

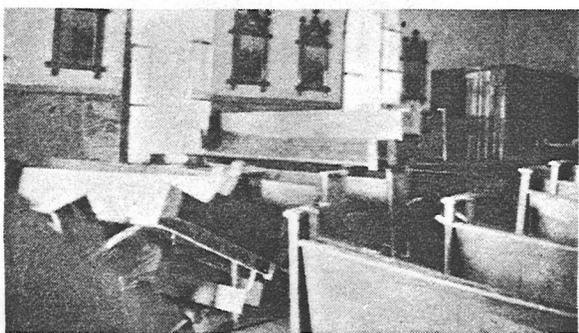
Submitted by Rose Ann Reagan, Stratton, Nebr. (1982)

# NEBRASKA'S TWIN DISASTERS



AT SUPERIOR THE MAD RUSH OF WATER BROKE DOWN THE BRIDGE, WRECKING MANY HOMES, FLOODING FARMS AND RUINING YOUNG CROPS

"GRASS Roots" is become a familiar expression these days, but in the great State of Nebraska during the past four years there were few roots of any kind because of the prolonged drought. We do not mean to imply that Nebraska is a State where extremes play havoc with men and beasts and vegetation, but we have evidence that the lack of rain, drying up everything growable, was succeeded recently by such torrents of rain that thirteen counties—about one-third of the Diocese



THE CHURCH AT RIVERTON WAS MOVED ENTIRELY OFF ITS FOUNDATIONS AND THE FRONT COLLAPSED

of Lincoln—were flooded.

As lives were lost in the turbulent rivers, as cattle drowned in the inundation that swept away homes and barns, as debris clogged natural outlets for the flow, the accumulated waters forced men to high ground to preserve their lives. As the waters swirled, carrying much in their vortexes, the loss of life was high and that of property was in the millions. Just as people gained vantage points and shivered in their wet clothes, desolation was increased by a tornado that swept across the flood drenched prairies. Immediately



AT CAMBRIDGE MEN WORKED ALL NIGHT, RESCUING PEOPLE FROM THE ROOFS OF THEIR HOMES

by Rt. Rev. Msgr. E. J. McGuinness, Ph.D.

*Big Flood of May 31, 1935*

relief agencies, government, state, local, were organized to meet the dire need created by the twin disasters, and though fervid, spontaneous efforts were made to meet the unexpected, the unforeseen, the appalling emergency, the real constructive work of rehabilitation will take many months. Red Cross nurses hurried to the scene, trucks laden with medical supplies and food were ordered as near the devastated sections as possible, everyone able to work, from CCC camps and elsewhere, were rushed to provide homes for the thousands exposed to the piercing winds that followed the destruction by the flood waters. Clothing, food, etc., were rationed out to those who lost all, while relatives and friends motored to the scene to bring the victims to their homes. The dead at this writing is in excess of 185 and few were recognizable because of the buffeting received in the swirling, refuse clogged waters.

OVER and above these losses, the bishop was further depressed by the reports which came to him from the priests who escaped from the maddening waters. In one county alone there is a reported loss of 120 because here the mountain stream rose six feet in as many hours, leaving three-fifths of the countryside homeless. The water in the church of Riverton reached up to the Stations of the Cross, and shortly after the removal of the Blessed Sacrament—the building having collapsed—it was forced by the waters down to the river. The foundations alone remain and its rebuilding will cost \$8,000. The Extension Society sent at once the vestments, linens, etc., for Mass, but unless you come to the aid of this stricken parish, the snow of winters will have vanished before they have a new church.

The church in Cambridge is a total wreck and \$5,000 are needed to replace it. In Benkelman the tornado got its innings by partially destroying the beautiful church, but most of it is safe to repair. The people here were particularly affected by loss of property and cattle. In Indianola the water reached the top steps leading to the church, making the basement a pool. Straat is under water, as are Alma, Oxford, Orleans, Arapahoe, Palisade and many smaller localities. The people are the ones most affected by these disorders and they will be objects of sympathy and charity for a long time. Though the two churches must be rebuilt and many others must be repaired, the priests somehow will get along in temporary quarters or the partially demolished buildings until we can see our way clear to send the money. The good people, anxious though they are to aid, are beyond the possibility of it because every penny they can get together

must go for the repair of their own premises. Consequently, one-third of the Diocese of Lincoln is at the mercy of you in the populous or the unaffected areas, and we earnestly hope that your charity will embrace this opportunity of doing good.

