

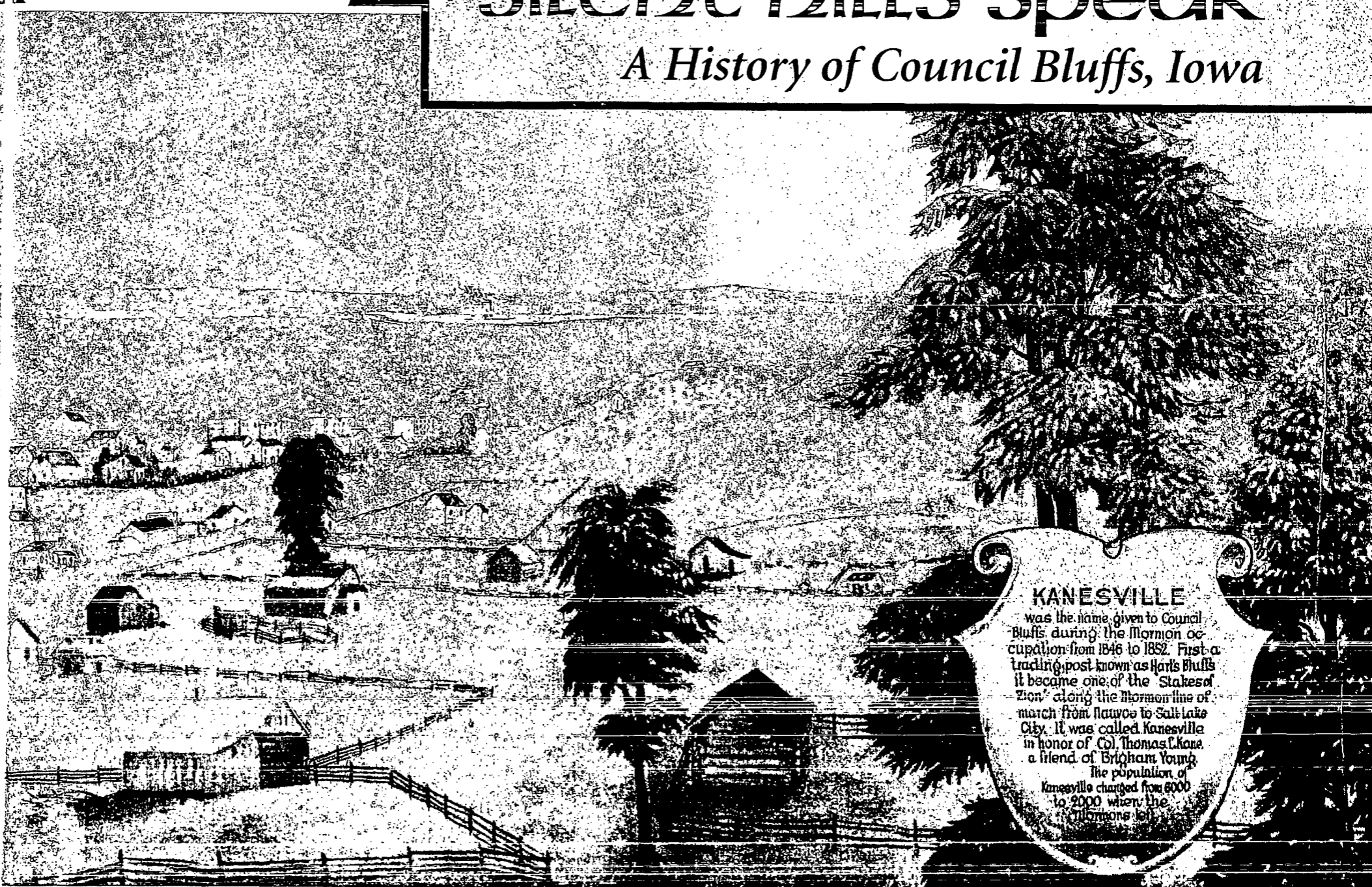
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Superfund

silent hills speak

A History of Council Bluffs, Iowa



KANESVILLE

was the name given to Council Bluffs during the Mormon occupation from 1846 to 1852. First a trading post known as Harris Bluffs it became one of the 'Stakes of Zion' along the Mormon line of march from Nauvoo to Salt Lake City. It was called Kanesville in honor of Col. Thomas Kane, a friend of Brigham Young.

The population of Kanesville changed from 6000 to 2000 when the Mormons left.

silent hills speak

A History of Council Bluffs, Iowa

William E. Ramsey and
Betty Dineen Shrier

Barnhart Press

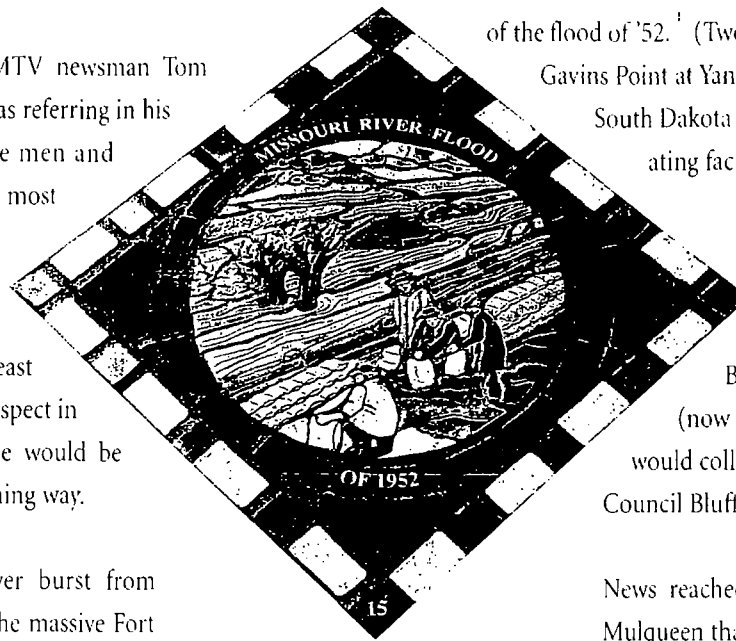
Marauding Missouri Meets Its Match

The Flood Fighters of '52

NBC news anchor and former Omaha KMTV newsman Tom Brokaw called it the Greatest Generation. He was referring in his best-selling books of the new century to the men and women who had known the Depression and the most destructive and far-reaching war in the history of the world. Those years were closely followed by the Korean War, which drew the line against Communist encroachment in Southeast Asia. Little did that long-suffering generation suspect in the Midwestern spring of 1952 that its mettle would be tested once again in a very personal and frightening way.

The unpredictable and unruly Missouri River burst from Montana with a vengeance in April of 1952. The massive Fort Randall Dam in South Dakota, still under construction, couldn't arrest the swiftly flowing Missouri. Fortunately, the dam sustained little damage in the onslaught and ultimately became a bulwark against later flooding.

The swollen river had overwhelmed dikes and spread 16 miles wide in some locations. Only one dam in the flood control Pick-Sloan Plan was operational at the time of the 1952 flood, the Fort Peck Dam and reservoir in Montana. The Garrison Dam in North Dakota and the Oahe Dam in South Dakota were still under construction, along with another at Fort Randall. Officials noted that had these dams been completed, their combined storage capacity would have held a volume of water nearly twice the size



Missouri River Flood of '52

In 1952, the Missouri River, which gave the city its birth, threatened to wipe it out. In April the greatest flood ever to roll down the valley pounded at the 19-mile protective levee. The point of greatest danger, and where the battle was won, was at the North 8th Street levee.

For four days and nights, thousands of volunteers stacked sandbags and successfully kept the river contained north of Council Bluffs near Big Lake.

Photo and description.
Council Bluffs Community Development Department

The river's going to know it's in the damndest tight it's ever had. And we're going to lick it.

