



Omaha's Flood, 1952

(Article begins on page 2 below.)

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Full Citation: B F Sylvester, "Omaha's Flood, 1952," *Nebraska History* 35 (1954): 45-58

Article Summary: In 1952, two years before the Pick-Sloan plan predicted that the Missouri River would settle down, eighty thousand square miles of deep winter snow in Montana and the Dakotas created an almost total runoff over a layer of ice. An unprecedented volume of water rolled toward the bottleneck at Omaha and Council Bluffs. This is the story of a successful effort to additionally fortify the levees and protect the population and structures of the two cities.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Lewis A Pick, Don G Shingler, Sam W Reynolds, James F Mulqueen, Kennard W Gardiner, Henry J Hoeffler, T W Tritt, M L Remde, Aleck G Ulmet, Harry C Crawl, Chris Christensen, Richard G Morrison, Carl M Stephens, Margaret Groneweg, Denmore J King, Mrs Roy Maxwell, Twyla Holmes, Allen Ardell, Robert O Beno, L W Ross, Russell J Mourer, Mrs Dorothy Danielsen, Charmaine Danielsen, Winn Phillips, O E Cooley, Leo I Meyerson, H H Nicholson, Russell A Hand, President Eisenhower

Place Names: Montana: Three Forks; Missouri: St Louis, Kansas City; Nebraska: Omaha, Douglas Street bridge, Fairmount Park, Sioux City; Iowa: Council Bluffs, Atlantic, Floyd River; Mississippi: Clinton; Tennessee: Memphis, Vicksburg; South Dakota: Fort Randall

Keywords: Pick-Sloan plan, Civil Defense, Black Friday, Broadway Methodist Church, First Church of the Nazarene, St Paul's Episcopal Church, Council Bluffs Savings Bank, Salvation Army, Tea Cup Restaurant, Red Cross, Creighton University, University of Omaha, ham radio, Civil Air Patrol, Chicago and North Western and Illinois Central, sand boil, Fifth Army, Freedoms Foundation Medallion

Photographs / Images: open Illinois Central bridge; north levee at Council Bluffs; Missouri River upstream from Douglas Street bridge at Omaha; air view of Missouri River between Omaha and Council Bluffs; human chain placing sandbags at the scene of Grace Street sewer break, Omaha; stretch of levee and mud boxes on Omaha side of the river above Illinois Central bridge; residences in South Sioux City under water; flooding near Brownville, Nebraska

OMAHA'S FLOOD, 1952

BY B. F. SYLVESTER

The Dutch boy who plugged the hole in the dike with his arm came to life in this country in 1952. With their hands, the people of Omaha, Nebraska, and Council Bluffs, Iowa, held back the greatest flood that has ever occurred on the Missouri River and showed what may be expected of civilians in crisis.

The Missouri is the nation's longest river, 2,464 miles from Three Forks, Montana to St. Louis, a turbid stream where water is thicker than blood. An Iowa farmer said it was "too thick to drink and too thin to plow." The man who knows the Missouri best, Lt. Gen. Lewis A. Pick, retired chief of army engineers, has called it one of the wildest on earth. In April, 1952, two years before the target date for its settling down to be a good river under the Pick-Sloan plan, the Missouri went on the loose again, perhaps for the last time.

"Big Mo" was roaring drunk on a snow-melt cocktail which could have been mixed by Paul Bunyan. It was made in Montana and the Dakotas with eighty thousand square miles of deep winter snow which was one-third water, a chinook wind, and an almost total runoff over a layer of ice. This was poured into the main stem by the Milk, Knife, Heart, Bad, and Cannonball and downed all at once. An unprecedented volume of water rolled over towns and farms for a thousand miles, into a bottleneck at Omaha and Council Bluffs.

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The river comes between the cities in the shape of a narrow question mark, tapering to a quarter mile at the Douglas Street bridge. Inside a ten-square-mile loop and against the stem on the Nebraska side were five thousand people, the Omaha airport, large industries, and the public power plant serving both cities. Under the bend on the Iowa side were eleven square miles, taking in two-thirds of Council Bluffs and thirty thousand people.

