

The Flood of 1851

The deluge began in May. For more than forty days the rain fell, not continuously but at very frequent intervals. Farmers in the valleys despaired of getting their corn planted. Crops of small grain were washed out or ruined. Not until July did the skies clear and the floods subside. A newspaper reported that neither the "memory of the oldest inhabitant" nor "any traditional accounts from the Indians" furnished any evidence of such an inundation.

There was no need of so much rain in Iowa. During the previous year of 1850 the rainfall was estimated at forty-nine inches which, according to modern records, was about eighteen inches above normal. The ground-water level must have been high in the spring of 1851. After the first down-pour, the earth became saturated and the surplus ran off to swell the creeks and send the rivers surging out of their banks, even above the second terraces.

Everywhere the same conditions prevailed, even on the narrow watershed of the Missouri slope. But the damage was greatest in southeastern Iowa, for there the water in the Cedar, Iowa,

Skunk, and Des Moines rivers, drained from two-thirds of the State, reached the highest mark. Moreover, that region was the most densely populated portion of Iowa. The settlers, clinging to the valleys, had not penetrated to the upland prairies of the central and northern sections. When the floods came, they discovered that their lowland farms were unfavorably situated. Most of the towns, being located on the rivers, were under water, but the inland communities were comparatively unharmed.

The heavy rains reached the first climax toward the end of May, culminating in a veritable cloudburst that lasted more than an hour. When the downpour finally abated the whole country presented "the appearance of one vast lake of rushing waters." Hundreds of acres of tilled land were overflowed; horses, cattle, hogs, sheep, and chickens were drowned; fences and buildings were swept away. Huge trees, washed out by the roots, came floating down or caught at the bends to form temporary dams. Water flowed in at the second-story windows of mills and warehouses built close to the river.

At Fort Des Moines the river was twenty-three feet above the low-water mark. Buildings on the east side were swept away or destroyed by the swift current that extended to the foot of capitol

hill. The present site of the North Western depot was submerged. Boarders at the Marvin House near Third and Walnut streets made their entrances and exits by means of a raft. Business was completely paralyzed.

While their ordinary occupations were suspended, several citizens spent the time catching trees that came down with the flood. These were towed to shore and anchored. When the water receded they were trimmed into sawlogs. Much valuable timber was secured in this way. This hazardous employment, however, cost the life of Conrad Youngerman at Fort Des Moines. In some unaccountable manner his boat capsized and he was drowned before help could reach him. His two companions were saved after a hard struggle.

Several other deaths were attributed to the flood of 1851. Two small boys were drowned at Red Rock. Sandert De Jong fell from a bridge at Union Mills and was gone before bystanders could help him. An elderly couple named Alloway living beside the Maquoketa River were overtaken by the rising water while seeking a place of safety. Mrs. Alloway was carried away by the swift current and her husband escaped only by clinging to a bush until he was rescued in the morning. Perhaps there were other casualties which were not recorded, for the newspapers of

that day had little space for anything but politics. No doubt the loss of life would have been much greater if the country had been more thickly populated.

Though newspaper descriptions of the flood were exasperatingly meager, general conditions were incidentally revealed by casual local items. All of the streams from the Maquoketa to the Des Moines were out of their banks. Muscatine Island was almost completely overflowed by the Mississippi. At Rochester on the Cedar River a monument was placed to mark the limit of the "High-water of 1851". Some railroad surveyors who wanted to determine the high-water mark of the Iowa River near Columbus Junction took the elevation of a muddy streak on the plaster of the ferry house "about three feet from the floor, where the water had evidently stood." The Skunk, too, spread itself in every direction. "Judging from appearances one would suppose it determined to declare itself navigable (without any act of legislature) by removing, without the aid of civil law, everything calculated to hinder small craft from taking an uninterrupted voyage to the Father of Waters."

The towns in the Des Moines Valley, however, seem to have suffered most. This stream drains nearly a third of the State, and the cloudburst on

May 21st seems to have been centered between Fort Dodge and Fort Des Moines. Further augmented by steady rainfall, the river took full possession of its former dominion, attaining a width of four miles in some places and leaving its "mark" on the land "so that the settlers may hereafter know how much is *claimed* by it." Nor was the monster any respecter of places. Timber land, cultivated fields, and towns were treated precisely according to their altitude without regard for human safety or property rights. Red Rock, Eddyville, Ottumwa, Iowaville, Keosauqua, and Farmington were all ravaged by the flood. Not once but three times the angry Des Moines reached out of its normal channel to invade streets and dwelling places, leaving behind a smear of mud.

