

# Erie's Blackest Day & Other Accounts of Phenomenal Weather

## Introduction

Just as politics, religion, industry and culture are important aspects of our region's history; climate and weather have influenced the history of Erie County as well.

- The natural harbor, abundance of fresh water, fertile soils and **temperate climate** lured Erie's first settlers to the region more than two hundred years ago.
- The banks of Mill Creek have flooded many times...the most disastrous flood being that of August 3, 1915 when damage estimates for the City of Erie reached three million dollars.
  - During the summer of 1985 several deadly tornadoes ripped through northwestern Pennsylvania, including the towns of Albion, Cranesville and Kane.

## Erie's Blackest Day

Mill Creek, one of Erie County's freshwater streams which empties into Lake Erie, has a history of overflowing its banks. One of the latest recorded floods, but certainly not the most disastrous, occurred May 1893. Jacob Albrecht, owner of one of the last woolen mills along Mill Creek, shared his account of the 1893 flood with John Miller, author of History of Erie County, PA.

"I could hear the rain and the roar of the rushing water; but it was dark. There was no moon, so I could see nothing. When the morning came we hurriedly dressed and as soon as the light broke we were eagerly looking for the creek. We saw with surprise and some fear that the water filled all the valley above and, running across the road extended up to within a few feet of our door-step.

Soon it became light enough so we could see that there was a heap of timber of all kinds jammed against the bridge, and the culvert of the tail race from the mill was clogged. The water was running in a swift torrent across the road and cutting deep gullies in it. At length with a noise of awful rending the bridge let go and went away down stream with all the mass of timbers following; the stone abutments went with the bridge; and the road itself seemed to be going with it, and through the yawning chasm a torrent nineteen feet in depth swept resistless."

After the worst of the flood was over, Mr. Albrecht inspected what remained of the mill, and discovered he had lost the water wheel and its connections and the mill's dam. Sixty hours of perpetual rain had caused Mill Creek to turn from its natural course, overflow city streets, enter houses and cause irreparable damage.

Ninety years ago this past August, Erie residents watched in horror as the waters of Mill Creek breached its banks one last time during the region's most significant natural disaster to date. The Weather Bureau called for a trace of rain for August 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>, however a succession of thunder storms released a record-breaking 5.4 inches of precipitation in less than 6 hours. As the waters rose, saturated banks released trees, barns, chicken coops and outhouses into the swollen Mill Creek, which normally flowed freely through the downtown. Debris clogged the 26th Street culvert, forming a reservoir extending the distance of four blocks. (The temporary lake formed where the stadium now sits at State and 26<sup>th</sup> Streets.) Attempts by police and firemen to clear the

debris with dynamite failed, and by 8:30 p. m. a “great roar” was heard. Immense pressure caused the culvert to give way, releasing millions of gallons of wreckage-filled water into the path of Mill Creek. Flood waters tore through the city at 25 mph, cutting a deadly path three miles long and six blocks wide.

After the flood waters receded, Erie residents were left to assess the “horrible results.” These results included damage or destruction of 225 homes and more than 300 other buildings, and thirty-six deaths. Although clean-up efforts began immediately, residents could not use the flood-ravaged section of the city for more than a month.

In response to the deadliest flood in the history of Erie, city engineers began work on a flood prevention system. The city’s answer to the flood was the Mill Creek Tube, a re-enforced concrete tube, which channels Mill Creek from 30<sup>th</sup> Street to the bayfront. Construction of the tube was finished in 1923 – the project’s total cost was 1.9 million dollars. The Mill Creek tube, visible from the Erie Zoo miniature railroad, successfully protects the city even today.

### **Eerily Familiar**

Two days after the deadly Mill Creek flood, the following excerpt appeared in *The Erie Daily Times* under the headline “Greatness of Calamity Now Realized by Erie People.”

