

A Look Back at Flooding in Beloit By PollyAnna Heberling-Perdue



Beloit is no stranger to natural disasters. Flooding is the most prevalent natural disaster Beloiters have witnessed over the years. The first recorded flood on file at the BHS occurred in 1881, since then Beloit has seen at least seven other floods including this past June. With modern advances in technology resulting in better dams and levies to control the water upstream from the state-line area, flooding has not been a major problem. But alas as we have seen this past couple months when Mother Nature decides to unleash her fury, our man-made structures are no match for her awesome powers.

The oldest recorded flood on file at the BHS occurred on April 20, 1881. At two a.m. the watchmen at the Straw Board Mill noticed a huge chunk of ice hit the dam with great force, but at the time caused no noticeable damage. An hour later the dam broke under the pressure of the swiftly flowing river. At four a.m. the

power went out at the Rock River Paper Company's east side mill and six employees noticed the water level had dropped considerably. They took a company boat and started across the river to investigate. About half way across the current hurled them down stream rapidly toward the dam. The boat went over the dam and one man fell out, shortly after the boat capsized and the remaining five were able to grab hold of the boat until it struck one of the piers of the town bridge. Only two men managed to stay with the capsized boat, one tried to swim ashore but was unsuccessful, he was luckily able to make it back to the boat exhausted, but his luck ran out when the boat struck a tree, the other man and sole survivor, John Klingberg was able to grab hold of the tree and cling to it until help arrived. Mr. Barney Cunningham and Mr. Robert Butler were credited with the rescue. The five who lost their lives were Will Comstock, Dan & Jake Ouderkirk, Albert Griffin and Al Bucklin.

The flood of 1904 was considered by many as one of the worst floods to inundate the stateline area. This time it was the Turtle Creek that overflowed its banks with the help of huge gorges of ice that built up around the C.M. & St. P. railroad bridge. The Flood occurred on March 22, after several days of heavy rains dislodged the ice from upstream. The flood waters covered much of South Beloit, Broad Street, St. Paul Avenue and the business district of Beloit. The basements and first floors of many houses and businesses were underwater causing thousands of dollars in property damages.

The worst part of this tragedy was undoubtedly the fire caused at John Thompson and Sons plant. The rising flood waters caused a gas line to burst spilling hundreds of gallons of gasoline into the water, which was ignited by a stove in the shop office causing a huge explosion. M.N. Wood, a night watchman, was killed and Bently Dadmun and James Ward were severely burned. The entire building and contents, except the foundry, were ruined by the fire, including all the gas engine patterns, drawings and records as well as implement patterns and patterns belonging to firms in Janesville, Chicago and other cities. The building was covered by \$40,000 worth of insurance and damages were estimated at \$150,000.

"If you want pike or pickerel, all that you have to do is kick around in the water, on Bridge street and you will strike one; if you should want deeper water to hunt in, just paddle around a while in the FREE PRESS office." (The Daily Free Press, Tues April 26, 1881)

Although there were several other floods that swept through the area after 1904, we'll jump ahead to 1973. Many readers who have lived in the area a while will remember the Easter weekend flood that left hundreds homeless, one dead, and \$25 million dollars in damages to a 40 block radius of Beloit and South Beloit. Water run-off washed out the dike in Shopiere causing the Turtle Creek to rise nine feet so suddenly that it caught residents totally off guard. In a 1983 article for the Beloit Daily News former South Beloit Mayor Gary Pierce recalled the event, "one minute it was dry, the

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Beloit Historical Society

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Newsletter edited by Jen Scott
Other contributors to this issue:
Paul Kerr, Pollyanna
Heberling-Perdue

This newsletter issue was produced almost entirely by **Pollyanna Heberling-Perdue**. Polly is a Beloit College intern working for us this summer. Among other work Polly is helping with the collections, the files and is presently researching and choosing artifacts for two displays in our cases located in the front lobby. She is a real asset.

Strategic Planning Session:

August 13, 2008, 1-5 p.m.

Executive Committee Meeting:

August 14, 2008, noon

Date of Next Board Meeting:

August 21, 2008, 4 p.m.

The Newsletter, *Confluence*, is published quarterly for the membership of the Beloit Historical Society to inform readers of Society activities as well as educate them on the history of Beloit. The Beloit Historical Society manages two sites, Lincoln Center Museum with main offices at 845 Hackett St. and Hanchett-Bartlett Homestead, 2149 St. Lawrence Ave. For further information please call (608) 365-7835 or e-mail us at Pkerr@beloithistoricalsociety.com. Or see our new website which can be found on the web at beloithistoricalsociety.com.

Flooding in Beloit

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next minute it was here."

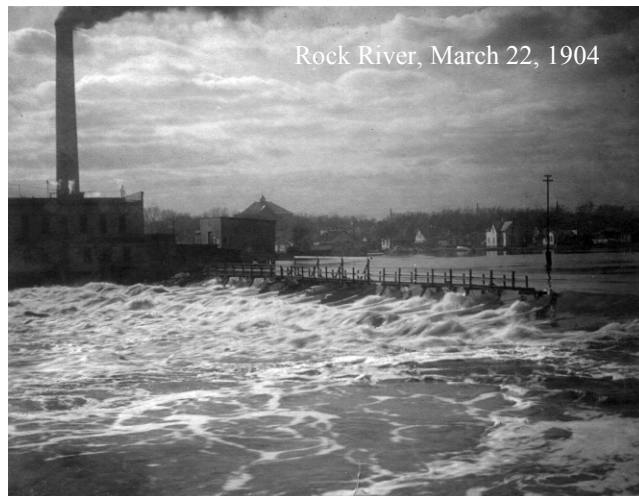
Freeman Shoes was hit the hardest by the event with an estimated \$2 million dollars in damages and 150,000 pairs of brand new shoes water-logged shoes that were unfit for sale in retail markets. Shortly after the flooding Freeman relocated to Beloit's Industrial Park. The Easter weekend flood was dubbed a "200 year flood" meaning the chances of it happening again are one-half percent in any given year.