— Officer, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
April 15, 1952

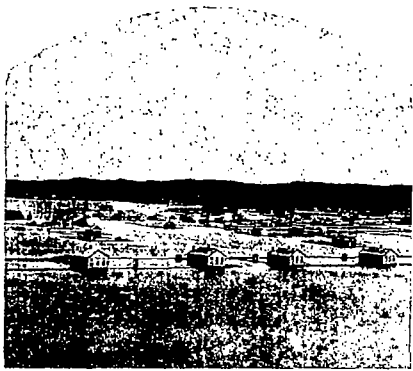
of the flood of '52.¹ (Two more dams were later added to the defense line—Gavins Point at Yankton, South Dakota in 1956, and Big Ben in Pierre, South Dakota in 1964. The latter was primarily an electric generating facility.)

When flooding began, city officials and Army engineers predicted that the river would either make the hairpin turns between Council Bluffs and Omaha, flowing under the Ak-Sar-Ben (now I-480) and Union Pacific railroad bridges, or it would collapse the levee system and flood some two-thirds of Council Bluffs and parts of industrial and downtown Omaha.²

News reached newly elected Council Bluffs' Mayor James F. Mulqueen that the river would crest at 26 feet on or about April 17, a foot and a half higher than in the great flood which had struck the community in 1881. (Mulqueen had been elected Mayor April 1, 1952, less than two weeks before the flood waters descended on the city.)

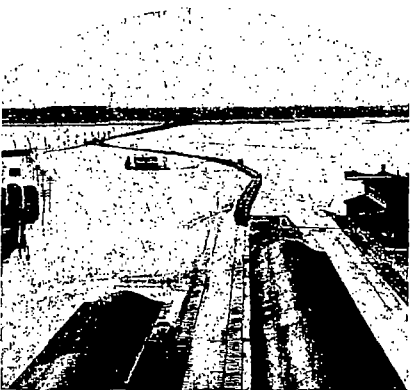
This ominous warning in 1952 brought back dark memories of the floods of 1943 and 1881. Previous crests were 22.46 feet in 1943 and 24.6 feet in 1881. The flood of 1952 ultimately crested at 30.2 feet, with an unofficial crest of 34 feet just north of the city.

Dispatches carried in the *Daily Nonpareil* in 1952 recalled earlier river ravages.



1881 Council Bluffs flood as seen from roof of Union Pacific Transfer, Union Pacific land office.

Photo: Union Pacific Historical Museum



Council Bluffs flood of 1881 from the roof of Union Pacific Transfer, right center.

Photo: Union Pacific Historical Museum

The newspaper noted that old timers referred to the flood of 1881 as a "humdinger." They should have made that colorful word plural, for that historic flood packed a one-two punch. Heavy damage, injuries and deaths were reported in Yankton, South Dakota, further alarming Council Bluffs officials. The first phase struck the city April 9, when the Northwestern Railroad levee gave way and the deluge engulfed large parts of the west and south sides of the city. Not unlike Paul Revere, an unidentified man reportedly rode his horse through the city's south side warning of the rising waters.

With little protection against the massive wall of water, the flood fanned out on the north and south beyond the Union Pacific Railroad Transfer and from Ninth Street west to the river. Residents fled their homes to seek safety at such places as Dohany's Hall (later the site of the Strand Theater), Bloom & Nixon's and other havens. Amidst the anguish of those days, two babies were born in the Pottawattamie County Courthouse, where the parents had sought refuge.

As conditions stabilized, the restless river delivered a second blow on April 19. The flood stage reached higher than the first, to 24.6 feet. More than a week of flooding found houses, large trees and even livestock floating down the river. Officials said waters rose to Eighth Street and Broadway, but old timers insisted that the flood's fury reached as far east as Sixth Street. As the river started to recede on April 27, residents began their painful return to sodden homes. Gone were sidewalks, fences and outhouses.

On the positive side of the ledger, the flood of 1943 gave the city its first victory over the river and resulted in a more effective levee system to protect Council Bluffs from future overflow threats. Those improvements were to be significant in the city's flood defense years later.

Prior to the floods, Carter Lake and Lake Manawa were part of the river channel. During the floods, the river cut new channels, leaving portions of its old bed as isolated. Some good did come from the harrowing events. For more than 120 years, and now into the 21st century, those lakes created by nature's violent seizures have brought recreation, beauty and residential development along the two lakes' shorelines.

I Remember...

While the city, the Red Cross and the Salvation Army and other organizations worked to find temporary housing, people in the east end were urged to house families if they could spare the room. My kind-hearted parents offered their home on Third Street to the Tinley family. Emmet Tinley had been a high school and college friend of Dad's. They had gone through Creighton University together and stayed in touch through the war years. My grandfather, James P. Marquee, purchased this house in 1912 and my mother still lives there in 2002.

As the floodwaters rose, Emmet, Jean and five Tinley children moved into our house. One aspect of the stay, now bitter-sweet, which made the arrangement memorable, was the insistence of Mike Tinley, the second son, to bring along a pet bird in a cage. That bird became the object of considerable attention in a house, which, at the time, had no pets. Mike was killed on September 11, 2001, while attending a meeting in the World Trade Center in New York.

— Robert E. Mulqueen

I Remember...

We lived in the neighborhood of 22nd and Avenue D during the Flood of 1952. The men put appliances on sawhorse to get them off the floor. We were going to take refuge at my brother's home on Stutsman Street in the eastern part of town. We hurriedly packed clothes and headed for the hills. There were 17 of us with three generations of kinfolk in their large home. The men went to fill sandbags. We were not allowed to go back to the area, as it was guarded by security personnel to avoid looting. We remained there five days until the floodwaters were contained and receded. It was good to return home unscathed and not have any flood damage.

— Patricia (Peg) Shudak

I will always remember the flood of 1952 because the radio announcer said we had to vacate our home. My father worked at Blue Star Foods as a night watchman and his boss gave us a place to stay until the emergency was over. My family took every household item we could carry with us. We all stayed in one room on the top floor of Blue Star Foods.

— Artis Helms

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April 1943, the 62nd anniversary of the destructive tides of 1881 brought yet another battle with the Missouri. By April 4, the flood stage reached 17.5 feet, with water pouring into Lake Manawa and backing up in Indian Creek channel as far as Sixteenth Avenue.

The city was warned to prepare for what might be the greatest wall of water since the flood of 1881. Boys from Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln High Schools were recruited to defend the city. Countless adult volunteers swelled the ranks of flood fighters. They raised the levee, but water poured into lowlands north and south of the city. An estimated 40,000 acres of land were under water. Units of the Iowa National Guard began patrolling the levees and roads along the river.

Workers rushed from trouble spot to trouble spot, with a break several hundred yards south of the city water works proving the most threatening. On April 13, City Engineer Jack Boyne claimed victory for the city over the Missouri. As the crest reached 22.45 feet, hundreds of workers and volunteers braved a cold night to guard against major breaks in the dikes. By the next afternoon, the river began to recede.

Hamburg, south of Council Bluffs, was the next victim, as dikes at McPaul and Percival, above Hamburg, broke. Water rushed over the town's residential district; but by April 15, 1943, the river was back within its banks and an all-clear message was sent.

On the west side of the river, Carter Lake residents had fled from their homes after two dikes gave way. The Omaha Airport was submerged under four feet of water.



Watchful eyes look to the rising river levels atop countless sandbags filled by hundreds of volunteers working day and night to save Council Bluffs and Omaha.

Photo: William W. Kraville



Deserted streets and empty homes resulted when thousands of homeowners were ordered to move to higher ground during the worst days of the flooding. Three days before the crest, Council Bluffs' West End was evacuated. National Guardsmen and civilian police established checkpoints in the area to protect against looting.

Photo: William W. Kraville

The *Des Moines Sunday Register* on April 27, 1952, elaborated on the cause of the flood. Heavy winter snows in 1951 and 1952 had blanketed Montana and the Dakotas. Early April had brought unseasonably warm temperatures reaching into the 70s. The Missouri, originating at the junction of three rivers in Montana—the Jefferson, Madison and Gallatin—rapidly gained force. A week of above-normal temperatures combined with the ground frost that accelerated run-off of melting snow spawned the flood.

