

# *The Great Wawasee Storm of 1943*

## Compliments of:



The sun rose into a partly cloudy sky on the 21<sup>st</sup> day of July in 1943. The atmosphere was muggy...dew clung heavily to the blades of grass in people's green lawns. Stepping out into the morning haze, it was easy to tell that this was going to be another hot, humid Indiana summer day...the fourteenth day in a row that the mercury would top 80 degrees...might even make it up to 90 if there was enough sunshine.

Though it had been a warm month, it was not unusually oppressive for July, especially when compared with the searing heat Midwesterners suffered through several years earlier. Also, a good deal of rain had fallen on northeast Indiana over the first half of the warm season. The Weather Bureau Airport Station in Fort Wayne reported one and a third inches of rain falling from the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 7<sup>th</sup> of July, and two more inches from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup>. That July would end up being the sixth wettest July on record, and although June had been dry, May 1943 was Fort Wayne's second wettest May on record. As a result, lawns were green, and the corn was tall.

The Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette's small weather section that morning called for another warm day, as if anyone needed to be told, with "widely scattered thunderstorms in Ohio this evening". Many residents on the Indiana side of the border hoped a passing thundershower might cool off *their* day as well.

As morning melted into afternoon, the heat grew. Although skies were partially cloudy, the summer sun was allowed to send the mercury climbing, and by mid-afternoon, thermometers in the area were giving readings in the middle and upper 80s. Farmers and city folks alike sought shelter from the beating sun. Restaurants had a brisk business selling iced tea and lemonade, served in tall glasses that one could place against his forehead and let the beads of water on the outside of the glass trickle coolly over his fingers. Squinting out the window into the glare, hopes for a refreshing thundershower diminished.---

Sergeant Lloyd Burkholder was ready for a break. After 51 bombing missions over Europe and North Africa, the twenty-five-year-old was planning on getting every ounce of relaxation that he could out of his week's furlough. He was on his way from Europe to Salt Lake City and had decided to spend the week between the two assignments at home in Indiana. He rented a cabin on Ideal Beach at Lake Wawasee, just down the road from his parents' Goshen home.

Lloyd shared the cabin with eleven other people, ranging in age from 9 to 32, although most of them were in their early to middle 20s. They had been having a great time on their summer vacation, spending many happy hours playing games on the beach and taking rides on Lake Wawasee.

Ray Reim, a twenty-seven-year-old resident of Goshen and one of Lloyd's guests, owned a 17-foot speedboat. He loved to tear across the lake in it, especially when crammed with as many of his friends as possible. Although there had been a few nighttime showers passing through the area that week, the days had all been sunny and warm, and the large group from the Ideal Beach cabin had been taking regular rides on the boat. Wednesday, the twenty-first of July, would be no different.

"Hey, are we going to go out on Wawasee today or not?" Lloyd directed at Ray.

"I dunno. Sounds good to me. Are any of you people ever gonna help me with gas money? Gas ain't free, you know!"

"Yeah, yeah. We'll draw up a collection at the end of the week. So you wanna get everybody together or what?"

"Sure. I heard we might see some storms this afternoon, but it sure looks okay out there to me."

"Oh, please. Since when do the weathermen know what they're talking about? Look at that - it's already almost five o'clock, and there's just a bunch of harmless fluffy white clouds floating around. If something was going to happen, it would have happened by now."

"Good point. Let's get everybody together."

It took Ray and Lloyd a solid forty-five minutes to assemble their friends. As they were corralling the people, the sun grew dimmer and eventually was blotted out entirely by the thickening overcast.

"Gosh, it looks like it's wanting to rain," cautioned Barbara Castetter. Barbara was one of the three grade school-aged students in the group. She was shy and tended to stick close to Betty Yoder, who was of the same age.

Betty replied, "Oh, those aren't rain clouds. Rain clouds are down low and are real dark. Those clouds look too high up in the air."

"Okay. I just would hate to get stuck in the middle of the lake during a rainstorm. I just got over a fever and don't much feel like getting cold and wet."

