

Johnstown Weekly Democrat.

VOL. XXVII.

JOHNSTOWN, CAMBRIA COUNTY, PA., FRIDAY, JULY 5, 1889.

NO. 13.

THE GREAT CALAMITY!

THE VASTNESS OF THE DISASTER NOT COMPREHENDED.

Unparalleled Destruction of Life and Property—Four Thousand People Drowned and Millions of Property Swept Away.

Our disaster! How tell of it, how portray it, or even how can it be faintly described? Whose mind can comprehend it, and whose vivid imagination can paint it? The pen is not yet made to write up its general features, much less to put the fearful details on paper; nor has the brush been manufactured to place it on canvass. In some remote age when additional arts and facilities for performing such a work, or when some one with unrivaled genius for describing unparalleled marvels shall be born, the story of Johnstown's destruction may be enfolded. But until then the full horrors of the kinetic energies of the Pittsburgh sporting clublake on the south branch of the Conemaugh creek, will remain undescribed.

Already many able pens from all sections of the country have been called into requisition in an effort to give to the outside world some idea of the fate of the Conemaugh valley, but with all that has been so well written the half has not been told. In trying to grasp the magnitude of the mighty death-dealing and property-destroying wave that struck the town lying on the banks of the little stream, or the ill-fated Friday afternoon of May 31, one is confronted with the inadequacy of words to do anything like justice to the subject. The vastness of the disaster is really too great for a finite mind to grasp.

Has it ever had an equal? In the United States certainly never; in the world's history, since the days of Noah, possibly, yes. At most it can be safely said it is only rivaled by one or two catastrophes in human history. The overflow of the Yellow river, in China, a few years back, caused a greater loss of life, but the destruction of property was slight in comparison with that of Johnstown and its vicinity. For eighteen hundred years Pompeii and Herculaneum have been favorite references as instances of unparalleled disasters in the annals of the world; but it was shown by an article in the *New York World*, some days ago, that the Conemaugh valley's whirlwind tide that broke from the accursed dam wrought greater ruin than the ashes and lava of Vesuvius—that the Conemaugh water avalanche was more startling and ruinous to life and property than the avalanche of red-hot lava that poured upon those cities with their ten thousand inhabitants.

But what of the scene itself—the sweeping away of strongly-built houses, the engulfing of hundreds upon hundreds—the thousands of men, women and children who were hurled with an irresistible force into the swelling flood to be crushed or drowned. Their cries of anguish could not be heard amid the deafening roar of the angry water, or if heard by those in their immediate vicinity fell upon ears of others as helpless as themselves—the display of pent-up energies being utterly deaf to the wails of the feeble and the imprecations of the strong.

Never can we forget the trying ordeal of that sorrowful Friday afternoon and night. Little did we think when preparing for Saturday morning's issue, that the matter being set up then would fail to be put upon the press. Though the rise in both the Conemaugh and Stonycreek was backing the water up Washington street and closing around the Democrat office, and causing a suspension of traffic and travel, not for one moment did anyone in the office or press room dream of any more serious damage to the town other than that occasioned by former overflows. Remembering the flood of two years ago, we thought at four o'clock the water would soon recede, hence gave very little thought to it.

But at about five minutes before four an alarm was sounded, and running to a window in the east end of the building we were appalled at what our eyes beheld. A huge wave, seemingly almost as high as the surrounding hills was rolling down upon us—surging, foaming, roaring and filled with buildings, wrecks of buildings, large trees, and logs, with scores and scores of men, women and children clinging to wrecked matter as they were swiftly and ruthlessly carried along. Above us, below us, around us we saw building after building torn in the twinkling of an eye from their foundations and falling in crushed masses in some instances, and in other cases tumbling forward, backward, then turned on their sides and anon whisked with the velocity of lightning upside down, and hundreds hurled to death in a moment, and others carried along amid the wreck of matter down toward the stone bridge. Then when the current changed, houses, parts of houses, stables and wrecks of stables, shops, offices, cars in countless numbers were tumbling, twisting, creaking on every side of us. South Fork, Mineral Point, East Conemaugh, Franklin, Woodvale, Conemaugh borough, the upper and lower

ends of Johnstown had by this time contributed to the mass of matter and the hundreds of unwilling floaters that were surging all through Washington and Franklin streets. Ever and anon the B. & O. depot building, in which the Democrat was published, would tremble and shake from top to bottom as logs, trees, and buildings would strike it.

