

## HAWARDEN...HOW IT ALL BEGAN

### FLOOD FREE FOR 50 YEARS

#### Chapter 27

By: Rexford Truesdell as told to his daughter, Mary Truesdell Johnson

Throughout my life in Hawarden, I have heard flood stories by the hundreds, mostly from my dad, Rex Truesdell and my mother, Elvina Harker Truesdell, and my maternal grandmother Louise Harker. The stories I heard over and over again had not been passed down by a previous generation, these story tellers had all lived the experience.

My dad and his family lived three doors north of the Avenue K Bridge over Dry Creek for most of his years as a young adult. He was 16 years old when he experienced the flood of 1926. My mother's family owned the Harker Drug Store (now the site of Transformations) and they experienced devastating damage and unbelievable cleanup during each of the floods mentioned since the 1900's. In the 1950's both of my parents had buildings affected by the floods, and quite frankly when they built their home at 920 Ave K and later built the Ford garage (now Hawarden Motors east of the Quick Corner), they raised the level of both structures to keep them above the recorded flood levels. This was done because they both had given up any hope of anything being done to the creek that would really help. Many things had been tried but none had worked.

The story I am about to tell will be my dad's story. The words are his as told to me many times, but especially in 1987 when he was asked to document the Flood Control project for the Hawarden Centennial Book. This is his story.

After life had returned to normal following the flood of 1953, I was asked to join the Toastmaster Club. I thought this would be a good experience and would help me to express my thoughts. After several meetings, each of us was asked to give a five minute talk. One of the suggestions for a subject was to talk about your town and the good qualities as well as what needed to be changed. I spoke on Dry Creek. I spoke about all the remedies that had failed and how after living through several floods it was becoming discouraging. Several members complimented me after the meeting.

A short time later it was my turn to have the 15 to 20 minute program at the local Rotary Club. Again I talked about the creek and expressed several of my opinions about what I thought should be done to correct the problem. After the program one of the members approached me with this comment, "a nice talk, Rex, but that is all it amounts to." This made me mad and that night I committed myself to prove him wrong.

I started asking questions of all the "old timers" who had lived their entire lives in Hawarden. All of them mentioned the railroad as the largest contributor to the problem.

I knew from experience that the dike constructed by the railroad sent the water north through town. Why not make a dike and send the water south under the tracks and then west to L.G.Everist Gravel pit, and in the southwest corner of the Everist Pit make a spillway into the river? When I mentioned this to several of the "old timers," they replied, "Rex, you get the dike built and you won't have to dig the channel. Just keep it plowed and the water will do the rest."

My next job was to convince the people who were going to have a creek or a lake close to them that the water would be at a lower level than their yards and would not cause the trouble that they already experienced from the floods.

To help convince the doubters and to better illustrate my plan, I took my camera and walked from the mouth of the creek upstream to the golf course taking pictures of the past efforts to control the creek that actually made the flooding worse. After taking many ground level pictures by walking up and down the creek, I asked Milo Engelbritsen to fly me over the town and the creek for aerial views. I then arranged a meeting with some local business men who had experienced the floods since 1926. I showed them my slides and explained my plan to build a dike from highway 10 southwest to the Northwestern Railroad and on the south side of the railroad build a spillway to the L.G.Everist Gravel Pit south and west of Hawarden. I explained that I had talked to Mr. Steve Everist and he looked over my plans and said that if Hawarden would let L.G.Everist take the gravel from the land south of Avenue B, they would take our flood water. They would also build the dikes for a reasonable amount of money. The group was speechless; it was hard for them to believe that our flooding could be solved so easily. Some of them wanted more assurance so the Army Corp of Engineers from Omaha was contacted. The plan impressed them and when they were advised of the offers made by Mr. Steve Everist, felt that it could be done for under \$400,000, which was the limit we could get for Federal Aid.

The rest is history, L.G.Everist got the dirt contract and sublet it to locally owned Keiser Construction Co. The project was completed in 1963.

My dad and all the others who were involved in this project have much to be proud of. As of this date in 2012 the channel has lived up to expectations and protected the property and lives of Hawarden citizens for 50 years.

It is the duty of our generation and the generations to come to maintain the dike and vigilantly watch for any type of damage or construction that could weaken it or divert the flow of water. Signs are posted to keep motorized vehicles off the dike and this is very important. Any type of rut has the possibility of turning into a crevice or channel that could weaken the barrier and send the flood waters back into the City limits. My father passed away in 1997 and continued to be proud of this accomplishment, but whenever floods were discussed, we were reminded that the channel has never been tested as in 1926 when 11 inches of rain fell in 6 hours, or 1953 when almost 8 inches fell in the span of an afternoon. The fury of uncontrolled water is something to fear. Hopefully we have conquered Dry creek and now as the remains of the old channel runs through Hawarden as walking paths and park areas it is really DRY for good. Only time will tell.

For more details go to: Hawarden Centennial Book, pages 354-358

