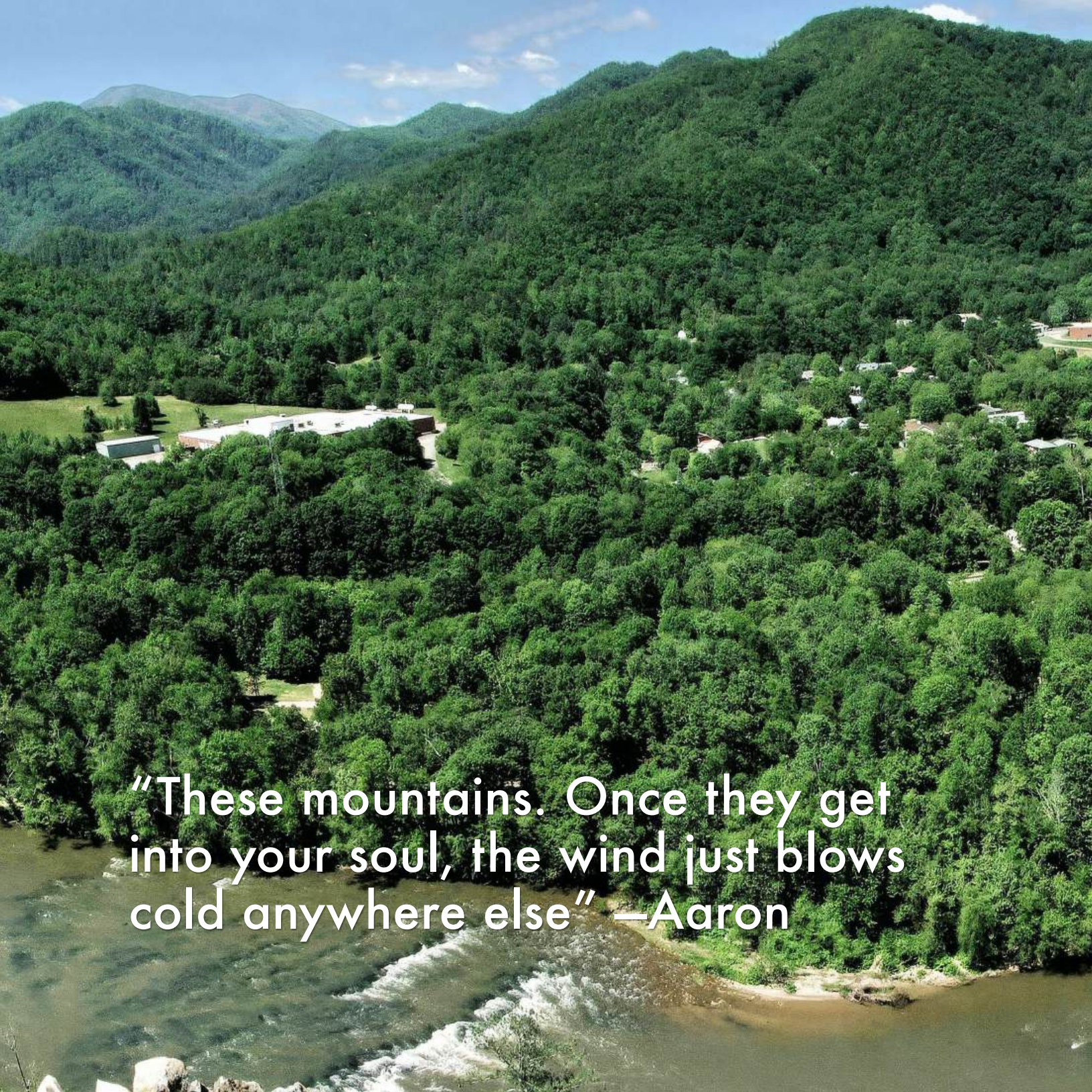


Through Our Eyes

A Community's Photographic Memory of
Hurricane Helene One Year Later.

An aerial photograph of a lush green mountain valley. A river flows through the bottom of the frame, with white rapids visible. A small town or village is nestled in the valley, surrounded by dense forest. In the background, more mountains are visible under a blue sky with some clouds.

"These mountains. Once they get
into your soul, the wind just blows
cold anywhere else" —Aaron





WELCOME

The Introduction

Our roots run deeper than the water ever rises.

