

P L E A S E
S T O P

THE DAY, ONE YEAR AGO, THAT
DROWNED PRATTSVILLE, NEW YORK,



T H E R A I N
G O D

H U R R I C A N E I R E N E N E A R L Y

P O P U L A T I O N 7 0 0 . B Y J O S H D E A N

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AM YOUNG saw no reason to worry. Like everyone else in Prattsville, a town perched on the edge of the Schoharie Creek, the 41-year-old single mother was accustomed to floods. When the water comes, it's predictable. It slurps over the bank at the bend in the creek, then runs down the sidewalk, onto her driveway, around the garage, and into the yard, where it backs up and ruins the grass. Pam didn't even feel especially hurried as she readied for the water while her 9-year-old son, Joey, played inside the house with his cousin Riley, also 9. She put on a T-shirt and shorts, moved her truck to higher ground, and readied the sump pump to do its work. *It's raining hard*, she thought, as the water fell in sheets. *But it's rained hard before.*

Pam was going about her preparations when a volunteer fireman showed up at the steps to say that the Prattsville Hose Company station was available as a refuge. Pam thanked the woman for her concern, but said she'd prefer to stay put with the boys. To move seemed unnecessary, and she didn't like the idea of leaving her two dogs and cat behind. Then she spotted her neighbors leaving in a rush.

"Oh my God," she yelled out to them. "Where are you going?" They told her they expected six feet of water in their front yard. They told her they'd been urged to leave.

If the neighbors are going, she thought, *then so am I.* Pam ran into the house to tell the kids and had begun throwing together an overnight bag when she saw the water. For the first time in the fifteen years she had lived in her house, Pam watched as a red-brown flow came up the back steps and into the house. That's when she knew it was too late. She was trapped.

Pam had been commuting an hour each way to her job in Albany for nearly two decades in order to live in the little white-and-green house that her grandfather built on Maple Lane. She moved into her home following the death of her grandmother, in 1996, and when her grandfather passed away a few years later, Pam knocked down some walls, replaced the roof, and installed gray siding to eliminate the hassle of re-

painting every few years. All told, she spent nearly \$200,000 over ten years.

Now, as she stood in the living room, a place that had always felt so safe, she was completely panicked. Outside the windows, her yard had been transformed into lake. She had no illusions about saving her furniture, but there were certain things she couldn't bear to lose, items she knew she'd miss if they were to disappear. There was the note her daughter, now grown, had written when she was little and angry and first able to put her feelings into words. There were the dried flowers from her grandparents' funerals. But before she could even pull the family photos off the wall, the water had risen to her waist.

Pam had a horrifying thought: If she didn't get off the first floor soon, she could drown in her own house. And worse than the prospect of her death was the thought of leaving the boys trapped alone upstairs with no way of calling for help. Pam ran up to the second story, the water lapping at her feet, and joined Joey and Riley in her bedroom.

The house began to shake violently. Something large had struck the front corner facing the creek and knocked the structure off the foundation. The house, nearly unmoored, made a quarter-turn and sagged as one side collapsed into the basement. When the movement stopped, Pam's entire house was leaning, practically tipping, and anything that wasn't nailed down began to slide toward the southeast corner, which was exposed to the current and taking direct hits from large objects in the water—furniture, downed trees, pieces of other homes. *Slam. Slam. Slam.*

With virtually no options, Pam pushed the kids and the pets out a bedroom window and onto the roof of an addition she had built in the place of an old porch. As the rest of the house peeled back, creating a two-foot tear with a view straight down into the dining room and kitchen, the addition, which rested on its own foundation, didn't budge. Pam went back and forth, from roof to house, never sure when the two structures would split apart completely. She grabbed dry-cleaning bags to help shield the kids and the dogs from the downpour, and then dumped the toy-train components out of some containers and put those over the children, too. Joey wailed as he watched his new school clothes, bought the night before, and his toys, including every one of his G.I. Joes, float out a window and into the maw.

Next door, large portions of her neighbor's home were torn away by the same detritus that was hitting hers, exposing its insides as if it were a giant, decrepit dollhouse. Fifteen mobile homes from a nearby trailer park floated past, one of them on fire and spinning wildly in an eddy of muddy water.

Every so often, the house would shake as another object struck it. *Slam.* Pam sensed that whatever was holding her home to the ground wouldn't hold for long. The current was so loud, it sounded like Niagara Falls.