*Erie today realized the extent of its calamity for the first time.*

*Yesterday the flood meant a magnificent spectacle for some; a hard search for others; and for many, a gruesome search through the morgue for missing friends or relatives.*

*Today it is the same to all. A loss of perhaps a dozen Erie citizens; damage estimates to be close to five million dollars; several hundred families homeless and a two-block section the entire length of the city, devastated.*

*The excitement of the flood and the attendant scene of wreckage now mean homes gone forever, after years of close saving had made them possible; business plants demolished after hard work had placed them among the most prosperous in the city; and a part of the beautiful city of Erie in ruins.*

### **Historical Heroes**

As the thirty to forty foot high wall of water tore through the downtown area, many residents were caught by surprise and were left stranded – in desperate need of emergency rescuers. Fire Chief John McMahon and four of his men were carrying people from a house at 23<sup>rd</sup> Street when a rush of water toppled it and threw Chief McMahon into the churning waters. Fireman John Donovan displayed a remarkable degree of courage in attempting to rescue the Chief from the flood by jumping into the waters. Chief McMahon was spotted at 18<sup>th</sup> Street, where a line was thrown to him and he was pulled from the whirling debris. He died August 20<sup>th</sup> from typhoid pneumonia, an illness blamed on the flood. Brave, young fireman Donovan did not fare well either. His body was discovered the day after the flood. Both men are remembered even today for their courage and persistence in the face of disaster.

### **Tornado Strikes**

Although not an everyday occurrence, Erie newspapers and history books report several instances where tornados have touched down in the county. Four days after the disastrous Mill Creek flood, a damaging tornado struck Harborcreek. The storm had gathered a mile and a half north of town and swept through the village and out into the lake. A heavy dark cloud descended

from those above and unleashed a volume of wind and rain not seen by the village residents before. By 7 o'clock, thirty minutes after it began, the tornado ventured over the lake. No one was seriously injured, however, damage to fields and vineyards was estimated at thousands of dollars.

On July 6, 1926 threatening skies broke open and released a violent gush of wind, which collided with the West 8<sup>th</sup> Street circus lot during a Miller Brothers' 101 Ranch Wild West Show performance. The storm tore through the main tent's canvas and poles and left the surprised audience entangled. The few people injured sustained only minor injuries.

The deadliest tornado in Erie County's history struck early summer 1985. Two hundred mph winds tore through the west county, destroying homes and businesses and leaving twelve dead and more than one hundred injured in the Albion-Cranesville area. Many local people maintain vivid memories of this contemporary storm.

### **Oral History Project:**

Find a friend or family member who remembers the disastrous west county tornados. Schedule an interview with them. Before you meet, assemble a list of questions you would like to ask, such as "Do you remember what you were doing the night of the tornado?" Take your questions with you and remember to record the answers you receive. Submit your neatly typed interview to Erie County Historical Society, 419 State Street, Erie, PA 16501. Interview excerpts will be printed in the newspaper.

### **Unpredictable Lake Erie Weather**

Lake Erie's somewhat unpredictable weather has caused it to become THE originator of shipwreck lore. There have been, and will continue to be, unexpected explosions of wind and rain, which cause conditions of the lake to change rapidly due to the shallowness of Lake Erie. The Black Friday storm of 1916 and the November 10, 1975 storm which claimed the Edmond Fitzgerald serve as reminders of the lake's unexpected fury.

Erie's Lifesaving Station at Presque Isle was created in 1876 in response to increased maritime travel and the number of Lake Erie shipwrecks. In 1915 the Lifesaving Station merged with the revenue cutter service, a service initiated after the War of 1812 to guard against smuggling, protect American shipping and patrol the lake. The merger formed the foundation for Erie's current Coast Guard operations.

### **Word History**

The ancient Greeks believed that the earth sloped from the equator to the north pole. They thought that this sloping caused the different weather conditions found in different regions of the world. Therefore they called each of the regions a *klima*, which was also the word for "slope" or "inclination." *Klima* was borrowed into Latin as *clima*, and from Latin it was taken into French where it was spelled *climat*. In English it became *climate*, a word which we now use more often to mean the weather conditions rather than the region where they occur.

Source: [www.wordcentral.com](http://www.wordcentral.com)