

Morehead Memories (People and Places)

The Flood

By Jack D. Ellis

"The rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell, and great was the fall of it." (Matthew 7:27)

During the past year (1998), and MSU Oral History class interviewed 32 individuals who were survivors of the 1939 flood, or who had memories of that tragic event. They did a thor-

ough job, and even transcribed the interviews. (This writer and his wife were among those interviewed.)

After reviewing the transcripts of many that were interviewed, I searched for more information. Also, I personally talked to 10 that were not interviewed, as well as relying upon my own memory. This account, on the 60th anniversary of that tragic night, is presented as a memorial to the 25 Rowan residents who drowned in The Flood

of 1939.

July 4th 1939 — a night remembered

Ask most Moreheadians, alive at that time, where they were the night of July 4, 1939, and they will readily remember. Just as they remember where they were when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, and where they were the day President Kennedy was killed, old-time Morehead residents remember sadly July 4, 1939. It was a night that will remain firmly embedded in their psyche as long as they live. That was the night of The Flood. No, not the Biblical flood that Noah (and family) survived in their ark, but the flash flood that devastated Morehead and much of Rowan County. It resulted in 25 deaths, and \$2,000,000 in property damage. (Estimates ranged from \$2,000,000 to \$5,000,000). That terrible tragedy ended a gala Fourth of July celebration in Morehead that began July 2.

Movie titles a strange coincidence

Morehead's new Trail Theater announced some very prophetic movie titles scheduled to be shown that week. Those titles included: Saturday: "Doomed at Sundown," starring Bob Steele (25 citizens were

doomed that night and never saw the dawn of another day); Thursday-Friday: "Water Rustlers," starring Dorothy Page, (water not only "rustled" but roared down our valley that night); 2nd Monday-Tuesday: "They Won't Forget," starring Claude Rains, (most Moreheadians won't forget the rains that fell that fateful night).

July 4th celebration planned

A gigantic gala celebration was planned the 4th of July, 1939 by the American Legion's Corbie Ellington Post 126. Dr. H.L. Nickell, Local physician, Legion Post Commander, and WW I veteran, said, "It would be the largest 4th of July celebration that Morehead had ever seen." As Moreheadians struggled to overcome the Depression, the planned celebration had the full support of the Morehead business community. That included: The Lee Clay Tile Company, L.P. Haldeman Company, Economy Store, Big Store, C&O Cafe, Imperial Cleaners, Consolidated Hardware Store, Nehi Bottling Company, Jack West, Perry Motor Company and Midland Trail Garage.

The city was decorated with flags, bunting, and ribbons by professional decorators. The celebration officially got underway with a parade at 10 a.m. July 4th. The parade included an American Legion Honor Guard, two drum and bugle corps bands, floats, clowns, monkeys and other acts from the C. F. Sparks Carnival in town for the week-long celebration. The parade began at MSC's Jayne Stadium, and marched west down Main Street, then south on Trumbo Avenue, west on First Street (Railroad), then North on South Wilson (Fairbanks) Avenue. Then the parade marched east on Main Street and back to Jayne Stadium.

July 4th parade and contests

Following the parade there were many events and contests scheduled including a cracker eating contest, hog calling contest, ugly man and beautiful woman contests, and a greasy pig contest. Clifford Barker caught the greasy pig, and won that contest. (The winner of the other contests is unknown.) At 3 p.m., a special "drawing" was held by the merchants as they gave \$50 to two individuals holding the lucky tickets. At 8 p.m., another drawing was held as the American Legion raffled off a new 1939 Chevrolet. (Value \$700.) The lucky winner of the new car was Bath County resident, Mr. Lacy Parks. He had bought two 25 cent tickets and drove the new car home. At 9:30 that night fireworks were scheduled at Jayne Stadium. Also scheduled to appear were the

famous county singers, the Carter Family, and also Miss America was scheduled to appear. (Sponsored by Lee Clay Tile Company.)

