

**The Flood of the Century:**  
**The Missouri River, Omaha and Council Bluffs, 1952**

When humankind comes together, uniting their resources to reach a common goal, the results can be spectacular. The people of Omaha, Nebraska, and Council Bluffs, Iowa, demonstrated this in the spring of 1952, when they held back the greatest flood ever observed on the Missouri River.<sup>1</sup>

The Missouri is formed by the junction of the Jefferson, Madison and Gallatin rivers at Three Forks, Montana, and has a length of 2,460 miles, making it the longest river in the nation. It drains an immense area totaling 529,350 square miles, which is about one-sixth of the country's total area. The Missouri had an unruly reputation, with Lieutenant General Lewis Pick, chief of the Army Corps of Engineers during the time of the flood, describing it as one of the wildest rivers on earth.<sup>2</sup>

In 1944, Congress passed the Pick-Sloan Plan for Missouri River Development, calling for the construction of a series of dams to tame the river and limit flooding. In 1946, Army engineers started to build levees and a floodwall in Omaha and Council Bluffs, which in conjunction with the soon to be completed dams would hold back a flood height of 26.6 feet.<sup>3</sup> Upon completion in 1950, the earthen levees stretched for thirty-six miles along both sides of the river, and an additional one mile-long concrete floodwall protected an industrial area in east Omaha.

Construction of the upstream dams experienced delays because of flooding in the late 1940s and budget cutbacks in the early 1950s. In the spring of 1952, only the Fort Peck, Heart Butte and Shade Hill Reservoirs were completed.<sup>4</sup> The delays would prove to

be costly for the people of the Missouri River basin, because all the right ingredients for a massive spring flood were coming together in the upper basin.

The winter months of 1951-1952 were extraordinarily severe in Montana and the Dakotas, creating one of the heaviest snow covers in the history of the Great Plains.<sup>5</sup> Accumulation in South Dakota started with a severe snow and ice storm on December 6. January snowfall came to be abnormally heavy in Montana and twice the average depth in North Dakota, with brutal storms continuing through February and March for the entire upper basin.<sup>6</sup> Winter temperatures were very cold, absent of typical periods of warm weather to allow intermittent thawing, contributing the excessive snow depths. The frigid temperatures also caused the river ice to become extremely thick, measuring two feet in the Dakotas. Experts described the thick ice on tributary streams as “strong, hard, not honeycombed or mushy.”<sup>7</sup>

The heaviest snow rested in a crescent-shaped area, located between Aberdeen, SD, and Bowman, ND, centered near Pierre, SD. The entire snow pack possessed a powerful flood potential, due to its high water content. On February 19, the Weather Bureau took measurements at several locations, and found the snow to be twenty-one inches deep in Pierre, with a water equivalent of 7.15 inches. In Aberdeen, the depth was eighteen inches, containing a water equivalent of 6.64 inches.<sup>8</sup> The Army Corps of Engineers, Missouri River Division Office, noted that the amount of snow across the mountains and northern Great Plains was greater than the totals prior to the flood of 1943.<sup>9</sup>

Incoming data on moisture content in the upper Missouri Basin, had agencies starting to worry about what the spring might bring. Ivory P. Reynolds, meteorologist for

the U.S. Geological Survey Office in Sioux City, Iowa, expressed concern that quickly melting snow would cause flooding. He confirmed in March that the northern plains received 155 percent of the average precipitation since December 1, with Pierre totaling a whopping 460 percent more than normal.<sup>10</sup> The Geological Survey reported on March 10, that river ice, along with an extensive snow pack over most of the eastern two thirds of the state, “presents a major flood threat for the breakup period in South Dakota.”<sup>11</sup>

The weather in late March continued to be wild and variable, causing flood fears to grow. On March 18, a powerful blizzard inundated North Dakota with more deep snow, stranding 1,200 farm families.<sup>12</sup> Heavy rains fell the following day over Nebraska and Iowa, causing the North Fork River to overflow its banks, and bitter cold air flowed in behind.<sup>13</sup> After a meeting of the Missouri Basin Inter-Agency Committee on March 20, in Kansas City, Brigadier General Don G. Shingler, an Omaha Division engineer, warned “that a flood threat lies in a twenty inch snow cover over a large part of the Dakotas.”<sup>14</sup>

Around March 26, temperatures began to climb above the freezing mark and stayed there, allowing spring to finally break winter’s long, cold grip. The snow melted rapidly, but sat on impervious ground, saturated and then frozen by a wet and cold autumn. The hard ground would not allow the water to be absorbed by the earth, so it ran directly into the streams and rivers that fed the Missouri River.

