

Interviews

Life Along the Kokosing

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WMVO Documentary Transcript

Sasha Lourie

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Researcher: Sasha Lourie

Event: WMVO's audio documentary of the 1959 Kokosing River Flood

The following transcript is of WMVO Radio's audio documentary of the Kokosing River flood. In **bold** will be the words of the tape's narrator; regular text will be used to mark the voices of those interviewed on the tape.

This is a story of people and disaster. The people, those of Mount Vernon, Ohio; the disaster, flood. The date, Wednesday January 21, 1959. A driving rain was pelting Mount Vernon; it had been raining heavily for the past twenty-four hours. The heavy snow from the previous week was melting fast, the ground was still frozen, and as a result, the water was not seeping in. The river was rising, people were beginning to worry, and the Weather Bureau did not offer much hope. This was the weather forecast as heard on WMVO the morning of January 21st:

The rain is likely to continue with bursts of still heavy rain up until 6 or as late as 8:00 this evening. After that time we look for a change to colder weather, there might well be several hours of either freezing rain or snow as the change towards colder weather begins to take place.

The fear of flood was not new to Mount Vernon, Ohio. The Flood of 1913 caused untold destruction and loss of life. But this time, Mount Vernon was going to be prepared. At 10:00 am the State Highway Patrol declared a state of emergency. At 11:00 am, Mayor Philip Mauger made this statement to WMVO listeners:

Please stay home, stay off the streets. I've already called the National Guard in Columbus, and asked them to send units in from the north to help us sandbag the dike in case we have to. Now in the last seventy minutes, the water has risen two and half feet, we got two and a half feet to go before it will go over the levee. We are right now in a state of emergency.

At about the same time, the radio station and the gas company began to receive numerous calls complaining about a heavy gasoline or gas odor which was now blanketing the city. Ohio Fuel Gas Company checked lines and traced the odor to a gasoline tank of 50,000 gallons capacity which toppled at the Ohio Oil Plant in Elmwood and spread fuels and danger throughout Mount Vernon. All schools in Mount Vernon had closed at 10:00 the morning of the 21st. At the time, there was indication that bus-riding children might be stranded by rising water on the return home. At 11:30, school superintendent Pitkins reported that he was getting calls from numerous alarmed parents. Their children were not home. Parents called the radio station and many came to the station; where were the buses? Through the efforts of WMVO, the stranded buses were located, all but one: bus number 7. This bus had been isolated in the south side of town, and because of the crippled communications, had been unable to get out the word that the children were safe. After some tense hours, the message was finally relayed to WMVO and relief came to twenty-eight anxious parents. By 12:00, evacuation efforts had already begun in some areas. The Sheriff's Office, Highway Workers and others were assisting. WMVO was already broadcasting emergency instructions. George Bennett, news director, had this evacuation information:

The streets to be evacuated are: Arch Avenue, Maplewood Avenue, Greenwood Avenue, Burgess Street, Sugar Street and Chestnut Street. Anyone having a boat and or a motor is asked to take it or them to the Sheriff's Office for evacuation if you can possibly get there. The river is overflowing at the bridge on West High Street.

News reporter Vern McKinley relayed these messages:

There is a request for bags to be filled with sand. Anyone having a burlap bags or anything that could be used for sandbags they're requested to bring them to the Cooper-Bessemer Plant is possible to get them there, and anyone who has any bulldozer equipment of any kind if they could get down to Cooper-Bessemer they'd appreciate it. If they can't get down there, they request that they call City Hall and they'll try to make arrangements to get that bulldozer equipment to Cooper's. They have a request to all truck drivers and so fourth to report to the Schleret Warehouse on Harcourt Road to help use those trucks for evacuation.

At 12 noon, January 21st, 1959, water was still rising on the Kokosing River at Mount Vernon, Ohio, and no encouraging word could yet be broadcast. George Bennett, WMVO News Director could only make this statement:

The situation now is becoming increasing worse, and still no signs, no predictions made by any officials as to when the river might crest and eventually recede.

