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Weather Disasters in the Great Black Swamp



"We may achieve climate, but weather is thrust upon us." --William Sydney Porter (*O. Henry*)

The most disastrous flood in Ohio's history was probably the one which occurred in March 1913. These men are rowing down a Defiance, Ohio street. Edward Bronson Collection (MS 454). Original negative owned by Defiance Public Library.

Northwest Ohio is not famous for its weather—at least not in the same way that New England is famous for its winters or that Florida is famous for its tropical climate. Thanks to the clearing of the Great Black Swamp, the wind blows more freely here than elsewhere in the state (Bowling Green is fondly called "Blowing Green" by many locals), but for the most part, the climate is typical of the midwestern United States. There are four identifiable seasons—hot summer, cold winter, cool, wet spring and fall, enabling farmers to grow corn, small grains, and vegetables. Within this climate pattern are the day-to-day changes in the weather with which we all live.

Catastrophic weather is so memorable that the events serve as milestones. Floods, tornadoes, and blizzards disrupt lives and destroy property. The tornadoes that did so much damage in northwest Ohio in November 2002, killing five people, will be remembered for many years to come. What resources will future historians draw on to learn about the effect this and other large storms had on the people and the economy of this region?

Radio and television weather broadcasts alerted the public that a major storm was on its way and tracked it as it passed through the region, spawning F2 and F4 tornadoes. Doppler radar allowed viewers to see the storm front move almost street-by-street through area towns and cities. Film crews were quickly dispatched to relay reports from around the area during the storm and then to record the damage and subsequent clean-up. Television stations maintain file tapes of major stories such as these to draw on for news review programs and to supplement contemporary coverage when current video is not available. Video archives are becoming as important as still photograph archives as a resource for historians.



Two women were killed in the tornado that struck Genoa, Ohio on March 28, 1920. This photograph documents the damage done to the Walter Wright home. CAC General Photograph Collections.

While newspapers cannot provide the instantaneous coverage of the broadcast media, their value is in their ability to gather more reports from a broader region, create timelines, and assess the impact of an event from its start through to its finish. Small town newspapers can also provide valuable, detailed information about how the storm affected local people, from the perspective of those whose lives were touched. Because they can take their time, newspapers can provide many eyewitness accounts.

Newspapers are a valuable resource as well for documenting the events surrounding the 1913 flood of the Miami River. Although Dayton was the most critically affected, cities throughout Ohio also suffered serious damage and loss of life. The *Defiance Crescent-News* for March 25-April 1, 1913 printed all the news on the situation that it could gather, including the rumors of a state-wide death toll that ranged from over five thousand to under one hundred. The press room itself was inundated, requiring that the newspaper be produced on a job press, rather than on the big Duplex press. Sanitation and relief efforts were recorded, and by the end of the week, the Rexall Store was advertising the sale of "Flood Postcards."

Photographs provide graphic evidence of the damage done by natural disasters. Everyone who has a camera records the devastation. Cars overturned by tornadoes onto indoor theater seats or rowboats transporting flood victims past street signs inspire a kind of grim humor. Ironically, disaster photographs are sometimes the only records we have of homes and businesses from certain time periods.

Local governments respond to natural disasters, too. Police and Fire Department payrolls may record overtime payment, and comments on the situation may be found in City and County Commission minutes. Welfare cases may increase for a time until recovery is complete. Death records in Probate Court or in the Board of Health may reveal the names of those who lost their lives. Relief commissions organize volunteers and collect donations of cash, food, clothing, and medical supplies and must account for their activities in reports (for example, pOG 1850 is the report of the Relief Committee which responded to a record 1884 flood in Cincinnati). Private organizations like the Red Cross also collect donations and organize rescue, relief, and clean-up workers. The Wood County Chapter (MS 410) collection includes a scrapbook documenting the organization's response to a 1953 tornado.

Very large disasters also inspire a host of commemorative publications—*Our National Calamity of Fire, Flood, and Tornado* (1913) documents the Easter weekend natural disasters which struck the nation in 1913 (including the Ohio floods) and is similar to the "instant" books produced today on such events. Relief efforts were memorialized in poetry, "Ohio's Flood; the Great Disaster" by J. D. Alexander (pOG 3318). *The Blizzard of '78 (A Photo Album)* by Ann Bowers, *The Blizzard of 1978 in Putnam County* by the Putnam County Historical Society, and "Blizzard of '78: Snowbound in Bowling Green" (pOG 1252) by Mindy Milligan document what has been called the largest blizzard in Ohio history.



Called the worst storm ever to hit Ohio, the Blizzard of 1978 produced winds of over 70 miles per hour and caused power outages throughout the region. Here, two residents of North Baltimore venture out into the streets after the snowplows have made their first pass. CAC General Photograph Collection. Source: North Baltimore News.

The National Weather Service has been responsible for recording observations on the weather since 1870. Long a part of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) (www.noaa.gov), its records can provide reliable information about weather conditions. In the Historical Collections of the Great Lakes, the journals of the government weather station at Alpena, Michigan, 1872-1917 (GLMS 23) and the National Weather Service at Cleveland, 1870-1948 (GLMS 93) as well as a number of ship logs record weather conditions at those locations.

Farmers in the 19th century almost invariably recorded temperature and precipitation notes in their journals, even when they wrote of almost nothing else. As the years went on, these notes gave them a kind of personal almanac that served as a basis for planning the next year's work.

The November 2002 tornadoes filled newspapers and television news programs with stories of storm debris, the household goods and personal effects blown miles away from their original location. Efforts have been made to gather up and identify these personal items and return them to their original communities. History researchers are already familiar with the special fascination that such primary documents inspire. The devastation caused by the storm gave residents of northwest Ohio a greater appreciation for everyday life and its records.

—Lee N. McLaird

Bibliography

- **MS 410** Wood County Chapter, American Red Cross
- **MS 454** Bronson Collection
- **GLMS 23** Weather Station, Alpena, Michigan
- **GLMS 93** National Weather Service, Cleveland
- **pOG 1850** Report. Flood Relief Committee, Cincinnati, 1884
- **pOG 3318** Alexander, J. D. "Ohio's Flood; the Great Disaster" 1913
- **pOG 1252** Milligan, Mindy. "Blizzard of '78: Snowbound in Bowling Green"

Help When Disaster Strikes

If your books, documents, photographs, artwork and any other artifacts are damaged in a disaster you may find useful information on their salvage and recovery at:

Northeast Document Conservation Center
100 Brickstone Square
Andover, MA 01810-1494
Telephone: +1-978-470-1010

www.nedcc.org/welcome/disaster.htm

At the NEDCC website you will find links to such helpful guidelines as:

- Emergency Management Technical Leaflets prepared by NEDCC to assist you with all aspects of disaster recovery including information on companies specializing in clean-up and recovery.
- "Tips for Water Damage to Family Heirlooms and Other Valuables" prepared by the American Institute for Conservation and the National Institute for Conservation.
- "Salvage Operations for Water-Damaged Collections" by Betty Walsh and the Western Association for Art Conservation.

The NEDCC website will also put you in touch with such organizations as:

- The National Task Force on Emergency Response
- The Federal Emergency Management Agency
- The Illinois Cooperative Extension Service - Disaster Resources Home Page
- The National Fire Protection Agency
- Conservation On-Line
- The Inland Empire Libraries Disaster Response Network

--Eric Honneffer