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The Flood of 1955:

Disaster has struck the United States. Hurricanes have been occurring more often in recent years than before. The mainland has seen countless amounts of damages, but are we truly safe here? Is Massachusetts in a safe zone from these storms? History would disagree. August of 1955 showcased some record-breaking weather in New England^[DV1]. On August 11th, Hurricane Connie produced roughly four to six inches of rain, bringing river and water reservoir levels well over their normal height. A week later, Hurricane Diane really hit New England hard in terms of rainfall. Some areas experienced over twenty inches of rain in just a twenty-four hour time period. Westfield was unable to escape the intense amounts of rain and the Westfield River's stage had rose over five whole feet its previous record! A river's "stage" is known as its water level in comparison to some arbitrary point, usually being near the river bed. In other words, it is the fancy term for water level (Water Questions). The Westfield River's highest stage level measured out to be 34.2 feet that year (US Department of Commerce, and NOAA).

Locals that can remember the flood recall it as two major floods. The first one being from Hurricane Connie, had been a small one. The true flood came with Hurricane Diane, Westfield in particular received nineteen inches of rain. There had been previous floods, so the city had installed dikes on the Westfield River. They held the entirety of the storm in fact, but the troubles began afterward. The city had been adding a sewer pumping station on Meadow Street and they had cut holes in the dike. Eventually, the dike gave out ^[DV4] and the water rushed into the city, taking out much of the tobacco land that was once where downtown is today. There was also a

man-made fishpond that was supported by an “Earthen Dam,” that eventually gave out. Those two occurrences are what really did the city in. To make things worse, in September they received another “smaller storm” that brought nearly eight inches of rain. A month later, Westfield was hit with an additional ten to fifteen inches of rainfall, greatly exceeding the seasonal record (Westfield Remembers).

The Flood now feels like a distant memory. It has now been sixty-three years since Hurricane Connie and Diane. There hasn't been a major hurricane or flood in the area for quite a long time now. I was able to stumble across an interview of sorts online that really deepened my understanding about this flood. President of the Westfield Athenaeum's Board of Directors Dr. Bob Brown, Professor Emeritus of History at Westfield State University, has been truly intrigued by the flood while he had been working on creating an archive for the city. Brown went on to describe the disaster and what caused it, but he was also able to give some input on how it affected the people. At the time, much of Westfield still remained farmland, it is not like the city I have recently been calling my temporary home. That being said, much of the crops were “drowned,” as he put it. Brown described the event as more of an “adventure” for the people than anything else. “It was kind of exciting to go outside and look at the flood and take pictures of the wreckage,” he said. “Crowds of people did. In terms of its impact on most citizens of Westfield, it was fairly minor. It was an adventure,” were his exact words. What I found really interesting about this piece of history is that it really does feel as if it has been ignored to a certain extent. Brown would agree with me in saying this.

Brown's stance on the matter is that not enough has been done to prevent future floods. Not only that, but the city has grown quite a bit since the 1950s, the damages could be much greater today than they were back then. Brown stated, “if a similar storm pattern hit Westfield in present

day, the problems would be far greater. With buildings and houses replacing farmland, more buildings would be damaged and more people would likely be injured.” This is a true statement, but the damages were still rather great at the time. When water broke through the dam on Montgomery Street, the water swept through and “cut North Elm Street in half,” and “blew through two floors of Sterling Radiator’s buildings” (Five Feet and Rising). The water kept moving rapidly and many local businesses and houses suffered great damages. When the storm finally cleared out, two lives were lost

Understanding the history of your surroundings can be so fulfilling, but also incredibly important when looking to the future. The City of Westfield has added a few dams since the notorious flood of 1955, but it likely will not be enough to prevent history from repeating itself. If the same were to happen today, the damages would be vastly greater. Having grown up in a surrounding area for my whole life and to have never heard of a natural disaster like this is rather concerning. Tom Mayes once expressed that “history can be understood at the real place where history actually happened in a way that it can’t be understood through documents and books alone,” in his article *Why Do Old Places Matter?* The memories of this live in the stories of grandparents and photographs. There is no true way of understanding any disaster to the fullest without looking towards those who actually survived them. It is vital that humanity learns from its past and its surroundings. Hopefully, Westfield never suffers a disaster such as this ever again, but it must be noted that it is always possible!

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