



Margaret Campbell

ABOVE THE WATER'S EDGE
Murray was a Haven for Many Caught
in the Great Flood of 1937

Keith M. Heim, Ph.D.

Much has been written about the "Great Flood of 1937," one of the greatest natural disasters ever to strike this country. In this area, its impact upon the river cities and towns, notably Paducah, was catastrophic, and accounts of the human misery and economic destruction abound in historic literature.

While the focus has rightfully been on the areas hit directly by the flood, the impact of the disaster upon adjacent areas is less well-known but nonetheless important and interesting. Several letters written during the flood by Miss Margaret Campbell, a teacher at the Training School on the campus of Murray State Teachers College, vividly describe conditions in Murray and the plight of the thousands of refugees from Paducah and other stricken areas who passed through Murray or were cared for there during the flood. The letters, which were recently donated to the Forrest C. Pogue Library at Murray State by Mrs. Ann G. Sutton of Seattle, a former student of Miss Campbell at the Training School, clearly describe the suffering and misery of the refugees, the magnitude of the problems their influx into Murray created, and the selfless spirit many in the Murray community displayed in their effort to aid those stricken by the flood. These letters form the basis for the following account of the flood and its effects in Murray.

In a letter to her parents in Tennessee, Miss Campbell wrote, "No, you have not heard any exaggeration of this flood in the Ohio.¹ Many times, I've pinched

¹Unfortunately, Miss Campbell did not give specific dates to her letters, dating them only as having been written "Monday night," "Saturday afternoon," etc. Several of them appear to have been written during the period January 20-22, 1937.

myself to see if I were having a nightmare, only to find it worse than ever. Of course, I personally only sat on the sidelines and looked on and gave hourly thanks that I was not in it."

The rains began on January first in the valleys of the Tennessee and the Cumberland and continued into February. In the month of January alone, Murray had twenty-three inches of rain—half of the yearly average rainfall for the town. The Murray State campus, she wrote,

is flat and the water just stood on it for days because the rain just kept on. Several times I walked through water over the top of my high galoshes. The climax began on the night of January 20th—it started pouring about dusk and continued in torrents with no cessation until sometime the night of the 22nd, when it stopped for only a few hours only to begin again Saturday and rain all day Sunday, and then it froze.

The campus and town became a giant skating rink. Short of coal for heating and without electricity for lights much of the time, college officials cancelled all classes for the duration of the emergency. All available manpower was needed for rescue and relief efforts, and the coaches bussed the members of the football team daily to Paducah to help evacuate families forced from their homes by rising waters. Many faculty and students joined in the effort, working from near dawn until dark.

Miss Campbell too helped out at a makeshift hospital, in a dining hall, and wherever she could be of assistance to the destitute refugees who began to trickle into town. Although she could have gone home to the comfort of her parents' home in Tennessee, a sense of duty caused her to remain in Murray. After all, she concluded, she was still on the state payroll and she might as well make herself useful.

Soon, the trickle of refugees swelled to more than 5,000 per week, taxing local facilities and the ingenuity of officials. Many were sent on, transportation permitting, to more distant cities which could accommodate them.

Local citizens opened their doors and their hearts to the refugees. Miss Campbell gave away almost all of her clothes except for what she was wearing and reported to the dining hall downtown, a tobacco floor which had been converted to feed the destitute, some of whom had not eaten in several days. A CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) cook was put in charge of the hall, and he quickly won her approval.

He is an army sergeant and he certainly is a whiz. He knows to the last detail how to run things . . . They have put in about four heaters—four ranges in a row, a long tin kind of trough to wash hands in. Tables for kitchen duty, tables & benches to feed them on. Really, it is equipped to feed hundreds. In fact the sergeant is preparing right now to serve breakfast to 500.

The Baptist Church basement was opened as a hospital, and at the college, she reported that "They are planning to move the boys to the top floor of the Girls Dormitory and put refugees in the Mens Dormitory. They have filled the churches tonight, I think, and hundreds more will have to come in I am sure."

Relief efforts were hampered when Murray was cut off from the outside several times during the week of January 20th by washouts on highways and railroads. Often, trains coming into Murray from Bruceton, Tennessee, were unloaded and then forced to back all the way back to Bruceton before they could be turned around again. The 22nd, Miss Campbell said, was "Black Sunday." The town had no electricity, water, newspapers, trains, radio, food, heat, or lights. "Electric stoves don't work well when there is no power," she observed wryly. Nor did furnace fans. Nevertheless, the refugees continued to come in. School busses from all over western Kentucky were pressed into service to haul between eight and ten thousand people to other locations in the area.

