

Northern Kentucky Views Presents:

The Big Flood

March 9-10, 1964

Falmouth, Ky

by

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1984

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Falmouth lies at the confluence of the South Licking and Main Licking Rivers, and some sections of the town have been subject to flooding almost annually. To my knowledge, two previous floods of major proportions have occurred in the 20th century, the first coming in January of 1937, and the second in February of 1948; at which times the major part of Falmouth lying west of the L & N. Railroad had been covered with water, but these occurrences were minor compared to the terrible deluge that raged thru the west end of the town on the night March 9th, 1964.

Only light rainfall for the past six months had created a water shortage in the surrounding area. Farmers had been hauling water for many weeks. It was generally conceded to be a dry winter, and the weather bureau reported a marked deficiency in the past several months of rainfall. The ordinary conversation included many comments about how badly we needed and then it came and once it started, it seemed it would never stop.

The first big rain occurred during a thirty hour period of March 2nd and 3rd, when 5¼ inches fell, and the rivers rose out of their banks and flooded some areas. Main Licking River reached a maximum of 37½ feet and flooded Shoemakerstown, but was still 4½ feet below the all time high of 42 feet, reached in 1937. Cooler weather prevailed, and the sun came out bright and clear the rest of the week. The grass turned a dark green overnight, and the smell of spring was in the air. Optimism spread among the people. This had been a major flood of course, but much needed rain had come, and the rivers started falling quickly. The danger seemed past. Then it happen-

ed - the worst catastrophe ever to hit the little town of 2,600 souls.

A large low pressure area of warm air moved up toward the Ohio Valley from the Gulf of Mexico, and was met by cool air from the northwest. It seemed to hang in the area of the mid-Ohio Valley, and especially in the area of the Licking Rivers through Sunday, Monday, and Monday night. The rain fell in torrents hour after hour. The rivers were still rather full from the flood waters of a week before; Main Licking standing at 16 feet when the new rise started. By Monday morning it was rising faster than anyone had ever witnessed before, and by early afternoon it had already reached the recent peak of 37½ feet. The rain continued to fall in blinding fury. There was no let-up. Hour after hour it continued, and the alarm began to spread that this was going to be one of the worst floods ever.

Some families started moving early from the low lying areas, but these were few, as no one had any idea that the water would equal the heights reached in the record of 1937 of 42 feet. I was personally alarmed, and some of the boys at the office seemed to think me a bit hasty in my conclusions, but I had read in the Courier Journal of the extremely high water on the upper reaches of the Licking on Sunday night, and I knew this water would reach Falmouth sometime late Monday. With all the rain falling locally, I felt we might be in trouble.

Two of our rural carriers, who were able to start on their routes which lead out thru Shoemakerstown, were trapped on that side of the river, and had to detour via Grants Lick in Campbell County, some sixty miles out of their way. One

of them was not able to get into town from that direction when he returned late in the afternoon. We tried to brace for the trouble we felt coming. Sewer outlets in the basement of the Post Office were plugged. Supplies and other materials were raised above the expected level should the basement be flooded. Water began seeping thru cracks in the floor. We seemed secure, and I took a quick ride out to west Falmouth and South Licking to look around about 3:30 o'clock. Surface water stood everywhere, but still U. S. 27 was clear. I returned to the Post Office.

Wilbur Ritter, a clerk had gone home about 3:00 o'clock as he lived on Liberty Street in the west end and was a bit concerned. At 4:30 P.M. he came rushing in the Post Office and confirmed a report we had heard only moments before that the water had broken over the U. S. 27 in the west end of Falmouth (this was described by many as a two or three foot rise in the water that resembled a roller coming in on the ocean beach). He had luckily been able to drive both his cars out with the help of his wife, and needed a boat to immediately go back to his home.

From that time until the next morning, about 4:00 A.M., was a nightmare. I shall never forget the experience, yet, it all seems like a dream. Some parts of it are rather hazy in my memory for after ten hours of the most feverish work, I was almost completely exhausted. I know there were literally hundreds of others who had similar experiences. The possibility of drowning in those turbulent waters I now realize were good, but no one seemed to hesitate to take any kind of chance. I am sure the many

men working never realized the magnitude of the operation until it was all completed.

Ritter and I hurriedly took my boat, not even taking time to get my motor from the garage loft, to the Shelby Street crossing of the railroad, and rowed to his home on Liberty Street where I left him to move his furniture upstairs, and immediately started taking people out of the lower lying houses to the railroad crossing. There, I turned them over to anyone who would transport them to someone's home, and returned for load after load. I rowed that boat until I thought my back would break. Elderly women were afraid to even step into the boat, and they were so terrified that they needed someone to tell them what to do. I gave orders like a tough Army Sargeant. The rain was coming down in almost solid sheets driving into one's face. I was soaked to the skin soon after starting to work.

