

The Great Flood of 1965

The great flood of 1965 was the most devastating in Iowa and Upper Mississippi Valley history. It struck with an overwhelming power and relentless fury that chilled the very marrow of those who fought back bravely against this remorseless foe. It left the Nation enthralled as it listened, watched, or read of new lessons in raw courage against insuperable odds, and of matchless devotion of men and communities as they sought to ward off the heavy blows of a tireless adversary that had never brooked defeat. It seemed to many, who watched vicariously on the sidelines, that man must ultimately yield and go down to defeat in this unequal struggle. And yet, almost every time, when the night seemed darkest and the battle lost, new strength, new courage, new resourcefulness spurred men on to victory.

The battle was a long one, and a hard one, for the Mississippi was no mean opponent. It had left in its wake while moving downstream to Iowa, scenes of desolation and destruction. It had proved no respecter of cities or states. It inundated St. Paul on April 17th with a crest that rose 9.9 feet above flood stage; it submerged Dubuque nine days later when it crested 9.8 feet above flood

stage. It continued its mad course down the Great Valley that bears its name — branding every community, large and small, rich and poor, powerful and weak, with the filthy mud and sickening stench that only a marauding wastrel carries in his folds. It seemed to say in passing: "I am the mighty Father of Waters! Let no mortal man forget my visit; let no Community, no State, no Nation dare to bridle my path or hinder my progress through a land which I have called my own for a thousand centuries — and more! Let no one forget me and my visit! I have spoken!"

Judging by news accounts carried in the press, on the radio, and on television, citizens of the Hawkeye State are not likely soon to forget the flood of 1965. Throughout the struggle newspapers were emblazoned with front page headlines about the flood. These headlines were accompanied by lurid, pulsing stories that were heartwarming to all Iowans. When the flood had passed and danger no longer threatened, several Iowa newspapers issued special flood editions which sold by the thousands to eager purchasers. These editions, drawn up while the conflict between Man and Nature was still fresh in the memories of the participants, reveal a depth of understanding and a keen appreciation of the drama in which each community had played a stellar role.

Typical of these first-hand, eye-witness, delayed-action reports, was the 48-page booklet is-

sued by the *Dubuque Telegraph-Herald* and entitled — *Flood '65*. Printed in the closing days of April, a few days after the Mississippi had crested and continued its march downstream, *Flood '65* is a colorful pictorial presentation with a graphic introduction telling of the intense struggle waged by the Key City of Iowa against the Father of Waters — a beloved and useful friend in balmy times, a cruel, merciless, and relentless tyrant when on a rampage.

Since Dubuque newspapers had been recording floods as early as 1844, the summary of that community's fight in 1965 is especially revealing.

Flood '65 — predicted to be the worst flood in the history of the Mississippi River — lived up to all the predictions.

The crest of 26.8 feet reached Dubuque on April 26; "Old Man River" was 9.8 feet over flood stage. The previous record was 22.7 feet, reached on April 25, 1952.

Dubuque was prepared for the flood. On April 12 residents in low-lying areas in Dubuque and East Dubuque were evacuated and work began in earnest on 3.5 miles of dikes in Dubuque and another mile of dikes in East Dubuque. The dikes, some of them 13 feet thick, held throughout the worst the Mississippi could muster.

Expert planning set up the defenses, but the city's heart went out to the estimated 3,500 volunteers who worked anywhere from one to five days each to build the dikes and patch the holes.

Most of the dike workers were young people and their efforts drew nationwide praise.

Early on the morning of April 24, fire broke out in the

Standard Brands Frozen Egg Division plant in the flood-swamped Sixth Street area. Firemen went by boat to the scene to contain the blaze, a half mile from the closest dry area.

When the crest was finally reached there was cheering by workers atop the 400,000 sandbags used in Dubuque and 100,000 in East Dubuque. Throughout the battle the Julien Dubuque Bridge, surrounded by threatening flood waters, had been kept open to traffic.

Dubuque had used 108 trucks, six bulldozers, plus other equipment in building and holding the dikes. Service and welfare organizations had given workers in the Dubuque area more than 80 cases of soft drinks, 900 gallons of coffee, 22,000 sandwiches, 6,200 cartons of milk, 19,000 candy bars, and 5,200 hot meals.

