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Ferguson's  
OLIE FERGUSON'S LETTER ABOUT THE REPUBLICAN RIVER FLOOD  
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June 17, 1935

Dear Folks:-

Frank Jr. is back from a trip to St. Francis and gave us word-of-mouth message from the folks there, which I'll try to pass on to you.

Junior drove to St. Francis by the Kansas route and had to ford streams and run thru mud up over his running board. At St. Francis they used a tractor to pull him thru the river and water went up over the floor boards of the car. There just are no roads, washed and gullied, with culverts gone as well as bridges,- it's a wonder he got thru at all. Will and Nina beat him to Cris's place by 3 or 4 hours but had to drive perhaps 150 miles extra to get there.

Frank and Nora had some forewarning of the flood on May 30. That night at 11:00 o'clock the water was up around their house. Later it entered the house to about the depth of the mop-boards, and then it began receding somewhat. They thought the worst was over but early in the morning it came on again in recurring waves that just gave them no time to do anything; got arm-pit deep to Frank very quickly. Nora was perched on the table, wrapped in a Navajo rug. They decided to climb out and Nora reached for a coat, clipped and fell off and submerged. Frank succeeded in grabbing her by the hair, and bringing her up. In the meantime, Frank had gone to the bedroom window and kicked it out in order to crawl out that way. Just as they started out the window, the house walls collapsed outwardly and the roof came down, but they were swept outward from under it. They really clung to the roof more than anything else as they were swept down-stream. Went about 8 miles in some 30 minutes, and by that time saw that their roof was soon going to pieces. They caught hold of the branches of a tree and stopped themselves, and after a great deal of difficulty, Frank succeeded in clambering up on the trash that had piled up around the tree, with water perhaps 18 feet deep below it.

It was a long time before his efforts and Nora's got her up to a similar vantage point, and she was pretty nearly exhausted by that time. They rode it out there, with 3 or 4 bull-snakes, a racoon with its young, and a bobcat!

The water went down eventually, and I believe they got their feet on the ground. It rose again somewhat but not seriously. It was 30 hours before they were rescued from this place.

The hired man had been away from home on the 30th, and was just returning when high water stopt him. I think he spent the night in his car and then got out and walked toward home; didn't reach the house in time to help but got there just in time to see it floating off with Frank and Nora. He hoofed it over toward Cris's, and finally borrowed a horse to finish the trip. Cris

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and others got out and went down the river until they spotted Frank and Nora and recognized them. The latter, however, didn't know it was Cris because they had lost their glasses. There wasn't any possible way of getting to them and it was only after the water had gone down somewhat and Cris and others had built a raft of bridge planking, supported by oil-barrels, all wired together that they could let the raft down by wires and get the folks. In the meantime, a rescue party was working just as feverishly on the other side of the river, and Cris beat them perhaps only 30 minutes.

Frank and Nora were taken to a farm-house where they cleaned up and went to bed. Cris went on home to get more clothing for them. The rescue was on Saturday afternoon, and on Sunday they went back with Cris. They are not seriously injured, just bumped and bruised around the legs, and neither one has had the slightest bit of a cold after all that exposure. Nora, who had to hitch her way upstairs because of a bad knee now patters right upstairs like anybody else. Rather heroic treatment for knee trouble, and not prescribed for general use!

Only a few things recovered from Frank's place, and those were picked up by various people miles down the river, and saved for them,- a Navajo rug; a brand new quilt Nora had just finished; a china platter and a china wash bowl,- neither one checked or chipped at all, etc. Cris and his brother-in-law lost some cattle, but are profiting from the fact that they were all branded and ear-marked, and the sheriff has gone with them to help reassemble them. They are still shy some 35 head. Up where Cris lives it rained so hard that the water couldn't get away, and it just came into the house anyway. He is away from the rivers so this was not the river flood.

Frank and Nora may come down to Edison in a week or two, and Junior thinks they may spend some time with him this summer, here in Lincoln. Hannah and I were talking about it last night, and would be glad to have them take care of our house for us while we are away July and August. We don't know what their plans will be, and I don't believe they know yet themselves. Nina and Will brought them a lot of things from their store, which naturally met their most immediate needs. When I asked Junior if there was anything at all that we could do he said, "No, there isn't, it's just a matter of waiting until their plans are made." Cris wants to keep them; Frank wants them; and we want them.

I guess this is the end of Report No. 3

Sincerely,  
O.J.F.

Republican Valley Flood  
Disaster Story  
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Mr. and Mrs. Frank Ferguson, who drifted eight miles down the river from the Wilson farm to an island in the South Fork east of the McDonald farm, tasted neither food nor water for thirty hours after their perilous flight down the raging torrents. The J. A. McDonald family tried to get coffee and a lunch to them but the river channel was too wide. They said that they had not suffered from either hunger or thirst during all that time but that strong coffee tasted mighty good to them after the rescue. In a conversation with Benkelman friends later, Mr. Ferguson said that the roof was reduced from its original size to less than one fourth at the time of striking the island. Constantly hitting floating trees and wreckage on its mad flight down the river was weakening it rapidly and he said he doubted if it would have held together much longer to serve as the only possibility between life and death for them. He said that it was caught in high waves and submerged at intervals of several seconds at a time for as many as ten times in the eight miles they rode it. "Whenever it hit wreckage or a cross current I would yell to my wife to hold on and then under we would go. Sometimes it seemed like a long time before we came to the surface again and each time relief came to me in unexpressable terms when I discovered that Mrs. Ferguson had been able to hold on and that we were both safe again, at least for the moment. When it hit the island, outstretched limbs of friendly trees seemed to be extended to us and when we got a firm hold on them and found ourselves safely on the island, it was far above the power of words to express the feeling of gratitude for the almost miraculous escape from almost certain death that came to both of us."

