“River on a Rampage: An Account of the Ohio River Flood of 1937”

by George P. Stimson*

In January 1937 the Ohio River went on a rampage and climbed to its highest point in recorded history. This paper relates the story of the “Great Flood of ’37” as it affected the Cincinnati area.

The Ohio River is 981 miles long, measured from its source at the confluence of the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers at Pittsburgh to its junction with the Mississippi at Cairo. Draining an area of 204,000 square miles, the Ohio and its tributaries are found in all, or parts of, 14 states, from New York, Virginia, Pennsylvania and Maryland on the east, to Tennessee and Alabama on the south.

Flooding is a common experience for the Ohio. A year in which the River does not exceed 52 feet in Cincinnati is the exception, not the rule. From 1858, when records were first kept, to mid-March 1964 the Ohio has passed flood stage 78 times. In some years — 1961, for example — there have been two floods. Ninety-five percent of all floods have occurred during the January–April period, with March accounting for nearly one-third. The only summer flood occurred in

*This article is based upon a paper read before The Literary Club on March 5, 1962. Since it relates Mr. Stimson’s personal experiences, it stands as a source document for the historians of the future. Editor
August 1875, when the River rose just over 55 feet. There never have been above-flood stage readings in June, July, September, October and November.

There have been 19 major floods (above 60 feet) since 1858. The River has exceeded 65 feet seven times, 69 feet four times, and 70 feet twice — 1884 and 1937. The 1884 inundation, when the River crested at 71.1 feet on Valentine’s Day, held the record until the 1937 giant came along. The third largest flood occurred in 1913; the Ohio crested at 69.9 feet on April Fool’s Day. The manuscript reports of three Virginia explorers suggest that the Ohio was “full, bluff to bluff” in June 1773. Allied evidence indicates that the River crested at about 75 feet.

The records show that floods have been more numerous in recent years than in the past. Of the 78 floods reported in the past 104 years, 16 occurred in the first 30 years, and 29 in the last 30 years. Of the 19 floods that bettered 60 feet, only 2 occurred in the first 30 years, and 9 in the last 30 years.

Heights of the River at Cincinnati have been measured over the years on four gauges. From 1859 to 1907, the official gauge was at the old water works, with zero altitude of 430.06 feet above mean sea level. From 1908 to 1934, the Broadway gauge was the yardstick. Zero on that gauge was 429.8 feet above mean sea level. While the Broadway gauge, painted on the Public Landing and on a stake at the foot of Broadway, was used in the 1937 flood — after it had been extended by survey further and further up the street as the waters rose — the official readings were made in the West End Power Plant of the Cincinnati Gas and Electric Company. The gauge was located in a condenser well, free from the effect of eddies and minor fluctuations, and connected electrically with a recorder in the offices of the Weather Bureau in the Federal Building. This gauge was used from 1935 to 1946, when the present electronic gauge on the Ohio pier of the Suspension Bridge was placed in operation. Zero mark on the Suspension Bridge gauge is practically the same as that of the old Broadway gauge, at 429.6 feet above mean sea level. Above flood stage of 52 feet, the readings on the Broadway gauge and that at the West End Power Plant were correlated to give identical readings.

The Great Flood of 1937 began inauspiciously. There had been heavy rain here and upstream, and on Monday, January 18, the River passed flood stage at 7 A.M., and continued rising at the rate of about 6 inches per hour. U. S. Meteorologist W. C. Devereaux predicted a crest of 58 or 59 feet, after 1.79 inches of rain suddenly dropped on the region in a 24-hour span. As usual, the lowland areas
around Newtown, Tower Hill and the Miami Grove districts, and Coney Island and the Millcreek, felt the first effects of the rising water.

It was a fairly normal Monday in Cincinnati. However, a preview of what was to come later was hinted at in advertisements by the Cincinnati and Suburban Bell Telephone Company, the Baltimore and Ohio, and the Louisville and Nashville. Said the phone company: “Notice! To Telephone Subscribers in Flood Areas: — To maintain uninterrupted telephone service to subscribers who find it necessary to move for the period of the flood, we request that you notify us as soon as you determine when you will vacate.” And the railroads, in heavy black-bordered announcements, informed shippers that high water was causing them to cease using freight stations at Plum Street and at Front and Butler.