Temperatures continued to jump, speeding the thawing process. On March 29, the mercury reached seventy-five in Omaha, and nearly as warm further up-stream. Roads once impassible due to deep snow were now turned to quagmires by its melting. Planes shuttled feed to ranchers because of poor road conditions.<sup>15</sup> The Omaha District of the Army Corps of Engineers suggested local municipalities all along the river review flood-

fighting policies, stock-pile sandbags and other supplies, and to take precautions in protecting the levees.<sup>16</sup>

The Army Corps of Engineers again expressed concern over the rapidly melting snow, and sent a survey team to monitor rising waters on the Bad and Big Sioux Rivers in South Dakota on March 30. At Akron, IA, the Big Sioux had risen ten feet in only three days, putting it two feet above flood stage.<sup>17</sup> The first of April proved to be no joke for the citizens of Sioux City, IA, as the rising Big Sioux drove many to higher ground.<sup>18</sup>

On April 2, Omaha residents read headlines of the devastation upstream, realizing an unstoppable force was coming their way. Flooding on one of the Missouri's tributaries, the Milk River, forced 1,500 people to flee the town of Havre, MT, under a declaration of martial law.<sup>19</sup> National Guard troops were called in to patrol this small city, now covered beneath ten feet of water.<sup>20</sup> In the surrounding countryside, cattle raced to small areas of high ground. Unable to save the beasts, ranchers shot them in order to prevent suffering.<sup>21</sup>

In Omaha, the Missouri River reached 16.6 feet on April 5, just two and a half feet under flood stage. The city expected an initial crest in three days, and then a much more devastating one ten days after that.<sup>22</sup> The following day in Blair, NE, official river reader Ed Stevens said the Missouri spilled over at lowlands on both banks, but could not estimate the number of acres flooded. Forecasters were now predicting stages that would exceed the flood of 1943, when waters rose to 22'4".<sup>23</sup>

On Monday, April 7, waters reached the nineteen-foot flood stage at Omaha. Local meteorologist, E.F. Stapowich, raised concerns by predicting the Missouri to rise higher than the all-time record of 24.6 feet, which occurred in 1881.<sup>24</sup> Temperatures

hovered in the fifties over the northern basin, adding to increased runoff. The Weather Bureau warned people to take precautions against “this major flood” on April 8, but Army Engineers were confident, noting that the levees were designed to carry 26.5 feet of water, and wouldn’t be topped until levels surpassed 31.5 feet.<sup>25</sup>

Residents of Omaha grew curious and started to loiter around the rivers edge, hoping to get a view of the Missouri’s strength. This led Brigadier General Don G. Shingler to say that people could help by not going near the river. Sam Reynolds, Omaha Civil Defense Director, called up the auxiliary police force to make sure the levees remained secure.

The flood stage stood at 20.5 feet on April 9, and the news from upstream continued to be grim. States of emergency were declared In Sioux City, IA, and South Sioux City, NE. Sioux City mayor, Ralph Henderson, ordered 250 homes to be evacuated by Friday, while three National Guard units mobilized in the city.<sup>26</sup> One hundred men braved the cold and wet elements to repair leaks on the dikes. Among these were the local high school track coach, J.R. Ferguson, and his track team. Despite the great loss, some residents tried to keep a healthy perspective on the matter. Staying at the South Sioux City Red Cross Headquarters, Mr. Harold Moes said, “Sure we’re going to loose our home, but why get excited? If it’s gone, it’s gone. We can be thankful we’re all here. We can replace our stuff, but not ourselves.”<sup>27</sup> Thousands of acres downstream from Sioux City were under water, as levees collapsed under the immense pressure.

