

Lancaster Farming

Antiques Center

Letter Revives Memories Of 1936 St. Patrick's Day Flood

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Bedford Co. Correspondent

My in-laws, John and Pearl Williams, both died in 1991. And, while I think of them often, I especially remember them on St. Patrick's Day and re-read the letter my mother-in-law wrote regarding the 1936 Johnstown flood.

BEDFORD (Bedford Co.) Most people think of the Johnstown flood as that occurring on May 31, 1889. To be certain, its devastation has never been equaled and the news it produced in the 19th century was equaled only by the assassination of Abraham Lincoln.

Many people still living remember the St. Patrick's Day flood of 1936. It was the year my parents were seniors in high school. My father often talked about how he got in trouble as he drove a carload of anxious youth from town to town looking at flood damage. They skipped school to do it!

Johnstown, however, was not one of the cities he visited. Residents of this city feared the worst...a repeat of the 1889 destruction.

My husband was a two-year-old toddler and his brother, a baby, on that fateful day.

Over the years, my mother-in-law's deep brown eyes would often cloud with tears as she remembered the fear she had experienced as she pushed her two little guys out the back door of their Johnstown home and up the hill to safety.

A month later, on Sunday, April 19, Pearl, my mother-in-law, sat down at her kitchen table to write a letter to her sister, Betty, in Cleveland, Ohio.

Her return address on the letterhead read simply, "Flood City".

Betty was pregnant with her first child and Pearl began the letter with misgivings over not being able to purchase some promised silk to make a robe for the upcoming hospital stay. She did however say she was sending a "teddy", a souvenir of the flood from Fosters' Store and was going to send her own silk nightie and jacket to wear for the occasion.

Continuing with family gossip, Pearl is pleased to share that brother, Andy, is buying a car for \$10 a week, a 1934 Oldsmobile sedan. The purchasing price was a bargain, in 1936, for \$500.

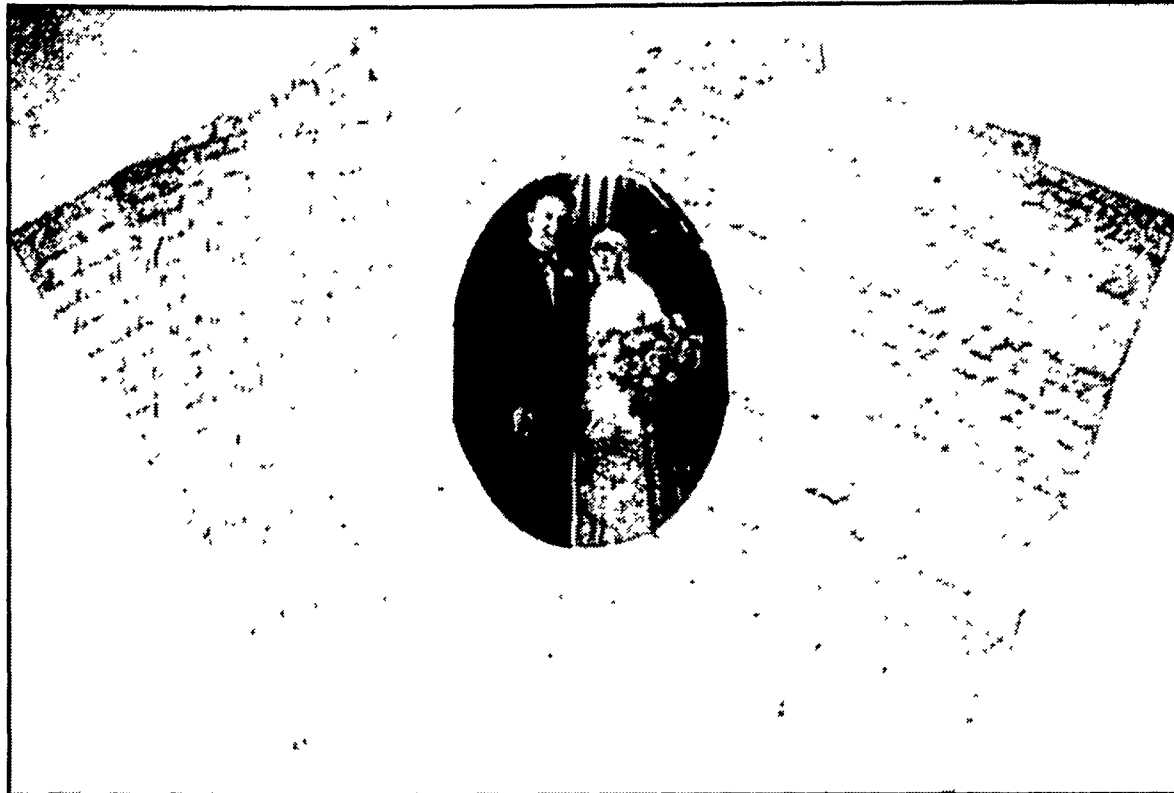
It's an ill wind that blows no one good and Pearl confirms this as she says that due to the flood, the Depression is over in Johnstown.

