Morehead Memories (People and Places)

The Flood (Aftermath) Part III

By Jack D. Ellis

"It came all unexpected, many people had to die. That was a terrible flood, that fell on the last night of July, 1999, in the poem, "Rowan County Flood" by Edward Marby."

Following what was the worst disaster, Morehead's history, the number one priority was to recover the bodies of flood victims before they were washed away as missing. After two days, all bodies were recovered, including the missing. But tragically, 25 people had been swept away by the torrential water, and it was estimated that about 75 people were killed. It would be like waking up in the morning and news of the deaths, and knowing that people were still missing. That gave one an idea of the magnitude of the disaster that struck this community 60 years ago July 4th.

Many Morehead mass funerals

The next tragic task was the burials. The City of Morehead might have been more efficient if they had given the families a more personal service. In many mass funerals, a funeral service was held Friday at 2 p.m. at Cranston for Mrs. Minnie McRoberts, her daughter-in-law, Mrs. Eleanor McRoberts, and sons. Harrison. The services were conducted Saturday for Mrs. Geneva Ambrose, Mrs. Lily Mosley, and her daughter, Margie and Oma.

Health and sanitation

After burying the dead, the next task faced by the Health Department was to make sure all of those killed had been buried within 24 hours. Those with bodies were urgent not to use their water until it had been tested, or pumped out. After Evans, County Health Director, said that the county would be in a disease danger zone for a month after the flood. That said, the water had been contaminated. And should the body not be taken, the hydrometric perfume would not work. One refugee was heard to ask another, "Have you been embalmed yet?"

Emergency electric power was restored by volunteer crews working through the night, working around the clock. Route 32 to Flemingsburg was the only open road to Morehead. Voluntary workmen were seen cutting mud from the road in each side of Morehead. Also one small railroad bridge was swept away. Telephone service was restored within 24 hours, but lost again after a short time. However, the local Red Cross representative, Rene Wells, was able to contact the state headquarters at Louisville. The representatives were here within 24 hours.

Red Cross begins emergency relief

The American National Red Cross was made the official organ of the disaster relief in Rowan County. It was established under the leadership of Warren C. Lappin. They set up their temporary headquarters in the old Citgo building and then later in the Morehead Chamber of Commerce. The representatives were Miss Helen Moses, Richard and Maurice Reddy, an all-female volunteer crew. Their job was to take charge of the disaster relief in Rowan County.

The Red Cross began immediately by providing emergency help to refugees families that lost homes and belongings. They set up temporary shelters in the Morehead High School gym, local churches, and in the old jail. The Red Cross was able to provide food, water, and shelter to those in need. They also provided medical care to those affected by the flood.

As the water receded, the caged livestock was turned over to the county. The livestock was then destroyed by the Red Cross. The agency printed leaflets and distributed them all over town. The agency estimated that about 900 of the 1,100 Rowan County farm homes were wrecked or damaged. The largest loss was from erosion, Agent Gogg estimated that 40 percent of the tobacco crop was lost, valued at $500,000. The estimate was for 200 head of livestock, five to seven thousand acres of corn; three to four thousand acres of tobacco; and 25,000 acres of other crops.

In addition to the 200 homes lost and 800 damaged, many businesses were devastated. The losses included: Big Store Furniture Company, $38,000; Morehead and North Fork Railroad, $20,000; steel bridge and one half mile of track; Imperial Cleaners, $10,000; Big Store Company, $15,000; Big Store Furniture Company, $15,000; C & R Railroad, $22,000; City of Morehead, $10,000; Chamber of Commerce, $5,000; and the Rowan County Lumber Company, $10,000, and the economy of the county. The major damage was estimated at $25,000,000, and was nearly laughed out of existence.

Other firms less severely damaged included: W. S. Allen Drug Stores, $1,500; W. W. Perry, $5,000; Independent, $5,000; J. A. Allen Grocery, $3,500; Eagles Nest Restaurant, $1,000; Crystal Rock Company, $5,000; and New!! Rebuilding begins

Other federal agencies that assisted in the rebuilding were: WPA (Works Progress Administration); WPA (Workers Progress Administration); CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps); and WPA (Wage Earners Progress Administration); and WPA (Wage Earners Progress Administration). Also, volunteer firemen, electrical contractors, construction workers, and equipment operators all worked round the clock to help Morehead recover.

Other businesses damaged but not estimated included: Calvert's Garage, Model Lumber Company, $1,500; WPA (Works Progress Administration), $5,000; J. A. Allen Grocery, $3,500; Eagles Nest Restaurant, $1,000; Crystal Rock Company, $5,000; and New!! Rebuilding begins

Citizens rebuild a safer town

Morehead residents were determined to rebuild after THE FLOOD, even though very few of the losses were covered by insurance. Most people had to borrow money to start over.
Many families that lived several blocks away suddenly became "close" neighbors as a result of the flash flood in 1939. (Photo courtesy of J.W. Holbrook Jr.)

Dorothy Holbrook hid her face in despair as a result of the irony of the "Press while you wait sign." Their family business was a total loss in the 1939 Morehead flash flood. (Photo courtesy of J.W. Holbrook Jr.)

A special bill was introduced in Congress by Joe Bates (and again. But they did their recovery from the greatest disaster to ever strike Morehead was phenomenal. They rebuilt a bigger and better town and community. Many years later with the help of another federal agency, the Gateway AD District, grants were approved over the years to dredge and widen Tripplet's channel. Also funds were received to build flood walls between the city and the creek. While those were under construction, many people questioned whether that was a wise expenditure of funds. But old time residents remembered and were thankful for those flood walls. Roger Russell, while working for the Gateway AD District, wrote several grants for those projects, amounting to millions of dollars. Those, along with other funds, received by Morehead and Rowan County, hopefully will prevent another tragedy like THE FLOOD.

When heavy rains hit Morehead even today, there is still some flooding along First Street. But when residents drive along the new by-pass and look over at the high green flood wall or drive over to the Don Greenhill City Park, and look down stream at wide Tripplet Creek Channel, be thankful.

According to the Book of Genes, God sent His rainbow

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To assure people he would never again destroy the world with water. Hopefully, the widening of the creek bed, and building of the flood walls, will mean that Morehead will never again suffer the death and destruction they suffered during THE FLOOD of 1939.

The following poem expresses dramatic insight into the tragedy of THE FLOOD of 1939:

Rowan County Flood
By Edward Mabry
Was in the hills of old Kentucky, in the year of thirty-nine. There was an awful flood, it was a distressful time.

You could see the lightening flashing, you could hear the thunder roar. While the water it was slashing through many a home and store.

There were many people walking on the streets of Morehead, while others they were sleeping snugly in their beds.

It came all unexpected, many people had to die.

That was a terrible flood, that fell on the fourth of July.

The storm could not be conquered, for hours it did last. Many people they were struggling, while the water was raising fast.

From the little town of Halderman, through Morehead and Bluestone. Many people they were suffering, and left without a home.

The storm in all its fury swept across the mountain tops. It filled the valleys with water, and destroyed many crops.

It washed away many bodies, and covered them in the mud. I'm tellin' you people, that was a terrible flood.

The following people were interviewed by MSU Oral History Class in 1998. They recounted their memories of that tragic Flash Flood in 1939. Those interviews are on file in the Camden-Carroll Library.


About the author

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

Following the flood, many merchants had the unpleasant task of cleaning out the mud and muck from their business. (Photo courtesy of J.W. Holbrook Jr.)

A car washed off U.S. 60 West into the middle of a field during the flash flood of 1939. (Photo courtesy of Iva Caudill and Icy Caldwell.)