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THE JOHNSTOWN FLOOD

Richard Fox

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Richard K. Fox

The Johnstown Flood / The Disaster which Eclipsed History

HORROR!

THE JOHNSTOWN DISASTER WHICH ECLIPSED HISTORY

A DEATH-DEALING DAM

Hundreds upon Hundreds of People Swept Away by the Flood

There is not one chance in a million that the Conemaugh river would ever have been heard of in history had it not been for its action on Friday evening, May 31.

The Conemaugh river is, or rather was, a simple little stream that meandered through Northwestern Pennsylvania and made glad by its peaceful murmurings those who dwelt by its bankside, or bore tokens of affection in the way of pleasure-seeking picnickers, moonlight parties or across-stream excursionists upon its placid bosom. It was one of those inoffensive creeks, termed by courtesy a river, that the Hudson river of the East, the Mississippi of the Middle or the Red river of the West might call a stripling.

There are times when even the still, small voice arises in its might and asserts its supremacy, and the wee small river of Conemaugh did that self-same thing on Friday evening, May 31. All along the banks of the listless, yet ever flowing, little alleged river the farmers were preparing for their anticipated harvests; the fishermen of the section – amateur fishermen indeed, for they were only equal to the fish – small and incomplete as was the Conemaugh, such as you and I, reader, who took pleasure in flinging their worm-crowded hooks into the stomach of a log and then going home for more bait; bonny fairies, brisk young tillers of the soil, toilers, and seeming-tired miners, these and all other human concomitants that go to make up such a quiet, thriving bailiwick dwelt in the locality.

And so went on the listless life of the denizens of the Conemaugh Valley, nestling at the foot of the Allegheny range.

Snuggling in the cosiest nook, right where no prying reporter or trout-fishing President ever bent his way was Johnstown. The word “was” is used advisedly, Johnstown is no more. At four o’clock on the fateful day all was serene. At six o’clock all was desolation and destruction.

The “big dam” had broken and the little brooklet had burst its sides for very glee at being dubbed a creek, and was making itself known in history. The Brooklyn Theatre holocaust, with its dead three hundred, paled into insignificance. The Mud Run and Reading disasters had to take a back seat.

“Let me alone for horror,” murmured the Conemaugh, “and I’ll get there!”

It did get there.

Right above Johnstown on the self-same Conemaugh, or rather where the North Fork glides into that erstwhile inoffensive stream, was a reservoir.

The reservoir is on the site of the old lake, which was one of the feeders of the Pennsylvania Canal. It is the property of a number of wealthy gentlemen in Pittsburgh, who formed themselves into

the corporation, the title of which is the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club. This sheet of water was formerly known as Conemaugh Lake. It is from two hundred to three hundred feet above the level of Johnstown, being in the mountains. It is about three and one-half miles long and from a mile to one and one-fourth miles in width, and in some places it is 100 feet in depth. It holds more water than any other reservoir, natural or artificial, in the United States. The lake has been quadrupled in size by artificial means, and was held in check by a dam from 700 to 1,000 feet wide. It was 90 feet in thickness at the base, and the height was 110 feet. The top has a breadth of over twenty feet.

From what could be ascertained by the writer, the reservoir-banks had not been considered absolutely safe by the people of the big and growing town. The reservoir was an artificial rather than a natural lake. The art came in when the South Fork Club, a corporation of gentlemen, took charge of the reservoir and dammed it. The South Fork Club had the dam inspected once a month by the Pennsylvania Railroad engineers, and their investigation showed that nothing less than some convulsion of nature would tear the barrier away and loosen the weapon of death. The steady rains of the past forty-eight hours had increased the volume of water in all the small mountain streams, which had already been swelled by the lesser rains earlier in the week. At this time it was evident that something in the nature of a cloudburst must have occurred just before the waters broke through the embankment.

Then the water came.

It came with a rush that astonished the natives.

There was a low murmuring at first, and then a rushing, hissing noise; then crevices appeared in the dam side. Then the embankment gave away, and onward rushed the torrent. It meant death and destruction to the fairest country on God's footstool. Johnstown became a City of the Dead, and the once pleasant valley was the Valley of Death.

Only those who were on the spot at the time can or could tell of the terrible scenes that ensued, and even they could not depict them in their real colors. It would take the pen of a mightier than human hand to indite the story, and a brush of a heaven-inspired artist to delineate the action. All was desolation, death and destruction.

