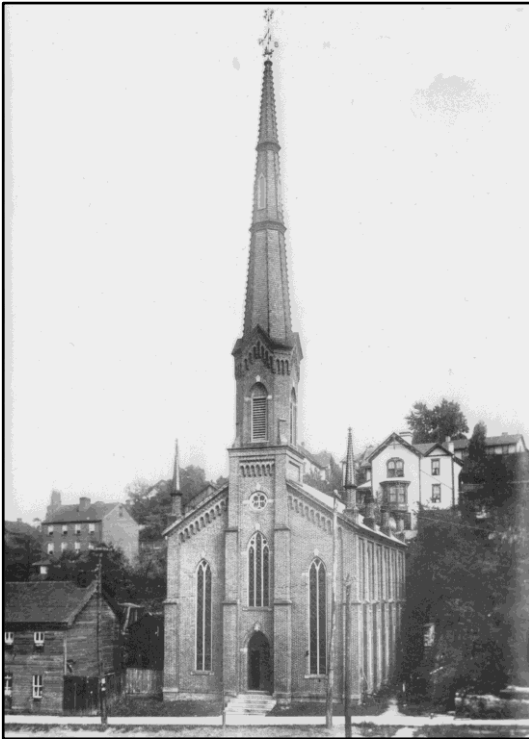


## THE BIG WIND

### REMEMBERING THE STORM OF 1936

I recently examined the historical post card collection of Raymond Christner, a longtime resident of Brownsville. One post card over which I lingered featured a photograph of the Second (Central) Presbyterian Church, High Street, Brownsville. My attention was drawn to the unusually high steeple on the church, a towering sixty-foot spire that can be spotted easily in any panoramic illustration of early twentieth century Brownsville.



**Central Presbyterian Church prior to 1936**

Today, the building stands on High Street opposite the municipal building. The steeple has been gone for years. It was a casualty of the worst storm ever to hit Brownsville, a fearsome gale that assaulted the town on a sultry summer afternoon.

News reports of that unforgettable storm described it variously as a “hurricane,” a “tornado,” and a “twister.” The Brownsville area had been experiencing an unbearable hot spell, with temperatures climbing above 100 degrees for several days running. In the late afternoon heat of Monday, July 27, 1936,

Brownsville residents hoped fervently for rain to break the heat wave. Relief from the heat came in a form that no one had anticipated.

Racing southward along the Monongahela River toward Brownsville, the “hurricane,” as it was called in a Brownsville *Telegraph* article published the next day, cut a swath to “Fayette City through Gillespie, Smock and Grindstone, into Brownsville, Republic, Maxwell, LaBelle and rural sections of Jefferson and Luzerne townships.” Preceded by an “ominous black cloud,” it descended upon Brownsville without warning a few moments before five o’clock in the afternoon.

Winds estimated at between 80 and 100 miles per hour roared over and through the town for sixteen terrifying minutes. As the *Telegraph* described it, “this community was held powerless in the grip of a new and fearful experience and then a driving four-hour rain brought additional damage and added to the misery already wrought. Never in the history of Brownsville has it ever felt the horror and desolation as the freak storm left in its wake yesterday.”

The windstorm roared in from the northwest. In a matter of seconds, Brownsville grew dark. The wind slammed into the town. Roofs were ripped off, chimneys flew apart. The air was thick with soot from disintegrating chimneys and with choking dust from collapsing structures of masonry and wood. The gale was accompanied by torrential rain. The downpour and the filthy air left figures standing only a few feet away almost indistinguishable.

The most spectacular casualty of the storm in the downtown area was the steeple of the Second (Central) Presbyterian Church. Eyewitnesses to the disaster said it was “as if a scythe had been used to take one layer of brick off the wall with each stroke.” The doomed steeple was blown straight backward. It toppled downward, smashing through the roof of the church, tearing a gaping thirty-by-fifty-foot hole as steeple, slate, wood and plaster roared down upon the balcony and auditorium floor in a deafening crash. Pews were crushed, stained glass windows shattered. In minutes the roar of the wind was replaced by the sound of cascading water as a four-hour-long driving rain poured water through the ruptured roof, soaking the dust-caked interior of the church.