The cities were protected by thirty-six miles of earth levees and a mile-long floodwall of concrete and steel, where Omaha industry crowds the river. These levees and floodwall were designed to protect against the greatest flood possible after upriver dams are completed—a stage of 26.5 feet, with a safety factor of five feet against wave action. The approaching crest was forecast at 26 feet, then 28.5, then 30, then 31.5. If not contained, the flood would have large sections under fifteen feet of water.

Brig. Gen. Don G. Shingler of the army engineers offered technical help and called in fifteen hundred specialists, big and little river rats from Washington to Dallas, including General Pick. At Clinton, Mississippi, the engineers produced a small well-water flood in a concrete replica of the Missouri. At “Omaha-Council Bluffs” the tiny torrent was 3.5 inches high in a channel six to eight inches wide and tearing along so fast that one day’s flood was reproduced in five and one-half minutes. The tests showed the levees would have to be raised two to seven feet, in six days, and held.

The odds, not counted at the time, were estimated later at ten to one against. Men and boys who finally numbered sixty thousand left their homes and went to the dikes. Civil Defense had a skeleton organization and a plan in both cities.

In Omaha, Director Sam W. Reynolds had medical and communication services, auxiliary police and firemen, and a file of material, equipment, and contractors. C. D. became the co-ordinating agency in evacuating the threatened area and raising 13.4 miles of levees.

Reynolds’ powers were not clearly defined but when in doubt he interpreted the situation and put the legal as-

pects on file. He authorized the public power district to cross private property in building a \$300,000 temporary levee around its plant behind the floodwall. He approved another levee which sealed off the switch tracks of six railroads.

Probably no other chairman of a Nebraska delegation to the Republican Convention ever contravened so many federal regulations in three days. One-half million gallons of alcohol might have duplicated the 1951 flood-fire at Kansas City. Because of U. S. Treasury rules, it could not be moved, so Reynolds moved it. Interstate Commerce Commission regulations, limiting drivers to a sixty-hour week, slowed gas and oil deliveries to the levee. He suspended the regulations. Finally, he authorized the Government, through the engineers, to lay explosives and blow up a section of the floodwall if the water got behind it.

James F. Mulqueen, thirty-five, who conducts a one-man insurance agency, had been mayor of Council Bluffs one day, Kennard W. Gardiner, acting city manager one day, when Col. Henry J. Hoeffler and T. W. Tritt of the army engineers revealed the city's danger. Under Iowa law, Civil Defense was restricted to disaster from enemy action, as in fifteen other states. It had good elements in communications, auxiliary police and equipment files. The mayor could take over and did. M. L. Remde, tire man, was ready with Red Cross disaster units. A list of potential shelters had been checked two weeks before. It required an hour and a half to change from defense against bombs to defense against flood.

On a cold and rainy Good Friday (they called it Black Friday), the mayor declared a state of emergency and government by proclamation. Including a county levee on the south, Council Bluffs had 29.69 miles to protect. To get to them, fifteen miles of roads had to be built over low and swampy ground. One hundred trucks hauled rock and gravel for a week to build and keep them afloat. On Saturday the mayor issued the first of five evacuation orders and closed most business and industry to release manpower and trucks. Roads to the city were closed to keep out sightseers. Vehicles hauling dirt to the top of the levees were stuck in

the mud. River stage, 22.6; minimum temperature, 35; precipitation, .27 inch.

Half the city had moved or was on the move Easter Sunday. Ministers held services, after which they evacuated their churches or turned them into shelters. Broadway Methodist became a twenty-four-hour restaurant. High school girls helped the Easter bunny find children at the shelters. Case of the Reverend Aleck G. Ulmet, thirty-five, pastor of First Church of the Nazarene: At 6:00 A.M. his area was ordered evacuated. He moved part of his furniture to the second floor of the parsonage, put the rest in a trailer to be parked in Fairmount Park. He held services attended by sixty women and fifteen men. Afterward, they moved three pianos and other furniture from the Sunday school rooms in the basement. Pastor Ulmet took his wife and three small children to a farm. Returning, he went to the dikes and did not leave for five days. He worked a sixteen-hour shift, slept in his car, and ate at the Red Cross and Salvation Army chow wagons.

