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Picking Up the Pieces

By Alison Fromme

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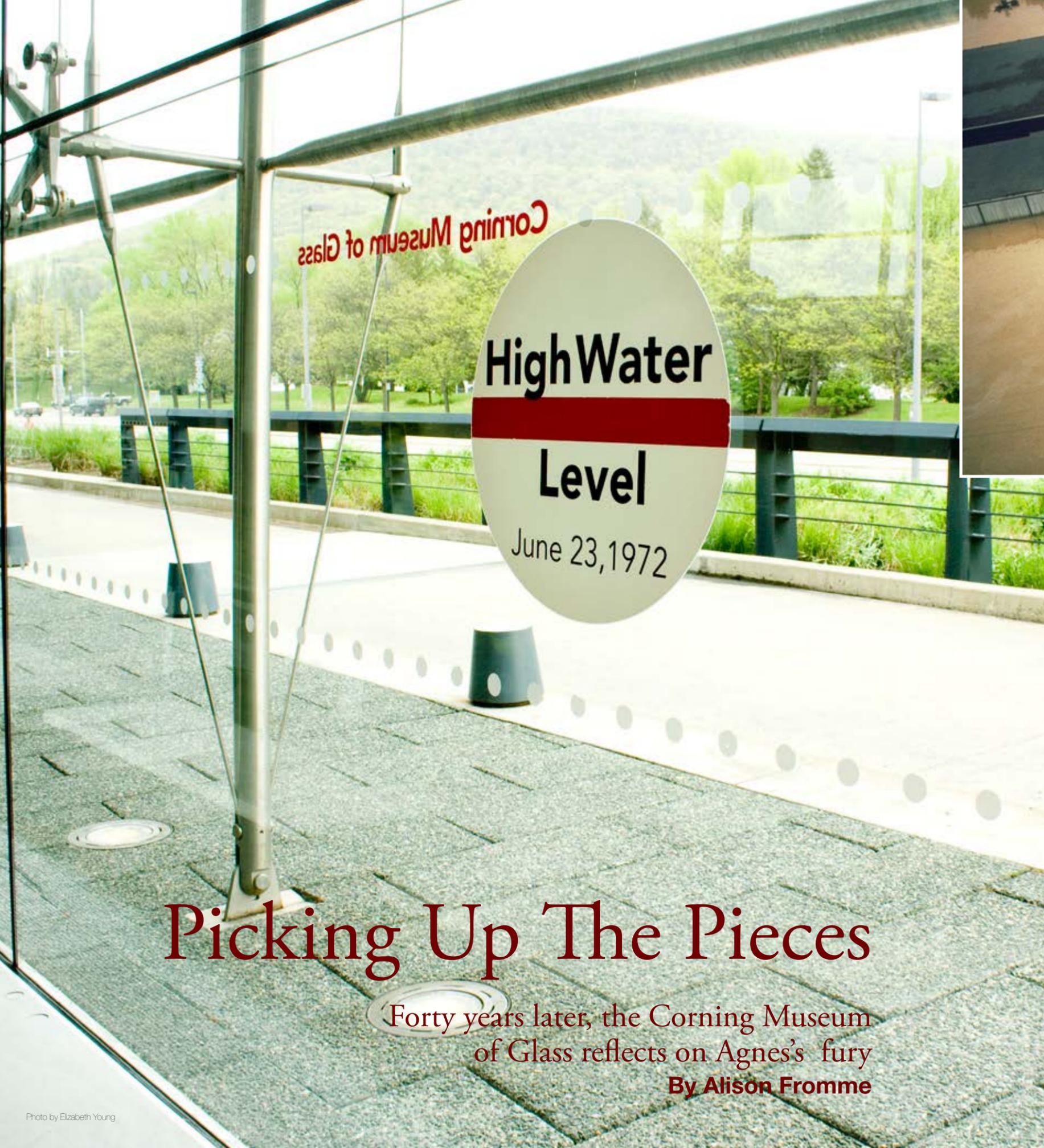


Photo Courtesy of The Corning Museum of Glass

Corning Museum of Glass curator Jane Shadel Spillman; (above) the museum under Agnes's waters.

