

Northern Kentucky Views Presents:

The Great Flood of 1937

By Dr. Carl R. Bogardus

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BY
DR. CARL R. BOGARDUS, SR.

The 1937 flood was the greatest disaster ever to strike the Ohio Valley. It is true there had been floods before. Every few years inundations of rather more or less severe character strike the valley, and more extreme ones occurred in 1884 and again in 1913, but this one was, by far, the most destructive and terrifying of all. I was an interested eye-witness to the debacle since I was engaged in the practice of medicine in Warsaw, Kentucky, at that time.

January, 1937, started out as a month of unusually heavy precipitation. The total rainfall that month was 13.68 inches. The second wettest in 78 years of record was 1876 with 9.49 inches. The Ohio River gradually rose, but no one was especially worried about the situation. It was not unusual to have heavy winter rains and moderate floods. By January 11th the river had reached flood stage, and due to the persistent rains, continued climbing slowly up its banks. Then along about the 20th it got much colder and a heavy snow fell covering the ground with a foot-thick blanket. Following that the weather warmed up again and on the night of the 23rd it started raining again, and continued all that night. Morning dawned on the most dreary, dismal day I have ever seen. The low sky was leaden and from it came a steady downpour of rain. Everywhere there hung a misty fog-visibility was very poor, and there was not the slightest breeze to dispel it. Underfoot was a thick, water-soaked sloppy slush-which truly was a terrible mess! Water stood everywhere-the gutters in town, the creeks and branches in the country were rushing their swollen contents to the already brimful river, and it rose higher and higher that day. The earth's soil was so saturated with water that there was no where else for further rain to go except into the creeks and tributaries, thence into the already gorged rivers.

One could almost see the motion of the water's edge as it slowly crept up places the oldest oldtimers could not remember it ever having been before. All that Sunday the downpour continued unabated and the rain and the melted snow rushed into the river. That terrible day will always be known in history as "Black Sunday", and very aptly named it was, as many people can testify today. The now mighty and swiftly flowing river relentlessly swept all before it. Several days previous to "Black Sunday" it had already passed the hitherto unsurpassed high water mark of the noted flood of 1913, which I very well remember, having been a lad of seven at the time.

The rains, especially that of "Black Sunday", had fallen over the entire extensive watershed of the Ohio River. The water quickly ran off of hill-sides long ago denuded of their protective covering of forests and even the level, bare fields of the farms held back very little of it. The silted-up streams rapidly transported the rich, topsoil-laden water to the upper Ohio to begin its destructive journey to the sea.

Day by day the great Ohio rolled on, ever higher and higher. Practically every house in Warsaw's slum district - the under-the-hill - was swept away by the swift and powerful yellow waters. A few especially tough and extremely well anchored houses disappeared beneath the surface of the rapidly-rising waters, but as the flood receded they were seen to be still resting on their foundations, and some are still there today. Such a house was that of my nearest neighbor, Lee Napier, whose domicile was directly down the hill from the Tandy house where I lived at the time (this house was later occupied by Mrs. Ruth VanHorn). When the rising waters got up under the floor Lee moved out, bag and baggage, but where to I do not now remember. Day by day the muddy, silt-laden water rose higher up on the weather-beaten old house, until finally the comb of the roof with

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a brick chimney at each end, projected from the swirling waters, but there she stayed anchored as firmly as though a part of the bed-rock. Lee's toilet, woodshed and chicken-house had floated away early in the flood, bound for the Gulf of Mexico, but the sturdy old house stayed put.

The little town of Warsaw fortunately is located on a high, level flood plain, or bottom. In this respect we're much luckier than any other town or city along the river. Col. Robert Johnson (1745-1815) and Henry Yates (1786-1865), Warsaw's founding fathers, knew what they were about when they laid out the town in 1814 (until 1831 it was known as Fredericksburg). They could not have picked a better spot. A ten-foot additional vertical rise would have been required to have brought the water up into the town's streets. However, long before that point was reached the relentless waters reached their crest and began to recede, slowly but surely, and everyone heaved a sigh of relief.

The rising waters quickly and surely crept up the sloping surface of my garden until it was almost lapping at the foot of the terrace wall which formed the north boundary of the yard. One could stand on the edge of the wall and spit in the river. With our hearts in our mouths we watched it come, hoping it would stop before it reached the house. A lot of less fortunate people than we were also watched and hoped, but saw the waters creep into their homes. Some moved themselves and their belongings upstairs thinking surely the waters would not follow them there, but follow them it did, driving them out and carrying off the house and its remaining contents on its ample bosom.

From where we lived we had a wonderful ring-side view of the whole disastrous proceedings. From our back porch we watched an endless procession of floating houses of all sizes and descriptions, barns with frightened chickens huddled on their roof tops, outhouses galore with their identifying stars and half-moons, boats, barges, lumber, furniture-in fact just about every object imagineable that would float, swiftly sped down the river. Some persons with especially fertile imaginations even thought they saw people clinging to the roof tops of houses, but there was no definite proof that this was true.

Highway U.S.42 both east and west of Warsaw was soon covered by the rapidly-rising waters, but we could always get in and out of town to the south over the Dry Creek road to Glencoe or Sparta. The Sparta Road, Kentucky 35, was also cut off by the flood water backing up Craig's Creek, where the Gallatin County Fish and Game clubhouse is today.

