

A Tree with a Tale

You might not notice just driving by today, but in front of our former home at 24 Summer Street in North Amherst stands a large maple tree that is strangely misshapen. The main trunk stops about ten feet up and several limbs branch out and up from there. This is the story of how it came to be.

In mid-September of 1938, we had several days of heavy rain. One especially stormy day, those of us attending North Amherst Grade School were sent home at noon, not because of the wind but because the Mill River was at flood stage and about to overflow some roads. My sister arrived home from Amherst Junior High a little later. Meanwhile, our father, an ardent nature photographer, was on an outing in the Berkshires photographing flood damage.

In the afternoon the wind continued to gather strength. While giant elm trees became uprooted and came crashing down all around, my pal Dick Swift and I were running around the yard in our swimsuits, thinking it was the greatest spectacle we had ever seen. It was, of course, the beginning of the great 1938 hurricane, the storm of the century.

Meanwhile, Mother was mopping the upstairs floor furiously and wondering how all the water was coming in. The storm intensified into the night. The large Norway spruce that towered over our yard whipped back and forth in the gale, and we wondered if it might come crashing down on the house, but it withstood the storm. The three of us spent the night huddled together in the downstairs bedroom, which was on the leeward side of the house, in darkness of course as the wind shrieked and the house shook.

When Father returned home the next morning, he was dismayed to find the metal roofing of our house torn to pieces, with most of it lying in a crumpled heap in our backyard. Some can still be seen on the roof in one of his photos, which also shows the damage to our tall spruce caused by our neighbor's large elm that toppled into it. When our roof came flying off, it took both chimneys with it. My frugal father planned to reuse the old bricks to rebuild the chimneys, so he paid me one cent each to chip the mortar off them. But the mason who rebuilt the chimneys insisted on using new brick, so it was all wasted effort. For years after, those old bricks were stashed away in our barn, and for all I know they may still be there.

We were without electricity or telephone for several weeks. Clearing the streets was slow work, with the men sawing up the trunks by hand using the good old two-man crosscut. No chain saws in those days. Especially exciting was watching the workmen split the larger trunks with dynamite. Some woodlots were leveled flat, and the sawmills were kept so busy that many good pine logs had to be left where they fell. Rotting piles of them remained in the woods for decades.

For a long time afterward, traces of damage from that great storm could be seen if you knew where to look. Now, seventy-two years later, I could still point out a few such places, such as the east side of our great Norway spruce (still standing) that got sheared off. In front of the house at 24 Summer Street is that misshapen maple tree I mentioned at the start, with its main trunk broken off about ten feet up and limbs branching out from there. That damage occurred during the hurricane, which I can state for a fact because Dick Swift and I were running around on the lawn when it happened.