

The Flood of 1937 a Story of Bravery

By : Mistress of Word Play

It was in January of 1937 that the rain started. Before the end of February of that year 18 inches of water would drop from the heavens and leave people destitute and homeless. Property was damaged, homes were lost, and death claimed countless lives. One woman in the face of adversity survived to tell her story.



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The Flood of 1937 a Story of Bravery : Chapter 1

Prologue to the Flood of 1937 a Story of Bravery

It was in January of 1937 that the rain started. Before the end of February of that year 18 inches of water would drop from the heavens and leave people destitute and homeless. Property was damaged, homes were lost, livestock perished and death claimed countless lives.

It rained that winter in Western Kentucky and other parts of the United States. The sky opened wide and began to send an endless stream of freezing water down on them. As it rained the river began to change. The people watched in horror as the already inflated giant began to expand and cover what had once been farm land. Water snaked its way across what was once dry land and began to consume everything in its path. Those who lived along the waterway started a slow evacuation of homes and businesses.

Rose Smith along with countless others refused to leave her home. This was where she planned to live out the last of her days. Her parents had migrated here from the east when she was but a child and built the home with hard work and love. She was not about to let a little water drive her from her home.

Contained here in this tale of travesty and despair lies the true resiliency of the human spirit and how sometimes even in the darkest of times light can still break through.

Chapter 2: Rose

Rose Smith stared out the window of her modest home in fear. Water ran down the windows and continued to pool on the ground just outside her house. She watched that pool turn into a pond as the days passed and she sensed this would be a bad one. She had lived through wind storms, hail storms, bad winters, and the occasional tornadoes, but nothing like this. It was as if the heavens themselves were waging war with the earth. The earth was apparently losing the battle. The river had become so rain engorged it had already in places expanded far beyond the reaches of its banks. More and more dry ground was being taken each day by the giant rapidly moving waterway. Rose feared the outcome would not be good.

She had been listening intently to the radio for the past two days now and more rain was in the forecast. They had been advising people who resided in low lying areas to seek shelter on higher ground. She smiled to herself. Things would have to get pretty bad before she evacuated the family home. Her father had built the two story cabin with her mother helping him. She would keep it safe or die trying. A loud hissing sound came from the old coal cook stove. Her tea water was done. She took the dark blue coffee mug to the range and poured the boiling water into the old teapot her mother had cherished when she was alive.

Her family had migrated from Maine when she was three. She could not remember moving to Kentucky, but her mother had told her stories about traveling on the river to arrive in their new home. Her older brother John did not finish the journey with them. He had died at the age of six. He developed a fever and never recovered from the ailment. The boat they were moving down river on stopped in Ohio so that he might be buried. She could still hear her mother's crying sometimes at night. It was a constant reminder that she had lost her brother whom she never came to know. There seemed a hollow spot in her heart because of this. Rose and her family had settled just west of a river town. The people who founded the town had named it Paducah after a native Indian chief. She had learned in history class his real name was actually Chief Paduke and the original name given to Paducah was Pekin. Chief Paduke was a Chickasaw Indian and he welcomed the white settlers to his native land as they traveled down the Ohio River. In later days the town's name became Paducah in remembrance of his kindness.

Her tea had finished steeping and she poured the warm liquid into the mug. The first drink worked its magic and she soon felt warm and toasty. After drinking her beverage, she donned her heavy coat and pulled on her father's old boots. She had stuffed old rags into the toes of the boots so her feet would not move about as she was walking. The first time she had worn the leather boots she had been graced with two rather large blisters on her toes from the movement of her feet inside the large black boots. Remembering the trick of stuffing rags into the boots had been learned from her mother. She tied the scarf about the top of her head and walked the distance to the barn in the driving half frozen rain. Rose had sheltered her three cows and her horse Daisy in the barn as the weather worsened. Daisy who was normally a rather gentle and subdued animal was pacing in her stall. She seemed agitated.

"Whoa girl," Rose crooned to the horse, "what's the matter girl, weather got you spooked."

She stroked Daisy's mane and took extra care to calm her down. She could hear the cows mooing in anticipation of their nightly feeding. Rose had decided she would turn the animals out if the river crept much higher. She felt they would be better off loose than to be trapped in the barn. She had noticed as she walked to the barn that the water had risen another inch or thereabouts. It seemed to her instead of the rain subsiding and clearing it was raining harder and to make matters worse the rain was turning into freezing rain. Hay and feed were distributed to her livestock and she wrapped her scarf and coat about the tiny frame. Her hands that were unprotected were a bright red and raw from exposure.

