchholz remembered. "It was like walking through desert with water drizzling through it. There were no streets left, the telephone poles were down. A few houses were on the beach, perched up like spiders moving in the breeze. It was just devastation."



Photo Credit: Louis Bruscia

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Burlington Avenue – Harvey Cedars.
Photo Credit: Louis Brescia

The loss took its toll on people. “It was the first time I’d seen my father cry since my mother died, when he saw what happened to his town,” Buchholz said. Residents had sheltered in safe buildings and emerged to find their homes gone. “People I know lost everything,” Buchholz said.

Lives were lost, too. Seven people died on LBI during the nor’easter, including an official who had traveled to the south end of the island to survey the damage before the storm had lifted and became trapped in floodwaters, Buchholz said.

Jeannette Lloyd was a regular LBI visitor and a college student in ’62. Lloyd, who is working on a book about Beach Haven’s old families, remembers arriving in the immediate aftermath of the storm and seeing the ruins of Holgate. Nearly two blocks of beachfront land were obliterated, she said. It took years for the island and the surrounding area to recover, but it was never the same. Debris from destroyed homes popped up in the bay for many years afterward, said Lloyd. Buchholz said many people who lost their homes simply gave up on rebuilding, swallowed their losses and left. Both women said they wonder and worry about what will happen when – not if – history repeats itself.

In the early days of island development, most people built homes at a generous setback from the beach, Lloyd said. “They respected mother nature,” she said. Things have changed, said Buchholz. There has been beach replenishment and dune restoration in some areas, “but it’s not going to last forever,” she said.

Looking back and remembering the 50-year-old disaster is important, said Buchholz, “because it’s going to happen again. Maybe not in my lifetime or yours, but it will happen again.”

Ms. Buchholz is often sought out as an authority on the storm and its impact.

She will be speaking at the LBI museum on July 16 and at High Point Firehouse in Harvey Cedars on August 16. Visit the following website:

www.down-the-shore.com/mtb.html for more information on these events.



Ocean Front Devastation on LBI.
Photo Credit: Louis Brescia



Destroyer DD798 Beached in Holgate
Photo Credit: Louis Brescia