Carnival brought bright lights

Small Town USA is a concept, an ideal, fondly revered and fondly remembered by most Americans who lived through at least half of this century. In small town USA during the depression years, the arrival of a carnival in town was an exciting event. That was especially true in "small town" Morehead in the depression doldrums of the summer of 1939. However, on Sunday afternoon, July 2nd of that year, Morehead came alive with excitement as the trucks transporting the animals, rides, games, tents, and carnival people arrived in Morehead.

As they passed this writer's home on U.S. 60 west, I jumped on my bicycle and rode to my

friend, Meredith Mynhier's home, and he, his younger sister, Janet, and I rode our bikes to what was know as the "Show Lot." It was an open field located at the end of South Hargis Avenue adjacent to the railroad tracks. (It was a dead end street then). That was where the carnival and circus shows set up at that time. My friend and I hoped to get a job helping "set up" the carnival, and get free passes for the rides. However, we were too young and too small, so we just watched excitedly and walked around. As we wandered around, Janet, Meredith's sister, got too close to the monkeys, and one of the jumped on her back and bit her on the shoulder. Unconcerned about her monkey bite, we left, trying to figure out how we could come up with the cash needed to get into the carnival when it opened the next night.

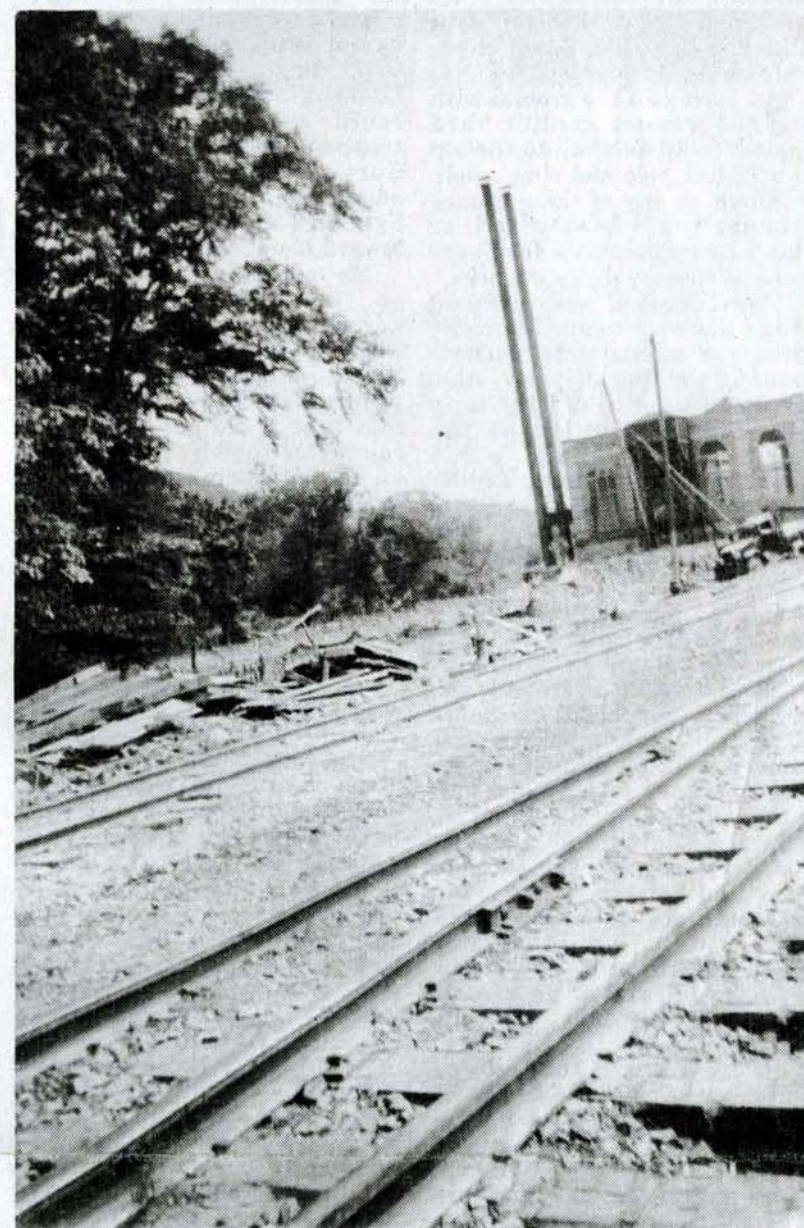
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Looking out over Triplett Valley during the flash flood of 1939. Scene is from U.S. 60 near where you go up into Lakeview Heights.