She could hear the pellets of ice hitting the tin roof on the barn and she shivered. How much longer Lord she asked. How much longer would this go on? Having cared for her animals she wound her way slowly back to the house. She stopped under the covered porch and collected more firewood as she went. The electricity would be going soon, so she had best be prepared.

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After bringing in more wood and placing it close to the stove so it would dry Rose fixed a modest meal of cheese and bread. It tasted extremely good. She smiled for an instant at the thought of how it might be her last meal. It was not a happy smile but one with cynicism and loathing.

The cold freezing rain continued through the night and Rose was awakened several times as the wind had started to gust. She could hear the creaking of the trees as the wind caught the branches laden heavy with frozen precipitation. My God she thought as she lay under the many layers of blankets, will this ever stop. It seemed she could not get warm. Even with a fire burning brightly in the pot belly stove she still felt frozen to the bone. Her body felt as if someone had used it as a punching bag and her head felt hot to the touch. Close to dawn she fell into a deep dreamless sleep.

Chapter 3: Paducah

As Rose slept not twenty miles away to the east the thriving river city of Paducah was preparing for the worst flood they would ever see. The townspeople started packing what belongings they could carry into horse drawn wagons, cars, and trucks. All river traffic had ceased due to the rising waters of the Ohio River. Fears of ships being overcome by the currents or hitting sandbars had increased over the last few days and the steady flow of supplies dried up as a result of the inclement weather.

Paducah, since the early 1920's, had grown into a thriving river city and many settlers much to their pleasure found Paducah an excellent place to call home. Wildlife seemed to be abundant as was good farm land. The winters were not as cold as they were in the northern states and the many lakes, streams, and flat land made it an ideal environment for a vast assortment of people from different cultures. Industry had exploded prior to the Great Depression and there was a massive influx of new blood which helped the city boom. Now people of different nationalities and diverse cultures began to leave the place they had firmly dug their roots into. News broadcasts were few and far in between. What little news they did receive from the outside world was grim, it rung of gloom, doom, and disaster. Fear had gripped the residents not only of the city but the outlying areas as well. Rain, rain, and more rain seemed to be the unsettling news they heard.

Paducah was comprised of a vast smattering of mercantile stores, livery stables, hotels, restaurants, seed companies, hardware stores, headquarters for the barge lines, barber shops, movie houses, offices for the railroad, local government, and yes a few bars. The city leaders tried at the beginning of the crises to discourage people from abandoning their businesses and homes, but soon dispatched the news that evacuation was imperative.

So as the rain continued to fall and the Ohio River expanded the vast population of Paducah, somewhere around 15,000 people at the time, began leaving and moving away from the river. There were those families that opted to stay. Their businesses were two or more stories tall and it seemed to them a good idea to remain. Andrew Long and his wife refusing to leave the mercantile store they had built from the ground up started carrying supplies to the second level of their building. Food, blankets, and other sundries they might need were painstakingly pulled from shelves and taken to the upper level. He and his wife and one of their neighbors Billy Wright had worked to stock the second floor area.

"Well Andrew," Billy said wiping the perspiration on his sleeve, "that's the last of it."

"Thanks," Andrew replied that same look of gloom on his face which had been there for days, "not a moment too soon. Water's already come in under the front door."

Mrs. Long sat looking out of the second floor window. She had been watching the water advance first along the river's bank then up Broadway. A sigh escaped her ashen lips and she crossed herself. The two men could hear her praying God's protection on the store as well as the people in the store. Mr. Long walked over to his wife of 30 years and embraced her.

"It'll be okay honey." Andrew said as he kissed her forehead.

"I sure hope so Andrew," she answered in a harsh whisper, "I sure hope so,"

"Gonna be a bad one," Billy said shaking his head.

"Yep, Billy," Andrew answered, "sure looks that way."

"Maybe we should go, too," Mrs. Long interjected.

"Don't be silly now Miss," Billy answered smiling, "we'll be fine right here."