In Pierre, SD, 1,600 people fled their homes when the water level reached twenty-three feet - eight feet above flood stage.<sup>28</sup> Boats and helicopters evacuated residents when the water rose to the second floor of most houses. There were flood relief operations in

twenty-seven North and South Dakota counties, and Red Cross chapters in twelve Nebraska and Iowa counties, were alerted for action.

Mayor Cunningham scheduled a meeting for later that day with Director Sam Reynolds to discuss activating Omaha's entire Civil Defense Unit. East Omaha Drainage District officials, Army engineers, and other local leaders were also in attendance. In the meantime, city officials were in action. Assistant Defense Director, Clara Siemsen, compiled a list of nurses and Public Improvements Commissioner, William Hinkey, requested engineering help from the defense ranks. Commissioner Hinkey also asked Street Commissioner, John Rosenblat, for the loan of fifteen men to man sewage pumping stations.<sup>29</sup> A major flood appeared to be coming toward Omaha, but the city would do everything possible to be prepared.

In Council Bluffs, Mayor James Mulqueen called for volunteers to assist in levee protection and gave residents instruction in the case an evacuation was ordered.<sup>30</sup> The mayor also attempted to head off any foul play and said anyone caught returning to homes if evacuation is ordered, would be treated as looters.<sup>31</sup>

On April 10, the flood stage stood at 20.67 feet, and experts were predicting a max height of 28.5 feet in about one week.<sup>32</sup> With Omaha's Civil Defense on full alert, the city was mobilizing to battle the flood, operating flood coordination efforts from the sixth floor of city hall. Flood Coordinator, E. I. Meyers, asked citizens not to panic and only pay attention to news releases from the Army Corps of Engineers, Weather Bureau, or his headquarters. Emergency flood passes were printed and given to workers in order to keep sightseers from crowding the levees.<sup>33</sup>

For the remainder of the flood emergency, sheriff deputies were required to work seven days a week.<sup>34</sup> In Council Bluffs, policemen were to work twelve-hour shifts, and all vacation days were canceled.<sup>35</sup> All unnecessary railroad oil and gas cars were removed and owners of storage tanks were encouraged to fill them so they wouldn't float away.<sup>36</sup>

The Missouri River reached a height of 22.4 feet on Friday, April 11, in Omaha, as the flood fight went in to high gear. Brigadier General Warren C. Wood, called up two Guard companies to maintain law and order in Omaha and Council Bluffs, and volunteers rushed to raise levees by two feet, under the direction of Army engineers. Russell Hand, head of the Nebraska State Employment Service, organized a reserve labor pool to provide a steady supply of volunteers.<sup>37</sup> The military began to provide more than just engineers, giving cots and blankets to the Red Cross for distribution from Offutt Air Force Base, and flew in an additional 73,500 pounds of Army supplies.<sup>38</sup>

Residents of east Omaha began to evacuate Friday afternoon, while businesses boarded up windows and laid sandbags around buildings.<sup>39</sup> Engineers advised evacuees to fill basements with clean tap water, which would equalize pressure on the foundation and keep out muddy floodwater. Companies and individuals alike offered assistance. Checker, Yellow and Safeway cab companies offered two hundred vehicles, and three hundred VFW members pledged to help.<sup>40</sup> At the Omaha Municipal Airport, United and Mid-Continent airlines prepared to move operations to Lincoln, and the Weather Bureau moved to a new location.<sup>41</sup> The Red Cross readied facilities for evacuees, such as the north recreation hall at the Logan Fontenelle Homes, and brought in a mobile canteen from Saint Louis.<sup>42</sup> Authorities closed the South Omaha Bridge to all non-essential vehicles.<sup>43</sup>

On Saturday, April 12, the river's height at Omaha reaches 24.35 feet.<sup>44</sup> Governor Peterson set the provisions of Nebraska's Civil Defense Act into place, instructing Sam Reynolds, Omaha-Douglas County Civil Defense Director, to take control.<sup>45</sup> At his disposal, Reynolds had medical and communication services, auxiliary police and firemen, and a file of material, equipment, and contractors.<sup>46</sup> The provisions under this act freed Mr. Reynolds from any personal liability in fighting the flood. All people in the lowlands of East Omaha and Carter Lake were ordered to evacuate by 6:00 PM Sunday.<sup>47</sup>