Standing in front of the present Folk Art Center looking North on South Wilson Ave. You can see the destructive force of the 1939 Morehead flash flood. Right: the Imperial Cleaners (owned by John W. Holbrook Sr.) was washed three blocks and deposited in the middle of the street. Left: shows flood debris deposited in front of Noah Halls Feed Store located on the present site of the Morehead Utility Plant Board.



Kentucky Utilities Morehead coal fired electrical generating plant washed out at 2 a.m. July 5, 1939 under 12 feet of water. It was located on the creek bank near the present site of Old Towne on the bypass.



J. F. Sparks Shows at Morehead after the 1939 July 4th Flood that completely destroyed the carnival.



These various household items were deposited by the raging waters of the flash flood that struck Morehead July 4, 1939. (Scene is near the old freight depot on R.R. Street (Now 1st Street)).

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ing plant washed out at 2 a.m. July 5, 1939 under 12 feet of water. It was located on the creek bank near the present site of Olde Towne on the bypass.



Ica Caldwell and Ira Caudill photo
Looking out over Triplett Valley during the 1939 Flood. Shows the Railroad (right) still above the water. Scene is on West U.S. 60.



The body of this young woman, one of 25 victims of the 1939 flash flood in Morehead, was brought to the Ferguson Funeral Home for identification. Many of the bodies were placed on the lawn for the grisly task of identification by relatives.

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Carnival excitement begins

The carnival that opened Monday, July 3, 1939, in Morehead was more than just a carnival. It was billed as the J. F. Sparks Shows, featuring six thrilling new rides, seven exciting shows, and band, free acts, concessions, and fireworks each night. Even a local couple was scheduled to be married in an open wedding on the midway July 5 (that never happened because the midway was no longer there on July 5).

The carnival, bright lights, rides and shows attracted not only local residents, but people streamed in from a five-country area. The rides included the tilt-a-whirl, loop-the-loop, Farris wheel, merry-go-round, and many others. Games included ring toss (toss a small wooden hoop over a pin about 16 feet away), baseball toss (knocking down wooden milk bottles with baseball from a distance of 30 feet), and target shooting with .22 caliber rifles. Also, there were games of strength, eg: hitting a spring on the ground with a giant wooden mallet hard enough to drive a ball to the top of a 12 foot pole and ring a bell. Winning at any of these games brought you a kewpie doll, or small furry panda bear. There were never very many winners.

The carnival also offered stage shows, music, dancing girls, and animal acts, such as monkey's riding bicycles. Also for 5 cents you could get in to see what was billed as the world's largest snake, a 350 pound python. It was no wonder that with the carnival in town, Morehead was ablaze with excitement during the July 4th, 1939 celebration.

Baseball game preceded the rain

On the afternoon of July 4, 1939, this writer returned home on west U.S. 60, about five houses west of the Freewill Baptist Church. The parade was over, and I planned to play baseball with my friends in the vacant lot near the abandoned ironing board factory. It was located behind my house adjacent to the railroad tracks. About 3 p.m., 10 or 12 of us got a pickup game going. One of the boys was new to the neighborhood. He was 11-year-old Leon (I didn't know his last name).

He lived across the railroad and came over to play with us that day. (There was no organized baseball then, only choose up games.) I had the bat so I got to be one of the captains. In order to determine who got the first nick, I tossed the bat to the

other captain who caught it in one hand, and then we put each hand on top of the other's and the one with his hand on top of the bat got the first choice. We chose up sides and Leon was the last boy I selected. We played until about 6 p.m. when our mothers called us to supper. I remember Leon walking slowly back across the railroad to his humble home right next to the tracks.

