

Flooding leaves Marion restaurant caked in mud

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J. Hartman's restaurant on U.S. Highway 70 in Marion closed up shop on Sept. 26, after emergency management officials came by the restaurant urging people to evacuate.

With Hurricane Helene headed toward western North Carolina, heavy wind, rain and flooding were in store. Owners Jennifer and Jon Hartman were at home on the lake trying to tie off their dock to keep it from floating away if floodwaters rose too high.

"We had no idea," Jennifer said. "Just like anybody else, we didn't know the water was going to come up that high, and I felt like we were pretty safe."

The couple didn't see the restaurant again until photos started popping up on social media of flood damage.

"Someone sent me a picture of the aerial view of the restaurant. ... I was just like, 'Oh my gosh,'" Jennifer said. "I came in here the next morning. At that point, one of my daughters and my in-laws were here, and they were standing on the porch and I could just see the mud. ... My mother-in-law said, she said, 'Prepare yourself ... because it's bad.' I walked in and it was just a disaster ... I was absolutely devastated."

She said mud was covering the floor, booth seats and chairs were strewn around the restaurant.

"This restaurant's ran by myself, my husband, my two daughters, and we've got 60 staff members here," Jennifer said. "It's our livelihood, but it's the 60 staff members' livelihoods. That's been one of my biggest concerns, is how quickly can we reopen to get them back to work."

She said they've hit roadblocks ever since the storm hit.

"We just keep getting hit with more and more bad news," Jennifer said. "Insurance isn't going to cover any of the property damage. The building owner, their insurance isn't going to cover any of the parking lot cleanup. They're not going to cover any of the property damage inside.



XAVIER MARTIN PHOTOS, HICKORY DAILY RECORD

Toni Hodge, left, and Laura Stotts pressure wash kitchen appliances behind J. Hartman's restaurant on Oct. 1. Stotts, sister of restaurant owner Jennifer Hartman, started an online fundraiser to help combat the monumental costs of getting the restaurant back in working order.

We're just at a loss."

The restaurant's next steps are unclear. She said they had to throw away about \$30,000 worth of food, filling up two dumpsters, and she doesn't know where to begin with the cleaning process for everything in the building after the water came in and contaminated everything.

"People are worried about their livelihoods," Jennifer said. "We've got an amazing staff, and I don't want them to feel lost or worried. Everybody's got so much loss and worry as it is. Them coming back to work is one of our biggest priorities, and I don't know how to do it."

Her mom, Toni Hodge, came up from Albemarle to help with storm cleanup. Hodge said she was worried about small businesses like J. Hartman's after the storm. She said she felt like big corporations would be able to recover, but small businesses may struggle with little help from in-



Albina Gonzales, left, Angeles Amable, right, and Nidea Cruz, back, clean the kitchen inside J. Hartman's restaurant on Oct. 1. Since Hurricane Helene, restaurant staff, family, friends and community members have helped clean up the restaurant.

urance and limited resources. "You have to weigh so many options," Hodge said. "I think it can

be done. I just think it's gonna be a long time."

While things seem bleak, em-

ployees and other community volunteers have been coming in to help clean up since Hurricane Helene hit Friday. By Tuesday afternoon, the floors were clear of any mud and most of the store's furnishings had been moved outside to be rinsed off.

"It's incredibly humbling," Jennifer said. "I don't know how else to describe it."

Pepper Strode, a manager at J. Hartman's, and Angeles Amable, a cook, were two of the employees who were helping with the cleanup at the restaurant Tuesday.

"It's how I pay my bills, and I love this family," Strode said. "They're some of the best people I've ever worked for, and I want to see this restaurant get back up and running."

Both cried when they saw the restaurant.

"My second home is here," Amable said.

Jennifer's sister, Laura Stotts, posted ways to donate on her Instagram account @diaryof_abandonment. By Tuesday afternoon, Stotts said about \$1,000 had been donated to the restaurant and another \$1,000 had been pledged. Some of the donations came from people who have never met the Hartmans or visited the restaurant.

"There's a whole lot of good people out there," Jennifer said.

She said in the first few days after the storm she felt numb, but seeing all the volunteers coming to help clean up changed that.

"I've been very emotional today. ... The first couple days I was completely numb, no emotion whatsoever, just like a zombie," Jennifer said. "And then the last few days, I can't stop crying."

Brandy Pittman originally headed to Grace Community Church to volunteer, but when the church had enough volunteers for the day, she pivoted to J. Hartman's. She made a call to Nebo Crossing Academy Administrator Dave Likins to get more volunteers on the way for cleanup.

"They're our people," Pittman said. "You don't leave your people hanging."

COMMENTARY

Raging waters return to western NC rivers

As I crossed over the N.C. Highway 16 bridge at Oxford Dam, the sight of the raging waters coming through the floodgates set me to thinking about floods along the Catawba River. The two major floods of the last century occurred in 1916 and 1940.

The impact of the 1940 flood was greater in the far western part of the state, although our area received much damage. Among the biggest floods recorded in 1916, 1940, 1961, 1964, 1994, most were caused by heavy rains that fell more than two weeks apart, said Ryan Boyles, associate state climatologist and operations coordinator of the State Climate Office in Raleigh.