In fact, a large thunderstorm had blown up over the southwest tip of Michigan as the friends at Wawasee were gathering. The storm's intensity increased rapidly, and when it crossed the border, it was angrily rushing across the fields of far northern Indiana. At 6:05 pm, the storm's winds streamed into Elkhart, ripping trees from the ground and blowing down power lines throughout the city. The people of the town were plunged into darkness, with the exception of the brilliant lightning forking from the sky. A woman caught outside in the sudden storm was struck and knocked to the ground by lightning. A few miles southwest of town, large stones of hail were beating down on the cornfields, causing a great loss to the farmers who had just that morning been working amidst the tall, green rows.

The fourteen people at Ideal Beach were talking loudly in their excitement to get out on the water, while Ray readied the boat. Robert Yoder, nine years old, had been watching the sky grow darker in the northwest. He was getting worried, but didn't want to look like a scared little kid to the others, so he kept his mouth shut.

He shot a glance at Billie. Billie was the sweetest girl he had ever known. She was friendly, pretty, and always treated him like a regular one of the gang, even though he was eleven years her junior. He looked at Billie, watched her laugh and chatter with her girlfriends, and decided everything would be okay.

Eloise, Ray's wife and Lloyd's sister, had been helping Ray with the boat when she glanced up at the sky. "Gee, Ray. I hadn't noticed how dark it had gotten over there on the horizon. Maybe we shouldn't go out?"

"Where's the sky darkest?"

"Northwest."

"Around here, strong storms come out of the southwest. If the northwest sky is the darkest, then it should miss us and go off to our north."

Eloise hesitantly went back to her work on the boat.

By 6:10 the leading edge of the storm's winds had traveled the ten miles from Elkhart to Goshen in about ten minutes. Branches and phone lines were felled simultaneously in Goshen and in Middlebury, several miles to the northeast. The brunt of the storm's fury was gathering south of Goshen, where hail the size of hickory nuts was showering to earth. The oat fields were flattened by the wind and torrents as though a huge roller had moved over them. In New Paris, two smokestacks, eighty feet tall and weighing four tons each, were not able to withstand the force of the gusts as they roared into the town. Trees were being felled and hail was coming down in Millersburg and Benton in the eastern parts of Elkhart County, but the storm's worst anger was concentrating in southern sections of the county, and was screaming to the southeast.

"All right, everybody, the boat's ready!" shouted Ray. "It's already a quarter after six -- let's get this ride in before it gets dark or that weather to our northwest decides to come down this way."

"It's already dark", thought Robert, but of course, he didn't dare say anything.

The 14 people piled onto the boat and shoved off into the lake. The engine leapt to life, and they began moving through the water. The air was oppressively humid and warm, and there was an odd, almost tinny odor to it. The sky to the west was working on turning from grey to black, while the southeastern horizon was still bright, giving the lake an odd shimmer as one side of the tiny waves reflected the light to the east and the other side absorbed the pall of the gathering storm clouds in the opposite direction.

At half past six, Dorothy Beckerich, who was one of the two people from the next-door cabin and had come up from Indianapolis to spend a few days at the lake, said worriedly, "Okay, it's starting to get green in the west. We've got to get back to shore. Come on, Ray, turn this tug around and let's get back to the beach."

Trees were being laid flat to the ground along routes 6 and 13 in the Syracuse area. Hail was stripping the corn stalks in the fields, reducing them to rubble.

Crashing thunder followed a dazzling streak of lightning. "That was really close!" shouted Lloyd. "Let's go! Let's go!"

"All right!" shouted Ray. "Let me turn 'er around!"

