

Monroe Countians endured torrential rains in 1883

"Last Wednesday and Wednesday night the heaviest rain that was ever known in this vicinity poured down, literally drenching everything that was uncovered, washing away bridges, street crossings, fences, drowning stock and causing a flood that swept everything before it."

— *Bloomington Telephone*, Nov. 24, 1883.

Southern Indiana is known for its spring and fall rains, but the amount of water that fell from the skies in a 48-hour period near the end of November in 1883 left Monroe Countians shaking their heads. It was a shame. There was no other way to describe it.

The *Bloomington Telephone* brought its readers up to date in its Nov. 24 edition, as if they hadn't noticed what was happening outside, wherever they were situated a few days earlier.

"All day Wednesday the rain fell in torrents, but at night it came down in sheets. It is stated by those who ought to know that as much water never fell in as short a time as fell between seven and eight o'clock."

The benign little stream which used to be known as Spanker's Branch turned into a menace and cut the southeast and southern parts of town off from the rest of it. During the



LOOKING BACK

By Rose McIlveen

heavy rain the stream acted more like its more recent name — the Jordan River.

The newspaper described what happened. "It was not long until the swollen streams began to sweep their way, regardless of property.

Citizens from the southeast end of town could scarcely ford the branch, and below the college it was impossible to pass. (It should be remembered that "the college," Indiana University, was shortly to move to Dunn's Woods.)

Continued the *Telephone*, "The bridges on Fourth and Fifth streets over Spanker's branch were swept away, and houses near the stream were filled with water."

Harmon Fedder, who presumably lived in that area, was obliged to move out of his house, and a few others did likewise."

Residents out in county fared no better. According to the newspaper, "thousands of dollars worth" of damage was done.

To begin with, the fences along streams were swept away. Nor were the overflowing streams respecters of cultivated fields.

Other things that usually dotted the rural landscape were scattered. That included cords of wood and hay ricks.

The greatest loss, explained the *Telephone*, was "in stock, especially hogs. In many places hogs were fastened in on low lands and were drowned before assistance could be rendered, so rapid did the land overflow. Cattle are reported lost in the same way."

For the newspaper there was nothing like an on-the-spot report of damage out in the county. The editor sent a reporter southward on the morning train as far as Harrodsburg.

He came back with the news that from the train car window he could see "thousands of dollars laid in waste."

To begin with the L. N.A.&C. railroad track was undermined by the rushing water. The reporter added, "Just this side of the Harrodsburg bridge a mile or more of road was washed from its bed."

Clear Creek fared no better. Incredibly, "Much of the stone fence is torn down." In another part of the county, Jack's Defeat Creek went on the rampage.

"A report from Ellettsville states that the

stream passing through that place was never known so high, and it has taken fences, flood-gates and everything before it."

At least one professor at the university was able to put what happened into perspective, scientifically speaking.

According to the *Telephone*, Theophilus Wylie had used some kind of rain gauge that yielded the following numbers: Tuesday morning to Wednesday 2 p.m. — 2.31 inches; Wednesday to Thursday noon — 3.1 inches; and a total of 5.61 inches in less than 48 hours.

Undoubtedly, John Blair and "Squire" Stephens of Salt Creek didn't care much about the statistics.

They were too busy counting what they had left, if anything. Blair had lost 45 hogs, and Stephens had 75 acres of destroyed corn that had not yet been cut.

The final paragraph of the *Telephone* article described another "victim" of the heavy rain.

"The skating rink stayed one day too long, for the floods came and the winds blew, and the stone bridge on East Third street caught their tent and fixtures as the angry waves were carrying them down Spanker's branch."

H-T 3/25/96