

## XV

## The Great Flood

Twenty-seven square miles of Louisville - three fourths of its corporate ~~center~~<sup>area</sup> - and sixty-five square miles of its surrounding county, Jeffersonville<sup>^</sup>, were drowned beneath the raging waters of the Ohio River in the last weeks of January, 1937. There has never been in recorded history another flood like it. The Ohio was out of its banks for twenty-three days. In many sections Louisville lay under fifteen to twenty feet of water.

The rains began in late December, 1936, and they continued almost without let-up until the end of January. In Louisville the rainfall measured 19.17 inches. <sup>Two hundred and thirty thousand</sup> 230,000 people fled their river-invaded houses by trucks, boats, mules and wagons, horses and buggies, cars, and on foot<sup>to</sup> refugee camps, mostly in churches and schools. Here for two weeks or more they waited without lights, which meant no radio, of course, without heat, phones, change of clothes, and two hours a day of muddy water, <sup>to</sup> for the river to come to its ultimate height and recede enough for them to return home. Many hundreds of them reached out of second-story windows ~~for~~ to get their food from supply boats.

Mark left our home in Prospect, a tiny village twelve miles from Louisville on the old Cincinnati highway<sup>^</sup>, at noon on Sunday, January 24th, and did not return until February 4th. Though the Ohio that Sunday had not reached the Courier=Journal and Times

*This is  
Jefferson  
County  
(not "ville")*

building, four blocks from the river, Mark could not navigate the many downtown streets already under water. He had to leave the car at the University of Louisville, at least two miles from the Ohio, and thumb a ride on a passing truck. About twenty other editors and reporters of the two papers <sup>also</sup> made it to the office, ~~too~~, though Mark never understood how they did it. They scrounged cots and blankets and made the paper their home for the next ten days.

Mark, Barry, and Lisle were able to get one room at the Seelback <sup>Hotel,</sup> two blocks away. All the other rooms were taken by refugees. They occupied the room for a few hours during the day; Miss Emily Overman, Judge Bingham's secretary, and two other of the papers' employees occupied it at night.

Mark devoted his energies to getting out the paper under the most adverse circumstances imaginable; Barry volunteered his services to WHAS, the papers' radio station located in the same building. At first the papers were published in the Louisville plant, but

I think  
it's  
Seelbach

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soon the flood spilled into ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> basement of the building and knocked out ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> generators that ~~moved~~ the publishing operation to the newspaper plant of Shelbyville, approximately twenty-five miles away on the only highway still open out of Louisville. Two editions were published there; then the operations were moved to the plant of the Lexington paper. At first four pages were published, then two and, finally, only one. There were no advertisements, of course, and no national nor international news. Just flood news. The papers were delivered by trucks to the refugee camps and other dry spots. Mark ~~always~~ boasted they never missed an edition.

With news space so limited, many of the editors and reporters had time on their hands and volunteered their services to WHAS, ~~the~~ <sup>The</sup> radio station owned by the Courier Journal and Times. The staff of WHAS was overwhelmed. They sent out the first flood warning Thursday afternoon, January 21st, and they continued unceasingly for 188 <sup>hours</sup> ~~hours~~. During those ~~seven~~ <sup>eight</sup> days, <sup>and nights</sup> lacking four hours, they sent out 115,000 messages.

Credo Harris, the manager of WHAS, at the time, wrote admiringly of the job the station did in his book, MICROPHONE MEMOIRS.: "These assistants Courier-Journal and Times people, added to our own force, settled down at borrowed desks, received and typed emergency messages which were telephoned in hour after hour. Over other desks these bulletins were passed for editing, watching for duplications, for something ambiguous, violent or otherwise improper. Then in an uninterrupted stream they went to the microphone."

Shift after shift, through seemingly endless <sup>days and nights</sup> ~~hours~~, they typed urgent calls for help with cold, benumbed fingers,

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squinting by a candle's flickering light to see the keys....

Though these workers <sup>at</sup> WHAS studios prepared the messages, ~~they~~ ~~the calls~~ were not broadcast from WHAS. The Louisville station had no power. On that ominous Sunday afternoon <sup>when</sup> Mark arrived at the office, the Electric Company <sup>wanted</sup> (the Courier-Journal and Times and WHAS it could furnish them no power after 8 o'clock that evening. That <sup>er</sup> meant the radio station, <sup>with</sup> ~~the~~ ~~only~~ ~~means~~ ~~of~~ ~~communication~~, ~~would~~ ~~be~~ ~~off~~ the air, ~~for~~ ~~already~~ the telephones in many sections were ~~already~~ flooded out.

Immediately WHAS began broadcasting pleas for <sup>l</sup> listeners to salvage their automobile battery sets so they would help receive and spread relief instructions.

Simultaneously, WHAS organized <sup>^</sup>, by means of teletype, The Volunteer Intercity Network for Flood Relief in the Ohio Valley. It was composed to WSM in Nashville, to the <sup>3</sup> South; WFBM, Indianapolis, to the north,; WLAP, Lexington, to serve the Blue Grass area; and WCKY, Covington, Kentucky, to the East. Those thousands and thousands of calls, "Send a boat," didn't come from Louisville at all; they came from one of those neighboring towns that sacrificed their advertising spots to send them.

On Monday, January 25th,

(<sup>and</sup> with the anticipated crest of the flood still two days off and much of the city already inundated, CBS and NBC, the only two national networks then in existence, joined in the Volunteer Intercity Network to blanket the United States and Canada with calls for help. Even the British Broadcasting System came in, <sup>and</sup> subsequently other foreign networks, which tied together approximately 5,000 shortwave stations throughout the world.