There were all kinds of small animals lodged on the island but "after riding those river currents for eight miles, there was not any more scare left in us". The only thing that gave cause for serious thought was a huge bob cat that at one time became so friendly that he came within six feet of them. He didn't seem to be a bit vicious nor yet again was he afraid. "In fact," Mr. Ferguson said, "he seemed to be in a stupor and wasn't much interested in anything further than keeping out of the water." Opossums were quite numerous on the island and there was at least one skunk. The thing that worried Mr. and Mrs. Ferguson most was the presence of snakes, especially those of the water variety. "They seemed to be everywhere," Mr. Ferguson said, "and I killed several of them to keep a spot clear. Dozens of them were clinging around the trees and entwined around the bushes and smaller trees. It got terribly chilly during the night and there was no way of helping it. All one could do was to sit still and watch for the dawn. But all of these things were better than the howling, gurgling waves that were around us on every side. When the sun came out all we had to do was to wait for the rescue which was begun shortly after daybreak, and to keep from stepping on snakes."

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OBSERVATIONS ON THE 1935 REPUBLICAN  
RIVER FLOOD IN NEBRASKA

BY

Frank H. Ferguson

At the time of the 1935 Republican River Flood, my wife and I were living in Lincoln, Nebraska. I was a Territory Service Representative for International Harvester Company. I came home for the week end and we were listening on the radio to accounts of property damage and missing persons in the Edison and Oxford, Nebraska area. We never gave a thought that any problem could exist with my parents near Benkelman, Nebraska. However, we were worried about my sister, Mrs. Merlin Martin, and her family who lived on a farm near Edison.

About midnight we could stand it no longer so Ralph and Tarnie Andrews and I got in the car and drove to Edison, arriving there early Sunday morning. The farm was deserted. The water, which had receded, lacked only a few inches of getting in the house at its highest point. We found the family safe at a neighboring farm on higher ground. Merlin's parents who lived nearby had waded with Merlin, Florence, and family to higher ground and safety in the middle of the night. The parents' car, home, and all belongings were washed away.

The scene was terrible, homes gone, trees uprooted every where, and water still covering the entire valley.

When we arrived home in Lincoln about midnight we were contacted by phone by Uncle Olin (O.J. Ferguson) who read a small article from a Kansas City paper to the effect that an "aged couple by the name of Ferguson were last seen near Benkelman floating in midstream on the roof of their house". Needless to say that was a shock to us. Telephone connections were practically nonexistent, but I finally talked with the County Sheriff at St. Francis, Kansas who told me he thought the folks were rescued but he did not know for sure. We were unable to contact any other town so just hoped his statement was true.

Having seen the amount of the flood and the destruction near Edison, I was almost sure the only bridge that remained standing would be at Superior, Nebraska, so I left immediately for Superior, hoping to cross and go to St. Francis through Kansas. Travel through Nebraska west of McCook was almost impossible. I arrived at Superior but water was over the road at each end of the bridge and was too deep to travel through. After waiting several hours the water receded enough that I could cross. I arrived at St. Francis about noon on Tuesday and immediately hunted up a county tractor and operator to drag me across the river. There were no bridges left. The water was still deep enough to be over the floor boards of the car. When I arrived at the farm of Cris Ferguson (my brother), I found that he had rescued the folks and had them there with him and Mabel.

I remained there and worked for a few days and while there we went back to the folks' place to see if we could find anything. We were having trouble getting a location of any kind because all of the buildings, trees, fences, etc. were gone and everything was covered with fine sand. Finally, one of us stubbed a toe on the one quarter inch

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pump rod from the well. It had been broken off about six inches above the ground and was bent over squarely to lay on the ground. From the location of the pump we were able to more or less figure where the buildings, etc. stood.

Originally the river flowing east had its channel about one fourth mile south of the buildings. Through some apparent freak the channel made almost a ninety degree turn and came north right through where the house stood, continued on north a few hundred yards, and abruptly turned east again.

The house the folks lived in had been there for many years. It was built on a high foundation but to my knowledge had never had water around it. A county highway ran east and west about one fourth mile north of the house, and a township road ran north and south just east of the house. It was not uncommon for the river to rise and have water run over the township road between their place and the county road. When they went to bed this was the case. I am sure they could have driven their car out through it if they had been concerned. When they woke up in the night, the water was at the foundation of the house, so no doubt would have been over their heads between the house and the county road.

The reason for the high water was that eight and nine inch rains occurred in the drainage area of the river above them. These rains were spaced so that all the water hit the rivers at one time and the valley was not adequate to handle it. The south fork of the Republican which was near them has its headwaters near Limon, Colorado which probably is one hundred or more miles from them. The north fork of the river goes to Haigler, Nebraska where it becomes the Arickaree River which has its headwaters north of Limon, Colorado. The two forks of the Republican join south of Benkelman.

The river channel changed through the valley. The current scoured almost a straight channel down the valley eliminating many, many miles of crooks and turns in the old meandering channel. Due to the straightened channel the water flowed much faster after the flood than before.

The flood was a terrible thing. Many people were lost in it. I personally knew nearly a hundred that were lost between Haigler and Franklin, Nebraska.

After the flood was over and the valley had dried so that travel over it was possible, we found it covered many places with sand from one to four feet in depth. I worked with several contractors in building some large plows to turn this sand under and bring soil to the surface in order to grow crops again. These plows would cut and turn a furrow five feet deep and five feet wide. They took from two to three large construction crawler tractors to pull them, and were very expensive to fabricate and maintain. It was several years before much was grown on lots of the ground.

- August 1979

North Dakota