

THE DAYTON LIBRARY IN THE FLOOD.

A Personal Record

By

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When I think of the days and nights spent in the Library during the Flood of 1913; of the dangers from fire and water and floating wreckage of the bitter cold and pangs of hunger that we suffered, the exhaustion and anxiety -- all crowd back upon me with a sense of oppression difficult to throw off.

Tuesday morning, March 25, I reported for duty at eight-thirty as usual. Other members of the staff lived at a greater distance from the Library than I, and street car and telephone service were already cut off. I thought I should be on hand for whatever might happen.

From four o'clock factory whistles and fire-bells had been sounding the warning to other sections of the City, but at home as I left it, there was apparently no danger. On the way, however, I was struck by the great number of people on the streets, especially men, and upon entering the Library Park I noticed people on the steps watching the water which seemed to be flowing in from St. Clair street west of the Library building.

To my surprise Miss Walter was already there. We consulted with the janitor, Mr. Harvey, about the possibility of a break in the levees -- though scarcely dreaming that such a thing could really happen. Meanwhile the water was

creepint toward the building. Things looked serious. We started for the basement. The Library supplies for six months, recently purchased, were stored there, also Public documents, newspapers, the medical collection, the Children's Library -- the books for the new branches with all their catalogues were there, representing 20,000 volumes or more.

We flew to the shelves, lifting books, supplies and catalogue trays to the top rows wherever there was space, working with all possible speed each in different rooms. A glance through the area windows showed the approaching water; the floor of the basement is about two feet below grade. Soon I noticed water running along the floor and started for the stairs, when suddenly there was a terrific noise; the east doors and windows were thrown violently open and a great surge of black muddy water rushed in like a tidal wave upon us. I screamed for Miss Walter and Mr. Harvey and made a dash for the stairway. Mr. Harvey who, on hearing the noise had started for the boiler-room, was caught in the waves to his waist, and only with the greatest difficulty succeeded in reaching the first floor. Miss Walter I did not see again until after the flood, but through the hours which followed I was pursued by the thought that she had perished.

All this happened more quickly than I can tell it. I reached the main floor; then discovered I could not get out. An iron chest in the basement bumped mournfully against the ceiling, so quickly had the place filled with water. In less than twenty minutes it reached the main floor, eight feet above grade level. People were running here and there or rushing wildly with the water, all were seeking places of shelter.

some ran into the Library. Seven men and one young woman were marooned with us in this building for three nights and days without food or water to drink and with no light or heat.

Men ran for the trees in the Park -- after trying vainly to save his horse, one man was forced to take the halter off and tie himself to a tree! Another swam from a tree to the Library, a distance of thirty feet where Mr. Harvey with the assistance of some of the other men succeeded in drawing him in through a window, more dead than alive.

We were forced to the museum on the second floor. From the windows we could see the terrifying progress of the waters in four directions, and up and down the canal on the east side of us.

A fireman's boat capsized: we thought him lost, his boat bobbed up and down then floated off. But in some miraculous way he reached the Library building. Already he had saved forty lives with his boat that morning in Riverdale.

Hundreds of horses from livery stables were taken to the canal bridge, which is slightly elevated, in the hope of saving them. These we saw swept off into the fast-rising current. At first they struggled wildly, floated awhile, then sank. One sought the Library steps, but unable to reach the door, turned away and was almost immediately drowned. This sight shook us terribly.

We could hear the man in the tree calling for help and making frantic appeals for some one to come to his

rescue. The black waters swirled around the building with a deafening roar. How was it all going to end? No one spoke. A mass of automobiles, carriages, boats, wagons everything imaginable went floating by. The rain continued; the building grew cold and damp as the grave. The day wore on, the water rising. From a window on the landing we could see the interior of the book stack, delivery and reference rooms. Here the havoc of the waters was indescribable. Bookcases, desks tables and chairs toppling over or walking about, shelves dropping out of the cases, books falling into the water, glass doors crashing and banging, catalogues and shelflist trays swinging around: destruction we were doomed to witness and with no power to prevent.

About two o'clock came a deafening report, we rushed to the window and to our horror saw the corner building across the way collapse. We waited breathlessly for the inevitable explosion and possible consequence, -- fire. When the smoke cleared away, part of the wall was still standing, the debris had fallen into the water and there was no sign of fire -- that day! This was on the West side of us. From the East side we could see houses, barns, porches, kitchens fully furnished, fences, -in fact everything imaginable sweeping by. When it was almost dark, a terrible looking object came floating or rather bounding along down the canal, and across the park cutting down splendid trees in its path -- and making straight for the Library. What could it be? Surely if that struck the building -- ! It swerved, crossed the park in front of us and down St. Clair to Fourth street. The thing proved to be an immense oil tank, but as it came

toward us I thought it was a mountain. Just then I should not have been at all surprised if the Union Station or Memorial Hall had come along.

The currents were so swift and treacherous no boat could live in such water -- It was clear that we must spend the night where we were. No one slept. The intense cold, the boom and roar of the water, greater than Niagara it seemed, only increased the mental strain. The rain and sleet continued, and the darkness was appalling; now and then it was lighted by the transitory glow of a match. But matches were precious.

The men had arranged to alternate in going to the window to call to the poor man in the tree. How we listened to hear if he would answer. All night long every fifteen minutes, someone would call to him, "All right old man?" "Hang on." "Is the water going down?" "It will soon be morning," etc. At times the voice would be so faint we could scarcely hear, -- then would come "All right!" At last he was rescued after hanging twenty-six hours in the tree.

One o'clock Wednesday morning the water was stationary, by daylight two steps were visible, so our second day dawned with hope. At seven it seemed to rise again. All that day we waited, boats were signaled but none could venture in to us with food or water.

In the afternoon another terrific report shook our building, until it seemed every window must be broken: another corner had collapsed, the drugstore, and a tiny flame not larger than a candle-light was noticed. Immediately we saw men rush to the edge of the tall building adjoining with

ropes which they threw over and seven people scrambled from the fallen building, deftly caught the ropes and were hauled to the roof.

The fire spread and raged wildly -- burning its way for two blocks to the water's edge. The contents of wholesale liquor stores, paint stores and drugstores exploded, burned and sent the flames higher. Our second night was light as day. Before dark, the youth who had been rescued from the tree insisted upon taking a frail birch canoe in the museum to forage for food. He succeeded in finding a box of canned goods and some milk, but when nearly opposite the Library window where he was to land it, the boat struck a tree and the men were thrown out. One of the men swam to another building. Our youth however was again treed; finally, drenched, exhausted and almost frozen he was rescued and brought back to the Library.

All night the fire raged, morning came and still no boats could get in. About ten o'clock two men, one in uniform, were seen slowly and cautiously working their way in a boat East on Second Street to the Canal. At the bridge their boat struck the railing and disappeared, while the white, frightened faces of the men could be seen turned upward, -- one swam, the other sank.

Three weeks later to the day, while working over the books in the gallery we noticed a great commotion at the bridge. The body of the soldier -- a mere boy it seemed, was taken from the water where he had disappeared from our sight.

By the end of the third day rescue parties were seen, word was sent around that only those in unsafe buildings

could be taken, Someone brought a box of grape fruit;  
 the juice was refreshing but by this time my throat was too  
 swollen to swallow. Toward evening a militia man in a  
 little boat said he was willing to take a few of us out, but  
at our own risk, In view of what we had been seeing this  
 sounded ominous but anxiety for my people gave courage.  
 I was taken to my brothers house, there to learn of the  
 safety of my parents, and re-united, --happy,-- grateful,  
 we were ready to begin again,-- somewhere.