The churning waters dealt Pierre, South Dakota, its worst flood in 71 years and rushed southward past small towns and major centers like Sioux City, Iowa. By Easter Sunday, thousands of Sioux City residents were fleeing their homes; the crest reached more than 24 feet on Easter Monday. The stage was set for a great drama which would pit men and women against the full force of nature. It became one of the biggest news stories ever generated by the metropolitan Council Bluffs-Omaha area and demonstrated how people of all backgrounds—social, religious, economic and ethnic—could join forces and subdue the watery giant with courage, perseverance, hard work and a relentless spirit to survive.

Nine years after the 1943 river confrontation, residents again had reason for apprehension. Weather bureau reports called for crests a foot and a half higher than those of 1881.

By April 10, Mayor Mulqueen had appointed Council Bluffs attorneys John LeRoy Peterson and Emmet Tinley chairman and assistant chairman of the manpower division of the city's disaster organization. "The army has informed us that in case of an emergency, we will need a minimum of 5,000 men and possibly as many as 10,000," Peterson said. That same day, the Council Bluffs garrison of the Iowa National Guard was put on alert with orders to be ready to mobilize on two hours' notice.

I Remember...

I remember as a child of 8 years, the youngest of 5 children, and the excitement I felt when I heard we were going to stay with some friends in big house on the hill. I thought of it more as a vacation than a problem. We lived on the south side of Council Bluffs, so our family was told to vacate.

The anticipation was wonderful. We loaded our car, kids, mom, dad and our old Tomcat. We started on our "trip" to McPherson Avenue, near Canning Street where Walnut Hill Cemetery is now. We stayed there about two weeks. We got to go to the "Big Park" every day to see all the stones with names on them. I was always looking to see if I knew anyone and wondered why my family didn't have one of our names on one.

The most important thing I remember is our cat ran away and I missed him. But two weeks after we returned home, our straggly old Tom came up the driveway and returned to the family.

— Solly Swanger Spidell

I Remember...

Because the trucks carrying sandbags in continuous lines to the levees, they'd roll down under the heavy loads. We saw burned out clutches, transmissions breakdowns. These were towed to the Company garage where mechanics worked hours a day. We brought any disassembled garage at 125 Pierce St. where I was in operation. We analyzed the problem, got in new parts and got it on the road again. We were never billed for that repair. Most drivers were not the owners. When they'd go to sleep or had to stop to eat, another driver would take over and kept the line moving. Floyd Huglin did repair work as his contribution to the effort.

When all the mechanics were busy, I volunteered to be the headquarters and drive food trucks along the levee to replenish the supplies at the distribution points. My father, G. A. Bartel, was in charge of the kitchen, and equipment for the kitchen. He worked around the clock for several days under the Red Cross.

The Loess Hills on 8th Street were regraded with dirt for the levee. Huge amounts of sand were transported to the river to make the levee. The hills they will always look that way to testify to the struggle that raged against the flood of 1952.

I Remember...

Because the trucks carrying sandbags were kept moving in continuous lines to the levees, the vehicles broke down under the heavy loads. We saw broken axles, burned out clutches, transmissions and differential breakdowns. These were towed to the Hughes Motor Company garage where mechanics were on duty 24-hours a day. We brought any disabled truck to the garage at 125 Pierce St. where I was in charge of the operation. We analyzed the problem, tore it down, put in new parts and got it on the road again. The owners were never billed for that repair. Most of the time, the drivers were not the owners. When the driver needed sleep or had to stop to eat, another driver stepped up and kept the line moving. Floyd Hughes counted this repair work as his contribution to the flood disaster.

When all the mechanics were busy, I would go to flood headquarters and drive food trucks along the levee and replenish the supplies at the distribution points. My father, G. A. Bartel, was in charge of supplying food and equipment for the kitchen. He worked just about around the clock for several days under the direction of the Red Cross.

The Loess Hills on 8th Street were really cut down to get dirt for the levee. Huge amounts of these hills were transported to the river to make the levees. I suppose they will always look that way to testify to the battle that raged against the flood of 1952.

- G. Arthur Bartel

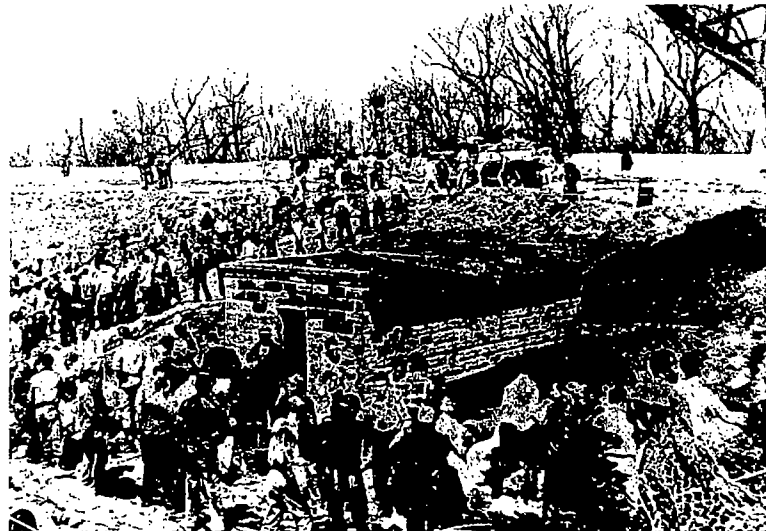
Communications were an integral part of the flood effort. The *Council Bluffs Nonpareil* and the *Omaha World-Herald* mustered all of their resources to keep residents advised of rapidly developing events. KSWI, the Council Bluffs radio station headed by Robert H. O'Brien, along with radio and television stations in Omaha, joined in the challenge to inform the anxious populace.

News media from around the country and the world also converged on the area to capture the tales of bravery and determination that would ultimately win the day. Many remember chain-smoking news legend Edward R. Murrow's reporting live from the levees. Many other media notables also praised and encouraged the flood fighters.

By Saturday, April 12, Mayor Mulqueen used his emergency powers to issue a series of orders. Non-essential businesses were closed for the duration and evacuation warnings were issued for residents of low-lying sections of the city. Red Cross and Salvation Army shelters, along with churches and other facilities were prepared to serve as refuges.

Most evacuees chose to move to homes of relatives or friends on higher ground. In less than four days, more than 30,000 residents had sought safety in the eastern part of the city. More than 500 trucks shuttled evacuees from the west end of the city to higher ground to the east. Furniture from the empty homes was stored and locked in railroad cars which were moved to higher ground.

Tom Hanafan, Mayor at this writing, was only 4 when he and his family evacuated their west side home at 3427 7th Avenue and moved in with his great aunt, Gladys McLaughlin, at 810 North 43rd Street in Omaha. The mayor recalled that his father, Bob Hanafan, a Union Pacific Railroad employee, worked on the dikes on the Omaha side throughout those threatening days.



Volunteers on levee duty. Flood of 1952

Photo: R. H. Fanders

Iowa Governor William S. Beardsley ordered remaining units of the Council Bluffs National Guard into service to help with the evacuation of residents and to prepare for general police and security duties. In Omaha, Brigadier General Warren Wood, Assistant Commander of the 34th National Guard Divisions, ordered two National Guard companies into action.

Omaha construction firms began bolstering floodwalls and levees. Governor Val Peterson of Nebraska declared a state of emergency in Omaha and all along the river in Nebraska. Omaha Mayor Glenn Cunningham called for volunteers to man the levees, as Mayor Mulqueen had done in Council Bluffs.



From right: Capt. Ole Rasmussen and Sgt. 1/C Emmett F. Muller of the National Guard find a new home for a kitten rescued from a hastily vacated home in Council Bluffs. Animal shelters were filled to capacity with lost animals for the duration of the emergency.