When the boys began to scream awful things like, "I don't want to die!" Pam tried to distract them with song ("Rain, rain, go away") and then prayer ("Please, God, stop the rain"). Even the dogs were quivering, and they stuck close to the boys when Pam went back inside the house to call her daughter's boyfriend and—because she refused to break down in front of the children—to cry. It had been a terrible year already. She had been diagnosed with breast cancer and had only recently finished her final chemotherapy treatment. She was weak, physically and emotionally. When it dawned on her that she had some Valium in her purse, she took one.

Pam called 911 to ask when a boat was coming and was told that the first one had been dispatched. It never arrived. She later learned it had capsized, tossing its rescuers overboard. When she called back, she asked what she should use as a flotation device if she had to do the unthinkable and jump into the raging waters. The man replied that he would have someone call her back with an answer. No one ever did.

Before her phone finally died, well into the afternoon, Pam Young posted a message on Facebook: "Somebody please save us."

PRATTSVILLE, WHICH IS roughly 140 miles north of New York City, exists on a thin finger of land boxed in by the Schoharie Creek to the south and Huntersfield Mountain to the north. Like many Catskill creeks, the Schoharie often floods, a reality the town is well accustomed to. But on August 28, 2011, Prattsville bore the brunt of a second channel of angry water—the Huntersfield Creek, a smaller tributary on the eastern edge of town that runs down the side of the mountain before emptying into the Schoharie.

In an area as jagged and wet as the Catskills, the rain doesn't just come down and soak the ground, seeping into the soil until it reaches an aquifer deep in the earth. It pours onto the steep, rocky slopes of the mountains, filling streams that follow the land downhill until they empty into larger streams that empty into creeks that empty into reservoirs that provide water to places like Manhattan. During a hard rain, the typical mountain stream will swell from something you could cross on foot to a surging channel of white water. In extreme conditions, like those during Hurricane Irene, even the banks can't

Previous spread: Dave Rikard's home, a day after the storm.

*Pam Young
and her
son, Joey,
on the land
where her
home once
stood.*



hold the water as it chews away at the dirt, yanking down trees and sucking chunks of granite out of the mud.

Which is what happened to the Huntersfield last August. Of course, all of that sloop and water should have poured into the Schoharie, as it had for eons before. But the creek had been pinched, its bank lined with boulders to guide the water into a culvert that ran under the road—a pipe that quickly clogged once the trees and rocks came barreling downhill. Instead of emptying into the Schoharie, the Huntersfield Creek, running as heavy as it ever had, emptied into Prattsville, joining the larger creek's overflow. And it didn't stop until the rain did.

AT ABOUT 8:30 A.M., before the Huntersfield Creek blew its banks, Brian Young (no relation to Pam) was assessing damage from the rising Schoharie waters. He opened the door to the basement of his parents' house—just upstream of AJ Young & Son, the family's home, garden, and feed business—and saw water pouring through a hole it had ripped in the foundation. Brian, 32, hadn't thought for a moment that Irene posed any kind of threat, and even after the water started running down Main Street, he assumed everything would be fine. That is, until he opened the basement door.

Brian raced to the store and with the help of his younger brother, John, 28, scrambled to save what they could of the family business. The two began to move computers and generators to the second floor, where a

stuffed black bear stared out at the clothing showroom. They were assessing plans to shore up the shop's defenses when they realized that they hadn't seen or heard from their parents since they'd left them in the barn to look after the horses.

Across the waist-deep lake that used to be the store parking lot, surging water had trapped Jim and Peggy Young, 56 and 52, respectively, inside the red barn where they kept the soil and feed. They had been coaxing their horses up onto a feed platform as the waters, flowing at a rate that was impossible to comprehend, pinned the barn doors closed. Jim and Peggy climbed up onto the landing and screamed for help.

Brian, wielding a large piece of debris, smashed a window and pulled his parents out. John threw Peggy over his shoulder and made his way—struggling with each step against the current—back to the store, while Brian helped his father. Once across, the four of them, plus their three dogs, bunkered down on the second story of the shop. They sat, panting in relief. *At least we are all together*, they thought.

Then the building gave way.

A large object, possibly a house plucked off its plot just upstream, barreled into the side of Young's store, knocking the 100-plus-year-old building off its foundation. The store jerked and moved six feet, no longer tethered to its concrete base. By this point, the Young parents had entered a zombie state, paralyzed with fear. John and Brian

exchanged a look. They didn't need to speak. If the family was going to survive, it was on them to make it happen.