In July of 1916, two Category 4 hurricanes converged over western North Carolina causing more than three days of downpours and the worst flood in history of the Catawba River. The first storm arrived early in the month from the Gulf of Mexico, with the second storm coming from the Atlantic in mid-July. On July 14, 15 and 16, the heaviest rains ever recorded in the Catawba Valley occurred. The National Weather Bureau recorded 22.22 inches of rainfall in one day at Altapass near Grandfather Mountain. At the time, it was the greatest 24-hour precipitation total ever recorded in the United States.

The Catawba River overflowed



SARAH C. JOHNSON, HICKORY DAILY RECORD

People gathered on Sept. 27 on the Alexander County side of the N.C. Highway 16 bridge to take photos and videos of water pouring through Oxford Dam.

its banks. Because of the complete ground saturation from the earlier rain, it is estimated that 90% of the water resulted from the second hurricane runoff.

The floodwater was nearly twice as deep as that of any previously recorded flood. The Catawba River, which had not been dammed as it is now, made a clean sweep of all railroad and highway bridges which crossed it. All rail, telephone and telegraph connections were severed. Mills along the waterways throughout the Catawba basin were destroyed and many dams were destroyed or damaged.

Hundreds of Alexander County residents visited the banks of the Catawba River during the days following the

downpour and watched the wreckage rush by. Over 200 bales of cotton, the property of the Rhodhiss Manufacturing Company, swept by, and scores of haystacks, chicken coops, sheds and a few houses were borne down the current. The debris from riverside buildings, including warehouses, were swept away. Newspapers reported that fishermen were busy in the shallows of the Catawba River as the floodwaters subsided. The recession left hundreds of fish stranded, enabling people to pick them up without difficulty.

All along the river's courses, the destruction and loss of life was widespread. At least 80 individuals were killed, and bridges, houses, factories, rail-

road lines, and other man-made structures were destroyed. A contemporary report by the federal government stated that property damage was approximately \$22 million. Adjusted for inflation, this total would be over \$430 million in today's dollars.

The Great Flood of 1916 prompted renewed interest in damming the Catawba, both for flood control and to generate power. In 1919, the Bridgewater Hydro Station (creating Lake James) and the Wateree Hydro Station (creating Lake Wateree) were completed. In 1924, the rebuilt and enlarged Lake Wylie dam was completed, and the dam creating Mountain Island Lake (near Charlotte) was completed. In 1925 and 1927, the Lake Rhodhiss and Lake Hickory dams were completed. The largest lake in the basin, (as well as the largest lake in North Carolina) Lake Norman was created by the Cowan's Ford Dam. Completed in 1963, it was the last major dam to be built on the Catawba River.

The floods of 1940 were comparable to the devastation as the 1916 floods in many parts of the state. The severity of a flooding event is determined by a combination of four components: the river basin terrain, local thunderstorm movement, past soil moisture conditions, and the degree of vegetative clearing. During the mid-20th century, increased development within the river basins of many western North Carolina counties left

many communities particularly vulnerable to flash floods. Tragically, the late summer rains of 1940 were stronger than average. In one 24-hour period, rainfall of over 8 inches fell in the Alexander County area.

Near Boone, the ground was saturated from days of wet weather and could no longer absorb the rapidly falling rain. Water cascaded down the mountainsides, swelling streams and rivers. Close by at Shulls Mills, a train (Old Number 9) waded through 2 feet of water and passed Grandfather Mountain, where it looked like the entire mountainside was a giant waterfall. As the train began the climb up into Cranberry Gap, the crew was flagged down and told they were heading into a washout. They reversed direction and began backing toward the Cranberry community. Here they discovered the culvert behind them had failed and another washout had occurred. Consequently, Old Number 9's final journey ended on a hill between Cranberry and the Gap. Since that day, Boone has never enjoyed regular-scheduled train service.

The floods of 1916 and 1940 left in their wake shattered lives and unimaginable devastation. The memories, though not pleasant, have endured for many generations and have become a permanent part of western North Carolina heritage.

Warren Hollar is a retired Alexander County Schools administrator.

1 man killed in crash with tree downed by Helene wind

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A tree downed by winds from Hurricane Helene killed a driver and critically injured his passenger in a wreck on Sept. 27, near Drexel.

Nick Mitchell, 52, of Morganton,

was driving on Summers Road near Drexel Road about 8:30 p.m. when he hit a low-hanging tree that had dropped across the road earlier in the day, said 1st Sgt. D.J. Wakefield with the North Carolina State Highway Patrol.

Mitchell was killed in the crash, Wakefield said. A passenger, 50-year-old Michael Sparks, was critically injured and taken to a Winston-Salem hospital for treatment.

Crews spent about 30 to 40 minutes trying to remove Mitchell and

Sparks from the vehicle, Wakefield said. It wasn't raining at the time of the crash, but it was windy and dark because of the power outages in the area.

Wakefield said while troopers spent most of the day Friday re-

sponding to wrecks during the hurricane, this was the most serious crash.

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