

Volume 14

Number 120

The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 -

III

Lead: In 1927 the Mississippi River blew over the levees confidently constructed to contain the mightiest of waters. To that time it was the biggest so-called natural disaster in American history.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: On Good Friday, April 15, 1927 all up and down the Mississippi Valley it was raining. It had been an unusual year. Spring had brought tornadoes, earthquakes, and almost constant rain. The US

Weather Bureau Station at Cairo, Illinois had noted 10 distinct flood crests moving down the Mississippi River. Flood crests meant flooding. Lots of it.

To many along the river all that water seemed to be no matter for concern. At a meeting with federal officials, the governors of Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana expressed their absolute confidence that the levees constructed would hold and protect their citizens and encouraged no one to panic. On April 9, 1927 Maj. Donald Connelly of the Army Corps of Engineers said, "We are in condition to hold all the water in sight." Unfortunately, he was mistaken.

On April 21st two major breaks in the levees occurred at Mound Landing, Mississippi and Pendleton, Arkansas. Almost immediately over 2,000,000 acres were flooded. Before the waters receded that spring the giant river had inundated more than 16,000,000 acres in seven states and at times the flooded region stretched over 100 miles in width. 180,000 buildings were damaged. 162,000 homes were flooded and somewhere between 250 and 500 people were killed by the flood.

As often is the case Americans came to the relief of their fellow citizens. Millions were contributed by the federal government. Private

citizens gave additional millions more to help feed and cloth victims and the Red Cross set up 154 temporary refugee camps. Volunteers contributed their efforts. People with boats set out to search for those who had been stranded and people pulled together across racial lines to help out those in need.

The great flood had a powerful impact on culture, especially within the southern black community. Blues musicians such as Lonnie Johnson, Bessie Smith, and Charlie Patton, wrote and recorded songs lamenting and celebrating the flood and its victims.

Despite the horrific suffering and a

clear inability of human engineering to contain the mighty river, engineers at the state and federal level continued the same policies that led to the disastrous flooding. People continue to make their homes in floodplains. The Army Corps of Engineers continued to tinker with the Mississippi channel, construct levees, and manufacture so-called safe zones for living and commerce, and Old Man River he just keeps rolling along.

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

Barry, John. *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How it Changed America*. New York, Simon and Schuster, 1997.

Daniel, Pete. *Deep'n as it Come*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.

**Morrison, Steven J. "Downhome Tragedy: The Blues and the Mississippi River Flood of 1927." *Southern Folklore* 51 (1994): 265-285. **

**Charley Patton. "High Water Everywhere – Part 1."
Taken from
<http://music.aol.com/song/player/audioplayer.jsp>
(accessed December 1, 2008).**

Copyright by Dan Roberts Enterprises, Inc.