The news at this time was not all bad. There were some signs of hope. The call from Soil Conservation Director George McConnell for example,

Dry Creek seems to have crested. That's a big help. That's the best news we've had this morning.

Good news for Mr. McConnell, Dry Creek seemed to have crested. But, McConnell informed us, that in downtown Mount Vernon, water continued to rise.

The water there is still rising some, but that's to be expected because that fillwhere (?) is at the dam. And actually so's the water up in I believe, is helping to protect downtown.

And the rain continued to fall. Just how much was reported by Vern McKinley.

Since 8:00 this morning, we have had 1.24 inches of rainfall. *One and a quarter?* Yes, since 8:00 in four and a half hours, and 2 and 63/100ths up in twenty-four ending at 8:00. So that's makes a total of 3 and 87/100 inches since 8:00 yesterday morning.

It was now shortly after noon. Water continued to rise on the Kokosing River in Mount Vernon, and people continued to prepare. Instructions were broadcast concerning public utilities. Robert Painter came to the studio to give this information on the power situation.

We have no major areas out at the present, and we do expect to maintain service. We don't think we'll be in serious trouble unless the water comes up another three feet.

Finally at 12:32, City Engineer Richard Moffit went on the radio to voice the words Mount Vernonites were praying they would not have to hear:

This is Dick Moffit talking. And the river is definitely going to go over the levee in the west end, and it'd be a miracle that would save it because the river is raising twelve inches every hour and is now toping the levee in several places, and everybody in the west end is got to be notified to get out. Evacuate. Otherwise there can be loss of lives. I wish to notify everyone in the West End to evacuate at once, the river is bound to go over the top of the levee and is now broken in two places. Please, there is no time to lose.

The water overflowed the dike and moved swiftly and moved into the west and southwest sides of the city. Lou Wagner, WMVO personality, called in his report

from the scene minutes after the dike break. His message, ‘water rising fast.’ How fast? Lou told WMVO News Director George Bennett.

In the five minutes we’ve been here, the water’s come up at least four feet. The water’s coming down Ohio Avenue so fast that it moved an abandoned automobile, moved it down about three blocks. It just took it along in the torrent and the gusts as you can imagine. The worst of this water, this water here that is coming in to this end of town is actually the water that overflowed the levee at the park on the West End. Seems like a pincher movement piling coming around from on all sides. The water has increased I’d say twice the speed that it was. And there’s another car gonna start moving out of there real quick. Down by the power plant there were a number of automobiles that were left and stranded that were totally covered and just their tops were sticking out of the water. And we certainly want to urge the folks who are downtown or folks who are home not to make any attempt to get downtown. The torrent of water coming down west Ohio Avenue looks like a natural-made river. The car that we mentioned earlier that is out there in the street is another one, it is starting to moving now. The current is so swift that it is moving actual parked automobiles that were evidently parked either with their breaks on or what have you, but it is moving the automobiles. It’s just inching along slowly like the wind is driving it. Well that’s it. *Well that certainly doesn’t sound very good.* I think I am going to get out of here before I get...*I think maybe you’d better.*

Mayor Mauger called in this report:

I just went down with Doctor Drake and the gentleman from WLWC-TV and we took some pictures down West Chestnut Street down to Maple Street, it’s about two-foot deep on West Chestnut Street. We came over Maple down on to High Street, and the current rather heavy on West High Street. And then we came up High Street and I’d say in places it’s three foot deep. North Jefferson Street it’s really coming down.

A Mrs. George Tanner was with the Mayor; she gave her reaction to the condition of the West End to WMVO listeners:

I had no idea of the wet condition of the West End. In fact I was scared to death. Cold, rubbish, cars, everything underwater.

The flood was not fully upon Mount Vernon, and the condition was worsening. The community was working full-paced to meet this emergency. National Guardsmen, Civil Defense, Army Reserve, County Highwaymen, volunteers with boats, trucks and hip-boots joined the rescue effort directing traffic, removing people. Thousands of instructions and messages continued to pour into WMVO to be rebroadcast.

