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Recollections of 1927 Flood in Montpelier, Vermont
by Peter Guiliani (1907-1998)

Believing that I was in a favorable position to view the progress of this unusual occurrence in the Main and State Street business section of the city, I undertake to commit my experience and observations to paper, in order that I may refer to it later for correct information. Though high and dry and comparatively safe and secure on the third floor of the Union block, I can truthfully say that I saw the rise and fall of the flood from start to finish, "as was" and I am recording here what facts I have actual knowledge of, without exaggeration or embellishment.

The second of November, the day before the flood, was most unusually warm, the temperature being in the vicinity of 90 degrees in the sun in the rear of River's Drug Store. People had discarded winter overcoats and topcoats which were necessary articles of apparel up until a few days before the deluge, and the general atmosphere of summer prevailed, although, of course, the trees were already entirely shorn of foliage.

It commenced to rain about ten o'clock the evening of the second and a heavy downpour continued through the night. It was still raining when I left for the office at eight in the morning and was obliged to take a raincoat and an umbrella. When I reached the office (F.E. Gleason, Esq., 38 State St.) I looked at the river out of the rear window and at that time the water was at its normal height. In fact, the low ground and bushes close to the concrete wall of the Union Block were entirely uncovered. I was not impressed and went about my work.

The rain continued to come down in sheets and soon the rapid rise of the water in the river began to attract my attention. It continued to come up fast during the forenoon, but the rise was in no way alarming. When I returned from lunch about one o'clock (still raining) I noticed that the water had come up very noticeably in my absence, and from that time on I was quite interested, in fact more interested than I should have been and watched the river closely. Though I looked at very frequent intervals, I always noticed a very marked rise each time, and by three o'clock the water was almost to the banks of the river. During all this time it rained with undiminished force.

In the course of the afternoon I received several calls from Mrs. Gleason in regard to conditions at the house, which were fast becoming threatening. At about 3:30 I had a call from Mr. Davis of Putnamville, selectman of the town of Middlesex, inquiring as to the condition of the river at this point. I told him that the water was just touching the lower steel stringers of the Langdon Street Bridge, which I could see from my front office window. He advised that the water was threatening to demolish his dam, far up the North Branch and he did not know how long it would hold. About this time or soon after, the high water alarm sounded, and it was repeated after the expiration of about fifteen

minutes. It was now fast growing dark and there was a great deal of excitement and activity in the lower stores and on the street.

About four I received an urgent call from Mr. Gleason's home, and in his absence, donned my slicker and set out to find him. Water was starting to come into the streets and was coursing rapidly along the gutters, making access from the road to the sidewalk impossible in some places. Searching for Mr. Gleason, I went first to the Court House but did not find him there. Charles Chisholm, deputy county clerk, had just received a call from his home on lower State Street advising that he would have to spend the night uptown, since the river had overflowed its banks and the house was entirely surrounded by water. From the Court House, I went to the power company office on Langdon Street and was also unsuccessful there in my search for Mr. Gleason. The water was rising alarmingly fast and was just beginning to come up over the planks of the Langdon Street bridge. I crossed the bridge as rapidly as possible, the water continuing to creep over the boards. I located Mr. Gleason at River's Drug Store and he immediately started out for home. His experience is another exciting chapter of the flood story and I will not undertake to tell it here.

At about four thirty I met Chas. Chisholm, who like myself, was thoroughly enjoying the situation, not realizing possible developments and believing that this was simply another high water experience such as the city has been through many times. By this time Izzy Schwartz's fur shop in the basement below the Imperial Restaurant was completely filled by water within six inches or so of the street level, and in company with Daughley Gould, entertained a crowd of people by rescuing fur coats from the shop. It was not totally dark. Having finished at Schwartz's we went down State Street to observe conditions, stopping at Gasoline Joe's filling station for a while and assisted in removing a quantity of oil and grease cans from the cellar. There I appropriated a stained and worn green sweater, which I am sure Joe would have been ashamed to be seen in, but it proved to be worth its weight in gold to me the next two days. Fearing to be marooned in the filling station, we headed up State Street, the roadway of which and all but a very small portion of the sidewalks on either side being totally under water which was moving swiftly.

