

## The Floods of 1920 and 1922

For almost three decades following 1892 the Mississippi desisted from its wayward course, confining itself to reasonable overflows during high-water that affected only lowlying farmlands and those areas where dwellings should never have been built in the first place. The destruction of property, the closing down of industry, and the interruption of transportation was slight.

There came a time, beginning with 1920, when the Father of Waters once more launched forth its flood waters with unparalleled ferocity. Thus, whereas the Mississippi had risen five times above the 20-foot stage at Dubuque between 1851 and 1888, it exceeded that figure six times between 1920 and 1965. In the latter year it set an all-time record for every river town.

	<i>Dubuque</i>	<i>Clinton</i>	<i>Davenport</i>	<i>Muscataine</i>	<i>Burlington</i>	<i>Keokuk</i>
1916	19.8	18.0	15.9	17.0	14.4	16.7
1920	21.0	19.0	17.1	18.0	14.99	16.7
1922	21.0	18.9	17.1	19.1	15.62	17.45
1938	20.6	18.3	15.8	18.5	15.2	16.4
1942	19.3	17.8	15.2	17.6	15.7	15.8
1951	22.6	20.7	18.2	21.0	17.9	20.2
1952	22.7	20.92	18.6	21.05	17.8	18.9
1965	26.81	24.85	22.48	24.81	21.0	22.14

The flood of 1920, declared the *Dubuque Times-Journal* of March 27, was "an extraordinary occurrence" because "high water usually comes during May and June." The flood was remarkable for several reasons: its early season — which began on March 22; its unprecedented rise of 4½ feet in 48 hours — which the United States Weather Bureau at Dubuque felt was perhaps the greatest rise for a 48-hour period ever recorded in Dubuque; and its precipitate decline after cresting at 21.0 feet on April 6. "The present high water," the Dubuque editor concluded, "is a result of the large amount of rain and snow during March and the quick breakup of the ice in the river."

Although ample warning was given of the oncoming flood, the original forecasts fell short by three or four feet of the ultimate crest. During the last three days in March lowlands were flooded, cordwood and timber set adrift, and many small boats carried downstream. Then, on April 2, the *Times-Journal* reported a rise of 2.5 feet in 24 hours, bringing the stage to 15.8 feet. Many factories were forced to suspend operations and several residential areas were flooded, particularly on the flats east of the railroad tracks, and those in the Couler Avenue area because of the "backing up of the Bee branch sewer." The flood stage of 18 feet was passed on April 3, and a rise to the 21-foot mark was predicted over Sunday. The boat houses in the harbor would have to be "anchored" to pre-

vent their beginning "a journey up Main street." "The greatest inconvenience and damage," the Dubuque editor complained, "is caused by the backing up of the city sewers into residential basements."

The unparalleled rise of the Mississippi was recorded in the *Times-Journal* of April 5.

March 22.....7.1	March 27.....10.5	April 1.....13.5
March 23.....7.4	March 28.....11.0	April 2.....15.8
March 24.....8.2	March 29.....11.4	April 3.....18.0
March 25.....8.7	March 30.....11.8	April 4.....19.5
March 26.....9.8	March 31.....12.4	April 5.....20.6
		(9:00 a.m.)

The Dubuque editor felt the city was fortunate there had been no big rain in conjunction with the flood. According to the *Times-Journal*: "In the 1881 flood 9.31 inches fell in one week. During the 1888 flood, it rained every day but three in a 16 day period for a total of 5.49 inches."

The peak of the flood — 21 feet — was reached on Tuesday, April 6, at which time the United States Engineers estimated 130 billion gallons of water flowed by Dubuque within the 24-hour period. The Mississippi was three miles wide at Eagle Point Park and health authorities viewed with concern the thousands of rats from the sewers that were "infesting" the city. Of further concern were the dead animals — "horses, pigs, cows and a great variety of livestock" — that filled the trees both on the lowlands and on the islands.

Floods frequently come in successive years. Thus, the years 1880 and 1881, and 1951 and 1952 were marked by tremendous floods. Fortunately, Iowans dwelling along the Mississippi were given a slight respite as a year intervened between 1920 and 1922. Both these years, however, registered a 21-foot flood stage.

The flood of 1922 began a fortnight later than did that of 1920. It actually started at a higher level and it did not have the phenomenal rises recorded two years previously. Its starting date was virtually the ending date of the flood of 1920. Both floods, however, must be considered early in occurrence as compared with the proverbially normal June rise.

The uniformly steady march of the flood waters down the Mississippi from Lansing to Keokuk can be demonstrated by the following statistics:

Flood Stage	LANSING	DUBUQUE	LE CLAIRE	DAVENPORT	KEOKUK
	12-Foot	18-Foot	10-Foot	15-Foot	14-Foot
April 7	—	11.6	6.6	8.8	9.2
April 8	—	—	—	—	—
April 9	11.1	12.0	6.9	9.2	9.7
April 10	11.8	13.2	7.5	9.8	10.4
April 11	12.2	13.7	8.0	10.8	10.7
April 12	12.5	14.1	8.4	11.4	11.8
April 13	13.4	14.7	8.7	11.8	13.2
April 14	14.3	15.6	—	12.6	13.5
April 15	—	—	—	—	—
April 16	—	—	—	—	—
April 17	16.6	18.8	10.2	13.7	14.5
April 18	17.1	19.8	10.8	14.4	15.2

Flood Stage	LANSING	DUBUQUE	LE CLAIRE	DAVENPORT	KEOKUK
	12-Foot	18-Foot	10-Foot	15-Foot	14-Foot
April 19	17.3	20.6	11.5	15.2	15.6
April 20	17.1	20.9	12.1	15.9	16.2
April 21	16.7	21.0	12.4	16.5	16.5
April 22	16.1	20.7	12.8	16.9	17.0
April 23	—	—	—	—	—
April 24	14.9	19.7	12.7	17.0	17.4
April 25	14.3	19.0	12.5	16.7	17.4
April 26	13.7	18.3	12.2	16.4	17.2

Much the same area was inundated at Dubuque in both 1920 and 1922. "Snaggers, with boats in the water," the *Dubuque Times-Journal* of April 17, 1922 recorded, "are reaping a rich harvest in floating timber, boats and a wide variety of articles that are traveling south on the crest of the waves." As in the previous flood, a highly undesirable "harvest" was being reaped, one which local citizens hoped might be harvested for the last time. The harvest — hordes of rats were driven from the "dumps" to "seek food" up town, "cat or no cat."

Let it be recorded for posterity that the Dubuque Boy Scouts faced this challenge with characteristic courage, the *Times-Journal* noting that:

A total of 232 rats have been reported killed in the rat crusade being conducted by the Boy Scouts of the city, according to a statement from Scout Executive Earl G. Moore, Saturday morning.

Walter Kemp, of Scout Troop 8, broke all previous individual records, when he turned in 89 rat tails at Scout headquarters a few days ago.