

## HAWARDEN...HOW IT ALL BEGAN

### FLOODS OF THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

#### AN INTRODUCTION

## Chapter 23

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Anyone who has lived in Hawarden or been a part of its history has heard of the placid, meandering, “harmless” little creek that used to wander through town. If you have lived here for more than a few years, you have probably also heard of the destruction and chaos that this “harmless” little creek has imposed on the citizens and property of this town. Where the name “Dry Creek” came from remains a mystery not solved in the history books, but it certainly has proved a misnomer through the years. I guess we could paraphrase from an old nursery rhyme: “when Dry Creek is dry, it is very, very dry and when it is wet it is horrid.”

Just where did this meandering creek come from? Some of the old, old timers say that “in the beginning” there was never a creek rambling through Hawarden. Think of the virgin prairies, with the miles and miles of flowing grass; centuries old without a sign of a plow or any machine to disturb the soil; land that had never been worked until settlers and farmers braved the wilderness to find a spot where they could settle and survive and raise food.

Stories from the “old timer’s” say that the creek was formed by the loaded grain wagon tracks from farmers bringing their harvest to the mill to be processed or sold. The hills north and east of Hawarden were impossible to climb with a loaded wagon and only one team of horses, so they went to town, cross-country following the valleys, before fences were ever thought of. They came from the northeast on the west side of the present golf course and headed south west by eighth street through the old Ball Park and then turned north again at the site of the present Hi Tec building. They proceeded north to east of the present Community Center and City Offices, and then west through the City Park on their way to the Mill on the Sioux River in Calliope. Because Hawarden is located on top of large deposits of gravel and washed-in top soil, it was easy for the water to soon wash out the tracks and make its own ditch. The other contributing factor to the origin of Dry Creek came from the dike the railroad placed across the pasture west and south of the golf course in order to divert water away from the railroad.

Morey Balcom, a close friend of ours always told the story of taking hunters who came here from Chicago to hunt prairie chickens, seven or eight miles north east of Hawarden in his dad’s livery buggy. When asked how he got across the creek, he answered that he never had a problem because there was never any water there. Dry Creek could also lay claim to another rare feature: the main part of the creek, running between 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> streets was actually on top of a knoll; its channel was on the east side of the former Heartland Motor building and the west side of the old Walter Scott home at 803 9<sup>th</sup> street: when the creek was there, the rain water ran west towards the Heartland building and east toward the Walter Scott home, showing that the creek was higher than the surrounding land.

March of 1897 gave Hawarden an early taste of the *fury* of Dry Creek. The front page of the March 25, 1897 Independent read as follows: *“Last Thursday night the placid stream which courses through Hawarden, and is misnamed Dry Creek, went on a rampage and flooded almost the entire business and about half of the residential portion of the city. All winter long, with every recurring snow, high water was predicted, but no one anticipated that a raging torrent leaping beyond the confines of its channel and high embankment would be*

*the result.*" The report goes on to say, that on that Thursday morning, the snow was melting so gradually that the announcement was made that all danger of flood was past. During the afternoon a mist began that soon turned into rain in the night. For the next five hours, the flood-gates of heaven seemed to turn upside down and the downpour reminded residents of the days of Noah and the Ark. In a couple of hours the creek was a seething, foaming sheet of water. The church bells were rung and the fire whistle blown to warn the residents of the impending danger. Earlier in the evening, several light poles had been undermined and washed downstream, so electricity to the entire town was shut off to prevent a possible electrocution. The town was completely dark except for a few kerosene lamps which were used to survey the devastation and attempt to lessen the destruction by carrying possessions to higher ground. The cakes of ice and debris that the rushing water carried with it grated at the girders of the iron bridge on Iowa street (now tenth) emitting a continual clank and grind noise into the already eerie evening.



The attack on the business portion of town occurred around three forty-five in the morning. Within twenty minutes Kansas Street (now Main Street) from eighth street north was a raging river and from ninth street west to the Milwaukee tracks everything was rapidly submerged. In less time than it takes to tell the story, every basement in the business section of Hawarden was filled with filthy mud, water and debris. By four thirty in the morning, the maximum height was reached and the water began to recede. Daylight revealed a huge lake ranging from a few inches to several feet deep covering the entire portion of the city located in the valley. By six thirty in the morning the creek was back in its channel, but the huge lake created

by the Northwestern Railroad grade on the east side of town continued to empty its contents into the business district until late in the afternoon.

The editor of the Hawarden Independent D.O.Stone wrote in his editorial: *“Deterred in growth or spirit by a single flood? Not Hawarden! Her business men and citizens are not constructed on that plan. With that enterprise which has characterized all her work in the past Hawarden has again put her best foot forward, and although less than a week has elapsed, nearly all traces of the flood, which would have paralyzed a less vigorous community, have been wiped out of existence and business has resumed its normal condition. **THIS IS THE HAWARDEN WAY!**”*

*Author’s note: That same enterprise and vigor was recently evident when trees were damaged and uprooted in Hawarden the Sunday evening before Memorial Day 2012. The activities at the Cemetery went on Monday morning as planned, electricity was restored, yards and streets were cleared, and a week later almost all signs of damage are gone. Again: **THIS IS THE HAWARDEN WAY!** More flood stories next week.*