Cadets from the Culver Military Academy aid in search-and-rescue operations following the 1913 Easter flood in Logansport, Indiana.

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INDIANA'S GREAT EASTER FLOOD OF 1913

FORGOTTEN WATERS

TERRE HAUTE HAD NO WARNING. AT ABOUT 9:45 P.M. ON EASTER SUNDAY, MARCH 23, 1913, THROUGH RUMBLING THUNDER AND FLASHING LIGHTNING FROM UNSEASONABLY EARLY THUNDERSTORMS, THERE CAME A ROAR OUT OF THE SOUTHWEST LIKE AN ANGRY EXPRESS TRAIN. HOUSES FELL, CRUSHING PEOPLE IN THEIR BEDS. FACTORIES EXPLODED. THE FEED MILL AND POWER PLANT WERE SET ABLAZE..

IN LESS THAN TWO MINUTES, THE DEAFENING ROAR SILENCED, LEAVING THE BEATING OF HEAVY RAIN FALLING ON A SWATH OF WRECKAGE FOUR BLOCKS WIDE AND SEVERAL MILES LONG THROUGH THE SOUTH OF TERRE HAUTE—AND THE RISING WAILS OF INJURED MEN, WOMEN, AND CHILDREN SEARCHING THROUGH THE NIGHT-DARK RUBBLE FOR LOVED ONES. **TRUDY E. BELL**

ALL IMAGES INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY; BASS PHOTO COMPANY COLLECTION, MARTIN PHOTO SHOP COLLECTION, JAY SMALL POSTCARD COLLECTION, P475

Only days later did a regional weather forecaster declare it a tornado. It demolished 330 homes; wrecked several important industries, including Root Glass Company and Gartland Iron Works; and caused an estimated $1 million to $2 million in damage (in 1913 dollars). More heartrending, it injured 150 to 250 people and killed 21. At that time, it was the deadliest twister ever to have struck Indiana.

The worst, however, was yet to come. The rains didn't stop. Instead, they intensified. The Wabash River began rising, overspreading the northern part of Terre Haute. By midday Tuesday, West Terre Haute (Taylorville) was three-quarters under water. Houses were being lifted bodily from their foundations and carried away. In the south part of town where the tornado had struck, the churning, icy waters rose through city streets until they were lapping at the wheels of boxcars that had been converted into impromptu infirmaries for the wounded and suddenly homeless. Phone and telegraph lines were dead. Train tracks and roads were submerged. Electricity was out.

A Brookville, Indiana, resident surveys damage to railroad tracks and boxcars in his community. The flooding in the Midwest prompted President Woodrow Wilson to declare a national emergency.

Only gradually did Terre Haute learn that it and the rest of Indiana were in the middle of the United States' most widespread natural disaster, the Easter flood of 1913. To the extent that the flood is remembered at all today, it's usually called the Great Dayton Flood, for the Ohio city that essentially functioned as the 1913 equivalent of New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

As with New Orleans, the focus on the one city personalized the tragedy and challenges faced by all flood sufferers: the misplaced faith in protective levees, the death-dealing ironies of no potable drinking water and of fires consuming buildings surrounded by acres of water, the sudden homelessness and destitution, the panic of separation from family, the subsequent spread of disease, and the determination to rebuild and to prevent similar future disasters. In 1913 Dayton's flood served as the prime focus of newspaper stories, national sympathies, and relief, and has since been the topic of several books, television documentaries, and even a stage play.

But also as with New Orleans, the spotlight on Dayton obscured the breathtaking interstate scale of the devastation. The Easter flood of 1913 was not only Ohio's worst flood, but also Indiana's. Nor was the devastation confined just to those two states. At its peak, the deluge spread across lowland regions of a dozen states from Missouri to Pennsylvania and down into Tennessee. The flood crests surging down the Mississippi River in April set new height records all the way to New Orleans. The same storm system spread record rains up across New York and into New England, setting record river heights on the Mohawk, Connecticut, and Hudson rivers. For a day and a half, the flooding completely severed all communications between New York City and Chicago, including the stock and commodity markets; its devastation disrupted freight and passenger rail service and the mails for weeks.