Fearful as was the scene of the whole night, it was not until daylight of Saturday did we comprehend, and then only inausurably, the extent of the widespread devastation. Where was Johnstown? Where, Washington street? Where, Franklin street? Where was Conemaugh borough? Where, Woodvale? A few wrecked buildings stood on the south end of Franklin, and some straggling ones could be seen along the hillside in Conemaugh; but of Woodvale nothing but the wreck of the flouring mill and woolen factory was left; and as to Washington street it was completely wiped out, save the wrecks of the B. & O. building and the Company store.

Where stood hundreds of dwellings, with well defined streets and alleys, now nothing but a barren waste of scores of acres of ground was to be seen; while other portions of the town contained huge piles of crushed houses, and hundreds of mutilated dead bodies. The debris all along Franklin, Locust, Main and other streets was piled up fifteen and twenty feet—over which, around which stricken men and women were climbing in search of loved ones.

Where are the lost? Some of them were swept down the river, some lodged against the stone bridge, others buried beneath a mass of rubbish, and still others covered up in the sand.

How the heart sickens in calling up some of the many familiar names of the town. Carried to their unlocked-for and untimely end we miss them on every hand. Some of the noblest of earth have been ruthlessly numbered among the hated reservoir's victims.

As to details, we have neither the heart nor the will to add any to this article.

We can only say, at this time, with the data at hand, that the number of the dead will not fall much below four thousand; and the property destroyed may run from twenty to twenty-five millions.

THE STONE BRIDGE.

It certainly saved many lives.

On that fateful Friday afternoon a Democrat reporter was at work in the line of his duty in Cambria and Millville boroughs, and when the waters of the reservoir struck this place, was on the river bank at the Pennsylvania Railroad Station. From the point on Prospect Hill to which he fled, he had the best possible chance to note the effect of the stone bridge on the waters, and as there seems to be much diversity of opinion on this subject, his conclusions are here given:

Had it been an iron bridge, or had the bridge given way with the first rush of the waters, all the houses that were floated from their moorings would have been drawn into the current and carried with great force through the opening. When the second heavy wave came, the water would have been drawn off somewhat, and it would not have been forced quite so high up across the town. Bedford and Levergood streets, and part of the lower side of Jackson street would probably have escaped from total destruction. From Clinton street down however, and out to the Stonycreek river the destruction would have been complete. All of the buildings on Main, Vine and Lincoln streets now standing, including the Post-office, Banks, Alma Hall, and the churches would have been swept down the stream, and the many hundreds and thousands of people who floated up and across the streams and were rescued, would have been drawn in, to the fearful vortex and dashed to death. The embankment of the railroad too, would have quickly worn away, and the mills of the Cambria Iron Company would have been almost ruined, as without doubt the Steel Works and other shops near the river would have been swept away. All of Cambria City would have been swept as clean as Woodvale, and the greater part of Morrellville would have been destroyed. Five thousand more people would have been drowned and much more property destroyed, although the rubbish would all have been carried away. People in Kernville and the Seventh ward would not have been flooded as they were, and the few lives that were lost in these sections would have been saved, but a fearful compensation for this would have been made by the total destruction of the lower part of the town, and all its people.

The Refuse.

Some steps should be taken to prohibit the depositing of the refuse on the river banks. What we want now is to widen our streams instead of making them narrower, and much of the stuff that has been deposited on the river banks must be removed. It would certainly be wise for the borough officials to take some cognizance of the matter.

THE FLOOD!

How It Swept The Valley.

HOUSES FLOAT UP THE STONYCREEK LIKE STEAMBOATS—TERRIBLE ORDEALS OF THOSE WHO WERE ENGULFED.

For years the people of Johnstown have talked of the possibility of a break in the South Fork reservoir, and many a one has prophesied the result. On Friday afternoon, May 31st, at nearly four o'clock the waters came, and the result is so awful that it can never be adequately pictured, nor correctly detailed.

From ten o'clock Thursday night to ten o'clock Friday forenoon an incessant rain fell and early Friday the streams began to overflow their banks. The water rose during the day, and at noon nearly the whole town was submerged, the water on Franklin street being about four feet deep. Many people fled to places of safety, but many more preferred to remain in their houses, their previous experience with high water here having been that they were safest there. Shortly after noon the following day a patch was received at the Pennsylvania Railroad tower, and was telephoned over town, communication by way of Lincoln bridge having been cut off. Reports from Conemaugh Lake via South Fork at 2:10 say the water is raining over and the dam may give way at any moment. Notably the people of Johnstown at once to prepare for the worst. This was signed "Operator," but as reports of the dam breaking were always current when we had high water people had become used to such talk and were not easily alarmed. At any rate, it was the experience of those who made an effort to warn the people, that the matter was treated with indifference. A second message was received at 2:44 which said the dam was breaking and the warning was circulated on a few of the streets, but the people had not the time nor the opportunity then to get out.