The next day, Tuesday, January 19, the Ohio began to obey Mr. Devereaux and inched past 57 feet. Devereaux predicted more
rain, but he expected it to be light. However, he moved his crest prediction up a bit, to 60 feet, and added that “present indications were that it would be a prolonged flood. Even if the crest does not exceed 60 feet, it would be several days before the stage would recede below the flood mark of 52 feet.”

Devereaux’s forecast of “light” rain for that Tuesday night was fairly accurate, but the light rain also fell over most of the Ohio Valley, and continued on into Wednesday, January 20th. At Portsmouth a fight was on to save the city’s floodwall, which was designed to protect Portsmouth to a stage of 60 feet. The River there had reached 58 feet and was still rising.

At Cincinnati the stage was 59.7 at 4 P.M. and Devereaux cautiously raised his crest prediction to 61 feet, a mark which he said would be reached on the next day. Businessmen in Cincinnati’s Bottoms were beginning to move merchandise and stock to higher floors. Cincinnatians reading about Franklin Roosevelt’s second inaugural ceremony may have seen a portent of their own future in the chilling downpour which accompanied the event in Washington. Even stranger was the sight of a rare o squaw duck, a seafowl seldom found inland, swimming in Ohio flood waters! With the southwestern Plains states covered by a deep low pressure area, Meteorologist Devereaux forecast more light rain for Wednesday and Thursday. The rain was anything but light. In the early morning, some 2 inches dropped within a few hours and the River and nearby tributaries ballooned. A new wave of destruction swept over the lowland communities. Property damage of $1 million was reported. The Ohio had now risen to 63 feet (1 1/2 feet over the predicted crest). At noon, it stood at 64 feet and continued rising at about 2/10 of a foot an hour. Devereaux, after indicating the pitfalls of estimating a crest under these new conditions, cautiously offered a figure of 65-66 feet by the weekend.

The unexpected surge caught hundreds of merchants by surprise. Valuable merchandise stored on lower floors of stores and warehouses in low lying areas was inundated. Even worse, the rising Ohio acted as a dam to the Little Miami, which backed up and took on the form of a vast lake. Its waters overflowed the Beechmont Levee and broke several important telephone cables, thereby producing a disruption in communication. Residents in Mount Washington became amphibians as they sloshed into the city proper. Nixon Denton, then a Times-Star sports editor and columnist, wrote that, in driving to work on Thursday morning, “practically everything along the devious course that I pursued was under water.” His ordinary twenty-minute trip on “less diluvian days” was now
extended to almost two hours. In his column “Second Thoughts,” Denton took a good-humored poke at the harried meteorologist: “With La Belle Riviere getting higher and wetter, the less said about Mr. Devereaux’s uncanny accuracy the better.”

Cincinnatians awoke on Friday morning (January 22) and saw the Enquirer’s screaming headlines: “River Stage of 70 Feet Looms;” “Ten Thousand are Homeless.” The situation was indeed grim, and even more rain was forecast. Only 3 of the 7 railroad companies could use the Union Terminal because of the inundation of lines along lowland areas. Lunken Airport was abandoned. The villages of Newtown, Elizabethtown and Addyston were cut off by the swirling waters, and Mount Washington residents no longer had gas and telephone service. The flood threatened to cut off Campbell County from Cincinnati and Covington. The Central Bridge was closed, and the Louisville and Nashville, and the Eleventh Street Bridges were threatened by the rising River. Some two dozen Hamilton County roads were impassable. Devereaux refused to predict a crest because of the continuous rainfall. By 3 P.M. on Friday, the River had passed the 1884 high water mark, and was still rising.

It was a grim state of affairs. Cincinnati was beginning to realize that it faced a crisis and prepared for the worst. Warnings were published that curtailment of electricity and gas might come at any time should the River rise beyond the level of protection provided by the Gas and Electric Company on the basis of previous experience. Telephone service was badly congested. Only the L & N and Suspension bridges were open to Kentucky and the former was expected to be closed shortly. Coast Guard men and boats were being rushed to Cincinnati from Cleveland and New Jersey. Train service to the Union Terminal was entirely suspended because, although the Terminal itself would not be flooded until the River reached 85 feet, all track approaches were under water. A stage of 74 feet in the River, while not expected, would put the Cincinnati Water Works Eastern Avenue Pumping Station out of commission and the city’s water supply would be cut off. Crosley Field was in the middle of a lake caused by the flooded Millcreek Valley. Police were on double duty. The fire alarm system in Cumminssville and Northside was knocked out. Buildings and cottages were floating past the Queen City. An “All Day Parking — 10 cents” sign barely peeked above the water at the foot of Main Street. The water lapped at the north side of Pearl Street. The intersection of Pearl and Eggleston was under water. All of Coney Island was flooded, the roller coasters writhing above the waves like the skeletons of ghostly
sea serpents. Boats and boots were the order of the hour, and there was a tremendous shortage of both.

