

Great Coastal Gale of 2007

by Tom Smith

At the end of November 2007, Annie, my wife, and I had our first chance to stay in our newly remodeled home on Cullaby Lake. Little did we know that we were heading into a historic storm event.

Annie originally bought her Cullaby Lake home in 1992, while we were dating. After we were married, in 1993, we lived outside the area and rented the house out for many years. One evening in late 2006, we happened to be sitting on a lanai at the Gearhart condominiums and contemplated getting a home on the coast again. It was then we concluded that we have a home here already. Why don't we just remodel the Cullaby Lake house? So, we did.

The first full weekend after remodel completion, we spent our first nights in our refreshed home at the end of November 2007. The 2007 storm started Saturday, December 1st like many winter storms on the coast. We were not internet junkies then, so at the local Fred Meyers Saturday morning, we were shocked to see so many people there. That's when we heard the ominous warnings that the storm was heading our way.

The next day, Sunday, December 2nd, we were trying to decide whether to head back to our other home in Port Orchard,

Washington and chance having the trees fall on us while heading east on Highway 30, or to stay at our freshly remodeled home at the lake. We decided to return to our home up north because I still had to work on Monday. It was a good thing because once we left all hell broke loose here on the coast.

By the time we left at about noon, the winds were already at 45 miles an hour and kept getting worse and worse. We made it home before a major downpour hit Port Orchard. As a result, the stream at the back of our lot flooded and we had salmon flopping between the horse pies on our neighbor's horse pasture, but that is another story.

The storm of 2007 is considered one of the most devastating storms of the last 100 years, surpassing the Columbus Day storm of 1962 in many ways. One of the most definitive descriptions of this storm was published on the web at <https://climate.washington.edu/stormking/December2007.html>. The storms on December 2nd and 3rd produced an extreme long-duration wind event with hurricane-force wind gusts of up to 137 mph (220 km/h) at Holy Cross, Washington on the Washington Coast, and 129 mph (208 km/h) at Bay City, Oregon on the Oregon Coast. The storm also brought heavy rains, produced widespread record flooding throughout the region, and was blamed for at least 18 deaths, resembling the Great Gale of 1880, a powerful storm that affected the region.

Once the storm ended, Clatsop County was devastated. There was no access on either of the major highways and most of the forested areas around the area looked like a mass collection of broken match sticks. In addition, power in the county took almost seven days to restore.





Three days after we left, we finally were able to call our next-door neighbor, Tom Grimm, manager of The Astorian print shop, by cell phone. He indicated that our neighborhood did suffer some damage including a huge spruce that fell across the main road to the Cullaby Lake Park. Fortunately, it did not hit our newly remodeled home. He also mentioned, with the lack of power in Astoria, they were having all their printing done up in Washington.

The experience of this huge three-day event is best described in an interview we did with Dana Weston. Dana, daughter of our own local history expert Paul See and great granddaughter of Josiah West, who developed most of the Clatsop plains north of Gearhart. She and her husband live at the south end of Surf Pines, just west of her parent's home on Surf Pines Lane. We thought that her description of this storm describes this storm quite well:

The thing that was weird and was so different about the 2007 storm compared to the other storms we get all the time, is that the 2007 storm went around in a circle like a hurricane. Usually when we get a storm, it's coming from the Southwest and blows one direction. If anything falls, it always falls that way. What was unusual that morning, after the first day of the storm, was the trees were down every which way. I think the four or five trees behind our house that survived had enough protection from our house that they managed to stay up.

It was very strange because we were at home and have weathered many ninety plus mile an hour storm. I mean the house would vibrate, but we never really had any issues. However, that night, the first of the series of storms, we closed the drapes on every window because it was beyond just vibrating. It was like, oh my God, I think these windows are gonna blow out. The worst part, keeping me awake all night, wasn't just the wind and the house vibrating. It was the house jumping.

I kept saying to Craig, "What is this jumping? Is it an earthquake?"

He says, "I don't know. The house is bouncing, not sideways pushed by the wind, but was bouncing up and down".

I said, "Maybe it's going to fall down," then said, "Should we be in a doorway? Should we go outside?"

He goes, "I'm not going outside."

I just thought, *"It's not good to stay here when it's bouncing like this. Something's about to give."*

This went on all night and of course the power was out. We couldn't see anything and didn't know what was going on. We couldn't get hold of anybody, as the phones were out.

The next morning, as the first crack of light came through, I opened the windows, looked out, and found the storm still raging. It had calmed down a little bit, but not much.

As I looked outside Craig says, "Did we lose any trees?"

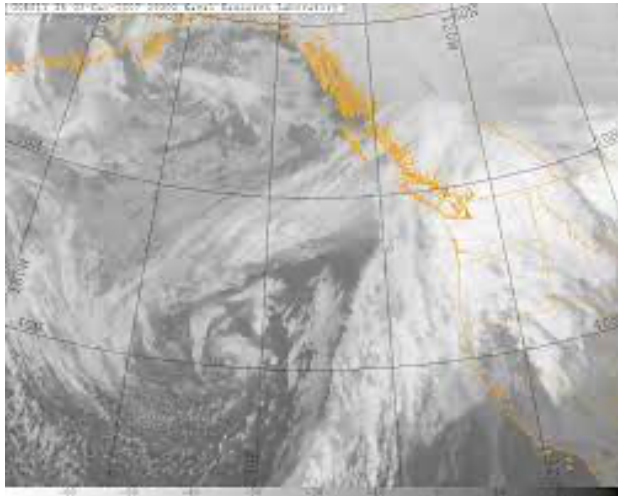
I didn't even know what to tell him. I thought, *"I don't want him to look outside."*

Just as I'm standing there looking out, a tree would blow down and the house would bounce. None of them hit the house, but all night long, every time a tree hit the ground, the house would bounce. So, we went through another whole day with the house bouncing up and down.