Photo: William W. Kraville

Durham scoured the Midwest and turned up more than 100 pieces of equipment to help strengthen the main levees. A secondary dike running from the Illinois Central railroad bridge on the river east to the Bluffs was also a high-priority item.

Durham also recalled the sad plight of the pets left behind by evacuees. "I remember the dogs, running in packs, howling and hungry," he said. It was a sad sight, but at least the owners were able to return to care for the confused pets.

Brigadier General Don G. Shingler requested the Fifth Army, headquartered in Chicago, to send four battalions of engineering troops to help save Council Bluffs and downstream agricultural levees and ordered other government assistance.

There was an urgent need for heavy equipment, and Council Bluffs officials turned to Charles W. (Chuck) Durham of the Henningsen Engineering Company in Omaha (later the internationally known Henningsen, Durham & Richardson). Durham had done work in the city during the late 1940s, rebuilding the community's infrastructure, and was the city's consulting engineer. Additional sandbags and flashboards would be critical to saving the city. Mayor Mulqueen asked Durham if he could secure the desperately needed equipment. Durham replied, "I don't know if it's possible, but we're going to try like hell."⁵

I Remember...

What I remember the most is the way that people all came together—red, yellow, black or white—and worked side by side on the levee, filling sandbags. My husband, the late Jerry Carter, was working for Omaha Standard Body at the time and they let everyone off with full pay to work on the dikes. I remember we just had one little girl, Judy, who was 3 years old. My husband didn't want to evacuate but they came and told us we had to go. We were one of the last ones to leave the west end. I didn't see much of Jerry as he and Norm Severson slept in a pickup truck for a few hours and then went back to work. I remember our Church, First Baptist, opened their kitchen to feed the men. It was truly a marvelous thing to see everyone pulling together.

With all the hard work and prayers, we were saved from the flood. Praise the Lord. I was only 23, but I have not forgotten to this day what a traumatic experience that was.

— Thele Carter

I Remember...

Ten of us lived together during the crisis, a new baby to a 70-year-old grandmother, a friend who didn't want to move to Omaha. My brother was on leave from the Army in Alaska and spent his time sandbagging the levee and saw most of his friends there. The men took turns taking calls for emergency.

We ate and slept in shifts when we were home from our outside job or volunteering at the Red Cross. My father-in-law, Al Hall, even managed to get in a few games. Fortunately the city was saved. It turned out to be a happy memory for all.

— Barbara La...

I remember a lot of people worked on the levee to protect us, including my husband Val and his father. A car with a loud speaker drove through the neighborhood telling people to evacuate. We lived in an apartment on 10th and A. My four-month-old daughter and I went to the Abraham Lincoln Community Center. Then our landlady's son invited us to stay with his family. They were really nice to us, that for strangers. My daughter and I were featured in a Newsreel shown at the movie theater those days. The whole town was proud. We had escaped the flood.

— Mary Kirkpa...

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— Barbara Lainson

I remember a lot of people worked on the levees to protect us, including my husband Vernie and his father. A car with a loud speaker drove through the neighborhood telling people to evacuate. We lived in an apartment on 10th and A. My four-month-old daughter and I went to the Abraham Lincoln Gym. Then our landlady's son invited us to stay with his family. They were really nice to do that for strangers. My daughter and I were featured in a Newsreel shown at the movies in those days. The whole town was proud. We had escaped the flood.

— Mary Kirkpatrick



Council Bluffs' top flood fighters are Acting City Manager Kennard W. Gardiner, Mayor James F. Mulqueen and Councilman Frank L. Griffith. Gardiner and Mulqueen sat in the top command post day and night; Griffith was the Mayor's levee inspector and rushed work through red tape confusion.

Photo and text: Council Bluffs Nonpareil

in the City Hall. At least one of the trio was on duty throughout the emergency. With little sleep and subsisting on hastily consumed sandwiches, they served above and beyond the call of duty.

Men and materials flowed into the beleaguered city from nearly 100 other communities. Three hundred experienced flood fighters were called from engineering districts in Memphis, Tennessee; Vicksburg, Mississippi and Kansas City, Missouri.

Volunteers from Offutt Air Force Base were easily recognized by the "Mae West" life jackets they were required to wear as they worked the levees. Air Force Globemaster aircraft ferried 1700 troops and 800,000 pounds of cots, blankets, medical supplies and equipment to the stricken area. On Wednesday, Governors of seven midwestern states gathered at Offutt to confer with President Harry Truman about the dangers and damages wreaked by the uncontrolled Missouri. The President quickly recommended appropriations to prevent future catastrophes.

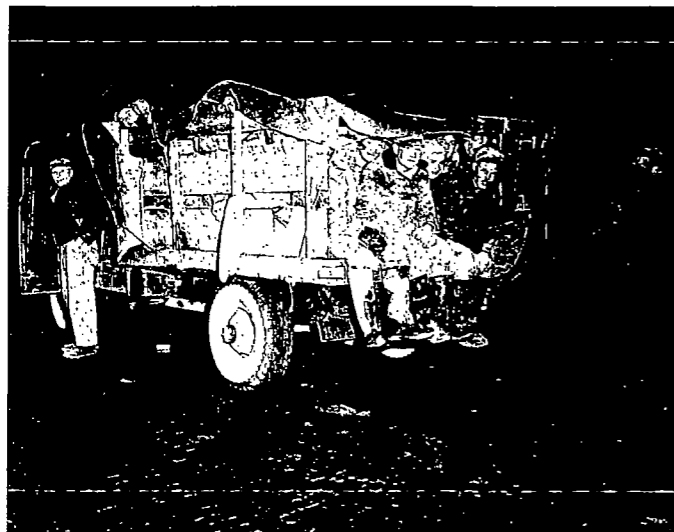
He also described Ed Foster, president of the former Foster-Smetana Construction Company in Omaha, as a hero in the fight against the flood. "Ed's firm was always given tough assignments it seemed. And when the Grace Street sewer backup threatened that part of Omaha, once again Ed's firm was quickly on the scene. His ingenuity and fast response prevented what could have been a destructive force."

Mayor Mulqueen, Acting City Manager Kennard W. Gardiner and City Councilman Frank Griffith maintained a flood center

President Truman arrived on the White House plane, The Independence, just before noon on April 17, 1952. The Air Force Band greeted him, first with the National Anthem and, then, the "Missouri Waltz." His visit, although lasting less than three hours, was considered highly productive.

Briefings continued through the lunch at the base's Officers' Club, with Lieutenant General Lewis A. Pick, Chief of Army Engineers, summarizing the crisis. Governors attending the critical meeting were William S. Beardsley of Iowa; Val Peterson of Nebraska; Adlai Stevenson of Illinois; Walter J. Kohler, Jr. of Wisconsin; C. Elmer Anderson of Minnesota; Norman Brunsdale of North Dakota; and Sigurd Anderson, of South Dakota.

Having flown in from Washington with the President were U. S. Senators Bourke B. Hickenlooper of Iowa; Hugh Butler of Nebraska; Karl E. Mundt of South Dakota and Dennis Chavez of New Mexico.



Every available means of transportation was utilized to carry volunteers to their various destinations. Despite the hardships, the men sustained a determined confidence.

Photo. William W. Krahrille

Waterworks superintendent Franklin Jensen ordered sandbagging of the waterworks' inlet station but assured residents that there was no imminent danger and that the water supply would not be contaminated, since most storage was on high ground. Police Chief Earl Miller promised that if the levees did not hold, there would be plenty of advance warning. Thousands of workers and volunteers manned the dikes and levees around the clock, with generators set up to provide lighting along the saturated front lines of defense.