The evacuation was in daylight, to avoid panic, from Saturday afternoon to Monday evening. It took in the west end and fringes of the business district, to within two blocks of the city hall. Under Red Cross, Harry C. Crowl, real estate man, directed 750 vehicles, volunteered by Council Bluffs establishments, farmers, Omaha stores which had suspended deliveries, and forty-eight towns. Besides trucks of all sizes, there were wagons and hayracks drawn by horses and jeeps. Six winch trucks stood by to extricate them from the mud. Funeral homes removed 175 bedridden persons by ambulance. Novices moved out pianos and refrigerators. Some families took water heaters and furnaces. Kennard Gardiner watched the faces of the evacuees and found them quiet and set on the task ahead, like those he had seen in London air raids. Sign on a house: "For Sail." Another: "I Shall Return."

One problem was livestock. Farmers would not take goats and twenty-five were on hand before a goat lover was found on an acreage. Chris Christensen, the famous dog-catcher, who had retired in a pet, cared for dogs, cats,

chickens, geese, and horses, besides three cows which he milked daily, and one sow which farrowed eight pigs.

The hill people took in the flatlanders until the district looked like a series of car parks. Between them and neighboring towns, only fourteen hundred went to shelters. There were thirty-three in the five-room home of Richard G. Morrison. Two Negro families shared the recreation room-kitchen at the home of Carl M. Stephens, president of the gas company. One was their evacuated maid and daughter, the other an employee at the plant and his wife. A friend of this couple had the screened porch. Stephens arose at 4:00 A.M. to cook breakfast at the plant for sixty employees going to the levees. A sixteen-year-old son was busboy. Mrs. Stephens spent her days at the city hall.

Cadillacs were parked in the street while garages, basements and porches held furniture. Margaret Groneweg opened her garage to 327 chickens which belonged to her maid. Automobile dealers removed new cars to release showrooms. Furniture was stored in a dozen towns and finally in forty-six freight cars.

Eighty-six families refused or failed to evacuate. The mayor called on the Reverend Denmore J. King, rector of St. Paul's Episcopal Church, who whittled the number to seventeen and tried again. A psychiatrist persuaded an expectant young mother to go to the hospital. A widow of ninety-six said her late husband had warned her to make no move without the advice of her lawyer. A retired sea captain, past eighty, was entertaining a young woman from Omaha and said to go away.

A sixty-year-old bachelor had an auto junk yard in the back and the levee in front. He realized the levee might fail but had taken measures. He pointed to a block and tackle attached to his refrigerator, by which it would be hauled to the second floor. He was cooking a ham which with other stores would last a week. What if the house were washed away? He had thought of that too, and showed a raft.

Father King glanced at a towtruck in the yard. "The mayor and the city need you," he said. "You and your truck should be in the motor pool." The man, who thought he needed and was needed by nobody, was touched. "I didn't

know the mayor knew about me, or that I could help," he said; "the ham ought to be done by two, I'll be up right after." The mayor made a tour that evening and found only national guardsmen with fixed bayonets and live ammunition to prevent looting. He wrote: "You can look down Avenue A, and you can't see a soul from 15th street to 37th. Not a man, dog or bird in sight."

Nerve center of the fight was the city hall, which the mayor put on a twenty-four-hour basis, along with himself. He counted on an informed public as the first line of defense. Business houses gave up their telephones so the city hall could have sixty-five more lines, and Mrs. Roy Maxfield recruited ninety-six women to answer questions. The radio station cleared the air instantly for the mayor. In many homes the radio was kept going.

Twyla Holmes, who had been secretary to former mayors, was general assistant. She kept a log, and an eye on the mayor and his top aides. She put a cot in the council chamber, which became known as Hotel Council. When she thought an official had about all he could take, she would say, "Get your drink of water. . . I'm going to lock you in." Two hours later she would let him out. From the log: "April 13, 11:15 P.M. Took the funnies away from Mulqueen. Lights out." Other round-the-clock workers got a few winks in the city jail. One was Municipal Judge Allen Ardell, radio car driver, who came to look no better than the bums he had been sending there for fourteen years.

