

In Touch with Prairie Living

June 1997

By Michael M. Miller & Ron Vossler

Germans from Russia Heritage Collection
North Dakota State University Libraries, Fargo



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In this month's column, guest writer Ron Vossler relates his experiences in the great flood disaster which struck the communities of Grand Forks and East Grand Forks. A native of Wishek, N.D., Ron teaches writing at the University of North Dakota. During May, he joined the NDSU Libraries-sponsored Journey to the Homeland Tour to Russia, Ukraine and Germany as a writer and interviewer.

Flood: Near the Point in East Grand Forks, April 18-19, 1997

That Friday afternoon--from atop a makeshift bank of moist clay--I watched part of a dike collapse. This was the prelude to a disaster. Maybe a city block away, the swollen Red Lake River swept away some sandbags, spilling yard-deep water into backyards and alleyways.

Quickly, at the base of the dike where I stood, near a low spot by the Point Video Store, the water swirled around the legs, then rose to chest level, of a stocky workman in orange hipwaders disconnecting some hoses from a pump he'd been operating.

The workman remained calm, his face focused and intent--one of the many same faces which I would see during these past days on sandbaggers and police officers and National Guardspeople no matter the danger. Next to me on the dike, two police officers hustled back towards Louie Murray Bridge, groping for walkie talkies hooked to their belts, to report the new collapse alert.

Stiff from days of sandbagging, I stumbled after them. I kept to the highest rim of the dike, crossing what had once been front yards of houses, which had been lost earlier to flood water. Like sacrifices to the rising river, gabled roofs poked above the water line; picture windows opened into inundated living rooms. In the entryway of one house, brown sofa cushions bumped against the windows like bloated dolphins. Sagging into the water from the eaves of another house a sign declared: "God Bless All

You Sandbaggers Who Tried To Save Our Home."

Meanwhile, on the Louie Murray Bridge, spanning the Red Lake River, there was chaos. Civilians were cleared out, with only police, guardsmen and essential flood personnel remaining. "If that dike gives way," someone warned, not even finishing the sentence. The air was tense! Buses full of tired sandbaggers, bumper to bumper, plowed through the gathering water, their hot manifolds steaming, headed for higher ground.

Three blocks away, from the front steps of my home, I watched determined effort to plug the gushing gap in the sandbag dike which protected my area of East Grand Forks. This was no easy task! Earlier, from the height of one dike, I viewed the sheen of a swollen Red Lake River, stretching into the far distance. All that water pressing against our dikes made me feel hopeless then, even before the break.

National Guard troops in mottled green uniforms leaped from their truck tailgates at the river bridge entrance. Their officers shouted orders. Flatbed trucks, loaded with pallets of sandbags from "Sandbag Central," wheeled around the corner, then sped over the bridge. They were followed by frontloaders with mud-caked wheels, followed by top-heavy, medieval looking backhoes, appearing like disjointed judgment out of a Hieronymous Bosch painting. That repetition went on, relentlessly, until evening.

Again, from my own front steps--until people on the river bridge became spectral shapes flitting back and forth through the headlight beams of police cars and National Guard trucks--attempted to see what was happening. But, this night action was too far distant. One result was clear, however: those flood personnel bought time for the rest of us, by wedging or jamming sandbags into that torn gap, by shoring up that soggy dike.

Around ten p.m., I spoke with my neighbor, a navy veteran with a penchant for reading history, who said, "I've seen what water can do. I've seen monsoons." We decided when we would abandon, not if, as discussed on the previous days. From constant stress of our past week, he mentioned developing a nervous twitch in his eye. "Just like General Paulus at Stalingrad, before he surrendered," he said with a forced laugh, while nodding in the direction of the swollen river, no longer passively benign, often neglected water which flowed past our town, but now the enemy.

This was a long night, of sirens, with heavy equipment trundling past my house. There were radio reports offering comfort that makeshift, secondary dikes would be erected on sidestreets. Once jolted awake by a siren, I peered sleepily, hopefully out my front window. There, to my famished relief, I saw, or thought I saw, the long ragged mound of an earthen dike, hastily constructed along the highway between my house and the river. This vision seemed real enough--what I wanted to see--so with a sigh of relief, I fell back into a restless sleep.

Early next morning, Saturday, grasping in disbelief, radio reports were a mixture of panic and resignation. No one wanted to recognize, nor could fathom what impact comes when the dikes collapse. One spokesperson described of a wall of water--"the likes of which had never been seen"--which, when the dike near Kennedy Bridge gave way, would swamp much of East Grand Forks.

From my front steps I reassessed the scene. It was a shock not to visually embrace along the highway that imaginary dike which I'd constructed out of my own grogginess and need for security. Instead, stationed on the entrance to the river bridge, there were only National Guard jeeps, some haphazard mounds of soil, and a few grim-looking police officers peering apprehensively across the bridge.

The dilemma was starting to focus that I must leave my home, soon! On my second floor landing, I put out extra

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food and water for my cats, enough for a week, hoping they'd seek higher ground when the water hit. Listlessly- numb with shock--I carried a few armloads of books upstairs as parting ritual. Next, I drove from my not-so-familiar town just as the final evacuation orders came, not knowing (thankfully) the full extent of what had happened--until anxiety became a flood of its own later: recognizing that life, we know as familiar, had changed so quickly.

Share Your Memories

Readers are invited to share their survival stories during the difficult days of April, 1997. Some of these accounts and a chronology of events appear at my personal home page at <http://library.ndsu.edu/grhc/biography.html>. The Germans from Russia Heritage Collection website is <http://library.ndsu.edu/grhc>. For further information and other comments, contact Michael M. Miller, NDSU Libraries, PO Box 5599, Fargo, ND 58105-5599. Tel: 701-231-8416; E-mail: Michael.Miller@ndsu.edu.

June 1997 column for North Dakota and South Dakota newspapers.