



TAR HEEL HISTORY

# HAZEL

On October 15, 1954, a terrible storm makes for a terrible day for the entire country. One county in rural southeastern North Carolina takes the most direct hit, with lives and communities shattered under the storm clouds.

BY MICHAEL GRAFF | PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF THE FAMILY COLLECTION OF BRYANT SPENCER

**I**T IS THE AFTERNOON BEFORE the full moon. The fish are going crazy — jumping, jumping, swirling, swirling — sensing a change in the earth, sensing a storm coming.

The people are fairly clueless. In Southport, a fishing village with oyster-shell streets, a teenage boy looks out into the Cape Fear River — a rough river on a good day, a symptom of hell on this day — and he can't help himself. He must get to them, those crazy fish.

So he rows his 14-foot wooden skiff into the churning channel. The boy comes from a family of fishermen. He's only 15, but he knows he'll be one, too. Today is a dream day for him. Spots and bluefish and Spanish mackerel practically jump into the rocking boat. One by one, he hangs them on a string, and soon he runs out of room on the string, so he turns home. He rows toward town and looks to the north, and on the weather tower, two flags are raised and blowing, blowing. Hurricane warning.

But it's just that, a warning. The future? What is that? Right now, he has a string full of fish. What else matters? Weather, to a boy, only counts when it's happening. To say a storm is coming is like saying he'll get old one day, and the teenage boy cares as much about those flags blowing, blowing, as he does warnings to not swim within an hour of eating. Besides, as of this day, October 14, 1954, Tookie Potter has never seen a hurricane.

Rain starts to fall as he ties up the skiff. He walks across the street to the front porch of his family home. His mom waits at the door. He holds up the string of fish, 10 feet long and smelling of success, and his mom yells at him. "There's a hurricane coming. I've been worried sick."

The boy looks back at her, nods and apologizes, and he walks to the backyard. He scales the fish and packs the meat. Rain falls; rain stops falling; rain falls again. The boy

**Hazel has no mercy. The winds whip into a frenzy, gust more than 100 miles per hour, and toss 35,000-pound shrimping trawlers around Southport like toy boats.**

washes his hands and attends to his pigeons — he has about 15 in the backyard; Southport is full of pigeons. Then he asks his dad what he should do with his skiff, if this hurricane really is coming. His dad tells him to remove the oars, loosen the rope, and sink that skiff. The boy thinks about it: *Sink a boat? On purpose?* But he listens to his dad, and he puts his little boat under the waves.

A quarter-mile away, down the main oyster-shell street, docks for fishing boats reach well out into the river. Shrimping is the big business here. Some captains have a fleet of boats, and one of those boats is working today way south down the coast, off the shores of South Carolina, near Charleston. At



With the winds and water calm once more, the people of Southport survey the damage, finding dozens of boats and yachts swept into the mainland. Every dock along the Cape Fear River is destroyed.

about the same time Tookie Potter feeds his pigeons, the radio crackles on the docks with a report from that boat: *It's getting bad down here.*

Every person in this town knows that tonight is a full moon, and tomorrow morning is the high tide. The full-moon high tide in October is the highest tide of the year. Tonight and tomorrow morning, the water around Brunswick County will be deeper than on any other day on the calendar. Between that fact and the news from South Carolina and those flags on the tower, all of Southport — the seat of Brunswick County in 1954 — knows it's time to get ready for Hazel.

Toward the south, though, the rest of Brunswick County knows less. It is a rural county, with big farms and distant beach cottages, a county where a few families own most of the land, and they're just starting to realize how wealthy that makes them. They're just starting to realize the joy of owning waterfront property.

A new mother in Holden Beach, a

nurse, is on her way to the hospital to work the 3-to-11 shift. A car dealership owner in Shallotte is about to leave work and stop by the hardware store. That hardware store manager is about to close the store and go home to Ocean Isle Beach, with his wife and kids and his new son-in-law. That son-in-law, Shallotte School class of 1953, is a newly drafted Army private, home for his two-week break between boot camp and moving to Alaska. And a 1952 Shallotte graduate lives just north in Varnamtown, a newlywed waiting for her husband to return home — he's gone to work this week on a party boat as a crew member, a boat that is docked in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, near Charleston, where the report is: *It's getting bad down here.*

#### A distant threat

LaVerne Norris is a charming fellow. When he was in high school, the girls swooned for him. Now, in his mid-20s and with a little money in his pocket, he's the catch of Varnamtown, a tiny shrimping town with dirt streets about

30 miles south of Southport.

