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EDITED BY WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

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Floods in Pioneer Days

For more than a century, the Upper Mississippi River has subjected Iowans to costly floods. Even before permanent settlement in the Black Hawk Purchase in 1833, the military posts of the Upper Mississippi recorded destructive floods. The first Fort Crawford at Prairie du Chien was continually plagued with "spring freshets that frequently flooded the barracks to a depth of three or four feet for several days in succession and were invariably followed by bilious diseases."

Clearly the United States Army had not reckoned with the whimsical caprices of the Father of Waters when it built Fort Crawford in 1816. In 1828, for example, the June flood made Prairie du Chien "an island over which steamboats could pass in any direction. Fences were swept away, the fort was for a time abandoned, and many inhabitants of the village were compelled to retreat across the slough to the higher part of the Prairie or to seek safety in boats, on rafts, or in the lofts of houses."

As settlers trickled into the rich farm land on both banks of the Mississippi, they frequently referred to the flood of 1828 as the measuring rod, even though no accurate local records were available. Actually there were no settlers in Iowa at the time, nor were there any for the next five years. Moreover, the first newspaper in Iowa was not established until 1836 at Dubuque. Even the Illinois side, with the exception of the straggling lead mining village of Galena, lay beyond the frontier. In addition to Fort Crawford, the only possible recorders of floods were the military posts which had been established at Fort Edwards opposite the mouth of the Des Moines River in 1815 and at Fort Armstrong on Rock Island in 1816. Both these forts, unlike Fort Crawford, were located on high ground beyond the reach of the Mississippi's surging flood waters.

Although reference is made to the great flood of 1828, it should be remembered that actual measurements could not be made in land uninhabited by the white man. Doubt must therefore be placed on the accuracy of the year 1828 as a true measuring rod for the floods that followed.

The Flood of 1844

There can be no doubt about the flood of 1844. The *Davenport Gazette* of April 25 that year noted that the Mississippi had been rising for ten or twelve days "until now it is higher than it has

been since 1828. The flooded river is a beautiful sight, truly the 'Father of Waters.' " The editor estimated the river was at least a mile and a quarter wide in front of Davenport.

The *Burlington Hawk-Eye* of April 25 declared the Mississippi was higher than the editor had ever seen it. At this early date he observed that the "Illinois bottom [present-day Gulfport] is flooded and the inhabitants have evacuated their homes."

The editor of the *Davenport Gazette* had an opportunity to observe the devastation of the flood while on a trip upstream from St. Louis in 1844. He recorded his impressions in the *Gazette* of May 2, particularly noting many houses accessible only by canoe. He likened some houses on the prairie to "islands" in a "vast sheet of water" that extended "for miles." He observed that the Mississippi had not been that high for sixteen years and expressed deep concern over the cost of such floods to the unfortunate inhabitants: "Whole tracts of country, usually devoted to agricultural purposes, were overflowed and thus rendered unfit for this year's cultivation." The editor took comfort in the fact that, with the exception of some flooded cellars on Front Street, Davenport had not been injured by the high water.

Since residents of the Upper Mississippi were largely dependent on steamboats for both freight and passenger service, the plight of these vessels was a matter of deep concern. On May 9, 1844,

the *Davenport Gazette* was informed that the packet *Lynx* was reported lost on a run from Galena to St. Peters, opposite present-day Fort Snelling. The *Lynx* was said to have taken a short cut across the prairie in the vicinity of Prairie du Chien and had been grounded — the falling water reportedly had left her “out of her element.” It is pleasant to record that the *Lynx* managed to extricate herself and continued to serve the Upper Mississippi for several years.

The Flood of 1851

The Upper Mississippi and all its tributaries were out of their banks in the great flood of 1851. Indeed, the flood was probably worse than actually recorded in the Iowa press of that period. Newspaper editors were fearful of discouraging prospective immigrants from settling in their communities because of the possible danger of floods. Thus, on June 5, 1851, the *Davenport Gazette* declared that flood damage had been “terrible elsewhere” but grudgingly admitted that the “only trouble Davenport has had was a little water, never more than 12 inches, in some stores on Front St.”

The *Burlington Hawk-Eye* of April 13, 1851 noted that the Mississippi was “over its banks” on the Illinois side and that because of recent storms, it could be expected to go higher. It hoped that the bridges would be saved (adding no doubt with

a political leer) as they had been saved under the previous mayor.