Picking Up The Pieces

Forty years later, the Corning Museum of Glass reflects on Agnes's fury
By Alison Fromme

Forty years ago, in June of 1972, Jane Shadel Spillman finished up some loose ends at the Corning Museum of Glass, where she was an assistant curator, and prepared to leave for a conference and archaeological tour in Mexico. She packed her bag and closed the door of her apartment, located on Center Way, just across from the Museum. At least that's where her home was when she left.

About a week into her trip, in a Mexican hotel, Jane received a phone call from her parents, who lived in Tennessee. We hear there's trouble in Corning, they said. Flood. They had no idea how bad it was.

While Jane was gone, the city she knew was washed away by Hurricane Agnes. Across the eastern seaboard, the storm wreaked havoc, leaving more than 100 people dead and \$3 billion in damages. In Corning, lives were lost, houses torn off their foundations, the Museum of Glass shattered.

The Flood

On Wednesday, June 21, 1972, the people of Corning watched with curiosity as the Chemung River water rose up the dikes. A cold rain fell. People shivered. But most residents had faith in the dikes, which had been built after the last big flood decades earlier.

When storm sewers backed up in low-lying areas, firemen pumped water back over the dikes, calmly confident that their 800 gallons per minute could keep up with the excess water. By Thursday, the evening paper, the *Corning Leader*, proclaimed, “Sturdy Dikes Save Corning Once More.” No one foresaw the devastation to come.

John Fox, the director of the Corning Glass Center, which housed the Corning Museum of Glass, left work late that Thursday night, ate dinner with his family at their house in the Northside neighborhood, then returned to check on the sturdy two-story building with a glass façade. About half the employees had been sent home early, but some remained

into the evening. At the Main Plant, workers carefully and slowly shut down fiery glass-making tanks. If cold water seeped into the basement and reached the hot tanks, thousands of pounds of molten glass would explode in a massive fireball.

The dikes were full to the brim, and yet people still gathered to watch the water gush through the center of town. Downtown shops stayed open. Students ate cake at the St. Vincent’s School graduation ceremony, where Father Joseph Hogan quipped to eighth graders, “In all charity, you were always able to whip up a storm.”

Corning was—and still is—a small manufacturing town, where just 16,000 people were lead by a part-time mayor. The town is nestled where the Cohocton and Tioga Rivers merge to form the Chemung River. Most of the time back then, the Chemung was a calm, lazy river, 100 yards across. During dry spells, you could wade across some sections. Houses and factories line the river. Bridges cross it, linking the Northside and the Southside. Surrounding

the town, narrow green valleys lie between beautiful forested hills. But under that mostly quiet landscape lurks a topography ripe for rare but rip-roaring floods.

The previous flood spilled into town decades earlier. Some old-timers remembered that one, but the modern dikes—at twenty-seven feet—were failsafe. Right? The dam proposed years ago and dropped due to the cost was unnecessary. Right?

That cold Thursday night in June, John Fox saw officials closing the Center Way Bridge at 11 p.m. and knew he had to act quickly. He gathered his family and moved them into the Glass Center for safety. Several neighbors and two dogs joined them. The kids in the group made tents out of office rugs for entertainment, warmth, sleeping quarters.

John feared for the Museum and the thousands of precious glass objects within. Founded as a nonprofit in 1951, the Museum had grown into a source of local pride and a world-renowned epicenter of glass history, art, and technology.

Roman glass, Islamic relics, European masterpieces, and centuries-old books on glassmaking techniques lined shelves on the building’s second floor.

Darkness had fallen. Power failed. By midnight, the river was rising one foot per hour. John clambered into the Museum and attempted to save a Venetian Dragon-stem Goblet, the symbol of the Museum at the time, but he couldn’t open the wet display case.

Around 4 a.m., Corning Glass Works sounded the factory whistle. Usually a friendly sound marking a shift change, the whistle became an alarm bell just before the dikes broke. Sirens and horns relayed the signal to outlying areas. National Guard members banged on residents’ doors.

The Fox family watched from the Glass Center roof as the 1907 railroad bridge failed, even with coal cars placed on top intended to weigh it down. The bridge and coal cars had acted like a dam, holding back water and debris until it let loose. The torrent of water released gushed, rushed, swirled, and churned through the gates of the dikes, down streets, and into living rooms, then bedrooms.