Situated along a horseshoe bend of the French Broad River, Hot Springs, North Carolina is a town shaped by water, by mountains, and by memory.

Long before it carried its modern name, this land was known to the Cherokee, who came to bathe in the warm mineral springs rising from deep within the earth. They called it healing ground. Later, travelers arrived by rail in search of rest and renewal. Grand hotels welcomed guests from across the country—each a monument to the town's golden age. Music filled the ballrooms. Steam rose from gardens and verandas. One by one, they turned to cinder. But the town never disappeared.

“We call it the vortex,” said Amanda Arnett. “If you are meant to be here—body, mind, soul—then there's no place touches you like this place.”

That pull is hard to explain but easy to feel. It lingers in the stillness of the poplars, in the turns of the river, in stories passed from porch to porch.

And stories abound here—of reinvention, of return. The Buncombe Turnpike once traced the river’s edge, driving cattle and hogs from Tennessee to South Carolina and bringing traders and cowboys through town. In time, the trains came, followed by textile mills and steady streams of visitors. During World War I, the grand Mountain Park Hotel became an internment camp for German civilians, who planted gardens and passed the months on unfamiliar soil. When those seasons ended, the town found new ways forward, as it always has.



“Town was pretty busy until they opened Interstate 40, and then it more or less died,” said Mayor Abby Norton. “But after Gene Hicks bought the spa property, Hot Springs has been rebuilding.” It has always found a way forward after change, holding on to the qualities that make it home.



“It was a safe place to grow up,” Abby recalled. “You could get out and ride your bikes and go visit friends. Everybody knew everybody... it was just a wonderful place to grow up.” That feeling is rooted in the beauty of nature: the mountains, the river, and the land itself.

The Appalachian Trail runs through downtown—not around it, but directly through the center. It follows sidewalks, crosses the bridge, winds past porches and storefronts before slipping back into the woods. Like the highway. Like the rail line that once brought visitors by the hundreds. These paths don’t bypass us. They pass through us. They carry people, memory, and change. They remind us that Hot Springs has always been a place you move through and return to. A place that leaves a mark.





The French Broad River runs through it, too—beautiful and unruly. Thought to be the third oldest river in the world, it winds through the Appalachian Mountains, themselves among the oldest on earth. In summer, it carries rafts and laughter downstream. But the same water that brings joy can also take it away. The river has flooded before.

In 1916, it swallowed bridges and fields. In 1977, it swept through homes and shops downtown, leaving behind mud and destruction. In September 2024, the waters rose again.

“This is so much worse than it was in ’77,” said Abby. “This is going to take a while. But even then, I had no idea how long that while would be.” Still, through it all, something held. A sense of community you’d be hard pressed to find anywhere else.

“I’m so proud of this town for pulling together after Hurricane Helene,” Abby said. “And they still are. We live here because we love Hot Springs.” That love is what endures. It does not look away from hardship; it stands within it. This town has never been defined by any one era or industry. Its strength lives in those who keep showing up, who carry the old stories and make room for new ones. Reinvention is part of its identity. It lives in the hollers and the steam, in front-step laughter and neighborly kindness, in the Appalachian grit passed down like an heirloom.

As Heather Hicks, manager of the Hot Springs Resort & Spa, put it: “We build grand things. We bring people in. And then, sometimes, outside forces humble us. But we rebuild and recenter through our community every single time. We’re constantly participating in history, and we understand the weight we’re carrying with us. That’s the great thing about being Appalachian. We share those stories and those songs. The river sings those stories and songs. The history of Hot Springs is tumultuous, but hopeful. Even with the storm.”

Helene did not mark our end. She reminded us who we’ve always been: A community that rises. Not just after storms, but because of them. What follows is our memory of that time—*through our eyes*.





The Waiting

The water came slowly,
then all at once.



Thursday, September 26, 2024, began like any other morning in Hot Springs, North Carolina. At Artisun Gallery and Café, steam rose from coffee mugs as Gio worked the counter. Regulars filtered in, the day unfolding gently. The mood was light, even as the forecast lingered at the edges of every conversation.

“Some people were saying the sky is falling,” Phillip recalled. He and his wife, Pascha, had run the gallery since 2019, showcasing the work of local artists and craftspeople. “And others were saying, ‘This is just another typical Hot Springs hurricane event.’”

