

The Bigger They Come the Harder We'll Fight—That Was the Spirit of Omaha and Council Bluffs People as the Big Muddy Met Its Master

Brig. Gen. Don G. Shingler's press conference bombshell announcement that Omaha and Council Bluffs faced a 31.5-foot river crest was made Monday, April 14.

For nearly a week the two cities had been organizing a defense against a record flood, calmly, confidently, efficiently.

But they hadn't expected anything that big. Behind a levee system designed to protect them against 26.2 feet, they had felt they could give a couple of feet and still whip the odds.

But 31.5? Well, we'd take that, on, too.

Everybody pitched in to work harder than ever before.

National Guardsmen, Regular Army troops, Corps of Engineers officers and civilian technicians, Civil Defense forces, city officials, Red Cross workers, Salvation Army officers and volunteers, Air Force work parties, Civil Air Patrol cadets and officers, sheriff's deputies, work teams from factories and stores, truckers, herds of individual volunteers, utilities employes and others swarmed behind the dikes.

From the smaller towns, from other states, from high places far from the raging river came hordes of people ready and willing to do what might be asked for as long as it might be needed.

The battle had built up from a rather leisurely start to a full crescendo in about this sequence:

Monday, April 7—Council Bluffs Mayor James Mulqueen, Acting City Manager Kenneth Gardner and their flood-control aids looked at Council Bluffs' levee system, found it in "excellent condition."

But they realized the vulnerability of their city. Most of Council Bluffs' homes are on the three-mile-wide flood plain. A levee failure could open more than half the city to flood water. So they and City Council members were more than willing to talk business when the Corps of Engineers asked them to appoint a disaster committee.

Tuesday—Omaha's Mayor Glenn Cunningham passed along to Civil Defense Director Sam Reynolds a request from the East Omaha Drainage District, which maintains the Omaha levees. The district wanted to know if Mr. Reynolds could provide guards to keep sightseers off the levees over the week end.

The river was expected to crest at 26 feet, more than a half foot below the "design flood" for which the levees were built.

"Sure," said Mr. Reynolds. "It will make a good practice run for our civilian policemen."

Wednesday—"We haven't seen anything yet," said Brig. Gen. Don Shingler, Missouri River Division Engineer. The crest prediction was upped 2.5 feet.

Thursday—E. I. Myers, consulting engineer for the East Omaha Drainage District, flew from Kansas City to head Omaha's Flood Steering Committee.

Friday—The crest prediction was upped 1.5 more feet. Army Engineers started letting emergency contracts. Eight contractors were hired to add a two-foot "lift" to the 23 miles of Omaha-Council Bluffs levees.

Mayor Mulqueen issued the first of a series of evacuation orders, telling everyone west of Thirtieth Street in Council Bluffs to move to higher ground.

Calls for volunteer workers went out.

Saturday—Rain made slimy mires of levee access roads.

Bulldozer operators, truck drivers, carpenters worked through the chilly night, to get roads in shape to keep the levee-raising going. Along the critical north end of the Council Bluffs levee, they laid more than a mile of timber road—2x12s in railroad-tie fashion, topped with parallel rows of doubled 2x12s for trucks to travel on.

Sunday—The river climbed past 25 feet, exceeding the 1881 record nearly a foot. Council Bluffs and East Omaha evacuations swelled to a torrent.

In industrial plants workers hung machinery from girders, boarded windows, piled sandbags around doors and basement windows.

Bulldozers, draglines, loaders, trucks swarmed to vacant lots, fields and park areas where dirt could be obtained. Swiftly it was transported and the levees grew and fattened on it.

Army Engineers hired four companies to place flashboards on levees to be faced and backed by hundreds of thousand sandbags.

The World-Herald, began a relief fund, surmising that "its readers, as always in such circumstances, will wish to throw out a lifeline." In two weeks World-Herald readers sent more than \$127,000, the largest amount of money ever raised by the readers of a single Nebraska newspaper for relief purposes, and money was still coming. The fund was administered by the Red Cross. Simultaneously a fund for the Salvation Army mounted to above \$78,000.

Monday, April 14—The almost unbelievable crest of 31.5 feet was predicted to reach here Thursday. Lieut. Gen. Lewis A. Pick, Chief of Army Engineers, arrived.

Action became so rapid that none could keep track of the whole picture.

From Camp Carson, Colo., Camp McCoy, Wis., and Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., came six thousand troops trained in construction work.



The Battleground—Here Omaha and Council Bluffs fought the river. Numbered landmarks: 1, Great Lakes Pipe Line Terminal; 2, Omaha Municipal Airport; 3, Illinois Central Railroad Bridge; 4, Union Pacific Railroad Shops; 5, Ak-Sar-Ben Bridge; 6, Omaha Public Power District main generating plant; 7, Union Pacific Railroad Bridge.



No Man's Land—Except for the men struggling to keep up the levees ahead of the river's steady climb, the West End of Council Bluffs was deserted after the April 12-13 week end. This area lies just below the river bend called "The Narrows," where a levee break could have covered thousands of acres. Broadway is at the left.