Among the non-essential casualties were barber and beauty shops, cleaning and pressing shops, and laundries except for hospitals and shelters. It put a group of army officers between the devil of regulations and the deep dark Missouri. Could they import a barber? The answer was no.

Mobilization was virtually total. Twenty-eight thousand registered volunteers went to the levees, not counting those who showed up on their own. A thousand were in the police auxiliary, and no one knows how many more were in other flood activities. There was one marriage, one divorce petition, and no other lawsuit. Doctors' waiting rooms were empty, and only the very old took time to die. Two leading

morticians had no funerals. One obstetrician had no births, presumed the stork was flying patrol over the levee.

When a dike worker was hit in the mouth with a shovel and lost a dental crown, the man next to him said, "I am a dentist. Come to my office and I'll take care of you." A foreman found that one of his laborers was a tax expert to whom he had paid \$225 recently for a day's service.

Robert O. Beno, vice-president of Beno's department store, and all male help but two older men, were on the river. L. W. Ross, president of the Council Bluffs Savings Bank, and nine of his fourteen officers, filled sandbags, as did Russell J. Mourer, Superintendent of Schools.

Mrs. Dorothy Danielsen turned over her Tea Cup restaurant to the Salvation Army and stayed to do the cooking. At 4:00 A.M. after a twenty-hour day, Mrs. Danielsen, herself an evacuee, would go to the home of Winn Phillips, a nephew. His six rooms housed eight families of relatives, numbering twenty-nine, and another guest. The men worked nights on the levee, the boys at the Red Cross. Charmaine, eighteen-year-old daughter of Mrs. Danielsen, cooked at a shelter, doing one forty-eight-hour stint without rest. Mrs. Danielsen says the flood was a fine experience, working with such wonderful people.

Manpower was dispatched from the basement of the city hall. Workers went out in trucks, clean, singing and laughing, and came back silent and covered with mud, to overflow cots and fall asleep on marble steps and floors. Volunteers came from ninety-nine towns, often in delegations headed by the mayor. One hundred Mennonite farmers were from Kansas.

A thousand men came from Creighton University and the University of Omaha. A Jesuit priest, turned down as too old, waited around the corner for a dike-bound truck and was smuggled in. Five hundred were from the University of Nebraska, Midland, Dana, Iowa State, Grinnell and other colleges. Dr. O. E. Cooley, superintendent of the Council Bluffs district of the Methodist Church, who was throwing sandbags, met ministers from Atlantic, Cumberland, Macedonia, Oakland, Greenfield, and Centerville,

which was two hundred miles away. Like the rebel with the tow truck, these people wanted to be needed.

One hundred eighty radio hams flocked in from all over the country and reported to Leo I. Meyerson, who had a communications center in his home, which handled eight thousand messages a day to and from the levees and other points. One hundred fifty members of the Civil Air Patrol from Oakland, Iowa, who patrolled the levees by air and on foot, had their daily briefings there. A levee patrolman reported weak spots by walkie-talkie to a volunteer taxi cab in the area. An operator in the cab sent the message over two-way radio to another cab in front of the Meyerson home. The second operator cranked an army field phone and relayed the message over a ground line into the house, where it was transmitted to dike operations.

The west end of the city was protected on the north by a levee anchored to a north-south bluff line two hundred feet high. It ran due west for a mile to the normal channel, then followed the river gently southwest toward Omaha. The water was highest there, five miles wide from bluff to bluff above the bend, fifteen miles wide upstream. The east end of this pocket was vulnerable for other reasons. The Chicago and North Western and Illinois Central tracks ran through it on a grade five feet from the top. The tracks had been torn out and the gaps closed with sandbags, but water seeped through the cinder and gravel ballast. This required careful watching by a group of old river men from Memphis and Vicksburg.