Schenkemeyers, my father-in-law's (Ned's) place of employment, had more work then they could handle, consequently, the workmen were getting time and a half for overtime and Sundays.

They wanted "Ned" to work on Easter but, tired of mud and cleanup, he preferred the company of his family.

"I have had my hands full cleaning up after the flood dirt," Pearl continued. Both of the children had been sick and one can only imagine the long days of working in the stench of flood waters. It was a smell my in-laws never forgot.

"I am so thankful for the little Hungarian girl in our neighborhood who helped me clean," Pearl related. "She worked like a trooper and I am all cleaned up



Letters are not valuable just because they are old. But families treasure finds such as this one because it is rich in family history. In this case, the letter details the experience of surviving the Johnstown Flood of 1936.

except the attic and spare bedroom upstairs. And, was I glad for those spaces as we moved everything we could up there the day of the flood."

"I think I shall never forget it, it was an awful experience...."

"I was washing clothes. We had such terrible rains for two days and nights and so much snow on the ground all winter that still lay on the hills and the ground still frozen would not take any more water."

"Why the water just poured down them thar' hills!"

"I was half done with the clothes, when the people next door called to see if I had water in my cellar. I didn't. But I looked out onto the street as our cellar is level with the street and we have a door that leads to the sidewalk. I heard people saying the river was high and over its banks in some low places but I didn't think anything of it until around one o'clock.

"Dick Thiel, one of the sons of the old lady we rent from, dropped by and said he thought we were going to have high water like they had in 1906.

"Our cellar is immense and is divided into four rooms. Dick had stored some boxes of books in the smallest room and he wanted to move them to the attic. The rain continued to pour down and inch under the cellar door.

Once this task was completed, Dick and Pearl began lifting things to higher ground as the water was quickly filling the cellar. They moved Ned's motor saw and tools and emptied the washer and pulled it over to the steps. They grabbed baskets of clothes and work clothes and carried them to the upstairs bedrooms.

When the water had reached the motor on the washing machine, she and Dick began to lug it upstairs. It was so heavy that Pearl, who weighed no more than 120, almost let it fall on Dick.

Outside, the street was a like a river. A couple of boats drifted by in the rain.

By mid-afternoon, Pearl was concerned enough to call her family who lived nearby. But the line was dead the telephone office

was already flooded. Pearl worried about her husband who had no way of contacting her. Finally, at 5 o'clock he arrived home.

Ned brought along a friend, Al. Dick had stayed and the three men sat at the kitchen table, already knee deep in water, to de-

avour a pot of freshly made Hungarian goulash. They also drank a quart of liquor and a half gallon of wine which Pearl is certain braced them for the night's work ahead.

They carried rugs, all the clothes, drawers, radio, living

room chairs, cushions from the couch, and dishes to the second floor. Propping the beds on chairs, they piled dressers on top of that and the davenport on top of that. Even the heavy Kelvinator refrigerator was lifted on top of the kitchen table. The motor got wet, but the insulation remained intact.

There was 53 inches of water in the house.