For a while, however, it looked as though when the river was at its crest, which occurred on January 27th., that our avenue of escape to the south would be cut off too, for the flood waters came through a dip in the highway about a mile above town and again flowed down through the prehistoric channel south of town-probably for the first time in ages. The water came down through the two McDanell ponds, the swamp, Cox's pond, Gill White's pond (most of these landmarks have disappeared) and flowed in a shallow sheet across the Sparta Pike from Harry Beall's house to Dr.E.C. Threlkeld's house. Then it found its way through the fields to join the backwater in Dry Creek valley near the Dean Richards farm. Then Warsaw was located on an island. The worried townspeople gathered at the spot where the water crossed the street and stared at it with furrowed brows. Anxiously they talked of parking their cars on the other side if it got any higher. However, their fears, and mine too, I must now confess, were proven groundless, for as soon as the water dropped a foot or two from its crest, the water no longer flowed through the old channel, and the populace breathed and slept a lot easier.

Daily we saw cruising up and down the river steamboats, diesel towboats and Coast Guard cutters, all bound on errands of mercy and rescue. Thousands of marooned people had to be rescued and transported to places of

safety, as all rail and highway transportation was completely disrupted in the vicinity of the rampaging Ohio River. Jeff Webb, Matt Webb, Jim Cox and many other rivermen carried on rescue operations in our immediate neighborhood, from Sugar Creek to Ethridge. One day I went down the river in a motor boat with some other interested "River Rats". We cruised up on Lem Bledsoe's front porch, (Now Dr. Roy and Mary Ann Eaglin's residence), where the water was about five feet deep, circled the house, then went across Highway 42 to Leo Weldon's. The water on his front porch was three or four feet deep. Leo had removed his front door before abandoning the premises. So we steered the boat into the hall and took a turn around the living room. Then we came back out of the house and returned to Warsaw.

One of our favorite pasttimes at that time was listening to the radio. Louisville was especially hard-hit by the flood waters. Radio station WHAS kept up a constant twenty-four-hour vigil, broadcasting urgent calls for boats to come to various parts of the flooded city for rescue purposes. The announcer would excitedly say: "Send a boat to 28th and Chestnut- a man, his wife and ten children are marooned in the attic with no food or heat", or some other similar calls, all of which began with the words, "Send a boat-!"

Flood refugees were sent all over the country as rapidly as possible to get them out of the disaster areas. Tent cities were set up by the Red Cross in various towns. After I located in Austin, Indiana, in 1938 I learned that many refugee families were quartered there, it having been designated as a relief station by the Coast Guard and the National Guard. One family in Scott County moved there because they were routed out of the Point, a low-lying residential area in Louisville on the River Road where the Boat Harbor is today, by the '37 flood. They were the Albert Evans family. It was for them that I delivered in their home a baby girl when I was a medical student at the University of Louisville in 1929.

After the river crested on January 27th, it slowly began to drop-faster and faster- and on February 8th it at last dropped below flood stage, the first time since January 11th. Then it was not too long until it was again peacefully flowing within its usual banks, leaving behind the most terrible scene of destruction this country has ever known. The damage ran into many many millions of dollars, and it was a number of years before all the evidences of the flood had disappeared.

The Ohio River is a remarkable stream of violent contrasts. It is said that it has the greatest rise and fall of any river on earth. Imagine a day in midsummer. The calm, clear green stream slowly drifts between banks lined with feathery, pale green willows, tall cottonwoods and sycamores, the bordering bluffs reflected on its mirror-like surface, while the more distant hills are cloaked in a bluish haze. Any stretch of the river along its course of 981 miles from Pittsburgh to Cairo will provide a scene of exquisite beauty, unexcelled anywhere in the country. I can close my eyes and form mental pictures of these beautiful scenes of my childhood on the Ohio.

Now, for the contrast. In the winter the water is yellow-laden with valuable topsoil and clay from countless farms. The trees lining the banks are leafless and dead-the hills are bare and gray. Even then to me, views up and down the reaches of the river are not without a certain beauty and grandeur. Then when the rains come and the streams become engorged with water, rise out of their banks and spread out over the surrounding countryside, the scene changes. Then it becomes a terrifying, rampaging monster and sweeps all before it, as it did in 1884, 1913, and 1937. Then it is as different from the peaceful midsummer scene as night is from day.

For Warsaw the flood was actually a blessing in disguise. True, it did considerable damage by wrecking or carrying away most of the homes of the denizens of the under-the-hill, and caused considerable hardship and

suffering, but it succeeded in moving most of the people out of there permanently, a change that was for the best. The Red Cross bought a tract of land adjoining the old Warsaw Cemetery, built a street and laid it off in lots which were sold on easy terms to the refugees. Today "Red Cross City" is full of unpretentious homes, and they are entirely safe from the vagaries of "Ole Man River". And the under-the-hill is completely changed, too. Maple-shaded Locust Street along the river was once lined on both sides by houses and places of business. Many of my old boyhood cronies lived there. Now all is practically deserted and approaches the condition it was in when Robert Johnson and Henry Yates laid out the town of Fredericksburg along the river bank in 1814. The ravages of the elements did a pretty good job of face-lifting on that part of Warsaw, and thereby improved her outward appearance considerably. Time Marches On!