

## Flood Time at Cascade

A group of Cascade schoolboys, tired after a busy evening of harmless pranks, trudged homeward on the night of June 14, 1925. Bright flashes of lightning in the north caught their eyes and illuminated the sidewalk at their feet. On the following morning, these same youthful students fidgeted at their desk seats in St. Martin's as they gazed apprehensively out of school windows: the Maquoketa River had overflowed its banks and was filling the bordering lowlands with a flood of swirling, muddy water! Slowly but surely the water rose and advanced menacingly toward the barns and dwellings which were situated on the outskirts of the little northeast Iowa town.

A night of cloudbursts in neighboring localities to the north was responsible for this flood which was sweeping down the valley of the Maquoketa, carrying with it tangled masses of debris and bits of wreckage. The main point of attack by the turgid avalanche of water was the massive arched bridge which connected the east side and west side of Cascade. The volume of water completely filled the arches of this imposing structure and poured over the deserted footwalks. With the

speed of a mill race the raging current swept over the dam which stood some distance below the bridge. A park pavilion near by was swiftly whisked away by the torrent despite valiant efforts to anchor it securely.

A steep hill east of the bridge offered protection to most of the people living in that area although the water encroached steadily on some of the homes which were located very near the stream. An arm of the muddy invader poured around the picturesque old grist mill but high ground forced it back to the flats which stretched southward along the river channel. The old mill building, supported by a substantial foundation of massive rock, "stood the test". The bridge, although buffeted by tons of floating wreckage, resisted the pressure of what was styled, with more emphasis than accuracy, "the greatest flood of known and unrecorded history."

On the west bank of the river the overflow ravaged the fields and swept southward. Merchants and shopkeepers soon realized that the business section of Cascade was practically an island, just beyond the grasp of the two sinister arms of the frightful invader. Fortunately, however, the high ground, several blocks in extent, which constituted this portion of town offered protection against great damage by submersion. The region included

in the residence district at the west end of town was far less fortunate. As the flood danger became more and more apparent, householders began moving all their portable goods to upper stories. In some cases this task was performed just in time to save valuables from spoliation as the water rose above the level of the cellars and poured into the rooms on the lower floors. Women and children experienced the terrors of the marooned as they cowered fearfully in upper rooms and attics. Below them the water played havoc with furniture and household goods.

Meanwhile, the raging current west of the business section was bent on much more serious destruction. A hardware store collapsed under its furious attack. Coils of rope, pitchforks, and other stock floated away, later to be found in the sand which covered the flats. The Baptist Church resisted immersion for a while but was finally carried away. Photographers ventured into dangerous places to take pictures of houses being torn from their foundations before the fury of the flood.

The main area of inundation presented a strange and desolate picture. Writing desks, porch swings, and pianos formed part of the flotsam which was quickly borne southward. Odds and ends of every description floated on the sur-

face for a short distance and then disappeared in the muddy current. Livestock of various kinds formed part of the tribute exacted by the insistent tyrant, and one person reported that "three chickens atop a coop" had made the dangerous voyage down the turbulent stream. A house built only a short time before the disaster clung desperately "to the west side of its foundations while the East side of the basement, furnace and garage, containing [a] brand new car was swept away."

Most of the citizens of the town were in a state of feverish excitement. Some congregated in little groups at various points from which they watched the destructive course of the torrent. Others paddled about in improvised rafts, water tanks, and makeshift boats, assisting marooned householders whose homes stood outside the path of the dangerous current. The more daring youths of the west side swam around in the muddy water which stood in the houses, rescuing household articles and handing them up to the owners who had fled to upper rooms.

Early in the afternoon the first of two drownings occurred. About two o'clock, Edward Bell, who was employed at a garage situated in the business district, announced that he wished to go home after dry clothing. His house was located west of the main current which was then a raging

whirlpool. With James Casey and "Nic" Cigrand, he set out in a canvas boat to cross the dangerous flood. They had gone only a short distance before the frail craft was caught in the swift current and forced down the stream, despite frantic efforts on the part of the men to change its course. Suddenly the boat capsized, throwing the men into the swirling waters.