Having uttered the words to Andrew's wife, Billy seemed satisfied that they had done the right and proper thing. He too walked to the window and watched as the dark, gray water churned its way down the now deserted street. Trash and paper floated in the grimy liquid as it ran rampant on its new course through the heart of this city he called home.

The streets of Paducah had become a wave of people, some in a panic, trying to escape the influx of water. To compound the situation the temperature started dropping and roadways began to freeze. For days the majority of the residents made their way to relatives who lived on higher ground. None of the inhabitants could imagine to what extent their lives would change and for how long. Some people prayed, others cursed, and others just felt as if it was the next great adventure.

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It was not long before those who had decided not to leave discovered the folly of their ways. With no heat and the weather turning colder some suffered from exhaustion, dehydration, frost bite, exposure, and starvation. A nightmare unfolded as the rain continued to fall and hope began to disappear.

Chapter 4: Harry Hammond

Harry Hammond had rounded up the last of his cattle and dispatched them to the barn. He had found one of his heifers on the rise with her dead calf lying next to her. The mother cow stood keeping predators from approaching the corpse of her prematurely born child. Harry had to blindfold her to move the stubborn cow away from the now dead calf. She and the other fifteen head were now safely entrenched inside the barn. He had given them feed and fresh hay to calm them down. The mother cow stood in her stall bellowing for her calf. The sound echoed through the barn and Harry finally could take it no longer and headed for the house. The rain had been falling non-stop now for four days. An abrupt drop in the temperature had made matters worse. Harry had gone out in his livestock truck and gathered as many of his cattle as he could. He knew his livelihood depended on salvaging as many of the animals as possible. Harry stood for a moment on the covered porch and thrust a fist up to the heavens.

"Damn you!" he screamed at the clouds, "Haven't we had enough?"

Harry not getting an answer walked dejectedly into his house. At least the stove was still warm and he pulled off the soaked coat, hat, and gloves he wore. He loaded more wood into the stove and watched the flames dancing brightly. A thought came to him of Rose Smith and those wonderfully bright eyes she had. He tried to shake the image from his mind but it remained there as it had for two years now. Rose was two years younger than Harry and he had fallen head over heels in love with her the first time their paths had crossed. He could still remember the old dungarees and flannel shirt she had on as she loaded feed to take to her farm. He had offered to help her but she had flatly refused his offer of assistance.

"That's really sweet," Rose had said to him, "but I can manage just fine."

Not knowing what to say Harry had simply shrugged and tipped his hat at her.

"Well good day, Miss," Harry had replied, "if you change your mind give me a shout."

Rose had already forgotten he was standing there as she continued loading the sacks of feed into the back of her pickup truck.

"What a woman!" he exclaimed to the walls as a broad smile crossed his lips.

Yes indeed he had been keeping tabs on her ever since that day. Harry had courted and wooed several women in his day, but they all fell short of a standard he had set. Rose with her stubborn pride and loving heart had cast some type of spell over him and try as he might he could not seem to break free of it. He had on a few occasions made his intentions known to her, but she just ignored and rebuked his advances. He loved her long thick red hair and the emerald green eyes that held so many secrets. Harry picked up the poker and began stabbing the logs in the stove. It seemed unfair to him that such a grand woman as she would reject him so quickly. Then he remembered the autumn ball and how enchanting she looked in the dress. Though her apparel was modest it accentuated all her best attributes. He had spied the firm ripe breasts peeking through the flimsy fabric and the jut of her nice round bottom. Rose had turned and stared him straight in the eyes her smile widening as she realized what affect her appearance had left with him. She devil he thought to himself. Ah but what a she devil. He cursed himself for feeling so helpless every time their paths crossed.

As he continued to daydream about his heart's desire another darker thought crossed his mind. Rose lived closer to the river than he did and a large creek cut his and her properties in half. Harry preoccupied with an earnest fear for her safety prayed Rose would have enough sense to abandon her home and move to higher ground. Surely she for once might see reason and do the safe thing. The longer Harry pondered over the situation the more he realized Rose would not do the sensible thing, but rather the latter of the two. She would not leave her home. A sudden cold icy finger ran the length of his back as he stewed over the problem at hand. He would have to go to Rose's house and make sure she evacuated till the rain subsided. He would bring her livestock here to his place and board them with his animals and perhaps board Miss Smith as well. A sigh passed from deep inside him as he pulled his coat, hat, and gloves back on and made his way to the door and then to the cab of his truck. Still shaking slightly from the cold rain he started the long hazardous journey to Rose Smith's house. He just hoped she would give him one of those warm, melting smiles when he arrived there.

