

# *Chronicles of Brunonia*

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Waiting, 1938

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The story of the famous hurricane of 1938 as revealed by the meticulous notes of David Patten, managing editor of the *Providence Evening Bulletin* at the time.

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At two in the afternoon on the twenty-first of September, nineteen thirty-eight, there were rumors of war in Europe. Neville Chamberlain, prime minister of Britain, had returned from Berchtesgaden, where two days earlier he submitted to Adolf Hitler's demands of self-determination for the German-speaking section of the Sudetenland. With a handshake, the German-speaking Czechs of Czechoslovakia's border territory were to be no longer Czech, but German, and all previous treaties null. France, once poised to intervene if Germany invaded Czechoslovakia, uneasily put down her arms. The Czech leaders threw up their hands in resigned expectation. And Hitler prepared his men to walk, his planes to fly, his tanks to roll.

In Massachusetts, the gubernatorial race was intensifying with a feverish round of rallies, flurries of visits and speeches days before the vote was to be left to a confused and amused public. Governor Charles F. Hurley, Democrat, seeking renomination, informed Bostonians that his principal opponent, former Governor James M. Curley, had lied to voters about Hurley's treatment of workers. Curley, in other rallies, denounced Hurley's "do-nothing policy." And in the south of the state, in Fall River, a third candidate, Lieutenant-Governor Francis E. Kelly, told voters that both Hurley and Curley had deprived citizens of revenues gained during liquidation of closed Massachusetts banks.

In Providence, Rhode Island, David Patten, the managing editor of the Providence Evening Bulletin, had a little inside story of a hurricane working up the coast from the Carolinas, a story destined for page three, behind the rumblings of tension in Europe and the primaries in Massachusetts. In his thirteenth year now of managing the paper, Patten had an eye for a story's staying

power, its social consequence, its punch, and for the appropriate location on newsprint. It was an eye grown from a writer's eye, practiced at the Bulletin since 1917, after a brief sojourn with the Fall River News.

Patten, one-time reporter producing stories for twenty dollars an hour, was by 1920 night city editor, by 1924 city editor, and in 1925 managing editor of this afternoon paper, late-day companion to the Providence Journal. He was a dogged researcher and devoted note-taker. He amassed reams of paper, scraps, and notes on his stories, and worked all hours. When he died in 1975, Patten would to be eulogized by the paper as an editor who "instilled an education into his staff. His constant direction and instruction to reporters was to use the short sentence, get color from verbs, not adjectives; write 'nervously.'"

And so at two in the afternoon on September 21, 1938, David Patten was at his desk in the Fountain Street office of the paper, following reports from Europe and from the neighboring states. He was concerned about the situation in Europe; casually interested in the results of the New England primaries. It was September, and not yet dark, though the sky may have been overcast from the hints of bad weather, the office infused with an orange glow from area lamps. Within the hour, the office's typewriters would be busy with news of weather grown worse; reports of trees down around the city. The storm from the Carolinas was clearly moving more quickly than expected. Patten shifted the hurricane story to page one with the column head.

As if in reaction to its telling, the storm gained momentum. A 3:30 Associated Press dispatch from Washington informed Patten that the storm had passed Atlantic City with property loss but no lives lost, and was moving across

Long Island and Connecticut with no winds stronger than fifty or sixty miles per hour. And, closer still, a man from Wickford, Rhode Island, concerned about the press' knowledge and public safety, called the Bulletin office to inform the staff that out there, the wind was blowing hard. There was some damage. It looked like a big blow. Patten raised the story to a three-column head. He moved the primaries down.

By four in the afternoon, reporters from the office left more quickly, returned wetter, more frightened. Trees were down, and below the Bulletin's office windows, roofs and signs blew in confused disarray. Office phones rang a measured response to the storm's speed of approach: calls from citizens, men in the field, family members. The windows of the bulletin office seemed likely to blow in under the force of the winds.

A call came in at the City Desk from a girl in Ballan's shoe store, downtown. "When will the water go down?" "What water?" "The water in the street. It's flooding the store." There were many calls then—the harbor was washing up into the city. It washed into Exchange Place, blocks from the Bulletin's office. Night men arrived drenched, barefoot, trousers rolled up to their knees. They cursed and stripped and ran for typewriters and phones. With a glance out the window, David Patten knew that here was the flood: a river swirled around the Biltmore and flowed out Union Street.

Madcaps, born from winds over one hundred miles per hour, rolled towards the office. Those same waves rushed around cars, pulled them from pavement. It circled around the waists of men and women and forced them into slow crawls up the street. Two women, inching along brick siding, held a young

girl shoulder high, barely above water. Winds slashed them back. They tore at the bricks with their finger nails. Newspaper men moved in and out of the office with cameras, wet feet, and stories. "You should see the town." Whispers—"just came across a car on Pine Street—crushed under a wall—saw a body in it—maybe others. Saw a body of a man drowned in Westminster Street. Saw—saw—saw—" and Patten: "Don't tell us, write it!"

