

A Personal Account of the 1861 Flood

As experienced by eight-year-old Mary Higley

The 1861 flood did more than destroy buildings. It also impoverished people and broke up families. Harvey Higley, aged 45, ran a store in Champoeg. The flood took nearly everything that he had, except the lives of his family and a bolt of ugly plaid wool cloth. He spent the next eight years away from his family, supporting them by working in the gold mines of Idaho.

This story is especially poignant, because it was experienced and remembered by his eight-year-old daughter, Mary E. Higley (Hopkins). The eyes of a child sometimes see more than those of an adult, and as far as we know, this is the most personal and detailed account of the flood at Champoeg and its aftermath. Years later she told the story to her daughter Grace, who wrote it down for posterity. The original document is at the Oregon Historical Society.

In the fall of the year 1861, when I was a small child, eight years of age, I lived in the old historic town of Champoeg, Oregon. This little town was situated on the banks of the beautiful Willamette River, and boasted of having three stores, which contained everything from groceries to hardware. In the back were piled shingles that were hand-made, which farmers had brought in and exchanged for provisions. Each store contained a small assortment of medicine such as vinegar-bit-ters, cherry pectoral, castor oil, and pain killers.

There wasn't any real post office, the mail being brought in on a steam-boat which came in every other day. The mail was then taken to one of the stores, and the merchant, as he opened the pouch, would call out the names he read on the envelopes, and from the crowd, which quickly had gathered, the owner would come forward to receive his mail. Really in those days, it was quite an event to receive a letter from back east, for it took many months for a letter to come so far. We had no railroads in Or-

gon at that time. Our furniture was mostly home-made, although many things were shipped to us around "The Horn", or brought by emigrants who had crossed the plains.

My father (Harvey Higley) was proprietor of one of the stores I have mentioned. It was the tallest building and the newest of the business houses. In the rooms above the store was the Free Masons'

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Hall. Our home was several blocks from the store. Uncle (George Smith) lived upon a high bluff, the nearest of any one else to the river. Often we children would go there to play. Aunt Lizzie (Smith) would always caution us never to go too near the edge or we would roll over the bluff and get drowned.

One day father came home to dinner wearing a very serious look and I heard him say to my mother:
"The river is rising faster than I like to see. It may go

over the banks but I hardly think it will do any material damage though." After dinner he went back to the store. My brother (Martin), sisters (Amanda and Willamina) and I went to school which was taught by Mr. King. Early in the afternoon, our attention was attracted by hearing some small pigs squealing. Looking out the window, we saw puddles of water on the ground. A farmer was taking his pigs from a pen that was now under water. Our teacher, Mr. King, stood looking out of the window for several minutes, wearing a look of uneasiness upon his face, then turned and spoke to his pupils: "Children," he said, "get your wraps; school is dismissed. Now I

want you to go right home and don't you loiter on the way."

When we arrived home, mother was gazing out of a window anxiously trying to keep her tears from falling. The tiny sack she was making for baby brother she hurriedly cast aside in her anxiety. When we saw her so distressed it began to dawn upon our small minds that something of an unusual nature was about to happen. Not long after this father walked in ordering mother and the older children to put everything that was on the floor up higher, as the river was rising very fast now and it might possibly come over the threshold. Then back



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to the store he hurried. Mother had six or seven trunks which she had brought across the plains with her. These trunks standing on the floor lined against the wall of her large bedroom. Upon chairs we piled the trunks. Valances of the four posters were thrown back over the bed, also clothes that were hanging low. There were only two baby buggies in town, which were two-wheeled, long tongue affairs. A family by the name of Bathman(?) had one, and mother the other, which we were very proud of indeed. We children hoisted this buggy upon the bed too, as it must be saved by all means. Mother meantime was taking care of things in the kitchen. The last thing I remember doing before we left the house was to climb upon mother's bed and hang my little old ring, the only piece of jewelry I possessed, on a nail. I don't know why I did this, unless in my excitement, I thought in so doing, I was saving a priceless possession. I never saw my little ring again.

