

The St. Patrick's Day Flood of 1936

By Bryan Seip - Montour Railroad Historical Society

As work on the soccer/athletic field complex and trail construction progresses at Montour Junction in Coraopolis, it must be noted that this area sits in the flood plain of the Ohio River.

85 years ago, on March 17 & 18, 1936, the city of Pittsburgh witnessed the worst flood in its history when water levels at the Point reached 46 feet. This flood became known as The Great St. Patrick's Day Flood, affecting the entire Pittsburgh area including Montour Junction in Coraopolis.

Previous floods had reached a mark of 38.7 feet at the Point in 1907 and 44.1 feet in 1783. The 1936 flood surpassed both those figures.

Newspapers nationwide called it "a disaster of undreamed proportions that begged description." Downtown Pittsburgh was underwater. Downstream on the banks of the Ohio River, Coraopolis was also flooded over most of its lower lying community. Montour Junction, where the Montour Railroad maintained its shops and offices, became a large lake which also inundated the neighboring community of Groveton.

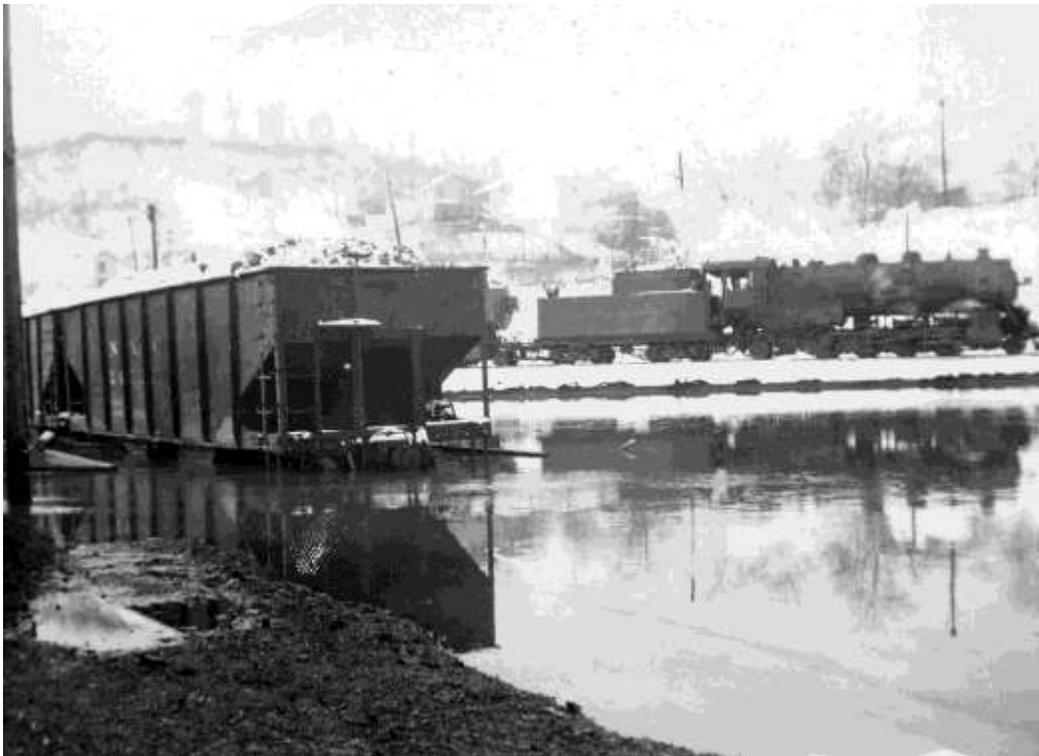
The accompanying photos show the outdoor car shop area under water, including buildings, machinery and materials on ground level. The engine house, mechanical shops and warehouse were also flooded.



Flood waters cover the car shop area at Montour Junction. Some cars under repair could not be moved and were left standing in place as the flood waters inundated the shops.

Parts of the yard tracks at Montour Junction remained just above the flood waters. Some locomotives were moved to those tracks and others were moved to higher ground up the main line, away from the flooded area. Those were taken to Lotus Siding, along Cliff Mine Road at Trail Mile 5.5. A hostler (a trainman who moves locomotives in and out of servicing facilities) and a helper were assigned to keep watch over those locomotives. Caboosees were also moved out of the flooded shops area.

There were several bridges over Montour Run in the shops complex, leading to the engine house, car shops and the Groveton Loop connection with the Pittsburgh & Lake Erie Railroad. Hopper cars loaded with coal were parked on the bridges in an attempt to hold the bridges in place as one of the most rapid river currents on record flowed through the Montour complex.



A view from the engine house area shows locomotives parked on yard tracks across Montour Run. The loaded coal hoppers sit on a bridge to help hold it in place. Houses along Rt. 51 can be seen on the hillside in the background. Photos courtesy Charles A. Ross

Debris from communities upstream swirled past and into Montour Junction, adding to post-flood clean-up efforts. Some materials and equipment stored outdoors at the shops were either swept downstream, lost or damaged.

Businesses and homes in the lower areas of Coraopolis near the river had water flowing several feet deep. Photos show the water nearly up to the roofs of cars parked along the streets.

Adding to the problems was the failure of the electrical and water supply systems. Power was out all over the Pittsburgh area and without electricity, pumps at water plants, gas stations and such were not working. With no power, the telephone and trolley systems were not operating. Broken or disrupted gas lines added to the confusion as they presented a fire hazard. Homes and businesses were asked to turn off their gas supply lines, leaving many of them without heat in the late winter flood.

Besides the Montour, the main line railroads along the river were paralyzed by washouts of tracks, debris and equipment being damaged or swept away by the current.

With the city in a state of emergency, President Franklin Roosevelt called upon federal agencies to lend support to the region and appointed a special emergency relief committee.

After a full week had passed, the flood waters finally receded to levels below flood stage and clean-up, recovery and rebuilding commenced throughout the region. Estimates of losses by merchants and industrialists ranged from \$10 million to \$200 million (in 1936 dollars).

This column appeared in the January-February, 2021 Montour Trail Newsletter.
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