Public transportation facilities were profoundly affected. Unable to deliver their passengers to the Union Terminal, the railroads were ending their runs at suburban stations. Pennsylvania passengers debarked at Norwood, and Big Four passengers from the west at Lockland. Oakley was the terminus of the B & O. The Winton Place station was under 15 feet of water. The airport was submerged and airline schedules cancelled. Busses still operated out of the city, but only on curtailed runs.

Up and down the River, the story was the same. The greatest flood of all time was either isolating communities or entirely drowning them. Portsmouth's dike had long since been topped and Louisville, less fortunate than Cincinnati because of its low-lying business district, was facing disaster. A Times-Star editorial correctly summed up the situation: "It is a major flood, perhaps the greatest in Cincinnati's history, and in its successive climbs to new levels, the most nearly unheralded and unexpected of all that the valley has known."

The weather forecast for Friday night called for rain changing to sleet and then snow, with the temperature dropping to a low of 20 degrees. It was hoped that the cold spell would slow the rising trend in the River. "There is nothing new," Devereaux said, "to change the predicted crest of 72 feet, or possibly a fraction more." He added that the River would probably stop rising Friday night.

Cincinnatians awoke on Saturday to find the city covered by a six-inch blanket of snow and the temperature well below the freezing mark. Had the snow been rain, it would have added another half-inch of precipitation over the water-soaked valley. Instead, the snow remained where it had fallen and there was no run-off — not yet.

Arriving at the Times-Star at his usual early morning assignment, the writer of this paper, then a reporter just a year or so out of the cub stage, was handed a strange assignment. Times-Star photographer Pete Koch, a naturalist and an outdoorsman as well as a lensman, had brought a canoe to town on top of his car. I, suspected of knowing how to paddle a canoe because I had talked too much about past summers spent at a boy's camp on the Greenbrier River in West Virginia, was ordered to accompany Pete on a canoe trip on the raging Ohio.

This foolhardy venture began when we launched the canoe on Eggleston Avenue, above Third Street, and sallied forth on the brown waters toward the old Pennsylvania Station at Pearl and Butler. In the backwaters it was easy going, if you remembered to duck your
head to keep from being garrotted, and perhaps electrocuted, by the trolley wires. They were suspected of carrying current. In any event, we did not test them. At Pearl and Eggleston, the water was flush with the top of the street signs. At the Cincinnati end of the L & N Bridge, a few people who had walked over from Kentucky were waiting to be ferried ashore in a skiff. Somewhere in an empty, flooded building, a lonely telephone was ringing. In the snow on the top of nearly submerged shed roofs were the footprints of rats. It was not until we turned from the protection of flooded buildings onto the edges of the Ohio itself that we found out how brash we were. Despite Pete's experienced and muscular arms paddling in the stern, the current whipped the 18-foot canoe around like a twig. We quickly sought the comparative shelter of the backwaters again.

A visit was made to the Central Bridge where nary a footprint or tire track marred the expanse of snow on the roadway. The toll collector was sitting quietly in his booth, waiting for we never found out what. Certainly no traffic would come his way. It had not for
several days, ever since the flood cut off the bridge, and it would not for quite a few days more.

From the bridge, and with our canoe moored to a stairway railing, Pete took a panoramic view of the flood and snowbound city. The River stood at 72.8 feet, and it was to remain stationary at that point most of the day. Upstream, behind the ice piers at the foot of Lawrence Street, was the Island Queen, riding high, even with the roofs of buildings along the riverfront.

Empty, deserted, a ghost city, was the impression of Cincinnati’s frontage on the Ohio. The water had submerged many waterfront one-story buildings. The old structures, harking back to the halcyon days when the River was Cincinnati’s means of livelihood, felt the lapping waters on their limestone and sandstone walls well into the second floors. Everywhere the water poked long fingers into alleys and streets, reaching up toward the higher ground of the business district. Oddly, the only sign of life was a cluster of houseboats, moored close to a warehouse, swinging this way and that with the current, fathoms above what had been, a week before, a busy waterfront thoroughfare. It was a strange sight and one long remembered. With a sigh of relief, Pete and I paddled back through the eddies and made a landing at the foot of Broadway, well above Second Street and beyond a flooded Pearl Street Market.