The week after Easter 1913, the Midwest suffered property damage greater than that during the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire, and its death toll exceeded that of the 1871 Chicago fire. Five hundred bridges and railroad trestles, 12,000 telephone and telegraph poles, and more than 38,000 homes and other buildings were swept away, and thousands of schools, businesses, utilities, and city streets were damaged. Direct losses to the Midwest were estimated—probably underestimated—to top a third of a billion dollars

Members of the Indianapolis Police Department take to a canoe to aid flood victims on Oliver Avenue. Law enforcement officers in 1913 had to deal with many of the same difficulties as the ones faced by New Orleans officials following Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

(today equivalent to more than $6 billion), most of which was not covered by the business or homeowner's insurance of the day. Most tragic, more than 700 people were dead, some 200 in Indiana alone. A quarter of a million people more were suddenly homeless and bereft of their life's savings.

The destruction began on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, March 20 and 21. The winter of 1913 had been unusually warm and wet, and March was particularly so, topping an oppressively sultry 80 degrees in some locations. But as an unusually strong Canadian high-pressure region moved east on Thursday night, temperatures plunged. Hurricane-force winds began mounting across the Midwest, sweeping from Alabama to Ontario. All over Indiana, record winds sustained speeds of up to sixty miles per hour. The windstorm uprooted trees, blew down billboards and barns, unroofed buildings, blew out windows, toppled chimneys and smokestacks, tore bricks from the corners of buildings, tumbled horse-drawn wagons, sank boats, and downed power lines. Flying debris caused injuries and at least two fatalities (in Lafayette and

A parade of rowboats makes it way through the floodwaters on East Fifth Street in Peru, Indiana. The Wabash and Mississinewa rivers both flooded their banks, causing chaos for the Hoosier community.

Frankfort). In Fort Wayne, winds were so strong that frame houses shook enough to move beds, waking their occupants, who feared they were in an earthquake. Most importantly for the days following, the windstorm splintered hundreds of telephone and telegraph poles and blew down several thousand miles of wires, crippling communications. To ensure destruction was complete, sleet moved in, encasing every surface and tree branch with glittering ice, its weight pulling down more wires and poles.

On Saturday, the winds abated and the ice melted. The night was graced with a total eclipse of the moon. But on Easter Sunday came Terre Haute's tornado and the pouring rains. With tropical fury but in icy temperatures, downpours beat incessantly over Indiana. In just four days, literally three months of rainfall fell, topping nine inches in the southern half of the state. Worse, more than half that water fell in just one twenty-four-hour period: Tuesday, March 25. In Indianapolis, 3.4 inches fell on Tuesday, while that same day Elliston and Shoals in the southern part of the state were deluged with more than six inches.

Because the rain was so intense and so widespread, even the smallest of Indiana's rivulets and creeks overflowed their banks, and modest rivers normally only a few tens or hundreds of feet wide spread more than a mile, flooding cities all along their courses. Indiana's major rivers became fearful torrents. In places, the Wabash River—which broke every high-water mark along its length—swelled wider than thirty-five miles; at Evansville the Ohio River reached fully fifty miles wide. Indeed, late in the week, as the floodwaters from both Ohio and Indiana poured into the Ohio River, hundreds of families in New Albany and Evansville were driven from their homes as the Ohio River began rising at the alarming rate of two inches an hour, eventually cresting at record heights.

LEFT TO RIGHT: *The 1913 flood overwhelmed a covered bridge in northern Indiana, lifted a train car full of coal to a precarious perch on the Old Vandalia Bridge in Indianapolis, and toppled a series of homes in Peru.*

But what also counted for flooding in Indiana was where rain was falling in Ohio. Most of Ohio's record rains that same four days—topping eleven inches in some places—fell over the unnamed continental divide that extends east-west across the northern quarter of the state, dividing the waters that flow into Lake Erie from those that flow into the Ohio River. That divide includes the headwaters of the Wabash River, chief tributary to the Ohio River. As a result, some of Ohio's deluge added to Indiana's, setting new flood stage records all along the Wabash River from its source in Ohio to its mouth at Illinois.

Because the winter of 1913 had already been unusually warm and wet, by March the clayey soils were already saturated. Most of the heavy rainfall simply cascaded off the hillsides, swelling even streams and creeks not known for flooding. Rivers began rising fast—faster than two feet per hour in some places. When they topped their banks, as most did on Tuesday, March 25, the churning waters began spreading wide with the speed and power of a flash flood. With so many telegraph and telephone poles downed across both Indiana and Ohio, almost no warnings were sent or received.

