

LIFE ON THE OHIO  
Switzerland County Historical Society  
Dan Back

BLACK SUNDAY

THE 1937 FLOOD

January 2007 marks the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of an event that changed Switzerland County forever. Lives were lost, homes, business and even towns were destroyed.

I am talking about the great 1937 flood. On January 26, 1937 the Ohio River reached an all time record height of 79.9 feet in Cincinnati. In Ohio River towns from Pittsburgh to Cairo, Ill., 385 people were killed, 1 million were left homeless and property losses eclipsed the \$500 million mark.

January of 1937 started out innocently enough. Much like the start of January 2007. The end of an unusual period of balmy weather was indicated for the Ohio River valley. Saturday morning, January 9, the wind had shifted and brought the temperature down from some 62 degrees to about 40. The river stage was 33.5 feet.

The following day one of the worst snow and sleet storms in many years swept down over southern Indiana. Flood warnings were posted with increasing rapidity during the next few days. Weather bureau experts expressed fears of conditions like those of the historic flood of 1913, or worse.

Wed. Jan 13: The Ohio River is reported to have climbed to 42.7 foot but predictions are it will crest at 43.5 Foot, well below the 52 foot flood stage. Except for those living in low lying areas, life in Switzerland County went on as usual

Thur. Jan 14: As heavy rains continued many roads were soon flooded. Residents in low-lying areas were forced to abandon their homes.

Fri. Jan 15: Flooded creeks were reported as subsiding. Preparations are being made to combat flood water in case the Ohio River goes beyond 52 Feet. Water has reached 50 feet after rising 7.8 feet in 24 hours. River Crest is still expected below 52 feet but the forecast is for continued rain.

Sat. Jan 16: The river is receding after reaching a peak of 51.66 Feet. All danger of flood is reported as having passed. Families began making plans to return to their homes.

Sun. Jan 17: A heavy downpour of rain extended up the Ohio valley past Pittsburgh causing the rivers to begin rising rapidly.

Mon. Jan 18: 1.79 inches of rain have fallen in the last 24 hours. Flood waters are now predicted to force thousands from their homes before the river rests between 58 and 59 feet.

Tues. Jan 19: River Crest is now expected at 60 Feet.

Wed. Jan 20: Flood waters have closed several State Highways. Hundreds of people are forced from their homes. Light rain is predicted. Estimates say the flood may reach 61 feet. As the river continues to rise additional areas of the county are evacuated.

Thur. Jan 21: There was a jump in waters following a downpour during the night and early morning. The river is over 63 feet and expected to crest at 65-66 feet.

Fri. Jan 22: Reports say the 1913 flood peak of 69.9 feet was passed by 10 A.M. and the water will pass the 1884 record of 71.1 foot by nightfall. Heavy rains have fallen the last 24 hours. Water will crest between 71 and 72 feet. Low points in the county roadways are flooded preventing traffic from getting through and making traffic dangerous. Thousands are forced from their homes. Business are closed as most are under water. Most of Patriot, Florence, and Markland are under water. Vevay fares somewhat better as it is situated on a high bank.

Sat. Jan 23: Heavy snow and wind conditions are present. Crest is predicted between 73 and 75 Feet. A report from Patriot indicates that of the 287 residents of Patriot, 273 of them were homeless due to the flooding. Reports showed that only seven houses, the Methodist Church, and school house didn't have water covering their floors. In the business district, 21 companies were submerged:

Mon. Jan 25: Ohio River at 79.2 feet and still rising. A crest of 80 feet plus or minus is predicted. Markland is almost completely inundated.

Tues. Jan 26: Flood water hits 79.99 Feet at 2 P.M. with predictions the crest may go slightly less than 81 feet. Many homes and barns are completely swept away by the rushing waters.

Wed. Jan 27: Farmers report a number of cows, horses, hogs and sheep have been carried away by water. The River is at 79.45 Feet and falling after Tuesday's peak of 79.99 Feet. No rain is expected.

Thur. Jan 28 and after: The crisis is passing and the time for assessment has arrived.

The Ohio River eventually crested in Switzerland County at 81.9 feet on January 25th, 1937. This mark exceeded the previous record high recorded in 1884 by nearly 11 feet.

Fri. Feb 5: The Ohio River finally drops below flood stage. County residents return to find their homes and most of their worldly possessions either washed away or destroyed beyond repair.

Could there be a repeat of the 1937 Flood?

What has changed since 1937?

There are fewer dams on the river. However, these new dams are higher thus the normal pool is already 20-30 feet higher than 1937. These dams are navigation dams, not flood control dams. During floods they are opened wide open to get the water out as quickly as possible.

Areas declared to be flood plain are being built on. Ground which once absorbed the rain is now covered with concrete.

More towns have levies around them. This has both a positive and a negative impact. The positive impact is that homes and businesses are protected from the rising waters. The negative effect is the river is more channelized which causes the river to rise faster because it no longer has room to spread out.

In answer to the question "Could there be a repeat of the 1937 Flood?" I would venture to say yes. The 1937 flood was considered a 500 year flood. This means that statistically a flood of this magnitude is likely to occur once during any 500 year period. Does this mean that we will not have a major flood like the 1937 flood for another 500 years? No! While living in Missouri we experienced a 500 year flood in 1993 and another 500 year flood in 1995.

We had a taste of what a flood would do to the county in 1997. This flood was classified as a 100 year flood.

Much of the material for this article came from the Vevay Newspapers.

Pat Lanman wrote an excellent story on the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1937 flood in January 1997. The article can be read at the Library and the Historical Society.