Men, women and children, animals, houses, furniture, were swept on the hell-bent waters!

All through Cambria came the flood. Then on to Cooperdale. Frantic mothers, with children born and unborn were compelled to flee, and then had to succumb to the deluge. The cruel, on-rushing tide had nothing in its instincts humanitarian. The death-tide rolled onward and suckling babes were swept from their mother's breasts even as if the King of Old had proclaimed.

So on to St. Florence in Fairfield – well-named. The people at Ninevah and the quiet, easy-going folk of the cruel-river towns counted their losses by hundreds.

“Ten thousand dead,” was the announcement that came over the wires.

The effect can never be told. Centuries may come and go, but no century can make its mark in the history of time like that of the Nineteenth, with its aide, the Conemaugh.

Hundreds upon hundreds of lives were lost. The number cannot even be approximated, for in such regions there are always innumerable people – what the careless world calls its floating population – who would not be missed or accounted for until the Judgment roll is called.

Even on Monday, three days after the horror, mothers meandered about frantically begging that their children might be returned to them, and men with hearts brushed tears from their eyes and endeavored to make them believe that their dear ones had been rescued. Children pleadingly prayed that they might be saved, but the cruel, ever onward-rushing flood gathered them in and swept them onward.

To add to the horror the Johnstown Bridge, as if to add terror to terror and to make confusion worse confounded, swept from its approaches and precipitated the horror-stricken multitude into the torrent. An overturned stove in a dwelling inaugurated a conflagration. Nearly a hundred people were literally burned to death, thus adding holocaust to the far more preferable death by drowning.

Scarcely had the news of the terrible disaster been sent abroad than the alert newspapers had their commissioners speedily on their way to the scene.

Only the most meagre accounts had been given to the public for the reason that every mode of communication via telegraph or train had been cut off.

When the newspaper representatives reached Johnstown the scene was a pitiable one. The former town was a swamp. Debris was piled here, there and everywhere, and the pestilential stench from the dead bodies was next to unbearable.

The scene beggars description.

Even the trained newspaper men turned their eyes aside and held their nostrils. Corpses everywhere. Dank corpses at that, with glazed, fishy eyes and sloppy wet hair, that made the onlooker feel aweary, and not over anxious to handle.

In a single hole, after the waters had passed by, one hundred and fifty bodies were found. Just imagine it! Two hours before these one hundred and fifty souls were alive, but there they were, huddled together as if they had been congregated for the purpose which had asserted itself.

East Conemaugh was almost depopulated, and Franklinborough, on the north of Johnstown, was entirely swept away. Mineral Point, between Johnstown and the viaduct, was blotted out of existence. If any of the six hundred souls that formerly resided there are alive, the reporters could not find them. Ninevah, just below the Conemaugh furnace, is a city of corpses. Indeed, from South Fork to Bolivar and for a distance of a dozen miles or so the banks of the old-time river are literally strewn with corpses.

After the death-dealing current had gone on the work of tallying began. It will never be ended.

Then the fiends in human shape began their ghoulish work of robbing the dead. Summary punishment was dealt out to some of them. A vigilance committee, hastily organized, ran a score of them into the river, and that was the end of them.

At five o'clock on Monday evening hundreds upon hundreds of citizens are arriving upon the scene. Coffins are coming in by the carload, and the result of philanthropic and necessary aid began to pour in.

More relief is needed.

The best story of the horror can be gathered from the tale of an eye-witness, C. W. Linthicum. Said he:

“My train left Pittsburgh Friday morning for Johnstown. The train was due at Sang Hollow at 4.02, but was five minutes late.

“At Sang Hollow, just as we were about to pull out, we heard that the flood was coming. Looking ahead up the valley, we saw an immense wall of water thirty feet high raging, roaring, rushing toward us.

“The engineer reversed his engine and rushed back to the hills at full speed, and we barely escaped the waters. We ran back three hundred yards and the flood swept by, tearing up tracks, telegraph poles, houses and trees.

“Superintendent Pitcairn was on the train. We all got out and tried to save the floating people. Taking the bell-cord, we formed a line and threw the rope out, thus saving seven persons.

“We could have saved more, but many were afraid to let go the debris. It was an awful sight. The immense volume of water was roaring along, whirling over huge rocks, dashing against the banks and leaping high in the air, and this seething flood was strewn with timber, trunks of trees, parts of houses, and hundreds of human beings, cattle and almost every animal.

