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 town like a wall of water,” began a news account of the flood of 1937, known as “Rowan County Flood” by Edward Mayby.

Following what was the worst disaster in Morehead's history, the number one priority was to recover the bodies of flood victims. With the water receding, the bodies were often found in areas that were inaccessible due to the water. The bodies were then identified by those who had known them, and burial services were held. The services were held in the town square, and the bodies were buried in the town cemetery.

Funeral services were held on Thursday, July 12, 1999, at 2 p.m. at Crabtree’s and Dr. Garrard’s Office. The services were held to honor those who had died in the flood. Those present included the Mayor, City Council members, and other local officials.

The service was attended by many people, including family members of the deceased. The service lasted about two hours, and many people cried silently as they said goodbye to their loved ones.

The service was followed by a memorial service at the First United Methodist Church. Many people attended this service, and the church was decorated with flowers and pictures of the deceased. The service lasted about an hour and included hymns and prayers.

In addition, the city held a fundraiser to help the families of the deceased. The fundraiser was held at the city hall, and many people attended to donate money. The fundraiser raised over $10,000, which was then distributed to the families of the deceased.

The flood of 1937 was a terrible disaster that affected many people and caused much loss. However, the community came together to help those in need and to remember those who had died. The memory of those who lost their lives during the flood will continue to be an important part of Morehead’s history.
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.)

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.)

Mail service was resumed on Friday, and the George Washington Train at 6 p.m. was the first train to get through the rebuilt tracks. With the dead buried, the homeless cared for, and water, electricity, phone service, mail service and train writer did not see the dead snake, and I often wondered if that was told just to calm the people. But for the rest of that summer I watched for that snake whenever I was in the woods. However, the next year, I was not worried because I knew it could not survive our cold winters.

Morehead and North Fork Railroad Bridge across Triplett Creek at Clearfield was destroyed by the flash flood July 4, 1939.

The Red Cross moved their headquarters to the second floor of the Peoples Bank on Railroad Street (First Street), and began the process of registering those people damaged by the flood. They announced that 700 people sand chickens; three thousand acres of hay; 40,000 rods of fence; and many other farm crops and equipment. Agent Goff emphasized that it was still early enough to plant some crops e.g. Buckwheat, Millet and Potatoes. The county qualified for special low interest loans to help rebuild. Businessmen, companies, home owners, and farmers were determined to rebuild a bigger and better Morehead and Rowan County.

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A special bill was introduced in Congress by Joe Bates (and

Aerial view of the destructive force of the flash flood that struck Morehead July 4, 1939. Twenty-five people drowned, and 900 homes were destroyed and 800 buildings damaged in Rowan County. View is looking south toward the railroad (today's bypass); upper left: Union Grocery (today's Folk Art Center); upper central: a two story house sits in the middle of the street, and several cottages and homes deposited by the flood water in the middle of the field; front central: Main St. and Hargis Ave. (Photo courtesy of J.W. Holbrook Jr.)

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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**
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 lightning 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 Halde-
man, 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.


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.)