He owns a car. And he drives fast. Since he was old enough to drive, he's dressed like a man twice his age and zoomed these roads in a 1931 Chevrolet. The town constable (police) stops him regularly for driving too fast but always lets him off because the young man is just so charming. There's one house along Norris's grandstanding route, a house where a girl named Luellen grew up. If she ever was in the yard when he blew by, she blushed.

She graduated from Shallotte School in 1952; they married on September 11, 1954. They live with his parents while he builds their bank account as a crew member on the *Argo*, a party boat.

A month and three days after his wedding, Norris is gone for the week on the *Argo*, preparing for a big party near Charleston. That afternoon, he and the crew have the boat to themselves. They drive just offshore and catch a mess of oysters for dinner. By the time they return to the dock, things are getting bad.

Hazel is a monster. Two nights earlier, on October 12, it struck Haiti as a Category 2 storm and killed hundreds. It's gained strength since then.

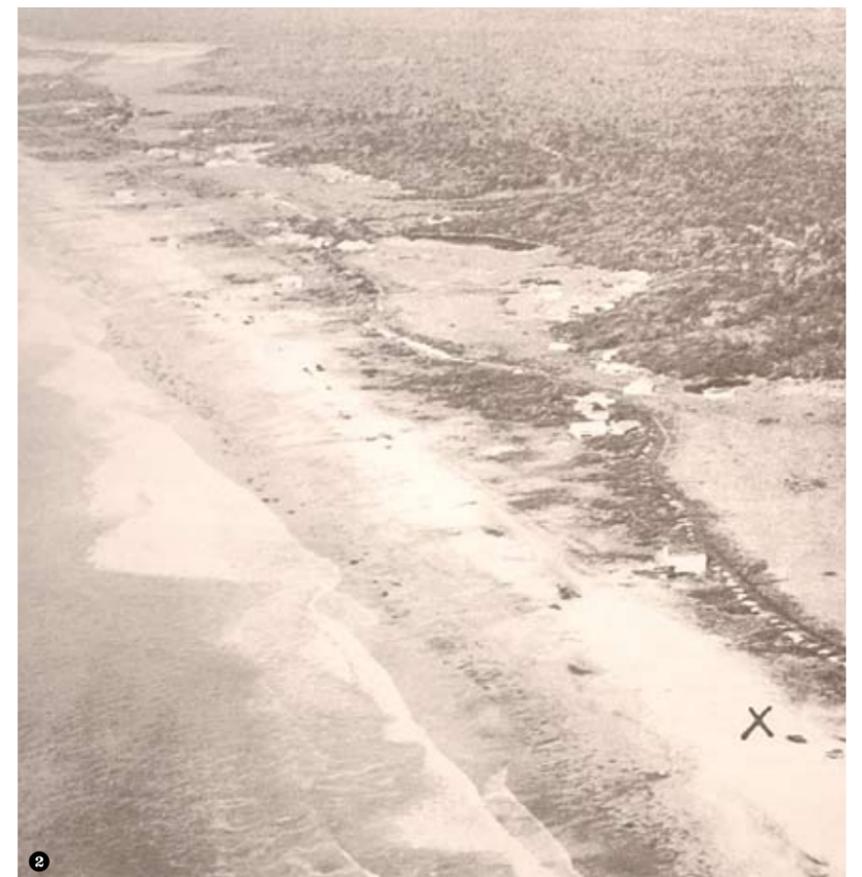
On October 13, an American pilot flew over the eye as it barreled north out of the Caribbean. The pilot has flown over dozens of hurricanes. Typically, when he looks down through the eye to the ocean, the water is green and calm, with just a few whitecaps. In Hazel's eye, he reports, the water is all white. The ocean is one of the world's most powerful forces, and Hazel tosses it around like light linens.

As strong as it is, Hazel is unpredictable. Originally predicted to hit Jamaica, it made a last-minute turn north and wrecked Haiti of lives and an economy — in Dame-Marie, 40 people in a town with a population of 4,000 are buried within two days, and the entire banana tree crop is wiped out. Still, as it moves north on October 13, weather forecasters in the United States remain ambivalent, believing that a high-level northeasterly wind will push the storm out to sea, well east of Nags Head.