They were not concerned about ordinary seepage which was only the quiet weeping of the river, relieving pressure and doing no harm. This was even encouraged, almost as if one said, "Have yourself a good cry. You'll feel better." Relief wells on the land side brought up seep which flowed through the sand underneath the levee. This was stepped up by pumps which sent some water back to the river over the top of the levee and some onto the land where it made pools and lakes up to five feet deep.

Pent-up seep was something else, violent and dangerous. Turbulent water, cutting and moving dirt, bubbled up in patches like a spring. The cry of "Sandboil!" brought

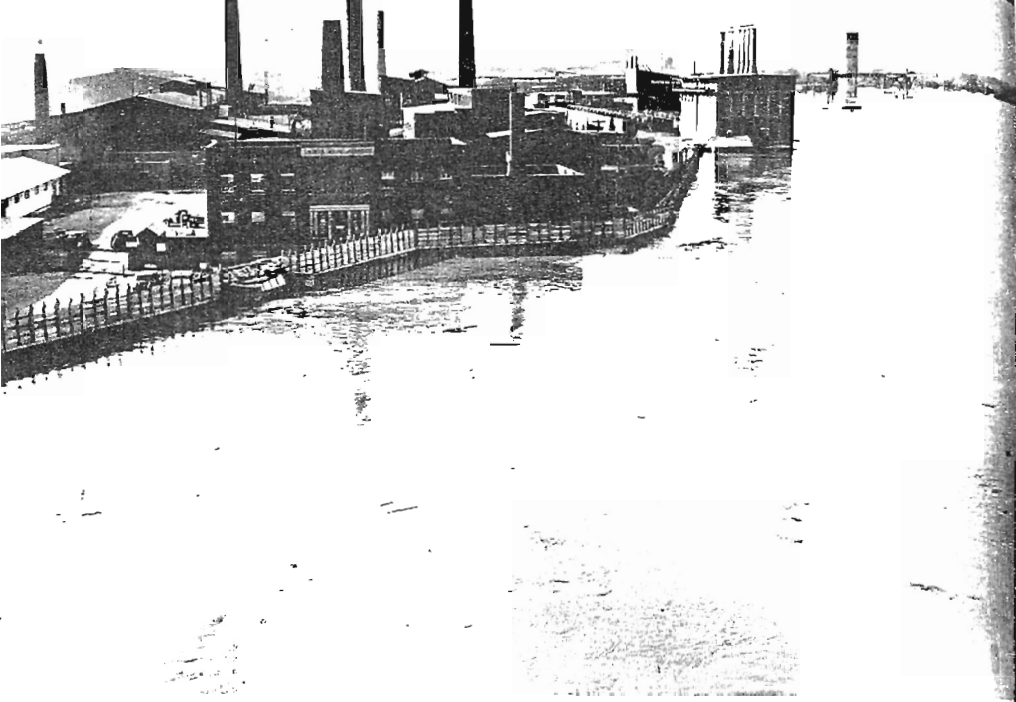


Above: Omaha. Illinois Central bridge left open. Omaha airport in background.

THE FLOOD, 1952

Below: North levee at Council Bluffs, most critical area of flood, was threatened by sandboils and seepage through the railroad fills.