RAILROAD men tell me that the twenty miles of track that was wrenched from its bedding and hurled in a twisted mass on the wayside, will



THESE PICTURES OF WRECKED HOMES WERE TAKEN WITHIN A QUARTER OF A MILE FROM THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN CAMBRIDGE

cost \$100,000 a mile to replace. That will give you an idea of the ravages wrought throughout the thirteen counties and the destruction of personal property the people endure.

Letters are before us from some of the priests located in the devastated area, and you will get a better idea of the doleful situation by reading them:

"In Riverton all homes on the south side were affected. The Blessed Sacrament was reserved  
(Continued on page 39)

and the breaking of Curtis dam, was half a mile wide and flooded the northern part of Cambridge; the Republican river was over two miles wide. Sixty per cent of Cambridge was under water; most people spent the night in the cemetery, the highest ground around town and the only road open which leads to the river bluffs. Cattle, hogs, debris, railroad ties came floating in our church yard. Sheds of all kinds and wrecked equipment that had been wrecked landed against buildings that were more solidly built. Of the eighty some homes south of the tracks only 11 remained on their foundations; some moved a quarter of a mile or more; all are damaged badly, and a great number have been completely wrecked.

"120 persons were trapped in their homes; young men rode rafts all night north of the railroad tracks and rescued people stranded on housetops. None of the 76 south of the tracks could be rescued that evening; some were lodged in trees, others on roofs. They were rescued the following day; three lives were lost, one of them being Catholic. We were very fortunate indeed that the wall of water did not strike us during the night; several families who gathered in the best built homes after they saw themselves encircled by water, soon saw their homes collapse.

"Now that traffic east and west has been opened, reports reaching our town were that Cambridge was the hardest hit town in the valley. Damage to homes in the north part of town by the Medicine creek, south and west by the Republican river runs into six figures.

"People had to give up their cherished possessions; rugs were covered with from half a foot to two feet of mud; clothes and furniture that was not swept through the broken windows fell to pieces.

"Completely isolated for three days, we tried to help ourselves and each other; four persons stayed at the rectory after the water had receded around the church property; thirty-five were sent to the hospital, many of them in critical condition from exposure.

"Thirty-nine families suffered from the flood; six homes almost completely destroyed; about 75 head of cattle drowned; five to six hundred acres of good bottom land completely ruined; new river channel runs through their land, damage to wheat, etc.

"Also damage to church, a few small cracks in the church caused by flooded basement, two electric fans for furnace and furnace also damaged, damage in the rectory basement.

"No train will reach us for several days to come. Cambridge is located on the main Burlington Route between Omaha and Denver.

"Our Altar Society helped feed the homeless before the Red Cross could reach us. The day before yesterday 200 CCC men reached Cambridge through a number of detours, and it seems like things are going to brighten up some."

Arapahoe and missions: "The parish of Arapahoe and its mission, Oxford, stretch along the Repub-

lican river for a distance of over thirty miles, including the towns of Holbrook and Edison. After investigation extending over two weeks, we have come to a realization of the havoc wrought and the great damage done in this section of the flooded area.

Journeying through the land stretching for a mile or more on each side of the river, there is nothing but a waste of mud and sand where once the fertile farm lands were covered with barley, wheat and alfalfa. The fields where the farmers were expecting to plant their corn have been rendered useless for this year at least, and possibly for many years to come by the sand washed over them from the river bottom. The herds of cattle that grazed here before the flood have been, for the most part, carried away. The few that are left find their pastures gone. There is no more for them in the waste of mud than they would find in the heart of the Mohave Desert. Many of the farmers were depending on the milk and butter of these herds to provide food and clothes and the daily necessities of life, and now they have to send away the few surviving cattle, sometimes long distances into the uplands, paying for their patronage. In most cases the hogs have gone in the flood waters and, all in all, the outlook for the farmers in this locality is a very depressing one.

