

CHAPTER VI

RISING WATERS, JANUARY, 1937

Floods are not uncommon in the Ohio Valley. However, there have been few mid-winter floods and certainly never any, at any time in the history of this country, to compare with that of January, 1937.

Even when the muddy waters of the Ohio River on Friday, January 22, reached a flood stage of 70.4 feet, the majority of citizens had not thought of the impending disaster. On that day most schools were compelled to close in Greater Cincinnati. Transportation had become somewhat crippled, and Northern Kentucky was fast becoming isolated because all approaches to bridges connecting Kentucky and Ohio were becoming inundated. Although the air was tense with excitement, few people realized just what the crisis would mean.

There was much concern when the news was spread that a building on Broadway, near the river front in Cincinnati, had collapsed, and that twenty-seven persons narrowly escaped death; but still Northern Kentuckians were not frightened. A few hours later the Miami River overflowed the Beechmont levee and flooded Cincinnati's airport.

It was a tremendous flood, but the people felt there

had been worse ones. However, on Saturday, January 23, when the river stage was reported at 72.8 feet and still rising, when reports were being broadcast over the radio warning people about the use of electricity, gas and water, when officials began to take command and to issue statements for the safety of lives, the citizens of Greater Cincinnati began really to be alarmed.

Almost at the same time at Pittsburgh, a city farther up the river, for several days, authorities had been preparing for a record breaking flood. The crest of the flood was reached at that city at one o'clock Saturday morning. Other points along the way experienced the disaster which came to be known as "The Great Flood Disaster of 1937". A little later many towns and cities in Ohio, West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Indiana and Illinois were affected. The story of Portsmouth, Ohio, is one of the most tragic of the history of floods. Then on to Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky cities came the most disastrous flood in a record of 31 during the past 54 years.¹

As early as January 15, it had been predicted by

1. The Picture Press, Wilkes-Barre, Pa., The Great 1937 Disaster.

authorities that the water in the Cincinnati area would likely reach a crest of 52 feet, which is flood stage in that area. The following day the river reached a crest of 51.66 feet and then dropped to 50.9 feet.

Then on January 18, a 58 foot flood was predicted. Thus every day a new figure so that when, with the dawn of January 22, news was spread of lives lost, property damaged, bridges closed and water and food supply in grave danger, and under a steady downpour of rain and snow, the Ohio, Miami and Licking Rivers still rising, it is no wonder that panic reigned. On Friday night of that day in Northern Kentucky, 4,500 families were driven from their homes. A building in Newport was swept away. Industry was at a standstill. One hospital was partially closed. Campbell County was isolated, her only connection with the outside world being the telephone and a Chesapeake and Ohio shuttle train between Cincinnati, Covington, Newport, Bellevue and Dayton.

A Cincinnati newspaper reporter called Sunday, January 24, "Black Sunday". By Sunday morning the river had risen to a 75 foot stage and was still rising. Cincinnati's power supply was in danger. Water was put on a ration basis. A \$1,500,000 fire swept through Camp Washington and hundreds of residents fled from their homes.

City Manager Dystra declared an "emergency holiday".

Monday morning, The Cincinnati Enquirer, carried such head lines as; "River Hits 77.72; Still Rising"; "Valley is Inferno as Gasoline Burns"; "Blaze Lights Sky"; "Water Service Reduced to Four Hours Daily"; "65 Rescued at Silver Grove, Kentucky"; "Water Rationed in Campbell County"; "Theatres Closed"; "Factories Closed"; "Suspension Bridge Closed"; etc.

By Monday night there were 7,000 destitute families in Campbell County. The County's only hospital was under water and evacuated. There were ten cases of scarlet fever in Dayton. There was no electricity, no means of getting out except by shuttle train to Cincinnati, and the water supply was low.

On Tuesday, January 26, the river reached a crest of 79.99 feet. On this day Cincinnatians and Northern Kentuckians began to feel the full impact of the flood. Streets were deserted or almost so; all streetcars, in both Ohio and Kentucky were withdrawn from service; all factories were idle; all theatres were dark; schools, shops, and libraries were closed. The water supply was sharply rationed. Many citizens, especially suburban residents, went in numbers to springs, wells, and tanks, with jugs, buckets, milk cans and beer kegs to help

supply the urgent needs of thirsty people.

On Wednesday, January 27, the sun shone for the first time in two weeks. The river at last was slowly falling, and people began to feel more confident and to believe that the worst was over. They were assured that food and fuel supplies were adequate and that health conditions were above those of normal times. Surveys of property damage were begun and rehabilitation plans were started. The Federal Government promised funds for clean up and rehabilitation.

On Thursday, the river fell to a stage of 78.62 feet, and people after the first fright, were beginning to become accustomed to their prolonged holiday. The Thursday morning papers carried the news that the river had fallen one foot in 24 hours. But with the good news of receding waters came new problems.

In Campbell County a survey disclosed 22,700 persons in flood zones. Many of these people were being housed in concentration camps. Cases of scarlet fever, small-pox and diphtheria were reported in these camps. Health authorities became alarmed. Plans were made for mandatory vaccinations and inoculations. Pleas went out over the radio and through the newspapers "to boil all drinking

water and cooking water" as a safeguard against disease.

The Cincinnati Enquirer of Thursday morning, January 28, carried a Red Cross report in which officials estimated that there were yet 12,000 homeless families in Newport, (officials estimated that each family included an average of 4 or 5 persons), where about 100 city blocks and 2,600 homes were under water. The estimate was that 6,000 persons in the county had been driven from their homes.

By January 30, "clean-up" was the order of the day in Northern Kentucky. Estimates of damage progressed. It was estimated that in Newport alone the damage was \$185,000. The damage in Dayton was estimated at \$60,000, and in Bellevue at \$20,000, while the damage to Campbell County roads and bridges was said to be \$517,100.

It was not until February 8, that transportation in Campbell County became normal. Although street cars did not operate for many weeks, busses were used instead.

Thus came and receded the greatest flood in the history of the county, leaving in its wake homeless and destitute people, some who were sick, some who were old and helpless, but most of whom were brave and courageous.

The American Red Cross, which had come to the rescue early in the flood, played a most important role in helping

to relieve the suffering and to rehabilitate these people. It is with the plans and work of this great institution that we are concerned in this thesis. We shall try to show in the next five chapters, how the Red Cross operated in Campbell County, in "The Great Flood Disaster of 1937".

THE WORK OF THE AMERICAN NATIONAL RED CROSS IN
CAMPBELL COUNTY, KENTUCKY, IN THE MISSISSIPPI
AND OHIO VALLEY FLOOD OF 1937

THESIS

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