In Council Bluffs, the coordination of relief efforts took a different route. According to Iowa law, Civil Defense resources could only be utilized due to enemy attack. This forced newly elected mayor, James Mulqueen, to take control in defiance of this stipulation.<sup>48</sup> He issued the first evacuation order on Saturday, requesting residents west of Thirtieth Street to leave and closed all non-essential businesses to free up resources for the flood fight. People clogged major city streets, and some found refuge in the homes of Hill District residents. All highways leading into the city were closed.<sup>49</sup> Parts of west and south Council Bluffs had the appearance of a war zone, with its streets patrolled by auxiliary police and uniformed National Guard troops.<sup>50</sup>

American Red Cross president, E. Roland Harriman, placed the entire organization in emergency status to aid mid west flood victims. Max Rote, Assistant National Director of Red Cross Disaster Services, supervised the relief efforts in Omaha.<sup>51</sup> In Council Bluffs, the agency opened shelters at Recreation Hall on Broadway for older girls and women, the Skylark Club on West Broadway for women and small children, and the Moose Hall on Pearl Street for men and boys.<sup>52</sup>

Rain fell on Saturday, making the struggle to raise levees cold and miserable. One man working on the levees said, “The trouble is, is that you get cold and wet. And when you get cold and wet, you can’t dry out.”<sup>53</sup> A phenomenon known as sandboils, also gave workers grief. The swollen river forced water under the levees through saturated ground, forming the bubbling threat. One ‘gang’ of men labored for several hours near the Ak-Sar-Ben Bridge in order to contain a single boil.<sup>54</sup>

To avoid the prospect of a brownout, men worked around the clock to protect the Omaha Public Power District’s main plant on Fourth and Jones. Officials considered the facility to be so vital, they built three lines of defense. First workers constructed an east-west dike, then placed sand bags outside entrances and windows, and finally sealed off an older section of the plant thought to be expendable.<sup>55</sup>

Upstream at South Sioux City, Mayor Wilbur Allen ordered a complete evacuation of the city’s 5,557 residents on April 13.<sup>56</sup> That same day, the Missouri reached 25.5 feet at Omaha, with 250,000 cubic feet of water rushing past its banks.<sup>57</sup> The Weather Bureau’s latest forecast predicted a flood stage of 29.8 feet by 8:00 am Wednesday, and then edge to 30 feet by noon and stay there for twelve hours.<sup>58</sup> The residents of Omaha and Council Bluffs knew that the levees may not hold, and a full blow evacuation was now under way. Five thousand people were in the process of fleeing from the east Omaha/Carter Lake area, and an astounding thirty thousand from Council Bluffs.<sup>59</sup>

Military personnel continued to supply strong support in the flood effort. The Air Force ferried more than a quarter million pounds of cots, blankets and medical supplies in two C-124 and three C-119 transport planes, from Columbus, Ohio.<sup>60</sup> The Coast Guard

brought in one helicopter, with plans for two more.<sup>61</sup> At Clinton, Mississippi, Army engineers produced a replica of the Missouri River at Omaha and Council Bluffs. Their findings showed that the levees needed to be raised more than two feet in just six days. The rain that fell all day on Saturday had finally ended, prompting Brigadier General Shingler to say, “Now we are fighting on even terms.”<sup>62</sup>

Many people not directly affected by the flood offered assistance to those in need.<sup>63</sup> Numerous volunteers worked fifteen to twenty hours at a time, stretching through the weekend.<sup>64</sup> Trucking facilities ran around the clock, helping to evacuate people and property.<sup>65</sup> On Easter Sunday, April 13, churches were filled with parishioners praying for flood deliverance.<sup>66</sup> After Easter services, ministers quickly turned their churches into shelters.<sup>67</sup>