The weathermen don't really know. Nobody really knows.

But by the evening of October 14, off the coast of South Carolina, Norris and the *Argo* crew know that their boat is rocking. They tie up using every rope they can find. They retreat down in the living quarters and close the curtains. They drown out the howling winds by playing cards in the night. The boat rocks for hours. They don't sleep. But Hazel is friendly to them, skipping past Charleston just offshore in the Atlantic. Norris, the charming fellow, dodges the storm. It heads north and up the coast, right toward his home.

1 The people who lived in the 300 homes along Long Beach once trafficked the long, black highway that ran parallel with the Atlantic. 2 After Hazel, those homes, and even that curve (the X marks where the curve was), were only memories.



**'They say a storm's coming'**

While the *Argo* begins to rock, the car dealership owner in Shallotte closes up for the day. On his way out of town, W.J. McLamb stops next door at the hardware store, like he does every day, to chat with the manager, Sherman Register.

McLamb and Register run neighboring businesses here in Shallotte, in the middle of the county, and they have neighboring homes on Ocean Isle Beach, eight miles southeast. They are among the first people to own homes on the water in south Brunswick County. They both got deals on their property from the man who owns the island, Odell Williamson. Register married Williamson's sister; McLamb's family bought the car dealership from Williamson.

Where they live is wonderfully remote and close to the water. There

are only a few dozen houses on Ocean Isle Beach. The island is accessible only by a short ferry ride across the Intracoastal Waterway.

Ocean Isle is a narrow, diagonal beach, running southwest to northeast. On a map, it looks like a baseball bat leaning up against the wall. McLamb lives at the far northeastern tip, right on the ocean. His father-in-law built the home to withstand any storm — tongue-and-groove joints, pine floors and cypress paneling on the inside, asbestos siding on the outside. Sibyl, the young wife, chose the paint color for the outside: pink.

The day they moved into that pink house in the spring of '54, they moved with a corner cabinet Sibyl's dad built to display their crystal. Sibyl stayed up all night putting the crystal on the shelves, fixing the house just like she wanted. She and W.J. have a baby daughter, Teresa. From their home, they watch the mullet

fishermen pull nets in the fall, watch the waves and sunrises all year, and live out the dream of a lifetime. It is that, after all, a dream.

W.J. and Sibyl were raised on farms about a mile apart — he on the North Carolina side of the state line, she on the South Carolina side. They met as teenagers at a party. Another boy was Sibyl's date to the party. But when that boy stood up to fetch her some punch, W.J. slid right in and sat down; they were married three years later. W.J. dropped out of Wake Forest College to be with her. Sibyl canceled plans to go to Winthrop College to be with him.

W.J.'s father is a judge, and he bought the car dealership from Williamson and put W.J. in charge of it in 1953. Williamson used the money from that deal as part of the payment for his island. Williamson is convinced the beach is prime real estate, but he's almost alone

in that thinking: He basically gives away pieces of property to W.J. and a few close friends and family to start the development, hoping others will follow.

On the morning of October 14, 1954, W.J. McLamb drives his wife to his mother's house near Calabash before coming to work at the dealership. At about 5 p.m., Sibyl and her mother-in-law are making supper. They've just finished sewing curtains for the beach house. Little Teresa, just 15 months old, runs around and plays.

W.J. locks the dealership and sets out to drive to Calabash to pick them up. But first, he wants to say hello to Register.

When W.J. walks in, Register asks



After Hazel exits Southport, it leaves the place in rubble, each board and brick a hint of a town that once was.



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# The ocean is melting away the beach. Cars float away. Homes break into pieces. Homes float away.

him, “You going to stay over on the island tonight?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” WJ. replies.

“They’re saying a storm’s coming.”

WJ. drives to Calabash, thinking. It starts drizzling when he pulls into the driveway at about 5:30 p.m. He tells Sibyl and Teresa that they’ll stay there for the night, with his parents on the mainland, to be safe. Teresa will sleep between them in an upstairs bed. They leave their pink house on the corner of paradise to fend for itself.

Register, meanwhile, closes the hardware store and catches one of the last ferries to Ocean Isle to his family. He’s told family members he doesn’t believe the storm will be that bad. A wire-cable pulley system moves his car across the choppy Intracoastal Waterway to the island. The ferry is big enough to fit two cars. But this time, Register has the ride all to himself.