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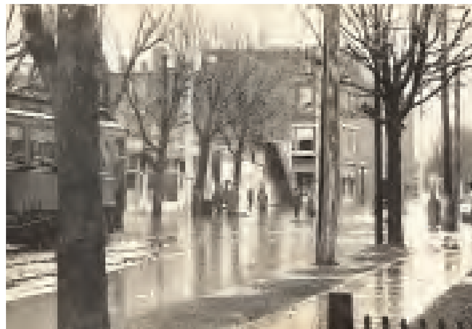
Along the Wabash River, the cities of Bluffton, Wabash, Logansport, Lafayette, Terre Haute, and Vincennes were more than half inundated and bridges were swept away. Tragedy was especially poignant in Peru, the winter quarters for several major circuses. As a major crossroads for railroads serving Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburgh, and Denver, Peru became the perfect location for many traveling circuses' winter quarters where animals and performers could rest and train. Colonel Benjamin E. Wallace, a major Indiana landowner and financier who owned the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus, which by 1913 was second in fame only to the Ringling



TOP ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT: *Spectators in Indianapolis gaze upon the ruins of the Washington Street Bridge, the Ell River surges around the Tenth Street dam in Peru, and an aerial view of the flooding at Indianapolis's Riverside Park.* SECOND ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT: *Scenes of the flood damage in Indianapolis, including a destroyed railroad bridge, wreckage left on the front lawns of homes, and an engorged White River.* THIRD ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT: *A member of the Indiana National Guard stands watch over homes in Indianapolis; a streetcar is stopped by floodwaters in Rushville, Indiana; and a view of the flooded Saint Mary's River in Fort Wayne.* FOURTH ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT: *Water rises to almost the top of homes near Tilly's Hill in Vevay, Indiana; a lifeboat plies the floodwaters on Third Street in Logansport; and three men survey the situation at the U.S. Post Office building in Peru.* BOTTOM ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT: *Debris left behind in Indianapolis following the flood, including a break in a canal.*

Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus, devised the idea for winter quarters. In 1891 Wallace bought 220 acres of low-lying land between the Wabash and the Mississinewa rivers. Although he had tried to buy higher property to the east, the farmers refused to sell their fertile lands. Had Wallace been able to complete his transaction, fate might have been kinder.

On Tuesday, March 25, the two rivers rose. The Wabash River—normally four hundred yards wide near Peru—grew to four miles in width. As its waters merged with the swollen Mississinewa River, they engulfed the circus winter quarters. Rescuers heard the frantic neighing of horses and the roaring of caged lions and tigers, which did not stop until the raging waters closed above their heads. Although the elephants managed to escape, the disoriented beasts—used to turning to humans in times of trouble—did not seek higher ground. Instead, they wailed outside the homes of their trainers, who were themselves trapped on upper floors by the rising waters. Although the trainers fed them hay and offered comforting words through upper windows, the pachyderms eventually succumbed to hypothermia in the chill waters. By the next day, nearly five hundred animals had perished.

Meanwhile, as soon as the Wabash River spread over its embankments and began pouring into Peru, fisherman Edward Mack ran through the streets shouting for people to run for their lives. His brave action was later credited for saving six hundred lives. People began racing for the higher land of the business section. Within hours, many homes in Peru were flooded to within two feet of their roofs. Most of the city's residents huddled in the upper stories of the business blocks near the Miami County Courthouse, which was made the center of relief work as the two blocks around it were the only parts of town not submerged. Between three thousand and five thousand of the instantly homeless—a quarter of the city's 1913 population of sixteen thousand—crowded around and inside the courthouse, those inside packed so tightly that half a dozen people suffocated. Those who could not get inside spent an awful night standing in the driving rain on the grounds around the courthouse, wedged shoulder to shoulder and anxiously watching the sullen waters that lapped ever closer to their toes.

Eight hours before downtown Dayton, Ohio, was ravaged by ten-foot walls of water loosed when the rivers through town breached the levees at 2:30 a.m. on Wednesday, a tragedy fully equal in scale befell Indiana's state capital. On the evening of March 25, the western portion of Indianapolis was swept by a wall of water more than two stories high when the White River levee burst at Morris Street.