Each son took a parent and went onto a side deck, away from the most violent current. Brian fired off a text to his then-fiancée to tell her the family was trapped, and to "pray for us." John tied himself to a garden hose and stumbled into the water in an attempt to reach the firehouse a hundred yards away. Within a few steps, he was knocked off his feet. When he resurfaced, he screamed to his brother to pull him back. And Brian did—pulling the hose as hard as he'd ever pulled anything. Brian had nearly drowned in Brazil five years earlier. He couldn't help but think of that day now.

Worried that the deck wasn't safe enough, the brothers scanned the surroundings and saw only one possible refuge—they could climb to the top of a small pavilion where they stored their lawn mowers. It was set on pillars anchored into concrete. And that's where the Youngs made their stand, soaked and shivering on the steep metal roof as Prattsville collapsed around them.

The rain fell so hard that it was difficult to see, but the worst part, Brian thought, was the look of death in his parents' eyes. They were pale as ghosts and clutched together as if each were the only thing keeping the other safe. To this day, Brian can't forget the image. To him, they looked like the couple from the movie *Titanic*—terrified and certain this would be their end.

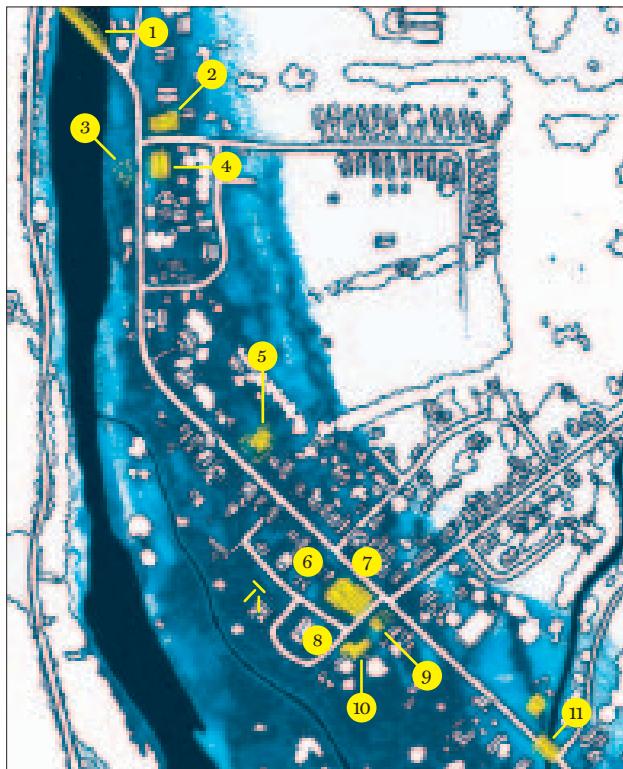
Focus on the dogs, he told his parents. *Hold them.*

BETTY O'HARA LIVES in the oldest house in Prattsville. She's 83 and has spent more than 60 years of her life in a former inn that was built around 1785 to house tired settlers moving through the mountains. The O'Hara House, as it's now known, was standing a half-century before Colonel Zadock Pratt founded Prattsville in 1833 and made it one of America's first planned communities.

Pratt served two terms as a U.S. congressman, during which time he created the Bureau of Engraving and Printing and supported the construction of the first transcontinental railroad. Nearly every building on Main Street today dates back to Pratt's time, and his former office now contains the Zadock Pratt Museum, of which Betty O'Hara is the president.

Betty and her late husband, Tom, raised four kids there while running the town's most iconic business, O'Hara's service station—directly across Main Street—for 47 years. When Tom retired, he passed the station on to his son Michael, who passed it on to his sons, Kipp and Kory, who is also the town supervisor.

Betty expected to ride out this flood the



Where the Water Went

1. Route 23 Bridge
2. Pam Young's house
3. The O'Hara service station
4. Betty O'Hara's house
5. Dave Rikard's house
6. Peggy and Jim Young's barn
7. The Youngs' pavilion
8. Prattville Hose Company
9. AJ Young & Son
10. Peggy and Jim Young's house
11. Huntersfield Creek bridge



Betty O'Hara in front of her 227-year-old home.

same way she had the eighteen others that had come before it: by sitting in her living room watching the rain. The few times the Schoharie had breached its banks, it flooded the service station and ruined some inventory. A mere nuisance, Betty always thought.