Across High Street at the Brownsville *Telegraph*, workers fought a losing battle with water and wind. A flying Brownsville Motor Company sign crashed through the roof of the *Telegraph* building. Torrents of water entered through the hole in the roof, spread out over the ceiling of the entire building, then began drenching offices in dozens of different places. Huge rolls of newsprint were soaked before anything could be done to save them.

The storm sent stone and bits of slate whirling through the air as it



**This was the scene of destruction on the day after the storm. The gaping hole in the roof of the Central Presbyterian Church caused the congregation to shift its worship services to the First Presbyterian Church on North Bend (North Side) until the damage could be repaired. The small white building with the decorative trim visible in the background was the South Brownsville Post Office, which occupied the site where the municipal building was later constructed.**

tore roofs from homes and businesses, completely encompassing the South Side and the business district. Dozens of plate glass windows were shattered, trees were uprooted, and utility poles were downed.

The roof was torn from the Mount Zion A.M.E. Church on Cadwallader Street. Wind carried a brick from the wreckage of the Central Presbyterian steeple through a window in the South Brownsville Wholesale Grocery. Plate glass windows were blown out at the Paul Gerecter Furniture Company, Berky Electric Company, Woodward-Wright store, Solomon's Market, and other businesses. The roof of the Monongahela Railway roundhouse in South Brownsville was ruined.

The storm swept in from the northwest and "cut a path over the North Side" of Brownsville. The roof of the historic Philander C. Knox house on Front Street was blown across the street. The Joseph Dami residence on upper Front Street had its roof ripped off. The same fate met the roof of the home of Dr. A. K. Odbert on Beacon Hill. The roof of a garage owned by John Patrick of Locust Street was carried three

blocks, landing in the garden of John Marshall, also of Locust Street. In the Knoxville addition, “practically all windows were broken, garages demolished and houses wrecked.”

On Market Street, the roof of “a large Ohio sedan was caved in and the interior was completely filled with bricks that had fallen from a chimney.” Kaufman’s Department Store had the rear of its building stripped of its roof, then water drenched the fixtures and stock kept on the second floor.

The *Telegraph* reported that Brownsville Township’s Riverview grade school on Fifth Avenue was demolished. On Telegraph Road, at the home of Mrs. Marie Lunden, “the porch roof was torn loose and smashed flat against the front of the house.”

Even Lock No. 5 at Brownsville suffered damage. A gate on the inside chamber at the lock was damaged when a steamboat and its tow were forced back by the wind. “Despite the fact the engineer used full steam,” a news account explained, “the boat could not cope with the storm, which pushed the barges and boat back until they struck and bent a spar on the gate. The steamer was just leaving the lock, bound up-river.”

Outlying districts suffered as well. The roof of the Union Supply company store at Colonial 3 was carried 100 feet and crashed against the Colonial 3 hotel. The Methodist church at Rowes Run, a brick structure, was overturned and demolished. High winds blew away sections of the Brier Hill Garage, damaging several autos.

At Centerville, the roof of a barn flew one quarter of a mile and plunged into the bedroom of the Everett Weaver home. In the same area, the historic Taylor M. E. Church was unroofed and a brand-new electric organ was ruined.

Hopewell Presbyterian Church was badly damaged by the collapse of the rear wall after the roof had been torn off. “Heavy timbers and falling bricks completely ruined furnishings in one end of the building. Damage,” reported the *Telegraph*, “will run into many thousands.”

At Fredericktown, the unexpected gale caught two canoeists in the Monongahela River. The wind picked up the canoe and tossed Helen Virgin of Fredericktown and her companion into the foaming, wind-whipped water. They held onto the overturned canoe as bathers onshore hurried to their rescue. They suffered no ill effects from their brush with nature’s fury.

Tragedy struck at Smock. Eight-year-old John McCann of Smock was instantly killed, crushed when a bandstand collapsed on a dance hall during the storm. Twenty-three-year-old Henry Williams, also of Smock and manager of the Smock baseball team, died the next day from a

fractured skull suffered in the same incident.

When it was all over, when the soot and dust had settled, when the torrential rain had stopped, and when all had grown eerily quiet, people began to emerge from whatever cover they had sought during the storm. They were stunned by what they saw.

Never before and never since has such a swift, deadly natural disaster struck Brownsville. Even the floods had come with some warning and had been restricted to the areas along the river. Unlike a flood, this storm had arrived quickly and unexpectedly, done its deadly work, and was gone almost as swiftly. Now it was time to clean up. Cleanup efforts began immediately.