## Last night of innocence

Sherman Register is the kind of man you’d want your sister to marry. He’s about six feet tall, well built at 240 pounds, early 40s, with a kind soul and strong work ethic. He’s part-owner of the hardware store in Shallotte with his wife’s brother, Williamson.

The hardware store sells everything. It sells washing machines and refrigerators and home appliances — and business is good, with all the building on the beach. Register has glass-cutting tools, wood-sawing tools, everything. Nearly everybody in Brunswick County knows him.

Register and his wife, Madeline, have two children, 10-year-old Buddy and 15-year-old Sonja. Buddy is a playful

kid, a little small for his age, with black hair. Some days, Buddy goes to work with his dad and plays air-rifle wars with his friends in town.

Sonja, meanwhile, is already married, to 18-year-old Bunky Bellamy. A few months after their wedding, Bunky was drafted into the U.S. Army. He returned from boot camp on about October 8, and he’s home for two weeks of relaxing at the beach with his in-laws before shipping out to Alaska.

Even if you knew a hurricane was coming, even if you had warned people it was coming, what would make you cross that waterway? For Sherman Register, it is his family.

He pulls into his Ocean Isle Beach home shortly after 6 p.m. The house, a three-bedroom cottage, has no phone. The five of them eat and try to rest.

The wind and rain fall as the full moon rises over the Atlantic Ocean.

## Hazel comes ashore

6 a.m. Friday. October 15, 1954. What is this? It’s here? Already? Overnight, Hazel dropped a gear. It’s traveling at 50 miles per hour, faster than most cars move up the coast, faster than any other hurricane that has hit here before or will hit here again. The acceleration is a good thing; and it is a bad thing. It is good because that means Hazel will at least pass quickly. It is bad because ... what is this? It’s here? Already?

Bunky Bellamy, the Army private, takes his young wife down to the ferry. The Intracoastal Waterway has crested the cables. They can’t cross. Bellamy drives back to the house. Sherman and Buddy and Madeline wait for them.

Bellamy is a decent young man. He

volunteers to work at Register’s store from time to time. His dad works with the Corps of Engineers, and Bellamy is one of six boys in a family with eight kids. They raise corn, potatoes, and peanuts, and kill eight hogs a year — just enough to sustain them. When his dad bought some land at Holden Beach a few years back, his mom hollered: “You lost your mind. You just bought a sand hill. Don’t you know it won’t grow a hill a beans?”

Bellamy went to Shallotte School, the largest school in the county with 1,000 students — from first grade to 12th. Bellamy graduated from Shallotte in 1953. But who cares about that stuff

## Storm track

**Date:** October 15, 1954

**Wind speed:** 150 m.p.h.

**Official landfall:**  
North Carolina/South Carolina line

**Property damage in N.C.:**  
\$136 million (equivalent of about \$1.1 billion today)

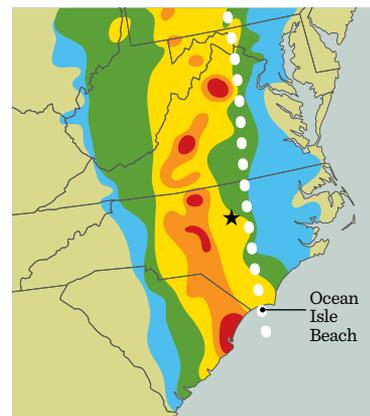
**Deaths in N.C.:** 19

**Injuries in N.C.:** 200

**Cost of damage in the U.S.:**  
\$281 million (equivalent of about \$2.4 billion today)

**Cost of damage in Canada:**  
\$100 million (equivalent of about \$855 million today)

**Precipitation and path:**





Six days after Hazel, Southport's newspaper, *The State Port Pilot*, writes about the post-hurricane mess. "There can be no quarrel with the way our people have pitched in to pick up the broken pieces. ...Nor can there be much question in the minds of those who know them that Brunswick County progress will be moving again at an accelerated pace."

now? High school was the past. And the future? Bellamy is a newlywed, married just seven months after graduation. His wedding gift to his wife was a cedar chest where she could store all of her sweaters. He's starting to question whether they were too young, and he's starting to wonder what it'll be like in Alaska and maybe Korea for the war, and hell, what is this? It's here? Life? Already? And now he can't even get across the waterway.

