



Delta History News

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Flood !

Ask an older Winnipegger about their memories of floods, and the Great Flood of 1950 will invariably be mentioned. But ask the same question at Delta and you are more likely to hear about the twin floods of 1955.

Flooding at Delta is not an uncommon occurrence. Since at least the 1870s, when European settlers began to pour into the area, records of high water such as those in the early 1920s punctuated the recollections of long-time Delta residents. But the flood of 1955 was the worst in living memory. Water levels on Lake Manitoba had been low during much of the 1930s and 1940s. But they gradually rose through the late '40s. An ominous taste of things to come occurred in 1954, when a windstorm in early October caused widespread flooding and beach erosion. It was, according to at least one Delta homeowner, the worst in over 40 years.

But in 1955, Mother Nature let loose with a double-barrelled blast of wind, one in the spring and an equally explosive one in the autumn. Combined with high water levels prevailing on the lake through the year (the highest, in fact, since measurements at Delta began in 1914), it was a potent recipe for disaster. In early May, fierce winds from the north pounded the southern shore of Lake Manitoba driving over a meter of water to land, and causing extensive flooding throughout the plains of the Delta-Longburn region. Winds at speeds of up to 80 kilometers per hour drove the water with such force that even the breakwater, a stout wood and stone structure built on the Delta Channel in 1919 (and subsequently rebuilt several times), was virtually destroyed. Mrs Kay Hutchinson, who operated a grocery store on the west side of the channel, would later tell reporters that she had seen large chunks of it floating away. Her small store, being on a high foundation, was not in imminent danger. Later investigation would confirm two gaping holes in the breakwater which allowed the water that had rushed into the marsh to eventually flow back to the lake. The driving waves had also carried away the footbridge.

Flood water immediately surrounded at least 175 of the 200 cottages and homes in the area, and it spread out across the

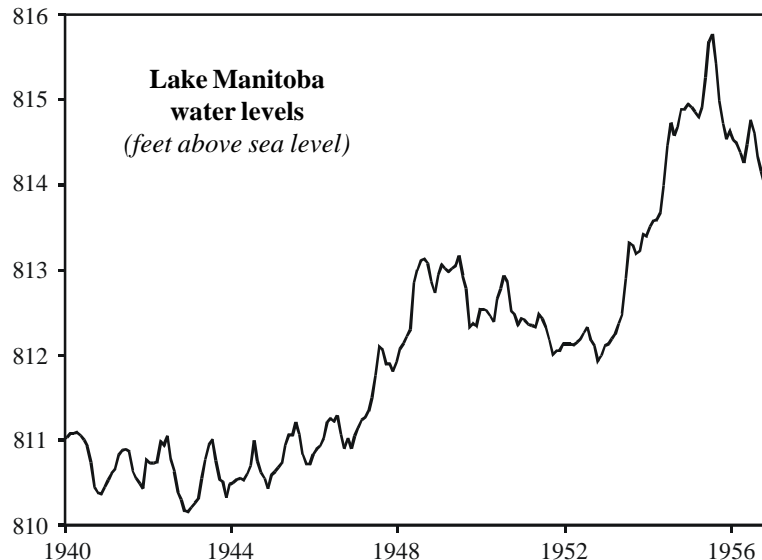
marsh, reaching farmland over eight kilometers south of the lake. Property damage was inevitable. Residents east of the Delta Channel had to use a long cable to haul waterlogged cars to safety on the dry west side through a meter or more of water. Like many others, Robert Henderson had to move his family out by boat. Farm homes were inundated. Mrs Harold Johnston, who with her husband operated a farm near House Creek, said that they were using a boat to get around their farm yard. They were also forced to block up their brooder house to keep the laying hens dry. Fences, pens, and buildings

at the Delta Waterfowl Station were badly damaged. Buildings were not structurally impaired but floors and walls that were submersed in flood-water later had to be repaired or replaced. The Station's director, Albert Hochbaum, reported that many birds had escaped although swift action by staff resulted in the recapture of the most valuable birds including some captive swans. Many of the ducks' nests were lost

but of five goose nests only one was badly damaged. Later that summer, Dr. Hochbaum would report to the Manitoba Game and Fish Association on some of the problems that flooding had caused for waterfowl populations. The high water had caused ducks to nest in higher, drier farmland and, as a result, many eggs were plowed under by farmers. Fewer ducks would be produced that year.

