



News Release

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75th Anniversary of the Great Flood of 1927

Vicksburg, Miss., March 12, 2002 -- This year marks the 75th anniversary of the devastating flood of 1927 that caused death and widespread destruction throughout the lower Mississippi Valley, from Arkansas to Louisiana, from Cairo, Ill., to the Gulf of Mexico.

The nation's most destructive flood began with the heavy rains that pounded the central basin of the Mississippi in the summer of 1926. By September, swollen tributaries were pouring through Kansas and Iowa.

From December 1926 to April 1927, heavy rains continued throughout the central areas of the basin. There were three flood waves on the lower Mississippi in January, February and April, increasing in magnitude each time.

In February, the White and Little Red rivers broke through the levees in Arkansas, flooding more than 100,000 acres with 10 to 15 feet of water. 5,000 people were left homeless.

The April rains were very intense and river stages rose rapidly on the Mississippi. By April 9, more than one million acres of land were covered by floodwaters, and the rain continued to fall. On April 19, a levee near New Madrid, Mo., burst open, flooding an additional one million acres. Portions of seven states (Missouri, Illinois, Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi) were under water.

-more-

2-2-2 1927 Flood

It is not known exactly how many died in the great disaster. Historians once estimated the death toll at 250 victims, but deaths due to disease and exposure after the immediate flood are hard to tally; some estimates exceed 1,000 deaths. At Mounds Landing near Greenville, Miss., for example, a flood surge blew out a levee where thousands of terrified workers were building a bunker of sandbags. Swirling westward, the flood ravaged 2.7 million acres of farmland before rejoining the mainstem of the Mississippi at Vicksburg, Miss.

The levee break at Mounds Landing was the greatest single crevasse ever to occur on the Mississippi River. It flooded an area 50 miles wide and 100 miles long with up to 20 feet of water. It put water over the tops of houses 75 miles away.

There were numerous breaks in the levees on the west bank of the river, also, inundating lands as far west as Monroe, La.

As the wall of water moved south into Louisiana, state and city officials prepared for the worst. Governor Oramel H. Simpson, with the concurrence of Commerce Secretary Herbert Hoover and the Corps' Chief Engineer Edgar Jadwin, authorized a plan to turn the flood into the St. Bernard and Plaquemine Parish marshlands, a desperate attempt to save New Orleans, La.

On April 29, 1927, at a place called Caernarvon, La., 13 miles below Canal Street, in New Orleans, La., 39 tons of dynamite was used to crevasse the levee, sending 250,000 cubic feet of water per second through a fur-rich, tall-grass marshland.

3-3-3 1927 Flood

New Orleans escaped serious damage, but the diversion annihilated much of the marsh traditionally trapped by the Canary Islanders whose 18th century fore parents had colonized Louisiana for Spain.

On May 17, the flood continued south and west toward the City of Melville and the fast-running Atchafalaya River. "The water leaped the crevasse with fury," reported a contributor to the Memphis Commercial Appeal.

"Breakers were shooting through and leaping over each other way up into the streets of the town. [The flood] swept everything before it. Washtubs, work benches, household furniture, chickens and domestic animals were floating away."

By August 1927, when the flood finally subsided, the disaster had displaced about 700,000 people. Twenty-six thousand square miles were inundated to depths up to 30 feet, levees were crevassed, and cities, towns and farms lay waste. Crops were destroyed and industries and transportation paralyzed.

At a time when the federal budget barely exceeded \$3 billion, the flood, directly and indirectly, caused an estimated \$1 billion in property damage.

It was a disaster of tremendous proportion, awakening the national conscience to the need for a comprehensive program to control the giant river. From destruction and ruin came the 1928 Flood Control Act, which authorized the [Mississippi River and Tributaries \(MR&T\) Project](#), the nation's first comprehensive flood control system.

4-4-4 1927 Flood

Until 1927, a "levees only" approach to flood protection was used up and down the valley, and most levees were built by local levee boards with the Mississippi River Commission's help.

However, the 1927 flood illustrated that the "levees only" approach was inadequate to control and safely handle the river's flood flows. It was time to take a new approach. More than 300 competing flood control plans were proposed, and Chief Engineer General Edgar Jadwin's proposal won the competition. His plan differed from the "levees only" approach in three major respects: (1) the incorporation of floodways to divert peak flows and hold down stages in the main channel; (2) backwater areas to divert peak flows from the river and store a portion of the flood waters near the peak of the flood resulting in reduced downstream stages; and (3) designing all works on the basis of a project flood -- a great hypothetical flood derived from examining historic rainfall and runoff patterns.

This comprehensive system of works was formalized in the 1928 Flood Control Act, which authorized the Jadwin Plan -- or what came to be known as the Mississippi River and Tributaries project.

The Mississippi River and Tributaries project has four major elements: (1) levees, (2) floodways and control structures, (3) channel improvements and stabilization measures, and (4) tributary basin improvements. These elements work together to provide flood protection and navigation, and foster environmental protection and restoration.

5-5-5 1927 Flood

The MR&T project is 87 percent complete and provides significant flood protection, navigation and environmental benefits. Since 1928, a total of \$11 billion has been invested in planning, construction, operation, and maintenance of the MR&T project. For that investment of \$11 billion, the MR&T project has prevented \$258 billion in flood damages to date -- a 24 to 1 return on damages reduced per dollar spent.

The [Mississippi Valley Division](#) includes portions of 12 states and encompasses 370,000 square miles. District offices located in St. Paul, Minn.; Rock Island, Ill.; St. Louis, Mo.; Memphis, Tenn.; Vicksburg, Miss.; and New Orleans, La., conduct the programs and activities overseen by the Mississippi Valley Division.

Links to photos:

[Arkansas City 1](#)

[Flood Victims](#)

[Marked Tree, Ark.](#)

[Arkansas City 2](#)

[Greenville, Miss. 1](#)

[Near Leland, Miss.](#)

[Arkansas Railroad](#)

[Greenville, Miss. 2](#)

[Near Old River, La. 1](#)

[Biplane](#)

[Greenville, Miss. 3](#)

[Near Old River, La. 2](#)

[Cabin Teele, La.](#)

[Greenville, Miss. 4](#)

[New Iberia, La.](#)

[Egremont, Miss.](#)

[Greenville, Miss. 5](#)