On Iron street and Millville an organized effort was being made to relieve them when the flood came. In Cambria there were no means at hand to accomplish much, while up town people with horses and wagons were busy taking those out who wanted to go. Communication between Cambria and Millville was perfect by means of the Pennsylvania stone bridge, although the water was over fourteen feet high at the bridge all afternoon. That side was cut off from Johnstown, except by way of the Woodvale bridge, the Lincoln bridge, and the bridge back of the company store being standing, but submerged. The Franklin street bridge was all right. The Poplar street bridge, the Company's toll-bridge at Cambria, and the Tea-Acre bridge were swept away shortly after eleven o'clock in the forenoon. It was the highest water yet known in the town and still gradually rising when the REAL FLOOD CAME, which we will not attempt to describe in full, but note its appearance as seen from a point on Prospect above the Pennsylvania Railroad Station.

First came a lot of debris, bridges and houses, and as they struck the Company's bridge, which was weighted with cars of metal back of the Company store, the current was deflected and pushed out above the store and across Washington street. Here the first houses in Johnstown borough were taken under. A few moments after, a mighty volume, seemingly ten feet high, the top covered with floating debris, houses and people came rushing down the valley. Everything was swept before it and all Iron street with the exception of a few houses along the railroad were at once submerged. It was impossible to take in the whole of the awful scene. The Gas Company's works squirmed and toppled over, and almost the same instant the Opera House collapsed, the Mansion House floated away and was submerged, and on looking toward Conemaugh borough everything was seen to be moving. The main current came on down along the river bed sweeping everything, and when it came to the point, the debris clogged the arches at the stone bridge. The water was held here, and the current was forced back, carrying houses and everything with it up Stonycreek street. The first rush of waters, which followed the course of the stream, was about five minutes in advance of the second great "tidal wave." When this came the whole bed of the valley was filled twenty feet deep, and the water taking a straight course made a clean sweep of everything from Clinton to Jackson streets. At the Stonycreek river, it struck the up current and added its momentum to the onward course of the stream now on the back track. Hundreds of houses at this time were seen floating up stream and everything before them were taken along, until the force of the waters was spent and the houses gradually settled

down. The force of this current is best known when it is told that the Unique Rink was picked up and carried to Sandvale Cemetery, and other houses were carried far beyond. After awhile the waters receded somewhat and when the waters settled down it was found that Woodvale was swept clean, also Conemaugh borough to Railroad street, not a vestige of the Gauthier mills being left. All of Washington street, and from Jackson street to Clinton street, Bedford and Levergood street a clean sweep was made. Up through the Seventh ward, and in Kernville the damage was great. All of East Conemaugh and Franklin on the low grounds, including the round house and over thirty engines had been swept away.

Thousands of people who were in their houses were swept bodily away, while many hundreds made their escape in the flood.

For over ten minutes all the water was held in Johnstown, the stone bridge and the embankment of the Pennsylvania Railroad forming the breast of a huge reservoir. At last the water began running over the embankment which was quickly worn deeper and the water began to flow over, and down through the yards of the Cambria Iron Company's mills. By this time a huge pile of wrecked buildings had been jammed against the stone bridge, and as the water began to flow over the embankment, many buildings that had come to a standstill, were drawn toward this place. At this time the view from the bank above the station, at Prospect Hill was heart-rending. Floating timbers, roofs, and sometimes whole houses, freighted with human souls were drawn into the vortex, and the people dashed to death before the eyes of their friends on the hill, who were powerless to help them. The swift current had not reached the houses on Iron street, next to the Pennsylvania Railroad, and when the embankment gave way they were the first to go over. As many of the inmates had been taken out, they were standing on the hill, painfully watching the other members of their families, as they were borne to their swift death, and the heart-rending cries of parents and children, sisters and brothers, added to the terror of the awful scene.

The water had been too deep in Cambria City, on Front, Chestnut and Broad streets, all afternoon for the people to get out, and when the overflow occurred the people were at the mercy of the pitiless torrent. Over half the borough was swept clean and the people with it all though the floating debris was so thick here that many managed to pick their way across and land along the river farther down. But little damage was done at Coopersdale, and many people were rescued there as they came down on the drift. Thus in less time than it has taken to tell this story, four thousand souls were hurled into eternity, tens of millions of dollars worth of property were destroyed, and thousands of other people were in the flood and not drowned were in insecure places for from twelve to twenty-four hours before they were rescued. During this time many suffered the agonies of a hundred deaths and the instances of narrow and thrilling escape could not all be mentioned were catalogued, and the great horror and suffering of the survivors are so well known that we will not attempt to describe them.

