

IOWA HISTORY

The Centennial Flood of 1876

The body of 10-year-old Minnie Bowers was found lodged in a pile of mud and debris. She was one of the individuals who died in the flood of 1876 that swept through northeast Iowa wiping out the tiny hamlet of Rockdale near Dubuque.

On July 4 towns and cities across the country were celebrating the nation's centennial. In northeast Iowa residents had returned to their homes by the time torrential rains began pounding the earth. The rains continued for hours and by shortly after midnight, streets and cellars were flooded. According to the *New York Times*, "terrific thunder and blinding lightning" partnered with "rushing torrents" to gorge the sewers in Dubuque, where a baby drowned in her crib before her frantic parents could reach the infant.

The *Dubuque Herald* reported, "Like a mighty wave of the ocean" the flood waters crashed down the valley to Rockdale, perched on the banks of Catfish Creek. They "licked up bands of steel" in rail bridges, toppled the hotel and store and ripped a portion of the dam away. The voices of men, women and children crying for help could be heard as the storm "embraced the heart and life of the peaceful hamlet."

Those who survived told harrowing tales of violent brushes with death. The Harris family clung to the rafters in their attic for three hours as waters rose to their armpits. Charles Kingsley climbed to the roof of his house through a window. He tried to hold his wife's arm as she struggled to join him, but the house fell apart and his wife was gone. Charles Themmesch leapt off the roof of his floating house and landed on shore. A boy of 11 seized his brother by the hair as they floated downstream, eventually reaching a tree. The pair clung to its limbs until morning, when they were rescued. Martin Carrie had been in the saloon when he looked out the window to see his house "crushed like an eggshell" as his wife and two children were flung into the churning waters. He survived by clinging to a tree, but his family drowned.

The following morning the roads were lined with visitors, who were shocked to witness the devastation. Many opened their homes to aid the survivors. Only the mill survived, but thousands of dollars of grain were destroyed. It was estimated that damages in Rockdale totaled between \$50 and \$100,000.

The *Cedar Falls Gazette* reported that the "Centennial Fourth will not soon be forgotten by the people of northern Iowa."

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Sources

"An Iowa Town Destroyed," *New York Times*, July 7, 1876.

"The Centennial Flood," *Cedar Falls Gazette*, July 7, 1876.

"The Great Iowa Storm," *Perry Chief*, July 15, 1876.