That kind of talk felt familiar. A little worry, a little humor. We’d heard it all before—gusty wind, early-fallen leaves, and a few days of cleanup with brooms and chainsaws. That’s how storms usually passed through these mountains.

But this time, the ground told a different story. Three days of rain had already soaked every inch of the valley. The mountains, generous as they were, could no longer hold it. Creeks pressed against their banks. Ditches frothed with runoff. Water was searching for a way out. By 8:00 a.m., the lower end of River Road had vanished beneath the French Broad.

Some residents packed up and headed for higher ground with little more than a backpack and a prayer. Others stayed put, glued to radar apps, hoping this storm—like so many before—would blow over.

But by midmorning, the air had changed. Dense. Close. Like it was waiting.

Phillip taped a sign to the gallery door:

**We’re closing a little early
because our staff may not know
how to swim very well.**

It was meant as a joke. But beneath it, something unspoken stirred.

Pascha was keeping watch from home. “We anticipated some flooding,” she said. “Especially in Marshall. Our store there is right on the river. But we thought Hot Springs would be okay. It’s seen this before.”

“I had a neighbor move a few things in Marshall. Phillip biked into town to check on Artisun. Volunteers had stacked sandbags in front of the doors, wrapped plastic tight. It looked like it might hold.”



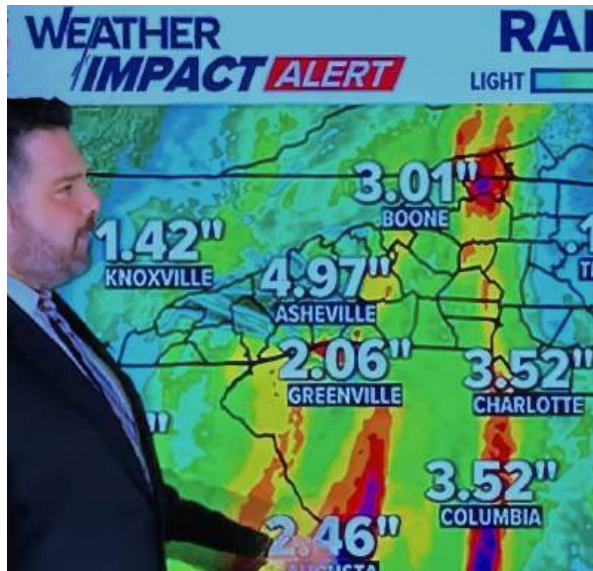
That afternoon, people had begun gathering at the Department of Transportation shed on the edge of town to fill sandbags. At first, it was just a few residents. But within hours, there were dozens—shoveling, sweating, loading pickup trucks with bags and hauling it the mile and a half into downtown. Another crew waited there to stack them and reinforce Bridge Street, trying to hold the line.

We didn't know how bad Hurricane Helene would be. But we knew how to show up for one another. Now, all we could do was wait.





As the wind picked up and the skies began to shift, a familiar weight settled over the valley—the stillness before everything changes. For those who had lived through hurricanes before, the feeling wasn't new.



You can't stop what's coming. But you can meet it with readiness and resolve.

Through the night, phones began to buzz. First a flash flood watch. Then a warning. Then another. Each one more urgent than the last. The kind of alerts you do not swipe away. Some people tried to sleep, but rest came in uneasy stretches. Others stayed up, watching radar, checking in with friends, listening for the sound of rain on the roof.

Lydia, originally from South Louisiana, knew the signs well. "I'm no stranger to the rhythms of hurricanes," she said. "Flooding is very different in the mountains as the streams pour in to join the river and the water levels continue to rise long after the storm has passed."

So she prepared, the way she always had.

Every vessel in the house was filled with water, including the bathtub. Loose yard items were tied down or brought inside. The fridge was emptied of essentials, packed into an ice chest and parked against the door to keep the cold in. Devices were charged, then turned off to save power. Lanterns were topped off. Candles and headlamps laid out within reach.

It was deliberate and practiced work.

The forecasts shifted. What began as a tropical system off the coast was now predicted to stall over the mountains. The National Weather Service projected 12 to 20 inches of rain across western North Carolina, with even higher totals in some pockets of the area.

