
From A Crash To A Bang

Songs and Stories of
the Great Depression

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Excerpt: FROM A CRASH TO A BANG

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As if the employment problems of the times weren't bad enough, Mother Nature seemed intent on creating more havoc.

Kansas had a plague of grasshoppers in 1936 causing one family to light kerosene lamps during a hot 117° July day because a baby was about to be born and they couldn't see inside the house – the grasshoppers had covered all the windows!

The Great Dust Storm covered the land AND the water. Sailors on ships 20 miles off the Atlantic coast were sweeping the dust from the decks! The Dust wiped out everything. Drought in the Dust Bowl lasted from 1934-1937.

Kentucky, Ohio and Indiana were invaded by the flood waters of the Ohio River in 1937. Strangely enough this deluge had been predicted the previous fall when Reverend Billy Branham in Jeffersonville, Indiana announced he had seen an angel with a measuring rod who had showed him that the town's

main street would be covered with 22 feet of water. His congregants laughed. By January 13, they weren't laughing any more.

The day started with gray skies that darkened to the color of slate. Soon alternating rain, sleet and snow began to descend on the Ohio River Valley in almost biblical proportions – appropriate given the angel's earlier announcement. The rain came down for fourteen hours. In Cincinnati, the Ohio rose two feet in five hours!

Three weeks later the waters were still rising – eventually exceeding the flood of 1884 which had been the worst on record. The Army Corps of Engineers, Coast Guard, National Guard, Red Cross and the WPA were called in to help. Sandbags were filled and stacked along levees and residents were evacuated. The rescuers worked exhausting twelve hour shifts in freezing water as high as three feet deep.

In Evansville, Indiana Martial Law was declared on January 24 and the river reached 54 feet. The WPA came in to rescue the residents.

By January 18, the flood walls that were protecting Cincinnati had been breached. A day later Newport and Covington Kentucky were inundated. The flood reached Louisville on the 21st and rose an additional 6.3 feet the next day. Paducah was at the 39 foot flood stage and the water flooded homes and stores and came up out of the sewers.

The entire Ohio River was above Flood Stage by January 24 and still the rain, sleet and snow continued to fall. The next day Howard Hunter, the administrator of Region IV of the WPA wired the governors of Kentucky and Illinois and mayors Cincinnati and Louisville to tell them that he was sending WPA engineers and field agents to assist them. WPA departments across the country shifted into high gear to get commodities and clothing into the area. The Coast Guard shipped boats overland to rescue the stranded citizens.

Finally the river crested on January 26 at 79.9 feet in Cincinnati. In Jeffersonville, Indiana, Reverend Branham's vision was fulfilled when the water on Spring Street reached twenty two feet deep and the pews and pulpit in his Tabernacle floated to the ceiling.

With the flood damage came public health concerns. Fear of typhoid from contaminated water was top on the list. Refugees living in some 360 temporary camps made up of tents, boxcars and other unheated shelters were already coming down with flu and pneumonia. The WPA stepped in to begin cleanup and sanitation in the area where the waters were receding.

When it was all over almost 500 people had died in the Ohio Valley, millions were homeless and the countryside was littered with wreckage. There was no electricity or clean water. Silt covered everything that had been under water.

The flood kept WPA workers busy long after the immediate danger was over. The clean-up was an immense job.

The *New Harmony Times* commented on the situation:

"A great human agency is at hand to help in the rehabilitation of this district, an agency that has worked during the flood and no doubt will continue to function on the job until the afflicted areas have been cleaned up -- the WPA.

...

A heavy deposit of silt has been deposited over the streets, sewers are disrupted, levees are broken, and the inhabitants must be returned to their homes. Fortunately at the head of this district is a man who understands the needs of his people -- John K. Jennings ... Now that the first phase is over, Mr. Jennings has asked that he be allowed to proceed with the biggest job he has ever done, a job that makes Hercules' cleaning the Augean stables a piker's job, and help make this fertile and beautiful region once more a fit place for human habitation."

John A. Ellert, of the *Evansville Courier*, wrote about the Fifth District WPA workers:

"Braving cold winds, rain, snow and sleet, WPA crews worked throughout the flood at jobs hazardous and unpleasant, mostly in cold and water.

"They were everywhere, from start to finish, doing all kinds of jobs -- constructing sanitary toilets over sewer manholes to protect the city's health; carrying relief supplies over precarious catwalks, cooking and serving meals

for refugees, soldiers and coast guardsmen, disposing of garbage and refuse, rescuing livestock and persons, cheering and entertaining refugees. ...

"They were among the first to go into action before Evansville realized the worst flood of the century was roaring down the Ohio from points above..."

Later the same paper carried an ad from the city's Retail Bureau praising the WPA in "salvaging property and saving lives, and immediately afterward they handled the cleanup job with such efficiency that many visitors were amazed that there was practically no evidence of the flood left throughout out the entire city. All honor and gratitude is due to the rank and file of the WPA for their often almost super-human efforts, always giving their best in the interest of humanity."

Perhaps the best description of the flood and its aftermath came from columnist General Hugh Johnson who wrote, "Never in our history have one-tenth so many people been affected by a great disaster and certainly never before have affected people been so skillfully (sic) relieved." WPA Director Hopkins is "a doer of good deeds, executor of orders, go-getter, Santa Claus incomparable, and privy builder without peer."



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This story is from the musical program, *FROM A CRASH TO A BANG* which is just one of Eden Valley's many programs based on an important historical event. Originally written for the Cleveland Metroparks on the anniversary of Look-About-Lodge which was built by the WPA during the Great Depression, it has become one of several music programs now part of the EVE repertoire.

Eden Valley Enterprises is dedicated to providing unique educational experiences. Our philosophy is that learning and doing are fun and our basic tool is theatre. While we specialize in living history programs, storytelling, and musical trips back in time, we are equally adept at other kinds of programs. From *CANAL SONGS AND STORIES*, a fun and informative program that features music and stories from the Ohio-Erie Canal, to *DOCTOR PUTNAM'S MIRACLE MIXTURE*, a vivid, high-spirited living history program, Eden Valley gives audiences drama that brims with energy, humor, and fantasy and features a magical cast of characters. For more information about Eden Valley Enterprises and its programs and publications, visit our website at www.edenvalleyenterprises.org.