Every where you looked, men were wading waist deep in water, or working frantically with furniture carrying it to second floors. Women and children were standing on porches where they still remained high enough to be above water and calling to you to come back and get them. You tried to assure them that you would be back, but some had to wait for a long time as only three boats were operating in the area that I was working for some time. Later, after dark, several motor boats arrived and rescues speeded up.

Confusion was rampant - people were frantically wading around in their living rooms with furniture already floating around some of them. Many had not the presence of mind to put on a warm coat or a pair of shoes. I stepped out of the boat onto an already flood-

ed porch to try to persuade the wife of an elderly man to leave (he had been caught uptown and was anxiously waiting at the railroad crossing). I got a slight electric shock when I touched the door, but grabbed it and nothing further happened. I found the old lady standing on the stairway in her bare feet, had to search for a pair of shoes, got a coat and sweater, and hustled her into the boat. When I stop and think about it, I know this took a great deal of courage on her part for, I was a perfect stranger and, she had never been in a boat in her life. She was about seventy-five years of age. She certainly had a great deal of faith in me to cast off from her front porch in those swirling, muddy waters. A roomer in the back room called to me to wait a moment, and he came wading thru the house to join us. We took off, the rain beating down especially hard at this time. The poor woman had not the presence of mind to put anything over her. I reached over and placed the sweater around her head and told her to hold it there, and strained at the oars. The current was getting very swift. This was just one rescue; there were many more.

I was soaked! My teeth were chattering. I turned the boat over to some boys and went home for a change of dry clothes. This time I got my good fishing slicker and remained fairly dry the rest of the night. Traffic was a terrific problem. Some people were frantic, and some were just driving around sightseeing. Many were a hindrance to the rescue effort, but I suppose that was to be expected.

Returning to the railroad, my boat soon came in and I took off again. The motor boats were helping now, and I decided that I had better not

try any more trips out with passengers for the current was too swift for safety so I stayed with Ritter and helped him place almost all of his furniture upstairs. The water was about a foot deep in his first floor before we left. We went across the street to John Browning's house, and I tried to persuade John to send some of the kids out as he would not leave, but he said they would stay upstairs. I took off for the railroad with one other man for I was now getting uneasy about getting my boat out without a motor. It was a struggle, and as soon as I reached there, I immediately dispatched two motor boats to John's house with an order from me for all of them to come out at once. Presently they returned with the three kids, but John sent word that he and his wife would stay. The darn fool! I had always thought him pretty sensible. What if the house caught on fire? I was disgusted with his attitude, but couldn't do anything about it, so I took the kids to my house and turned to more urgent problems.

A rest home in West Falmouth had to be evacuated. A fire there was reported earlier, but the fire department could not reach it. It must have been extinguished easily, for I never heard any more about it. Soon, boats were bringing the patients to the railroad crossing, mostly on mattresses, laid flat in the boats with the cruel cold rain beating down upon them. There was no cover except a few blankets or anything that could be picked up at the home before leaving. Some were deathly quiet, some were hysterical, and some were bright eyed with the look of terror in their eyes. Many were in a weakened and feeble condition. Almost all were soaked by the time they reach-

ed the waiting ambulances that transported them via 4th Street to the school. Such a pitiful sight I hope never to see again.

In all the confusion, one remembers the coolness of some. Rumors were circulated, some true, some false. You had no way of checking them except to go and see. Many trips at someone's request were unnecessary for the parties about which they were concerned had already been taken out by someone else. Some of the boat operators were pretty much disgusted with people who declined to leave their homes. You heard a bit of cursing and swearing all mixed with work-hard work. One incident I remember was a remark made about a certain lady who had the reputation of being a bit contrary even during a drouth. She remained true to form during the rising waters! Someone suggested that she was still at home and the waters were getting dangerously high in her house so a boat should be dispatched for her. Another says, "Let the old bitch drown; I've been after her three times." Of course, he didn't mean it, but this expressed his frustration. Another of my friends came in with a load and as I was helping them leave the boat, he told me of a sweet old lady that I knew well, who had refused to leave. I told him to go back, and if she would not come, to bodily pick her up and put her in the boat. She weighs about ninety pounds and he is a husky 6 foot, four inches. I never have asked him what happened, but on his next trip he had her in the boat.