Actually, Indianapolis's destruction began on the night of March 24, when Eagle Creek rose above its banks. The normally sixty-foot-wide creek spread to an angry gush half a mile wide. Some time later, the White River tore through its levees at many points. Around noon on Tuesday, Fall Creek leaped its banks, flooding a large part of the city's north side residential district, ending streetcar service, putting the water works out of commission, and threatening other public service corporations.

Those living in the endangered area packed possessions into wagons and carried pianos and larger furniture up to the second floors of their homes. At about 3 p.m. water started to seep through the levee. Everywhere the seeps appeared, a force of more than a hundred men hurried to stop them with bags of sand and bales of straw held in place by telephone poles. But about 4 p.m., when the men were concentrating on reinforcing the levee north of the Morris Street bridge, water unexpectedly broke through the barriers at the west end of the bridge at the corner of Morris and Drover streets. The district did not flood rapidly at first, but the thousands of gallons pouring through the breach gradually enlarged the opening. Hastily, people tied what valuables and food they could into bundles, grabbed their children, and began fleeing across the Morris Street Bridge. The evacuation of the crowds in loaded wagons proceeded in agonizing slow motion, as the water rose first to their ankles, then to their knees, then to their waists.

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Despite the break, the White River kept rising. By 6 p.m. the river was level with the top of the levee a hundred feet above the Morris Street Bridge. Although watchers expected to see the waves cut through the top of the wall near the bridge, the unexpected happened. Water burst through the base of the levee about four hundred feet upriver of the bridge. In an instant, tons of rock caved in and a twenty-five-foot wall of water half a mile wide cascaded through the opening with the power of a bursting dam. As the column of water shot out to Drover Street into the flooded district, the last faint hopes of saving the homes disappeared. Part of the White River's main current funneled into the residential district at Kentucky Avenue and Morris Street. Houses simply crumpled before the gush, and smaller buildings were picked up and swirled around to their destruction. Factories and other businesses were submerged, and tens of thousands were suddenly homeless.

Indianapolis was not alone that fateful Easter week. Levees burst all around the state—on the Mississinewa River in

CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM, LEFT: *A husband and wife in Peru, Indiana, calmly watch the flood from the front porch of their home; a meat delivery wagon is caught by the current in Rushville; supplies stand ready at a flood relief station at Wolf Hall in Indianapolis; and an Indianapolis child clutches what possessions she could save from her destroyed home.*

Marion, on the White River in Muncie, on the Wabash River in Lafayette, and on the Ohio River in Lawrenceburg—flooding the cities they were supposed to protect. In the southern part of Kokomo, Wildcat Creek simply overtopped its levee to inundate city streets with eight feet of water.

The statewide lack of communications from the thousands of telephone and telegraph poles and wires downed by the windstorm, tornado, and flood made orchestrating relief nearly impossible. Governor Samuel M. Ralston immediately appealed to the Bell Telephone Company, asking the firm to use every effort to put him in contact with the stricken districts. The company assigned Frank Wampler, the district commercial manager of Bell's Central Union Telephone Company in Indianapolis and a personal friend of Ralston, to the governor's office to work magic with routing emergency circuits around the state to patch lines into different cities. Because Wampler was often working well after the exhausted Ralston had retired about 1 a.m. each night, the newspaper reporters at the Indiana Statehouse nicknamed Wampler the "Night Governor."

To obtain the necessary food, shelter, and medical supplies for the injured and suddenly homeless, Ralston appealed for help to cities around Indiana as well as to other states. He sought donations of money, blankets, food, and even coffins. The governor appointed a trustee to receive all funds and to arrange for train cars of supplies to be dispatched. Although the various railroads—notably the Big Four, the Pennsylvania Lines, and the Vandalia—were reeling from their own huge losses of bridges, tracks, and locomotives, they put their rolling stock at Ralston's disposal and dispatched thousands of men in work crews to reconstruct the network around Indiana.

Ralston also contacted the American Red Cross, which sent Henry Stewart of Chicago to establish a temporary headquarters in Indianapolis. In 1913 the Red Cross was still relatively unknown in the field of disaster relief. Although founded by Clara Barton in 1881, it had been reconstituted with a congressional charter in 1905 and had already shown its mettle in providing relief to the victims of the 1906 an Francisco earthquake and fire. But in 1913 the Red Cross was still relatively small, with only a handful of fulltime employees in Washington, D.C., and only about sixty volunteer chapters around the nation, and never had it faced such a geographically widespread disaster as the interstate flood.