They wrote through the storm; wrote in wet feet and cold hands. They wrote as the office darkened from time of day and cloud cover. Electric lights refused to work, shorted out with power lines down. Phone down. In that dark evening, as they wrote, the newsroom was illuminated in patches from lanterns and electric flashlights. Everything eerie and still. In the time after the storm, a river flowed and receded steadily through Providence streets. Without the hum of the generator or press, both now underwater, the office echoed emptily. Through windows, miraculously intact, the southern sky glowed. If this glow were a fire, there would be no phones to call for assistance. Alarms would sound on a city unable to provide a truck; a city filled with water but unable to quench a flame.

David Patten waded through the basement with a flashlight. One hundred tons of newsprint swelled and burst down there. Fish swam around in the filthy water. Broken sprinkler pipes added inches to the flood, and alarm bells rang continuously. The meters that ran the presses were under water, as were the transformers and electrical controls for the entire building. All of them lodged down there in that flooded hole. Despite the rapidly receding water, there would be no chance of publishing from Providence.

The men were still upstairs, writing, without a press to print. In early

morning, one phone line came through. David Patten arranged with H.D. Grozier, publisher of the Boston Post, to print from his offices until the basement could be pumped, machines restored, newsprint re-ordered. In the too-quiet early morning, Patten assembled twenty-five staffers and the stories and negatives they had gathered through the night for the paper's sojourn in Boston. At 5:30 on a morning when few were sleeping, the Bulletin convoy drove cars which, on higher ground during the flood, had stayed dry. Drove the cars through downed trees and lines, stranded autos, emergency rescue workers, wrecked houses, businesses, and onto a clearer highway north.

For the following ten days, blocks from the Brookline house in which Patten was raised, in the Statler Hotel in Boston, the paper chronicled the disaster in its home state. Gathered photographs from men in the field and recorded wreckage, marked it down, all from a vantage point of forty-five miles. For if businesses and autos and schools had stopped during the storm, the paper must continue to arrive, continue to inform people of things they needed to know: that Curley had won the Massachusetts primary—and things they already knew: that Rhode Island was in a state of disaster, that there were many dead, that people's boilers, trees, boats and roofs were all sent haphazardly through the city in a few unexpected hours of wind.

There was other necessary news; pieces which eventually shared headlines with accounts of the hurricane. Two thousand miles away, in Europe, Hitler, unsatisfied with the eventual promise of the Sudetenland, called for the area to be evacuated by the Czechs and immediately occupied by the Germans. Czechoslovakia called for a general military mobilization. A day later, the French

called for a partial mobilization. In Rhode Island, emergency crews set up shelters, treated those injured in the hurricane, restored floating cars, boilers, to their approximate appropriate locations. The German army bristled at the borders of the Sudetenland. Czechs fled the country en masse on trains, by foot. Families held funerals in Providence, Bristol, Newport, in still-damp cemeteries. Hospitals felt for broken bones without the aid of X-ray machines, machines now jammed and rusting under the lingering presence of a misplaced harbor. Neville Chamberlain scheduled urgent talks with members of his cabinet; with Hitler. Roosevelt promised aid to Rhode Island.

And there was an eerie stillness in Europe as Hitler prepared for the 29th of the month, the day on which he threatened invasion if Czechoslovakia did not abandon the Sudetenland. France and Britain watched Germany with a wary eye. The Czechs, however, urged into motion, pushed natives out and strengthened borders. They taped windows and moved children and loved ones to higher ground, safer ground, foreign ground. Eleven days after a storm occurred in a state not terribly smaller than the smallest state in Europe, Chamberlain called leaders of leading countries together to protect against the violence of a promised onslaught. In Munich, he, Hitler, Daladier of France, and Mussolini of Italy met and effectively opened Czechoslovakia to attack. Britain and France withdrew military support for the small country and left the Czechs to defend themselves if they did not submit to the German demands for annexation. Czechoslovakia chose to submit, opened her borders for annexation, and the threat of war subsided.

On the 29th of September, eleven days after the storm, David Patten

recorded news from this conference, sitting by the phone and telegraph machine, pen in hand, nervous at the news before the conference, relieved at the outcome of the proceedings. That day, he issued from Boston a special edition of the Providence Evening Bulletin. The issue was a Peace Issue. It outlined Britain, France and Italy's negotiations with Hitler, and the quiet in Europe after the conference, the quiet of a continent confident that disaster would not strike.

In Providence, at the breaking point of harbor and bay, there stands a monument to the storm, a mass of concrete and steel poised to open or close at the arrival of a tidal wave. Providence's streets, buildings, cars, can no longer be flooded, except in some extraordinary circumstance we have yet to fathom. In Europe, these safeguards came too late. Seven years after the storm, in 1945, the continent reeled from almost a decade of war. Germany was militarily, economically and socially immobilized by regulations from Allied countries. Hitler's empire left millions dead, nations in shambles, Europe divided neatly in two with a heavy iron curtain.