Early to bed — early to rise

I could not go the carnival that night because my grandmother and cousin had arrived from Florida for a visit. It was a hot muggy night, and my cousin, Buddy Thompson, and I made us a pallet on the floor of our screened in back porch. We went to sleep around 10:30 p.m. (Central Standard Time). Rowan County was the eastern most county in Kentucky in Central Time Zone. Also, there was no such thing then as daylight savings time.

I was awakened about 2 a.m. by the continuous sounds of the shrill whistle of a freight train. Looking out my back porch I could see the engine had stopped after rounding Brady Curve. It was stopped almost adjacent to Leon's house, and its light was shining up the track toward Morehead.

My mother and dad came out on the back porch with a kerosene lamp because there was no electric power. They said there was a terrible flood and people were drowning. But at that time it did not seem to be raining extremely hard, however, the lightning was flashing continuously so that you could see clearly out over the valley toward Clearfield.

Sounds, sights, and screams of terror

I remember clearly hearing the roar of the water, as it swept its deadly path down stream. I could also hear the pitiful anguished cries of people in mortal terror. There were high pitch sounds of women and hoarse sounds of men as they screamed for help knowing they faced death at any moment. Some were in tree tops, some climbed on top of box cars, some were on stacks of lumber and some had gotten on top of their roof before the house was swept away by the tremendous force of the strong current. Others were screaming for loved ones and children whom they could not locate. As the lightning flashed, I could see houses as they floated silently, smoothly and dead-ly, like giant ice burgs I have seen in the North Atlantic. As the lightning flashed, I saw one

man on the roof top of a house floating down stream, holding on the chimney that still protruded grotesquely above the roof top. Those who were on the housetops were fairly safe unless the house hit a bridge or tree and broke up. Many did and the people drowned unless they were fortunate to swim to safety.

Lightening flashed continually

The lightening continued flashing rapidly like you would experience when you turned your overhead light switch on and off as rapidly as you could. You could see the brown muddy water was from hill to hill, and was roaring like the rapids above Niagara Falls. During that night we knew something terrible had happened to our town, but we did not realize just how tragic it actually was. But the sounds, the sights, and the sadness remained with those who lived through The Flood throughout their lifetime.

Writer's uncle and family survived on house top

Throughout the night of the Flood, my family was in no danger and the water just barely reached into our backyard. But throughout that night we were worried about my aunt and uncle and their family. (Julia, Buster and Don Day.) Their

home was just across Triplett Creek from Brady Curve. The water reached up in the attic of their home. They survived by first getting in the attic, then chopping a hole in their roof and there they survived the ordeal. The house was saved because of a giant elm tree just up stream in their yard, that split the force of the current. It enabled their house to stand when the others around them washed away.

Receding flood waters reveal grim discovery

The afternoon following the flood, after the waters had receded, search parties began searching through the mud and driftwood for bodies of those listed as missing. I followed along behind a group of CCC boys as they searched the area below Brady Curve near the old City Sewage Disposal Plant. There, they discovered a body lodged in a barbed wire fence and covered with mud and driftwood. It was Leon, the 11-year-old boy I had on my pickup baseball team less than 24 hours earlier. (Then I was glad I had chosen him on my team.)

Neighbors warned neighbors There were many individual acts of heroism that night. Many unselfishly risked their own lives as they attempted to warn others of the rising waters. Max-

ie Arnett, his mother and brothers, Joe and Scott, lived across the railroad next door to the Jesse Boggess family on Raine Street. (Presently across the bypass from the Rowan Water building.) Maxie stated in his interview that "he was awakened by Jesse Boggess pounding on his door and yelling for them to get out of their house." He gave Mr. Boggess credit for saving their lives as they barely got out of their house before it washed away. He went on to say, "I've often wondered if Jesse Boggess's mother, who drowned, might have been saved if he had not taken the time to awaken us." Also, there were other people on that street who were awakened by Mr. Boggess, or they probably would have

drowned.

Boggess family flood account

This writer contacted James Boggess, the only surviving child of the Boggess family to hear his account of The Flood. Jimmy, who was 11 years old at the time of the flood is now a successful Commercial Real Estate Broker, living in Miami Beach, Fla.