The President told the Governors that he wasn't running for office but was lobbying for 155 million Americans to support a Missouri Valley flood-control program. He urged the governors to join in the effort. President Truman also designated \$500,000 in flood aid for Iowa and South Dakota. He concluded his talk with a note of levity despite the tense circumstances: "That's all I am, is the nation's public servant, to see that we can do what is best for the most people. I didn't come here to make a Democratic speech, either. Thank you very much." With his customary quick gait, he then left the lectern.

Waterworks superintendent Franklin Jensen

I Remember...

I remember how most of the people in the lowlands moved all their belongings into their relatives' garages in the hill district. We owned and operated the White Bakery. That had to close, like every other business. We put in a cot for my wife and me. The children went to their grandparents. The ride in the streetcar across the river was breathtaking; the river was so very wide, splashing onto the four-foot wood extension of the dirt levee. The wonderful feeling was seeing and knowing how we all worked together to save our city.

— Earl and Harriett Buskness

I was in the Air Force at this time and was home on furlough. Gene Baldauf's family lived on North 8th Street by Big Lake Park. Gene and I both volunteered for working on the levees—sometimes at Big Lake and sometimes by the old Waterworks on North 35th Street. We filled sandbags at night by carbide lights. My furlough was up and the threat of a flood still was there. By applying to the Red Cross, they got me an extra week of furlough and it was never counted against me. Gene and I stayed at his folks' house during much of the time we worked on the levees.

— Laurence Ellison

I Remember...

My husband worked for Union Pacific Railroad. After a 12-hour day, he worked the levee 4 hours. The Salvation Army moved us to high ground.

The National Guard told us we could be shot if we entered the west end of the city. I went with fear, we drove down to pick up our husbands at the Union Pacific. We were shot...I'm living proof at 83 years of age!

— Esther Dineen

Our home was across from Longfellow School which was designated as a command post for the south part of Council Bluffs. A relative's death in the family had left us with little money. We had flowers and donated bakery items. On Easter Sunday, we loaded our furniture onto a flatbed truck, placed the flowers to decorate the truck and invited the men working on the levees to come and sit on the floor in an empty room to finish off the snacks. Then we moved our family to higher ground. Even after the crisis was over, we did not return home for days, because we were having a good time. We took the opportunity to paint and redecorate the bare rooms at our leisure.

— Barbara Le...

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— Barbara Lainson

Chief Miller said that if the levees gave way, air raid civil defense sirens would sound from the railroad roundhouses and from Bluff City Laundry; all church bells in the city would ring; and additional high-powered electronic devices would alert the residents. Civil Air Patrol aircraft with high amplification speakers would also fly over the city to warn residents. Designated vehicles on the ground would patrol the area with loud speakers, and 20 more speakers were installed at Playland Amusement Park. Fire engines would make at least one run with sirens wailing. Area taxi companies were recruited to assist National Guard Patrols since they were equipped with two-way radios. Ham radio operators from Iowa and Nebraska also volunteered to help. Joe Connell, a Council Bluffs ham operator, said that the group was especially supportive of the Red Cross in the evacuation of lowland residents. Leo Meyerson, owner of World Radio in Council Bluffs, also worked the ham radio network. His group set up in the American Legion Club on Pearl Street.

The Rev. Val J. Peter, Executive Director of Father Flanagan's Boys' Home (now Girls and Boys Town), remembered working the levees as a young man. He asked a superintendent what he should do if the dikes broke. "Run for the hills," he was told, "but you won't make it." It was worth the challenge, young Val Peter thought.

H. H. "Red" Nelson, Council Bluffs business leader, was heavily involved in the struggle, using his boat to deliver food to levee workers north of downtown. He recalled heading up the river, against the swift current to get past the Illinois Central Bridge. "When possible, I kept the boat close to the shore," Nelson said. "We had several close calls as chunks of debris barely missed the boat." Nelson said that volunteers also set up cots in his office on Pearl Street to take brief breaks from the backbreaking toil.

On Easter Sunday, April 13, with the river stage at 24.24 feet, evacuation of west and south side homes escalated. By April 15, approximately 65 percent of the city's population had moved to higher ground. Even Mayor Mulqueen's home became a haven for a family evacuated from the west end of the city. It happened to be a well-known Bluffs family and longtime friends, the Emmet Tinley family. The mayor's son, Dennis, recalled that there were stacks of empty sandbags awaiting pickup around their home. He said, "They made a great playground for the expanding youth population in that part of the city."



Fifty years ago, these men stopped for a hearty food break before returning to the levees to fight the rampaging Missouri River. In the far left, back row is Jack Weekly, then a determined volunteer and now Chairman of the Board and CEO of Mutual of Omaha.

Courtesy: Jack Weekly

It was a massive collective effort of men and machines, of women and children, of volunteers, of sleep-deprived leaders. One theme prevailed...this was a strong, united front determined to save Council Bluffs and Omaha. It was a war, but spirits were high as everyone pitched in to do his or her part. It was the finest hour for these neighboring communities as they demonstrated in countless ways what good neighbors do for one another.

On April 14, the Mayor ordered all schools closed in response to General Shingler's warning: "The Missouri is coming with a rip and a roar. We're in a hell of a lot of trouble."⁷

Colonel Henry Hoeffler, Omaha District Chief of Army Engineers, announced that contracts had been let for levee raising and that work had begun April 11. The levee in Omaha was raised to a river height of 33.6 feet, with Council Bluffs' 23-mile levee brought to the same height over most of its length. Flashboards were used to raise the levees, heavy timbers erected atop earthen and concrete walls. Eight construction companies from Council Bluffs, southwest Iowa and Omaha undertook the huge task. Volunteers from both sides of the river stacked sandbags to back up the flashboards. *MORE SANDBAGS* became the battle cry of the flood of '52.

An Associated Press wire story in mid-April captivated the frenzied momentum of the battle with the flood waters: Leonard (Bud) Brugemhemke, Council Bluffs city Purchasing Agent, had trouble keeping up with the astronomical figures of flood-fighting supplies. About a week before, he was told to order 10,000 sandbags. He had

no more than placed the order when the Army Engineers advised him to order 200,000 more. The next day, 500,000 more sandbags were needed. "After that, they said to order 2,000,000 more," Brugemhemke said. "What's happened since that time I don't know. They have been ordering them themselves."

As it turned out, the final count for sandbags used in the battle was 3,327,000, a dramatic increase from the 4,000 the city had available when the flooding began.

Years later, when Walter Pyper was elected Mayor in 1980, he remembers receiving a phone call from former Mayor Mulqueen. Wishing him well in the Mayor's job, the flood-fighting Mayor of '52 said: "Mr. Mayor, I have just two words of advice for you—*MORE SANDBAGS!*"

Railroad service came to a standstill, as did air traffic in the two cities. Much of the railroad stock was sent to higher ground. The Union Pacific's vast ribbons of steel in the Council Bluffs yards were uncharacteristically quiet.

Carter Lake was a nearly deserted community after Mayor Wilson Mabrey called for evacuation.

The hastily, but well built levee system had a safety feature: a main levee supported by a secondary levee to the east. Seepage at the levees produced sand boils, however, which popped through the ground between the two dikes. Sandbags had to be quickly placed around the threatening boils.



U.S. Army Corps of Engineers directed comprehensive flood prevention efforts to save property on both sides of the Missouri River in 1952.

Photo: William W. Kraville

I Remember

Because the emergency gave the city certain duties and powers and because the cooperation of the local authorities in the midst of rising A... around-the-clock attention, Dad worked around the clock in the hall. He wore his Army fatigue uniform in World War II. My mother, brother and I were there day or so during this time of crisis.

One day, Dad asked if I would like to go to lunch with him in the center of town. I was a half-year-old, I jumped at the chance and dressed myself before dawn. My mother picked me up in a big Army transport truck at 6 a.m., my mother answered and a friend knew something was wrong. She told me, "Your father wants to talk with you." At the muster, my father said something happened on our day together. He tried to explain it to me with little warning. When my mother, I burst into tears and sobbed on our day together just because he had named Harry Truman?"

