

THE PALIMPSEST

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The Rockdale Flood

About two miles south of Dubuque lay the straggling village of Rockdale beside Catfish Creek. The little settlement consisted of eight frame buildings situated on each side of the Old Military Road which transected the narrow valley over a causway several feet high. A stone bridge spanned the creek. Below the highway was a flour mill and dam, while just beyond the Illinois Central Railroad rounded a bluff at the left, crossed the creek with a long steel bridge, and continued up the valley along the stream. Catfish Creek and the railroad formed the legs of a capital A, with the mill near the apex and the highway serving as the cross-bar.

In this secluded little community the centennial Fourth of July, 1876, came and ended with its customary noise and gayety, and by ten o'clock most of the inhabitants had retired for the night, save a few who had gathered in the saloon for further talk and

refreshment. Some one suggested that there was a feeling of rain in the air. Sure enough, the sultry evening soon grew perceptibly cooler and a few big drops splashed into the dust. Sharp flashes of lightning tore the sky, and deep ominous thunder rolled across the heavens. The darkness became opaque and the rain began in earnest.

By eleven o'clock the rain had settled into a steady downpour which continued for hours without abating. Lightning continually slashed the intense darkness of the night, while thunder reverberated almost incessantly. Peal after peal seemed to "leap from hilltop to hilltop", and the earth continually trembled under the onslaught.

Charles Thimmesch, a bar-keeper in the saloon, was the first person to realize that there might be actual danger in the heavy rain. Upon opening the door to see the effects of the storm, about one o'clock, he noticed that the creek had swollen until the water was crawling up the sides of the elevated roadway. Alarmed at this discovery, he ran upstairs to notify the family of his employer. By the time he returned, a flash of lightning showed that a channel had been torn between the saloon and the right bank of the stream, through which the water was rushing with fury. Escape toward Dubuque was also cut off, for the water had raised above the road in that direction.

Every one in the saloon was aroused, and frantically they sought some means of escape. The

twelve or fifteen persons there, however, could only await with stricken hearts and blanched faces the progress of the flood. "With one despairing cry for help, one prayer to the Infinite Father for mercy, they waited the coming of the avalanche, which all too well knew must engulf them in its folds." The heavy waters, freighted with "debris torn from the hillsides", snapped the steel of the railroad bridge as if it had been the merest web, and sent the loosened structure careening down the angry stream. "Wave after wave of water, many feet high, came in succession, as with the weight of molten iron and the erectness of a wall, and house after house went whirling and spinning, and tumbling and crashing, on the mad avalanches of water which tossed them like things of air, onward and downward."

The first building to go was the Rockdale House, a large frame tavern. It was nearest to the stream on the west side of the road. Soon after the railroad bridge went out the tavern was swept from its foundation and tossed by the torrent until there was nothing left but fragments and splinters. The wife of the tavern keeper and Mr. and Mrs. Peter Kapp and four of their seven children were drowned. Three of the Kapp boys miraculously escaped a similar fate. The oldest, a lad of fourteen, clung to a piece of roof when the house went to pieces. Another boy, eleven years old, swam for a time in the water, holding on to his little five-year-old brother. Finally he managed to clamber on a bit of

roof and pull his brother after him by the hair. When their crude raft drifted against a tree, they climbed into that, where, in precarious safety, the larger boy held the smaller in his arms until morning.

The Kapp residence, which stood next door to the tavern, was the only building in town left in an upright position, though it too was moved from its foundation. When the flood threatened, the family had left this place of safety for what they supposed was the more secure shelter of the larger building.

As soon as one building had succumbed, the rest followed in rapid, crazy procession. The dwelling next door to the Kapp house was struck by a wall of water which uprooted it and laid it over on its side as "completely as if it had been lifted into the heavens, turned and dropped sideways."

The Carey residence went next. Martin C. Carey, who was one of the anxious watchers in the saloon, saw his house totter, saw the lights go out, and watched it start on its mad journey downstream, carrying with it the precious lives of his wife and two children.

A few moments later the saloon itself was struck, and as it toppled, took with it eleven terror-stricken people. Among the number was a man and wife and their two children who were on their way to their farm not far distant, but had stopped for shelter from the storm. Only four persons in the saloon escaped with their lives, three of these being saved

by clinging to trees into which they chanced to be thrown.

Charles Thimmesch was the fourth survivor. As the building began to sway he ran to the upper story and broke through a window, jumping to the roof of the adjoining store which appeared to be more substantial. It was but a moment, however, until that began to move also, so he stripped off his clothes, put some money between his teeth, plunged into the raging waters, and struck out for the opposite shore. The battle was long and gruelling, but he was an excellent swimmer and finally gained the land.

The blacksmith shop was the next to go, and then Peter Becker's house was crushed in a whirlpool with himself, his five children, his housekeeper, and her two little girls within. His brother and family had been wiped out when the saloon fell.

Thomas Blenkiron, the proprietor of one of the stores, had early in the evening taken his wife and cousin out of any possible danger and started them on their way to Dubuque, carrying the account books of the establishment. After they had reached high ground he waded back along the road in the water, expecting to follow them if the flood increased, but he and his son were caught in the building. Their bodies were pulled out of the mud the next day.

The last building left was Gustave Horn's store. It swayed for a moment as the surging water closed around it, "and then went down with a crash, careening sideways and crushing down until its roof

was nearly upon a level with the water." By superhuman effort Horn succeeded in getting his wife and four children upon the roof, where they clung until after daylight.