As the River marked time, the city took measures to stamp out looting of flooded buildings. Police ordered a ban on sightseers on Sunday, with other than emergency vehicles prohibited within five blocks of the flood zone. Ice in the River hindered rescue work, and food and clothing for refugees became a problem. The Union Central Life Insurance Company turned over its annex building at Third and Vine to the Red Cross and other relief forces. Members of the Ohio National Guard were called out for duty, and the number of railroads using the Union Terminal was cut to two — The Southern and the C & O of Indiana, both of which had high-level approaches to the station. Hotels were filled to capacity as many persons found it impossible to reach their homes in outlying areas in Ohio and across the River. Life, however, went on. A baby was born in the flooded area of the East End, and a Newtown couple, who fled their inundated home four hours before, became parents in Bethesda Hospital.

While food and fuel were problems in many parts of the city, the Cincinnati Gas and Electric Company, waging a gallant fight against rising water in the condenser wells of its West End Power Plant, announced that the power supply was protected. The Cincinnati Water Works, waging an equally brave battle in its East End
Pumping Station, assured the citizens that water would continue to flow through the mains.

And the Kroger Company, rising to heights of prose undreamed of, ran this deathless advertisement:

WE CONSIDER IT OUR DUTY TO THE PEOPLE OF CINCINNATI———

In the midst of this catastrophe — the great flood which has descended on our city — every mother's son and daughter of the Kroger organization — in this city and all surrounding territory, pledge themselves to work night and day and do everything within their power to supply our friends, neighbors and fellow citizens with a continuous and reasonably adequate supply of food.

Some of my associates have not had their clothes off for forty-eight hours, sloshing about in the water in those stores that are flooded, straining every nerve to save food for human consumption.

We have trucks lined up in Columbus, Dayton, Indianapolis to carry adequate supplies from these cities to our city. No road will be too long, no weather too bad, no night too dark to stop our gallant and faithful truckdrivers from discharging their duty to Cincinnati and her citizens.

We consider it our duty to the people of Cincinnati, particularly in the time of an emergency, a public trust, and we will go the limit of human endurance to discharge that trust.

Hundreds of calls have come into the Kroger office asking about the possibilities of a food shortage. It would be folly to say that food supplies are normal or that there is no danger of a shortage. But I must say to the people of Cincinnati and vicinity that we will do everything in our power to furnish adequate food supplies — come what may!

Let us all be helpful, cooperative, determined and calm during the trials of a great and disastrous flood. That great organization, the Red Cross, is moving to the limit of its abilities to supply the needs of the homeless. Let me appeal to every individual in Cincinnati to contribute to the Red Cross — money, clothes, food, anything that will furnish to the unfortunate the necessities of life.

(Signed)

Albert S. Morrill,

President, Kroger Grocery and Baking Co.
Piggly-Wiggly Corporation
On the other side of the commercial coin, a modest notice, black-bordered, of course, appeared on the same page:

NOTICE
SEE THE FLOOD
from the Top of Carew Tower
Avoid Traffic Congestion at Flooded Areas and
Help Police and Relief Workers
ADMISSION 25¢
All Proceeds from Admissions during
Flood will be Donated to
American Red Cross
THOMAS EMERY’S SONS, INC.

In the Millcreek Valley, near where Arlington Street dips down from Colerain between the buildings of the Crosley Radio Corporation and meets Spring Grove Avenue, a number of gasoline storage tanks of the Standard Oil Company were broken loose from their foundations by the rising backwaters of the Ohio. Upended, they spread their contents upon the flood waters. All smoking was banned in the area, and fire and police officials sat anxiously with fingers crossed. At 10:30 A.M., Sunday, January 24, a streetcar wire snapped in front of the Crosley Company main plant, and dropped
into the water. A police officer on the scene reported: "There was a sizzling arc and a flash, and suddenly the whole water was a mass of flames." A fireman arriving at the scene looked about and, according to the police officer, stated that it was the first fire he had ever seen which prompted him to think of turning around and going back, so hopeless did the situation appear. Within minutes, the scene was a roaring inferno. Two hours later the dancing flames had consumed the refrigerator and storage building of the Crosley Corporation. In two hours, this building was reduced to twisted girders, fused glass and fallen brick. The fire next raced to the Standard Oil plant. The smoke and flame billowed to tremendous heights as tanks and drums of oil, gasoline, naphtha and other volatile fluids exploded in a staccato fashion. The flames swept through the Triumph Manufacturing Company and the Cincinnati Fence Company. At one time, firemen reported that thirty-two buildings were ablaze. Every available city fireman was thrown into the battle. Companies from Norwood and nearby communities were called in. “Black Sunday” a Times-Star reporter with the appropriate name of Bob Waters called it, and so it is known to this day in local tradition.