"The devastation among the farm homes, their barns, hog pens and various other buildings has been appalling. Most of them have been swept away entirely and the few that are left have been badly wrecked, and filled with mud from four to eight feet deep.

"In all the thirty-mile stretch of the combined parishes of Arapahoe and Oxford the land south of the river has been cut off almost entirely from the north. The road and bridges going south from Arapahoe are an impassable mass of wreckage, gullies washed out in the road for a stretch of nearly three miles, with here and there new channels of the river passing through, the bridges over Muddy Creek and the Republican River are wrecked and twisted masses of concrete and steel. More than half of the congregation of the parish are cut off and will remain cut off from the church for the greater part of the year to come. The priest, to visit the sick in the area south of the river, must climb through the debris that was a road, and cross the channels of the creek and river on suspensions of

hog wire with planking laid across them.

"Immediately after the subsiding of the flood waters a spirit of neighborliness brought help and the necessities of life, but this will not continue indefinitely and those interviewed express serious concern over the problem of obtaining food and clothes for themselves and their children."

Benkelman: "Once green pastures are now eyesores and blots on the landscape. They are mud flats, devoid of all vegetation and impossible of reclamation for many years to come. The loss in live stock has not yet been estimated, but all able-bodied men in the area spent several days burying the carcasses of horses, cows and swine left behind by the raging torrent. Many houses, though not destroyed, were flooded so that the furniture and personal effects of the residents were totally ruined.

"Bridges, highways and railroad tracks in many places have disappeared so that travel is extremely difficult. Roads, once wide and smooth, are now mere trails and very rough.

"The greatest disaster of all was the loss of human life. In this district alone, thirteen bodies have been recovered and seven persons are still among the missing. Probably their bodies will never be found."

Alma: "The moan or sullen roar of the river was heard a mile away. One wall of water after another rolled down the serene valley, churned, tossed and tore through fences, trees, houses and barns. It buckled bridges and laid them prostrate, it crawled under railroad embankments and set the ribboned rails on their edge. With fiendish and high glee it rushed down upon its victims, first spattering them with debris, then flinging them to the ground and finally carrying them struggling to the wire fences and trees or burying them in the churning sands. Receding, it left its cruel marks on the valley floor. The once rich fields are now covered, dead cattle, hogs and horses, great trees uprooted or bent to the ground, fences stretched, scattered or buried, ditches and deep holes in the fields, once fertile farms and now islands, greet the eye and the workers who are cleaning the fields."

Trenton: "It was impossible to determine the extent of the damage done to the church. Because of the way the building is constructed, it will be

necessary to rip up portions of the floor to see the damage done to the supporting beams. The floor is intact and usable, but the boards have spread considerably. I am afraid that it will be necessary to put in a new floor. The building is some forty years old and, since this makes the third time that it has been under water in three years, it is imperative that repairs be made. The outside of the building received a very heavy coating of black mud to a height of about three feet.

"Most of the parishioners who live on the south side of the river have been unable to get to Mass at all. The only way that they can get across the river is on narrow planking. Because of this, it is necessary for them to drive to Kansas to go to Mass on Sundays. It will be some time before another bridge is built, and it may be months before all the parishioners can attend Mass at Trenton. Two-thirds of the congregation come from that section, so you can realize what that means."

Action was taken immediately by the zealous Bishop Kucera, who requested that a collection be taken up in every parish outside the stricken territory. Moreover, a request was made to the bishops throughout the country, and now Extension asks that as many as possible join the helpers of these afflicted people. Small or large, your co-operation will be received with gratitude, and the pleas, as you see, are imperative.