“The fearful peril of the living was not more awful than the horror of hundreds of distorted, bleeding corpses whirling along the avalanche of death.

“We counted 107 people floating by and dead without number. A section of roof came by, on one of which were sitting a woman and a girl.”

Other tales by eye-witnesses confirm the fact that the horror has never been excelled by anything of its kind in history.

Indeed, it will never perhaps be known what the real extent of the awful calamity is.

Johnstown, with its former population of ten thousand or thereabouts, was almost entirely swept away when the awful floods came, and many of the villages between that point and Nineveh are things of the past so far as life is concerned. Indeed the whole valley is a veritable Valley of the Shadow of Death.

So great was the crush of the wreckage, debris and dead bodies, at some points along the valley that dynamite had to be used, thus adding to the horror of the scene.

Nineveh is twenty-three miles below Johnstown, yet a large number of the bodies found at Nineveh were those of former residents of Johnstown, who had been swept that great distance down the valley to their death.

There are incidents where bodies were carried a hundred miles and there deposited.

A relation of some of the real facts, circumstances and scenes and incidents of the terrible disaster would be considered Munchausenish by the majority of our readers, but some of them were miraculous. Here is one. S. H. Klein, a New Yorker, had a queer experience. He was at the Merchants' Hotel and he worked like a beaver during the trying times of Friday night and Saturday morning, aiding in the rescue of no less than sixty persons from the floating debris. Among these were the Rev. Mr. Phillips, his wife and two children. Mr. Phillips is a stalwart man and when the flood struck his house he fled to the roof with his family. Presently the house floated and the sturdy dominie placed his wife and two children on a table. Then he got under the table, and, letting it rest with its precious burden on his head, arose to his feet. As the house floated down on the tide it grazed the hotel building, and Mr. Klein and others assisted in hauling the imperilled parson and his family into an upper window of the hotel.

Here are other incidents: The story of the mishap to the day express train at Conemaugh bridge is developing slowly through the efforts of the railway authorities to obtain definite information. Of the 300 passengers on the train, all but eight seem to be accounted for, and it is believed that these eight are lost. They are Bessie Bryan, daughter of Mahlon Bryan of Philadelphia, and her companion, Miss Paulson of Pittsburgh; Mrs. Easley, Rev. Mr. Goodchild and Robert Hutchinson, of Newark, N. J.; Andrew Leonard, Mrs. J. Smith and Chris Meisel, manager of the Newark baseball club.

Miss Bryan was a delicate young woman. She was returning from a Pittsburgh wedding with Miss Paulson. They had been preceded the night before by the bridal couple, who were to be guests at the Bryan home at Germantown. They rode in the Pullman car, and did not get out quickly enough. Fearing that they could not reach the hill where the other passengers took refuge, they returned towards the car, but before they had reached it the waters caught them and carried them away.

Miss Rose Clarke, a beautiful and well-known young lady, the daughter of a very prominent citizen, had a remarkable experience.

"When the water rose," she said, "we were all at home. It drove us from floor to floor, and we had just reached the roof when the house started. It went whirling toward the bridge, struck it, and went down. Mother, my little sister and I all caught on another roof that was just above the water, but father and my little brother went down with the house. Father's face was towards us as he sank. He shouted goodby, and that was the last. Just then my little sister lost her hold and she followed father and brother. Then mother called out that she was going to drown. I got to her and raised her head out of the water. My head rested on a sawlog and a board protected me from the other timbers. Some rescuers came running down the bridge and saw us. I made them take mother out first and meantime I struggled to get out of the timbers, but they closed in on me.

"The more I struggled the tighter they held me. The fire was just behind me, and I could feel its heat. By the time the men had carried mother to the bank the fire was so fierce they could hardly get back. When they did reach me they could not get me out, for my foot was fast between a saw

log and a piece of timber. Then they ran for tools. The fire kept sweeping on before the breeze from up stream. I had almost resigned myself to an awful death when some other men braved the fire and reached me. They began chopping and sawing. One blow of an axe cut off a drowned man's hand. The men tied a rope around me. How they got me out finally I scarcely know. My kneecap was almost cut off. When the current sucked my father down he caught me by the foot; that is what dragged me so far into the timbers.”

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