All through the night those who had escaped death suffered the most fearful agonies. As the whole town was under water to a depth of from fifteen to thirty feet, and as the houses and other places where they had taken refuge were constantly being moved and shaken, no one felt secure in his or her position. To add to the horror the piles of wreckage at the Stone bridge took fire, and all through the night, the lurid gleams of the flames made people fearful that their place of refuge would also fall a prey to the fire. Then the shrieks of the wounded and dying, which could be heard on all sides were terrible. At the Stone bridge many who were entangled in the ruins and could not escape, were burned to death.

Timely and Efficient Help.

Where so much good work has been promptly performed it is difficult and might appear invidious to discriminate; but the service rendered by the various church organizations is worthy of being noted; and among such societies that was active in relieving the needy was that of the Presbyterian church, under the wise direction of Rev. Dr. Beale, its pastor. Telegrams and letters poured into him from all sections of the eastern part of this State and from New Jersey and New York, asking for particulars as to the wants of the people; and boxes of food, clothing, and even bedding were sent to him as soon as railroad facilities permitted. A room was then secured at the corner of Main and Adams street, which was put in charge of Mrs. Dr. Beale, Mrs. Jones and Miss Duncan, of this place, Miss Graham of Wilkingsburg, and Mrs. Dr. Marchand, of Irwin, who distributed edibles, wearing apparel, etc., to multitudes of every name, grade and profession who were left in destitute circumstances.

OUR WASTE PLACES.

One month and six days have elapsed since the fateful visitation of the contents of the reservoir, and the horrors of it are still too manifest to forget it even for a moment. Where destruction is so general and complete it is difficult to say what part of the town and its environs suffered most.

A stranger viewing any one of the flood-swept spots would necessarily mark it as the successful candidate for the sad distinction—concluding nothing could be worse. But on going further and seeing more he would be soon convinced of his error. Say that his first point of observation was on the South Side, the appearance of Haynes, Somerset, Morris and Napoleon streets, in Kernville, would impress him with the idea that the flood spent all its fury there, but crossing Stonycreek to the Johnstown side, and casting his eyes down along River, Vine and Lincoln streets, and out Franklin to Washington, this thought would be immediately dispelled. Then coming on to Main street and gazing upon the ruined buildings up to Clinton, the ravages of the avalanche would be seen to be as in ensified as to force the conviction that it is idle to even try to discriminate, and this conviction would be confirmed as he turns down Main and looks at Market, Walnut and Union streets. These, with Chestnut, King, Potts and Conemaugh streets, and all around and about the Point, are left with little more than vestiges to tell their locations or boundaries.

Looking across the Conemaugh creek into what was known as the First ward of Millville borough, nothing, not even a wreck, save the school house, is left to indicate that even a house, shop, office, store or stable ever stood there. Then turning up Washington street that was crowded in the south side with houses from Walnut, past Market and Franklin, up to Clinton, not a solitary former building of any description is to be seen; while on the north side, clear back to the Conemaugh, the wrecks of the Company offices and store and part of the B. & O. railroad depot are all that are left to tell the sad story.

Then, as the stranger turns down Clinton, a few dilapidated edifices tell of the great losses along that thoroughfare; and reaching the point intersected by Main and Bedford streets, and looking at the wide waste up Bedford and out through Conemaugh borough, that was so thickly crowded with buildings, he yields to the conviction that here the havoc wrought by the engulfing wave exerted its demon-like powers. Could ruin be more thorough and more general?

But hold. Let him wend his weary steps over, around and about the wreckage that intervenes in his course, on up the Conemaugh river, and as he reaches the site of the large Gauthier Works, that were a quarter of a mile in length, he is furnished with an expressive commentary upon the terribly destructive force of the great body of water that swept down the now desolated valley.

Passing over the now quiet Conemaugh into what was the neatest, prettiest borough of the valley—Woodvale—and seeing nothing but a cleanly-swept surface of sand up to the ruins of the flouring mills, and from there on to the upper end nothing but rocks and stones, resembling the bed of a widespread and dried-up river, he would be staggered when informed the long street was formerly lined with substantial dwellings and cottages; and that the upper end had contained the large stables and sheds of the Street Railway Company. These, with all the cars and eighty-nine head of horses, were all carried away.

From here up to East Conemaugh, past the fair ground, which like the upper end of Woodvale resembles the bed of a large river, with nothing but large boulders exposed to view, the scene is one strongly testifying to the power of the maddened water. At East Conemaugh all buildings on the low ground, including the large and massive roundhouse, were all gone. Of the thirty locomotives swept away ten or twelve of them are lying down alongside and in the bed of the river, some partially covered up with sand and debris brought down from along the railroad as far up as South Fork.