But Black Sunday actually began earlier than 10:30 A.M. It began in the pre-dawn hours when rain again began to fall on Cincinnati. It was a pouring rain, dumping 2.34 inches on an already soggy city. More than an inch fell over the central Ohio Valley, and the River, fed by the new precipitation and the slush from melted snow, again began rising at 7 A.M. Sunday. From a stage of 73.4 feet at that hour, it surged to 77.3 before the day was over. Apparently unaccustomed to such a flood, the electric recording river gauge of the Weather Bureau stopped functioning at 70 feet and readings were being made by sight on the West End Power Plant gauge. Late Sunday afternoon, with the 75-foot mark reached, the River overcame the struggling men at the East End Pumping Station of the Water Works. The pumps shut down and, paradoxically, in the midst of the greatest flood in its history, Cincinnati was without water!

At the Crosley fire, where this writer was clumping and sloshing around in hip boots, asking inane questions of Marshal Edward Shearwood and periodically telephoning a report to the Times-Star on the situation, the water stoppage at first promised to be a major disaster. I was standing by Marshal Shearwood when a fire-fighter ran up and shouted: “Sir, the water has been shut off.” The Marshal, with rain streaming down his smoke-blackened face, did not hesitate a minute. “Turn those god-damned pumpers around and stick the intake hoses in the river,” he ordered. Ohio River water was used
from then on to fight the fire which the Ohio itself started. Gazing on the blazing inferno which, at its height, covered 3½ square miles of inundated land and affected 32 buildings, I felt constrained to ask the Marshal something, and so propounded about the most stupid question on record for that day. "Have you got it under control?" I asked. Showing remarkable restraint, the Marshal grabbed my arm and pointed to some large tanks in the middle of the blaze on which firemen were pouring water. "See those tanks?" he said. "They're full of naphtha. If they don't go, I've got her whipped." They did not "go," and the fire was "whipped."

With the water supply off, Cincinnatians began drawing on the reservoirs. They were told to fill pots, pans, jugs, crocks and all available containers, including washbasins and bathtubs, with water as an emergency supply. It was to be used, among other things, for flushing toilets, and the staunch citizens became quite expert at flushing this vital piece of sanitary equipment with a minimum amount of precious aqua pura. It was interesting to check the rate of water consumption from the reservoirs. We then lived in a third-floor apartment in Clifton, apparently at the same level as the Winton Road reservoir. As water was parcelled out during a one-

hour flow during mornings and evenings, it successively ceased to come from the taps on the fourth floor, then the third, and so on, until after a few days, water could only be obtained in the basement.
Springs and wells which had been long forgotten suddenly came back into use. Lines formed on Clifton Avenue Hill where residents came to get water piped from a spring. Norwood, with its own supply, came to the rescue, delivering water in street flushing trucks. Toward the end of the week, water was even sent to Cincinnati from Cleveland and Chicago, coming via railroad tank cars and trucks. It was not an unfamiliar sight to see a street flusher labeled “City of Cleveland, Division of Streets” wandering around Cincinnati. The downtown hotels, which had well water of their own, did a rushing business in the days that followed, and some Cincinnatians went to the Netherland Plaza, or to Dayton, Hamilton and Columbus hotels, for the privilege of taking a bath.

Also on Black Sunday, the Cincinnati Gas and Electric Company’s West End and Columbia plants ceased operations. Cincinnati had no locally generated power. What it received it got through a power grid from neighboring cities. Electricity was valuable, and residents were asked to limit their use to the radio, refrigerator and one light. Whole sections of the city were deliberately cut off circuits to save power. Only on streets where the old, familiar, dependable gas lights gave their friendly gleam was there any illumination.

Cincinnati was in the grip of a major disaster. Council voted extreme powers to City Manager Clarence A. Dykstra and an emergency holiday was proclaimed. Mayor Russell Wilson broadcast a message of assurance to the citizens. Certain streets were off limits; schools, theaters and stores were closed; all water should be boiled; gas, fuel and medical supplies must be conserved; and utmost conservation of utility services was ordered.

