

50 years ago, a storm that redefined the Jersey Shore

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SEA ISLE CITY, N.J. - The collapsing hotels looked like tipped-over wedding cakes sliding into a furious sea. Brightly colored summer cottages were transformed into houseboats. And by the end of Day One, the massive Sisters of Mercy convent was a pile of rubble.

It was March 6, 1962, and Bart Milano awakened in Sea Isle City to the howling onshore winds that were ravaging the Jersey Shore and the rest of the Mid-Atlantic coast.

He peered out his window at 6:30 a.m. and saw his front porch - floating away. It was time for him and his family to flee the Cape May County town, which nature was targeting with a special ferocity.

They were almost too late.

Tuesday marks the 50th anniversary of the great Ash Wednesday Storm of 1962, whose aftermath would redefine the character of the Jersey Shore and affect coastal development across the nation.

The three-day siege, from North Carolina to New York, killed 22 people, including seven on Ocean County's Long Beach Island, where the Atlantic met Barnegat Bay in five places.

In New Jersey, the storm destroyed or damaged more than 50,000 buildings - causing almost \$800 million in damage in the three Shore counties alone. Waves towered up to 40 feet. Towns that didn't lose power were torched by short-circuit fires.

Nothing comparable has happened in the half-century since, but everyone agrees that if it did, the price tag would be unimaginably steeper.

For now, the '62 storm remains the true Storm of the Century, and it is being commemorated this month in Sea Isle, Ocean City, and Beach Haven.

A line in the sand

"It was so devastating that everything that happened was always referred to as 'before' or 'after' the storm," said Joe LaRosa, who was an 8-year-old living in Sea Isle that year.

It was a stalled "nor'easter" - the breed of coastal storm that takes its name from its potent northeasterly winds - and it coincided with five high tides, swollen by the pull of the full moon.

Its persistent gales proved the winds of transformation, for the storm marked a watershed in the history of coastal development.

The resulting devastation was so alarming that the federal government considered barring development from barrier islands.

Instead, the U.S. government drew a line in the sand against nature.

Far from discouraging building on the beach, since 1962 the federal government has inadvertently bucked up development by subsidizing beachfill and flood insurance, and committing billions in disaster assistance for storm recovery.

Well more than 90 percent of all federal shore-protection projects since 1922 have occurred in the last 50 years, according to data assembled by Western Carolina University researcher Andrew S. Coburn.

The measures have contributed to an unprecedented building boom and run-up in land prices. Real estate values in the coastal towns from Barnegat Light to Cape May Point have rocketed from \$1.2 billion in 1962 to almost \$99 billion today.

The value of real estate in Avalon has jumped 44-fold since the storm, and that's adjusting for inflation. On a Dune Drive lot that a Philadelphia man once purchased for \$500, after selling a rare postage stamp, sits a property now assessed at \$19.4 million.

Sea Isle City hosts \$4.7 billion worth of properties, or 27 times the value in 1962.

Back then, Sea Isle was a very different place. Like Avalon, it was not yet popular with the mainlanders, who preferred the less-subtle diversions of Cape May, Ocean City, Wildwood, and Atlantic City.

Thus, for full-time Shore residents such as Sea Isle's Milano and Jim Coulter, the storm was a private matter. They weren't concerned about the long-term impact. They feared for their lives. All they could do was band together.

"I think I was too intent on what needed to be done to be frightened," recalls Coulter, 85, who ended up a hero.

After he saw his porch sail away, Milano, 87, said he dressed quickly and alerted his wife and three children that they needed to get moving. The car wouldn't start, so the family raced to a neighbor's drier house for safety, about a block away.

Then Milano realized he had forgotten the family dog. He went back to the house on 57th Street, picked him up, and hustled down the back stairs.

"When I got to the second step from the bottom I could feel the house just pull away from me," he said. "There was no noise . . . nothing. It was like it was in slow motion."

In his driveway, a chunk of the collapsing house crashed onto Milano's stalled car, setting off a horn that didn't stop going off until the battery died.

A human chain

About 12 blocks away, Coulter also decided to move his family to safety. Others had the same idea, and would soon confront a terrifying hazard.

With the rising bay and ocean conspiring with the pounding rain, standing water was everywhere. Finding the roadbed was a challenge, and it was impossible to know the water's depth.

"You couldn't tell where the road had washed out," said Coulter. "You found out when you fell in."

Someone, Coulter doesn't recall who, commandeered a school bus. Coulter, his wife, three children, and mother-in-law boarded the makeshift evacuation transport and attempted to get to the mainland via the narrow causeway.

But about a third of the way across, the road disappeared beneath roiling floodwaters, and up ahead, a stuck bulldozer blocked the path.

They tried to hike back to town, forming a human chain for safety, but the wind was too powerful, so they returned to the bus. Coulter volunteered to wade next to the bus and guide it off the causeway, back the way they had come. With him directing the bus, the passengers returned to town and were rescued by Navy helicopters the next day.

'Truly heroic'

"When you think about what could have happened, that the entire bus of children and adults could have been swept away or ended up toppling off the road into the water, it is truly heroic," said Mike Stafford, a local historian who has helped organize Sea Isle's anniversary events.

"That storm changed a lot of things," Stafford said. "But ultimately I think it brought the town together. People really worked together to get things back to normal."

Stafford remembers more than 1,000 volunteers coming from Levittown, Bucks County, to help with the cleanup. People who owned undamaged rental properties opened them to storm victims. Area car dealers made vehicles available.

"People banded together in an amazing way," said LaRosa.

"I think it's important that we recognize this anniversary because we need to be better prepared if something like this should happen again," said Deborah Whitcraft, president and curator of the New Jersey Maritime Museum in Beach Haven on Long Beach Island.

As she spoke, the former Beach Haven mayor looked out at a stand of oceanfront buildings far more dense than the community that weathered the storm of the century.

"I'm not sure we have learned our lesson," she said.

Surge of Events

Events will be held in various towns on the Jersey Shore to commemorate the anniversary of the Ash Wednesday storm of 1962. Here are some

of them:

Sea Isle City. The Sea Isle City Historical Society and Cape May County Library System will host an exhibit of artifacts and photos throughout March at the library at 48th Street and Central Avenue. Eyewitness accounts of the storm will be presented at open houses there from

10:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Tuesday and Saturday. Information: 609-624-7929.

Beach Haven. Margaret Thomas Buchholz, coauthor of *Great Storms of the Jersey Shore*, will deliver a presentation titled "'62 Nor'easter 50 Years Later" on March 31 at 7 p.m. at the New Jersey Maritime Museum, 528 Dock Rd. Reservations are required: 609-492-0202.

Ocean City. The Ocean City Historical Museum will hold a "Were You There?" discussion about the storm on Thursday at 7 p.m. at the Community Center Complex, 17th Street and Simpson Avenue. Participants are encouraged to bring storm-related photos, news clippings, and artifacts. Information: 609-399-1801.