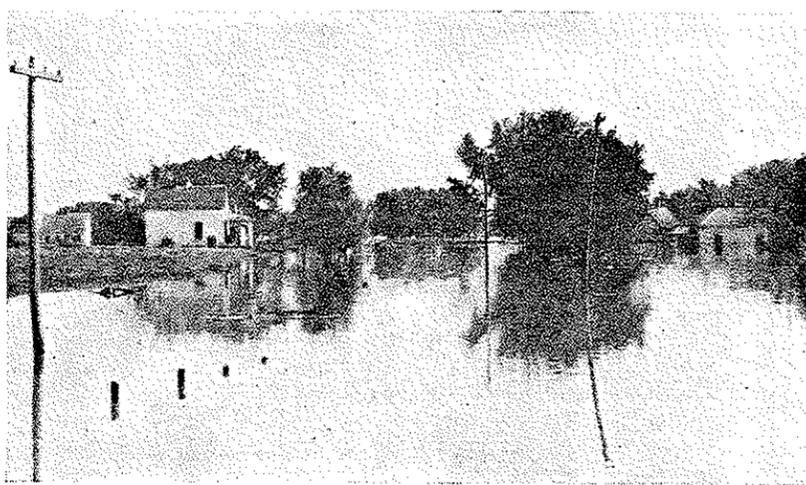
"The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

#### Prompt Action Merits Gratitude

"AS pastor of the good people of Saint James Church at Trenton, Nebraska, I wish to take this opportunity to thank you for the personal interest that you have taken in them. In their name I desire to thank you for the gift of vestments and altar linens. These good people, who have suffered much in the last few years, will not forget the good that Extension has done for their Church in these trying times. When good times return for them, you may be certain that they will be as generous to Extension as Extension has been to them. If at that time I have the care of these good people, I will see to it that they do not forget their benefactors.

"For years I have read of the wonderful work of the Extension Society through the pages of its publication, but little did I realize that I would one day have the care of a church that would be the object of its benefaction. In the past I have spoken in many parishes in the eastern part of the country on behalf of Extension. I realize now that I never said half enough in its favor, but in the future I will be one of its greatest boosters.

"As yet I have not had the opportunity to make known to the people of Trenton the gift of these vestments from Extension. As you may know, Trenton was flooded again last Sunday and it is impossible to get to the town. If I can get to them for Mass on Sunday, I will ask them to pray for the work of Extension and for its patrons." *End*



## Nebraska's Twin Disasters

*Big Flood of 5-31-'35* [CONTINUED FROM PAGE 20]

here as it is the largest of my three missions in point of parishioners. The Blessed Sacrament was saved as were a few articles of furniture, but the water came so fast and swiftly that one had no time to lose. The church was moved entirely off of its foundations and the front collapsed; the pews were stacked every way and many broken; the statues were found at the entrance door; the altar collapsed; the vestment case and contents are completely destroyed. The water was 6½ feet high in the church. Thank God, none of my people lost their lives, but some had narrow escapes. A young lad was caught driving cattle from the river bottom. The horse he was riding outran the flood and carried him to safety."

Superior: "About the 'dead hour'

of night a wall of water, twelve feet high, hurled itself with an ominous and terrible roar against the bridge a little west of Superior. Fortunately, the span held but the devouring flood dug a new channel, spreading the wild waters over a large territory, sweeping away homes, outbuildings, machinery and livestock. Where a short time before were happy homes, cultivated farms and young crops, now only water. The expression on the faces of many of the sufferers would draw tears from a stone. It will take from six months to a year for them to recover from the physical and mental shock."

Cambridge: "It was the most heartbreaking happening in the fifty-year old town of 1,200 people. People running from their homes or com-

ing out of their homes on improvised rafts, leaving behind them everything they owned in the world to be at the mercy of a rampaging river which rose six feet in fifteen minutes. A number of our people are left penniless and without homes. People who worked hard for years to have a home of their own saw all their efforts wiped away in a few moments. As the water filled the basements of church and rectory, people kept passing by, wading through the high water. Never since 1914, when the German armies invaded my home town in Belgium, have I witnessed a greater disorder; people were panic stricken, tears rolled down the cheeks of the most brave men in town. Two floods struck here at the same time; the Medicine, a creek of over a hundred miles, swollen by a six inch rain

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