In addition to neighbor helping neighbor and local municipal workers pitching in, the WPA supplied five special trucks and a detail of



**The view after the storm from the Brownsville (inter-county) bridge, showing the I. N. Hagan store on the right, the A & P store left of center, and the steepleless Central Presbyterian Church in the center.**

fifty workers to help clean up the debris in Brownsville. Within days of the storm, Central Presbyterian leaders announced that Sunday School would meet as usual that coming Sunday, with classes held at the First Presbyterian Church on the North Side.

County Agent Rex Carr warned farmers of another menace. Soaked hay, drenched in barns unroofed in the storm, was a threat to burst into flame from spontaneous combustion. Carr reported that the entire corn crop was destroyed, about one third to one half of the oat crop survived,

and the fruit crop was a total loss.

In a final irony, on the day after the storm the *Brownsville Telegraph* ran a large block advertisement headlined “Windstorm Insurance.” It advised citizens that such insurance could be secured by contacting Fred J. Chalfant at Room 306, National Deposit Bank Building. For many would-be customers, the horse – not to mention the roof – was already out of the barn.

It had truly been, to borrow a phrase often applied to another well-known disaster, “a night to remember.” There are local residents who vividly remember the events of July 27, 1936. Next, some of them will share their personal recollections of that summer evening many years ago, when Mother Nature unleashed her power on an unprepared river town.

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### *SHARING MEMORIES OF THE STORM OF 1936*

After reading the article about the Storm of 1936, many readers have contacted me to share their memories of that awful afternoon. At the time of the storm, Mrs. Pauline Hanan Ingram, who is eighty-four years old, lived with her late first husband, Fred Hanan, on a farm they rented from Scott Hartley. As she described its location, the farm was situated on Rush Run Road near the crossroads, between Hopewell Church and old Telegraph Road.

On the afternoon of the storm, she was confined to her bed under doctor’s orders because she was seven months pregnant and had a history of premature births. She remembers that it was miserably hot that July afternoon, particularly since she could not get up and move around. Her husband was outdoors working on the farm. She was alone upstairs in the house, and the landlady was downstairs.

Her bed was situated with its headboard between two windows, and on the wall beyond the foot of her bed was another window. From her position in bed, she could see directly out that window. As the storm approached, she saw a washtub and other heavy items blowing around the yard. She saw no funnel cloud, but the sudden darkening of the sky and the wind frightened her.

She said that she “didn’t think it was possible for a storm to come up so quick and be gone so quick.” She rolled over on her side and looked out the window next to her. A barn was in easy view, directly

across the road. Its roof already had been partially blown off. Through the rain pelting the window pane she could see a blurred image of lightning “playing on the metal machinery” in the exposed interior of the barn.

She said she could not call for help; no one could hear her. The wind, she said, tore out trees and fences and ruined the cornfields. The chicken coop collapsed, but she later nursed the only injured fowl back to health. Fortunately the room from which she watched nature’s destruction was in a sturdy brick farmhouse. The storm left as quickly as it had come, and the home survived intact.

In a sad postscript, I asked her if the baby she was carrying came through the ordeal unscathed. She said the baby did, but when born in October, the baby had a broken arm and other problems and died in December.

“I only raised one of eleven,” she told me, meaning that the others had not lived to adulthood. Plagued by premature births, she said some of her children lived a while but died of complications due to their premature births. Today, modern medical care affords premature infants a much better chance of survival.

My own father, whose name is also Glenn, remembered that he and his childhood friend, Don McKenna, were swimming in the Monongahela River along the West Brownsville shore when they noticed the ominous sky. They left the river and began walking hurriedly back up the hill to Blainesburg, where they lived. They didn’t beat the storm.

It caught them on Pittsburgh hill, the steep road that leads up to Blainesburg from near the present-day West Brownsville borough building. At the time, my dad says, the guide rails along Pittsburgh hill were made up of posts spaced several yards apart, connected by two or three thick cables. When the wind struck, the boys held on to the bottom cable for dear life.

Once the storm had passed, they continued up the hill, then on to the upper end of Sixth Street, where my father’s home was located. There they saw that the neighbor’s garage, belonging to a family named Scally, had been “blown over the hill.” He arrived at his own house to find his family in the basement but only one window damaged.