Fears rose over the possibility of Council Bluffs losing its water supply, prompting the Metropolitan Utilities District in Omaha to take action. This neighboring utility placed a twelve-inch pipe across the Ak-Sar-Ben Bridge, to provide a back up supply in case of emergency.<sup>68</sup> Residents of the evacuated area in Council Bluffs received warning that electricity would be shut off at 1:00 pm the following day.<sup>69</sup> Workers made progress raising the levees throughout the day, and were 60% done erecting flashboard on Omaha’s concrete floodwall.<sup>70</sup>

Many facilities designed for different purposes, coupled as shelters for tired refugees. The Creighton University Field House made the change,<sup>71</sup> as did Council Bluffs’ armory, which filled with 275 men on Sunday night.<sup>72</sup> Hundreds of people went to the Lincoln High School Gymnasium in Council Bluffs, but many had to be turned away due to a lack of space.<sup>73</sup> Sixty flood refugee house trailers lined the drives of Miller

Park in Omaha, and the Red Cross housed twenty-six children and fifteen adults at the park's pavilion.<sup>74</sup>

“The Missouri is coming with a rip and a roar. We're in a hell of a lot of trouble,” General Shingler declared on April 14.<sup>75</sup> The river reached 26.6 feet on Monday, more than a foot higher than the day before.<sup>76</sup> The man in charge of holding back the flood, Lt. General Lewis A. Pick said, “The greatest flood the white man has ever seen is coming down the upper Missouri Basin.” Mayor Mulqueen expanded the evacuation area in Council Bluffs, to include everything west of Seventh Street, south of Fifth Avenue, and west of Main Street. Trucks with loudspeakers drove through the city's evacuation area, an area covering three quarters of the city, advising people to evacuate by dawn of the next day.<sup>77</sup>

Also on April 14, the Weather Bureau increased their crest prediction to 31.5 feet. Contractors attempted to raise levees to that height, by building wood cribbing thirty-six inches high and thirty inches deep. They were placed on top of the levees and filled with dirt.<sup>78</sup> Otto Sokol, field man in charge of levee work in Council Bluffs said, “I'm sure we'll hold 31.5 feet, how long, I don't know. They have three or more feet of flashing on top of the levees, and I believe the lower half will hold.”<sup>79</sup>

Omaha was not alone in this battle with nature. On Tuesday, April 15, eighty-seven towns in the upper Midwest were flooded or threatened.<sup>80</sup> Lt. General Pick ordered all federal levees to be raised wherever possible. He said, “We're going to make a fight. We have a good chance of holding all Federal levees in Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas and Missouri.”<sup>81</sup> The Missouri rose to 27.8 feet Tuesday, rushing 322,000 cubic feet of water per second past levees originally designed to only hold 250,000.<sup>82</sup> Residents had reason

for hope because the levee system was holding for the moment, and both Omaha and Council Bluffs remained dry. However, experts challenged this optimism, predicting flood defenses had only a 50% chance of holding.<sup>83</sup>

The *Omaha World Herald* started a relief fund for the Red Cross, bringing in over \$24,900 as of Tuesday. The paper listed donors each day, down to amounts as small as one dollar.<sup>84</sup> The Nebraska Legislature strove to bring relief funds to the region as well, agreeing to meet for a special session at noon Thursday. Governor Peterson of Nebraska wired President Truman for Federal aid saying, “City, village, county, and state governments are striving to meet the unprecedented stress upon them. Our people will do all possible.”<sup>85</sup>

Meanwhile, upstream from Omaha near Onowa, IA, the Missouri River’s width stretched for miles. Richard McFarland, a reporter for the *World Herald*, visited the area in a powerboat on Tuesday. He said, “We were seven miles inland from the Missouri River channel, but there was water as far as you could see.”<sup>86</sup> This vast reservoir of water had to funnel through the narrow channel at Omaha of just one-quarter mile.