By this time our stranger would conclude "eye had not seen nor ear heard" of anything in the history of the world's great disasters that surpasses in extent of destruction, or in the magnitude of horrors Conemaugh valley's visitation.

But if not too foot-weary and oversurfetted with harrowing sights we would suggest that he should retrace his steps and go down into Cambria City, where he would find only a few lonely, crushed and ruined buildings—the remnants of Broad, Railroad, Chestnut and Front streets. Three hundred and sixty-five houses, stores, shops and saloons were destroyed. Fully satiated with his hurried inspection of the flood's ravages, in a property point of view, our stranger has no heart to think of, much less to try to estimate the number of human beings that was so rapidly carried into the regions of that "undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveler returns."

CLEARING UP THE TOWN.

Only 500 Men to be Employed After To-morrow—A Johnstown Man Should be Put in Charge.

Another important step was taken last night by those having the matter in charge of cleaning up the town. Colonel Douglass, the chief engineer in charge resigned, and after to-morrow all the present contractors and their present force of men will be withdrawn. The work will be continued hereafter, but only five hundred men will be employed. General Hastings will also leave, as his presence is required elsewhere, but he will visit the town once a week, and oversee the work. The sanitary corps will direct operations, and a local engineer will be put in charge. All the work will be under the supervision of one contractor, and with his force of five hundred men it is expected that two months will be required to complete the necessary work.

In this connection we have one suggestion to make to General Hastings, and that is, that the contract be given to a Johnstown man. We have men here who have lost their all, who are fully competent to take charge of five hundred men, and we doubt not that they would handle them better than any foreign contractor. Being acquainted with the town, he could direct his forces more effectively, and certainly would not make the mistake that other contractors have done of shoveling and hauling away part of a man's lot. Let us have a Johnstown man for this work General Hastings, and thereby render a benefit to the people of the town, as well as to the State.

The Board of Inquiry—Arranging for Distributing the Relief Funds.

The work of this board is a difficult one, and should be prosecuted with the utmost care. Messrs. W. H. McCreary and S. S. Marvin, of Pittsburgh, J. B. Kremer, of Carlisle, and Judge Cummins, of Williamsport, members of Governor Beaver's Commission, were in town yesterday and examined the work the Board here is doing. The full Commission, with Governor Beaver as Chairman, will sit at Cresson next Tuesday, and consider a plan for the distribution of the vast fund that has been contributed for the relief of our people. The distribution of this money is a difficult task, and there are many suggestions on the subject. It is hoped that the Commission having this responsible work in charge will give the matter serious consideration, and arrive at some equitable basis for distribution.

A Word Gratefully to our Merchants and Other Business Men.

It is not probable that many, if any, of them can pay dollar for dollar what they owe; and nearly all are receiving letters of condoleance from most of their creditors with assurances that former accounts might stand and orders would be filled for new supplies. Now, this in some instances may result satisfactorily, but as "an ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure," it is suggested that the better and safer way would be to settle all claims on some definite basis, before making new purchases.

GIVE THE MONEY NOW.

If reports are trustworthy at least three and a half million of dollars have been contributed for relieving the necessities of Johnstown's unfortunates. This sum if not diverted into channels never contemplated by the donors would go far to affording relief to the absolute needy; and if handed over at once would do a thousand-fold more good than if held for months. Ought not the proper authorities of town see to it that the relief fund be properly and promptly applied.

Additional Morgue Items.

The body of Miss Lizzie, daughter of Godfrey Hoffman, was found near the Morrell Institute yesterday evening.

No word had been heard yet this morning from the relatives of John Donnelly, who was killed yesterday, and the employees of the morgue will take charge of remains. The coffin was handsomely decorated by Oliver Badger and the other employees.

The body of a female was found back of Sulka's Hotel this forenoon. It is described as follows: Female, unknown, weight about 130 pounds, height 5 feet 6 inches, button shoes, gum rubbers, two gold ear-rings, chased.

Bridges.

Some steps should be taken at once to have permanent bridges erected across our streams, and the borough officials should move in the matter. The Board of Civil Engineers from Philadelphia will be here on Monday, and it is hoped some recommendation may be made to the State authorities on the subject of bridges. There has been no road bridge to Cambria since the flood, and great inconvenience is experienced on this account. People there who have orders for portable houses cannot get them across the river.

List of the Dead.

A complete list of the known and unknown dead, found up to this date, is printed on the second and third pages.