The flood of 2008 has been named a "100 year flood" that is

in any given year there is a one percent chance of a flood such as this occurring. The

"There is no one alive today who has ever seen water this high on the Rock. The little kids will be talking about this event 75 years from now." (*The Janesville Gazette*, Friday June 20, 2008).

damages and losses although great were not as devastating as they could have been. When we look at our neighbors to the south of us in places like Iowa we are reminded that in comparison we were rather lucky that the river did not do more damage.



Rock River, March 22, 1904

flood was expected to crest Saturday June 21, 2008 at almost 14 feet. Some areas such as Indianford have already seen water levels rise close to 19 feet. County officials are estimating that damages and losses will total approximately \$42 million dollars just in Rock County alone.

As we clean up in the after math of one of Mother Nature's most destructive forces, we should count our blessings that the

Membership News

Please make a special effort to thank and welcome our new members. The following have joined the Beloit Historical Society since the last newsletter:

John and Karen Clark-Hansen
Gary and Nora Gard
Genealogical Society of Utah
Linda and William Schwebke

Jackie Weeden Memorial

The Society sincerely thanks the Weeden family and the estate of Jackie Weeden. Additional thanks is extended to Martin & Rita Kades, Katherine Jensen, and Debra Jensen DeHart for their memorial contributions. Memorials are still being accepted.

Fred Bull has worked for the Beloit Historical Society since 17 July 2000. By the time you receive this newsletter Fred will no longer work here. He has put in a full 8 years of construction, cleaning, hauling and lifting and putting up with me. He certainly deserves a break. Personally I'll miss him. The Society had a good man in Fred and the volunteers and I wish him well in his retirement. Guess I, for a while at least, will be making the coffee on Thursday mornings. Take care Fred.

Annie McLenegan

Annie McLenegan, the only daughter of Henry Hall and Sarah Reigart McLenegan, was born April 12, 1875 in Turtle Township. She attended Strong School and then entered Beloit High School in 1889, but graduated from a high school in Milwaukee in 1893. While at the University of Wisconsin, Annie worked on the editorial staff of the literary monthly, *Aegis*, was editor of the 1897 *Badger*, and served as president of the Women's League and vice-president of the Fortnightly Club. While attending university she was in great demand as a speaker and lecturer. She went on the University of Wisconsin where she received her Bachelor's degree in 1897. After teaching English in Beloit for three years, Annie returned to the university in 1903 with a scholarship to pursue a master's degree.

Annie taught in Milwaukee for one year before

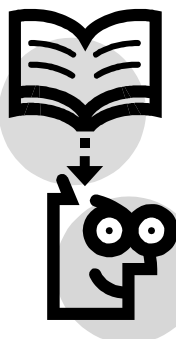


returning to Beloit as a history and English teacher at the high school. She served as the director of senior dramatics until 1915 and developed the high school orchestra.

During this time Annie wrote several plays and a historical novel, *Pioneer Life in Fox Valley*. She was also instrumental in the development of the Pageant of 1916. In addition to teaching and her many other duties, Annie also served as Assistant Principal for Beloit High School during her years there.

Annie retired from teaching in 1923 and completed her doctorate in the following year. She wrote *The Harvey Play*, a biography of Governor Louis Powell Harvey, and the *Centennial History of the Town of Turtle*. Annie McLenegan died in 1962 at the age of 87. In 1966 McLenegan Elementary on Beloit's Northeast side was named after the former educator.

Thank you to Jane Solem and Arthur & Lila Gibbs for contributing to the Stateline Community Foundation in the Society's name. We grateful for the continued support.



Books at the Beloit Historical Society

The Beloit Historical Society has a great selection of books representing a slice of Beloit history. Stop in to get your copies today. Don't forget, they make great gifts too!

Century of a City \$24.95, Now \$20!

Beloit's Club Pop House \$19.99 *

Pioneer Beloit \$10

Sparks of the Flaming Wheel \$10

History of the Fire Department \$10

The Book of Beloit (1936 edition), \$20

Only 5 copies left!

Windows to our Past (postcards) \$20 *

**\$8 of each sales goes to BHS*

Recipe of Old

Strawberry Shortcake

1 cup of powdered sugar
1 table-spoonful of butter,
rubbed into the sugar
3 eggs
1 cup prepared flour—
a heaping cup
2 table-spoonfuls of cream



Bake in 3 jelly-cake tins

When quite cold, lay between the cakes nearly a quart of fresh, ripe strawberries. Sprinkle each layer lightly with powdered sugar, and strew the same thickly over the uppermost cake. Eat while fresh.

~Marion Harland,
Breakfast, Lunch, and Tea, 1875.

Our 13th Gala Auction is being held at Roger Bryden's Showroom on October 4, 2008. The theme is *Motorcycles Through History*. The Gala event has been our best fund raiser and we hope for continued success. We're looking forward to us for an evening of conversation, music, and good food. We hope you can join us. Call 608-365-7835 for reservations or to make a donation. Tickets are \$50 per person.

Below is a group of cyclists lined up on State Street in the early 1900's.



Confluence

Beloit Historical Society
845 Hackett St.
Beloit WI 53511

Address Service Requested

The Vision of the Beloit Historical Society is to
make history a focal point of community pride
and to serve as a constant reminder to the
community of its great and diverse heritage.

Visit our web site at
beloithistoricalsociety.com

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