Early that morning, the White House announced the flood area by President Truman we were with Mayor Glenn Cunningham of Council Bluffs, and several from the Council Bluffs with the President. For the remainder of the story would bring a hearty laugh from

I Remember...

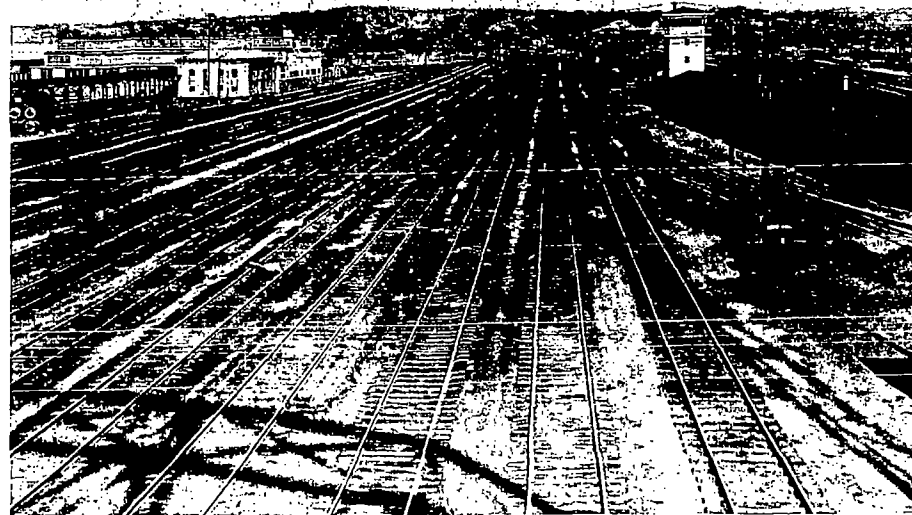
Because the emergency gave the city council and the mayor extraordinary duties and powers and because the coordination with state and federal authorities in the midst of rising Missouri River waters required around-the-clock attention, Dad would often sleep on a cot at city hall. He wore his Army fatigue uniforms from his time in the service in World War II. My mother, brother and I would see Dad every other day or so during this time of crisis.

One day, Dad asked if I would like to see the levee and dike system and have lunch with him in the center of the turmoil. As a precocious four and a half-year-old, I jumped at the offer. When the day came, I got up and dressed myself before dawn. I could hardly wait to have Dad pick me up in a big Army transport truck. When the phone rang at 9 a.m., my mother answered and a frown began to form on her face. I knew something was wrong. She handed me the phone and said, "Your father wants to talk with you." In as soothing a voice as he could muster, my father said something had come up and we'd have to postpone our day together. He tried to explain that sometimes such things happen with little warning. When I handed the phone back to my mother, I burst into tears and sobbed, "Why does Dad have to cancel our day together just because he has to have lunch with some guy named Harry Truman?"

Early that morning, the White House confirmed a tentative visit to the flood area by President Truman would occur that day. Dad, together with Mayor Glenn Cunningham of Omaha, several U.S. Senators from the region, and several from the Corps of Engineers planned to meet with the President. For the remaining forty-four years of his life, that story would bring a hearty laugh from my father. I'm glad that it did.

-Robert E. Mulqueen

In sheer water volume, the '52 flood was twice that of the flood of '43. Water flowing past Council Bluffs in one minute was sufficient to supply the city with water for 42 days. An astounding 245 billion gallons per day rushed past the beleaguered cities. At the Ak-Sar-Ben bridge, the water measured 65 feet deep and flowed at nearly 9 miles per hour through a channel only 1,500 feet wide. The 30.2-foot crest lasted from midnight April 18 until noon the next day. The north levee recorded an incredible 34.24 crest. As the crest neared, Edward R. Murrow's CBS report advised, "Whatever the outcome may be, these people have already met the big test. There has been speculation as to how those of us who live in this nation would stand up to the disasters that match with modern war. The answer is here. There is a community of effort. There is a great deal of improvisation. But above all, there is a steadiness and a willingness to work."⁸



Deserted Union Pacific Yards evacuated during the flood of 1952. Loess Hills are seen to the east in the distance. The Transfer Hotel, one and one-half miles east of the river, can be seen to the left in this photo taken in April 1952.

Photo: William W. Krabilla

I Remember...

As a Red cross volunteer, I had the opportunity ride with a city official through the western part of town after the evacuation. It seemed like a ghost town except those homes on any other day would have been inhabited. All of them were totally empty! It gave me a very eerie feeling.

Another thing I got to do on this ride was to drive out North 8th Street to the place where the levee was tied into the hills near Big Lake. I had my camera with me and I prize the picture I took of the water surrounding a tree that is still there west of the Northwestern tracks and north of the levee.

— Lucy Beall Graeme

The river stage on April 21 had receded to 23.64. Operation Homebound began, with between 25,000 and 30,000 evacuees eager to return to their homes. The Council Bluffs Gas Company inspected homes before people were allowed to move back. The following day, the Army Corps of Engineers finally declared the city safe from flood threat and praised the spirit and cooperation of the citizens of Council Bluffs and Omaha.

Businesses were allowed to re-open on Sunday, April 20. Pottawattamie County Sheriff Gaylord Stuelke opened the city's bridges, the South Omaha Bridge (now the Veterans Bridge) and the Ak-Sar-Ben Bridge (now the I-480 bridge). In an effort to discourage sightseers, autos needed to display passes to cross these bridges. The Sheriff lifted all roadblocks leading to the city.

A secret weapon in the flood fight arsenal had been the Army model of the Missouri River at Clinton, Mississippi. According to a World-Herald story that appeared on April 27, the Clinton model had indicated that the floodwaters would flow four to five feet higher along the city's north levee than through the narrows between Council Bluffs and Omaha. That had triggered building the north levee four feet higher. The model also had shown that "buckboards" or "flashboards" were effective in elevating levees. The model, built in part by German prisoners of war from World War II, was located at the Waterways Experiment Station. Miniature levees were subjected to pressure in scale to that of actual flood conditions. Many officials concurred that the model was a major tool in saving local levees.

On April 24, Mayor Mulqueen offered a prayer of thanksgiving for Council Bluffs: "Almighty and everlasting God, in whom we live and move and have our being; We, thy needy creatures, render Thee our humble praise for Thy preservation of us from the beginning of our lives to this day, and especially for having delivered us from the dangers of the flood.

"We commend to Thy continual care the homes to which Thy people are returning. Fill them with faith, patience and Godliness. For these Thy mercies, we bless and magnify Thy glorious name and offer our humble thanks for your many blessings."⁹ The Mayor asked the city's churches to designate Sunday, April 27 as a day of thanks for deliverance from the flood.

Just before noon on Saturday, April 26, 1952, Mulqueen read a message for broadcast: "The city is no longer governed by the Mayor's proclamations, but governed again by the people." The Mayor added: "History books will not disclose a greater example of courage, of sacrifice and downright dogged determination to win than was shown by those of you who fought the successful fight against the rampaging waters of the Missouri River."¹⁰

The Mayor paid special tribute to the levee legions, neighbors from dozens of communities, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Red Cross, the Salvation Army, Visiting Nurse Association, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, contractors, the medical profession and city employees.

COUNCIL BLUFFS AIR FORCE

The flood of '52 was the father of many "Air Force" of one plane and two men in the city during those turbulent times.

Earl Henriksen, a retired Air Force sergeant and Council Bluffs policeman, played a unique role.

Henriksen, a native of Dannebrog, Nebraska, joined the Navy in Grand Island and Hastings before joining the Army Air Forces. (The name was changed in September 1947. Prior to the beginning of the service was the Army Air Corps.)