The front line battle of raising and protecting levees continued. Sandboils proved to be the greatest concern near the Ak-Sar-Ben Bridge, where non-stop sandbagging and pumping were required.<sup>87</sup> Army Engineer Colonel Jack Person said, “There is a good chance of licking the flood, but people should not be lulled into a false sense of security, the crest is still two days and four feet away.”<sup>88</sup>

April 16 brought a glimmer of hope to flood workers, as the Missouri began to fall in Blair because of the wide floodplain. In Omaha, however, the water continued to rise. Because of the narrow bottleneck, the water level now reached 28.9 feet at the Ak-

Sar-Ben Bridge.<sup>89</sup> The Weather Bureau abandoned its shortly held pinpoint prediction of a 9:00 P.M. Thursday crest, stating that the vast amount of water made accurate prediction impossible.<sup>90</sup>

The evacuation of east Omaha and Council Bluffs was achieved on Wednesday. Mayor Mulqueen said, “We have now completed one of the most difficult tasks posed by the current flood threat - the evacuation of the western two-thirds of our city.”<sup>91</sup> Homes and streets were empty and quiet, except for truck convoys carrying workers and supplies to the levees. In one Council Bluffs home, the front and back doors were left wide open to allow water to flow through without bursting doors or windows. The first floors of many houses were bare of furniture or piled on top of tables.<sup>92</sup>

Evacuees accustomed to having their own homes, now had to share living space with hundreds of others. At the Abraham Lincoln High School Gymnasium, Mrs. Howard Cole described life in the shelter. She said, “That’s the worst part about living in a shelter - the noise. The kids make the most of it.” At 9:00 am, just after breakfast, cots were moved to the other side of the gym so sweepers could clean. People would watch television, listen to radios, talk with new friends, or wash clothing before lights out at 9:00 pm.<sup>93</sup>

As the day wore on, the river continued its assault on city defenses. Water oozed through the earthen levees because of saturation, and the concrete portion of Omaha’s floodwall disappeared from view, with only the wooden flash-boarding still above water.<sup>94</sup> Bulldozers and giant rollers compacted new dirt, as water lapped near the top of the original dike. The *New York Times* described the effort to raise levees as “the battle of the inch.”<sup>95</sup>

President Truman flew to Offutt Air Force base in Omaha, for a conference with Missouri Basin Governors, Army Engineer Officers, and other officials on Wednesday. At the meeting, Lt. General Pick outlined the causes of the flood, what had been done to date on flood control along the Missouri, and how the flood could have been stopped. After flying over the devastated area, Truman declared “its time for action” on flood control. He said, “This is the great breadbasket of the nation. The breadbasket certainly should be protected and it must be.”<sup>96</sup>

Bright floodlights lit up the dikes on both sides of the river, as workers toiled through the night. Creighton University student Gene Marigold said after finishing work on the dikes, “I hate to leave it. It would be good to stand here behind all this work and watch the river take a beating.”<sup>97</sup> According to Army Engineers, the two biggest concerns were saturated levees and continuing showers ruining access roads for equipment.<sup>98</sup>

On Thursday, April 17, workers remained resolute as the crest slowly approached. The river gauge read 30.09 feet, just inches from the anticipated crest. Water flowed through the channel at 395,000 cubic feet per second, putting extreme pressure on the levees.<sup>99</sup> This buildup of “static pressure” caused Brig. General Shingler to fear that the dikes would fail. Thousands of men kept constant watch for weak areas on the dike and Civil Air Patrol flew all day long over the river.<sup>100</sup> If one of the levees failed, a siren would sound in Council Bluffs, and in Omaha a buzzer would notify people during daylight hours, and flares at night.<sup>101</sup>

As the crest neared, tensions rose for all involved in the flood fight. Mayor Glenn Cunningham said he and all of Omaha’s Flood Steering Committee would keep a “round-the-clock” stand. Volunteer help had been considered adequate the previous night, but

Labor Pool Director, Russel Hand, feared enlistments would fall after the crest passed. He pleaded for a large labor force over the next four days and said, “We particularly need new blood. A lot of the volunteers are white-collar people who aren’t used to this work, and they are pretty near exhaustion.”<sup>102</sup> Many of the tired workers were current and former soldiers as well. A reporter for the *Omaha World Herald* described seeing army trucks full of servicemen, “many of them wearing their old service fatigues and the jaunty jockey caps that became a favorite with the soldiers in the last war.”<sup>103</sup>