Numerous volunteers augmented the regular staff to handle the calls. Here Reverend Hoss received and relayed an important message:

Bill, I wanted to talk to someone concerning some beds please. *All right, go ahead, you’re on the air.* We’d like to be able to get about twenty-five cots if we could. *Where do you want them to come?* We’d like them to get the delivered to the Saint Paul’s Episcopal Parish House. *All right sir, I’ll be glad to make that announcement many times.* And blankets if we can get them also. *All right, blankets okay.* Okay. *Thank you.* Thank you very much.

Other urgent messages, County Commissioner Ransom made this plea for bread to Jim Hays’ Grocery.

Jim Hays. If you have extra bread in your store in Gambier please bring to City Hall as soon as possible.

Just as WMVO was the communications center for the flood, City Hall was the nerve center of the operation of the evacuation, and also for plans of handling emergency power, water, food and shelter matters. The City Health Department sent instructions to the station concerning the reliability of drinking water. How many times this message was broadcast, relayed by County Commissioner Ransom: This is an emergency message to everybody in the city of Mount Vernon and surrounding area, a very, very important message, please listen carefully. Doctor John Balby, the City Health Commissioner has authorized me to announce to all citizens, anybody in this area, to please boil their drinking water before drinking it.

Anticipating a possible run on the stores, Mayor Mauger closed the stores and set up emergency food requisitioning provisions. Again Bob Ransom relayed the information from City Hall:

This applies to everybody in the Vernon area: If you need food come to the Mayor's Office. You must have a requisition before you can purchase any food in the city of Mount Vernon because of the situation.

Roads around Mount Vernon were in bad shape. Numerous washouts had occurred, and Mr. Ransom relayed this warning from City Hall:

All persons traveling on County and Township Roads please travel with extreme caution. There are numerous washouts that have not been marked. They could not get them marked because there are just too many.

Telephone communications were crippled: some lines down, others jammed. George Tanner relayed this information.

They are having difficulty with the line at the Red Cross and the Police Department because of so many calls. Do not use your phone unless absolutely necessary, and then limit your call.

WMVO, normally a daytime operation, had requested permission from the Federal Communications Commission to remain on the air throughout the night to relay the vital flood information. With minutes to go to signoff time, Western Union relayed, finally, the essential permission. Again, Commissioner Ransom from City Hall relayed the information.

[Sic] -21 Section 204 provides authority for communications during emergency resulting from flood, hurricane, white area, forest fire or [sic] freezing blizzard.

Thousands of personal messages were broadcast by WMVO. A small service that reassured many. Bob Ransom:

James Skeet at Fredericktown: call sister 27390. Jim Loskings, call sister 22278. If you can't reach either one of these numbers, call here we'll be happy to report so that their sisters know they're okay.

Hundreds of people came to the station to relay messages and give opinions.

WMVO staffer Rudy Maxwell claims he will never forget his interview with a Mr. Blair. Mr. Blair had heard that the West High Street Bridge which originally appeared to be deterring the flooding now was adding to the flooding by acting as a dam, hampering the flow of the river and banking up the water into the town. Now some people wanted to blow out the bridge. This met with some opposition. Mr. Blair was opposed:

Well it'll destroy it. But if you'd have to go down, it'd be better to go on down and take out 50, 25 or 30 feet of Pennsylvania track. *I see. ...Blowing up the bridge I don't*

think'll do any good. When it's blowed out, they've gotta get more room. If the bridge ain't letting it through just blowing the bridge out. As long as the water's high, the bridge ain't gonna let more water through when the bridge comes out. *I see.* And to go on through now, it's gotta have more room up there and it's gotta have room to get out down below at the Viaduct. *Well, Mr. Blair, it's been nice talking with you, and we certainly appreciate your opinion as to what you think should be done about this situation. Of course you recognize that we have no control over it ourselves, we only relay what others think and what others have to say. We're a communications...well I have no control over it, but I just think that if they're gonna have to blow the bridge up, they're gonna have to get someplace else for that water to go... I see...it'll just back up anyhow. Why don't you. Have you got time to go downtown and look the situation over and maybe get a hold of Mr. Mauger?* I'm going downtown and report my telephone out. *I hope come out for you all right Mr. Blair and thanks ever so much for being with us this afternoon. Thanks a whole lot. It's a problem all right. Here's Charlie.*

