

Who Is My Neighbor?:

Parables of Survival from the Floyd Flood of 1999

by Charles D. Thompson, Jr.
photography by Rob Amberg

Gathering Waters

In September 1999, a trio of hurricanes battered eastern North Carolina. The second of the hurricanes, named Dennis, churned on the Outer Banks for days, drenching the eastern third of the state with over twenty inches of rain in some locations. When the third arrived, Hurricane Floyd, nearly every drop of its rain ran off the fields and parking lots and immediately into ditches, streams, and rivers. Their banks could not hold. Waters began to rise throughout the region.

After the storm blew through the eastern counties and into the center of the state and upstream, September 16 was sunny and calm. A few trees had uprooted, and many people were without electricity, but this was a small price to pay, many thought, and a relatively mild hurricane. The cleanup began. Many people even went back to work. Too many people remained unaware of the gathering waters to the west as they slept calmly that night.

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Unlike the noisy winds of hurricanes, floodwaters are stealthy. Only slowly, during the early hours of September 17, did people come to realize that these waters were rising faster and spreading more widely than any they had ever seen or heard of. Many had to be awakened and convinced that water was already lapping at their front steps. Seventy-nine-year-old Frank Cavanaugh of the Northeast Community

in Duplin County remembers what a complete surprise the flood was, even to someone who had seen dozens of floods before:

*I figured I had a couple of days, or a day – the usual thing was that it would rise about an inch, or two, or three, in a day – that I had a couple of days, where I could get my stuff to higher grounds. But about three or four o'clock that night, a neighbor called me up. He said, "Buddy there's some water in the yard. We got to do something."**

<<From these memories come stories that remind us of our humanity and encourage us to hold on to our loved ones->>

With water over his front steps, Mr. Cavanaugh and his neighbors fled by jumping on a dump truck driven by neighbors and riding to higher ground. He left everything he owned in his house and that was the last he saw of all his possessions for nearly two weeks. He rode by his wife's grave, now under water, and cried, knowing that not only had he lost her the previous year, but now everything else was washing away, too. It is hard to make words express this kind of pain. As people told such stories, it became abundantly clear that something else beyond the broad sweeps of statistics is required to respond to disaster.

Somewhat like storms themselves, macro-statistics and official statements of damage cover a lot of ground, but they can also be so large that they blow over the human drama of stories that originate in

**The tapes and transcripts of the full interviews, excerpted throughout this article, are deposited, bearing the individual interviewees' names, under the heading of the Floyd Flood Project of the Southern Oral History Program in the archives of the Southern Historical Collection in Wilson Library at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. These excerpts have only been slightly edited for clarity. Brackets and ellipses, to indicate insertions, changes, and cuts, have been kept to a minimum.*