Flood '65 was over and Dubuque and East Dubuque had beaten — as much as it was possible — the Mississippi.

Iowa towns — large and small — had felt the brunt of the mighty Mississippi's power as it moved irresistibly downstream from flood-stricken Dubuque to Clinton. That power had been indelibly impressed on the minds of the thousands who had been driven from their homes and suffered millions of dollars property damage, or through loss of employment. The triumphal march of the Father of Waters was as overwhelming as it was costly to those who dwelt along the way. The following record-breaking crests tell a story of heroic courage on the part of eight communities in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Iowa, before the rampaging waters reached Clinton.

| <i>Town</i> | <i>Crest</i> | <i>Date</i> | <i>Over Flood Stage</i> |
|------------------|--------------|-------------|-------------------------|
| St. Paul | 26.0 | April 17 | 9.9 |
| LaCrosse | 17.9 | April 20 | 6.0 |
| McGregor | 25.4 | April 24 | 7.3 |
| Guttenberg | 23.7 | April 25 | 8.7 |
| Cassville | 24.1 | April 25 | 7.1 |
| Dubuque | 26.8 | April 26 | 9.8 |
| Bellevue | 23.5 | April 26 | 5.5 |
| Sabula | 22.9 | April 28 | 7.9 |

Days before the arrival of the flood, the *Clinton Herald* had warned its readers of the impending onslaught. As reports of the havoc wrought upstream were flashed to Clinton, the crest was moved up by the United States Army Engineers.

Each report called for more feverish defense measures on the part of an embattled citizenry whose lives as well as property hung on the outcome. The river stage at Clinton during the 22-day nightmare is revealed in part by the following:

River Stage at Clinton

| | | |
|------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| April 12....14.3 | April 20....19.1 | April 28....24.85 |
| April 13....14.9 | April 21....19.85 | April 29....24.54 |
| April 14....15.7 | April 22....20.95 | April 30....24.26 |
| April 15....16.4 | April 23....22.04 | May 123.84 |
| April 16....16.9 | April 24....22.76 | May 223.52 |
| April 17....17.2 | April 25....23.54 | May 322.84 |
| April 18....17.7 | April 26....24.40 | May 422.43 |
| April 19....18.4 | April 27....24.70 | |

The *Clinton Herald* issued a handsome souvenir book on May 9 recording the giant effort of Clin-

tonians whose "magnificent courage and determination" would always be held in "grateful appreciation" by posterity. The introduction to the *Clinton Herald* brochure follows:

Dedicated To — The People

Historians are sure to describe the Mississippi river flood of 1965 as one of the greatest disasters of all time in the midwest.

They will write of death and destruction at the hands of the savage river which soared many feet above previous record crests.

They will write of property damage in the hundreds of millions of dollars; how much of Iowa and Illinois was designated as disaster areas; how homes, stores and factories were wrecked; how thousands of acres of rich farmland were inundated; how entire communities were ravaged.

But the story they might not tell is one of PEOPLE . . . people in the Clinton area who fought the river around the clock; day after day; week after week.

. . . old people, young people, middle-aged people.

. . . people in uniforms and in blue jeans; in house dresses and business suits.

. . . people unaccustomed to manual labor who blistered their hands working unbelievably long hours at the grueling task of filling and piling sandbags.

. . . people who lost track of time and ignored bonegnawing fatigue to provide leadership and supervision needed in a succession of emergencies which never seemed to end.

. . . people who always were able to furnish all the services and assistance constantly in demand.

. . . people who answered every call for help, whether it was for food, hip boots or more volunteer labor.

Like its sister-cities to the north, Davenport and the surrounding countryside felt the full force of the Great Flood of 1965. The intensity of the drama was magnified by the large number of people in the Davenport-Bettendorf area, where 2,000 were made homeless by the flood. The losses from all sources in the Quad-Cities, representing the greatest concentration of population between St. Louis and St. Paul, were staggering. The *Davenport Times-Democrat* presented its report in a special tabloid edition entitled *The Great Flood of 1965*. The following are excerpts from the section entitled "River on a Rampage."

In one way or another it touched the lives of everyone in the Quad-City area.