Downstairs at the Glass Center, water rose and rose and rose, above the driveway ramp where the Fox’s had parked their car, thinking it would be safe. Water raged into the first floor entrance and continued rising past the ceiling and into the second floor Museum and down the hall to the research library. The water did not stop until it rose more than five feet above the second floor. The Glass Center essentially became an island towering among the wrath. Debris rushed past the building.

Glass crashed. An Islamic cup, blown and cut more than a thousand years ago, broke. An 1,800-year-old Roman pitcher broke. A German beaker, gilded with gold, broke. The Dragon-stem goblet broke. Some display cases toppled, shattering contents. Some floated and sloshed about. Some stayed bolted down, and water rose inside slowly, gently.

In the library, shelves tumbled. Books swelled, doubling their width. Photos absorbed water. Shelves warped. Paper began to disintegrate. Bindings broke. One extremely rare volume—*The Art of Glass*, printed in 1662, owned by King Charles II of England, the first book on



Photo Courtesy of The Corning Museum of Glass
Inside display cases, antique glassware picked up, set down, and filled with flood mud; (below) a museum office rearranged by flood waters.



Photo Courtesy of The Corning Museum of Glass

glassmaking published in English—lay sodden with mud.

Above, a State Police helicopter rescued the Fox’s crew from the Glass Center rooftop.

The Devastation

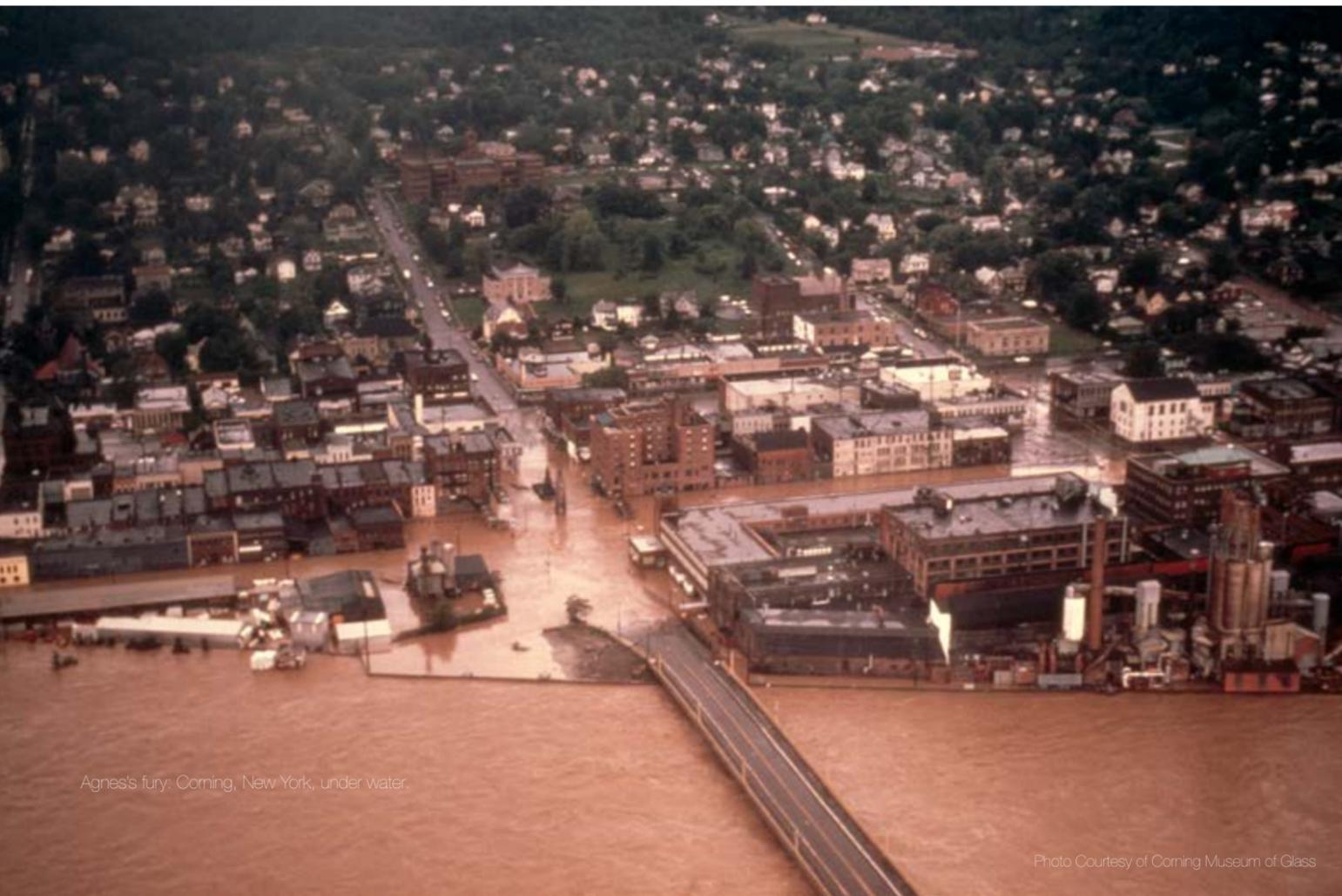
The flood itself was terrifying. But as the water receded, people were forced to face what had been lost. Flood mud coated virtually everything.