I received a letter from Mr. Lester C. Martin of Vanderbilt in which he described the damage he recalls from the storm. He was eighteen years old at the time. He told me of his father’s hurried gathering of the horses into the barn when the storm approached. His home and barn were spared. He said that a number of windmills and spires were blown down in the area, which was about two miles southeast of Perryopolis.

He also told of several other structures damaged near Vanderbilt

and Flatwoods. He helped to replace the destroyed roof of Ollie Wells' barn near Grindstone. Accounts such as these make it clear that this storm affected a very wide area of southwestern Pennsylvania and did not cut a narrow swath such as would be expected if it were a tornado.

Mrs. Betty Jean Whetzel Lawrence, who was sixteen in 1936, telephoned to tell me that she and her parents were not at their home in Brownsville when the storm struck. Their house was in Brownsville Township on the north side of the Pike, "the second house south of Knoxville Road. There was our house, then Cameron's house, which was a big house on the corner of Knoxville Road off the Pike, then there were two double houses, a single house, then the Hilltop Garage. My father had built the Hilltop Garage."

"What was your father's name?" I asked.

"Well, they called him 'Ginger' Whetzel. John was his right name. My mother's name was Nellie."

At the time the storm hit, she and her parents were in Texas, where they were attending an exhibition. They had driven to Columbus, Ohio, left their automobile there, and taken the train to Texas. When they arrived back in Columbus, they went to her aunt's house, where they had left the car. Her aunt said to them, "Have you heard from home?"

"No," they replied.

"Well," her aunt said, "your roof is partially off your house, and the windows are broken."

Betty Jean recalled, "My dad made a beeline for the car; we threw our things in the car and came directly home."

On the journey home to Brownsville, "the car was silent, you know, coming home from Columbus. The only thing that my mother and I secretly were worrying about," she said, "was the china closet that was in that corner. We thought maybe that was the corner where the windows were broken, and that her china would be . . ."

She chuckled. "You know, you think of some of the silliest things!"

"How did the china come through?" I asked.

"It wasn't touched. The windows were broken in the living room; the rain poured in through that window. I had a piano in the living room, and the music was plastered against the wall. The Oriental rug was soaked. There was a large pot with a fern in it at the window, and it splashed mud all over the living room. We had a tile roof, and at the back end of that roof, the tiles were all blown off."

"Are you talking about the type of orange tile that is arched . . .?" I began.

"No, this was from Ohio, and they were flat squares of green tile. One of those tiles was blown to what we called the 'upper road' there at



the Pike. Taylors lived out that road, Howard Taylor. I don't think the road ever had a real name.

"One of our tiles blew through Taylor's front window and landed in the middle of the potato salad that they were serving! We all laughed about that later when he told us."

Betty explained that friends had stayed in the house until they returned home so that no one would break in. As we wrapped up our conversation, I got a surprise.

"Where do you live now?" I asked, wondering which part of our community she now called home.

"Lexington, Kentucky."

"Oh, you're back for a visit?" I assumed.

"I was back in the summer. I'm calling you from Lexington." A friend had clipped the column and sent it to her in Kentucky.

"Oh, you're in Lexington!" I exclaimed. "I missed that somehow." I began apologizing for running up her phone bill.

"Don't worry," she laughed, "I've got ten cents a minute, so that isn't so bad!"

Charles Yokum, who now lives in Vanderbilt, wrote me that at the time of the storm, he was working at the Barnard farm in Deemston Borough with his father Joseph, Frank Cleaver, Bobby Pryor, and Jimmie Elliot. They were hauling hay to be stacked.

Seeing the approaching storm, they took the horses two hundred yards to a sheep barn, closed the door, and crouched inside. The wind hit, the beams shifted, and the barn fell off its two-foot-high foundation. They got out of the still-upright structure and huddled together in the wind and rain, afraid the barn would collapse. It did not.

Charles declared, "Had this barn not been put together with wooden pins, as were used many years ago, it would have been completely destroyed, with a possibility of lost lives as well as a good team of horses."

He concluded his letter by writing, "This is clear in my mind today, and I can still see the storm clouds rolling up just like barrels. I was sixteen years old at the time and am the only one living today of the five that experienced this dreadful storm together."

