

**As the Water Rose,
One Family's Experience with the 1972 Flood in
Lewisburg
by
Betty Lou McClure**

This is taken from a personal letter I wrote to Philadelphia friends on July 5, 1972, a few days after the water receded from one of the two great floods affecting Lewisburg in the 20th Century. The original letter is hand-written. The text that follows has been edited slightly for clarity, and some explanatory words have been inserted between brackets, but otherwise it remains as it was written then. When the river rose, I, my husband Jim, and our children lived at 17 Market St., just three doors from the bridge across the Susquehanna.



Flood waters surging along South Water Street

The letter begins:

Yes, Lewisburg got thoroughly flooded. No one was ready except the very cautious, because no one would believe it would be as bad as 1936. It was 2 feet higher than 1936 despite all the dams built after '36.

Lewisburg was too small to mention on TV, I'm sure, as was Milton, which had its business district entirely whipped by a raging current and wiped out!

It all began 2 weeks ago today. It seems a month ago at least. It was Bizzy's birthday and the pool swim party that night was completely rained out. It poured all day! 8 little girls spent the night and I had agreed to have them home by 10:00 on Thursday A.M.

At 6:00 A.M. we were awakened by a parent who lived on 6th Street, saying they were evacuating and someone was on the way to pick up the child. By 7:30 Jim had delivered all girls except Sarah Brodnax.



Market Street looking west from near 5th Street

Holly and I walked down to Market and 6th St. about 11:30 Thursday. Bull Run flows in back of the houses on the east side of 6th and eventually through Pop and Nana's meadow. The water looked like the Niagara River just before it goes over the falls. I wouldn't have put my big toe in it.

That morning we lost of Director of Safety, Gordon Hufnagle, who retired last year as police chief. He was in a boat rescuing a couple who were trapped on 6th St. Both he and the lady were drowned when the boat capsized. The husband clung to wreckage and was rescued.

All Friday we watched the river rise and Bull Run now began to back up from the river and spread out.

Dick and family were at the shore. Jim moved their furniture to the 2nd floor – everything, then moved all his folks(?) 1st floor, then ours, then a woman across from Dick and D. Ann. Some firemen and National Guards helped him.

Sat. night the crest finally came. There was 2 feet of water over the bridge – our bridge, 2 houses away. It moved with the current through the intersection of Water Street (at the corner) and Market and, in the gutters, came up as far as our maple tree out front. We had 5 more feet to the front door. 4 ½ feet in the basement; ruined everything there, mostly things we should have discarded long ago. I do feel bad about all the Christmas decorations, some my mother and grandmother's traditions. The state of the basement refrigerator is uncertain.

We don't complain though because we are so lucky. There was so much destruction around us.



Market between 5th and 6th Sts.

Our neighbor on Water Street had 4 to 6 feet in the first floors. The mud was thick and slimy and oily – many oil tanks tipped over in basements. We had no water for 2 days so people began to wash out mud using cellar water or river water – anything was cleaner than the mud.

Our oil co. men had appeared on Friday in the midst of all the morning to take our burner to the second floor.

So, after the crest, Jim lucked into an electric pump from the Telephone Co. and pumped the water out of our basement, finally, and we had our burner back and our heat on before most people. No water, though, as no hot water tank working.

We turned our electricity off as the water rose in the cellar and Friday night and Saturday Jim and I slept in a bare study on sleeping bags with candles, a fire in the fireplace and the transistor radio, checking the river every hour.

Fortunately our fuse box was above the water so we had electricity again as soon as the river had crested and started to recede.

Dick's 1½ feet in the first floor left warped floors – still too damp to bring furniture down. Their basement took forever to clear.

The Amish and Mennonites have been fabulous. They just appear with bucket, rags, etc. and dig in. D. Ann had 6 hefty Amish women helping in her basement.

Picture water covering Rt. 15 from the intersection at the high school down to Bechtel's dairy 4 blocks north.