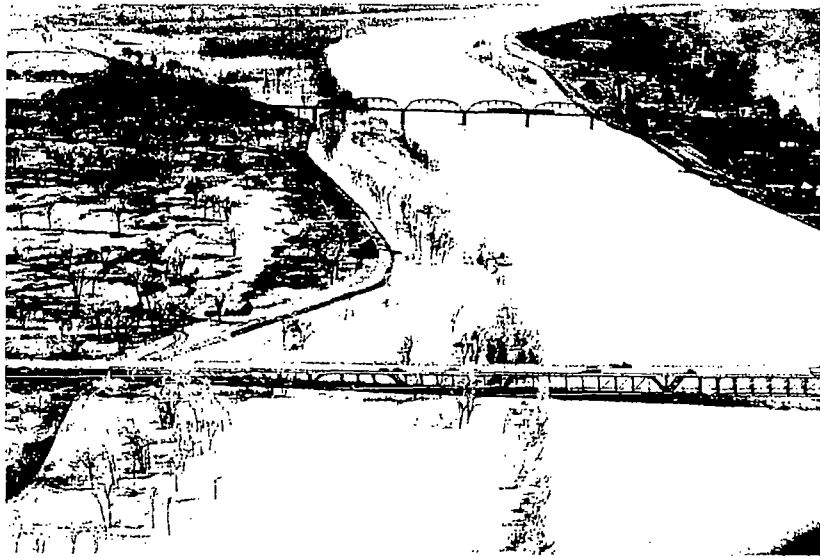
Bottleneck of the Missouri River. In places

COUNCIL BLUFFS AIR FORCE

The flood of '52 was the father of many emergency needs. One of them was the "Air Force" of one plane and two men that became part of the team protecting the city during those turbulent times.

Earl Henriksen, a retired Air Force senior Master Sergeant, and Nick Sulentic, Council Bluffs policeman, played a unique role in safeguarding the threatened city.

Henriksen, a native of Dannebrog, Nebraska, joined the Army Air Forces in 1946 in Hastings, Nebraska to be a volunteer and not a draftee. He had tried to join the Navy in Grand Island and Hastings but the lines were too long, so he opted for the Army Air Forces. (The name was changed to the United States Air Force in September 1947. Prior to the beginning of World War II, in the spring of 1941, the service was the Army Air Corps.)¹¹



Bottleneck of the Missouri River. In places, the river upstream is 16 miles wide.

Photo: *Daily Nonpareil*

His career took him to Offutt Air Force Base in the early 1950s where he served on the staff of General Curtis LeMay, Commander of the Strategic Air Command (SAC). Before his unusual assignment in the midst of the flood threat, he had been given another unusual order by General LeMay—to form an Aero Club at the base which airmen could join as an avocation while serving on active duty. The clubs were intended to give airmen an off-duty diversion and get them interested in flying. Henriksen also helped acquire light planes and coordinate their shipment to SAC bases around the world for the new Aero Clubs.

During the flood crisis, he was one of many airmen who served on the flood control team. Henriksen was assigned to the Council Bluffs airport, operated by Harry McCandless. Council Bluffs police sergeant Nick Sulentic, who was also a pilot, joined him there. Their role was singular and unusual: to fly over the levees holding back the pounding floodwaters in the event of any break in those levees. Their Cessna 170, doors removed, was outfitted with a large siren that would be sounded in the event of a break in the defense, alerting the workers and volunteers to abandon the levees and head for safety.

"The best part of our job," Henriksen said, "was that we never took that flight. We stayed by the phone for a week awaiting the possible call. Nick and I had cots at the airport and lived on C-rations. There was water seepage at the airport (now the Manawa Power Center), so the runway was soggy but usable," he said.

"We were glad that we didn't have to fly that mission," Henriksen smiled. "Nick and I made the best of a very tense situation."

Sulentic went on to become Chief of Police in Council Bluffs from 1968 to 1977. Henriksen retired from the Air Force and accepted a teaching job at Iowa Western Community College, a job he hadn't sought but was encouraged to accept. He taught in the aviation department and was an instructor for helicopter pilots, including those from the Omaha Police Department.

Damage estimates in Council Bluffs totaled \$217,000.00, primarily in ruined streets, while in Omaha, the amount exceeded \$1 million in street and sewer damage. More than \$43 million in damages resulted from the flooding Missouri, Little Sioux and Floyd Rivers. Estimated total damages from the flood, from Montana into Missouri, exceeded \$200 million. Fifty towns and cities suffered flood damage, and muddy waters soaked over 2,000,000 acres of farmland.

Without the extraordinary defense of 1952, floodwaters would have ravaged the community, inflicting damage estimated in multi-million dollar amounts and threatening the safety and lives of its residents.

The human machine, some 40,600 strong, was critical in the struggle against the river. It required fuel, food and supplies in vast quantities. The Red Cross and Salvation Army estimated these astonishing figures:

Over 90,000 hot meals served; 829,000 sandwiches; 354,000 doughnuts; 1,076,000 cups of coffee; 45,000 candy bars, and 50,000 packs of cigarettes. An incredible 3,327,000 sandbags were filled in the fight. Eighty rail cars of sand were required to fill the 50-pound bags. That herculean effort can be fully appreciated when compared with the mere 4,000 sandbags available in early April.



Lunch on the levee is necessary to keep hard-working men on the job day and night. Mrs. Charles Milner of Council Bluffs is serving coffee to Bill Guyer, an Omahan who came over to work on the local levee-building project. Sandwiches and hot meals were also served workers.

Photo and text. *Daily Nonpareil*



Displaced residents bed down on cots in the Abraham Lincoln High School gymnasium.

A salute to veterans and to victorious flood fighters took place in mid-May during the Armed Forces parade. Those interviewed called it one of the grandest parades in memory. More than 10,000 citizens cheered the floats and especially the gallant men and women who had helped hold back the mighty Missouri.

Leading the parade were Brigadier General D. G. Shingler, Missouri River Division Engineer; Mayor James Mulqueen; Acting City Manager, Kennard Gardiner; Armed Forces Day chairman, James Huyek; and local project officer, Major George Wickersham.

The float which stirred the most vivid memories was that of the city sewer department. It depicted workers filling sandbags while a pump spewed a stream of muddy water.

Retired *Nonpareil* Editor C. W. McManamy said it well in his April 12, 1989 column: "The flood was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. For that there was and will be a lot of folks who were and are eternally grateful."

Mayor Glenn Cunningham of Omaha, in a July 2001 interview, recalled the epic struggle against the Missouri. "Probably the single most important thing we did in our city was to organize a civil defense system. That order



Mayor James Mulqueen and Mayor Glenn Cunningham view the now-controlled Missouri River 40 years after the flood of 1952.

Ph

came from the federal government and shortly before the flood threat in April 1952

"One of the most important appointments was that of business and community leaders to direct the effort. He selected several dozen executives to organize the system," Cunningham said. "The Missouri River threatened our city and we were ready. The Civil Defense organization involved the entire community, which was a godsend in floodwaters."

"Another shield against the river was our advice from the Mississippi flood fighters' model. It gave invaluable information in our preparation for cities," the former mayor said.

The mayor said that he had shuttled between the center at City Hall at 18th and Farnam Streets and levees protecting the city. "The thousands



Mayor James Mulqueen and Mayor Glenn Cunningham view the now-controlled Missouri River 40 years after the memorable flood of 1952.

Photo: *Omaha World-Herald*

came from the federal government and was implemented shortly before the flood threat in April 1952," he said.

"One of the most important appointments I made as mayor was that of business and community leader Sam Reynolds to direct the effort. He selected several dozen key community executives to organize the system," Cunningham said. "When the Missouri River threatened our city and Council Bluffs, we were ready. The Civil Defense organization had mapped out the entire community, which was a godsend in fighting the floodwaters.