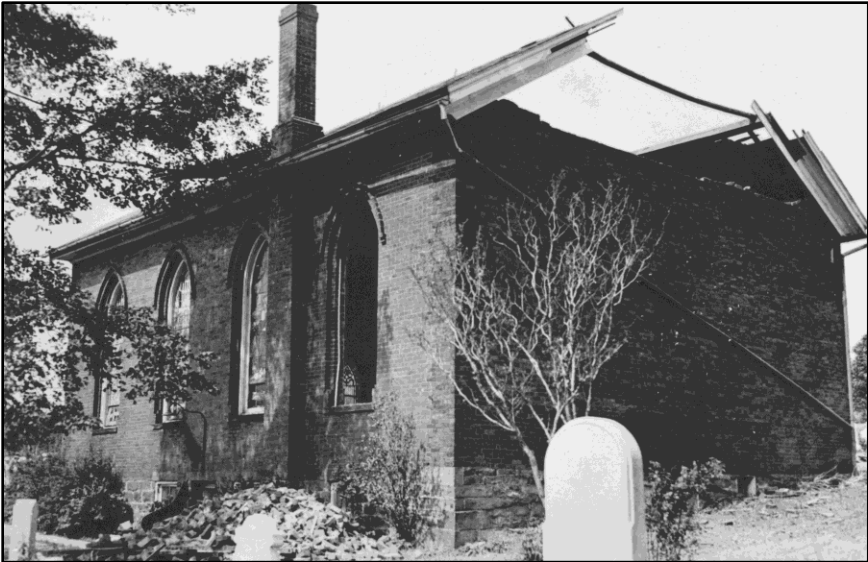
Pauline Paling Keller of Palm Coast, Florida, was a sixteen-year-old living in West Brownsville at the time of the storm. Pauline vividly remembers the "green and yellow boiling clouds" approaching West Brownsville from the direction of Blainesburg. She said she ran excitedly from window to window while her mother frantically begged her to take cover.

Ray Christner recalled that when the storm reached its height in

downtown Brownsville, the doors at the Strand Theater were chained shut to prevent patrons inside from exiting into the maelstrom beyond.

Albert Smith described returning as a teenager from an Ohio vacation after the storm had passed, noting the worsening damage as he neared Brownsville. He passed wind-ravaged Centerville, saw the damage to Taylor Church, noted the missing Presbyterian steeple in downtown Brownsville, and arrived home to a house missing part of its roof. The outhouse, he wrote, had tumbled into the railroad cut.

Josephine Camino MacIntosh, now of California, Pa., lived in Brownsville in 1936. She was nineteen years old. Her father operated the Joseph Camino Bakery in the 1400 block of Water Street, across the street from the present bus garage.



**Taylor Methodist Church near Centerville suffered damage to its roof.**

The bakery was struck by the flying roof of the closed T. S. Wright monument works building. Josephine recalls a funnel cloud approaching from the direction of Bridgeport mine, and that the force of the wind tore her shoe off. She found it later near the Monongahela Railway yard office.

Rebecca Binns Hoop of Blainesburg told me that the gale gave her a fear of storms that still haunts her sixty-three years later. To this day, she “almost panics” when a storm warning is broadcast.

She said she was twenty-two and living on Ridge Road on that

fateful day. She had never seen the sky so black. Fumbling at clothespins in her haste to take in the hanging laundry, she ran out of time to rescue the baby chicks running about the yard. They were never seen again. The barn was damaged, her house lost part of its roof, and water poured into the upstairs and drenched the kitchen below.

Rebecca then told me the fascinating tale of a very special monument in the graveyard of the Taylor Church. In what may have been a stroke of divine justice, the monument suffered severe damage in the storm.

Next, the strange story of the McCutcheon monument.

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### ***MOTHER NATURE STRIKES A BLOW FOR HUMILITY***

*"Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall."*

*Proverbs 16:18.*

This is the story of a local eccentric whose unusual last will and testament set the stage for a lesson in humility. The moral of this story is that a greater power can countermand the best laid plans of mortal man.

I wish to acknowledge several individuals from whom I have acquired information for this article. They include Floyd Gillis of Low Hill, who helped write *Centre to Center*, a book of reminiscences of Centerville borough; Rebecca Hoop of Blainesburg, who suggested that the story of the McCutcheon monument might interest readers; the Rev. John A. Springer, whose 1989 "Your Brownsville And Mine" column included details of the McCutcheon story; and Lindsey P. Gillis of Beallsville, who relayed an eyewitness account of the monument's gusty finale.