On May 29 the editor of the *Hawk-Eye*, in observing that the Mississippi was out of its banks in Illinois, commented that the water was higher than it had been for many years. The Des Moines, Skunk, and Iowa rivers were also swollen to many feet beyond their usual depth, causing large quantities of cordwood and many fences to be swept away.

On June 5, 1851, the *Hawk-Eye* declared the Mississippi was higher than it had been in 1844 and threatened to go as high as in 1828, which was six feet higher than in 1844 and was the highest recorded. Davenport had suffered "a great deal of damage" while farmlands along both sides of the Mississippi were expected to be covered by four feet of sandy silt when the river receded. There was so much lumber, logs, and other debris floating in the river as to endanger steamboat navigation. Fortunately, the editor assured his readers, "Burlington has a locality which exempts her to a large extent from sharing in this calamity."

The flood of 1851 was memorable to many Iowa pioneers not only because of the havoc created by the Mississippi but also because of the damage by Iowa streams which had overflowed their banks, thus combining to increase the already heavy streamflow of the Father of Waters as it journeyed south along the eastern border of Iowa.

The Flood of 1859

The flood of 1859 did most of its damage in early spring. The *Dubuque Express and Herald* of May 10, 1859, recorded a 17-inch rise in 24 hours and saw no prospects of a decline. The Mississippi was already within 40 inches of the 1827 [sic] crest and within 22 inches of the 1851 crest. The lower end of Sixth Street from the bridge to the outer levee was completely inundated. Twenty teams and a "large number of hands" were hard at work strengthening the levee and building it higher. The outer levee was already in a precarious condition. In many places it was not over eight feet wide and not over ten inches above the water.

Two days later the *Express and Herald* reported the river still rising at the rate of eight inches in 24 hours:

It is now running across the foot of 1st street, near Northrup & Ryder's Warehouse. The various Improvements still keep ahead of the water and have no fear, when a high wind arises, of their ability to protect the works. It is feared that the rise is destined not to stop immediately, as all the present body of water comes from the Wisconsin River, while the great Spring freshet from the extreme North has not arrived here.

The flood of 1859 hampered railroad as well as steamboat traffic at Dubuque. Thus, the Dubuque & Pacific train was obliged to stop at the lower depot, the water was so near the top of the track

the engineer thought it unsafe to venture over it. Meanwhile, another seven-inch rise made many Dubuque streets impassable. "The outer levee at the foot of Seventh Street," declared the *Express & Herald* of May 13, "is covered by the flood, so much so that flat boats go in and out with ease."

At Davenport the *Daily Iowa State Democrat* expressed fear lest the Mississippi might again flood business establishments. In late March it viewed with apprehension a sudden rise in the river, noting that rivers throughout the Upper Mississippi Valley were on the rise. On April 9 a momentary fall was recorded but on May 6 readers were warned that the Mississippi was on the rise from Dubuque to St. Louis. On May 18 the river was a foot higher than in 1858, and the following day it stood at 14' 8" above the low water mark of that period. "Unless we are visited with a heavy rain storm," the editor concluded, "the water will undoubtedly be on the decline in a few days." Thereafter, the Mississippi sought its normal bed and Davenporters breathed a sigh of relief.

The Flood of 1862

The Upper Mississippi flood of 1862 was fed by tributaries stretching from its headwaters to the Des Moines and Illinois. As each tributary debouched into the Father of Waters, it created more misery for the inhabitants along its banks. As

early as April 19, the *Davenport Daily Democrat and News* warned its readers:

The river at this point is rising rapidly. Last night the water was overflowing the levee almost entirely. We shall look for a still greater rise. Property owners along the border of the river had better guard against loss which they are liable to be exposed to. There is an immense body of snow about the Upper Mississippi and its tributaries, the effects of which may prove disastrous.

As a service to its readers, the *Democrat and News* printed the daily stage of the river between April 23 and May 10, showing a rise from 8' 5" to 15' on the Mississippi and Missouri railroad bridge. On April 30, the editor noted that the rampaging stream was swelling rapidly between Davenport and St. Paul. He observed that the Davenport levee was "almost invisible yesterday." On May 1, 1862, the *Democrat and News* reported as follows:

The father of waters is on his annual bender with a vengeance. The water is now nearly as high as it ever gets, and is still rising rapidly and bids fair to be up to the curbing of Front Street before it gets lower.

Ten days later, the Mississippi was receding steadily, but it was still "very inconvenient" for boats to land in order to receive and discharge freight at Davenport. Although Iowa newspapers stressed the clash of arms in the South, most editors located along the Mississippi continued to report on the stage of the river during flood time.