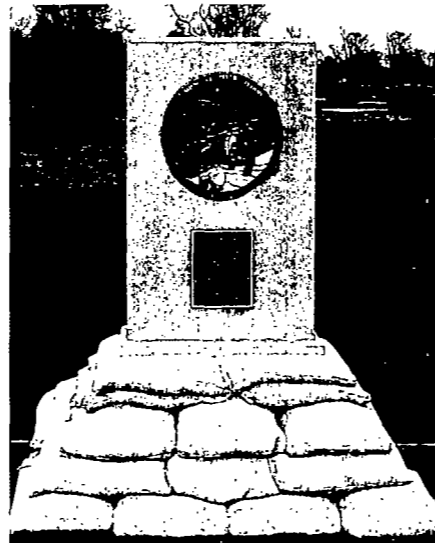
"Another shield against the river was our advance information from the Mississippi flood fighters' model of the Missouri that gave invaluable information in our preparations to defend the cities," the former mayor said.

The mayor said that he had shuttled between the flood control center at City Hall at 18th and Farnam Street and the dikes and levees protecting the city. "The thousands of workers and



Chuck Durham gazed upon the Missouri River in 2001 and recalled the challenges it presented in 1952.

Photo: *Bill Ramsey*



This unique marker is located at the Dodge Riverside Golf Club. Wilson Custom Design Tile Company created the tribute and used the design of their artist, Beth Davis, who has completed 16 historic tiles for the City of Council Bluffs. The plaque reads:

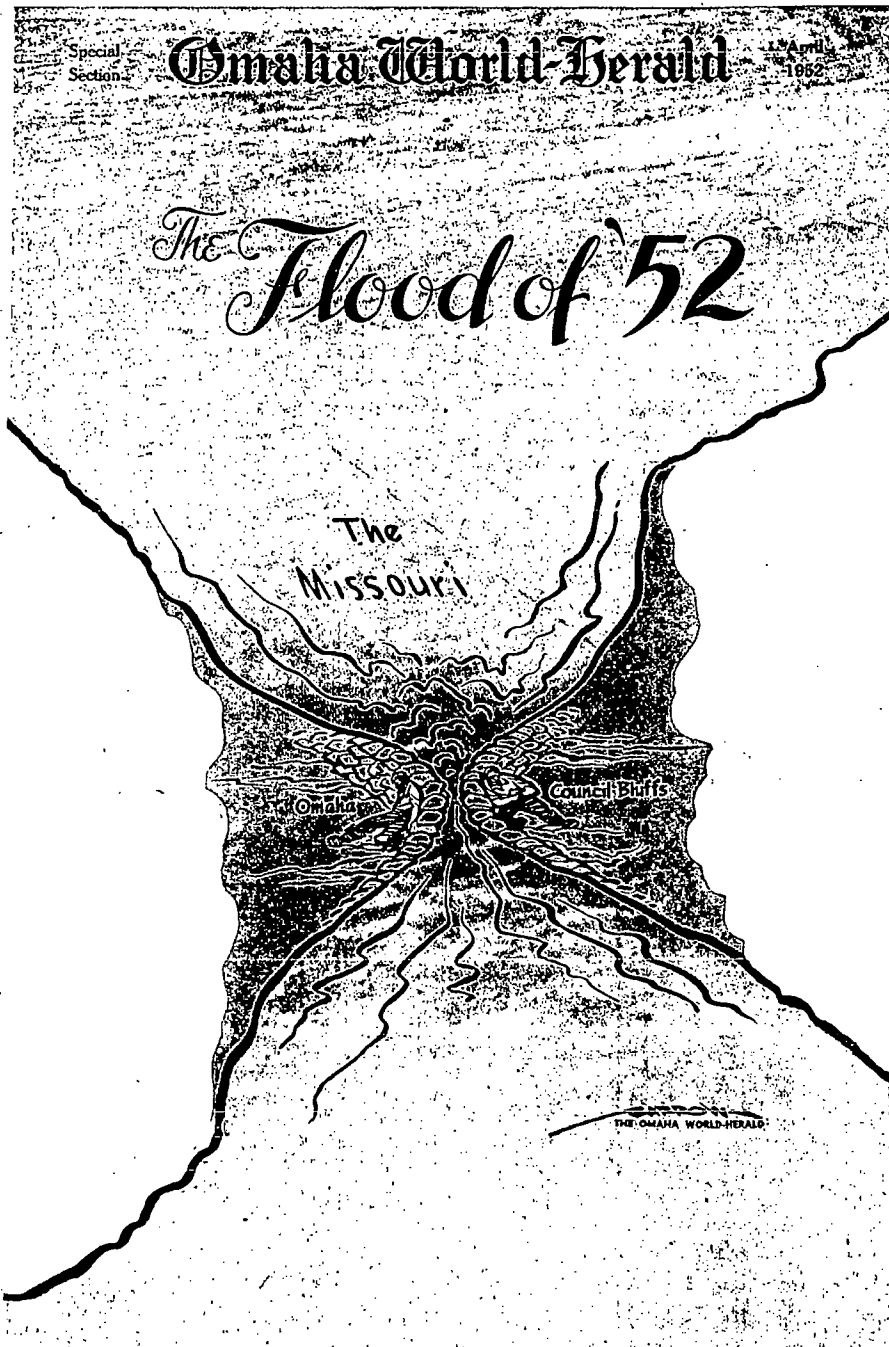
IN HONOR OF ALL WHO WORKED TO SAVE THE CITIES OF COUNCIL BLUFFS AND OMAHA FROM THE HISTORIC MISSOURI RIVER FLOOD OF APRIL 1952 - LED BY JAMES F. MULQUEEN, MAYOR OF COUNCIL BLUFFS- GLENN CUNNINGHAM, MAYOR OF OMAHA- WITH 50 YEARS OF GRATITUDE FROM THE CITY OF COUNCIL BLUFFS-IOWA WEST FOUNDATION,

volunteers really saved the two cities. Some would come to the City Hall to rest. They were exhausted but always willing to continue to fight the rampaging waters," he said.

He recalls finally heading for home when the worst of the threat had passed. "I hadn't been home for days and as I drove from City Hall, I had an urgent call on my car radio. A hole in the dike had allowed water to back up into Grace Street. A manhole cover blew and water gushed from it," Cunningham said. "The Corps of Engineers battled the late-breaking problem and finally stopped the inflow." He called his wife, Janis, and said, "I think we've won the battle. I'm coming home."

Jim Mulqueen reminisced in a *Nonpareil* story on March 4, 1968, 17 years after the flood. Amid the fear and anxiety, there were lighter moments, he recalled. One man insisted that he intended to return to his home even though the area had been evacuated. He said that it was Good Friday and he had to plant potatoes. "We changed his mind," the Mayor said. Another man carrying a TV was stopped by police. He was merely carrying his own television from his evacuated home.

Mayor Mulqueen said, "With all that water coming down from Montana and the Dakotas, it was like dumping water into an hour glass. Something had to give." He said what surprised him the most was the orderliness of the flood fighting operation. "So many things could have gone wrong. There were no epidemics, measles or something, with so many people thrown together and no serious injuries or looting. It was pure guts and determination that saw us through," he said. "I just keep thinking that God must have really wanted us to beat that flood."



"The Flood of '52" Cartoon: Henry Barrow
 Photo: Omaha World-Herald

1988 Summer Storm Stuns City

Council Bluffs residents will never forget the storm that devastated the city in the late afternoon of Friday, July 15, 1988. The first tornado warning for Pottawattamie County sounded at 4:13. Slashing, fast-moving tornadoes, 90-mile-an-hour winds and torrential rains ripped through Omaha before descending on residential and many business sections of Council Bluffs.

In its wake, more than 70 Council Bluffs residents were injured, homes were shattered, fires started, railroad cars overturned, thousand of trees uprooted and electrical and telephone services cut. Bluffs City Councilman Stanley Grote stated, "It's an absolute miracle that no one is dead."

One official said that Omaha sustained n the deadly tornado of 1975. Most of Or east of 72nd Street. At least four funn However, the heaviest damage was infl Council Bluffs homes and businesses we city was without power Friday night.