Hazel's winds rise to 80 miles per hour. 100. 110. The sand burns their skin, what sand there is, what sand hasn't faded away already, under the ocean.

At 8:30 a.m., the only other people stuck on Ocean Isle Beach — three couples from High Point who are here for a house-warming beach party — knock on the Registers' door. *What*

*do we do?* they ask. Everyone looks around. Sherman Register, the big, calm hardware store owner, finally makes a decision: They'll pile into his work truck, all 11 of them — four men; four women; one child; and Bunky and Sonja, the young newlyweds who are caught somewhere in between — and they'll drive west toward Halfway Hills, the highest point on the island.

They reach the end of the road, about two miles from the house. They drive as far into the sandy hill as they can. From the hill, they look down toward the east. The ocean is melting away the beach. Cars float away. Homes break into pieces. Homes float away. The water creeps toward them, harassing them in a slow climb, until it finally licks the back tires. Then it bites the front tires. Register tells the women and children

to move into the bed of the truck. The men will hold it down from the sides.

The truck faces the same direction as the island — the front pointed toward the southwest, the rear to the northeast. Sherman Register is standing on the passenger's side, facing the ocean. Bunky Bellamy is on the driver's side, facing Register.

The water rises, rises.

The truck rocks, rocks.

The water reaches the men's belts.

And then, at about 10:30 a.m. on October 15, 1954, Bellamy looks across as Register, his father-in-law, the hardware store manager, the man who would do anything for anyone, and Bellamy watches this big man grab his wife and son and tuck them close to him as his eyes double in size. Nobody screams a warning. Bellamy doesn't turn

around. He can sense it behind him, building, building. But he doesn't want to see it. He doesn't want to see what his father-in-law sees. He doesn't want to see the tidal wave.

**The worst part**

Bellamy hangs on to the truck as he goes under water. The power of the wave

kicks his legs skyward. He holds until he can't.

Hazel has 140 mile-per-hour winds, and those winds are snapping trees like chicken bones. But the water is the real destroyer. This is the hour, the 10 a.m. hour, the exact hour of the October full-moon high tide. Of any hour of the 8,760 over the course of this calendar

year, this hour is the worst hour for a storm to arrive. And Hazel is a most inconsiderate guest, having turned into high gear last night just to make it here on time.

Ocean Isle Beach is no longer an island; it is merely a higher point on the bottom of the sea. The same soon goes for the beaches to the north — Holden Beach, Long Beach, Oak Island. Towns like Shallotte and Varnamtown and Southport, towns along the western edge of the waterway that are protected by these islands, are, for the hour, oceanfront towns. All anyone can see from there is ocean; every inch of sand on every Brunswick County barrier island is just a sandbar underwater.

And a work truck on Ocean Isle is on that bottom, turning over in the waves. The 11 people who were in the truck are scattered at the mercy of the tide, salt water filling their noses.

Bellamy releases his grip from the truck and swims to the surface. He swims skyward about a dozen feet before finally breaking the surface. Air, air. Breath, breath. The sky is dark. He sees an oak floor from one of the houses floating. He swims to it and climbs on. Hazel carries him to the mainland. He will never be able to recall anything about the ride. Maybe it was five minutes; maybe it was 15; maybe it was an hour — you don't take notes during something like this.

He lands on a clay road, 200 feet west of what was the waterway. Within a few minutes of landing, he realizes he is alone. And just then, the rain stops. The wind stops. Everything stops.

**The eye**

The eye of a hurricane is no place to consider life, but it is also a great place to consider life. It is, and it isn't, a calm place. The front side of the storm passes; there is sunshine; the back side of the storm passes. Rain

falls; rain stops falling; rain falls again.

Bunky Bellamy stands on the banks of the Intracoastal Waterway and looks east. He sees only ocean, white across the top, tossed around like loose linens. He doesn't see his family. He doesn't see any of the people he was with on the truck.

In Calabash, about a dozen miles west, W.J. McLamb and his wife, Sibyl, walk outside of his mother's house and look up. Birds fill the sky, birds they've never seen before, hundreds of them, riding in Hazel's eye. But the metal carport, which had been hopping on its back legs like a kangaroo for the past hour, is still. The wind has stopped. The sky is gray, but clear. They wonder whether their pink home survived. It is floating while they wonder, the crystal still on the shelves.

