



24 hours of terror

By John C.K. Fisher and Peggy Kreimer, Post staff reporters

FALMOUTH - The devastating Flood of '97 began with a rain so light it hardly warranted an umbrella.

That morning, a Friday, the depth of the Licking River in Falmouth stood barely above 4 feet as it flowed under the Ky. 22 bridge on the northeast end of Falmouth.

By morning, the National Weather Service was warning of a flash flood.

"It rained hard and light, off and on, all night Friday and all day Saturday," said Craig Peoples, Pendleton County's Disaster and Emergency Services coordinator.

By 7 a.m. on Saturday, March 1, the Licking had risen to 17.5 feet. By noon, the river was at 27.5 feet, just below the flood stage of 28 feet. Still, the rain came.

"You begin to say, 'This is not moving out of here.' It is raining and raining and the totals are increasing. It is hitting the same river basin," said Ed Yess, a weather service hydrologist.

By 9 a.m., the Falmouth Fire Department made its first rescue run.

"We had a gentleman and a vehicle on a bridge on Gum Lick Road ready to wash away," said Falmouth Assistant Fire Chief Marty Hart.

Over a 36-hour period between that Friday and Sunday, an estimated 10 to 12 inches of rain fell, most of it on Saturday. The Licking exploded out of its banks in a drama that became more intense by the hour.

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11 a.m.

Police began warning residents along the river of a possible flood.

By now, the National Weather Service had recognized the potential for a major flood, forecasting a crest of 40 feet by early Sunday. Falmouth is accustomed to almost annual floods in neighborhoods along the river's shore. But 40 feet would send water into much of the town.

At first, police concentrated their door-to-door warnings on Shoemakertown, a low-lying neighborhood by the Ky. 22 bridge. The main fork and south fork of the Licking River join nearby. When the river floods, Shoemakertown is usually the first to go under water.

Officer J.B. Brown was among the policemen knocking on doors. Brown did his duty but had his doubts the river would be a danger. "I was skeptical," said Brown, who has spent most of his life in Pendleton County and thought he knew the river.

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1 p.m.

Local officials decided it was time to evacuate Shoemakertown. Residents filled two school buses and rode to Pendleton County Middle School on the southern end of town for shelter.

Firefighters kept watch and prepared for higher water.

"Some guys went home to check on their families," Hart said.

"We blocked off a few streets, got a few calls about water getting up into houses. We shut some electric off. We did that on and off for most of the afternoon."

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5:30 p.m.

Water had not yet crossed Ky. 22 at Shoemakertown. But as police, fire and emergency workers compared weather reports with city maps, they realized Falmouth was in trouble.

"We knew this would put the town under water. But we had an impression that it would be about 12 hours," Hart said.

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6 p.m.

Firefighters and police started evacuating 60 patients from the town's two nursing homes, taking some to Pendleton County Middle School and others to the nearby St. Luke Care Center.

The Care Center - a substance abuse recovery unit - has its own generator and would later become the center of operations and the only place to get a hot meal on the south side of town.

At Shoemakertown, the river had risen over Ky. 22.

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7:30 p.m.

Fire trucks cruised the streets with loudspeakers, telling people to start evacuating.

A Campbell County Water Rescue crew, which had come earlier but left with the assumption the worst was over, returned and responded to a call to help a woman and children trapped in a house. The woman and her children already were gone, but water had filled their basement and was entering the first floor.

Water Rescue Chief Mike Wise decided to stay in Falmouth with a boat and two other rescue workers. They wouldn't get home - or get sleep, except in spurts - for two days.

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8 p.m.

Calls for help were coming in from all over town. One came from Gold Star Chili, where people were stranded by high water covering U.S. 27, Falmouth's main artery.

"We proceeded to Gold Star, and a quarter mile down 27, water was hitting the door of my truck," Hart said.

Hart ordered his crew to back up the truck to a viaduct over the railroad tracks - higher ground - and set up a command post. Firefighters waded up the street, stopping cars and telling drivers to head for the viaduct. As many as 50 people were on the road.

"People got real mad at me," Hart said. "They didn't want to leave their vehicles - until one of the cars started floating. Then they started getting out."

Within five minutes, the water went from ankle deep to hip deep.