Certainly no one who lived through the long nightmare of the great Mississippi River flood of 1965 will ever forget it.

It was epic, it was history-in-the-making, it was awe-inspiring. . . .

No one will ever be able to figure the total damages. They will run into millions of dollars. An estimated 12,000 persons in the area were driven from their homes. Many of the homes were destroyed. . . .

All up and down the river, communities began sounding the plea for volunteers to help with the sandbagging. In no time the entire area was soon the scene of millions of sandbags in endless rows, one atop the other, and long dikes in unexpected places. Sandbags were everywhere, being passed along the lines of lengthy human chains to fortify store fronts and protect industrial plants.

By the end of the week, some 2,000 had left their homes

in the Quad-City area. Barge traffic was halted on the Mississippi. All river towns were digging in. The flood stage had been reached and preparations were feverishly being carried on around-the-clock. . . .

A new menace appeared — rats. Forced to higher ground, sewer rats posed a problem in many places. Police sharpshooters were pressed into service. . . .

National Guard units were dispatched to the more critical points along the rampaging river. Some communities took on the air of armed camps and of areas under siege as the guardsmen moved in. . . .

Camanche, down river from Clinton, was virtually surrounded, and in Pleasant Valley water rose as high as some rooftops.

Buffalo, in Scott County, struggled mightily against the river. Damage in Buffalo was estimated at \$200,000. Most businesses were forced to close. . . .

The honor roll in this biggest Mississippi flood of them all goes on and on.

Sabula, Clinton, Fulton, Camanche, Princeton, Bettendorf, Moline, East Moline, Davenport, Rock Island, Buffalo, Keithsburg and Muscatine — they all proved themselves big in heart as they fought to save themselves.

And they hardly had time to draw a breath before they began the big, dirty job of cleaning up.

All this — and much, much more — was the great Mississippi River flood of 1965.

Although the surging waters of the Mississippi took their toll at Muscatine and Burlington, and to a lesser degree at Fort Madison and Keokuk, the ravages were by no means as great as in the river towns to the north. True, a portion of the Muscatine waterfront, including railroad tracks, parking

areas, and the major highways along the river, were completely submerged and made of no use until the waters receded. For the most part, however, with the exception of the breakthrough in the Lake Odessa area, the levees at Muscatine held back much of the Mississippi's overflow.

At Burlington, aside from the riverfront that included the Municipal Barge Terminal and Memorial Auditorium, damage was relatively slight. The cultivated lowlands north and south of Burlington were inundated while across the river in Illinois, the Mississippi broadened to eight miles as had been customary over a century of time since 1844. Nature clearly had never intended a settlement at Gulfport and all who elected to dwell there did so at their own risk.

Once past Keokuk, the Mississippi overflowed lowlands and invaded towns that have always been a fair play for its caprices. As Mark Twain once said:

You can't say that the river is very charitable on the measure of a flood in a town. Except for the fact that the streets are quiet of kids and drays, there really is nothing good to say about a flood.

In a day that was marked by little levity and much soul-searching, it was not surprising that the clergy of many denominations should ask for Divine interposition followed by thanks for those who had given their full measure to protect their homes and community. The prayer of Reverend

Emerson Miller of St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Davenport is worthy of recording at this time.

Great Lord and God, in the midst of these days in which our community is threatened with disaster by the overwhelming forces of nature, by the ravages of flood and destruction; we thank Thee for the men and women in our midst who have been moved by Thy Spirit of compassion and responsibility to give of themselves to organize and inspire our efforts to preserve our homes, our businesses, and our lives.

We thank Thee for our youth, for their energy and strength, for their willingness to toil and to persevere in throwing up bulwarks around us. Wouldst Thou continue to bless and to keep strong the results of their labor. Give heart, we pray, to those upon whom great loss has come. Save them from despair and make strong their hands as they seek to re-establish and refound their homes.

May this lesson in the hard school of life, be a means of teaching us all that we are indeed our brother's keeper, and only as we work and plan and live together — as we render "service above self" — can we have and hold those things which make life worth the while.

It can be truly said of the flood fighters of 1965, as it was said by Winston Churchill of the small but determined force that beat back the Nazi onslaught in 1940 — "Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few."