

## The Flood of 1892

The year 1892 marks the most devastating Upper Mississippi flood in the closing decade of the Nineteenth Century. The 1892 flood actually exceeded all records in Davenport and Muscatine and came within a fraction of equaling the highest in Clinton and Burlington. Since Upper Mississippi river towns enjoyed their greatest growth between 1851 and 1900, the increasing population, the development of manufacturing, and the spread of agriculture to lowlands that were subject to inundation made floods more costly in each succeeding decade of this period.

### POPULATION OF THE MAJOR RIVER TOWNS

	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890	1900
Dubuque	3,108	13,000	18,434	22,253	30,311	36,297
Clinton	*	*	6,129	9,052	13,619	22,698
Davenport	1,848	11,267	20,038	21,831	26,872	35,254
Muscatine	2,540	5,324	6,718	8,295	11,454	14,073
Burlington	4,082	6,706	14,930	19,450	22,565	23,201
Keokuk	2,478	8,136	12,766	12,117	14,101	14,641

\*Lyons had 453 in 1850 and 2,703 in 1860.

Due in part to their rapid growth, and also to the fact that their topography made them more susceptible to the ravages of the river, Dubuque and Davenport always looked forward to costly floods.



A COMPARISON OF RECORD HIGHWATER MARKS IN  
THE ABOVE TOWNS FOLLOWS:

	<i>Dubuque</i>	<i>Clinton</i>	<i>Daven- port</i>	<i>Musca- tine</i>	<i>Burling- ton</i>	<i>Keokuk</i>
1851	23.0	20.0	16.4	—	—	20.9
1870	21.83	19.73	16.9	—	15.0	16.4
1880	21.7	21.0	18.4	16.9	15.8	17.5
1881	20.2	19.5	17.7	16.8	16.53	18.9
1888	21.4	20.5	18.6	16.9	17.55	19.65
1892	17.6	20.0	19.4	17.6	17.5	19.25

The above statistics bear out the main facts of population growth and the relation of the major Upper Mississippi floods to this growth down to 1892. Since rafting, lumbering and wood-working were the major industries along the Mississippi at this time, it is not surprising that these should be especially subject to floods. And, since railroads had been constructed along both banks of the Father of Waters, their yards and depots were almost invariably located on or near the river bank. The Iron Horse, therefore, could be just as easily hampered, if not completely throttled by highwater, as could steamboating itself. In 1892, for example, the *Dubuque Daily Times* recorded:

The first accident attributable to the heavy rains and high water, to occur in this city happened this morning in the Burlington yard at the foot of Third street, resulting in throwing an engine into the slough and fatally injuring the fireman, Eddie Good.

Throughout May and June of 1892, railroad



tracks were inundated, undermined, and badly damaged. This caused frequent delays in transit and costly repairs along railroad right-of-ways.

The flood of 1892 swept down the Mississippi with devastating velocity, a rise of four feet in four days being chronicled by the *Dubuque Daily Times* of June 1892. "All lowlands are flooded," the editor declared. "Farmers were driven from their fields again, and may abandon corn planting altogether. It is still raining tonight."

The *Dubuque Herald* of June 2 reported the lowlands submerged and the Mississippi "a vast sheet of water from shore to shore."

Sawmills are closed, and large sawdust accretions are being cut away. The Burlington road's tracks are surrounded and caving in. All the cellars along Front street are filled with water from the seepage. Along the valley of Couler creek the worst situation is found. Sewers are reported washed out, the street cars are cut off, houses and streets under water, and bad damage being done by washing. This is only a hasty summary of the mischief. By the time this reaches the reader's eye it will have been considerably greater.

The *Davenport Democrat* of June 1, 1892 did not minimize the serious flood situation.

A continuation of rain and resulting high water will relieve the river engineers from the necessity of doing any great amount of work this summer. In the first place any efforts they might put forth in the way of keeping the channel clear will not be needed. Steamboating is very good over the cornfields now in a good many places and



the actual channel is of small moment. In the next place improvement work cannot be done, except in rare instances, at such a stage of water as this.

By June 2nd Muscatine Island was "largely under water" and hundreds of acres of melon and sweet potato lands were three to four feet beneath the surface. The river at Burlington was "eight miles wide," the lands on the Illinois side being completely submerged. Although Fort Madison had not been seriously damaged the farms around the mouth of the Skunk River and the Green Bay flats were inundated. Meanwhile, the Mississippi continued to rise.

Sometimes a larger Iowa tributary to the Upper Mississippi played a leading role at flood time. Thus, when the Mississippi at Keokuk rose 3.2 feet in 24 hours, the *Keokuk Daily Gate City* of May 6, 1892 explained:

This was due largely to back water from the Des Moines which is spread out all over the bottoms; but the rise up river was something remarkable. The Illinois bottoms opposite Keokuk do not often overflow, but now they are inundated.

The high water mark of 1851 was 20.93 feet, and that of 1888, 19.65. In that year the lower lock grounds were flooded. A couple of years ago the lock walls were raised four feet and the ground filled in, making them above high water mark. Yesterday the water had risen as high as the lock gates and they were opened, allowing steamers to pass through without interruption.

Iowa editors frequently rose to heights of real



literary charm in describing the ravages of a Mississippi flood. On May 6, 1892, the *Keokuk Daily Gate City* observed:

#### THE OLD MAN IS RAGING

The Father of Waters is on the rampage. Usually he is majestically beautiful in his tranquility. But now he is raging and his anger inspires apprehension. Each wave is so petulant that it wants to get up out of reach of its companions and as a result the turbid tide is rising at a remarkable rate. Every little tributary of the big stream received such a deluge from the clouds that it could not think of holding the water and so made haste to pour the flood out into the broad Mississippi. Along with the flood went trees, driftwood and all sorts of debris. In the hot summer time the great river is very thankful for the contribution of every rivulet. But now he has had so much thrust upon him that he is in a terrible mood. He swirls the debris about in the most violent manner and takes everything from the banks that he can get hold of and hauls it out into mid stream with the old trees, etc., or sinks it to the bottom. No partiality is shown, and he takes things valuable with no more remorse of conscience than he does the most worthless trash. He is encroaching at a rapid rate on the lowlands and if something is not speedily done to pacify him there is going to be no end of trouble.

By 1892 most river folk were keenly aware of the many moods of the Father of Waters. Despite its frequent depredations, they loved to dwell upon the bank of the majestic waterway and neither storm nor flood could lure them to a safer and more certain shore.