

Surviving the Torrent: Victor Heiser and the Great Flood of Johnstown, Pennsylvania

*by Sarah Lancel
Wittenberg Class of 2000
Hartje Award Winner*

Thunder echoed through the valley. The people heard the rumble of the waters without seeing the thirty-six foot high wave as it descended upon their city.¹ It was May thirty-first 1889, and the South Fork Dam, a notoriously unstable earthen structure, had burst unleashing millions of gallons of water upon the population of the valley below. The water-logged population of Johnstown had already been enduring yet another annual flood fourteen miles down the valley, and citizens worked to save merchandise and possessions from the ever-rising water of the storm.

On Washington street, George Heiser contemplated the safety of his beloved carriage horses tied in their stalls in the stable. In the end, he sent his son Victor out to untie the horses and lead them to dry ground.² This errand surreptitiously saved his life.

As he untied his father's fine horses, he too heard the coming of the waters of the South Fork Reservoir as the wall of water and debris encroached upon his home.³ Victor emerged from the stable and saw his father motioning for him to climb onto the stable roof, which he did hastily. Later on in life he remembered watching the flood waters advance upon his home. He recalled that "... It was not recognizable as water; it was a dark mass in which seethed houses, freight cars, trees, and animals. As this wall struck Washington Street broadside, my boyhood home was crushed like an eggshell before my eyes, and I saw it disappear."⁴ He never saw his parents alive again.

A few moments after the floodwaters crushed his home they struck the barn upon which he was perched. The structure was ripped from its foundations and rolled over and over like a barrel. Victor desperately scrambled along

the sections above water and somehow managed to stay on top. As the stable was thrown into the neighbor's house, he leapt into the air and miraculously landed on the roof.

Unfortunately for Victor, the walls of the housed collapsed under the pressure and he was dropped onto yet another home. This time he dangled precariously from the eaves, but couldn't hold on any longer and fell into empty space. Victor had landed on the barn roof upon which he had originally sought shelter. The screams of injured and dying people as well as the splintering of building surrounded him and blended with the roar of the rushing waters. Nearly everyone who was swept away by the flood had some piece of clothing torn away from their body, and some were left completely naked. From the barn roof, Victor observed people passing by him clinging to life on various objects.⁵ He recognized some of the people drifting by. Victor recalled that "I saw the Italian fruit dealer Mussante, with his wife and two children, racing along on what seemed to be their old barn floor'. Suddenly the whole mass of wreckage heaved up and crushed them out of existence."⁶

Victor continued to ride the crest of the wave clinging to the roof of the barn for dear life. He noticed that he was being propelled toward a jam of houses and debris that had collected between a two-story building and a stone church. Once again, he was tossed from the barn roof. He had to jump over the girders and trees the force of the water pitched at him, and after each jump miraculously landed on the barn roof. Finally, it seemed as if he was going to die; a freight car descended toward him. Just before he was crushed by it, the brick building gave way and released the pent-up water

pressure. Victor's barn roof, upon which he had once again landed, shot out from underneath the freight car and continued along the relatively peaceful crest of the water.⁷

Like many other victims, Victor drifted helplessly along the top of the flood waters, and waited to see where he would be deposited. He gazed around at the others struggling to stay afloat, and recognized more people whom he could not help. An African-American man prayed on the detached roof of his employer's house as he floated past Heiser. Victor noticed the flood was sweeping him toward the stone bridge where debris was accumulating. In fact, the debris was thrown against the bridge with such force that it shortly became a funeral pyre that incinerated people and animals, alive and dead. It continued to burn long after the floodwaters had receded. Fortunately, Heiser was swept toward the hills in the backwash, and eventually jumped onto the roof of a building when the momentum of the water slowed.⁸

The debris at the stone bridge lit up the sky, and the screams of the dying echoed through the night air. By dawn it had stopped raining, and the survivors of the Johnstown flood emerged to survey the wreckage of their city. Victor, like the others, set out to find his parents and friends. The following days and nights were spent recovering survivors and corpses as well as reclaiming the leveled city. One out of every ten people in the city of Johnstown, over 2,200 people, died in the flood.

Many of the survivors stayed to rebuild. Others, like Victor Heiser, had lost everything and everyone near and dear to them. These men and women gradually, if not immediately, moved on and created new lives for themselves elsewhere. Heiser himself eventually became a doctor. Mercifully, the dam itself was never rebuilt, and the site it occupied became a historical landmark. Today, drivers on route 219 can observe pristine white tombstones stretching as far as the eye can see against the kelly green grass of Grandview Cemetery, memorializing the victims of an unparalleled tragedy in Pennsylvania's history.

Notes

1 David G. McCullough, *The Johnstown Flood* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), 145, 147.

2 Richard O'Connor, *Johnstown: The Day the Dam Broke* (London: Alvin Redman Ltd., 1959), 99.

3 Ibid.

4 Victor Heiser, M.D., *An American Doctor's Odyssey: Adventures in Forty-Five Countries* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co. Inc. Publishers, 1936), 4.

5 Ibid., 4-5.

6 Ibid., 5.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., 5-6.

Bibliography

- "Driver of Old Horse-Drawn Streetcar Tells Experience,"
Johnstown Daily Tribune 31 May 1939, ?.
- Dvorchak, Bob. "Flood City Doesn't Try to Deny its History,"
Johnstown Tribune-Democrat 29 May 1985, 30.
- Heiser, Victor M.D. *An American Doctor's Odyssey: Adventures in Forty-Five Countries*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co. Inc. Publishers, 1936.
- McCullough, David G. *The Johnstown Flood*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968.
- O'Connor, Richard. *Johnstown: The Day the Dam Broke*. London: Alvin Redman Ltd., 1959.
- Petrikin, Albert Barna, "Reminiscence[sic.] of the Great Flood on May 31st 1889, date of account unknown," photocopy of typed version of handwritten original. Courtesy of Cambria County Historical Society, Ebensburg, PA.
- Rice, Robert G. "Hell on Earth: South Fork Man Recalls Tragedy," *The Tribune-Democrat* 2 June 1959, ?.
- Walters, Phil. *Johnstown, My Uncle, and the Flood: A Fresh and Eyewitness Narrative of a Community as its Destiny Unfolds*. Ligonier, PA: Cliffwood Publishing, 1989.
- **NOTE: The eyewitness account and newspaper articles were sent to me from the Cambria County Historical Society in Ebensburg, Pennsylvania. Some of these sources did not have all of the bibliographic information, and one article did not have enough information available to use for citation.