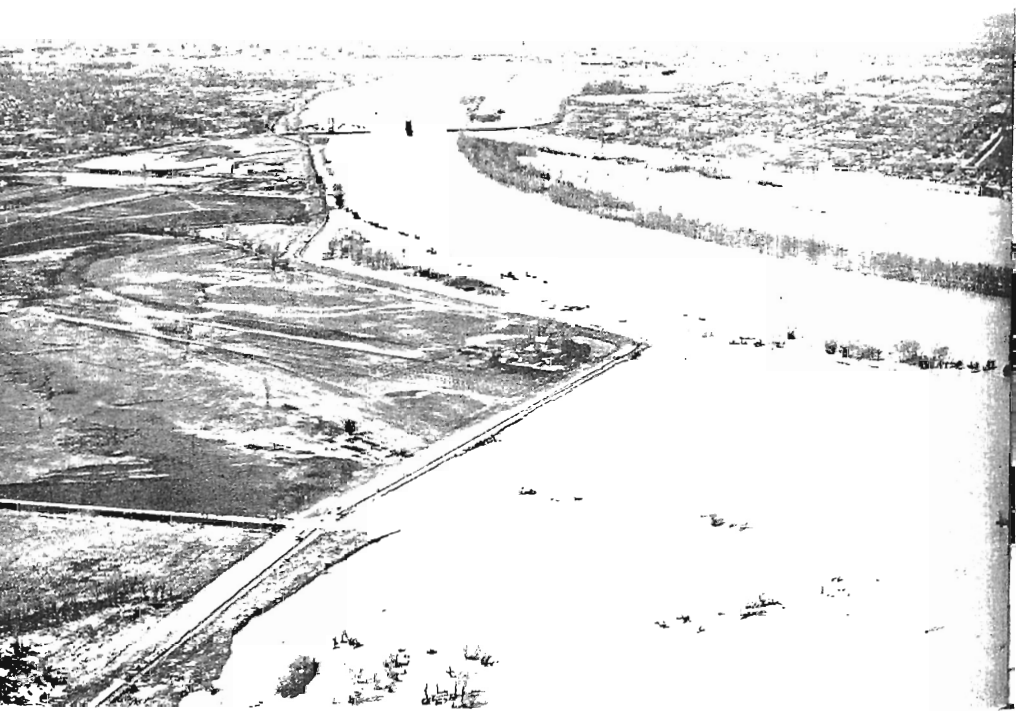




Above: Missouri River upstream from Douglas Street bridge at Omaha, April 16, two days before crest of 30.24 feet. At left, section of \$1,000,000 concrete-steel seawall surmounted by section of flash-board.

WATER EVERYWHERE

Below: Air view of Missouri River at top of its question-mark course between Omaha and Council Bluffs, April 14. Willow trees, upper right, outline normal channel.

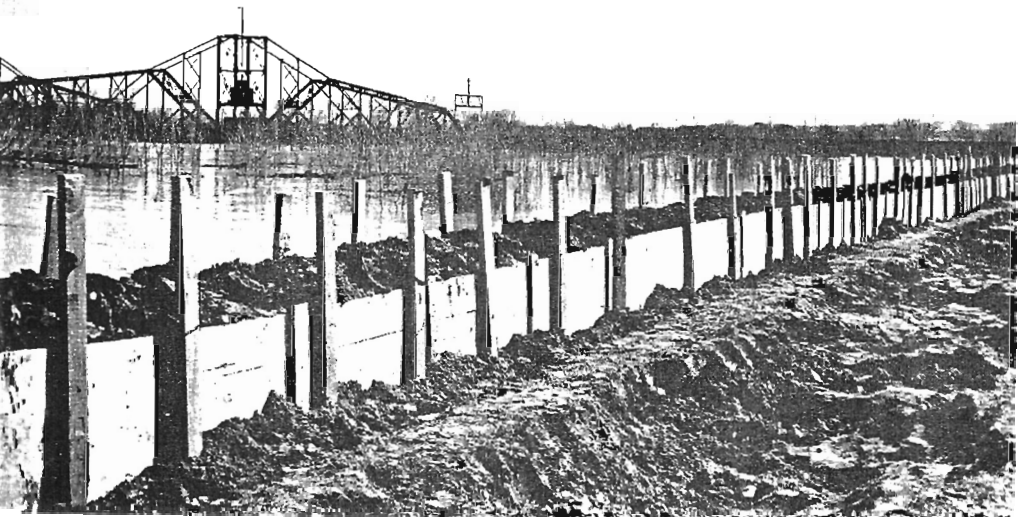




Above: Human chain placing sandbags night of April 18, at scene of Grace Street sewer break, Omaha.

SANDBAGS AND MUD BOXES

Below: Stretch of levee and mud boxes on Omaha side of the river above Illinois Central Bridge.





Above: Residences in South Sioux City under water, April 14, 1952.

NOT ONLY OMAHA

Below: Flooding near Brownville, April 18, 1952.