Even if Hot Springs didn't take the brunt of the storm, every drop that fell upstream had to go somewhere. We were downhill from almost every projection. Downhill meant right through town.

We read the alerts, listening to the hum of weather radios, scrolling through updates on our phones. The rivers would rise, they said. Hot Springs could face major flooding as the water moved west through the valleys.

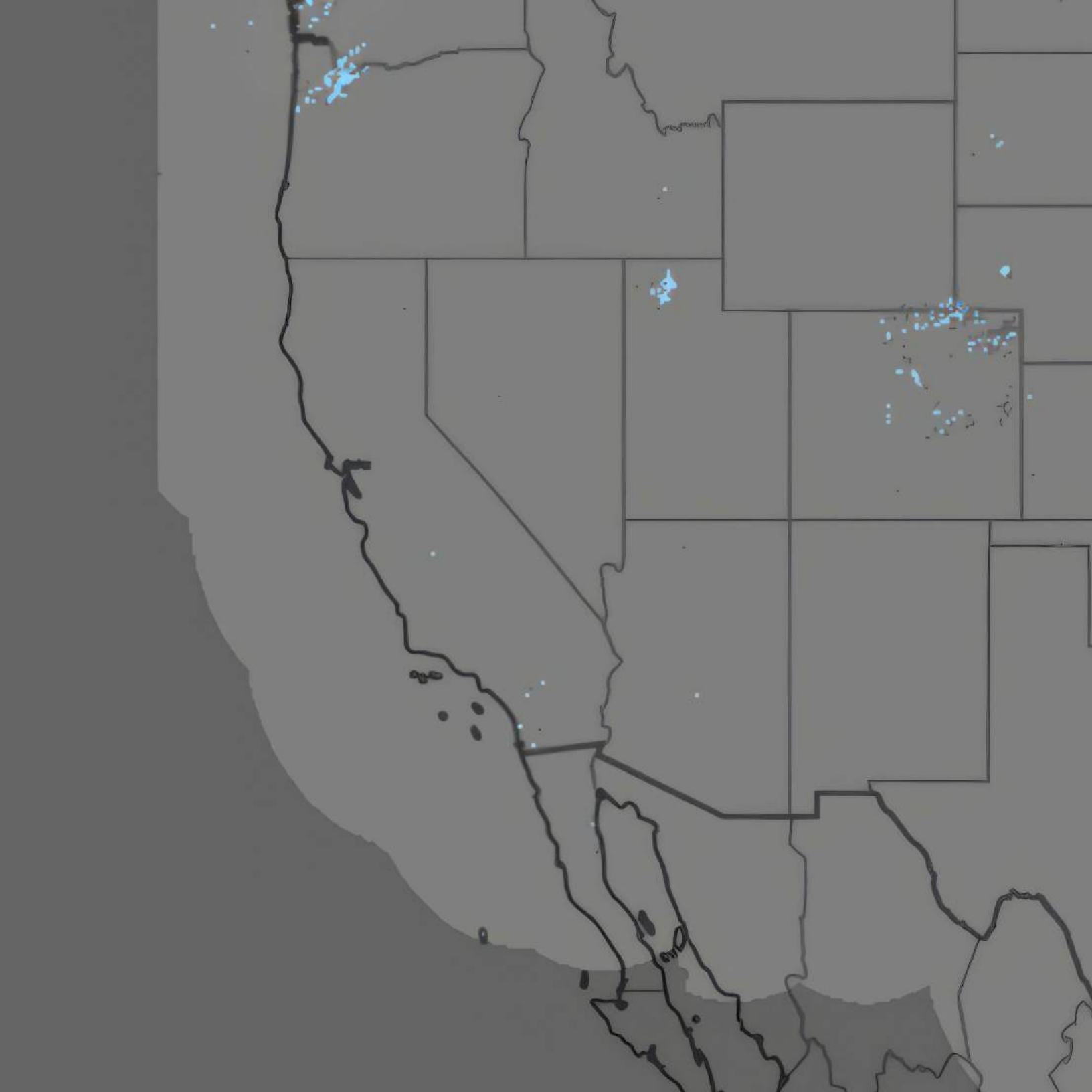
Outside, the rain kept falling.