Casey managed to grasp the trunk of a tree which still stood upright. A party of rescuers soon dragged him to safety. Cigrand was washed past him downward to the flats and out of danger. Vainly clutching at every object which might impede his momentum, Bell disappeared from sight. It was not until two weeks later that some workmen found his body deeply imbedded in the sand and earth deposited by the high water.

In a small frame house near the path of the current lived Mrs. Phoebe Russel, one of the oldest residents of the town. When the force of the flood became alarming, efforts were made by neighbors to induce her and Mrs. Nellie Cowan, a daughter who was attending her, to leave the building. They refused.

"I was in the house and saw everything coming", related Mrs. Cowan. "My mother was on a bed and when I felt the house start to shake I put a cover over her. 'Billie' Cooley came into the

house and told us that we should get out. I told him that the house had a good foundation and that it would hold. He begged us to leave saying that the house could not last longer. I told him that I was going to stay and see what would happen. Billie begged us again and then left and just as he stepped out of the house the ceiling and plaster began to fall on us. I went over to see my mother and found that the falling plaster had cut her head. Just as I placed a cloth over the cut to stop the flow of blood the house left its foundation."

The little house collapsed before the eyes "of hundreds who congregated near by". In despair the onlookers searched the swiftly moving current with anxious glances. Finally Mrs. Russel was sighted. The old lady was drifting down toward the flats on a mattress which served as a raft. But the worst fears of the powerless spectators were affirmed when the mattress overturned and the woman disappeared. Meanwhile Mrs. Cowan was afloat on a mass of wreckage which made its way down the stream. In stark terror she clung to her unstable support while beds, tables, and other wreckage crashed together and were whipped about her by the current. Those who viewed the spectacle thought that any moment would be her last. Nevertheless she was finally rescued, distraught and terrified by her harrowing

experience. Her mother's body was found on the following morning.

While these tragedies were occurring, organized attempts were being made to give aid to persons who were besieged by the high water. From Dubuque, Sheriff F. J. Kennedy and Fire Chief Joseph Fisher arrived with a group of assistants. In all manner of water craft these officials performed a great service in releasing many who were imprisoned in their homes by the watery menace. The workers gave no thought to food or rest and after five hours in the water they were taken to the City Cafe "where, as guests of the sheriff, they enjoyed a splendid dinner."

By nightfall the fury of the flood was spent, and citizens of the town congregated to view the scene of the destruction. A gorge, twenty-five feet in depth and from fifty to one hundred feet in width, marked the path of the current and testified to its ferocity. This apparently natural channel extended along Pontiac Street for a considerable distance. The huge ditch invited the interest and wonder of all who gazed upon it. On either side was piled high a collection of debris which, in the words of the *Cascade Pioneer*, was "beyond description" and "appalling to the heart of the beholder." Heaps of wreckage dotted the lower end of the town. Household articles of every de-

scription, cherished keepsakes, and ruined goods from the few stores in the path of the current, were elements in the refuse. The fine gardens and lawns of residents along the once pleasant street which led toward this dumping ground were hopelessly destroyed. The whole area was "a barren waste" of sandbars.

The people of Cascade went to the immediate relief of the individuals who had suffered most from the effects of the flood. The spirit of neighborliness which pervaded the little town was an immense asset in this time of stress and privation. Unfortunates were given food and clothing. Undamaged homes were opened wide to those whose dwellings were uninhabitable. Various community organizations began to collect funds to be expended for the flood sufferers, many of whom faced the prospect of being homeless for a considerable time. "Cascade people did this without any request for outside aid", later declared the *Cascade Pioneer* with justifiable pride.