Chapter 5: Disaster Looming

Rose after resting through the night woke up to the sound of sleet pounding against her bedroom window. Though she had slept, she still felt groggy and exhausted. Her face felt flushed and there was an almost unbearable dryness that ran from her lips down into her slender throat. She did not feel well at all. The fever she had run during the night hours had left her ravaged. Slowly she placed her feet to the hardwood floor and made her way into an upright position. Rose felt as weak as a premature kitten might feel. After making sure she had stabilized her wobbly legs she made her way into the kitchen. She began by drinking several glasses of water. This seemed to clear her head somewhat. She cautiously made her way to the cook stove and after lighting it set water down to boil.

The wind had started howling again, enough so that her front door seemed to come to life. A slight jiggling noise could be heard each time the force of the gale would hit the wooden structure. Rose shivered. Would this nightmare ever end, she asked herself. She flipped on the radio to listen for news updates regarding the storm, but it seemed the weather was interfering with the radio station's broadcast. She walked over to the telephone hanging on the kitchen wall. There was no dial tone. Rose wondered what, if anything could go wrong next. It seemed she was here isolated from the rest of the world. Her teapot began screeching signifying that her water was ready. She unceremoniously prepared her tea and gulped it down. The hot liquid upon hitting her irritated throat caused her to gag slightly. She rummaged deep into the medicine cabinet and found the bottle of aspirins. She took two of the small white pills and gulped them down. Thank God for aspirin, she said to herself.

After finishing her tea Rose changed into warmer clothes and once more donned the heavy rain coat, hat, and her father's boots. She was astonished at how deep the water was in the yard outside her home. Where the day before only a few spots had water standing, now there seemed to be at least a half an inch of water. A wave of nausea hit her as she crossed the distance to the barn. She shivered uncontrollably as she unlatched and entered the barn. It seemed she was ill with some strange ailment, but the animals still needed their feed and water. What we all need right now, she thought, was for this infernal rain to stop.

As she walked into the barn Rose noticed where water was starting to advance into the barn and she shook her head sadly. She most likely would have to turn the animals out so they could make it to higher ground. Anger and resentment invaded her mind and Rose with a new found zeal and vigor began to distribute hay, feed, and water to her livestock. Daisy still seemed extremely agitated and Rose stroked her neck and ran a brush across the horses back and hind quarters. This action helped soothe the animal and it gave Rose something to do as well.

"There, there girl," Rose crooned to her steed, "it has to stop sometime."

Daisy nuzzled Rose's arm and gave her a playful nip as if to say, thanks so much for caring for me and the others.

Having tended to her animals Rose made her way back to the house. The wind howled about her and pushed against the young woman. It seemed as if nothing was going very well. Rose stopped once to catch her breathe. White wisps of smoke escaped through her nostrils and mouth. She bent over double from the exertion and weakness which she felt.

After several minutes Rose made her way to the front porch. She paused for a moment and looked around. It seemed as if an opposite hell had come to the land. It was not a hell of fire and brimstone as outlined in the Bible, but rather one of water, cold, and relentless wind. Turning to enter her home Rose picked up what firewood she could carry and made her way inside.

Rose carried the wood to the pot belly stove and began loading more logs into it. The fire had almost extinguished itself through the night and the house had grown cold. After loading the stove Rose went back to her bed and stretched out. She could still hear the frozen rain striking the windows and door. The wind seemed to be dying down a little and Rose smiled. Might just make it through this one after all, she thought to herself.

Rose wrapped the quilt her mother had made years ago around her slender body and immediately fell fast asleep.

Chapter 6: Margarete

The water from the mighty Ohio began to rise in earnest. A vast majority of the city's inhabitants had fled days earlier and only a handful of people remained to ride out the disaster as best they could. Most of the people who stayed behind had already found refuge on the second levels of their buildings. They had entrenched themselves with supplies and firearms anticipating only a few days of isolation. The river had already drifted a good foot over flood stage along the river's edge and the water had amassed to over a foot deep in Paducah's lower town area. The electricity had finally failed and with no power, wood or coal burning stoves and fireplaces were the only heat source. Phone service had also come to an abrupt end.