Roads, which were not good at best, were utterly impassable. Many of the bridges were out and the rope or hand-power ferries were useless. Under these circumstances the settlers in the interior were isolated. In a few weeks the supplies of food and other merchandise, depleted during the winter, were in danger of being exhausted. Most of the mills could not grind because of the high water. Moreover, gardens had been destroyed and crops ruined by the flood.

In this emergency, four men at Fort Des Moines determined to go to St. Louis for a steam-

boat load of supplies. If the flood closed the normal routes of transportation it also provided a navigable waterway. Though the trip was hazardous, the enterprise promised big profits.

It was a cloudy morning in June when J. M. Griffith, a general merchant, W. T. Marvin, proprietor of the leading Des Moines hotel, Peter Myers, a speculator, and Hoyt Sherman, the postmaster and county clerk, "started on their perilous journey of 170 miles to the Mississippi, without chart or guide, on a river running out at a higher stage of water than ever before known". Their means of navigation, in the words of Mr. Sherman, "was a rough board skiff made by unskilled hands out of native lumber, with a flat bottom, and not at all constructed to resist the bumps from violent contact with stones or piles of heavy drift". The space was so limited that each one "had to remain seated in the same place between starting and stopping" places.

In all probability these four men still hold the rowboat record from Des Moines to Keokuk — a little less than four days. Carried along by the swift current, their principal task was to keep in the main channel and avoid snags. About noon on the second day they reached Eddyville. Rowing up to the hotel, they tied their boat to the bannister of the outside stairway, climbed to the second

story, and ate a hearty dinner. They reported that a "three foot rise" was due soon, but their prophecy was not taken seriously by business men who already had to reach their stores by boats. By the next morning, however, the river had risen so high that hundreds of bushels of corn which had been drying in a warehouse had floated out of the open doors and were "bobbing up and down in the swift current or circling in golden eddies near the shore."

From Eddyville the voyagers "floated out over the overflowed bottom, following as closely as possible the submerged stage road for a large part of the distance to Ottumwa." At that town "every store, warehouse and residence on the low ground was partially submerged." Having obtained a good map of the river, they had "no further trouble in guiding the boat through the proper channels."

At Lowaville, then a village of "thirty houses, some stores, a blacksmith shop and hotel", the flood spread across the bottom land to the bluffs about a mile away. Most of the inhabitants had retreated to Joel Avery's farm on high ground where they camped for more than a month on a kind of compulsory picnic, but a few simply went upstairs and lived in the second story of their houses until the water subsided. Guests at the

Iowa Hotel were made as comfortable as possible on the upper floor.

On down the river went the boatmen from Fort Des Moines impelled by business motives but making a sort of holiday lark of their trip. At Keosauqua, Bonaparte, Farmington, and Croton they found typical flood conditions — families homeless, streets changed to canals, merchants selling groceries and gingham from the top shelves. On the afternoon of the fourth day they “floated into the great Mississippi, and their boat was soon safely moored to the wharf at Keokuk.”

Having proceeded to Saint Louis by packet, they chartered the steamboat *Kentucky*, bought a load of flour and other provisions, took on some passengers for Des Moines, and set out for home. At Keokuk additional goods were taken aboard and the voyage up the flooded Des Moines began.

Obstructions to navigation at Croton and Farmington were passed without difficulty. At Bonaparte, however, Meek's dam was a more formidable barrier. “The steamboat was pointed directly at the breast of the dam” and had nearly passed the obstruction when the paddle wheel at the stern reached the deep trough in the water just in front of the dam. Out of the water it “flew around with great velocity,” threatening to break the machinery, until the engine was stopped.

Then the steamer drifted back in the swift current. Again and again the boat was brought up to the dam, only to repeat the failure of former trials. At last the owners decided to abandon further efforts, stored the cargo in a warehouse, and returned to Saint Louis for another steamer.

Captain Joseph Price was induced to attempt the voyage to Fort Des Moines with his *Caleb Cope*. After reloading at Bonaparte, he boldly approached the Waterloo of his predecessor. Confidently and steadily he piloted his boat "through and over the surging flood of the dam to the still water beyond." The worst of the trip was over, and the remainder of the journey was made without delay or danger.

All along the way the *Caleb Cope* was welcomed by the settlers in the Des Moines Valley. Supplies of flour, sugar, and coffee were sold at every town. The arrival of the steamer at Iowa-ville on the Fourth of July made memorable the celebration of the national holiday that year. On the following day the steamboat reached Fort Des Moines and delivered the much-needed provisions. By that time the river had returned to its normal course, but the water was still high enough to enable Captain Price to make the return trip without serious difficulty.

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