

THE PALIMPSEST

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Weather Chart: 1952

Masked behind Iowa's 1952 weather records, which on the surface indicated little deviation from the normal rainfall or temperature averages, there lay a dramatic chapter in the endless story of man struggling against the unleashed forces of Nature. Floods and droughts, snowdrifts and dry wells, miry acres and sweeping grass fires left their imprint on men's minds and on their soil. The mightiest works and plans of men were put to a severe test as Nature left a pathway of watery destruction on one hand, and scorched prairies on the other.

The chain of events which led to the tragedy of devastated farmlands, flooded homes, and property losses calculated in the millions of dollars began far from Iowa. Unusually heavy snows in the Northwest had blanketed the vast region which forms the upper drainage basin of the Missouri River. To the east, snow and ice clogged the tributaries of the Mississippi. Army engineers warned that conditions would be hazardous if the

snow and ice melted rapidly. Ominously, the skies brightened late in March, and rapid thawing was soon under way. Western Iowa felt the impact of these early thaws when the Floyd, Big Sioux, and Rock rivers began overflowing their banks late in March, finally reaching record crests.

By April residents of Sioux City's lowlands were preparing to evacuate their homes as the flood waters of the Big Sioux bore down on them. The crest, highest in sixty years, washed away sections of railroad tracks, then inched toward homes and business offices in the area. The havoc created by the turbulent Big Sioux was only a preliminary, however, to the chaos which the Missouri floods brought for a hectic two weeks that began April 8. Warm weather, with mercury readings above normal for early April, increased the danger of a serious flood along the Missouri. Reports from upstream convinced army engineers at Sioux City that the river crest there would be the highest recorded since 1881.

Meanwhile, the unseasonably warm weather created a grave situation along the Mississippi, where the rising water indicated that a flood crest above the 1951 record was in prospect. At Davenport river experts predicted a crest of 14.5 feet. Residents at Sabula recalled their efforts to keep their community high and dry during the 1951 floods, and readied themselves for more trouble. At Dubuque, Clinton, and Muscatine preparations

to hold back the anticipated flood were also undertaken.

But Nature, which had dealt severely with Iowa's eastern border in 1951, was now switching her worst elements to the western slope. The rampaging Missouri forced its way through new channels, dashed at the existing levees, and pounded at sandbag barricades with fury. Threatened areas in Sioux City were abandoned to the silty, brown-yellow waters which soon lapped at the outskirts of the metropolitan business district. By April 12 the town of Blencoe, 45 miles to the south, was inundated. Eight National Guard companies were ordered to the stricken area for flood relief duty, and almost 6,000 persons were homeless in the Sioux City area alone. Bulldozer operators worked feverishly at Onawa to build an earthen dam to protect their city. High school gymnasiums were hastily converted into emergency relief shelters where food, bedding, and typhoid inoculations were made available to evacuated families.

To the south of Sioux City, 400,000 rich acres were covered with water. Farm homes were surrounded by the Missouri, and helicopter service was used to rescue families isolated by the raging river. Mondamin, Modale, Pacific Junction, and Onawa were evacuated. Businessmen, teachers, youngsters, and even retired citizens sweated shoulder-to-shoulder with the guardsmen in pre-

paring sandbag levees to curb the flood waters. Sandbags became a symbol of security as men sought to protect the structures which represented a lifetime of sacrifice, ranging from simple farm homes to the \$3,000,000 Sioux City municipal auditorium.

The magnitude of the Missouri flood was recognized by President Harry S. Truman on April 13, when he allotted \$250,000 in emergency flood relief funds to Iowa sufferers. Business in Sioux City was brought to a standstill. Then, on April 15, the flood crest at Sioux City began to drop, and the anxiety which her citizens had known now gripped residents at Council Bluffs. More than a million acres of rich land in the Missouri and Mississippi valleys were already under water. Cloudless skies in the flooded areas seemed to portend better days for the hard-pressed flood victims even as they strained with the next row of sandbags.

By mid-April, more than 8,000 soldiers and civilians were fighting "Big Muddy" from Sioux City south to the Missouri border. An additional 2,800 soldiers were on their way to Council Bluffs from Camp McCoy, Wisconsin, and President Truman had personally visited the area to determine the extent of the flood damage to crops and property. Hundreds of thousands of bushels of corn in government bins were offered for sale without restriction in an effort to save the grain from the flood's destruction. Governor William

S. Beardsley called for additional funds after \$40,000 had been used by the state in flood relief, and the Des Moines *Register* started a private campaign for flood relief that soon had brought over \$25,000 in contributions from generous Iowans. Thirty thousand persons in the Council Bluffs area were forced from their dwellings into emergency shelters set up by local and state relief agencies.

Along the Mississippi the flood threat was imminent by April 17, but far less pressing than the situation in western Iowa. Flood barriers were erected at Davenport and Muscatine as the Mississippi continued to rise, and 1,000 families in the Muscatine area were advised to move to higher ground. The Red Cross helped 100 Dubuque families move from their threatened homes, and by April 22 nearly 5,000 persons were homeless because of the Mississippi's rising crest. Seven National Guard units were called into action to assist flood victims from Dubuque to Clinton, and an emergency inoculation station was set up in the Dubuque city hall. Soon four more companies of guardsmen were on duty along the banks of the Mississippi. Railroad tracks were swept away between Sabula and Clinton. Guttenberg reported a flood crest of 20.2 feet, slightly higher than the 1951 mark, and officials of the \$15,000 Quad Cities Open Golf Tournament cancelled the affair — the course was under water. A week later the

Mississippi showed definite signs of receding at Muscatine and Davenport. Roads and railroad tracks had received less damage than during the 1951 flood.

