

VIEWS OF THE PAST



The History of Kansas City, Kansas in pamphlet series

Series 5: "THE GREAT FLOODS OF 1903 AND 1951"

Sponsored by the Kansas City, Kansas Bicentennial Commission

THE 1903 FLOOD

Sunday morning, May 31, 1903, recorded the beginning of the most disasterous flood in the history of Kansas City. The valleys of the Kaw and Missouri Rivers were flooded, sweeping away bridges and isolating the city from all outside communication

This photograph was taken from the roof of the Maple Leaf Elevator several weeks before the 1903 Flood.



The same view taken during the crest of the 1903 Flood

The East and West Bottoms manufacturing, wholesale and railroad districts were covered with water to the depth of from six to twelve feet. Box cars filled with slack lime caught fire, which spread to adjacent buildings. Firemen were powerless. The city faced famine and disease as a result of sanitation problems. Looting added to the difficulty, and authorities were forced to give orders to shoot thieves and firebugs on sight.

Those who had homes and small businesses in Armourdale and Argentine had to leave the area, which meant over 20,000 people were in need of immediate help. The city was without gas, electricity, water and street car service.

A sea of water covered the lowlands, homes were buried and wild rumors of lost friends and relatives spread throughout the city. Fifteen persons lost their lives in this disaster. Property losses amounted to thousands of dollars.

The city of Leavenworth sent \$15,000 in food, clothing and cash assistance. Car loads of bread were sent in the early days of the flood and nearly every family in Leavenworth gave clothing and provisions to the people of Kansas City. Relief committees from other Kansas towns also sent supplies to the flood victims.

Even in these trying times, people retained their sense of humor. A street sign, hung in the West Bottoms, read: "A \$600.00 piano for sale --\$.10."

This pontoon bridge was the first bridge across the Kaw River after the flood waters had subsided.



THE FLOOD OF 1951

In 1951, the greater metropolitan area of Kansas City once again found themselves facing a crisis caused by flooding. The Kaw River, ignoring the dike system, swept through the Argentine lowlands and the Armourdale district, overcame levies on the east bank and flooded the Central Industrial District. Over eleven square miles were flooded. By late morning on July 13 the river had reached an unsurpassed stage of 45 feet the highwater marks of the 1903 flood.



An aerial view of Procter and Gamble and the Armourdale railroad yards.

Flooding damaged properties that helped provide the financial backbone of the area, including: Procter and Gamble and the Colgate Palmolive Peet soap plants; Wilson, Cudahy and Swift packing plants; Midwest cold storage; flour and soy bean mills in the Armourdale district; the stockyards and Stock Exchange; the big Armour plant and several small meat packers; Sonken and Galamba Corporation; and all of the Missouri industrial area.

Families took what they could of their belongings and piled in trucks and cars, abandoning their homes for higher ground. Some went to relatives and friends; others took advantage of the emergency shelters quickly set up by the Civil Defense and the Red Cross.

Ten people lost their lives in Kansas City, Kansas during the flood, and thousands were homeless with property damage totaling into the hundreds of millions of dollars. Twelve bridges in Kansas City, Kansas and Wyandotte County were closed due to the high waters.

Fire began to add to the problems when the storage tanks of two oil companies at Roanoke Road and Thirty-first Streets exploded, spreading their flames to Southwest Boulevard.

An explosive fire started in oil storage tanks and swept over a five-block business area at Roanoke Road and 31st Street and Southwest Boulevard.



The 1951 Flood was the costliest in the nation's history. Over three quarters of a billion dollars worth of damage was done. Out of the disaster, however, came unified action on flood prevention measures to make certain that the city would never again have to pay the price of such a disaster.

The story of the 1951 Flood is one of thousands of personal tragedies - of homes and belongings swept away in the flood waters; stranded railroad cars; enormous accumulation of debris; cattle and hogs swimming around aimlessly in the swollen waters; and submerged bridges, highways and buildings.

It is a story that reflects the courage and spirit of the people of Kansas City, Kansas and the work of the Salvation Army, Red Cross, Civil Defense and other emergency agencies who worked to ease the situation.