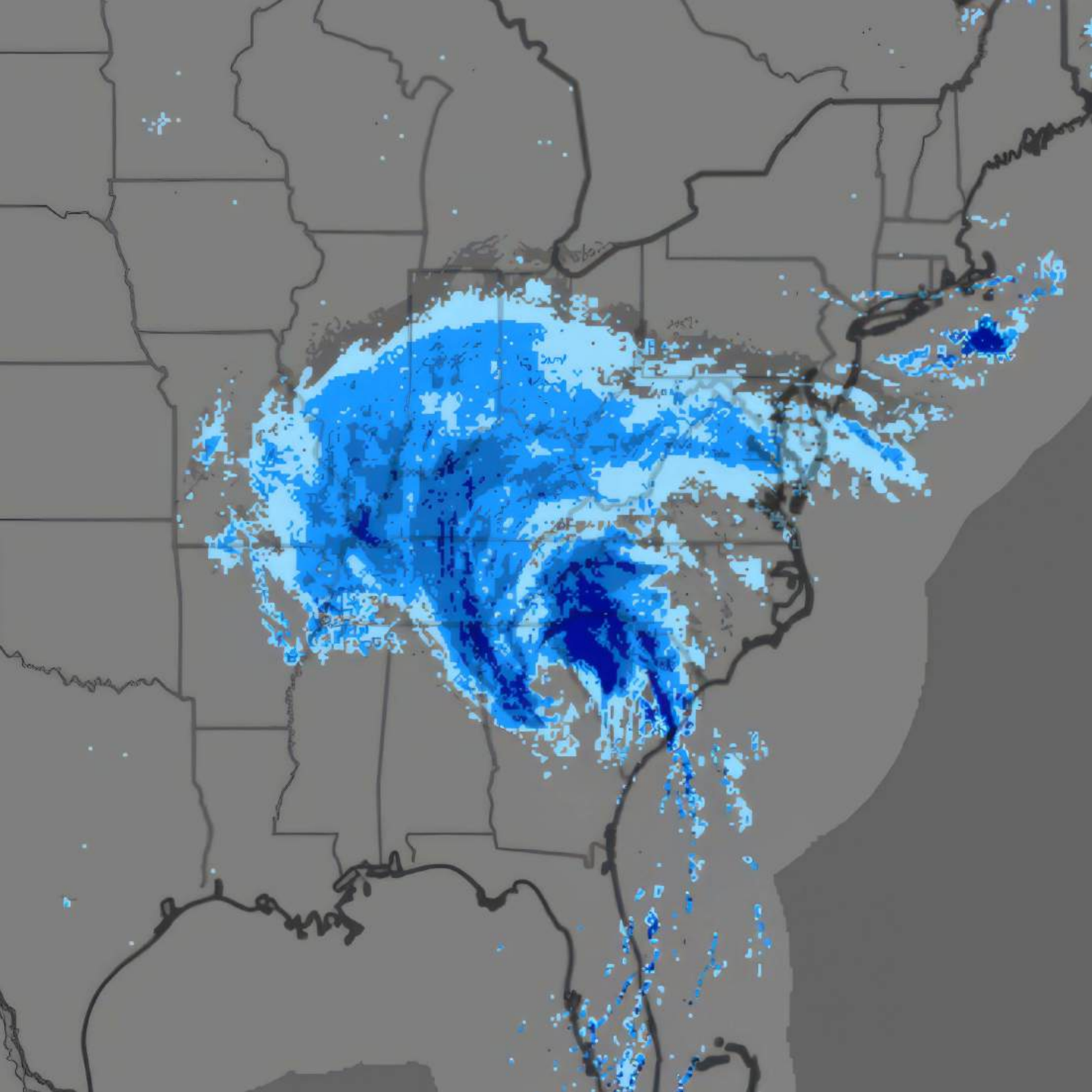
Inside, the town braced itself for what none of us could yet see.



“We plead with everyone that you take every single weather warning very seriously through the entirety of this event as impacts will be life-threatening and make sure to have to have multiple ways to receive the alerts ... We cannot stress the significance of this event enough.”

—National Weather Service





By 6:00 a.m. on Friday, September 27th, 2024, scanners lit up, tones dropping over the Emergency Operations frequency. Swift water rescue crews from Walnut were being dispatched upstream. The French Broad River was already roaring—swollen, fast, and heading straight for us. The Spring Creek was rapidly rising, gathering up debris by the second.