Flood officials identified four chronic trouble spots: in Omaha near the Socony-Vacuum Oil Company plant where water seepage had flooded two sections of Sixteenth Street; along the levee northeast of the Municipal Airport; in Council Bluffs at the Dodge Park pumping station; and along the north-end levees, where 350 troops and one thousand volunteers piled sandbags against wooden flashboard.<sup>104</sup> One problem that continued to frustrate workers over all sections of the levees, were sandboils. A worker battling them said, “We threw a dozen bags of sand in there, and the river threw them right back at us. Finally we made some of them stick and then we dumped two loads of dirt in to squelch the threat.”<sup>105</sup>

Crossing the river on Thursday became very difficult because of bridge restrictions. The South Omaha Bridge closed to all traffic except essential flood relief workers. Only common truck traffic could cross the Ak-Sar-Ben Bridge and then only with one vehicle moving in each direction at a time and a maximum speed of ten miles per hour.

Tired refugees had spent five days away from their homes, but relief operation continued to offer assistance. The Visiting Nurses Association offered support, and at the

University of Omaha, the Salvation Army housed an auxiliary kitchen to prepare food for flood fighters.<sup>106</sup> Agencies were not able to help everyone. Lyman Giles, a Council Bluffs resident with a home near the river, refused to evacuate. He decided to wait out the flood with his dog, even though his house had no heat or electricity. He said, "I'm just bullheaded, I guess. That's the only reason."<sup>107</sup>

The crest arrived on Friday, April 18, at the record height of 30.24 feet.<sup>108</sup> The river began to slowly fall around 6:00 A.M., but the cities continued to be in danger. River levels would remain at record height for days to come, capable of breaking through saturated levees. "We're in the top of the danger zone," said Brig. General Shingler. "We're winning the fight, but we're going to be in this crest business for days."<sup>109</sup> This struggle was demonstrated at Omaha's Municipal Airport, where water ran fifteen feet above the runways. Five hundred volunteers fought to reinforce the levee there, using a human chain one hundred yards long to pass sandbags in from the runway.<sup>110</sup>

Since the emergency began, hundreds of students from around the region arrived to offer their help. About two hundred University of Nebraska students came with a promise from the Dean of Men, T.J. Thompson, that faculty members would be generous in allowing for missed classes. Creighton President, Rev. Carl Reinert, praised his students and added, "We not only ask, we expect every Creighton man to stay on the job until the emergency is over."<sup>111</sup>

From the beginning, workers had been successful in fending off a major inundation of water. That would change, however, at 7:00 P.M. Friday night when a sewer line broke at Grace and Thirteenth Streets in Omaha. 120 feet of pavement blew apart, as water shot several feet in the air. Led by General Pick, hundreds of men and

trucks were sent to the area with gravel and supplies.<sup>112</sup> Crewmembers dumped rocks and sandbags into the opening, but without success. Barges then delivered heavy steel beams to the sewer's outlet in the Missouri River. Here engineers used them to seal the opening, finally ending the emergency. The Grace Street sewer break took eight hours to contain and flooded two square miles of east Omaha.<sup>113</sup>

On Saturday, April 19, the Missouri River stood at twenty eight feet, more than two feet below the record of Friday morning. The crest had finally come and gone, leaving Omaha and Council Bluffs for points further south.<sup>114</sup> Lt. General Lewis Pick, the man in charge of this monumental effort, headed back to Washington DC confident the cities were now safe. He said the people showed great spirit and teamwork, "without parallel in my experience."<sup>115</sup> Flood workers would continue a vigilant watch over levees for the next several days, but the great mounds of earth would remain sound. Colonel Henry Hoeffler gave the green light for evacuees to return home on Tuesday. He said, "The river now has fallen to the stage where I consider it safe to resume normal activity in the evacuated areas."<sup>116</sup>

Thanks to advanced warning and hard work, the cities of Omaha and Council Bluffs were spared from catastrophe by the biggest Missouri River flood in history. Led by the Army engineers, a total of sixty thousand people came together and successfully fought back the water.<sup>117</sup> Thirty-Five Thousand residents evacuated during the emergency, considered by the Army Corps of Engineers as one of the greatest mass movements in the history of the Missouri Valley.<sup>118</sup> Amazingly, no deaths were reported.

