

The Flood of 1913 in Union County

- Robert W. Parrott

One-hundred years ago, the State of Ohio and Union County suffered the worst flood in state history and Ohio's greatest weather disaster. The Flood of 1913 as it became known, engulfed 104 Ohio towns, took the lives of an estimated 430 Ohioans, destroyed 20,000 houses, rendered over 35,000 homes uninhabitable and caused damages estimated at \$300,000,000.



Mill Creek Overflowing, Marysville

Eighteen people died at Delaware when the Olentangy rose to a level of 32 feet. Ninety-three people died at Columbus when a levee broke on the west side flooding 4,000 buildings with a wall of water. Hardest hit was Dayton when flooding from the Great Miami and Mad Rivers breached several levees swamping most of the city including the business district. Ninety-eight people died as a result. Union County was much more fortunate. Although many towns were flooded, no lives were lost.

It all began in the middle of March with a week of unseasonably warm weather in the 70s. The hot temperatures caused the winter snow and ice to melt rapidly saturating the ground and filling the streams with runoff. On Good Friday, March 21, the weather changed severely as a cold front swept through the area. The worst windstorm in state history brought down limbs and damaged buildings, fences and roofs with wind gusts at 70 to 80 miles per hour. This was followed by sleet and ice. On Saturday, March 22, temperatures rose. For most of the state, this brought a steady downpour that lasted four days. Bellefontaine, Urbana and Marion reported 10 to 11 inches of rain. Although the streams and waterways through Union

County swelled from precipitation elsewhere, none of the heavy rains fell in the county on Saturday or Easter Sunday. That changed early in the morning of Monday, March 24, with a violent rain storm. By noon the streams were out of their banks and by 10:00 p.m. Monday night, Marysville and many places in Union County were experiencing the greatest flood it had ever known. The rain ceased for a short time, but late Monday night and early Tuesday morning, March 25, a downpour began again. By daybreak low lying areas were completely under water. The streams were out of their banks and had turned to a raging torrent destroying property, roads and bridges.

In Marysville, the Light & Water Company next to Mill Creek was flooded leaving the town with no electricity or water. The lack of water also meant there was no fire protection and special police were appointed to help prevent or extinguish any fires that might occur. The Maple Street Covered Bridge was partially under water and the Main Street Iron Bridge had to be closed. Many businesses such as the Standard Stamping Company, the Standard Oil Company and the Cement Tile Roofing Company were filled with water. Houses near Mill Creek and the Town Run were flooded. Several families had to be rescued that were trapped in their homes. The bridge on Plum Street was washed off its abutments and destroyed.



North Side, Marysville

Around the county, Bokes Creek had filled the streets of Magnetic Springs and Fulton Creek had done the same at Richwood. Citizens paddled through the town in boats. Darby Creek flooded the north access to Milford Center, Unionville Center and Plain City. Many roads and approaches to bridges were washed out by the erosive action of fast flowing water. Considerable damage was done to bridges, including a number of iron and covered bridges that

were completely washed away. Both bridges on the Columbus, Magnetic Springs & Northern Electric Railroad, a trolley line from Delaware to Richwood, were destroyed and much of the railroad damaged. County Commissioner Charles Rausch estimated the loss to the county's bridges, pikes and culverts at \$250,000.



Thompson Covered Bridge Destroyed, Millcreek Township

On Wednesday, March 26, President Woodrow Wilson put Ohio under martial law. Ohio Governor Cox ordered out 8,000 men of the Ohio National Guard, which included Company E from Marysville. Since much of the communication infrastructure was destroyed, the local militia unit was called into action by a whistle on the Light Plant that signaled them to meet at the Armory. Company E was immediately sent to Columbus to help with clean-up efforts, building shelters for the homeless and patrolling the streets to keep order and prevent looting. Sadly, Private Russell Kimmel was compelled to shoot a looter. The newspaper reported: "No sympathy is expressed for the victim, who it is believed was guilty of as dastardly an outrage as it is possible for the human mind to conceive, that of pillaging the homes of the dead or those in terrible distress."

Although Marysville and Union County had been hit hard by the flood, the citizens immediately focused on helping those around the state who had suffered even more. Local doctors went to Columbus to aid those injured and to restore sanitary conditions to avert the danger of disease and prevent epidemics that could be caused by contaminated water, sewage and dead livestock. Local carpenters also went to Columbus taking tools and materials to help build or repair homes damaged in the flood.