In Southport, the 15-year-old boy, Tookie Potter, is stuck in a house full of family. His grandmother doubles over crying, worried about losing her house. The boy can't listen to it anymore. So he, with his learner's permit, pulls the car out of the driveway and down the oyster-shell streets to see the damage. The shrimping boats are onshore; the roads are flooded, and he can see for miles out into the ocean. Long Beach (later renamed Oak Island), which usually is the land in the distance from here, is wiped out; 352 of 357 homes are gone. Potter looks up and sees clouds coming again. So he drives the car back home and parks.

Before he goes into the house, he looks into the backyard. *Shoot*, he thinks, *all the pigeons are gone*.

Fifty miles south, Sherman Register's body washes into marshland. Buddy's body washes up there, too. Both father and son have perished in the waves. Madeline Register's body is never found. One of the couples from High Point survives. And Sonja — Register's daughter and

Bellamy's wife — floats to the shore, unconscious, but living. Someone finds her and transports her to Doshier Hospital in Southport, where a nurse is working for the 22nd consecutive hour.

**Hazel comes ashore, again**

The wind blows again, coming from the other direction now, northwest to

southeast. As fast as Hazel pushed water inland, its backside force sucks it out like a vacuum cleaner. By 1 p.m., it looks like low tide.

Betty Fulford is 24 years old, and she loves to help people. She's been at work since 3 p.m. yesterday. She was ordered to stay last night, not by the hospital staff, but by the highway patrol. Nobody



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should be driving, they told her.

She lives about 25 miles south, on the mainland side of the Intracoastal Waterway near Holden Beach. She'd come to work thinking it would be like any other night shift. But she'd had strange things happen on ordinary shifts before.

Three years ago, while Betty was

in training to become a nurse at a hospital in Maryland, a young man named Hinton walked in. He worked with a dredging company, and his job was to transport any injured worker to the hospital. That day, while digging as part of the Bay Bridge project over the Chesapeake, a man in Hinton's crew got hurt, and Hinton drove him

into the hospital. He met Betty there. And for the remainder of the job, Hinton used every excuse he could find to come back and see her. They married two years later, in 1953, and moved to Hinton's hometown of Holden Beach and had a daughter named Gail.

When Betty went to the hospital on October 14, Hinton was down in Savannah, Georgia, working on another dredging project. Betty left Gail, six months old, in the care of Hinton's dad.

## Hazel kills 95 people in the U.S. It is the hurricane that changes the way the country thinks of hurricanes.

Hinton's family owns hundreds of acres of land — his ancestors received it in a land grant from England in Colonial times. Hinton's dad sold some of the land to allow for the construction of a causeway to the new swinging bridge that takes cars to Holden Beach. He built a service station on the causeway to catch the beach traffic.

The Fulford family also farms. Among other crops, they grow cotton. It is the fall, and Hinton's dad, in preparation for the storm, stores the freshly picked cotton in the service station, not wanting it to get wet.

That night, in the hospital, Betty agrees to stay but asks the highway

patrolman if he'll drive to the store and check on her in-laws and daughter. He finally makes it back at about 1 p.m. on October 15, just after Hazel sucks all the water back out to sea. The patrolman tells Betty that he didn't see anybody.

Betty worries. But she goes back to work.

She is on duty when a teenage girl from Ocean Isle Beach named Sonja — wife of an Army private, daughter of a hardware store manager — comes into the emergency room, having nearly drowned three hours earlier in the southern part of the county.

Betty Fulford and the staff at Doshier help keep Sonja alive.

### Here and gone

After Hazel leaves Brunswick County, it moves so fast that its winds remain strong well inland. Ten weather stations from the coast to the Piedmont record the highest rainfall totals in history. Hazel blows through Raleigh with gusts of 90 miles per hour. It tracks north, exiting North Carolina at the Warren County line at about 2:30 p.m. During the next day, it will whip through Washington, D.C., and all the way to Canada, with wind speeds in Toronto even reported near 100 miles per hour. Nineteen people die in North Carolina. Hazel kills 95 people in the United States. Hazel is the hurricane that changes the way the country thinks of hurricanes.

The more populated North Carolina beaches up the coast, those closer to the city of Wilmington — Carolina Beach, and Wrightsville Beach — suffer the greatest financial damage, simply because there are more houses there.