Andrew Long, his wife Margarete, and Billy Wright had not prepared as well as they thought for the disaster. Food, kerosene lanterns, water, blankets, and firearms had been carried to the upper level but they had never considered the temperature dropping below freezing. The men had only carried a small amount of wood up the steps, never realizing the length of time they would be trapped by the water. The river had already swept its way down the city streets closest to the river's bank and water which measured at least two foot deep now stood in the lower level of the store. Margarete Long had taken to not eating and had developed an ominous sounding, deeply seeded cough. Margarete had just finished having one of her coughing fits. Andrew looked in her direction with a look of concern etched on his face.

"Margarete," Andrew Long asked his wife, "are you okay?"

Margarete who had refused to move away from the second floor window of the store turned and smiled a cold lifeless smile in her husband's direction.

"I am fine," she finally whispered hoarsely at her husband of twenty years.

"I worry about you dear," Andrew replied, "you haven't eaten since this thing started and you scarce sleep anymore."

Margarete sat as still as a granite statue. She continued to gaze out the window as if it was a beautiful spring day and nothing was wrong. A sudden coughing spell caused her to double over and Andrew Long noticed the spatters of blood that tinged his wife's handkerchief. He cringed and walked over to Billy Wright.

"I fear for my wife's health," he said quietly to Billy, "she is not well and refuses to eat or rest. Maybe we should have done as the others and moved to higher ground. I am afraid escape is impossible now."

The cold icy water continued to rise almost as if by magic. Billy and Andrew had gone down to the lower level earlier that morning and found the water to be almost two feet deep inside the store. There had been cries that had come through the night from neighboring buildings. The others who had opted to stay were communicating with each other by a series of yells that went up periodically. The electricity and phone service had finally played out and Andrew wondered if his dear wife would survive the ordeal.

"I should have taken her to safety," he whispered to Billy, "if she dies it will be my fault."

Billy placed a hand gently on his friend of ten years shoulder and gave a firm squeeze.

"No my friend," Billy responded shaking his head, "we had no way of knowing this would happen. Come let's fix something to eat and get Margarete away from that window."

Andrew feigned a smile at his friend and then nodded his head in an affirmative manner. The two men walked over to her side and pulled Margarete cautiously away from the perch she had built at the window. At first she began kicking and screaming but she soon exhausted herself. They brought her to the makeshift bed in the corner of the room and Andrew covered her up with several quilts which Margarete had sewn. He bent down slightly and kissed her forehead. Her skin was cold as the rain that was falling beyond the store's walls. What bothered Andrew the most was the glassy look she had in her beautiful emerald eyes, those eyes Andrew had fallen in love with years ago. They had been so full of life and promise and now they had become dark and cloudy.

"Will you try and eat something?" Andrew asked her imploringly.

Margarete still in her own little world she had created stared at her husband with a blank expression. It took several minutes before she eventually nodded her head in a negative manner. Andrew sighed and pulled the quilts a little tighter around Margarete's tiny body.

"Sleep my love," Andrew whispered to her, "when you wake up the worst may have come and gone."

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He watched her eyes flutter several times and then they closed. Andrew sighed and went to sit with his friend. "With any luck at all and maybe a prayer or two," Billy said to Andrew, "this thing will be over with soon." Andrew had always been a very religious man and he and his wife had attended church services on a regular basis. Andrew had not a doubt that there was indeed a God and he believed in the Bible. What struck Andrew as odd was that his friend Billy had in his own way professed his faith as well by saying what he did. Andrew knew for a fact that his friend did not believe and never had in God, church or the Bible. It seemed strange to Andrew that Billy would make such a remark.

"Yes my friend," he replied smiling, "perhaps a prayer or two will get us through."

The two men sat and ate a modest dinner of bread and goat's cheese. Billy had brewed a pot of coffee to drink with the meal. They sat talking quietly to each other for a long time.

The sound of people calling back and forth to one another began once more. There was a faint tapping noise as the rain had changed over to sleet. The sound echoed hollowly and eerily in the room where the three had taken refuge. Margarete had fallen into a deep uneasy sleep and occasionally the men would hear her coughing. Each time her cough sounded just a little bit more severe than the time before.

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