Collecting Provisions for Relief Train, Marysville

One of the greatest acts of compassion occurred on Wednesday morning, March 26. The Ohio Central Railroad managed to get an engine from north of Columbus to Marysville. Those on the train brought news of the great suffering at Columbus. Immediately, Marysville business men formed a Flood Relief Committee to raise donations of food and clothing to be sent to Columbus on the train. In two hours, two box cars of provisions had been loaded for the Marysville Relief Train which left for Columbus around noon. Everything that could be spared was sent by the people of Marysville. This was the first outside aid to reach Columbus. The train returned later that day to be restocked with supplies that poured in from around the county in response to a plea to help the flood victims at Columbus. For the next two days, no less than two shipments every day were sent to Columbus from the people of Union County. It was called "one of the finest sights ever seen in Marysville and one that comes so seldom, but comes to show that all the world is kin."



Flood Relief Train, Marysville

As the Relief Train returned to Marysville from Columbus, it brought with it flood refugees. The people of Marysville opened their homes to nearly 50 flood victims. From the refugees came first-hand accounts of their experiences during the flood and graphic descriptions of the destruction and dead. Donations of food, clothing and cash continued to pour in to the Flood Relief Committee from all over the county and did not cease until word was communicated on Friday, March 28, that enough supplies had been received.

By Sunday, March 30, the waters had returned back to their normal levels and much of the flooded areas had drained. Water service was restored to Marysville the following day giving the town fire protection and drinking water. Clean-up had already begun in Marysville and around the county. The Commissioners inspected the roads and bridges to determine the amount of damage to the county infrastructure. State legislation was quickly passed allowing counties to issue bonds for the repair of roads and bridges. Over the next two years, the county would build dozens of new bridges. One of those was the Bridgeport Iron Bridge on Streng Road near Fairbanks School which still stands today.



Bridgeport Iron Bridge, 1914

Despite all the damage to Union County as a result of the flood, the only thought was how lucky they were in escaping the devastation that other areas suffered. The editor of the *Union County Journal* newspaper reported that Monday evening's flood waters began raging in local streams, overflowing their banks, carrying off bridges, washing away roadbeds and damaging much private and public property, and we felt particularly distressed. All day Tuesday we looked upon the raging torrents with a single eye that could see only the destruction that was being experienced locally. With the dawn of Wednesday, however, came the realization that the local losses and inconvenience was as nothing compared with the inestimable havoc that had been wrought in countless other places. Knowledge of the frightful conditions in Columbus, Delaware, Dayton and scores of other cities, less favorably located

than we are, brought a full realization of our own safety and from that very moment, there was not even a suggestion of complaint regarding any local distress or inconvenience.

The *Journal* continued by writing that when the word came at 10 o'clock Wednesday, that thousands of people were homeless at Columbus and suffering for want of food and clothing; the real character of Marysville's magnificent citizenship was placed in the balance and not found wanting. No one faltered. Within two hours the first of several relief trains was on its way. The editor summed up the efforts of his fellow citizens during the 1913 Flood in this way, "It has been a glorious achievement and one that will bring much satisfaction to Marysville citizens in the months and years to come. It was an undertaking in which there was absolutely no thought of selfishness or self-aggrandizement but simply the unanimous and whole-souled action of a generous and sympathizing people."

Sources:

Bell, Trudy E., Swept Away, The Great 1913 Flood, Timeline, Ohio Historical Society, January/March 2009, p. 38

Echoes, Ohio Historical Society newsletter, March/April 2013, Vol. 52, No. 2

Gaumer, F.T., Water, Water Everywhere..., My Two Cents Worth, Marysville Journal Tribune, March 29 1985, p 51

Gaumer, F.T., Continuing With the 1913 Flood, My Two Cents Worth, *Marysville Journal Tribune*, April 2 1985, p 52

Marysville Tribune, Marysville, Ohio, 1913, 1914

Roseboom, Eugene H. and Francis P. Weisenburger, A History of Ohio, Columbus: The Ohio Historical Society, 1976

Schmidlin, Thomas W. and Jeanne Appelhans Schmidlin, Thunder in the Heartland, A Chronicle of Outstanding Weather Events in Ohio, Kent State University Press, 1996

Union County Ohio Commissioners Journal, 1913, 1914

Union County Journal, Marysville, Ohio, 1913, 1914

**Flood Scenes Around Union County
1913**

Marysville



South Court Street, Marysville



South Plum Street, Marysville

Richwood



Ottawa Street, Richwood



Bomford Street, Richwood

Milford Center



Darby Creek Overflowing, Milford Center



Water to Platform of Bridge, Milford Center

Unionville Center



North Side, Unionville Center



Bridge Over Darby Creek, Unionville Center

Magnetic Springs



Sager Sanitarium, Magnetic Springs



Boating on Main Street, Magnetic Springs

Plain City



Road Destroyed, Butler Bridge, Plain City



East Main Street, Plain City