Tom Buechner, President of the Board of Trustees and founding director, and Raymond Errett, the Museum restorer, arrived on Saturday morning at

the Museum to find a thick, slick layer of mud—*inches of it*—covering floors, walls, everything. Raymond groped his way toward a storeroom, climbed over fallen display cases, and shuffled around broken glass to get tools to pry open cases and bookshelves.

Some display cases were left standing, mud residue clinging to the once clear cases, a line showing the high water mark. Some objects stood eerily upside down, as if the flood waters had gently, delicately lifted them and replaced them upside down, like some cruel prank.

Heartbreak and loss were acute at the



Agnes's fury: Corning, New York, under water.

Photo Courtesy of Corning Museum of Glass

Museum. People had spent years working on cherished, rare objects and books, the heirlooms of the world that had survived not just generations, but millennia. Buechner had grown the collection from a couple thousand objects in 1951 to more than 26,000 books and artifacts by the time of the flood. And the loss extended to the community. The Museum was a showcase of glass wonders on exhibit for passing tourists, the community itself, and the world.

But the real conservation emergency wasn't the glass. Librarian Virginia Wright arrived at 9 a.m. Saturday morning. "I wasn't interested in the cases or the glass," she said. "I just went on, I wanted to see what happened to my books."

Floodwaters swept the entire collection of 600 rare books off the shelves and into muddy chaos. Soggy books were already decaying and disintegrating. Mold and mildew threatened irreplaceable pages of cotton vellum and flaking paper and fragile leather bindings. Magazines, documents, archives, images, slides, films, and audiotapes lay limp and gritty. Moisture and slimy silt damaged almost everything and invited insects to pick

indiscriminately at centuries of knowledge. "To walk through the library, and see all these books in such bad shape, it was like hundreds of deaths all at once," said Virginia. "Everywhere we looked, there was damage and disappointment."

During all this time, Jane Shadel Spillman was safe and dry in Mexico. But she, and the rest of the Museum staff—and Corning and the region—faced a major undertaking ahead. Cleanup and restoration.

When Jane returned, the water was gone, but muddy wreckage still remained. Her Center Way apartment (now the site of the Guthrie Medical building) had ripped off the foundation and floated a few blocks until it landed on the dike. The water lifted her fridge and deposited it on the countertop. Her dishes remained unbroken in cabinets. Friends had reached her apartment before her return



Bookshelves buckled by waterlogged books; (below) community volunteers assisting in the massive clean-up.



Photo Courtesy of The Corning Museum of Glass

and scrawled on the fridge, "Jane, you have to clean up this mess." Jane later took a walk around town and saw one of her chairs in a tree.

Jane's parents were horrified at the damage she described. Her father, an engineer with the Army Corps, offered sympathy—thankfully not a reminder that he had warned her years earlier about the dangers of living under the flood line. Jane's grandmother's silver, an irreplaceable heirloom, washed downstream. She lamented to her parents that her books were destroyed. "I was in shock," Jane said. "It was mindboggling." She was one of 6,000 Corningites displaced from their homes.

Next, Jane went to the Museum. She had joined the staff almost exactly seven years earlier, right out of graduate school. It was the best job she was offered, one that would allow her to be involved in all kinds of museum operations. A week after the water overtopped the dikes, piles of soggy papers, carpets, desk chairs, and other debris towered at the entrance, a grim greeting. Jane was numb. "It was indescribable," she said. "And totally upsetting." Now she would be involved in yet another museum operation. A rescue mission.