Jesse Lee Boggess married Ethel (Cornette) Boggess. They had five children: Harry, Earl Lee, Mary Olive, Ella Mae and James. In 1939, they lived in a two-story stately white house on Raine Street. It was located directly across the railroad track from the end of South Hargis Avenue. Jesse's mother lived two houses downstream from

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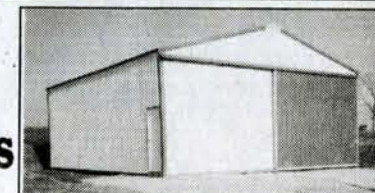
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his house in a modest one story house. Mr. Boggess looked after his 77-year-old mother. Mr. J. L. Boggess was a prominent member of the community and he was chairman of the School Board as well as a building contractor in Morehead.

House remodeling finished July 4th

July 4th, being a holiday, the Boggess family worked to put the finishing touches on a major remodeling of their home. That day they finished painting, papering, installing new carpet, getting new furniture, and hanging new drapes. They finished mowing the lawn about dark. But the children managed to cross the railroad tracks to attend the carnival. But when it started raining they came home and went to bed about 11 p.m.

The phone rang about 12 midnight. It was Clark Lane, one of the local funeral directors, (who also operated the ambulance service), asking Jesse to come to Mrs. Wood's Boarding House next door and help load one of the guests into the ambulance. It seems the guest had a heart attack.

Neighbor helping neighbor

Mr. Boggess dressed and helped Mr. Lane load the victim into the ambulance. By the time he returned home, it was raining so hard he said you had to put your hand over your nose in order to breathe, and the air was literally saturated with water, leaving very little oxygen. Also, by the time he got home the water had risen to his front porch and the the lightning was flashing continuously.

Family and car moved to high ground

Mr. Boggess ran into this house, and quickly he and Ethel got all the children out of bed. He told Ella Mae, his oldest daughter, to take their Packard touring car and drive it to higher ground. By the time they loaded in the car with a few belongings, the water was up to the running board of the car. Ella May drove the car to her Uncle Lindsay Caudill's house on Second Street where she woke them up saying there was a terrible flood, and they needed help.

Young Harry Boggess unable to save grandmother

Soon after the car drove off, the water began rising rapidly and the electricity went off. Mr. Boggess sent his oldest son, 18-

year-old Harry, to his mother's house two doors away to get her out, while he went around knocking on his neighbors door screaming get up, get out, there's a flood coming! Before Harry could get to his grandmother's house, a 4 foot wall of water came roaring down the valley sweeping him off of his feet. He said one minute he was wading in water knee deep, and the next minute he was swimming for his life. Harry was an excellent swimmer, but because of the force of the current, he could never reach his grandmother's house. Soon another 4 foot wave came roaring down the valley. With Harry swimming for his life, he soon found refuge in the top of a tree where he spent the night. His grandmother's house was washed away like a row boat tossed about in a pounding surf. The house broke into small pieces and Mrs. Minerva Boggess became one of the 25 victims of The Flood. Harry Boggess survived the longest night of his life, and was rescued the next morning. The Boggess family home was washed about 25 feet from its foundation, but it survived. The water reached to the ceiling on the first floor and the yellow muck and mud was 2 feet deep in the house. However, the family spent several days living with friends and relatives. Then they rented a house on West Main Street for several months. However, they eventually cleaned the mud out, and restored the house to a livable

condition. They remained in that house for another five years, before moving to Grayson. (But they always kept one eye on the weather most of the time.)

In 1939, the disastrous flood waters on First Street reached a depth of 6 to 8 feet. There is a tiny brass plate on the N.W. corner of the Passenger Depot (Tourism Center), marking the depth reached by the water in that flood. The next time you drive east on First Street, stop and look at that marker. It will give you an idea where the water level was in that flood.

**(More on the
flood next week)**



About the author

Dr. Jack D. Ellis is a retired Morehead State University Library director and a retired minister.