It was the largest number of stations, tied together in the history of radio, with all their information emanating from the candlelit ~~and~~ studios of

WHAS .

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Special telephone lines were installed in the WHAS's studios to keep them in constant touch with City Hall; the Mayor's Committee, which Mayor Neville Miller had ~~hastily~~ <sup>quickly</sup> organized to help him in the emergency; the Sanitation Department; the Health Office; the Police, the Red Cross and the Relief Centers. Added to these were eighteen trunk lines into the Courier-Journal and Times switchboard.

Though, "Send a boat," was the call that sounded most frequently those harrowing days, there were a wide variety of others: "Paralyzed woman 80 years old. Send Boat immediately to..." "Send boat, South 45 street, Child desperately ill." "City Hall calling. 50 children marooned at ...church." "Hurry." "Attention police cars. In same man with revolver at Eleventh and Walnut." "Seven people marooned on housetop on Lower River Road..." "Attention Dr. Holmes at Carrolton, Kentucky. Plane leaving with vaccine. Be on look-out. Landing cannot be effected. Will drop vaccine from plane." "Woman in throes of childbirth. Rush boat and doctor, if possible...."

The woman needing a boat and doctor wasn't Mary Bingham, the wife of Barry, but it could have well been. Mary went into labor on the night of January 23rd and Barry had the most horrendous time, getting her to the hospital. The River Road, which they normally would have travelled, was many feet under water, so Barry tried a little dirt road that snaked out the back way over high ground. But the flimsy little bridge that crossed the stream on the road was washed out. For agonizing moments it seemed as if Mary would have the baby right there on the dirt road. However, Barry got two boards across the stream and he drove on. It was to <sup>us</sup> know avail. Every road to the Norton Hospital, where the doctor was supposed to be waiting, was barricaded. High water, every

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"Highwater!" Maybe he could reach the Baptist Hospital, ~~it was~~ on a hill, out of the flooded down town area, He reached it. And so, of course, did Mary. But she didn't reach the delivery room.

"You can say the baby was born in the elevator," Barry said dramatically when he recounted <sup>to friends</sup> the events of that night.

(The baby was named Sally and Mark was her godfather.)

Indeed, those long black nights with only feeble candle and those long, dragging days ~~light~~ were full of drama. Voluntary sound-equipment trucks with emergency messages drove as close as possible to the flooded areas and turned their large horns outward ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ and boomed the messages across the rushing water to listening boatmen. (These boatmen came to help from many parts of the country, The fishermen from Gloucester, Massachusetts, with their long boats, perhaps, <sup>the</sup> ~~some~~ farthestest. Official records show

54,000 ~~of~~ the refugees were rescued by hurriedly summoned boats.) Rabbi Solomon N. Bazell ~~became~~ a dramatic figure. Coming by boat to 2 WHAS studios to make a talk, he was ~~pitched~~ <sup>flung</sup> overboard high water by the wash of a passing launch. Rescued, he appeared shortly at the microphone to do his speech in a sweat shirt from which grinned the <sup>painted</sup> faces of Paul and Dizzy Dean, popular baseball pitchers, and a long blanket draped from his shoulders. His clothes were drying ~~in~~ over a little oil stove in ~~another~~ <sup>an adjoining</sup> studio.

<sup>bellhop</sup> ~~Appeared~~ <sup>to</sup> at the Brown Hotel leaped in the lime light. <sup>by catching in his hands</sup> ~~Max~~ <sup>with</sup> ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ in the lobby of the Brown, ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ on the second floor. The fish was stuffed and hung on the wall for many years for visitors to gape at.

However, the figure that made the greatest impression on Louisvillians these days was the man calling out from a flying airplane to all citizens to get their vaccine shots. The water was

was contaminated.; everybody must be vaccinated. Dr. Hugh Roadman Leavell, health officer, had set up centers in dry locations and people must make their way to them. Evidently, the people heard; they couldn't have missed the voice rolling from heaven. It sounded eerie, omnipotent. It could have been the voice of God. And the people harkened. There was no epidemic. Just as there was no drowning.

The flood ~~at last~~ crested <sup>at</sup> at 460 feet, ~~in the city~~ on January 27th. It had been above flood stage, 431 feet, since January 15th. The day it peaked, it started to recede, slowly at first, then more rapidly. At long last, on February 7th, it subsided into its rightful banks.

It left behind unbelievable devastation. <sup>The damage</sup> ~~It~~ was incalculable. Almost the entire manufacturing and wholesale activity of Louisville had been shut down for three weeks. Most of its stores had been closed; silt, oil and water, and debris of every description, three inches deep, covered the first floor of 33,000 homes; floors were buckled, windows smashed; plaster and lather wrecked; outside clapboards torn away. Trainloads of household goods <sup>were</sup> ~~had been~~ hauled to dumps; 1,000 pianos, many of them grands, were trucked away as trash during the first two weeks after the flood; streets had sagged; sewers collapsed. An estimated damage of \$1,098,546 was placed on streets and alleys alone.

Having heard the calls for help for so many days, a great many people across the country thought Louisville was destroyed. To scotch that notion and also to make the national advertisers realize there was a gigantic task of refurbishing, repainting and rebuilding ahead, Mark wrote a full page advertisement, headed "THE SUN still shines bright of my old Kentucky home," and ran it in The New York Times, the Herald-Tribune and The Wall Street Journal. The ad did its job. Louisville was on its way to full recovery/