One of the last drivers to be rescued started having a heart attack as the water rose around his car. Hart, two firefighters and a man from the crowd struggled to get the man to solid ground, but the current knocked them all off their feet.

"I thought we were gone," Hart said.

Firefighter Mike Martin charged into the current.

"He's a big, strong, stout boy," Hart said. "He got us on our feet and another boy threw a rope."

Fire trucks and police cruisers continued to roll through town, blaring the warning to evacuate. But residents who remembered what they thought was a false alarm for the 1988 flood were reluctant to go.

"That's how we lost three cruisers," said Police Chief Greg Reis.

"Our men were going door to door, pulling them out, telling them they had to go. By the time they got back to the cruisers, they were swamped," Reis said.

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8:30 p.m.

All of Falmouth was now on notice: Leave.

Officer Brown - who had started his shift watching the river and doubting it would rise to dangerous levels - had gotten off work and gone home to Barkley Street. He was hosting a birthday party for his sister-in-law, and he didn't intend to leave. But, just in case, he put some family belongings in the attic.

Down the street, Lisa and David Wiggins had invited friends over. The Wiggins hadn't heard any of the loudspeaker announcements from the street. They had a TV on, sure that an alert would be broadcast if residents had to get out. Lisa even called the TV stations, but they didn't have news about an evacuation.

The morning's drizzle was now a thunderstorm.

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8:55 p.m.

DES area director Rick Watkins contacted John Meyers of the Northern Kentucky Amateur Radio Club and asked him to start rounding up members. They might be needed.

Hart was back at his pumper by the viaduct, directing rescue efforts. Much of town was under 3 feet of water.

"A citizen had a big track hoe," he said.

"We put it in water and drove it up and down streets. We got people off all the vehicles. That's all we had, but it worked."

Water filled the basement of the police dispatch center, knocking out the electrical system. Emergency phone calls were routed to St. Luke Care Center and dispatch workers moved there.

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9:30 p.m.

Water was surrounding the middle school. The people who had gone there for shelter had to be evacuated again, this time to Southside Church. Firefighters used a bus parked about a block away and escorted people to it in small groups along a pathway still above water.

Throughout the town, cars were stalling in the water.

"People were piling in cars and throwing in everything they could get their hands on. It was like a big panic," Firefighter Lindsey Stewart said.

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10 p.m.

On Barkley Street, a neighbor pounded on the Wiggins' door and told them the river had jumped its banks. They carried as much as they could to the second floor. David waded through waist-deep water to get an elderly neighbor out. Everyone climbed into vans and left town for a friend's house.

A block away, police knocked on the door of the 1920s-era home where Virginia Mardis, 65, has lived most of her life. Neighbors helped move her belongings and those of her uncle, Calvin Perkins, 76, upstairs.

Over on East Shelby Street, Eddie Lonaker, 36, had been out for groceries and missed the police warning. Now, as he put his groceries away, he saw water coming into his yard.

"I knew it was trouble and started throwing stuff upstairs," Lonaker said.

His daughters Brittany, 8, and Megan, 4, were staying with his sister in Butler, but because of the flooding, he would not see them or hear about them for three days.

"I was sick from worry," he would say later.

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10:30 p.m.

One by one, sections of town were losing electricity. All around, people were calling for help in the darkness.

"We had people stuck on roofs of cars and houses, hollering for help. We had two or three houses catch on fire and burn down, probably because water was getting into the electric systems," Hart said.

Friends of William Pettit came by to take him from his single-story, white frame house on Dickerson Lane just off U.S. 27. Pettit, 57, bought the house after the record 1964 flood and never had a problem with the Licking. All day, Pettit had heard reports of the flood threat.

"My friends kept calling me. And I kept saying the weatherman would give me a break in the rain for a couple of hours," said Pettit, a custodian at Southern Elementary School.

"But the rain didn't quit. And it kept thundering and lightning."

Now, Pettit didn't have time to take anything except his two dogs, Sugar, a poodle mix, and Sawyer, a setter mix, and a rabbit named Peaches. He had spent the past 31 years carefully accumulating antiques, heirlooms and mementos. He left them behind.

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11 p.m.

