

## Cottage Grove Sentinel

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## OPINION

**"I never considered a difference of opinion in politics, in religion, in philosophy, as cause for withdrawing from a friend." — Thomas Jefferson (1800)**

## THE COLUMBUS DAY STORM

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Fifty years ago this week, on Oct. 12, 1962, Cottage Grove's Harrison School was let out early due to news of an impending storm.

Seven-year old third-grader, Shellie Snook, remembers that day well: "I had to walk from the school on 10th Street to my home on Van Buren, including a trail through a group of trees on the way. As I entered the woods, trees began falling. I became scared, but also excited, by the warm air and heavy winds."

## The Big Blow in Cottage Grove

The Columbus Day Storm of 1962 (also known as the Big Blow) began as "Typhoon Freda" in the tropics, north of Bikini Atoll, and technically became an "extratropical cyclone" as it rapidly traveled northward through northern California and western Oregon and Washington.

Winds reached more than 145 miles per hour along the Oregon Coast and more than 110 miles per hour in many locations in the Willamette Valley, Portland, and southwest Washington. Because of the strength of these sustained wind gusts, the Columbus Day Storm is often termed a "hurricane" — but just the fact that it traveled 1800 miles in less than 36 hours is one reason it is considered a cyclone (hurricanes travel much slower).

The Columbus Day Storm caused an estimated \$230 - 280 million (in 1962 dollars) in damage and blew down an estimated 11 billion to 15 billion feet of timber; both figures generated mostly in western Oregon and southwest Washington.

Storm damage was far worse than the only previous historical windstorm of similar magnitude in the region — the Jan. 9, 1880, "Great Gale" — and greatly exceeded the November 1992 "Friday the 13th Storm," which many local residents still recall.

For the Pacific Northwest, it was truly the "Storm of the Century" for the 1900s.

At least 46 people were killed during the storm, and hundreds more injured. Telephone, television and electrical services were eliminated for tens of thousands of families (sometimes for weeks) and hundreds of miles of roads and streets — and rivers and creeks — were blocked by downed trees and wires.

Cottage Grove was lucky. Five people died in neighboring Eugene, but no one was killed — or even seriously injured — in Cottage Grove. The local paper said this was a "miracle" and it was, at least, extremely fortunate.

Jim Peterson survived being "blown about 100 feet" when the roof blew off the Keith Rob-



**Among the most damage done to any business in town was the loss of a roof and several new cars at Keith Roberts Ford. (Photo courtesy CH Historical Society and The Sentinel)**

erts Ford Building on 9th and Main, but he escaped with only a "floor burn and a bruised shoulder." Only one ambulance call was made during the storm, and that was to "rush five construction men, all out-of-towners, to Sacred Heart Hospital for treatment of injuries received when the storm demolished a shed they were constructing" north of town.

Several close calls were encountered at the Evergreen Motel, where "one tree crushed three trailer homes owned by Harold Owens, Mr. And Mrs. Leonard Closner, and Mr. And Mrs. E. H. Hughes," all of whom, fortunately, were away at the time. "Other trailers as well as several small houses" in the complex were also damaged or destroyed by falling trees, including one home in which the two renters, Gene DuCharme and Harold Gilstad, had left just moments before.

However, local police were overwhelmed by "a group of organized looters" and Governor Mark Hatfield agreed to order 20 National Guard troops to patrol downtown Cottage Grove until order could be destroyed. On an Oct. 19 visit to Cottage Grove to survey the storm's damage, Hatfield offered the services of the state's highway department and department of forestry to help restore damaged trees and roads, but Mayor Wilbur Workman rejected the offer because he "felt there was no need for it" — local residents were "handling the tree situation" fine.

Local Weyerhaeuser and Georgia-Pacific tree farms experienced millions of feet of timber blow-down caused by the storm, and began salvage planning and operations within hours and days. Many of the unimproved backcountry roads used by hunters, recreational enthusiasts, and loggers during the past 50 years — both locally and regionally — were put in place during salvage operations related to the Columbus Day Storm. In further support of the idiom "it is an ill wind that blows no good," timber salvage and processing jobs and businesses boomed in Cottage Grove in the years to follow.

Local orchardists lost thousands

of trees, including George Ross, who lost 300 trees in just one location. Miles Wicks suffered a badly damaged orchard and lost a barn. At the Van and Erbine Grousbeck place, the walnut and apple orchard was "totally destroyed."

Several other local barns were also destroyed, killing cows and bulls and exposing tons of hay to the weather — including the Ralph Benter dairy farm and the Harry Simmons and Dave Eckhardt ranches.

Other notable storm damage in Cottage Grove included:

- The "city park was a shambles," as play equipment and the new tennis courts experienced extensive damage due to at least 65 fallen trees;
- The Coast Fork Willamette and Silk Creek were "plugged up" in many places through town by fallen trees;
- The Argo Drive-In Movie theater screen was "totally demolished";
- A dozen "magnificent" old-growth oak on the Hidden Valley Golf Course blew over, "one nearly missing the main building."

In summary, Cottage Grove was very lucky during the Columbus Day Storm, compared to many other western Oregon cities and towns. Still, there was extreme danger and significant damage caused to the community by this event, albeit with some short- and long-term benefits to the local economy.

Whether it was trees falling on houses or cars, across power lines or roadways, or into creeks and rivers, a common denominator with much of the danger and damage associated with the Columbus Day Storm was directly related to falling trees — typically large and poorly located — and that is without considering the thousands of fruit and nut trees and billions of board feet of timber also blown over and otherwise damaged by the wind.

What have we learned in regards to growing trees in urban environments and developments in the fifty years since the Columbus Day Storm? All evidence seems to say: "not much."