A few minutes later father returned and said: "Uncle George's house has gone over the bluff into the river. Get the children ready, dear, and bring them to the store, as it is much larger and stronger than any of the others in town." Just about an hour before dark mother took us to the store. Upon our arrival there, father bade us to stay down stairs until he had put away a few things which belonged to the Free Masons, then we were permitted to go up. Mother had brought a small feather tick with her from home. This she told brother to carry upstairs for the young children to lie on in case we were compelled to stay there all night. Up to this time no one seemed to think the flood would prove to be any ways serious. In a short time a few more of the townspeople came up and joined us. Later on others came until all the chairs in the hall were filled with women and children, the men remaining downstairs to watch developments.

It began to grow dark and we heard some one from below say in a voice of horror that the porch had been swept away by the flood and that the water was creeping in. This struck terror to the souls of the now badly frightened women. Some were wringing their hands. Some cried and gathered young babes closer to their anguished hearts. The big building began to rock adding greatly to our terror. Some men started off to get canoes while others began to climb the stairs to get their feet out of the water, which was rising swiftly. Also they called to us words of kindly encouragement that all would be well and to try and keep a brave heart and that we would get you out of the room. But how long the time seemed until the canoes came to our rescue. At last when they came, the orders were for only the women and children to climb in first. The building was now afloat. After we were taken in we struck for a higher place; to a hill where a family by the name



Mary and her family took refuge "with a family by the name of Newell," in what is now the Robert Newell House Museum.

of Newell¹ lived who took us in. The men returned with the boats after more people until all had been rescued. We stayed at Newell's the rest of the night. Mrs. Newell told mother to take us up stairs to bed, as she could make room up there for the younger children. We were still greatly excited and preferred staying down by the glowing fireplace and listen to the grownup people talk which seemed very cheerful after our recent excitement. For awhile we lingered by the windows watching houses, still with lights burning in them floating slowly off down the river. We could hear people shouting as they passed by. The baker and his helper had stayed a little too long in the very small building which was called a bakery and were compelled to crawl out on the roof, and in their distress carried some kind of a light with them. Perhaps it was a lantern. This building turned completely around and then floated down the river. Several years later we heard that both men were rescued.

The next morning Mrs. Newell and daughter

¹ Robert Newell was the chief promoter of the town of Champoeg. After the flood he tried to restart the town on the high land around his house, but the new town, called Newellsville, never succeeded. Newell later gave up and left for Idaho.

baked many pans of biscuits and made a quantity of coffee, and when this was ready we stood around a long table and ate our breakfast.

We were now homeless as the flood had swept it away, and we never saw it again, but the store building was found later one mile from where it stood, lodged in among hazel nut bushes. Immediately after breakfast, the men folks started out to find some place to take their families. A family by the name of Smith agreed to take us in until father could make other arrangements. Mr. Smith came back with father to where we were, and took us back to his farm in a lumber wagon, where we stayed for several days, till father could get word to an old bachelor friend, Martin James, who lived upon the red hills, not far from Champoeg.

Every morning while we were at Mr. Smith's, father would go back to where the town once stood and try and locate the place where his store used to be, as he had buried his money in the ground, in an old wood shed, back of the building, but it proved a hopeless quest as he never was able to find one cent of his money. The flood had washed out great holes there in the ground, and I suppose taking everything with it.

In those days there were no banks, and money in any great amount was usually buried in the ground, or hidden out somewhere. White men and red men were seen fishing in the muddy, washed out holes with long sticks which had hooks on the end of them, fishing around to see what they could find.

In a few days the river went down so we could cross it. Father sent word to his friend, Martin James, of our distress. Word came back to get a canoe and row across and he would meet us with a wagon and team on the other side of the river.