At 6:35 pm, the terrible gust of wind sped across the lake and slammed full force into the boat and its occupants. The people instinctively looked away from the direction of the wind and shielded their faces. As Ray was beginning to turn his boat around, the waves on the lake began growing at an alarming rate. The boat was leaping and falling violently upon the waves, prompting the people to hold on as tightly as possible. The women's mouths were open, but their screams of terror could barely be heard over the howling gale. Ray felt a pull at his shoulder. "Barbara's overboard!!" screamed Lloyd as close to Ray's ear as possible. Before Ray could respond, a wave six feet tall - the tallest ever seen on Lake Wawasee - crashed broadside into the boat, capsizing it and sending all of the remaining thirteen people into the lake's black, turbulent waters.

In the South Shore Inn, a group of guests had gathered behind the large picture windows that viewed the lake. There was a general murmur of conversation: "...my goodness, look at that!..." "...I've never seen such waves on Wawasee..." "...you can't even see a hundred feet through the rain..." "...I hope there's nobody on the water..."

Seventeen-year-old Rita Niese had come up from Indianapolis for vacation and was talking with sixteen-year-old Jacqueline Casey of Anderson. They had become quick friends over the previous few days, sharing a deep love of swimming.

"Wow! Look at that wind! The trees are just about bent all the way over!" said Rita excitedly.

"Yeah - the windows are even starting to shake!" replied Jacqueline with large, stunned eyes.

A tree several feet from the window crashed to earth, narrowly missing the building. The onlookers near the window backed away nervously. "Yikes! That was close!" yelled Rita.

In the lake, behind the curtain of driving rain that prevented them from being seen by the inn guests, the fourteen friends were being pitched violently across the water from one wave to the next. Their bearings were lost, and it was extremely difficult to know which way was up, let alone which direction the nearest shore was. Rain and hail pummeled the lake and its occupants so completely that the demarcation between lake and air was barely detectable. As they gasped for air and struggled to keep the water out of their lungs, the boaters swam as best they could while the wind blew them along. Eventually, several of the people managed to get a hold on a sailboat that had been anchored in the lake, while others were swept up onto the shore. Still others were lurching about in the water, getting beaten without mercy by the wind, waves, rain, and hail.

A loud crash startled the folks by the inn window. They looked out to see the terrible storm reach its peak intensity. Trees were being torn down left and right...parts of roofs were flying through the air...shingles were getting stripped from the roof of the inn...piers were collapsing and sending their boards on a quick flight across the property. All of this happened very suddenly and spectacularly, like the finale at a Fourth of July fireworks display.

After a few long minutes, the hail stopped, and the winds and rain began to slacken. People started leaving the window, shaking their heads in amazement. Rita, captivated by the weather, and Jacqueline, too terrified by it to turn away, crept closer to the window and continued watching. Soon Rita said, "Hey - what's that out there across the lake? See? Way over there."

Jacqueline said, "It looks like a sailboat anchored in the lake."

"Right, but what are those things on the side?"

"I dunno - nets I suppose."

"They can't be nets. It looks like they're - they're waving! They're people!" Without thinking, Rita ran out of the building into the pouring rain. Jacqueline fell in step right behind her.

They ran into the lake and began swimming as hard as they could, fighting the still falling rain and the waves that were yet in the process of calming down. After several minutes of intense work, they reached the sailboat and started helping people across the lake.

Several trips had to be made in order to help everyone to safety on the shore outside the inn. About half-way through the rescue, a man in a boat reached the scene to assist the swimmers.

The group stumbled into the inn and fell about the floor. Guests ran for towels and began comforting the boaters.

Some were sobbing, others were simply staring at the floor. Barbara, who had fallen out first but managed to stay afloat and reach the anchored sailboat, suddenly looked up and, with terror in her eyes, shouted: "How many of us are here!?" The rest of the party looked up and counted. Eight. Again. Eight. Once more. Eight. Oh no...only eight. "Where are the others??" shrieked Barbara. "Where are they??"

Instantly, several men ran out of the room, headed for their boats.

The police and ambulance had been called and were on their way. A total of twenty rescue boats were launched onto the lake to search for the remaining six people who had been on Ray Reim's boat half an hour prior.