In fact, Betty had no plans to leave her house, even when the water threatened the hem on her dress. If her grandsons hadn't insisted she evacuate, if Kipp hadn't said that he'd never seen the water like this, she would have been content to sit tight and safeguard her life's possessions. But when Kipp came to take her to safety, she didn't fight. He helped her out the door and into his pickup truck, and plowed across fields to the fire station, where Betty and a dozen others crammed into the first and only ambulance to make it out of town before the roads were totally impassable. By the time they reached the Hide-away Hotel, two miles up the hill from town,

even the firemen were helpless, trapped on the second floor of the station.

DAVE RIKARD WOKE up with a start at the sound of the Prattsville Hose Company's alarm. It was 8 A.M., and he was still a little groggy from the previous day's Fire Department clambake. Rikard, 53, had a yellow-and-blue Victorian with his 6-year-old son, Jamison, who'd spent the night with Grandma outside of town, and his 22-year-old daughter, Anastasia, who was still sleeping in her room at the back of the house.

It was pouring outside, but the forecast had called for only an indirect hit, so Rikard—Prattsville's resident lawyer and the vice-president of the Hose Company—expected to spend the day pumping water out of basements, as he had in previous floods.

He went to the station and checked in with the chief, and when he heard that

members of the company had been sent to urge people to move to higher ground, Rikard decided it was probably wise to go home, wake his daughter, and move the car. When Anastasia dropped him back at the station, it was with the understanding that she was only going to make a quick stop back at the house to pick up some things before heading to her grandmother's.

Starting at 8:30, the station's phone and radio went berserk as calls came in from all over town. Chief Tommy Olson thought the tanker truck might be stable enough to drive through the water without getting swept away, but just as Dave pushed the button to raise the bay door of the station so his nephew Sam could move the truck out, the driveway behind it peeled up in one piece and keeled over backward. Dave looked at Sam, then closed the door. The Prattsville Hose Company, the town's only rescue squad, was now as trapped as everyone else.

For the next several hours, Rikard watched the water swallow Main Street, rising up steps and over windows. From the firehouse, he could see his chimney and white picket fence. He was shocked when Anastasia called to say that she'd been stuck in the house and that their neighbors, the Carrs, were practically clinging to their collapsing house. Rikard paced the firehouse floor, telling Anastasia to look for ropes or flotation devices or anything she could toss over to the Carrs, but before she could, she screamed. *Dad, the house is moving!*

Rikard ran back to the window. He could no longer see his chimney.

EVEN AFTER HER FATHER woke her up, Anastasia Rikard wasn't sure why everyone was so freaked out. He wanted her to go straight to her grandmother's, but she told him she'd rather just head to Mom's, in Catskill. After dropping him off at the station, she went home and packed a bag, but by the time she'd changed into jeans and a T-shirt, water was up in the driveway. There was no way she was going to be able to get her car out. *Oh well*, she thought, *the water will go down*.

Anastasia went up to her bedroom, opened her laptop, and began killing time. She browsed Facebook and reassured her mom and friends via text, but every time she went to the stairs, the water just kept rising, and she began to feel the house swaying in the current. Cracks formed in the corners of her room, and molding snapped off doorways. She had a terrifying close-up view out her window as the house next door began to collapse on itself, trapping the Carrs in a room. She tried to communicate, but it didn't matter how loudly

she yelled. Anastasia saw their mouths moving, but heard only the deafening roar of the water.

She called her father's cell to plead for someone to come save them, but hadn't yet grasped just how much she was in need of rescue herself. The house was shaking, and chunks of plaster dropped from the walls and ceiling as it shifted, wheezed, and then fell forward with a horrifying crunch. Suddenly, her second-floor bedroom was at ground level and sloped at such a steep angle that she had to use the hallway railing just to pull herself to Dad's room in the back. It had a small bathroom in the far corner, and that's where Anastasia Rikard spent the longest two hours of her life.

Her cell-phone battery lasted long enough for her to talk to her father, who tried to comfort her, and her mother, who was on the other line when the toilet popped up out of the floor. Then the phone died and she was alone—just her, the cat, and the dog. She sat and waited, sat and waited, for what felt like days.

Dad's final warning had been to jump out the back if she felt the house was going to go, but Anastasia never let herself consider that possibility. She knew that if she went into the water, she wasn't coming out.