But the terror of high water was not yet over. At about one o'clock on Wednesday morning a heavy rain storm occurred. The storm area was again north of town. The Maquoketa, which had by this time reached its normal stage, began to rise. Fear again seized the townspeople as they visualized further disaster. Various rumors



sprang up. According to one story a plot was afoot to blow out the dam, thus removing one obstruction in the path of the stream and lessening the flood hazard. This rumor as well as others could not be verified. But the fears of the people were without foundation. The river channel carried the surplus water without overflowing.

The record of the destruction in property is revealing. Fourteen buildings were "totally demolished"; fifteen structures were listed as "partially demolished"; and about seventy houses, barns, and places of business were damaged by water. It was not unusual for a farmer whose place was situated in the flood area to list such casualties as "four cows, barn, 20 hogs." Losses were estimated at \$500,000 by the *Cascade Pioneer*.

The task of gathering up the wreckage and general cleaning was soon consuming many busy hours for workmen and householders, although low spirits reduced the efforts of some of the distressed people to a minimum. "We must not be discouraged", declared the editor of the local newspaper. "Cyclones and fires have nearly wiped out smaller towns and they have recovered. . . . The solid citizenry of Cascade is still here ready to help and go ahead. God reigns and the soul of Cascade still lives." Letters from old citizens who had long ago moved to distant States

expressed deep sorrow. One sympathizer stated emphatically that "if aid is necessary I am willing to do my share. My heart is with the good old town of Cascade and her people."

On Sunday, June 21st, the little town was visited by another flood, but this time it was a flood of sightseers. Throughout the greater part of the day cavalcades of automobiles moved along the old military road to the scene of the disaster. "There were all classes of cars", said the *Cascade Pioneer*, "from expensive limosines, sedans and touring cars, to the most dilapidated flivvers resurrected from the junk pile, and the people likewise included a variety as cosmopolitan and variegated as their vehicular means of transportation." Many of the visitors harbored the impression that the gorge running along Pontiac Street was the river!

Within the next week a meeting was held by leading townsmen "to formulate ways and means to prevent future floods in the locality." A committee with James H. Devaney acting as chairman was selected to have charge of submitting a program of reconstruction to the board of supervisors of Dubuque County. The Cascade group recommended that the river channel be straightened to the north for a distance of 1500 yards. Other proposals included the removal of the dam which stood below the bridge and the substitution of a

suspension bridge for the picturesque old arched structure.

During the long period of official negotiations, various steps were taken to aid Cascade in its rebuilding program. Dubuque initiated a movement for a fund "to help Cascade come back." Another fund to be used for the same purpose was sponsored by the *Cascade Pioneer*. Toward the end of July the Dubuque collection, which had grown to \$1546, was turned over to the reconstruction committee. Even the little village of Bernard made a substantial contribution. Baseball games, dances, and picnics also provided sources of needed funds. A donation of "two days' labor" was made by the Cascade farmers and business men.

During the early summer months groups of schoolboys scampered along the banks of the Maquoketa south of town. Home they came, with pockets full of odds and ends which had been deposited there by the flood. Jack-knives, photographs, and whistles could be found among the collection — treasure trove to these sun-browned lads, but mementoes of disaster to their elders. "The flood" was the absorbing topic of youthful conversations, while Rin Tin Tin playing in "Tracked in the Snow" at the local theater lost much of his usual appeal.

The little town of Cascade is again relatively

prosperous and serene. No signs of the disaster of 1925 are visible. Cars and wagons pass at all hours on Pontiac Street, once the channel for a flood current. Buildings have disappeared, but others have taken their places. A new suspension bridge spans the little Maquoketa River which glides from the northward in a straightened channel. A concrete dike flanks its west bank. Downstream the waters rush over a small declivity formed by the natural rocky stratum from which the village decades ago received its name. The dam is gone. Only the old mill stands as it was on that fearful day eleven years ago. And as the townspeople seat themselves on the lawn of the city park to listen to the music of the waterfall and perhaps watch the youthful fisherman angle for his prize, a glance at the old mill sometimes serves to recall the day when Cascade had its greatest trial by water.

THOMAS C. GEARY