Just after sunrise, an oil barrel hit the Spring Creek bridge. Then came the wreckage—trees, boulders, boards torn from barns, homes and bridges—clogging the flow until Spring Creek burst its banks and surged into town.

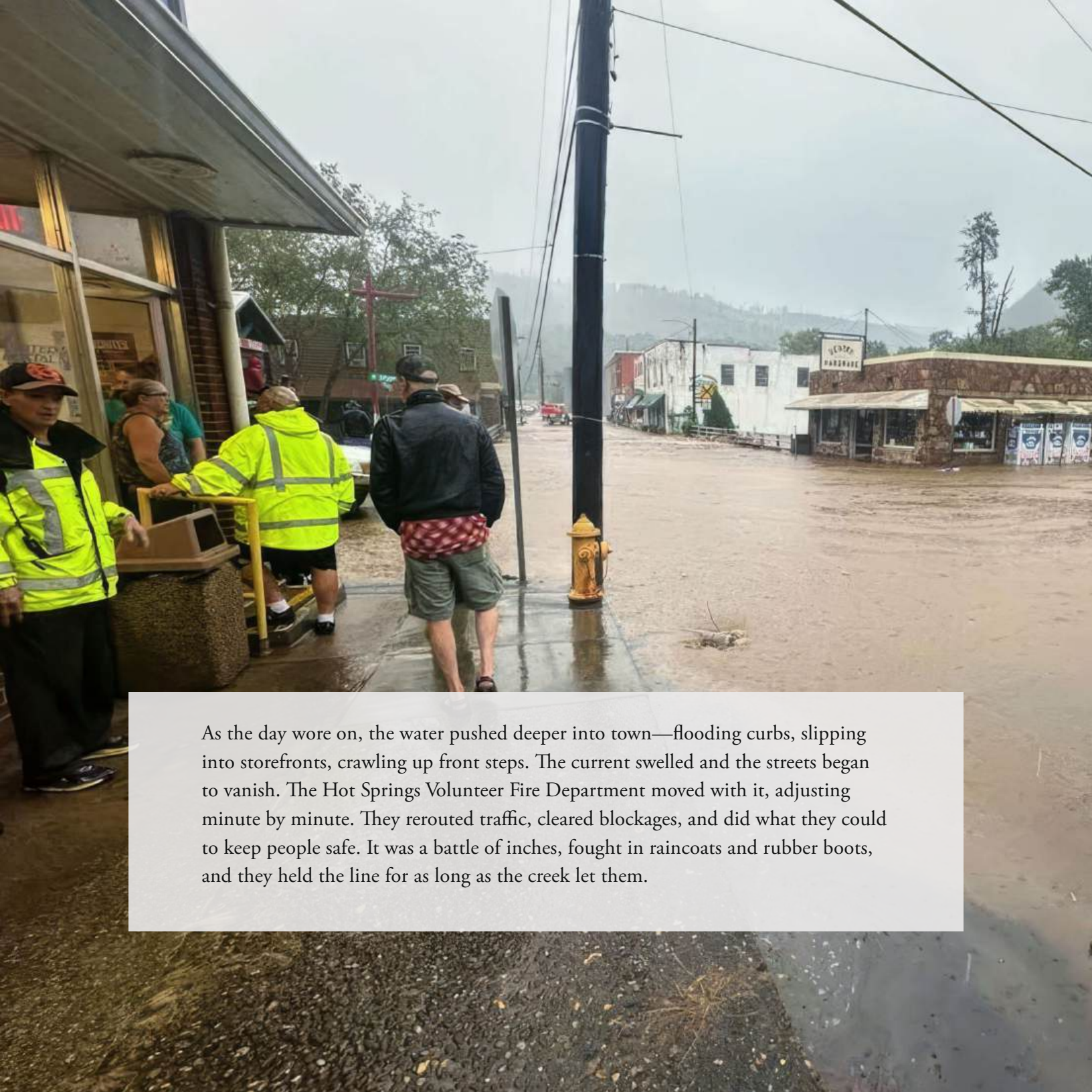
We'd heard the old stories—1916, 1977. Some floods were footnotes. Others, legend. But this one was different. This one was ours.



