

The Nicely Family: The Effects of an Ohio Disaster

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The Ohio Flood of 1913 is recorded as the largest weather disaster in the state's history. For a five day period, society was devastated. Lives were lost, crops were destroyed, and buildings were ruined. All lowlands and riverbeds were susceptible to incredible flooding; therefore, no part of Ohio was unaffected. This account of the Vernando Nicely family is based entirely in historical fact. Only some small details about the way Vernando experienced the situation are the author's speculation.

Outside Bellevue, Ohio, Late March 1913

Vernando H. Nicely only resided in Bellevue for a short time. Mr. Nicely was from Defiance; his wife, the former Jennie O'Donnell, came from Wood County. Bellevue was a clean slate for Vernando and his family. Like many others, the Nicelys arrived in Bellevue for employment. A city at the crossroads of many different railroad lines, Bellevue was a bustling place that offered new chances. Vernando's two brother-in-laws worked for the railroad there already. Though originally from Defiance, they brought their families to Bellevue between 1905 and 1907. His other brother Cassius also moved to the Bellevue area to farm. By relocating, Vernando moved closer to the majority of his family, but also gave his children and wife a chance to restart after several setbacks, including the death of an infant son.

In early March, Vernando prepared his crop. The fresh start in Bellevue rejuvenated his family's attitude. He had three children: Ralph, 11; Robert, 5; and Norman, 2. Jennie was pregnant again; he looked forward to the new addition to his family. A new baby was a symbol for hope. Economic stability hinged on the survival of his crop; everything seemed to indicate joy coming to fruition.

Then the rain came. The skies opened and for five days straight water pummeled the earth, inundating his fields. Vernando felt cursed. Had God turned his back on him forever? He tried to act as though everything was normal for

his family, but the excessive rain influenced his attitude. One morning, they awoke to find their home and farm buildings completely surrounded by water. Rain continued to pour as Vernando and Ralph explored the region surrounding the house. They found no escape route through the water: they were trapped. On March 27, the last day of the rain, Norman had his second birthday. They were unable to fully celebrate the event because pessimism overcame the evening easily. Dampness lurked in the very air they breathed and was a constant reminder of a potential inability to plant.

The next day, Robert saw a boat coming through the high water. Depressed as he was, not even the sight of rescue made Vernando feel better. Jennie answered the door and was told by the man to collect their essentials. They would be taken into the city for shelter. She hurried about the house grabbing belongings. Vernando walked aimlessly, comprehending his destruction in his waterlogged fields.

Bellevue would claim fate was against the Nicelys from the beginning. However, the next twist it had in store for them was quite horrific. Just as they had gotten settled in the small boat with all of their essential belongings, a combination of a breeze and the distribution of weight capsized the boat. All of the family fell into the water. After a few moments, Vernando, Jennie, and a rescuer were able to get everyone safely back on board. They, and their belongings, were completely soaked. It was several hours before they were safely in town at Vernando's sister's house to dry. That was the day he began to cough; the rainfall had not claimed its last victim.

Vernando Nicely died on June 30, 1913 of typhoid fever, leaving his wife with four children. He was buried in Bellevue Cemetery, where you can still see his marker today. Vernando and the Nicelys were victims of the flood, just like many Ohio residents. Yet, rather than generalizing by saying that "lots of people died," it is significant to examine a specific case and the grievous toil the flood took upon real human beings.

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