Black Sunday bowed out on a dark city, beset by an inundation of more than 77 feet in the Ohio, without water, and living in a state of emergency. Fires burned despite the efforts of weary firemen, and business was at a standstill. All social and other events had been called off. What few advertisements appeared in the newspapers either announced closed doors and further curtailment of vital activities, or urged the citizens to conserve existing supplies. A typical notice is that of Mabley and Carew which said: “At the Request of City Manager Dykstra, Mabley and Carew will be Closed Today. We ask that our employees do all they can to help their fellow Cincinnatians during this crisis and to refrain from coming to town today.” Other stores and business concerns ran ads offering financial assistance to any hard-pressed employee, or the establishment of temporary payroll offices. Insurance companies announced
a month's grace period to policyholders who could not meet premium deadlines.

And the Ohio continued to rise. On Monday, January 25, it was 79.4 feet, and going up. It was rising from Pittsburgh to Cairo. Louisville was paralyzed with nearly three-quarters of its population homeless. The Ohio's current was carrying a staggering 894,000 cubic feet of water per second past Cincinnati. In the Ohio's entire 981-mile length, only one bridge was open — Cincinnati's Suspension. Traffic on it was maintained by means of a temporary causeway built in Covington and a sandbagged approach at the Cincinnati end. Only authorized vehicles were permitted to cross.

Monday brought another fire — a "ten-blow" alarm. Indeed, every fire would now become a ten-blow affair since the city was without water to fight fires. The blaze was in the Riverview Apartments on Hackberry Street, and threatened to be a serious conflagration. But the Fire Department had learned its lesson the day before on Arlington Street. When available chemicals and cistern water were exhausted, Chief Barney Houston ordered 5,000 feet of hose stretched from the high Walnut Hills bluff to the River itself, nearly 300 feet below. Five pumpers, stationed at intervals up the hillside, were used to boost the pressure. Although flames at times shot 30 feet in the air, the blaze was brought under control.

Late that day, with the River at 79.55 feet, Meterologist Devereaux forecast a crest of "80 feet, plus or minus," and said it would be reached late that night or early the next day. And reach 80 feet it did — or almost. At 2 A.M. on Tuesday, January 26, 1937, the Ohio River stage at Cincinnati was 79.99 feet, estimated by sight on the West End Plant gauge. At 3 A.M. it read 79.97, went back up to 79.99 at 4 A.M. and then began a slow fall. By 8 A.M. it had dropped to 79.92, and the Times-Star headlined: "OHIO RIVER AT CREST, BELIEF." The belief was well-founded. By noon the River had fallen to 79.84 and to 79.63 by midnight. Lieut. Col. Dabney O. Elliott, U.S. Engineer at Cincinnati, said the top had been reached. Devereaux, at last cautious after so many misses, stated the River at Cincinnati would go "not more than one foot above the stages of early Tuesday," which meant over 80, but under 81.

A 79.99 top was an odd figure. It is a bare eighth of an inch below 80 feet. Just how it was set as the official crest, particularly when it was read by sight on a painted gauge, and not recorded by delicate instruments, is a mystery. The Weather Bureau explanation is that the 80-foot mark was never quite wetted, at least when the gauge was being read, so the 79.99 was the best estimate. A diligent
“ISLAND QUEEN” RISES TO MEET MT. ADAMS, 1937

Courtesy of George Stimson
search of the records, and talks with newsmen who tried to track it down, produce no confirmation of the rumor that the official crest was deliberately kept below 80 feet. For what reason? Had it reached an official 80 feet, as the rumor went, double indemnity clauses in certain insurance contracts might have become effective, and the companies would likely have been thrown into bankruptcy. For all practical purposes, the Weather Bureau now accepts 80 feet.

When the crest was reached, 45 of Hamilton County’s 350 square miles, and 11 of Cincinnati’s 72 square miles were under water. The shore line of the River followed the 509-foot contour line, reaching up the Little Miami Valley to Terrace Park, and up the Millcreek Valley to Elmwood Place and Hartwell. Both those valleys were lakes upon which there was no life, except that in rescue craft. The waters lapped at the south side of Third Street, and the Coast Guard launched boats at Third and Vine. California and Newtown were submerged, half the city was without any water supply at all, traffic lights were off, stores and theaters were closed, and downtown streets were off limits for private automobiles unless on official business. The skimpy electric power available ruled out all but necessary elevator operations. Home plate at Crosley Field was under twenty feet of water. A similar depth covered Knowlton’s Corner.