But Brunswick County, this close-knit county where people are just starting to realize the joy of living on the water, is the most critically wounded. The

beaches become new places. Where once there were small inlets, there is sand. Where once there was sand, there are small inlets. Holden Beach loses 75 feet of sand all the way down the island; the second-row property becomes oceanfront. Nearly 60 years after Hazel, tax-record maps will show rectangular

sections of land, owned by people, in the ocean.

And along the banks of the mainland, people find refrigerators with food still inside, washing machines and floors and roofs and everything that had been on the homes of the beaches — much of which had been sold from Register's store.

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Along the beaches and streets of Brunswick County, people search for their things: homes, refrigerators, photos, washing machines. Hazel leaves nothing untouched.

**Left behind**

In any instance where people face an enemy, the philosophy that guides us is this: If we stay together, we will win. All animals make clusters of themselves — packs or schools or flocks or battalions or neighborhoods. But when the opponent is weather, our theories of organization become worthless, and the powers of wind and rain shatter reason and reduce us to mere pieces of a natural world that wants to be random.

It would be easy to question Sherman Register, the hardware store owner, to say that he and his wife and his young son Buddy aren't alive because they stayed on the land closest to the water. But then what of Laverne Norris, who stayed on a boat *in* the water, but water that just missed the worst of Hazel as the storm skipped past South Carolina and headed toward his homeland here, land where he will live for the rest of his life, land where he will have children and raise a family of his own, land that years after 1954 Norris's grandson, a real estate agent, will sell and rent to people who love living next to the water.

Norris may be a charming man, but he pushed Hazel out to sea no more than Register beckoned it to come straight for him and his family. It wasn't up to them.

Norris makes it home to hug his new wife, Shallotte School class of 1952. They walk down to the shore of Varnamtown, and a tugboat has washed ashore, crew still in the hull, waving down at them and smiling. Norris later becomes a tugboat captain.

W.J. McLamb, the car dealership owner, finally catches a ferry to Ocean Isle Beach and finds his pink home with tongue-and-groove joints still intact, even if it's a hundred yards from where it was. He finds seaweed in the attic. He'll have the home moved back, and years later, it will have to move again. The sand where it stands in 1954 will be 500 yards out into the ocean by the turn of the century because of erosion. McLamb returns to Calabash and tells his wife that they nearly lost everything, but didn't. They go to sleep at his parents' house that night, their daughter, Teresa, sleeping between them, and his wife whispers to him as they close their eyes, "We have so much to be thankful for."

Bunky Bellamy, the Army private, finds the cedar chest he gave his new wife as a wedding gift on the shore. All of the sweaters are dry. He never goes to Alaska; the Army discharges him, so he can help clean up his home county and regroup. He and Sonja divorce a year later. She moves in with

Williamson, her uncle, the man who owns the beach, and then she goes off to college and settles down in Greensboro. She never talks about the storm again publicly. Bunky Bellamy works for 35 years on a dredge boat, remarries, and lives in a home on the water in Shallotte. He doesn't talk about the storm until 1994.

Betty Fulford, the nurse, finishes a 24-hour work shift and drives home to Holden Beach. Her husband is there. He'd driven "like mad" up the coast from Savannah overnight. Hinton's father is there, with their daughter; he took the family inland to Lumberton overnight. Betty cries when she sees them. The roof has blown off of the service station. And cotton is scattered across the land like snow.

It is cold.

And along the oyster-shell streets of Southport, 15-year-old Tookie Potter can't help himself — he must walk around to see what he can find. His skiff, the one he put under the waves the previous day, is the only boat remaining in the yacht basin. Potter walks farther east, along the Cape Fear River. Shrimping boats are ashore, hundreds of feet from the water. All of the docks on the river are destroyed.

Potter walks farther north, around the bend, and he comes across the strangest tree he's ever seen here — a banana tree, fully intact, roots and all.

The young boy looks at the tree, looks back at the water, back at the tree, back at the water, and he wonders: *How could that have happened?*

*Michael Graff is the senior editor of Our State magazine. His most recent story was "The King" (July 2012).*

**ONLINE:** Do you remember Hurricane Hazel? Share your story and photos, and read others' online at [ourstate.com/hurricane-hazel](http://ourstate.com/hurricane-hazel).

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