Relief for the flood victims came from every quarter. The Iowa legislative interim committee earmarked \$350,000 for emergency flood relief. A share of a \$55,000,000 Congressional appropriation was scheduled to bring some aid to Iowa farmers whose crops had been destroyed. Lieut. Gen. Lewis A. Pick, chief of army engineers, said "The worst is past" when he viewed the scene at Council Bluffs on April 19. The Missouri flood crest had moved farther south, swamping half of Hamburg with its crest of 30.24 feet. Soon the wrath of the Missouri had passed. Early in May most of the families forced from their homes by high water on Iowa's borders had returned to their dwellings.

The flood news had dwarfed the importance of other weather happenings that occurred during the same period. On April 9 southwestern Iowans noticed a strange earth tremor that worked its way to Des Moines, rattling dishes and windows. A St. Louis geophysicist said the earthquake was one of the strongest shocks ever recorded in the Midwest. Five other states also reported a mid-morning disturbance. A Red Oak resident claimed his office walls shook for thirty seconds, and women employees in the new state office building at Des

Moines became dizzy and faint during the rumbling.

Bad as the floods were, the ungoverned rivers did give a warning. No such warning came to farm families in the Buck Grove community in Grundy County when a tornado whirled through a three-mile path on June 2. One youngster was killed, and two other persons were injured. The local school building was destroyed, and the ballots deposited there on primary election day were never found. A second tornado struck northern Cherokee County late in June, with winds clocked at ninety miles per hour. High lines were blown down along the thirty-mile route of the destructive whirlwind, fifty-three farm buildings were damaged or destroyed, and four persons were injured. The property loss was estimated at over \$1,000,000.

Floods continued to plague Iowans months after the great damage of the spring had been partially repaired. Flash floods and heavy rains forced the Des Moines River out of its banks on June 23. Extremely heavy rains fell in Monona County a few days later, and an observer declared that "10,000 acres of the best farm land in the Whiting area was covered by five and a half inches of rain." Another 5,000 acres near Onawa was inundated in an unwelcome reminder of the recent Missouri overflow. The freakish weather was marked by a 23° temperature drop at Sioux

City in a two-hour period, followed by heavy rains and flooding of railroad tracks in Woodbury County.

Apart from the areas visited by floods and high winds, the weather picture for 1952 began with promise for the farmer. Corn and soybean crops were favored by almost ideal growing weather, although the oats crop was hit by blight in southern counties. The weatherman and the farmer cooperated marvelously as the fall approached and dry weather was needed to mature and harvest the major crops. After a wet spring and summer (unfortunately interspersed with damaging hailstorms in July and August), dry weather permitted farmers to pick corn and complete other harvesting operations with a minimum of delay.

A definite change in the weather became perceptible to most Iowans by mid-September. After September 2 a drought began which robbed parts of the state of the usual autumn scenic beauty, created a fire hazard on many farms, and caused alarm in several communities threatened with serious water shortages. During September only .88 of an inch of rain fell in Iowa, less than one-fourth the usual amount. Many Iowans saw no rain between the beginning of September and November 16, when rains of torrential proportions came. For seventy-five days farm ponds grew smaller, the water level in wells went lower, and over seventy major grass fires threatened wildlife and farm

property. The shortage became so acute in some cities that voluntary water rationing was considered, bonfires were prohibited because of the tinderbox condition of fields and lawns, and newspapers carried accounts of farm machinery and mechanical corn pickers that had been damaged by cornfield fires.

The drought not only created a fire hazard and hence delayed the opening of the pheasant hunting season — it also reversed the favorable trend of the summer weather for the farmer. The lack of moisture parched orchards, delayed plowing and planting, and forced cattlemen to bring water in tank trucks for their stock. Rivers and streams in widely scattered parts of the state reached their lowest stage on record. Much speculation centered around the possibility that freezing weather might come and stay without sufficient moisture in the ground to aid the 1953 crops. Iowans heaved a collective sigh of relief when the November rains came after .02 of an inch of rain in October, the driest ever recorded.

The rains which broke the drought measured up to six inches at Knoxville and Bedford. Snowfall followed, thus indicating that the weather was back to normal in Iowa. The snow was heaviest in the north central area, with seventeen inches recorded at Bancroft. Traffic was disrupted, highway travel made difficult or impossible, and many motorists left stranded in farm homes. Six high-

way and exposure fatalities resulted directly from this drought-breaking series of storms.

After the many gyrations of the barometer in the first eleven months of 1952, Iowans probably should have expected more unusual weather in December. The prevailing sentiment was that cold weather had come, the drought was over, and a normal period of dampness and snow was ahead. No pattern of conformity bound the weather, however, and with a 63° reading at Fort Madison on December 8 it seemed that spring was in the air. A heavy ice storm hit the state on the 19th and convinced Iowans that anti-freeze and a full coal bin were still worth the investment.

When weather bureau statisticians compiled their final report on 1952, "normalcy" among the averages belied the violent day-to-day chartings. The precipitation average was 29.80 inches, only 1.57 inches below the normal amount. Similarly, the average temperature was 49.1° , which was only $.5^{\circ}$ above normal.

Although the weather played many tricks with Iowa in 1952, few of the scars left by Nature's whimsies seemed permanent. Despite the heavy property damage, Iowans were thankful that the loss of life was surprisingly small. Man's harnessing of Nature appeared to be well under way, and Iowans on the western slope were cheered by reports that Fort Randall dam upstream from Sioux City was nearing completion. By using its skills

and talents, America was planning to end at least a part of the threat which had made the memory of 1952 weather unpleasant for thousands of Iowans.

ROBERT RUTLAND