The Endless Procession—Loads of dirt totaling 21 thousand tons were hauled to the Mosquito Creek levee south of Council Bluffs to raise a three-mile stretch. The over-all job on both sides of the river took 225 thousand cubic yards of earth.



A Rescue—Along the bottoms near Bellevue, air-men and civilians helped residents move. Unable to walk, Mrs. Anna Covrig, 92, was lifted into a truck.



Fifteen thousand an hour—At Sixtieth and Walker Streets in North Omaha (above) and at other sites crews worked to fill sandbags. About 5 1/2 million were ordered.



Too Young?—Disregarding a rule about workers being over 18, Harvey Paley, 15; Phil Schragar, 16; Bill Connolly, 15, showed up in a sandbag line.



Time Won't Wait—Nobody watched the clock for getting time when a sandboil or seepage developed. They worked through the night passing sandbags from one man to the next. When one trouble spot was patched, there always was the job of rebuilding stockpiles for the next emergency.

Tuesday—Council Bluffs was evacuated to Seventh Street.

Sandboils began to appear all along the levee system. Each called for quick erection of a ring of sandbags until the water pressure was equalized. In some places the levee was getting boggy. The stamp of a foot could make the top quiver.

Wednesday—President Truman met with Midwestern governors in Omaha, called for "action" by Midwesterners to promote flood control.

Thursday—The river had climbed to a stage of 29.67 feet that morning. "Today is the critical day," General Pick said.

The Weather Bureau predicted the crest's arrival by late evening.

Along most of the levee system water lapped at sandbags. Saturation was so nearly complete, engineers said, the levees had settled several inches.

The concrete floodwall was bending from the weight of the water.

At collection points trucks loaded with sandbags sat nervously awaiting emergency calls.

Through the night rain splattered. Under carbide and emergency electric lights, lines of volunteers shuffled with sandbags. The sound of pumps and portable generators muffled conversation. Now and then the voice of a Mississippi River-trained levee boss would twang:

"Any men sittin' around up theah? We could use a few men heah."

In Omaha, Mr. Myers alternated shifts with his top assistant, Ed Foster.

In Council Bluffs, Mayor Mulqueen, Mr. Gardner and Councilman Frank Griffith rotated the command job.

The river crept up to 30.2 feet, dropped and raised nervously for several hours.

Friday, April 18—At 8:30 a. m. the river stood at 30.24 feet. That was the crest and the highest stage ever recorded here.

Two or three hours later it was apparent the crest was past. The levees still held. But there was another fight ahead.

Late Friday afternoon Ed Foster took a "break" from his desk. He got back about 6:45 p. m. in time for a phone call:

"Big break in the Grace Street Sewer. They want five hundred men and half a million sandbags."

Mr. Foster had never seen the Grace Street Sewer before he was appointed to the flood committee. But he had studied it after he learned it might be a weak link.

The picture was clear in his mind as he hurried to his car—equipped with radio telephone because of the flood emergency—and sped toward the scene.

The sewer, he knew, was made up of two parallel concrete tunnels, each 7.9 feet in cross section. When it burst it was carrying back pressure from the river of about seven thousand pounds per linear foot of tube. Plugging a break from the land side probably would be impossible. The volume of flow could cover two thousand acres with a foot of water every 24 hours.

And if the tremendous pressure on the tunnels continued to cause ruptures working back toward the levee, a whole section of levee could go, and the battle could be lost.

As he drove, he began giving orders over the car phone. He called the Paxton & Vieling Iron Works and asked them to deliver 20 steel I-beams, each 20 feet long, to the foot of Seward Street. He called the Omaha Steel Works and placed an identical order.

When he reached the levee around the long bayou into which the Grace Street sewer empties, Mr. Foster found a milling mass of volunteer workers, troops and Army Engineers. Sandbags and boulders they dropped in front of the sewer mouth were useless.

Mr. Foster outlined his plan. Engineers agreed. Action started. Trucks poured gravel on the soft roadway to lead the steel trucks to the levee. Sandbag crews built up the sodden grade to bear the weight of trucks.

In the bayou were two barges and a tow-boat. Mr. Foster directed the troops as they lifted the thousand-pound beams from trucks and laid them on a barge in a neat row.

Then, with a Corps of Engineers man probing the murky whirlpool that marked the sewer's mouth, the barge was worked gently into position. It was a precarious attempt. It had to be done just right, and was.

It was nearly midnight when they started dropping the beams overboard.

Then a barge load of rock was brought in. A nerveless bulldozer operator shuttled his growling monster across the narrow deck, shoving the boulders into the water.

With the grillwork of beams in place and the rock in front of it, the flow began to lessen.

Then from the levee, the familiar chain of sandbag tossers came out across the barges, dropping sandbags in the water. The bags filled the chinks. The flow at the sewer break cut suddenly to a relative trickle.

It was 4 a. m. Saturday. Tired faces of the Grace Street crew brightened.

By Saturday afternoon, the Missouri had settled sullenly back to less than 26 feet.

Already it was rolling against the cities and farmlands to the south.

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