Sarah Brodnax was finally rescued by her father on Sunday with the help of the National Guard. They had a big amphibian "duck" in town to transport across the water. We drove Sarah to N. 3rd St. where the National Guard picked her up and took her to a gas station across Rt. 15 at Buffalo Road where Ed Brodnax had managed to get by going to Mifflinburg from Winfield via back roads.

People had to be taken by boat to the hospital – Buffalo Creek crosses Rt. 15 just below the hospital. They were without heat, water, and electricity at the hospital for quite a few days.

I'll never forget the sounds and smells of the flood days. No vehicular traffic – quiet prevailed except for muffled voices, and the lap lap of water. The



North 5th St.

smell of fuel oil was all pervasive, followed by the smell of wet wood and cardboard and mud that was piled high on curbstones to be hauled away. A huge front loader came along and scooped furniture, appliances, etc. etc. into trucks.

At the widest, Bull Run covered the distance between the A&P and the RR track, through town. So the store's merchandise in there was wrecked. Furniture floated out of Donohoe's furniture store, windows broken by the pressure of the water.

Huge oil tanks, broken loose from the Oil Co. floated through the McClure's meadow, as well as bales of peat moss from Agway and probably Mrs. Murphy who hasn't been found yet. They found Chief Hufnagle near the underpass at the College (St. George St.) about a week after he was lost.

The water came up on the Sr. McClure's porch 1" from the front door and first floor. It covered the stone posts in the meadow. Their furnace was ruined and they are still without heat, as are D. Ann and Dick. When will it ever dry out again? It is raining again today!!



St. Anthony St. ?

Jim's folks stayed on the 2nd floor the whole time. Jim would "boat over" to make fires in the fireplace for them. They took in an old couple from nearby and had a grand time.

There was an 8:00 (P.M.) curfew in Lewisburg and one night Jim took Holly and Kim over to stay overnight with the folks. It was about 8:30 and they were "walking in" via the RR tracks where the water was just over the ties. Suddenly a bull horn bellowed at them from down the tracks and they almost got arrested. Actually it was risky because they had crossed the RR bridge over St. George St. and you can picture the water. Jim came on home via canoe.

We had to boil all our water for 10 days.

The other side of the river is much worse off! The Fence where Kim and Holly had summer jobs washed away. Montandon was all under water. Mr. McDavitt, my dear old friend and perennial gardener, was ruined and is retiring and selling his greenhouse and business, what's left of it. Mobile homes are spilled all over the landscape, on the RR track, in people's yards, on end, etc. It's hard to believe your eyes.

Milton is still under marshall law. Their damage was monumental and the business district may never recover. Sunbury's dike held. The water rose to the very top of the dike – the whole city was evacuated to the hills while they waited.

On Mon. the sun finally appeared and we set to work clearing out the Presbyterian Church basement, which had 6 feet of water, ruining all Sunday

school material and equipment. We had crews of 3 hosing down, after we carried water-soaked stuff out to the curb. Hose pressure alone wouldn't take the mud off, so a crew with rags or sponges and buckets of Top Job [detergent] followed, then we jet-hosed with a disinfectant solution. Then all the water had to be pumped out again.

After the church basement we cleaned the children's library. All the books had been moved upstairs, but the shelves and walls were covered with silt – looked like a beautiful brown paint job.

The TV cable was broken right at the beginning of the emergency and we had no TV, newspapers, or mail for a week – all we knew about was Central PA.

This is a scrawled account of the flood of '72. I may add another note of two if I think of it and Jim will try to duplicate this so we can keep my hand from freezing around the pen. Hope you can read this. Please excuse the haste.



South Front St?

Photos used to illustrate the 1972 flood are lent by Dr. Richard Sauers, and, for the photo on p. 6, courtesy of The Packwood House Museum. Their assistance is gratefully acknowledged.

✧ **ACCOUNTS** ✧