Extremely urgent messages were frequently carried that day of the 21st. They too got results to save lives. George Bennett relayed this one:

We've been unable to contact any law enforcement official, and if they're listening to our frequency right now, there seems to be quite an emergency right now on the Lower Gambier Road three miles out. A Mrs. Straight, along with two or three children, is trapped in the home there with rising water. That's three miles out on the Lower Gambier Road an emergency situation there. Any law enforcement unit hearing this broadcast please respond.

Mrs. Straight and children were immediately rescued by boat. Just one rescue due solely to WMVO announcements. The men of WMVO news remember well making a similar announcement over and over again. This one did not get such prompt response. Two men were reported seen trapped on a farm tractor in a field with water rising around them. After three attempts, these men were finally retrieved. The Mayor of Gambier came to WMVO to tell us about it.

Well, they've taken the men off, and Dale McNut with the Township Maintainer. And it was Harold Burch and one of his boys there, Dale Burch and one of his boys, Harold's boys. But they have been taken off there and they're all well.

The radio station under the supervision of General Manager Helen Zalkowitz was doing an unending job of relaying essential information and instruction at this vital time. But there was always the danger of power failure. What then? At 6:15, a tree at Monroe Mills fell across power lines and the power did fail. But fortunately, WMVO was able to continue broadcasting under emergency auxiliary power supplied by the Army Reserve Center, on duty since 4:00 that afternoon. Thanks goes to Lt. Lambowat and Cpt. Delgott for this vital service. This electrical failure left many listeners with out power to operate their receivers. Many families without the access to portable or transistor radios scurried to their autos to listen for the vital flood information. WMVO had reports of entire families spending day and night in their automobiles because of extreme uncertainty in their area. Early in the evening of the 21st, it was recorded that the flood level was receding. Good news to all. On the 22nd, the water receded more. The water came and went quickly, but it left its mark. Limited travel on only some roads, power still off, and only a partial supply of drinking water. No loss of life was reported, but nine persons were

injured in the evacuation efforts. An estimated 1600 persons were evacuated from their homes. City Engineer Moffit said water was twelve feet in some areas, and he estimated damage upwards of five million dollars. Three plants closed because of the flood: Continental Can Company, Cooper-Bessemer Corporation and the Mount Vernon Bridge Company. Damage to Continental Can ran to over half a million dollars alone, and Cooper-Bessemer Company had four and a half feet of water in one of its shops. The local A & P was completely covered with water. Newspaper and wire service reporters sent to cover the flood were stranded all night. On Friday the 23rd, Ohio's Governor DeSau (?) came to Mount Vernon to inspect damage. After a tour of the city, the governor made this statement for WMVO.

We were considerably distressed by the amount of damage that we've witnessed. But greatly encouraged by the example of cooperation that the people of this community have set in joining together to help minimize the results of this disaster. We'll do everything that we can to qualify this disaster for Federal funded flood relief.

By Saturday the 24th, the crisis was passed. Power was restored to all areas. Cooper-Bessemer and Continental Can were near normal operation. Lamb Glass, closed for lack of power, reopened. The people had been safely evacuated, but with the levee still broken and the possibility that the river might rise again, Mount Vernonites wanted to do something. But what? Saturday afternoon, City Council met in emergency session to consider immediate repair to the levee. At that meeting, Mr. Curtis read this proposal:

Be resolved that that director of public service be authorized...

Side 2 deals with the creation of the new levee and the Kokosing Dam and Reservoir and the reaction of the town, and also the flood's impact on the Mount Vernon. About 15 minutes of tape on this side.