With some little difficulty, and by removing our shoes and socks in the step of Fisher's Art Store, Charles and I managed to get to the Rialto block entrance and went up into my office, planning to dry out and remain there until the water subsided. The rise of the water from that time on was alarmingly fast and soon reached a depth of about three feet or more in the street. Being situated immediately over the river and sensing that we would be in a precarious position if the water continued to rise, I suggested that we vacate and go to the Union block where we could make ourselves more comfortable in the K of C rooms. Charles demurred strenuously to this, since we had partially dried out and he objected to getting wet again. We argued voiciferously for a while and strange to say, I emerged victorious. We took off our shoes and socks again, rolled up our trousers and sallied forth. The water was getting deeper and the current more vicious every minute and I had great difficulty to get the street door of the Rialto block entrance open,

since it opened outwards and was being blocked by a swiftly moving stream of water dotted with steps, chicken coups, and miscellaneous debris.

With the water to our waists, we waded to the Union block entrance, I carrying the shoes and socks of both of us and a pie which I secured for our supper with great difficulty and fifty cents at Cote's Restaurant a short while before. Upon reaching the K of C club rooms we found several other refugees, among them being the Bardosi's and Bertoli's, who had made themselves thither some time previously. Being wet and cold, Chas. and I and Vat Bardosi adjourned to the kitchen, where we removed our wet clothing and sought to dry out over a two-burner gas cooking range, with moderate success.

Between five thirty and six o'clock people began to make their way to the club from buildings all along the side of the street, climbing over the roof, and they continued to come until the early hours of the morning. It was a very motley crowd indeed, ranging from Mayor Deavitt himself to the kitchen help of Cote's lunch room and their families. Among the fifty or sixty people who spent the flood period in the K of C hall and in the telephone exchange were Mason S. Stone, John P. Adams, D.J. Morse, G. O. Boyles, Dr. R. J. Fitzgerald, and several telephone company officials. Everyone had the freedom of the telephone exchange and the entire K of C suite and believe me, everyone made himself at home.

The night of the third was exciting enough for anyone. No one slept for more than two or three hours, most of the people remaining awake and watching anxiously out of the windows. The water rose in dead earnest and shortly before the street lights went out, about eight o'clock and plunged the entire scene into the deepest darkness, the water was within a very few inches of the bottom of the street lamps at the corner of Main and State Streets. Just about this time things began to happen and we were so absorbed trying to pierce the blackness of the night that all sense of time was lost. I remember very distinctly seeing Richard's and Perloni's filling station rise up out of the water with a hideous crash and sweep along with the current. Soon after a large structure like a house or barn could be indistinctly seen floating down the river. It crashed against the Rialto bridge and collapsed completely. All through the night loud crashings were heard and we could see huge quantities of debris piling up against the bridge, By midnight the water had almost covered the sign over Peck Brother's store, and practically all the plate glass windows on the street had been smashed, permitting the contents of the stores to float out and be swept away in the current.

Perhaps the weirdest spectacle of the whole night was the collapse of the telephone poles in the vicinity of the post office. A loud crash would be heard, and from the windows we could see the poles lurch from the water in a blaze of light caused by the breaking wires and fall back again into the water. The entire scene would be illuminated with a ghastly red light and the scenes so revealed were weird indeed and far from reassuring. The poles continued to crash at intervals, but soon after midnight things seem to quiet down a little and not much could be heard except the rushing of the water and pelting of the rain on the skylights.

Early in the evening refugees from Cote's lunch room appeared and with them they brought a quantity of food which they had saved from their restaurant, next door to the Western Union. With the appearance of the eatables everyone seem to take encouragement. The early arrivals at the club rooms had some candy from the showcase for supper, but those who came late actually faced the possibility of spending the night without any supper of any kind. Soon, however, those in charge of the new arrival of food installed themselves in the kitchen and almost immediately the entire company was munching ham sandwiches. These, however, did not go so well as might be expected, since there was no coffee, tea, milk, or pop—only muddy water from the tap. The culinary hit of the evening was the toast and egg sandwiches prepared over a kerosene lamp by Miss Phyllis Nichols of Barre, an employee of the M&W railroad who was among those coming over the roof-tops. I myself tried the toast and it really wasn't so bad.