While the storm was terrorizing the people on and around Lake Wawasee, it was also busy leveling cornfields and ripping down trees and power poles in Topeka, Ligonier, and North Webster. Trees were torn completely out of the ground along Route 13 from Syracuse to North Webster. By 7 p.m., the storm had covered Route 33 from Ligonier to Churubusco with trees, telephone wires, and hail. In Churubusco, a tree fell on a car that was driving down one of the little town's streets. A barn north of Collins was blown down.

The tempest had spent a great deal of energy destroying property around Lake Wawasee, and, while still very powerful, was not quite the unwelcome terror in Noble and Whitley counties that it had been earlier. However, as it entered northwest Allen County shortly after 7 pm, it had rested long enough and made the decision to attempt to return to its previous fury.

The storm created a swath of destruction from the northwest corner of the county to the north side of Fort Wayne. Hail and wind leveled cornfields. Corn that wasn't blown down by the terrific wind was stripped by the hail, reducing their height from three feet to twelve inches. Windows were blown out of farmhouses, and several barns were beaten to the ground. Hail the size of hens' eggs battered the Irene Byron Sanatorium near Wallen, breaking dozens of windows. Torrential rain flooded all roads in the northern part of the county. The Weather Bureau Airport Station, at Smith Airport on the north side of Fort Wayne and less than a mile away

from the large hail, reported 1.34 inches of rainfall between 7 pm and 8 pm. The road outside the weather office was washed away.

Around 8 pm, Dorothy Beckerich's body was discovered.

Dorothy was from Indianapolis and had just turned twenty-one. She had been having a great time with her friend Virginia Rush, with whom she shared a cabin on Ideal Beach. That afternoon, Lloyd from the cabin next door had asked her and Virginia to go out on the lake in Ray's boat. They didn't have to think twice - a boat ride would be great. Three hours later, Dorothy's water-soaked body washed up onto the beach, half a mile east of the South Shore Inn, not far from the remains of her twenty-year-old roommate, Virginia.

The storm raged on as it ripped down trees and power poles in Saint Joe, New Haven, and Monroeville. At Harlan, the trees were stripped of their bark and leaves.

A barn was blown across a road into a farmhouse. A hundred chickens and a cow were killed when another barn was demolished by the unrelenting gusts.

At 8:30 pm, the storms crossed the Ohio line. They produced two tornadoes. The first one struck southwest Paulding County between McGill and Tipton, where it produced F2 damage to two barns. The second tornado dropped from the sky just northwest of Van Wert around 9 pm and inflicted F2 damage to six barns.

Nobody was killed or injured in either tornado.

The last of the six bodies at Lake Wawasee was found at 5:45 Friday morning, nearly thirty-six hours after the accident. Fortunately, Robert Yoder, who had silently depended on her for support as the storm clouds gathered that Wednesday afternoon, was not present to watch the men pull Billie's lifeless body from the water, where she had drowned and been held seven feet below the surface by sunken debris.

## **Epilogue**

On Wednesday, July 21, 1943, a terrible storm swept across northeast Indiana. Directly in the path of its untempered fury was Lake Wawasee, and a boat with fourteen friends out for an evening on the lake. The boat capsized in the tallest waves ever seen on the lake, spilling all fourteen people into the water. Eight of those people never forgot the terror they were put through that night.

## **Perished**

Sergeant Lloyd Burkholder, age 25, of Goshen

Dean Yoder, age 21, of Elkhart

Lloyd Conklin, age 21, of Goshen

Dorothy Beckerich, age 21, of Indianapolis

Billie Binkley, age 20

Virginia Rush, age 20

## **Survived**

Earl Markham, age 32, of Goshen

Ray Reim, age 27, of Goshen

Eloise Reim, age 24, of Goshen

Doris Radkey, age 22, of Goshen

Betty Radkey, age 20, of Goshen

Barbara Castetter, age 13, of Rome, New York

Betty Yoder, age 13, of Goshen

Robert Yoder, age 9, of Goshen

The survivors owed their lives to two teenage girls from central Indiana: Rita Niesse and Jacqueline Casey

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