Putting her two little ones in a baby buggy, Ned escorted Pearl up the hill to the neighbors known as "The Valleys." In a four room house, four families bedded down for the night. The children slept in the living room, but none of the adults could sleep.

"I could hear people calling for help, the noise of houses breaking and porches being swept away. The Poplar Street Bridge which is just below our house was washed away."

Toward dawn, Pearl was awakened by her husband who came bustling into the room with a flashlight declaring everyone should go down to the alley light to see the huge river as we may never see another flood.

"I certainly hope not," Pearl wrote.

"It was horrible, only the roofs stuck out at some places."

Pearl had taken all of her food from the refrigerator to the Valleys and was happy to share it for

(Turn to Page B28)

'Great Find' Demonstrates Collectibility Of Old Literature

LOU ANN GOOD
Food And Family
Features Editor

DUNCANNON (Perry Co.) — Old letters, catalogs, sale bills, printed advertisements garner high interest not only among collectors of old literature but also individuals who have a personal connection to select items.

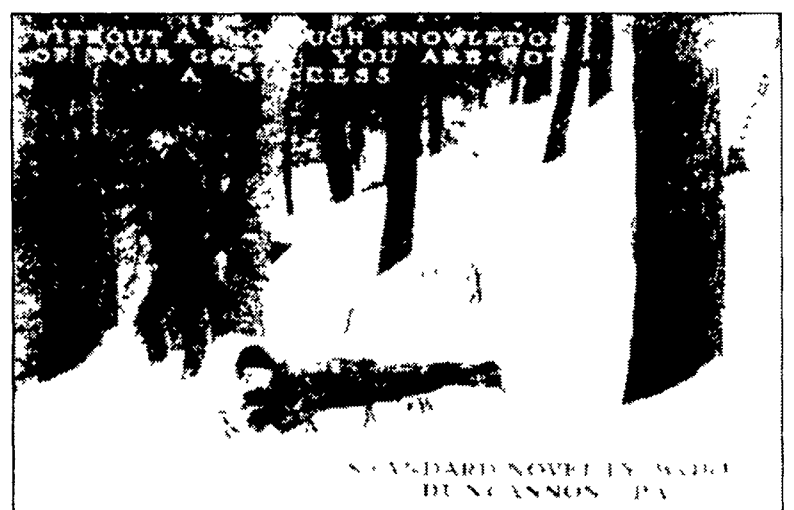
An example of this happened recently. Hassinger and Courtney Auctioneers were preparing the contents of an old hardware store for auction. Hidden in a cache of paper goods stored in the rafters above the third story building, they found a 20-page catalog from Standard Novelty Works, the largest and best-known children's sled manufacturer in the country during the early 1900s. The catalog advertised Lightning Guider sleds, which are highly prized today.

The auctioneers knew the value such printed pieces have to descendants of the business and to those affiliated in some way to the former business.

The auctioneers contacted Jimmy Rosen who owns the former sled factory building in Duncannon. He was interested. Rosen attended the Feb. 15 Auction and purchased the old catalog for \$450.

This catalog will be prominently placed in the museum he operates in the former sled factory.

Printed on the front of the



Printed on the front of the 20-page catalog advertising Lightning Guider Sleds are the words: "Without a thorough knowledge of your goods, you are not a success." Hassinger and Courtney Auctioneers believe their implementation of statement was especially beneficial to them when they discovered the catalog among a cache of paper goods stored in the rafters of an hardware store built in 1890. Hassinger contacted Jimmy Rosen who owns the former sled factory building in Duncannon. Rosen purchased the piece for \$450.

20-page catalog advertising Lightning Guider Sleds are the words: "Without a thorough knowledge of your goods, you are not a success."

Hassinger and Courtney Auctioneers believe their implementation of this statement was especially beneficial to them. If they would not have recognized both the sentimental and monetary value of the piece and contacted Rosen, he would not have attain-

ed the item for his museum display, and the piece might have been discarded.

Rosen, who operates an antique and craft store in addition to the museum in the former sled factory, is delighted with his purchase.

He said, "This is a great find. It's the oldest known piece of Lightning Guider literature that is known, and illustrates many of the companies earliest products."