



# Levee Break

## The 1927 Mississippi River Flood

**"The people of the Mississippi Delta fear God and the Mississippi River."**

David Cohn, *God Shakes Creation*, 1935



*The raging, muddy water of the Mississippi River consumed everything in its path, making tiny islands of Indian Mounds, levee tops and a few roof lines.*



*This crevasse in the levee shows just how powerful the Mississippi River could be.*



*A narrow strip of grass separated residents from the homes they once knew and the tents they now called home.*

## There She Goes!

The morning of April 21, 1927 began like most others. Children were getting ready for school. Men headed off to work while women began the day's chores. The ground was wet, saturated from endless rain over the past several days, weeks and months. The fall and winter of 1926 had been especially wet with heavy rainfall over the entire Mississippi River Valley.

The residents of the Delta were used to high water. When you lived along the banks of the mightiest river in the country like Greenville did, flooding occurred, and often.

For days, citizens of the Port City had been paying close attention to the rising river, to rain forecasts and rain totals in the upper Mississippi and Ohio River valleys. They had heard of levee breaches north of Memphis. The fear of it happening to their town was real.

On Thursday morning, April 21, approximately 1,500 men worked tirelessly to keep the river at bay. At 7:45 a.m., just as the day was truly getting started, that battle was lost as the flood waters of the Mississippi River broke through the levee at Stopps Landing, about 18 miles north of Greenville. The last words spoken just before the levee breeched – "There she goes!" Suddenly, April 21 took on a new, life-changing meaning.

The fire siren sounded, alerting everyone that the unthinkable had happened. In Winterville, the Payne family was preparing to send their children off to school. As young Billy and Tut walked down the long driveway, someone in a car pulled



*While thousands of farm animals were lost, some cows managed to get to higher ground, where they would stay for days.*

in, quickly telling the young boys there would be no school today, the levee had broken and to get home as quickly as possible. Furniture was moved upstairs, the cow was tied on the back porch and the boat, normally stored under the house, was brought out into the yard and anchored where it could be reached at a moment's notice.

Farm workers in the area of the break made a beeline for the highest, safest spot on the plantation. One worker tells the story of having to literally outrun the water to get to a safe place. Livestock took refuge atop the Winterville Indian Mounds. Homes were destroyed or washed away. The countryside became the river. And the slow trickle towards town was underway.

Special trains ran so folks could "head to the hills" or any place safe.

Kindergarten teacher Helen Patterson Williams was expecting her first child, Josephine Elizabeth, when she got word of the crevasse. While her husband

remained to help any way he could, Helen eventually hopped on the last train out of Greenville, heading to her hometown of McComb and dry ground.

Folks who had nowhere to go ran to the top of the levee. Those in homes with second floors moved upstairs. The Washington County Courthouse became a refuge for about 800 flood victims, as did Greenville High School (now E.E. Bass Cultural Arts Center). Cars were parked on porches

A family is stranded on a levee, making do until help arrives.



Tent cities were set up along the levee top in Greenville, giving those flooded out of their homes a place to stay until the waters receded.



Young boys were in awe of the event taking place around them while men and women gathered at the Goyer Company to discuss the devastation. The building also became a temporary parking garage.

and boats tied to porch posts. It took a few hours for the water to reach Greenville. It wasn't until early the next morning that the flood water began to fill the gutters, a slow trickle at first, then quickly filling up and spilling out into the street, consuming yards, porches and entire first floors of buildings. The water was dirty, filled with bugs and crawfish, snakes and eels. There was nothing to stop it. It rose steadily for a week. Practically every business in downtown Greenville was flooded along with about 80% of the homes.

Refugee camps were established on the levee. While a great number of residents did leave, others stayed behind to help any way they could. Elevated walkways were built across the street between stores giving residents the opportunity to purchase needed supplies.

With flood water up to ten feet deep across the Delta, residents pulled together to survive. The local newspaper, *The Daily Democrat Times*, missed only one edition. For the next several days, the printers sloshed around in knee-deep water, set the type by hand and got the single sheet editions out. The banks were only closed for two days. The water didn't begin to fall until early May. But the city council, in a show of community spirit, voted on May 25, 1927 to invite the American Legion to hold their state convention in Greenville in mid-July.

It was late June before the water receded completely, just weeks prior to the convention. Thousands of dead animals and a thick layer of mud were left in the water's wake. But when the Legionnaires arrived, the city of Greenville was clean and open for business.

Until Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005, the Mississippi River Flood of 1927 was the greatest natural disaster in our nation's history. As a major result of the flood, which impacted eleven states, the National Flood Control Act of 1928 was passed by Congress. That Act is still in place today.

## 1927 Flood by the Numbers

Population affected	185,495
Estimated deaths	1,000
Dislocated residents	637,000
Homes flooded	162,000
Buildings destroyed	41,000
Buildings damaged	62,089
Red Cross camps	154
Livestock/Farm animals lost	308,235
Acres flooded in 7 states	16.5 million
Crop losses	\$102 million

An entire crop year was lost.



The Queen City of the Delta proved she was worthy of the title when the American Legion held their state convention here just three months after the river flooded the town.



While trains had to suspend operation for a while due to high water, high ground around the depot became a safe haven for automobiles.



A makeshift boardwalk was constructed across the water, connecting one side of Washington Avenue at the U.S. Post Office with the other side of the street.



Some folks even found a way to jack up their cars so they could still be used without getting any part of the car in the water except the tires.

Water completely surrounded every business in downtown Greenville.



*The intersection of Broadway and Central Streets became the river, passable only by boat.*



*Businesses such as The Fair did the best they could while the water was high. Many stores sold necessary items from the second floor windows. A horse-drawn wagon had a tough go of it in the high water.*



*The Methodist Church stands vigil over a flooded downtown while water laps at its steps.*



*The once bustling downtown Greenville became silent for a few days as water flooded the streets. Then, merchants found ways to get their goods to their customers.*



*St. Joseph Catholic Church was surrounded by water, but it never actually got into the church.*



Damage left by the high water.



A Greenville woman goes through her belongings, salvaging all that is left after the flood waters raced through her home.

For more information about the 1927 Mississippi River Flood please consider the following sources:

#### Books

*Rising Tide* by John Berry

*Deep'n as It Come: The 1927 Mississippi River Flood* by Pete Daniel

#### DVDs

*The Great Flood* by Bill Morrison

*When Weather Changed History: The Great Mississippi Flood* by Towers Productions

*Fatal Flood* by PBS

#### Visit

1927 Flood Museum

118 South Hinds Street

Greenville, Mississippi 38701

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To see additional memorabilia and film, visit the  
1927 Flood Museum at 118 S. Hinds Street in Greenville, Mississippi.  
To schedule a tour, phone 901.652.1390 or 662.347.2782.