So it was eight days after the River spilled over of its banks and passed flood stage. But bad as it was, it was not as terrible as radio commentator Floyd Gibbons made it. Broadcasting from a comfortable suite in the Netherland Plaza, he told the nation that all of Cincinnati was inundated and that the water was swirling around outside his hotel room, a statement he proved by swishing water in a washtub for sound effects. Mr. Gibbons was never a very popular figure in Cincinnati after that.

The flood had its humorous aspects, too. Just before reaching crest, the Ohio eddied through the open windows of the board room of the Wadsworth Watch Case Company in Dayton, Kentucky and gently lifted from its place on the wall the portrait of the Company’s founder. Out the window went the oil painting, headed for the Mississippi. A waterfront character, rowing about on the River near Bellevue to see what he could find, chanced to spot the gilt-framed picture drifting along. “God Damn,” he said, “there goes old man Wadsworth!” He fished the portrait out and later returned it to the Company, little the worse for its watery journey.

The River, which rose so rapidly, took a long time to fall. Thirty-six hours after it reached its crest, it had not yet dropped a foot. Six days were to elapse before it had receded to the 70-foot mark, which was below the 1884 record. By then the Water Works was being dried
out, and electricity had been restored on a partial basis as generators were placed back in service. One week after the crest, with the River at 66 feet and falling rapidly, the Eastern Avenue Pumping Station started limited operations and water once more flowed through Cincinnati’s mains. On Wednesday, February 3, 1937, City Manager Dykstra announced that stores could open the next day. On Friday, February 5th, between 4 and 5 A.M., the Ohio dropped below flood stage of 52 feet, and the 1937 flood slipped into history.

For 19 days or parts thereof, the River had been out of its banks. At the crest, about 15 percent of Cincinnati was under water. Yet, there were only 8 casualties that came as a direct result of the flood. There was no increase in disease, no curtailment of gas service, public transportation was always available to the residential areas, the fuel supply was adequate, and telephone service was uninterrupted except for the heavy burden placed on the system because of the emergency. Business almost as usual would have been the order of the day throughout the crisis had not the water and electric power supplies failed. Damage caused by the flood was estimated variously at $15 to $65 million.

What caused the excessive rainfall — and the flood? The villain was an abnormal barometric pressure distribution over most of the northern hemisphere. Pressure was very high at and above the earth’s surface from the South Atlantic states eastward to Bermuda — the familiar Bermuda High of summer months — resulting in a continuous northward and northeastward movement of tropical air masses from Louisiana and Tennessee eastward to the Atlantic States, New York and New England. At the same time, air masses of polar origin moved south almost continuously over most of the western half of the United States. In the technical phraseology of C. L. Mitchell, Forecaster of the Washington Forecast District of the Weather Bureau:

The extremely heavy rainfall over the Ohio Valley, Tennessee and Arkansas and part of the adjoining areas was in general caused by the fact that this area was so located with relation to the very deep areas of high pressure on either side that at the earth’s surface the line of contact between the warm, moist air from the south, and the dense, cold air of polar origin that came in over the Ohio and middle Mississippi Valleys on many days from the north and northeast, lay somewhere over this area much of the time; and the less dense warm air from the south or southwest was forced to rise over the cold and denser air. The rapid lifting of the very moist air of tropical origin resulted in abundant precipitation.
A weary Mr. Devereaux is reported to have explained it much more succinctly when he told a reporter: "If we hadn't had so much rain, there wouldn't have been a flood."

HOW TO GET RID OF RATS

"Goats kept about barns and graneries will effectually drive every rat from the premises. The smell of the goat is very obnoxious to the rats."

_Cincinnati Weekly Times, Jan., 1872._

THUNDER AND LIGHTNING

"A fellow was lately swigging at the bung-hole of a gallon jug, with all the ardour of one who really loved its contents. The jug, in reply to his drafts, went clug, clug, clug, -- on which an anxious expectant, standing by, remarked: 'Jim, you'd better stop; don't you hear the thunder?' 'No,' replied Jim, 'but I perceive the jug begins to lighten.'"

_Charles Cist, Cincinnati Miscellany, v. II, p. 336._