This triumph should not be viewed lightly. Some damage did occur because of the Grace Street sewer break and seepage. The cost of evacuation and securing property

proved to be costly as well. Loss to Omaha residents driven from their homes totaled \$500,000. 5 percent of this total was because of water seepage and the other 95 percent because of evacuation costs.<sup>119</sup> Total losses for all residents and business reached \$10,357,800 in Omaha, and \$7,190,300 in Council Bluffs.<sup>120</sup> While these losses were big, they were relatively small compared to what they could have been.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of the Interior, Geological Survey, *Floods of April 1952 in the Missouri River Basin (U.S.G.S. Water-Supply Paper, 1260-B)*, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975, 45.

<sup>2</sup> B.F. Sylvester, "Omaha's Flood, 1952," *Nebraska History* 35, no. 1 (1954): 45.

<sup>3</sup> Dept. of Interior, *Floods of April 1952*, 66.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Army, Corps of Engineers, Office of the District Engineer, Omaha District, *Preliminary Report on the Flood of April 1952 in the Missouri River Basin*, Omaha, NE: Corps of Engineers District Office, 1952, 12.

<sup>5</sup> Dept. of Interior, *Floods of April 1952*, 49.

<sup>6</sup> Corps of Engineers, *Preliminary Report*, 6.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 50

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>9</sup> Schneiders, *Unruly River*, 188.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Dept. of Interior, *Floods of April 1952*, 45.

<sup>12</sup> "Rains Ease; May Delay Flood Peril," *Omaha World Herald*, 19 March 1952, 1(M).

<sup>13</sup> "Spring Finds State Chilly," *Omaha World Herald*, 20 March 1952, 1(M).

<sup>14</sup> "Dams Needed on Tributaries," *Omaha World Herald*, 21 March 1952, 3(M).

<sup>15</sup> "Showers May Reach Omaha," *Omaha World Herald*, 30 March 1952, sec. A, p. 1..

<sup>16</sup> Corps of Engineers, *Preliminary Report*, 46.

<sup>17</sup> "Water Rises on Missouri," *Omaha World Herald*, 1 April 1952, 1(M).

<sup>18</sup> "Waters High at Sioux City," *Omaha World Herald*, 2 April 1952, 1 (M).

<sup>19</sup> "Flood Brings Town Under Martial Law," *Omaha World Herald*, 3 April 1952, 1(M).

<sup>20</sup> "Huge Inflow is Held Back by Fort Peck," *Omaha World Herald*, 4 April 1952, 1(M).

<sup>21</sup> Schneiders, *Unruly River*, 189.

<sup>22</sup> "Montana City Fights River Rise," *Omaha World Herald*, 6 April 1952, sec. A, p. 1.

<sup>23</sup> "Worst High of Spring," *Omaha World Herald*, 7 April 1952, 1(M).

<sup>24</sup> "River Tops Bank Level," *Omaha Morning World Herald*, 8 April 1952, 1(M).

<sup>25</sup> "Crest Here in 8 Days," *Omaha World Herald*, 9 April, 1(M).

<sup>26</sup> "Emergencies Ordered," *Omaha World Herald*, 10 April 1952, 1(M).

<sup>27</sup> "Rubber Boots," *Omaha World Herald*, 10 April 1952, 8(M).

<sup>28</sup> "Emergencies Ordered," 1.

<sup>29</sup> "Civil Defense," *Omaha World Herald*, 10 April 1952, 2(M).

<sup>30</sup> "Mayor Calls for Volunteers," *Omaha World Herald*, 10 April 1952, 8(M).

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- <sup>42</sup> “East Omahans Moving Out,” 4.
- <sup>43</sup> “Reserve Pool of Workmen is Organized,” 1.
- <sup>44</sup> Dept. of Interior, *Floods of April 1952*, 244.
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