Picking Up the Pieces

The Museum was set to reopen on August 1, just six weeks after the disaster hit. Director Tom Buechner, who "led by the force of his personality," according to student assistant William Warmus, made the decision. He could not stand to have tourists drive by the "closed" sign on the highway. That would have been a sign of defeat.

Employees groaned at Buechner's quick timeline. How would they accomplish such a Herculean task?

"Over the years, a lot of people have asked me why I didn't just leave, get a job somewhere else. But that never occurred to me," Jane says. "The obvious thing to me was stay here and clean things up."

Pricilla Price, Secretary to the Director, said that the staff loved the museum and they wondered how they would ever get through this ordeal. But volunteers showed up to shovel mud out of buildings. Experts flew in to help. Insurance claims were filed.

Some tasks couldn't wait. Librarians Virginia Wright and Norma Jenkins thought quickly to avoid the first conservation crisis. They knew that freezing books froze time, temporarily halting decay and insect damage. A summer intern found two home freezers and then a freezer truck to handle some paper. Some books were eventually sent to a meat locker in Watkins Glen, to share space with trophy game fish and wedding cakes. Boxes of 11,000 damp, muddy photos were taken to a backyard pool on Spencer Hill, where teens in bikinis volunteered to wash them and dry them out on the lawn.

Meanwhile, glass shards from display cases intermingled with ancient, valuable glass, hidden in four inches of flood mud. Workers strained mud with kitchen sieves to find lost pieces, placed fragments in boxes, kept notes about what went where. Mud tainted many of the Museum's 13,000 glass items, but only 528 broke.

The museum reopened on schedule,

and many out-of-towners were oblivious to the flood damage. Visitors couldn't believe the stories locals told. They didn't understand why everyone spoke of events as either "before the flood" or "after the flood."

In the Museum's back rooms, the restoration work continued for years. Slowly, painstakingly, the pieces



Photo Courtesy of The Corning Museum of Glass

For books damaged by the flooding, a specialized, no heat, dryer (pictured below) was used to remove the moisture from the books.

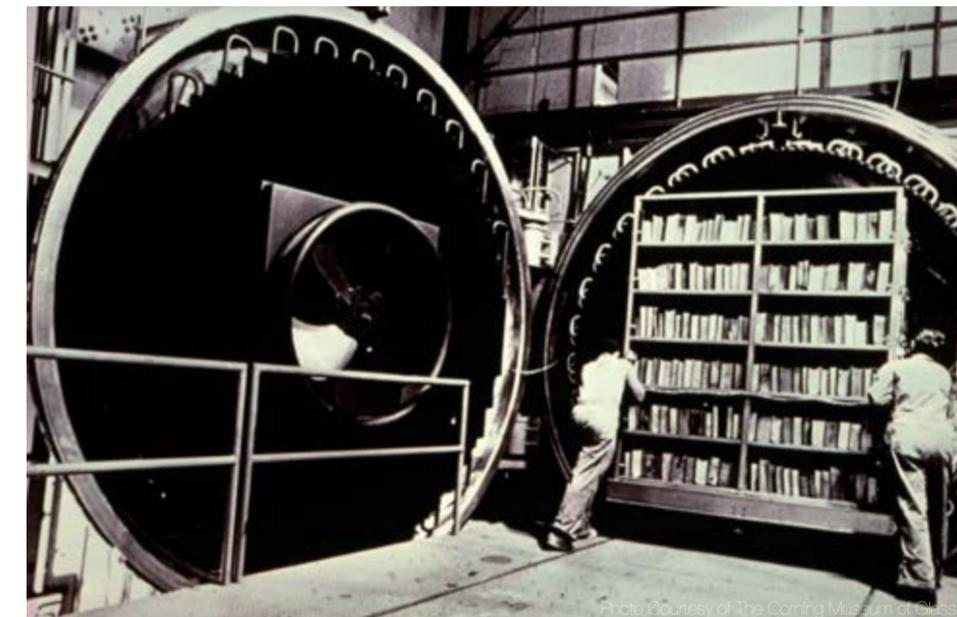


Photo Courtesy of The Corning Museum of Glass