Fortuitously, when we built our house, we chose the little, tiny clearing that was in the forest west of Mom and Dad's house. We picked that spot because it was the most beautiful little

clearing. However, when we started the house, I realized that the trees were still close. I mean, we were using almost the whole clearing for the house. I love trees and all, but I don't like being under the trees with resulting darkness. It's dark enough here most times, like today. So, I thought, *"I need a little more of a wide berth."*

I remember Dad being kind of upset when we did our yard, when we took out more trees. I wanted a seventy-foot clearance all the way around our house to make sure we got sunshine. I am so glad, since this is what saved us when those trees went down. The tree tips would brush past the side of our house. The fallen trees were all around our yard, smashing our landscaping



and stuff outside. Luckily our cars were garaged, so no cars were smashed but no one could get the cars out of the garage for a while, because there was no place to go. Our driveway was covered.

Mercifully, no trees fell on our house, but our driveway was covered twelve feet high with fallen trees. The first two days after the storm, we had two chainsaws and my dad had one, so the three of us worked on clearing their driveway. We finally got down to the end of the driveway enough that you could get a vehicle through. About the

time we got to Surf Pines Lane, we could see a little path cleared along the lane. About the same time here comes Pam Weidman, who lived across the street. She had a big horse barn on Easy Way that blew down. So, she comes with two other people leading horses. They asked if they could bring their horses to stay at our place? They told us their whole barn had blown away. We went over and looked at it. The big pieces of metal that were the roof looked like tin foil crunched up, the panels were all wadded up all over the place.

However, the old barn at my parent's home, next to their driveway, amazingly had no damage. My dad, Paul See, his friend, and I built the barn in 1972. It was built out of mostly scraps of two by four lumber we found on the beach and was not the greatest construction.

When that storm hit, I remember thinking, *"Oh God, the horses are in the barn."* My biggest concern that night was, *"I hope they die fast or that something just knocks them right out when it falls."* I hoped they wouldn't lay there and suffer, because I couldn't get over there and do anything.

The next morning, at first light we saw what had happened. I remember telling Craig, *"We need to get over and see if my parents are okay"*.

He says, *"You cannot go out there yet. There are still trees falling."*

We were having a real argument about whether to go over to check on my parents when somebody knocked on our door. I said, *"Oh my God, there's somebody here"*.

I ran downstairs to find it was Dad. I looked towards his house from our house and rubble was at least 20 feet high, a jumble of fallen trees.

We looked at my dad and said, *"How did you get here?"*

He said, *"Mostly on my hands and knees."*

Then we got our chainsaws and followed him back over to his house to start helping him clear the driveway. Happily, we had plenty of fuel, since my dad was good at storing gas. Plus, we had some more stored down at the barn for the Gators. We managed to have enough gas to get to the end of their driveway. Surf Pines Lane was also open about that time.

It took us two or three days to clear our driveway and get more gas. I don't even remember where we got the gas. It was probably another three to five days before we got our driveway cleared enough that we could drive down our driveway. Beforehand, getting between the road and our house required a climb up and over the trees and crawling like my dad did.

I remember when my dad first got to our home, I asked him, *"Did the barn go down, and are the horses all dead?"*

He says, *"I don't know. I couldn't get down there. I don't think it went down."* He explained that he had gone straight to our house and had not tried to look.

We came back with the chain saws and cut our way to the barn, which turned out undamaged. I guess all the spruce trees around it blocked the wind. The barn lays down in a dip with several spruce trees surrounding and protecting it. If that barn had been over by our home, it would have been gone. I thought that was amazing. However, the stalls inside the barn have a honeycomb plastic floor that is a solid floor. In addition, we had big, heavy, rubber mats over the top of that. The horses had been so panicked during the night, locked in their stalls, that they had managed to come down with their hooves down the walls trying to dig their way out. When we got there all the floors were torn up and the horses couldn't wait to get out of there.

They were not injured but were wild and crazy and with the winds still blowing with over eighty MPH gust. We decided to get them out of the barn mainly because we still thought the barn was going to go down. So, we let all the horses out to the pasture.

Dana's experience echo's many of the Clatsop Plains experiences. When the storm finally ended on December 3rd it would take another five days to clear the highways into Clatsop County. It would take seven days to bring power back into the area. According to pictures and stories of those who survived the storm, over eighty percent of all the trees in Surf Pines had been blown down. It took many weeks of effort to clean up this mess and those who survived are so happy that this kind of storm only hits the Oregon Coast infrequently.

What we find interesting is that Oregonians call this tempest a bad winter storm, where people on the east coast call them hurricanes. So, here's to a good winter storm.