

# HAWARDEN...HOW IT ALL BEGAN

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

1926

### Chapter 24

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Immediately after the flood of 1897, the City Council met in extra sessions to address repairs to crossings, bridges and other damage to the town. They also immediately began to discuss plans to prevent a repeat of the flooding. The Superintendent of the Northwestern Railroad came to Hawarden and expressed his willingness to meet the people of Hawarden half way on any plan they might suggest to solve the problem. The March 25, 1897 edition of the Hawarden Independent states, "They (Northwestern Railroad) had their engineers here and took a survey of the creek, made levels and other scientific observations which will be of value when it comes time to enlarge the creek, raising the embankment and devising other plans to carry off surplus water. It is the intention this time, no matter what the cost, to prevent a reoccurrence of these unpleasant visitations. AND IT WILL BE DONE !"

The railway company agreed to provide an outlet under their track to carry the water from the flat area, and it was the consensus of the Council that the flood was a blessing in disguise, as the plans mapped out would protect the City now and in the future. This was not the first or the last time that these promises were made only to find that they would not solve the problem.



The Flood of September 17, 1926, caused by the downpour of eleven inches of rain in a span of six hours, proved all the previous flood control plans inadequate and the catastrophic destruction of property was devastating. The tragedy was the loss of one of Hawarden's pioneer citizens, Charles M. Fleshman 62 years of age. Mr. Fleshman attempted to cross Main Street from the City Hall on the corner of Eighth Street to go north to the building occupied by the J.F. Keehn Billard Hall. Apparently when he stepped off the north steps of the City Hall, he was swept away in the raging current and his body was not recovered until morning when the waters started to recede. Some young men saw him swept into the water and attempted to help him regain his footing, but the water was too swift and they were powerless to rescue him. Search parties looked for him through the night with no avail. Around 7 AM Mr. Ernest Anderson found his lifeless remains in some

debris against the Anderson Auto Company's Garage a block west of where he entered the water. Since the funeral parlors were flooded, his body was taken to the home of Walter Scott (803 9<sup>th</sup> St.) where it was prepared for burial.

On that fateful day, the rain fell incessantly all afternoon, but no one really anticipated the tragic events that were to follow; families were separated, some at work, others at home, children had just been dismissed from school and a large number of them were in stores on Main Street and forced to take refuge on the second floors of the buildings. The City Hall was opened and many people stayed there all night. Parents and spouses were frantic until they could reach their loved ones. The telephone lines stayed intact in most areas of the city, and the telephone operators (located in the second level of the Hawarden Bank Building on 9<sup>th</sup> and Central) remained at their posts for the entire night helping people locate their loved ones.

Dry Creek went out of its banks east of the Earl Meeter Ball Park (the location of the present Avenue K Bridge). The wall of water that surged toward Central Avenue was unbelievable. Reports confirm that the creek overflowed its banks around six P.M., and within fifteen minutes, the water was three to four feet deep on Main Street, as well as many other streets of the city

Within a very few minutes of the occurrence of the disaster, Hawarden residents had sprung to action. Men and boys arrived to assist families caught in their homes. As they worked, many of them waist and shoulder deep in water, the rain continued to pour down with no sign of relief. Boats were drug down behind cars from the northern part of town and these men worked into the night helping families relocate to safe areas. The swiftness of the current as it swept through town made navigating very difficult. Some boats capsized, but fortunately the operators were able to rescue themselves and prevent further loss of life. Saddle horses were even called into service and several people were taken to safety on them. There were many acts of outstanding heroism by the rescuers, whose only concern was to help people to safety.

Most of the businesses were open at the time of the flood and a frantic effort to remove stock and merchandise from basements was futile. The water approached with such speed and fury, that even the merchandise on the main floors was heavily damaged, and items in the basements were totally inundated.

Houses on the creek bank were not only flooded, but many of them were undermined and fell into the water and were washed away. Reports of physically removing residents from their homes just minutes before their homes were washed away were common. Barns, garages and sheds floated away and were demolished by the current and debris. Steel bridges were undermined and some carried away. The bridge on Tenth Street by the Library was the only bridge that was accessible to cross Dry Creek for many days. The Northwestern railway yards suffered immense damage caused by undermining of their tracks, the Milwaukee pile bridge over Dry Creek was practically swept away and hung there with rails and ties waving like a suspension bridge across the widening creek channel. The damage in Hawarden's City Park changed it forever. The Creek channel that ran through the park was three times its normal width when the water receded, taking with it ornamental trees and shrubs and leaving a barren reminder of its former beauty.

Over two hundred and fifty homes were damaged or swept away. The price tag to owners for property and possessions was immeasurable. Every business in Hawarden was affected, either directly or from loss of business in the days following. One of the largest single items of financial loss caused by the flood was damage to Hawarden's streets. The flood waters literally rolled up the asphalt and broke it into pieces. The entire business district as well as large portions of the residential area had to be replaced or repaired.

The Red Cross came to the rescue with relief efforts and appeals for assistance. Their headquarters were located in the City Hall, and the first order of business was to warn residents to refrain from drinking any unboiled water or eating any uncooked food to avoid disease and infection. Citizens were encouraged to take

advantage of the free Typhoid Inoculations that were given at the Hawarden Hospital. Calls went out for clothing and bedding from surrounding communities and the response surprised even the professional Red Cross personnel. They were amazed at the quality and quantity of the donations.

The flood entered Hawarden on a Friday around supper time. As soon as the flood waters started to recede, clean up began, but little business was conducted on Saturday. On Sunday there was a regular "circus crowd" of spectators that came from as far as seventy-five miles away to view the damage. Gradually the utilities were restored to damaged areas and pumps removed the water from basements and first floors, and life became a cleanup and fix-up project. As damage was assessed, citizens took their losses stoically and continually discovered that someone else's loss was much greater than their own.

And of course, as soon as life returned to some sort of normalcy, people started talking and planning to make sure that this WOULD NEVER HAPPEN AGAIN.