The historic Taylor United Methodist Church, founded in 1772, is in West Pike Run Township along old Route 40, four miles west of Brownsville. In the cemetery adjoining the church stands an unusual grave marker. Local residents call it the "Spite Monument." The story of the monument is that of a miserly old man who, rather than bequeath his fortune to his surviving family members, decreed in his will that his entire fortune was to be spent on a monument to himself.

James Shannon McCutcheon, one of three children, was born on January 15, 1828. At the age of two, his parents moved to East Bethlehem Township in Washington County, where James was raised.

He labored as a farm hand during his youth, saving and investing his money wisely.

As an adult, he purchased 127 acres of land on the present Tate Road near Taylor Church. Later, at the age of fifty-six, he bought the Denbo Farm and lived there until his death in 1902 at the age of seventy-eight. According to *Centre-To-Center*, the farm's "fine old brick house, built before the Civil War, is the present residence of the McAnulty's."

The Reverend John A. Springer wrote that McCutcheon's financial fortunes benefitted from the discovery of coal on his farm, and that he was a bachelor who "lived quietly and frugally with his sister. He came to Brownsville occasionally, mostly to the National Deposit Bank."

Unfortunately, when McCutcheon's sister married and moved away, he became an eccentric miser. Rather than pay the toll to use the covered bridge, it was said that he would cross the frozen Monongahela River on the ice. When asked to donate to church missions, this relatively wealthy man contributed one solitary dime. He once gave a dozen teaspoons as a wedding present and bragged that they "cost him every bit of a dollar."

What did McCutcheon plan to do with the money he was hoarding?

The story is that McCutcheon was talking to a Dr. Cotton of Centerville one day and reportedly said that "he was going to build a large burial monument to himself in Taylor Cemetery so that when people passed by on the National Pike, they would say, 'There lies Shannon McCutcheon.'"

Sure enough, he contracted with T. Wright and Company Marble Works of Brownsville to erect an eighty-five-foot high granite monument with a forty-five-foot base. His entire fortune was to be spent on its construction. The Rev. Springer noted that the price of the granite alone, purchased from a granite company in Barre, Vermont, was twenty thousand dollars.

McCutcheon supervised the project on a daily basis. Rumor was that he devoted his fortune to this memorial, rather than bequeathing his estate to his sister and her family, to spite her for moving away and leaving him to live alone. Locals soon nicknamed it the "Spite Monument."

Ironically, McCutcheon died before it was completed. According to details provided in *Centre-To-Center*, his will stated that "the monument was to cost around \$20,000. The balance of his estate was to be used for building a fence around the main monument with smaller monuments at each corner as high as the balance of his estate would permit. The corner monuments were to be the same style as the main one. The inside of the low granite wall surrounding the monument was to be paved with granite blocks."

Since the monument was not complete when he died, he was temporarily buried to the rear of the site. When the memorial was finished, his body was moved to its present location at the front.

For years, the towering spire could be seen for miles around. The name of Shannon McCutcheon undoubtedly passed many lips.

Then it happened.

On July 27, 1936, the infamous windstorm ripped through the area. Lindsey Gillis of Beallsville told me that his cousin, John Cleaver (owner of Cleaver's greenhouse in Richeyville), was caught in the storm. John was attempting to reach his home, which then was at Malden. When he reached Taylor Church, fallen trees blocked the road.

Unable to go further, Cleaver watched in wonder and awe as the tumultuous wind seized all but the pedestal of McCutcheon's eighty-five-foot high monument and hurled it to the ground. The granite obelisk smashed into the surrounding tombstones. Only the base of the monument was spared.

When the storm had subsided, an appraisal of the destruction was made. The builders of the original monument, T. Wright and Company, were no longer in business. Their successors, Simon White Sons Monument Company, assessed the damage. McCutcheon's will had specified that his entire fortune was to be spent on construction of the memorial. There was no money left to repair the damage. The shards of shattered granite were hauled away by Simon White Sons.

Now, ninety-seven years after his death, gentle winds waft by the empty pedestal, humbled without its grandiose spire.

And the breeze whispers ironically, "There lies Shannon McCutcheon."