The waterworks in Bedford, Indiana, is overwhelmed by the 1913 flood. Water became unsafe to drink as human waste from flooded privies polluted rivers and streams.

Nonetheless, newly inaugurated President Woodrow Wilson—who on March 19, just two days before the windstorm, had accepted the supposedly ceremonial title as honorary president of the Red Cross—declared the Red Cross to be the official disaster-relief agency for the federal government. Ralston put the Red Cross in charge of the six hardest-hit Indiana counties, and the state of Indiana took charge of the rest.

With most communications and transportation paralyzed, independent local organizations did not wait for instructions from Indianapolis or Washington, D.C. Instead,

CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM, LEFT: *Advertising messages on billboards in Indianapolis are obscured by the flood, a horse and carriage carefully makes it way through wet streets in Rushville, workers cart off dead cattle caught and consumed by the flood, mud and debris line an Indianapolis street as the floodwaters begin to subside, curious onlookers gaze at the raging White River from the safety of the Meridian Street bridge in Indianapolis, and a man and woman pose before a set of twisted railroad tracks near Rushville.*

they took on the tasks they saw needed to be done. One of those organizations was the Rotary Club of Indianapolis. In February 1905 the world's first organization dedicated to community service was founded by four businessmen on Dearborn Street in Chicago. Called Rotary, within five years there were sixteen clubs around the nation (and one in Canada), and by 1913 there were more than fifty. In February 1913 Indianapolis business leaders met to found a Rotary Club in the state capital. On March 1 Rotary Club Number 58 received a charter in Indianapolis, with a membership of seventy-five, one of the largest in existence at the time. Within a month, the disastrous Easter flood was testing its purpose and resolve. Collectively, Rotarians nationwide raised $25,000 (today the equivalent of half a million dollars) for the Midwestern flood sufferers.

Bridge Street in Indianapolis is washed out following the breaking of the levee in Indianapolis.

Indiana was not only the geographical center of the Midwest's monumental winter storm system; it was also a virtual microcosm of events that unfolded in the nationwide disaster. Earlier the same evening that the tornado barreled through Terre Haute, a family of tornados five hundred miles west devastated Omaha, Nebraska, leaving 103 dead and hundreds more injured. With Terre Haute's telephone and telegraph wires downed by the windstorm two days earlier, Omaha's tragedy was the first news to be flashed nationwide. Its magnitude swamped the delayed news about Indiana's tragedy in Terre Haute, as well as about eight other tornados that same night that together claimed another eighty-nine lives in Nebraska, Iowa, Louisiana, and Missouri—all associated with the same monumental winter storm system.

Moreover, Indianapolis—with a 1910 population of 233,000, double that of Dayton—was the single largest city so badly devastated by the 1913 flood. Had news about the breaking of the huge levees in Indianapolis gotten out before that of the breaking of the Dayton levees, the 1913 flood might have been remembered as the Great Indianapolis Flood, instead of the Great Dayton Flood.

So what kind of storm caused the catastrophe? As nearly as the meteorologists of the day could later reconstruct from their charts and readings, it began following the normal pattern of Midwestern winter storms, but developed some special characteristics conducive to flooding. The strong Canadian high that had brought the widespread windstorm stalled off Bermuda, also stalling the normal eastward travel of the trailing low with all the rain. Then another Canadian high moved in from the west, squeezing the low into a long, low-pressure trough between the two highs, its center stretching diagonally from southern Illinois, across southern and middle Indiana, and across northern Ohio. Up that diagonal path, at least two lows moved in fast succession, the rain of one merging together into the next. But nothing in the weather observations or theories of the day prepared the U.S. Weather Service, or any other body, for the unprecedented volume of water that fell out of the sky during those four days of March 1913.

Could it happen again? Absolutely. That pattern of stalled highs that delay rain-bearing lows, which recurs occasionally over the Midwest, is now known to create ideal conditions for major flooding, especially if the soils are saturated or covered with ice. Indeed, that weather pattern has occurred since, notably for the major Ohio River-Mississippi River flood in January 1937, which mostly affected the southern third of Indiana. More recent Indiana floods, such that of January 2005, have locally exceeded a few high-water marks set in 1913. However, because levees and other manmade developments have constricted the flow of many rivers in places, new record heights can be set with a lower volume of water. In short, 2005 was no repetition of 1913.

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