During the night the more sportive element enjoyed themselves playing pool, billiards, checkers and poker,—all by the light of two or three flickering candles. Others sat glumly in chairs or walked restlessly about, going often to the windows to look out.

At one time new arrivals brought the disquieting news that Berlin Pond was giving way and even greater disaster faced the city. This rumor was soon squelched by the chief telephone operator, Mrs. Colombo, who had received advice from the city engineers both at the pond and at the reservoir that everything was intact and there was no occasion for the slightest alarm.

As regards sleeping accommodations, it must be admitted that the facilities offered by the improvised hotel were none too good. Those who parked themselves on the large leather divan in the main reading room of the K of C suite were indeed fortunate, but those who had to attempt to sleep on billiard tables, in chairs and on the springless upholstered settees in the lodge room found it difficult, if not impossible to get any rest whatsoever. In the first place, the chairs and settees, except a few stuffed chairs in the reading room, had just about as much give to them as a cement pavement, and in the second place the unrestful atmosphere and lack of heat supplied the finishing touches to the discomfort.

The dawn of the fourth was bleak and dreary and revealed a desolate scene, and though the water had receded about four feet, the intermittent cold rain had a very depressing effect. My first trip to the roof that morning disclosed a painful sight indeed. All the streets in sight were covered with swiftly moving muddy water anywhere from five to ten or more feet deep. A large crowd of people were gathered on the hill in the rear of the city hall and many more could be seen at the windows of the Blanchard block where they also were marooned the night before. Four or five men were moving slowly and cautiously on a raft on Main Street, the water at that time being about four feet below the bottom of the sign over Jerome's store. Ed Reney's lunch wagon had been pushed deep into the alley-way, where it was resting on its side, and in front of the fire station was the side and part of the roof of a large white barn.

Between seven and eight in the morning Mr. Houston appeared on the roofs of the buildings on the opposite side of the street taking pictures. A short while before some happily inclined person appeared on the same roof and sought to enliven the scene by playing an accordion which had been rescued with a couple of banjos in a floating box from Littlefield's Piano Store. Early in the evening before about twenty Victrolas and ten pianos were carried out of Littlefield's by the water and were last seen floating down State Street.

The water continued to recede slowly and by about ten o'clock the tops of nine automobiles could be seen from one window. One car was turned on its side in front of the American Fidelity Company and as the water went down one of its working lights could be seen, still burning brightly after being under water all night. Though occasional row-boats and boats with outboard motors were seen in the morning, rescue work did not begin in earnest until the latter part of the afternoon. Many thrills were furnished during the day by the boatmen in the swift current and several mishaps were closely averted, but few rescues were being made. The boats did, however, with great difficulty succeed in coming alongside the buildings to permit the people in the upper windows to hoist food with ropes. It seems that these provisions were sent to the scene by the Red Cross at the urgent request of the telephone company, and from the time the first boatload was hoisted up, the table board improved immensely and everyone indulged liberally in real coffee, hot soup, and other substantial fare. Earlier in the day some enterprising boatmen rescued a couple of bunches of bananas from the remains of Bardosi's store, one bunch of which were hoisted to us and the other to the inmates of Houston's studio across the street, who had had little or nothing to eat up until that time. Though wet and cold, these bananas proved to be a welcome variation in the bill of fare and an entire bunch was disposed of in about five minutes.

By six o'clock the water had gone down about eight inches below the top of the hydrant in front of Peck Brothers store, and although the current was still strong, several boatloads of people were taken out, boats coming into the entrance of the Union block and taking passengers from the steps and then making their way to safety by hanging onto a rope extended along the side of the building. I was taken out in the second boatload and landed on E. State street in front of Haye's garage.

Though there were many women and girls in the company of refugees who sought safety in the K of C rooms and in the telephone exchange, and the situation was none too encouraging at times the best of morale prevailed and everyone made the best of an uncomfortable situation. Notwithstanding the fact that the ages of those present ranged from four months to 81 years, there wasn't a moment's weakening by anyone.

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