Thus in the short space of half an hour, between one and two o'clock, all but the mill and one of the dwellings in Rockdale were swept away "like so many cockle shells", and whirled by the surging torrent until they were smashed into fragments. Only the mill was left wholly intact. The stream which swallowed the village was fully twenty feet deep and two thousand feet wide. Like the victims themselves, the piercing shrieks of men, women, and children were drowned amidst the roaring of the water, the crashing of the buildings, and the reverberation of the thunder which was accompanied by terrible lightning and a steady downpour of rain.

After several hours the storm ceased and the day dawned bright and clear. The sun smiled and the birds sang, quite oblivious of the awful scene of destruction in the little valley. By six o'clock some fifty volunteers had arrived from Dubuque to feed and clothe the survivors and to search for the dead.

It was a gruesome business. For a mile along the creek the bodies of nearly two score of people were strewn. Some of the heads were crushed almost beyond recognition. Some of the children were asleep with a smile upon their lips. They were found in the ruins of houses, in the water, and in the mud and brush along the bank. Often only an arm,

a foot, or a bit of clothing was exposed in the mud and debris. The loss of many little children between three and twelve years old made the calamity more pitiful. One small boy was in a tree-top clinging desperately to the branches. The rescuers called to him to come down, but he made no move to obey. He was dead.

The number of victims mounted up and up until it totaled thirty-nine. By six o'clock on the day following the flood thirty-one of the bodies had been located, and the next day the others were recovered.

Neighboring houses sheltered the dead. They were laid in rows, and often by families. The Klasens, a father, mother, eighteen-year-old son, and three daughters, one a round-faced child of five, were ranged side by side in death. The only one of the entire family to be saved was a little boy who floated on a board for over a mile and was rescued in the morning, still on the plank.

Dubuque suffered also. While the storm was at its height streets and lawns became part of a swirling river, with the tops of picket fences gleaming here and there in the lightning. The vast sheet of rapidly moving water, "covered with fences, sidewalks, pig-pens, outbuildings (some overturned and partly demolished, some carried off as complete as they had stood on the ground), uprooted shade trees, tree-boxes, wagon-boxes, cordwood, garden vegetables, cistern tops, with an occasional sawhorse, cellar-door or croquet mallet, went rushing and

whirling by, while the squealing of drowning porkers, the clamor of perishing chickens, the lowing of terror-stricken cattle trying to make their way to safer ground, filled up the rare intervals between the rattling of heaven's dreadful artillery."

All the low parts of the city along the creek were flooded and considerable losses resulted therefrom. The stone wall in front of the German Theological Seminary was completely torn away and in place of it yawned a chasm fifteen feet below the street level. Street car tracks, on the other hand, were buried beneath two or three feet of dirt and sand. High board fences were twisted and flattened. Trees were uprooted and plots of green grass or flower beds were either buried under a cake of mud or swept completely away. One man whose garden had been destroyed by previous floods had built a solid stone wall around his place which was a foot above the highest flood mark recorded. But the wall that "God Almighty couldn't wash out" was scattered stone by stone for a distance of half a mile, and fragments of glass from his greenhouse were strewn to the four winds.

One man was partly "compensated" for his misfortunes by the arrival upon his premises of a large hay stack which had lost little of its symmetry of form in transit. Another citizen became the possessor of an unidentified horse, which when found was still hitched to its feeding box.

Inside the homes there was great confusion,

caused for the most part by the sudden flooding of cellars. Grocery stores were particularly susceptible to damage in this respect, for the reserve stock of vegetables, kerosene, sugar, flour, and other staples was kept in the basement and consequently ruined. Many barrels of vinegar floated out of a lower window of the vinegar factory.

In one house the owner became alarmed at the ferocity of the storm and started down cellar to see what damage was being done. Suddenly the steps, loosened by the water, gave way and precipitated him into the murky pool. His son, hearing the commotion and receiving no answer to his frantic calls, immediately plunged into the water, for he knew that his father could not swim. Again and again he dived to the bottom and searched in vain. A few moments later, worn as he was with exertion and despair, he hardly knew whether to be glad or angry when he heard his father's voice calling his name. The older man had plunged through to the other side of the cellar, succeeded in reaching the outside door, and thus escaped drowning.

But the flood was not confined to basements. A man and his wife awoke to see the "bureau afloat and tumbling about the room, and the bed held down only by their own weight." In another house a woman was startled out of her sleep by the feeling of "something cold". She and her husband had considerable difficulty in wading out.

Only one fatality occurred in Dubuque. Mr. and

Mrs. Ulrich who lived on the flats were awakened by the feel of water; instinctively Mrs. Ulrich reached out for the cradle which was sitting beside the bed. But it had been tipped over and the tiny occupant drowned while the parents were still asleep.

The morning of July 5th revealed strange sights. There was land where there had never been land, and water where there had never been water. Houses had been torn apart, and great piles of debris littered the neatest lawns. Hundreds of dollars worth of property had suffered destruction within a few hours. But the residents of Dubuque counted their losses small when they heard about the catastrophe which had befallen the little town of Rockdale. Their hearts were stirred with a terrible, shuddering awe when they thought of their neighboring village — the eight houses which, on the fourth of July, had been the happy homes of unsuspecting parents and children — and of which on the fifth nothing was left but the “heart-piercing wreck of what had been.”

PAULINE GRAHAME