

# Hurricane still haunts survivors 50 years later

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daughter and the family pet swept over a bridge in the same area.

Described one witness: "I was warning cars away from the bridge but these people decided to go ahead anyway. They roared across the bridge, tore the railing down and were swept away. I could see the headlights bobbing for the longest time and could only guess at the terror they felt."

Their bodies were found the next day.

There were also dramatic rescues. Just outside Woodbridge, another bridge went out sending an oncoming

car nosing down into the Humber. A truck driver looked on as a female passenger in the car clambered out of the vehicle and went for help.

She later returned with a rope tied around her and, with the aid of another motorist, helped the rest of the passengers out of the car to safety.

In Thornhill, a motorist was stranded on the roof of his car that was sitting in six feet (two metres) of surging water on John Street.

Then Richmond Hill police chief Robbie Robins and some firefighters used a small boat to reach him. They managed to fasten a rope to the car and form a human lifeline to rescue the motorist.

It was the overflowing Humber River, running south through Woodbridge, that caused the major loss of human life and damage in the area. Ten people died in Woodbridge alone and 250 others were left homeless. Total damages exceeded more than \$25 million.

Sidewalks were uprooted, sewage and water mains broken. Mobile homes were washed down the Humber as it flooded one third of Woodbridge and nearby Pine Grove.

Richmond Hill resident, Albert Roberts, was a fireman with the North York Fire Department at the time.

"We were mainly searching for bodies up and down the Humber south of Woodbridge and rescuing residents forced to stand on their roofs to avoid the rising water," he said. "Everything was out. A wall of water, seven or eight feet deep, had rushed down the Humber. It was like being hit by a tidal wave."

One of the more bizarre twists in the search for victims came when a fireman thought he had discovered a body floating in the water.

"He saw a leg sticking out of the water," Mr. Roberts said.

"It turned out to be the leg of a mannequin which had been washed out of one of the stores."

The nightmarish night also touched Richmond Hill and Thornhill.

Because it sat on high ground, Richmond Hill managed to escape the brunt of Hazel although it suffered



Flooding from Hurricane Hazel in '54.

uprooted trees and downed power lines. One anxious time came when a school bus, taking students home from Richmond Hill District High School from late classes, went missing for several hours. Frantic parents later found the bus and their children safe at a farmer's home where the driver had taken refuge when roads became impassable.

Fifty years later, Hazel still has an impact in the way municipalities are planned.

In 1957 the Metropolitan Toronto Region Conservation Authority was formed. One of its most challenging tasks was acquiring lands for flood control to ensure another hurricane would not catch the Toronto area unprepared again.

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