IRENE WASN'T SUPPOSED to hit the Catskills. The western jet stream, which typically stalls a hurricane's northward charge somewhere in the mid-Atlantic, stayed wide of the storm, allowing it to churn up the coast unimpeded. By the time the spiraling mass reached New York, it had been downgraded to a tropical storm, with winds reaching 65 miles per hour. But Irene's strength wasn't the problem; it was the size. The storm measured roughly 500 miles across—big enough that a chunk of the system stayed out over water, providing moisture for rain. And when a massive weather event like Irene hits the mountains, the topography forces the air upward, where it cools rapidly and creates the kind of torrential rain that's measured in inches per hour.

Starting in the early hours of August 28 and peaking between 7 and 9 A.M., Irene dumped up to fourteen inches of rain on the Catskills, creating "exceptional rates of surface runoff and stream flow," according to a postmortem study. At its worst, the force of the water equaled the flow of Niagara Falls. Some 50 stream gauges in eastern New York measured new record flow rates, including the one in Prattsville, which registered 50,000 cubic feet per second of water before it broke (but was estimated to hit 80,500 cf/s, nearly twice the previous high). Downstream, in Gilboa, a gauge hit 108,000 cf/s, shattering

the previous record of 70,800, measured during the infamous 1996 flood.

Three hours south in New York City, Mayor Bloomberg had ordered evacuations of low-lying areas, and the media panic over the storm's projected path had scared many people out of the city entirely. When the waters wrapped around Moore's Motel, just east of Betty O'Hara's house, they stranded a group from Long Island in a motel room they had fled to for safety.

PAM YOUNG LOST TRACK of how many times she thought her life was over. She sat on the roof of the addition in the pounding rain with the kids and the dogs for six or eight hours, she still isn't sure, running through scenarios until it finally seemed safe enough to hop back across the gap and into her house, where the floor had tilted so dramatically that it messed with their equilibrium.

With no way of communicating with the outside world, Pam had no idea how soon help would arrive. She'd been staring at the Route 23 Bridge all day, using it as a marker of the water's height, and she kept going back to the window to be certain it was receding. When it crested over the deck of the bridge and then dropped back, she knew she would live.

In the midafternoon, she spotted three men carefully crossing the swaying metal span, which was littered with debris and at risk of collapsing into the rapids. The water was down, but still flowing, so with the help of a neighbor who'd also been trapped, the men—one of whom she recognized as a 17-year-old junior firefighter named Cody Voorhees—were able to run a cable to Young's deck. Using the line for stability, a rescuer made it across the lawn and, her eyes watering at the sight, Pam watched as he climbed up onto the roof and into a bedroom window. His boots hit the floor with a thud.

The man went downstairs, cleared away the ruined furniture and mud, shimmed open the sliding glass door, and then hooked the cable first to Young's nephew, and then to her son. Pam cradled her smaller dog, while a rescuer hoisted her 80-pound Golden Retriever over his shoulder and wrapped her 16-year-old cat in a blanket. He led the way through the watery yard to the trailer park, where Pam was told that people had watched her plight in horror from afar, unable to help.

Pam looked back at her house, nearly toppled, and her neighbor's, which was in an even worse state, and then across the street at the spot where O'Hara's service station had stood. The building, made of cinder block and anchored to concrete, was gone. Not crumpled. Not collapsed. But gone. As if it never had existed. Once

again, Pam cried.

Across town, Brian, John, Jim, and Peggy Young spent four hours stuck on a metal roof in the pouring rain, huddled around a cupola, with only bags of mulch to keep them from sliding off. They, too, noticed the waters easing, and by midafternoon, the Young boys were able to move their parents and the dogs back across the water and into the store, which now sat six feet west of its original foundation. The four stripped off their wet clothes, picked new coats and sweatshirts from the surviving inventory, and waited for help to arrive.

At the fire station, Rikard and the rest of the fire crew were finally able to get out of the building around 4 P.M. The water was still four feet deep, and in some areas where it had fully receded, they saw trenches eight feet deep that had been cut into the earth. It was still too dangerous to cross Main Street, so Dave and Sam picked their way through the carnage, around crumpled houses and through torn-up yards, until they had a good view of his house. It sat half-collapsed into the front yard, but that hardly mattered. He had a perfect view of a rescue crew on a raft forming a human pyramid to pull Anastasia from a second-story window.

AT THE HIDEAWAY HOTEL, Betty O'Hara could barely sleep. Prattsville's cell-phone tower had failed that night, and the phones and power were severed during the storm. Betty had had no contact with her grandsons or anyone else in Prattsville since she got into the back of the ambulance and headed up the hill. Determined to get home, she packed her bag, wandered out to the road, and raised a thumb in the dim light.

