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2022 - Weather in the Flint Hills

They Survived the '51 Flood

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Recommended Citation

Thompson, Neil and Dawson, Norman (2022) "They Survived the '51 Flood," Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal.

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The Field Journals are made possible in part with funding from the Fred C. and Mary R. Koch Foundation.

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Flood Disaster (Homecoming—Kaw Valley), 1951

Thomas Hart Benton

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THEY SURVIVED THE '51 FLOOD

The great flood of 1951 devastated many homes and communities in Kansas, including Chase County. These firsthand accounts written by native Chase Countians have been edited for clarity.

NEIL THOMPSON

In July 1951, the rains came to Chase County in amounts we had never seen before.

I was living on the farm east of Cottonwood Falls with Mother and Dad between semesters at the University of Kansas. Warren, my brother, was living with his wife, Wilma, and his daughter Vicki near Lake Kahola. My sister, Sharon, was at a Methodist camp in Baldwin.

Our home was built on what we thought to be high ground. We never imagined it would be a victim of flooding. It was not uncommon for flood waters to rise within 5 or 6 feet of the house, and water would periodically flood the barn and some livestock buildings. We sometimes took the cattle and hogs to higher ground on the neighboring Frey ranch when it appeared they might be in danger.

In 1951, the flood waters rose higher than predicted, and it was too late to take

the livestock to safety. This didn't concern us because we thought the flood would not be life-threatening.

However, the night of July 6, when flood waters were peaking, it rained an additional 11 inches. This was devastating. As the water rose higher and higher than we had ever seen, we released the livestock from their pens and prayed they would find safety. We did not see them again.

As the water crept closer to the house, Dad and I emptied the basement of anything the water would hurt. Most of this was stored in a breezeway off the kitchen.

But the water kept rising. We finally realized it would get into the house.

All roads away from the house to higher ground were now impassable, even by tractor. We knew we would have to stay with the house until the water went down. Mother emptied the refrigerator and pantry, and we took what food there was to the attic of our one-story home.

Dad and I lifted what furniture, rugs and clothing we could into the attic through an access door no more than 3 feet by 3 feet. This included Mother's pride and joy sewing machine. However, Mother's true pride and joy, the new piano, couldn't go to the attic. Somehow, Dad and I lifted it onto the kitchen table. We felt it would be safe some 30 inches above the floor.

By this time, the water was about 4 inches deep in the house. The one thing of my own I recall moving to the attic was the navy blue suit I had just purchased to wear for my wedding on September 2.

Fortunately, Dad and I had floored part of the attic previously, so we did not have to walk or sit on rafters. When the water was about 12 inches deep on the first floor, we all climbed the ladder into what was to be our new home for the next two days and nights. This was not easy for Mother physically because she was quite heavy. Of course, mentally this was very hard for all of us.

The water continued to rise until it was 42 inches deep on the first floor. The new piano we had worked so hard to save was ruined.

The saddest part of the stay in the attic was to hear the crying of the farm animals that had been swept away upstream and had not yet drowned. The currents of the flood carried these animals past and within a few feet of us.

The most frightening thing was when trees, telephone poles, railroad ties and other debris would slam into the house. We were so fortunate that the collisions did not knock the house from its foundation.

After two days and nights, the Corp of Engineers came to rescue us from the attic. At first, Dad would not leave, and he felt it was too risky for Mother and me to go. After much discussion and pleading, we all managed to get into a small fishing boat. Dad was extremely concerned we could not fight the strong current.

The flood water was so deep that all fence posts were under water and even some utility poles. The advantage was that we did not need to follow the road but could go in a straight line toward higher ground near Cottonwood Falls, about 3 miles away. The disadvantage was that we did not know what poles might be barely covered and could foul our boat's propeller.

We made it safely!

After several days, we were able to return home to assess the damage. It was devastating. All livestock was missing, all crops were washed away and most everything in the house was ruined. The mud in the house was about a foot deep. We used wheat shovels to clean out the mud.

The greatest loss was to Dad's health. The flood ruined him financially. Within 60 days, he suffered another loss when Warren's wife, Wilma, died of polio while Shirley and I were on our honeymoon.