At last father located his store building and thought it best to stay one night in the building and gather up what we could that the flood had left us, so in the afternoon we were taken to the store building. We found a chicken coop containing a few chickens; also an apple house well stocked with

apples which had drifted near the building. Needless to say that we dined on chickens and apples. All we found left in the store was two bolts of goods—one of toweling, the other a bolt of the ugliest looking plaid woolen goods that you ever laid your eyes on. Near the corner a dead calf was lying. This was all we found at the store. Whether the half-breed Indians had looted the place of the goods and things on the shelves, or if they had been washed away by the flood, we never knew. We passed a most cold and miserable night on the floor of the Free Masons' Hall. We had a blanket spread down to lie on but nothing to cover us but the clothes we were wearing. The feather tick mother had brought from home was found just where she had left it before we hurried away from the flood. On the feather tick the children were made more comfortable.

In a canoe the next day, we crossed the river and found Martin James with his team waiting for us as he had previously promised. We clamored into the lumber wagon and soon were on our way to the farm. We saw many dead sheep lying by the wayside, which had perished during the flood. It was very rough traveling as the ground was soft and miry. The wagon wheels would mire to the hubs in some places. At last we reached the small farm house where we made our home until after Christmas. Every day while we were here father and Mr. James would go back to where Champoeg used to be to hunt for father's money or find some trace of our dwelling house, but as I said before, it was a hopeless quest.

In the meantime mother had washed the bolt of woolen plaid which we had found left in the store. Out of these goods she made each of us girls dresses and petticoats. Oh! How we hated this ugly big plaid with its stripes of brown, black and green. We should have been very thankful that we had the material to make into good, warm clothing, but instead we damned the big ugly plaid garments. We felt as if we were dressed for a masquerade. It

certainly was durable goods, as it seemed as though it would never wear out. Five years later I was still wearing a petticoat made of this material which had been handed down to me by an older sister. How happy we were when Sunday would roll around and we could discard our ugly plaids for our pretty dresses of dark red. A few weeks before the flood, mother had sent the material to a seamstress who lived out of town to make each one of us girls a dress. So after the flood, mother had sent my brother to the seamstress to find out if she had started to make the dresses, and if she had not, to bring the goods back with him as we had no money now to pay her for her work. Fortunately she had not even cut into the goods and brother returned bringing back the package which

contained needles, thread, hooks and eyes and lining as well as the dress material. It was very lucky we had all the articles to complete the garments. How proud we were too with our pretty Sunday dresses. A bolt of sheeting Martin had in the house furnished us with gowns and underwear. For many weary weeks mother sewed by hand. I remember standing by her side in order to thread her needles. I would thread six or seven needles and then run off to play until she needed more needles threaded. I

did not dislike this task as I was glad to be of some help. My elder sister was able to sew a straight seam, and thereby was able to help mother in her long, tiresome work.

Christmas was anything but a cheerful holiday when it at last came. The next day though, Uncle George came over to see us, bringing a little candy, which we appreciated very much. At last our clothes were finished, and we girls were sent to the Sisters Boarding School (Catholic). Father was completely broken up financially and was compelled to seek his livelihood elsewhere. Many people had owed father for things purchased at our store, but were unable to pay their debts as they were in the same dire circumstances as we were. Mother took the baby and went to Salem to find work.

She soon got a good

job nursing the sick. Father, with my eldest brother, went to the gold mines of Idaho where he worked hard eight long years before the family was once more re-united. Eight long years he toiled hard to keep us in school and also to save enough money to make a fresh start in life. After many years I met a number of people that had been in the same flood, and all had different experiences to tell. As long as I live, I shall never forget my experience in this flood of 1861.



Oh! How we hated this ugly big
plaid with its stripes of brown,
black and green.



This photo of the Champoeg school children was taken circa 1859. Mr. King stands on the left. It is quite possible that Mary and her siblings are here too, but there is no way to verify this.

Our teacher, Mr. King, stood looking out of the window for several minutes, wearing a look of uneasiness upon his face.

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