Memphis and Vicksburg on the run. They ringed 250 of these spots with sandbags, like a chimney, as high as the level of the river and let the water rise. One area, where the boils were cancerous and spread, had to be ringed with a levee that required 115 trucks hauling dirt for sixteen hours.

In two days of rain which made vehicle movement on top of the dikes impossible, engineer Tritt had been able to get less than a foot of dirt on the north levee. At two Sunday morning he got a dealer out of bed and ordered lumber to put up eight and a half miles of flashboard. This was a wooden panel, two and a half to five feet high, nailed to stakes driven into the top of the levee and reinforced by sandbags. A mile-long plank road for the lumber trucks was made on top of a muddy section of the north levee. In Omaha, engineer H. H. Nicholson went to flashboards and mudboxes, which were, in effect, a double flashboard with dirt between. River stage, 24.6; minimum temperature, 34; precipitation, .04 inch; wind, 18.4 miles.

At six Monday morning the nailing crews went to work. The story is told that on one section the workers had lumber and nails but no hammers. A man went to get them and returned in half an hour to find three blocks of flashboard were up. A half mile of snowfence, weighted with sandbags, was put down on the river side of the north levee to guard against wave action. River stage, 25.6; minimum temperature, 36; precipitation, 0; wind, 9.7 miles.

Meanwhile one-half mile below the north levee, Tritt was building a second and higher one. It was a mile and three quarters long, over twenty-eight sets of switch tracks, and joined the north levee at the Illinois Central bridge. One hundred fifty dump-trucks and twenty-six earthmovers wheeled their loads bumper to bumper twenty-four hours a day over the rising embankment. Little earthworms took twelve tons at a bite, middle-sized ones twenty-seven tons, and big ones forty-five tons. They ate down a hill until a wag said, "This is now Council Bluff."

The levee took two and a half days to build, was finished at nine Tuesday night, losing a race to the flashboards which had been completed at two that afternoon. Stock-

piled was enough canvas to line the riverside for one mile. Weighted with sandbags, this would have delayed action of the water against the soft earth. The massive structure, across the top of the flatlands, heartened the people and would have lasted two to four hours if the north levee had broken, long enough for the workers to escape. River stage, 27; minimum temperature, 32; precipitation, 0; wind, 3.8 miles.

Rain or not, the sandbags never stopped. One and a half million were filled and tied, often by hands bearing lacerations from binder twine. Forty-nine Indians filled fifty-eight thousand in twelve hours. Forty-pound bags were passed up the slopes and along the top of the levees by human chains, one of which was eleven hundred men long, almost a mile.

Disturbing signs of saturation appeared Wednesday when the railroad fill sections of the north levee quivered underfoot. Saturation is the last stage before chunks of earth slough off and the structure melts away. Considerable water was coming under the fills. Sandboils spread until the danger was greater under the levee than on top. It was decided to build a third levee in a half moon to ring the danger area. It would impound the seepwater, put weight on the soft levee and, it was hoped, the seep would neutralize sandboils. When workmen cut into the Illinois Central grade, fifty feet back of the primary levee, preparatory to crossing with the new one, a freshet came from underneath, and they could not proceed. The levee had to be shortened to enclose only the north western section. The job took twenty-four hours. To hold the other section a board mattress, weighted with bags of rock, was laid on the slope of the levee and on both sides of the railroad grade. River stage, 28.3; minimum temperature, 33; precipitation, .01 inch; wind, 6.8 miles.

Thursday was the day of the expected crest. The water was sixteen feet higher than the land and up to eighteen inches on the sandbags. Volunteers and Fifth Army soldiers went along raising the levee one bag at a time, keeping ahead of the river. Water trickled between and under the

sandbags, through cracks in the flashboard and over sandbag spillways on the land side.

The dike fighters were to stay and pile on sandbags until the river washed them out. Fifty-two boats were ready at eleven stations, with eighty more standing by, to remove them. Planes waited to give the signal if the levees failed. The Council Bluffs alarm would be a siren; Omaha's a buzzing by day, flares by night. River stage, 29.4; minimum temperature, 49; precipitation, .17; wind 9.4 miles. Under carbide flares and electric lights, the men watched the river rise slowly through the night. There were discussions on what was holding it back. With a round oath, a boilermaker exclaimed, "I know the Lord is on this dike!"