We believe the culmination of these tragedies was too much for Dad. He suffered a heart attack and was never again healthy. He died of another heart attack seven years later.

Neil Thompson's family home was about 3 miles east of Cottonwood Falls at the time of the 1951 flood. After the flood, the house was moved to Cottonwood Falls. It is still a residence today.

NORMAN DAWSON

Norman Dawson was 16 years old in the summer of 1951. In 2017, after watching coverage of devastating floods in Texas and Florida, Norman wrote to his grandchildren about the '51 flood.

Dear grandkids,

The media have been showing the catastrophic damage in Texas and Florida. When I see these reports, I think about my personal experiences in Elmdale during the great flood in 1951. For this reason, I am writing an account of how my small hometown suffered then.

At the time of the '51 flood, I had just finished my junior year at Elmdale High

School and was working at Camp Wood, located 2 miles south of Elmdale. Camp Wood sits on a hill, so there were no problems with flooding.

Before electricity and telephone lines went out, my dad called and said he needed some help in Elmdale. By then, the Cottonwood River, Middle Creek and Diamond Creek were all flooded. The water was over the highway and the railroad tracks, and it was actually bluff to bluff. Dad had a small flat-bottom boat with a five-horse gas engine. He was evacuating people out of Elmdale with this boat and taking them to a hill west of town.

The only way for me to get to Elmdale was by boat, so I used a canoe from Camp Wood. My first problem was to get across the river. I chose to wade across the bridge with the canoe in tow. The water was waist high. After crossing, I climbed into my canoe and headed toward Elmdale.

My next problem was how I would stop when I reached town because of the swift current. I was able to stop at our house and tied the canoe to the front doorknob.

Dad was there, but my mom, my three sisters and a little brother had gone to Clover Cliff Ranch, which is located on a hill south of town.

Dad was putting our furniture up as high as possible because we did not have an upstairs. We put the beds on

sawhorses and piled clothing and small items on top, but it wasn't high enough. The water inside was shoulder high (about 5 feet) and getting higher. Soon, the beds and other furniture started floating and then turned over in the water. What a mess! Flood water is very dirty with slimy mud.

Dad and my Uncle Bummie, along with a few others, were staying on the second floor of the high school, across the street from our house. Water was up to the second floor, so we tied Dad's boat to a second-story window. We stayed in the high school for two or three days until the water started receding. We ate food from the school lunch program — canned peaches, green beans, etc.

Dad liked to tell stories about removing people from their homes during the flood, usually from a second-story window, and taking them by boat to hills west of town. Many people wanted to stay in their homes, but when water reached the second floor, they were ready to go.

One elderly lady was in her upstairs bedroom. Back then, some women did not wear slacks or blue jeans, and she was wearing a dress. She was trying to get down the porch roof holding down her dress and keeping her shoes on. She was having a hell of a time. These were my Dad's words: "Sit on your ass, slide down the roof and get in this boat! We are having a flood!" We finally got her into the boat, over the

railroad tracks, over the highway and to a hill west of town. Farmers and ranchers were taking Elmdale people to their homes to stay until the flood receded.

Weather events such as the 1951 flood caused many hardships for people. Most Elmdale residents, including Mom and Dad, did not have much money, and it took many years to recover and replace what was lost. Prior to 1951, Main Street in Elmdale had several businesses: two grocery stores, a gas station, a hardware store, a pool hall, the bank (where my dad was president) and a post office. The hardware store, one of the grocery stores and the pool hall never reopened after the flood. Before long, the only businesses left were Bummie's grocery store, the bank and the post office.

Love, Grandpa

P.S. The flood water was shoulder high inside the bank. All bank customer records were underwater. Some of Dad's friends in a KC bank came and took all soggy records to KC, dried them out and reconstructed his books. All safe deposit boxes were full of mud and water. The boxes could not be opened unless the customer's key and the bank key were used. All customers mailed their keys, so we opened the boxes, dumped the water and made an inventory of contents. Dried them out. ... Mailed the contents and key back to the customer. Not one complaint that there was anything missing. That would not happen today.



Flood Brush
Clive Fullagar