Wise, of Campbell County Water Rescue, put his boat in the

water. It hit the top of a submerged car and bent its propeller, but kept going.

"We were running against the current and hitting flood debris. It was wild out there," Wise said.

Residents joined the firefighters in fishing boats, helping people off roofs and porches.

In the confusion, Hart heard a firefighter had washed away. He didn't have time to get facts or to grieve. He would learn later that the firefighter was saved off a neighbor's roof.

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11:45 p.m.

Earlier in the day, Officer Brown had told people they might have to evacuate. Now, his neighbors were telling him to go. He and his wife, Laura, drove their 1994 Mercury Topaz about two blocks and made it as far as U.S. 27.

They had to abandon the car in the parking lot of a bar that was soon submerged in water.

"The water was up to my knees," Brown said.

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SUNDAY, MARCH 2

12 a.m.

In the eerie darkness, flashlights lit rescue operations.

"I probably had 20 people on roofs hollering to me. All I could do is say, 'Stay calm. We're coming to get you,'" Hart said. "But we couldn't get them."

Water had cut the south end of town off from the north end. Hart's command post was handling the southern end of town. Assistant Southern Campbell Chief Jim Bell set up a command post on the north end of town at the U.S. 27 bridge.

Members of the Northern Kentucky Amateur Radio Club headed for the bridge on U.S. 27. Because of the surging water, police and fire officials stopped them. Ham operator Rick Wyatt, who lives above the south end of town, took his equipment to St. Luke Care Center and went on the air.

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1:30 a.m.

Boone County Water Rescue arrived at the U.S. 27 bridge with 16 rescue workers, two Waverunners, a johnboat and a 26-foot river patrol boat.

"The two Waverunners scouted things out. They told us there were people all over the place," said Water Rescue director Dale Appel.

"We lost one Waverunner. Our man was circling one of the people hollering for help, and the crosscurrent got him. It sucked the Waverunner right out from under him. He floated down and caught onto a tree. We were dodging mobile homes, houses, cars."

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2 a.m.

On U.S. 27's north end, just across the street from the sign welcoming visitors to Falmouth, 21-year-old manager Rachel Gabbard and owner David Bay, 33, kept B.B.'s Superstore open to help the last few residents who wanted gas and provisions before leaving town.

Bay and Ms. Gabbard turned off the electricity and left. The water had risen above the streets to the gas pumps.

"There is no doubt in my mind there was some huge wall of water that hit Falmouth hard," Bay said.

"There was hardly any water at all, and all of a sudden, boom! Water kept pouring in from everywhere."

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2:30 a.m.

With phone service out, emergency workers used a few hand-held radios to try to keep up with rescue efforts.

"It was dark and the current was so swift," Police Chief Reis said.

"I've been in fire and ambulance service for 20 years, and that's about as helpless as I can remember feeling. People were screaming for help. They were firing guns up in the air

to let us know they were there. We couldn't do anything. That's the worst part."

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3 a.m.

Virginia Mardis and her uncle sat in an upstairs bedroom with their dog, Fred, and waited for help. Ms. Mardis shined a flashlight out the window to see what was happening. Water had risen above the roof of her porch.

"I sat by the window and listened," she said. "It sounded like someone hollering, 'Help! Help!'"

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6:30 a.m.

Ms. Mardis saw a light. Rescuers in a boat came up to their second-floor window and said they were going to save a family with four babies and would be back.

"It was my third time in a boat," Ms. Mardis said.

The first was the flood of 1937; the second was the flood of 1964.

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7:09 a.m.

Sunrise. Falmouth was a milky brown lake dotted with rooftops. Most of its 2,700 residents had fled, staying with friends or relatives or packed into shelters in church basements and school gyms. Some remained trapped on roofs or in second floors, hoarse from calling for help.

At first light, more rescue boats took to the water. Police started adding a ham radio operator or two to the rescue boat runs, ferrying them to the south side of town.

"Those amateur radio operators were the only communication we had," Chief Reis said.

Once on the south side of town, the radio operators fanned out, setting up radio links among the hastily set up shelters, the disaster headquarters at the Care Center, and the outside world.

The first calls told the news.

Falmouth was under water. Send help.

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Staff reporter Frank Main contributed to this story.

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Return to the Front Page

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