The official crest at Douglas Street bridge was 30.2 at 4:00 A.M. Friday, though it was 32.5 on the north levee. A woman called up at 4:20 to ask if she could move back. It was hard to convince her that the crest would be constant for a day, and danger would be no less for two or three. This was proven on the Omaha side when a storm sewer exploded four hundred yards behind the levee at 7:00 P.M. Friday. It required nine hours to close the mouth, by dropping steel I-beams and nine hundred tons of rock from a barge.

The river was down to 29.5 feet by Saturday; 27.3 Sunday; and 24.3, Monday. The Dutch boys of 1952 took their fingers from the dike and went home. The evacuees returned under precautions. Inspectors found gas in 20 per cent of the houses because pipes had not been capped properly after detaching stoves and refrigerators.

Now there was time for the two cities to look back. Thirty-five thousand persons had moved out of their homes and back with no injury and almost no damage to possessions. No home had been entered by water or pestilence and only two by looters. Except for one traffic injury in Omaha, there had been no major accidents. It was the biggest dry run in the brief history of civil defense. Russell A. Hand, who handled manpower in Omaha, said, "We have shown that we don't need to be afraid of Stalin or anyone else."

The earth levees were intact. The floodwall was bent one and one-half inches but returned to its original position.

Only one wall was breached. In Council Bluffs there had been sectional feeling between the flatlands and the hills. Now they knew each other. Said Leo Meyerson, "This flood is the finest thing that ever happened to Council Bluffs." Item: whereas the Chamber of Commerce raised \$22,000 for operations in 1951, the 1952 goal of \$35,000 was exceeded by \$5,000. Item: a railroad man told of having come across two of his neighbors on the levee who had not spoken for five years. One was holding a sandbag, the other filling. Item: Chris Christensen returned to his old job as pound master.

Mayor Mulqueen pondered all this in studying the deliverance of his city. He noted, too, that though April is a time of heavy thunderstorms with thirty to forty mile gusts of wind, which would have augmented the snow melt and created waves to cut and undermine the top of the levee, there had been none, just light drizzle and soft airs from the south. Floating trees, houses, piling, tanks and telephone poles which could have produced scouring and cutting of the levees or smashed the flashboard stayed in mid-channel.

On April 25, the mayor proclaimed the end of the emergency, set aside April 26 and April 27 as "days of prayerful thanksgiving," and urged the people to attend their churches. He said, "For man did not win this mighty battle against the forces of nature alone, but only with the help of divine guidance."

Eighteen months later only the flashboard, not yet removed from the floodwall, and occasional rotting sandbags remained as relics of the great effort. The wounds of the fight, deep erosion gashes on the river side of the levees and truck ruts on top, were healed without a scar, filled and covered with new grass—an operation equivalent to reseeding one hundred acres. A crushed rock roadway, ten feet wide and twenty-three miles long, was being made on top of the levees, in case trucks should have to roll again in time of peril. The Omaha levee had been raised one-half foot for eight miles. Sewer breaks and leaks had been repaired. The badly battered relief well system was being re-

stored and expanded. The last of the rehabilitation would be finished in the spring of 1954.

In July, 1953, Omaha Civil Defense Director Reynolds received a Freedoms Foundation Medallion at the hands of President Eisenhower for his work in the flood. The era of community good feeling and the co-operation between Omaha and Council Bluffs continues.

Above and below the two cities the fifty thousand who fled their homes in 120 towns and on two million acres of farmland have repaired their damage, and much of the land has been reclaimed. Closure of the dam at Fort Randall, South Dakota, was made three months after the flood, providing substantial insurance against new dangers. This safety factor was increased last May with the closure of the larger Garrison Dam in North Dakota. They will take six to seven feet from an upriver crest.

The big dams, of course, do not protect against flooding by local tributaries below Fort Randall. The flash flood on the ninety-eight mile Floyd River in Iowa in 1953 killed fourteen persons at Sioux City, though no life was lost in the record flood of the Missouri in 1952.