

One school jeopardized by rampaging river



This is how Marlinton appeared early Tuesday afternoon. Water remained deep in the streets, although it had receded nearly 6 feet from its high point. With the water flowing freely through the

streets it's hard to distinguish what bodies of water are where, but the Greenbrier River is to the left

Photo by Doug Chadwick

By Joann P. Rhody
Staff Writer

Sand bags ready, Greenbrier County's superintendent of schools spent Tuesday "watching and worrying" at Alderson Elementary as flood water rose within 4 or 5 feet of the brand new \$380,000 facility.

"We checked the 101-year flood (level) and built above the flood stage," Gordon Hanson said worriedly. He and a few employees manned the county's only school jeopardized by high water but no schools in Greenbrier were in session Tuesday, according to the superintendent.

There also was no school in flood-prone Pocahontas County but other districts, including Raleigh, Wyoming and Fayette, operated normally. Hanson said he authorized Pocahontas County emergency officials to use Greenbrier East's gymnasium for a temporary shelter. Sixty persons from a Marlinton residential home were to be transported to the Fairlea high school, he said.

Meanwhile Greenbrier's emergency services director, Ben Gee, transported blankets and cots to the high school from the West Virginia School of Osteopathic Medicine and evacuations from the Ronceverte area continued all day.

In mid-afternoon, some Pocahontas residents still remained trapped on roofs, according to Hanson's information. Telephone lines to Marlinton were out of service and power failures plagued vast sections of the Greenbrier Valley.

Meanwhile schools dismissed in

Summers County at 12:30 p.m. Tuesday, according to elementary supervisor Larry Deeds. High water at Bellepoint along W.Va. 3 and concern about the Greenbrier River led to the early dismissal, he said. School buildings were not in jeopardy.

In Monroe, surface water burst a hole in an exterior wall of the Gap Mills consolidated school, causing it to be closed Tuesday, said Monroe Superintendent Bobby Via.

He said a power blackout caused by Ronceverte's flooding affected not only Gap Mills but also the Union schools. Union staff, however, reported "they made it fine. They didn't have any lights but they were comfortable," the Monroe superintendent said.

Via said all Monroe County schools, including Gap Mills, would be open today if West Virginia Power Co. was able to repair the Ronceverte substation and restore service throughout the area. In the alternative, he said, the Union and Gap Mills schools would be closed while the rest of the county held school.

Uncertainties about how high the Greenbrier River would rise prevented officials in Greenbrier and Summers from predicting whether schools would be open.

Hanson, however, said it would be difficult for him to open any facilities in the eastern part of Greenbrier County, where Ronceverte, Reutek and Frankford experienced flooding. As for the river area, he said, "We probably can't get the students out of there."



Marlinton resident William Merchant made his escape from the second story of his home via ladder early Tuesday morning (photo left). Later in the day, unidentified rescuers helped some Marlinton residents on Eighth Street.

Photos by Doug Chadwick

Rescuers flock to Marlinton in wake of devastating flood

By John Blankenship
Staff Writer

Flood waters receded in Marlinton Tuesday after an estimated 800 people were evacuated from their homes.

There were reports of lives being lost. Rescuers reported seeing bodies of those who were trapped in their dwellings when the Greenbrier River rose rapidly in the pre-dawn hours. Four deaths in the county were confirmed late Tuesday.

Larry Tinney of the Richwood Fire Department and volunteers from several other fire area departments arrived in Marlinton early Tuesday, but they were unable to cross a bridge in the city because of flood waters cresting at about 22 feet.

"The water was so high it was over the bridge, and it wasn't safe to cross it," Tinney said. "The whole town was flooded."

Volunteers and firemen aided in rescue efforts on both sides of town after the flood waters had receded. A woman reportedly was found in her attic at Buckeye, where she had been stranded all night. She was a diabetic and was in shock, according to Tinney. The woman was taken to a temporary first aid station on higher ground near Buckeye and later was transported to a hospital in Lewisburg, the fireman said.

Tinney also said three Civil Air Patrol members stationed at Richwood were injured in an accident at Mill Point in Pocahontas County en route to Marlinton. The three were identified by a nursing supervisor at Human Hospital Greenbrier Valley in Lewisburg as Gary L. Hollingsworth, Herbert Wright and Marilyn Lynch. Hollingsworth and Lynch were in stable condition late Tuesday night, according to the supervisor. Wright was treated and released.

Rescue efforts began shortly after daybreak for about 50 patients at Pocahontas Memorial Hospital, which is about 250 yards from the river. Tinney said. The hospital staff remained at the facility until after the water went down. Then, many of the employees were transported to their homes outside the city by the Richwood Fire Department ambulance.

Several patients from the Marlinton hospital were transferred to Humana Hospital according to the nursing supervisor there. Tinney described the flood-ravaged scene this way:

"Cars were on top of trucks. Cars were everywhere when the water went down. A house was up against a bridge. It was a complete disaster."

Tinney said one of Richwood's fire trucks remained on stand-by at the Marlinton firehouse where all of the city's firefighting equipment was damaged by the flood.

Emergency generators powered Marlinton city hall Tuesday night. The city was without power, telephones and drinking water. Five baseloads of people were transported to shelters late Tuesday evening.

Free-lance photographer Doug Chadwick of Hill-sboro reported about 30 National Guard vehicles, carrying water and generators, were headed to Marlinton Tuesday evening. Dump trucks were sent in by the guard to help in clean-up efforts which are expected to begin today.

Earlier, the muddy Greenbrier had deposited tons of dirt and debris in the town's business district. "Water was at the tops of the doors in downtown," Chadwick recalled of the flood. "People in boats were pulling people out of buildings."

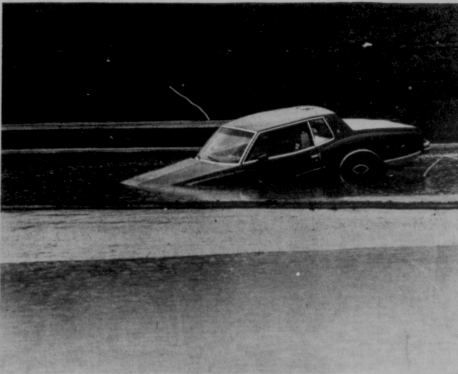
Chadwick said some of the victims were snatched from buildings already swept off their foundations. "One radio station kept on playing music because the staff couldn't get down to Marlinton to report on the flood," Chadwick said.

This flooding is said to be the worst of the century in the area. One 77-year-old man in Marlinton told rescuer Tom Dragan of Fayette County the flood is the worst he's seen in his life.

"But," Dragan said, "the man told me he's willing to go back and start all over again."



Rescuers from Wild Water Unlimited in Fayette County traveled to Pocahontas County to lend what assistance they could to flood victims. Photo by Doug Chadwick



This Chevrolet Monte Carlo was one of the flood victims of heavy rains in Lewis County. Traffic on both lanes of Interstate 79 just south of Jane Lew near Clarksburg was rerouted for most of the day. In the north central part of the state, 500 residents of Granville, near Morgantown, were evacuated as the result of days-long rain. Staff photo by John C. Dean