

A Flood to Remember

Growing up on a farm, you learn to appreciate nature. You're taught from an early age that rain is good, but too much is bad. It's not a difficult concept. This is true not just for farming, but really the entire world. Nature affects us in more ways than we realize, and Weston is no exception. The town has persevered through numerous floods, fires, and droughts. Citizens of Weston were eye-witnesses of the tremendous force that is nature in the summer of 2011 as the Missouri River swelled and overflowed its banks and flooded the surrounding river bottoms. However, not just nature was to blame for the destruction, and this made the flood of 2011 one to remember.

In the winter and spring of 2011, nearly 900 miles away from our peaceful little town, mountain states such as Wyoming and Montana were experiencing record precipitation. Heavy snowfall caused an increased amount of water in streams that formed during the spring thaw. This unusually large amount of water found its way to the Missouri River. Reservoirs on the river in North and South Dakota quickly filled up, and eventually reached their full capacity. The Army Corps of Engineers were faced with a difficult decision. Should they let the reservoirs overflow or release unprecedented quantities of water out of the dams? It was not a clear and simple answer, but the Corps of Engineers eventually made a choice. They would regulate the release of water out of the reservoirs in the Dakotas, causing severe flooding downstream. The essentially man-made flood angered many, and citizens of Weston were no exception.

Orville Fulk, manager of Sur-Gro Plant Food, was outraged when he told 41 Action News, "The idea that a government agency has a right to figure out whose property and whose needs are greater than someone else's need (sic)." Many others felt the same way. Farmers,

business owners, and public workers alike resented the decision to release so much water but nothing could be done except brace for the worst.

All along the Missouri River, people were reinforcing levees and evacuating houses in anticipation of the expected flood. This was where the flood of 2011 differed from previous ones. Communities were aware of the flood waters long before they were to arrive. Citizens of Weston came together to prepare. Thousands of sandbags were lined along levees by volunteers. Some of them didn't even have land that would be affected by the flood. Farmers kept a watchful eye on the river, praying that the levies would hold up. Homeowners and businessmen packed up their belongings to move to the safety of higher ground. Only so much could be done, however, and there was no avoiding the inevitable.

In late June, there was a breach in the levee north of Weston and water filled the floodplains. Farmlands were destroyed. Crops were fully submerged in some areas. Houses and businesses suffered severe water damage. In downtown Weston, it appeared as if it were the 1800s again as water from the river could be seen from Main Street. Altogether, the City of Weston suffered more than half a million dollars in damages. The people of Weston were no strangers to floods. There had been many before, and a particularly bad one in 1993, but those were purely because of nature. This had been the doing of the United States government. It was their fault it was happening. They felt the well-being of the reservoirs to the north was more important than the farmland and cities downstream. It was hard for people to accept, and for good reason. Perhaps it was just the resilience of the people, or maybe the mutual feeling of contempt towards the Corps of Engineers, but Weston citizens would not let the difficult circumstances get to them.

There's a saying that disaster brings out the best in people. This was clearly illustrated by the flood of 2011. Weston experienced great loss and devastation. But somehow the close-knit community became even closer. Neighbors helped neighbors. Stranger helped strangers. Tons of sand that the river dumped in the fields was excavated for months after the water receded. The Weston water plant had wells destroyed by the floodwaters. The city just recently received over \$400,000 from the Missouri State Emergency Management Agency. Damaged houses were demolished and rebuilt, just as Weston has done many times before.

That's the thing about Weston. Whatever obstacles the town faces, it always makes it through them. The people come together as one and look the challenge in the eye. Sure, we may stumble and we may fail, but a helpful friend will be right there to help us up again. The people of Weston are tough, and the flood of 2011 brought out the strength of them. They could have easily blamed the government, took pity on themselves, and given up. But the people of Weston didn't, and that makes the flood of 2011 such a memorable one.