Hurricane Helene dropped an estimated 40 trillion gallons of rain across the Southeast. And here in Hot Springs, tucked along the last stretch of the French Broad River, every drop that fell upstream was coming our way.

Spring Creek rose fast, gnawing at the earth below Hiker's Ridge and hammering the support beams beneath the deck at Spring Creek Tavern. Many of us had gathered on that very deck the night before, watching the water rise.





As the day wore on, the water pushed deeper into town—flooding curbs, slipping into storefronts, crawling up front steps. The current swelled and the streets began to vanish. The Hot Springs Volunteer Fire Department moved with it, adjusting minute by minute. They rerouted traffic, cleared blockages, and did what they could to keep people safe. It was a battle of inches, fought in raincoats and rubber boots, and they held the line for as long as the creek let them.



SOUTH
25
EAST
70

DOWLAND HILL
INSTITUTE

SPEED
LIMIT
20

NO
BICYCLES
OR
EQUIVALENT

HIGH
WATER







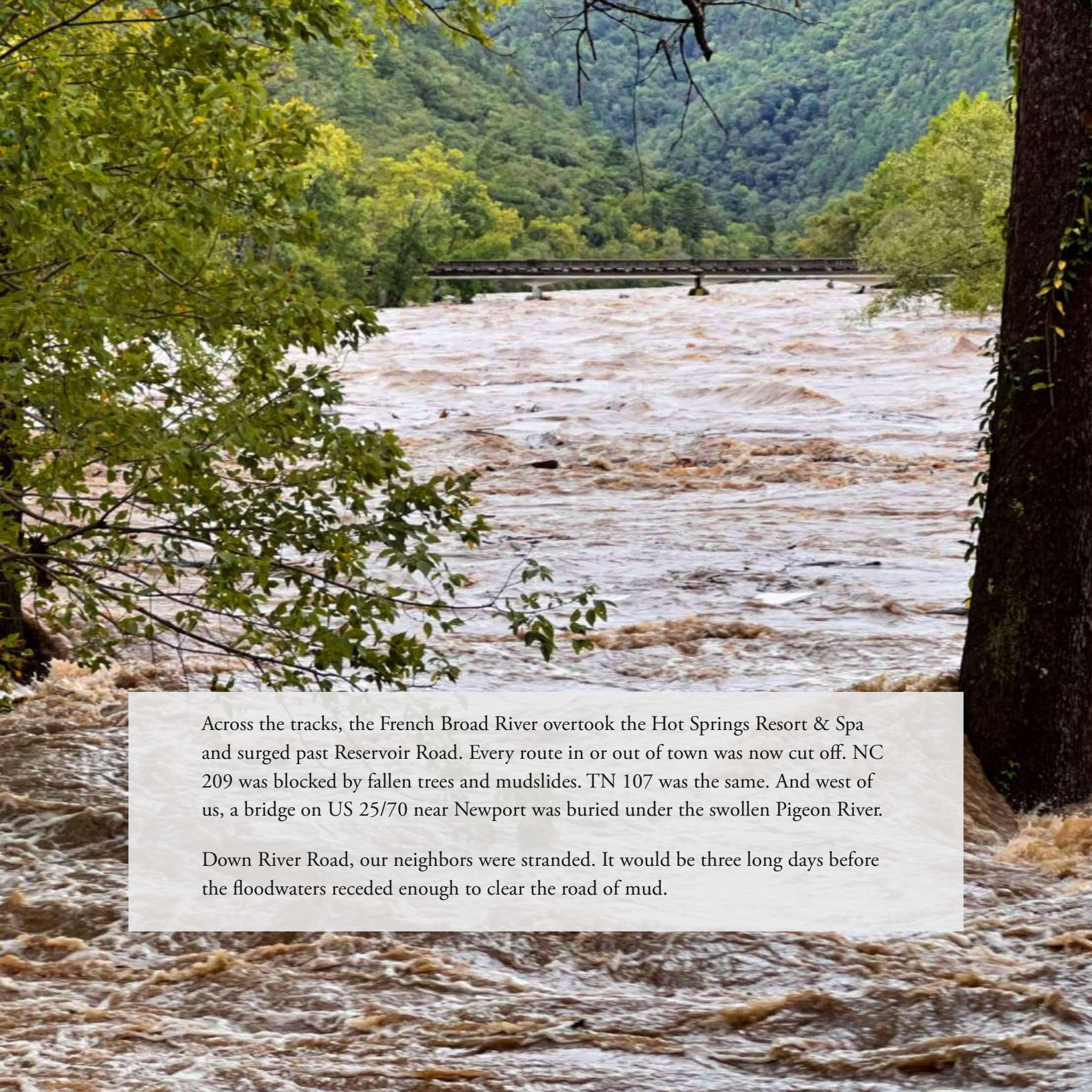












Across the tracks, the French Broad River overtook the Hot Springs Resort & Spa and surged past Reservoir Road. Every route in or out of town was now cut off. NC 209 was blocked by fallen trees and mudslides. TN 107 was the same. And west of us, a bridge on US 25/70 near Newport was buried under the swollen Pigeon River.

Down River Road, our neighbors were stranded. It would be three long days before the floodwaters receded enough to clear the road of mud.



“We found ourselves drawn to the place where the river had swallowed the road,” Lydia recalled. “There we stood with our neighbors in profound awe and grief as we watched the River’s fiercest face roaring past us.” Miles of plastic piping, refrigerators, car tires, small buildings, gas tanks, whole pieces of daily life, floated by in the current.



"Some of us wept. Some faced the river stoically. Some numb or in shock. All were completely silent. It was one of the most intimate and haunting moments that I have ever experienced in my life."

On Boys Home Road, farmers watched over their livestock as the river claimed the pastures. Down Lower Shut-In Road, a way out was disappearing, and emergency crews were preparing for rescues.





The water came fast. First a slow creep across the floor, then waist-high before Gloria, whose home was at the bottom of Paint Rock Road, could process what was happening. Furniture began to float. The cats, sensing something was wrong, began to cry.

“Mugsy,” Gloria said, “you’re going up first.”