It was now 1:00 A.M. and the water was breaking over the railroad tracks on Shelby Street in a waterfall. Fourth Street was blocked at the Baptist Church. The other rest homes downtown were being

evacuated via Shelby and then up Montjoy. Montjoy was the only street open to reach Maple and higher ground. Certainly it wouldn't be long before all the downtown area would be underwater. Most people were out of the west end we thought. John Browning and his wife were still at home, and I knew the water was getting close to the second floor (it reached about 6 feet in his living room.) Well, I've got to make one more try, so I asked a perfect stranger with a good looking big sturdy motor boat to go and get him. He refuses because he says he is tired arguing with some of these people, but he finally agrees to go if I will accompany him, and we take two other fellows to help. It is a good thing we do for the current carries us into trees and poles and you need to grab to keep the boat from smashing up.

I knew when I left that I was going to be pretty definite in my talk to John. I didn't leave any room for him to say no. We had a difficult time getting in to the porch roof from the street because of the trees and swift current. I called to him to get their coats that they were going out, and I don't think I ever tried to say anything just that firmly in my life, for he and his wife meekly were helped out the second story window and down the slight incline of the porch roof and stepped in the boat. The current was so swift that it would catch that big motor boat and spin it around 90 degrees time and again. Houses and obstructions seemed to create whirlpools. When we reached the railroad I carried his wife about half way up to the Depot to keep her feet out of the water. They were amazed and I think a little frightened then, for they had not realized that the waters were so high. We walked to a point

above Fourth Street and Maple which was the closest I could get my last trip in the car, and I took them to my home.

Most every home in the subdivision was now filled to overflowing with refugees. The most I knew of that stayed at any one house in this part of town was twenty-six persons. The City School had hundreds including the rest home patients from all three homes in town. We continued to work until around 4:00 A.M. when we fell into bed exhausted, but I couldn't sleep. A high wind came up and we had quite a storm. This was even more frightening after the excitement of the night. My television aerial lay flat on the roof the next morning. I was up before six and after breakfast placed my boat with motor attached in the water just below Chas. Lemmon's garage on Fourth Street. I motored down Fourth past the church to Chapel and then down Chapel to Shelby, and tied the boat to the railing at the front entrance of the Post Office. The water at the highest point was over the first step leading into the Post Office. Water was 10 inches deep in the Falmouth Deposit Bank, about the same in Moreland's Drug Store. Needless to say, all basements were full of water. The only dry bit of street showing on Shelby was about 10 feet square at the corner of Maple and Shelby, near the Methodist Church.

A total of 9¼ inches of rain fell from late Saturday night thru Tuesday morning, and added to the 5¼ inches of the week before made a total of 15 inches. Falmouth was about ¾ under water. Despite all rumors and claims no existing dams on the Ohio River could possibly have had any effect on the water level. We simply had too much rain for the s

eams to carry. South Licking was higher than Main Licking as evidenced by the waterfall that poured over the railroad from its bridge to a point above the lumber company of D. M. Daugherty. Hundreds of gas and oil tanks were torn loose from their anchorages and were carried away. Many were caught on the railroad bridge and the tracks south of there, and recovered after the waters receded. Few homes in west Falmouth saved any furniture because of the quick rise of the waters. It was only a miracle that no one was drowned. I know of at least four boats that were overturned and swept away, but the occupants all rescued. A neighbor of mine and a cousin had a very close call, when after getting a boat to come to them by flashlight signal they experienced having two boats overturned and sunk beneath them before reaching safety. Approximately 150 cars were caught in the west end and lost in the flood.

I suppose perhaps I have tried to make this account sound a bit sensational and dramatic, but at the same time I have written very honestly of my observation. I make no inference that I acted heroically in any instance, but I am sure there were heroes that night about whom their acts of heroism will never be written. Many had narrow escapes from drowning when boats overturned. Had the rise of the river come four or five hours later, I feel sure we would not have escaped without loss of life.

When the water receded and people returned to their homes many were in a state of shock. It was a pitiful sight. Tears came to my eyes many times as I watched them and talked to them. One would be amazed at the help that soon arrived, for these unfortunate people. Hundreds of friends as

well as strangers came to help with the clean up job. Dozens of farmers came with truck loads of fresh clean water from other towns. Truck loads of clothes, food, etc, and the Red Cross and Salvation Army all were here promptly.

Officially, the water reached a record 47 feet on Main Licking, or 5 feet above the 1937 flood record of 42 feet, but what a difference those extra five feet can mean! As noted before South Licking was even higher than the Main Rivers.

On Wednesday the waters were receding, and many people were anxious to reach their homes to start the messy clean up before floors became dry or even before the water left them entirely. We had no mail to deliver so I operated a ferry service for them for some time. The reaction of different individuals varied to a great degree. One lady that I took to her home alarmed me because of the state of shock that seemed to engulf her. The furniture was in disarray all over the house and coated with a two inch layer of slimy mud. They had saved not a single piece. The house suffered great damage. Two of the basement walls had caved in. Everything seemed to be ruined to her relatively new home. When she viewed all this a numbness seemed to come over her. She could not speak. She was near a state of collapse, and I supported her to be sure she didn't fall. She reentered the boat and unwillingly let us escort her away from the area.