The road leading to Portage from Delta suffered minor damage but repairs and reinforcing by the municipal government made it passable. The road running along the lakeshore behind the cottages of the Delta West Beach was almost completely underwater and some sections had been seriously undermined. Cottagers were forced to use boats or, in a few cases, to hitch a ride in trailers pulled by farm tractors. At a June meeting between the municipal council and the Delta Beach Association, the council was asked to seek federal

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Delta History Fish Fry & Silent Auction

Come enjoy all-you-can-eat pickerel
and find out more about Delta Marsh history!

Saturday, 23 November 2002

Herman Prior Centre
40 Royal Road North, Portage la Prairie
Come anytime between 11 am and 2 pm

Tickets (\$10 for adults, \$5 for kids 6-12, kids under 6
free) are available at the door, or in advance from the
Delta Marsh History Initiative.

All proceeds help to support the work of the
Delta Marsh History Initiative.

Flood - continued

government assistance for repairs to the breakwater and installation of a gate to control water flow through it. The Association also voted to make a special \$10 assessment on cottagers to build a new road to replace the old one that remained flooded by mid-year.

Concern for public health prompted local medical officials to warn about the risks of typhoid. Area residents were advised to have inoculations against this disease.

By September, much of the cleanup had been done. Then, the winds came back. Vicious winds lashed the lake into a frenzy, pounding the already battered breakwater, sending sheets of spray high into the air. Hutchinson's store again became isolated on an island. East Beach residents had to wade through hip-deep water to reach or escape from their homes. And everyone had to cope with the emotional and physical demands of flood-wracked buildings and yards. Members of the Portage Country Club could only reach their clubhouse by boat so an impromptu transportation service was rigged to permit hunters and their guests to reach the shooting marshes. Luckily, to the relief of Peter Ward and other organizers of the Delta Field Trials for gun dogs, the autumn flood came too late to pose any inconvenience. Over 1000 spectators, sportsmen and dog-lovers attended the two-day event. An American black Labrador, Cork of Oakwood Lodge, would take top honors in a year of drama and destruction.

Without doubt, 1955 was a bad flood year. Surely, 1956 would be better. Or would it?

Thanks !

We send sincere thanks to the following groups for their generous donations to our Delta history project:

- The Delta Beach Association donated proceeds from its First Annual Art and Craft Sale, organized by Donalda Johnson on 30 June.
- Project Wild donated funds remaining after its activities were completed.

Oakland History

Does your family have a link to the village of Oakland, on the southwest edge of Delta Marsh? If so, the Oakland History Committee, which is preparing a family history book, wants to hear from you.

Information is welcome on such subjects as the railroad, elevators, schools, churches, cemeteries, rinks, business, and community activities such as 4-H clubs, ploughing matches, bonspiels, sports, box socials, and dances. Family histories can include such items as:

- year of arrival, mode of travel, home locations
- reason for move to district
- maiden name of wife (mother), original home
- family member and spouse names
- pioneer way of life, home construction, furnishings, foods, farming methods, transportation, social life, recreation, etc.
- experiences - exciting, humorous or other interesting happenings
- school attended, where, when, and any teachers names remembered
- if you know of people who have left no descendants or who have left the area, please send any information along as to where they lived, interesting facts, etc.

For more information on the project, please contact:

Oakland History Committee
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You can help!

- provide photographs, reminiscences, family stories, or any other information pertaining to Delta Marsh
- let us know about people you know who have information about Delta Marsh
- contribute your time to help collect and organize information, contact people, and prepare the book
- make a tax-deductible donation to help with costs of the project

Delta Marsh History Initiative

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