Perhaps the hardest to bear was the lack of news about family and friends in the stricken areas such as Paducah, Birmingham, and Hickman. For the most part, radio was the only means of communication, and refugees and townspeople huddled about the sets straining to learn some news of loved ones. Miss Campbell was amazed at the makeshift system of communication, reminiscent of the old pioneer system of sending messages, which developed. "Everyone took messages and they were passed on and on and all seemed to be delivered, not only in the flooded district but all through this valley." A friend who had managed to obtain a copy of the Mayfield newspaper took it with her to the college dining hall to read and reported that at least twenty students stopped at her table to ask to read it. Most of them hoped for some news of their families. Miss Campbell worried with many students about the situation in Hickman. "I heard today," she wrote, "(but do not know whether it is true) that they are afraid the wall there (will break) and the whole town will have to move out."

After the long days working with the refugees who continued to pour into Murray day after day, there was little respite for her when she returned to her home. As churches and other buildings filled up, residents took refugees into their homes. Her landlady took in twenty-one on the second floor of her home, and one night there were forty-three! A friend who had come in from Paducah reported that she had stayed for four days in a room with six others with no heat and only pork and beans to eat.

Despite the desperate conditions which worsened daily, Miss Campbell sometimes found pathos and humor existing side by side:

You could have cried your eyes out to see the old people leaving what they had worked a lifetime to get, and then you would laugh to see other things. Everybody was so kind about animals and every boat came out with dogs, cats and birds. The story goes that in one railroad coach an old parrot squawked all the way, "Send a boat! Send a boat!" They were helping an old Negro woman on the train here and she was dragging a dog and carrying a suitcase. Some workers examined the suitcase and it was full of puppies. One group of Negroes brought here were all carrying bloody bundles. Upon investigation, they had killed their chickens and brought them along for food. They had the biggest chicken feast ever held in town.

Children amused themselves by catching items floating by. At one house, they caught "a coal scuttle full of electric bulbs, much soap, and several boxes of cigars, and they caught laundry until the elders forced them to stop."

As the waters receded and the situation began to improve, Miss Campbell was one of the first to go to Paducah from Murray to view the damage there. The devastation was almost beyond belief, but amid the desolation, she was amused at the sight of a donkey standing on a front porch eating a loaf of bread.

It is estimated that about 1,000 of the 38,000 (people) did not move out of Paducah. I shall never begrudge one penny that I may give to the Red Cross when I've seen what went on here. They moved the sick and the well, the black and the white, the poor and the rich. Very few deaths occurred, and no epidemics of illness. That is a marvellous record. All of the patients in the two hospitals had to be loaded in boats and taken out.

The dispossessed returned to begin the enormous task of salvaging what they could of their homes and possessions and start to rebuild. Miss Campbell had viewed the enormous damage caused by a tornado in East Nashville, but she wondered if the devastation from a tornado wasn't preferable to that of a flood. "At least the tornado is clean," she concluded.

The furniture is literally dissolving. Many people are just scraping it out on the sidewalk and letting the garbage haul it off. I read the other day that the dumps were about to be exhausted! There was not a plate glass window left in Paducah so far as I could see. The floors were like ocean waves. . . I can't begin to tell what the residences were like, but it was enough to see books, mattresses and such piled up on the porches, and the underpinning washed out of so many.

In all, the Ohio River had taken eighteen days to rise from flood stage to the crest and eighteen to go back to flood stage. Seeing the devastation the receding waters revealed, Miss Campbell wrote,

It is going to take the most heroic courage to build, but I think they will do it. The old people will work and the young ones don't mind it. I overheard a conversation the other day that expresses the ideas of age and youth. One woman, bemoaning over and over the terrible condition her house (was in) and how she dreaded (the clean-up), when her daughter, a right young girl said, "I wish you would hush worrying about it, I think it will be exciting!"

During the desperate days when the thousands of refugees taxed the capacity of Murray to help them, Miss Campbell observed that "Everyone is showing the finest spirit imaginable." While the young were perhaps alone in finding the experience and the challenge of rebuilding "exciting," a dogged optimism pervaded the people of western Kentucky, and the people of Paducah found the will and courage to begin again.