

Mother Nature's Fury — Winds And Floods Bring Destruction

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For reasons known only to her, Mother Nature vented her wrath on the greater Chequamegon Bay region on four occasions early in the 1940s. In late August 1941 an enormous "cloudburst," accompanied by winds of "tornado-like velocity," swept through the region.

Almost every community suffered some damage, with the southern sections of Ashland and Bayfield County hit hardest. Railroads and roads were washed out, and telephone and power lines were blown down, temporarily isolating some communities. The bridge over the mouth of Fish Creek, west of Ashland, collapsed when the flood current scoured the bottom of the creek to twice its normal depth, loosening the piles. The two 45 ton bridge sections were swept downstream by the current, where they rested on the bottom in about 15 feet of water. The sections were salvaged and used to rebuild the bridge. A one-lane army Bailey bridge carried traffic until the new bridge was completed.

In Washburn, the wind blew the creamery chimney down onto the roof, wrecking equipment and spoiling milk inside the building. Several plate glass windows were also broken, parts of the roofs of the farmers' warehouse and opera block were torn away, many of the huge pine trees in Memorial Park were blown down, while the deluge of water swept large quantities of sand and debris into gutters and storm sewers.

Outside of Washburn several barns were blown down, the collapse of one killing a young man who had taken refuge inside.

Bayfield's turn came in mid-July 1942 when over eight inches of rain fell in a 12 hour period, which overtaxed "the capacity of storm sewers and created a raging river through the heart of the city," according to the Bayfield County Press.

The "raging river" or "flash flood" began in the hills above



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Bayfield, growing in size and gathering sand and debris, as it roared toward the city. It struck the cemetery first, strewing coffins and bodies about. Then, channeled into two large ravines, the wall of water plowed into the business district, destroying several businesses, heavily damaging and ruining fixtures, stock, and machinery.

The Bayfield County Press reported that "Our newspaper equipment . . . is buried in five feet of sand topped by a goodly supply of rain water, well stirred, and caked to beautiful chocolate brown." At the harbor front the flood washed away the railroad tracks, filling a cannery and a cold storage plant with sand before it debouched into the lake, where it tossed fishing boats about like so many chips of wood. The damage was estimated at \$750,000.

In August 1943, a year after the catastrophe in Bayfield, a violent wind, accompanied by heavy rain, struck the northwest corner of Bayfield County, heavily damaging farm buildings, crops, and animals, and blowing down hundreds of trees, with damage "estimated at several million dollars."

This debacle was followed in November by a "nor'easter" off Lake Superior, "described by old

timers as the worst since 1905," pouring windblown rain, snow, and sleet on the Chequamegon Bay area for two days. Power and communication were disrupted, while fishermen along the bay shore suffered heavy losses to their docks, boats, and buildings. The seas were so heavy and visibility so restricted that eight ore and coal carriers were forced to take refuge in the Ashland harbor.

Mother Nature relented for two years, but then struck the north country with renewed fury in June 1946 with what the Times described as the "Worst Flood In History," caused by two days of heavy rain.

Ashland was isolated as all roads and railroads were washed out, while in the city several houses were destroyed, with many businesses flooded.

East of Ashland, Odanah was completely covered with water that flooded all of the homes, destroying many of them. The farm land around the village was inundated, while water covered the roads in all directions, isolating the village.

Bayfield was again threatened by a flash flood, but quick work by volunteers erecting a barrier of sandbags contained the water with minimum damage.

There was no significant damage in Washburn, but one of the creeks flowing through the Du Pont plant property flooded, destroying bridges, buildings, and a section of the plant railroad.

Part of Mellen was inundated when the dam on the Bad River burst, releasing a flash flood that destroyed or flooded homes and businesses on the low areas along the river, washed out railroad tracks, flooded the veneer plant, and deposited large quantities of debris along the way. All available boats and men were used to rescue people stranded in their flooded homes, or on the roofs of buildings. At least 175 people were "flood refugees," cared for by the Red Cross and local citizens.