Another couple that I know well, and have a nice family of six, seemed to spend about two or three days wandering from room to room doing almost nothing. They couldn't bring themselves to throw the furniture away which was all ruined. It was hard to talk to them, or advise them. One just didn't know what to say.

Once I observed the wife with tears streaming down her face trying to sort out the contents of a dresser drawer. Among which were pictures of the children, all covered with that slimy, gooey mud, and she mumbled something to herself about the fact that she just couldn't throw these things away. I couldn't take any more of it just then. I had to get out of that house quickly, and then when she couldn't see me, I cried a bit for her too! These were my friends, and they were heartbroken! And then I got to thinking about all the little things that one saves over a lifetime, that aren't worth much money, but are priceless in sentimental value. They had lost them all.

Down the street an elderly lady called to me, and I went over to see if I could bring her anything. She was smiling. She had mud all over her clothes and even some on her face, but with the help of a young boy, they were filling her front yard with wreckage. No fooling around here, she already had a plan and was in an optimistic humor. I was surprised when she apologized to me for being stubborn about leaving her home on Monday night, and thanked me for making her go out early. Frankly, she had been one of the easiest to persuade to leave.

A few were bitter, and oddly, some who were in the best financial position to sustain the loss, were the bitterest. I heard of one family that sold their home at about 60% of pre-flood value, and abandoned everything. A few have moved away and left Falmouth.

Although the State Police, the National Guard, Civil Defense, and local police worked diligently to control traffic, the sightseers from everywhere created a problem during the clean up. They hamp-

ered operations and even though they were barred from most areas, they would pretend to have relatives, etc. in the area and get in. One resident became so incensed and disgusted that he went out to the street and invited them into his home to view the damage. Sarcastically he told them to take a damn good look so they would remember everything and then asked them to go back and tell all their friends about it so they too wouldn't have to come to Falmouth to see it. I suppose I would feel something like he did, if I were trying to get some supplies or a truck or something to clean up my home, but found the traffic tied up for blocks. I don't blame him much for being so nasty to strangers.

A disaster brings out the worst in people as well as the best. In spite of strict security there was some looting and stealing. Most of this took place at the ruined supermarkets where much of the food was condemned by the Health Department. Strangers came in and just helped themselves and some didn't make much distinction between damaged and undamaged goods. The owners and their crews were frantically working to clean up so they didn't try to police their places much. My sixteen-year-old boy who works part time at one market said he lost his temper when he saw a man loading all his pockets with undamaged rifle cartridges. He said he told the man that if he didn't put them back on the shelf, that he would call the police. The man sheepishly emptied his pockets. Another person told me he saw a well-known person in the county loading his car with groceries, and he had nerve enough to use one of the service carts to transport them to his car from the store. A fill-

ing station operator lost about 100 new tires and they were scattered all over west Falmouth. I saw people rounding them up and loading them in their cars as the water receded, but very few were returned to him. Why are people so basically dishonest? Why in a time like this would some take advantage of the victims, instead of trying to help them?

People panic very easily. One had only to visit the only large grocery left untouched on the early morning of March 10th to observe their actions. We had no bread for breakfast and a houseful of people to feed. I took only some biscuits and rolls, but many others were buying far more than their immediate needs. The bread supply lasted only a few minutes after opening. Later, I saw a farmer and his wife, who had come to town to see about some of his relatives, fill the rear end of his car with foodstuffs for which I am sure he had no earthly use at present. He had only himself and wife to feed, but he talked about how scarce things were getting. There were no refugees at his home. I couldn't understand something like this. They are apparently nice people, but they had panicked for no reason. They never stopped to think that they were denying the unfortunate in Falmouth food which was needed. I was disgusted and ashamed of them. God forgive me, but I will be reminded of this exhibition of selfishness whenever I meet him. And may I also be forgiven for judging them, but they missed a lesson somewhere in the Sunday School they attend regularly. A disaster brings out the sordid selfish side of the human race.

In spite of all the ugliness of these things, and all the cheapness, and all the bitterness; a great compassionate

understanding seems to have swept over the people. Aid has come in every form imaginable to the stricken city. It will take a long time to remove the physical scars - but all of the torment and heartbreak will lessen with the years. The future of the people in Falmouth will become brighter, and forever in their hearts they will be grateful to friends, neighbors, and perfect strangers who came to their assistance in a time of dire peril and need.

Mr. Marquette is the writer of the above article and has this as one of his hobbies. He places his historical articles on file in the Pendleton County Library. He was Falmouth Postmaster at the time, March 9th, 10th, 1964.