She pulled down the attic ladder and placed each of her six cats into the crawl space one by one, making sure they were safe above the flood. Somewhere in the middle of it all, she thought to grab her purse. “For some unknown reason,” she later said, “I put it up there. My other papers are gone, everything else is gone... but I still wonder if they’ll show up somewhere.”

Marble, her dog, was still in the water, flailing. There was nowhere for him to go. She couldn’t leave him behind.

“I kept praying every step of the way,” she said. “I mean, I was praying, and we had peace, but I thought, Lord, how am I going to get him up this ladder? Because I was not leaving him.”

And then they came.

“Gloria, where are you?”

“I’m over here!”

“Come on, get out of here!”

It was Rodney, Christopher, Chad, and Chris—river guides with years on the water—who heard she was in danger and didn’t hesitate to go.

“For some reason, I was changing my pants. Try to change your pants in waist-high water,” she said, laughing. “So I grabbed the shawl and wrapped it around me and said, ‘Don’t look.’”

She climbed out the window with Marble. The raft was waiting, serious faces inside. “I’ve never seen these guys look so serious. They were serious.”

Chad later told her that while they were paddling, the river surged beneath them. “They didn’t know what had made that happen,” she said. “That was like right around the time they started talking about dams breaking.”

The journey out is lost to her.

“I have no memory of how we got from out of this window to the other side of Paint Rock,” she said. “Now, in my mind, I thought we went under the trestle. And they said, ‘No, Gloria. The water was over the trestle. You had to go over the water.’”

She doesn’t remember getting to shore, or the John boat that pulled them in, or the next-door neighbors who were rescued after her. But she remembers Amber being there with Country Volunteer Fire Department, wrapping her in a towel or a blanket. And she remembers the crowd—people standing and waiting, just waiting, for someone to make it out.

She remembers Marble sitting in the raft beside her the whole time, calm and quiet.

In town later that day, Chris, one of the rescuers, approached her. In his hand was something small.

“He said, ‘This followed you out.’ It was the little hand of God with the little girl in it. It was my candle that I had here, and I had gotten it from a yard sale like eight years ago. I always kept it there.”

She keeps it in her bathroom now. A reminder of what made it through.

Across the valley, there was nothing to do but wait. For the river to fall. For the quiet that comes after chaos. To see not only what was lost, but what held on. What pieces of our community the storm couldn’t take.