She hadn't even been waiting five minutes before a car pulled up. It was Debbie Baker. Debbie and her husband, Steve, own and operate Moore's Motel, as well as the town's trailer park and a modular-home business. It's likely no one in town suffered more total damages. They lost a garage, fifteen trailers, and six model homes worth more than \$500,000, all of which was swept away and left crushed in the twenty-foot-high piles that accumulated in the woods just west of town.

With all the mud and debris, Debbie Baker's car was unable to reach Main Street. Betty thanked her, got out, and waved down a four-wheeler driven by Jim and Peggy Young. They told Betty to hop on.

As the sun rose, so did the temperature, and the day after the storm was suffocatingly humid. Helicopters buzzed overhead. First responders were everywhere. The National Guard had arrived to seal off the damaged roads and a neighborhood watch discouraged looters.



Anastasia Rikard and
her father, Dave.

So catastrophic was the damage that Betty didn't even notice that her car had busted out the back of her garage, or that her shed and barn were in shambles. Clumps of trees had vanished. Entire houses were obliterated. And, worst of all, her family's service station, including the foundation and the pavement around it, was gone.

Every structure on the strip that comprises Main Street was partly or fully destroyed, including all 22 of the town's businesses. Eleven houses collapsed in the flood, fifteen were condemned and torn down, more than 100 homes were so damaged that the residents couldn't return to them, but, amazingly, there were zero fatalities. It took the contractor who won the job more than a month to haul all the junk out of Prattsville. Today, much of the town still looks, as Betty put it that afternoon, like it had been hit by a bomb.

PRATTSVILLE WAS NOT alone in suffering the wrath of Irene. Across the region and the Hudson Valley, more than 600 homes were destroyed, 150 major highways were damaged, and 22 state bridges were forced to close. Upstate New York "paid a terrible, terrible price for this storm," Governor Andrew Cuomo said. He estimated the damage from Irene would come close to \$1 billion and announced, when he visited with Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano at his side, that Prattsville was among the worst-hit towns. But nearly a year after the storm, Prattsville is piecing itself back together: A town that lacked jobs, had a dwindling population, and was increasingly boxed in by watershed lands was given another chance.

Betty O'Hara's home has been stripped back to its creaky wooden bones, but with

the help of various grants and volunteers, Prattsville's oldest house is in the process of returning as an even nicer version of its former self, right down to a new, more solid foundation. Like everyone in town, Betty lost invaluable artifacts—family photos, her wedding dress, her grandparents' antiques. But one very important object made it: her late husband's ashes. After the storm, the urn was found upside down and filthy, but still sealed.

Across the street, Kody and Kipp began rebuilding O'Hara's station on the exact footprint of the original, as soon as they could clear the junk from the site. It's unpainted, and still has a dirt parking lot, but it's open for business.

Dave Rikard's yellow house became the symbol of Prattsville's destruction. A photo of the place, crumbled and covered in graffiti (one scrawl read, "God Save Prattsville"), appeared in papers around the world. Within weeks, it was razed. He plans to rebuild.

Peggy Young and her husband have agreed to borrow \$500,000 to rebuild the store that had been paid off for decades, but she's feeling happier than she's been in years. As her son Brian told her, *If you think you're going to die and you end up living, even if you lose everything around you, you still feel like the luckiest person on Earth.*

It seemed like most everyone in town was finding a way to resume their lives—everyone except for Pam Young. Pam was one of the few town residents who had flood insurance, and as soon as her adjuster released the check, she arranged to have what remained of the house demolished. She flattened the land and planted four trees as a memorial; one of the only things that remain from before the flood is a section of the hedge her grandfather had put in.

With the insurance money, Pam bought a house outside Albany, closer to her job and her son's school. She's over \$70,000 in out-of-pocket costs replacing every plate and fork and hammer from her previous life. But Pam isn't giving up on Prattsville. She held on to her land, and now thinks she might rebuild someday, perhaps in retirement.

At least she has her grandfather's rocking chair. It was one of two chairs that sat on a patio next to the garage, and while the garage vanished on August 28 along with two sheds and an aboveground pool, the rocking chair was still there when the waters finally gave way. Pam remembers seeing it as the rescuers rushed her out. "It made me feel like my grandfather was watching us," she said. ■