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# Cruel Flood: It Tore at Graves, and at Hearts

By ISABEL WILKERSON, Published: August 26, 1993

When the Missouri River barreled through town like white-water rapids this summer, and grain bins and City Hall and the Assembly of God church and houses and barns gave way and there were no telephones or electricity or running water, people in this tiny farm town thought they knew all about the power of nature.

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Then the unthinkable happened. The river washed away about two-thirds of the graves at the cemetery where just about anybody who ever lived and died here was buried. The river carved out a crater 50 feet deep where the cemetery used to be. It took cottonwood trees and the brick entryway and carried close to 900 caskets and burial vaults downstream toward St. Louis and the Mississippi.

The remains of whole families floated away, their two-ton burial vaults coming to rest in tree limbs, on highways, along railroad tracks and in beanfields two and three towns away.

"You cannot accept the magnitude of it until you're standing in it," said Dean Snow, the Ray County coroner. He said it might take years to find all the remains. Reminders of Losses

Now people who lost everything else to the flood are left to weep for the parents they mourned decades ago, the stillborn children they never saw grow up, the husbands taken from them in farm accidents, the mothers who died in childbirth. It is as if the people have died all over again and the survivors must grieve anew.

Every day they show up at the county fairgrounds to get word of their lost loved ones, gathering at a bulletin board where the names of the dead who have been recovered and identified are posted. People have driven from Kansas City and St. Louis to check on half-brothers or second husbands. A man called from Sacramento, Calif., trying to find his parents. Another flew in from New Mexico to find his mother. She was missing too.

"People are just heartsick," said Ed Wolfe, who had five generations of relatives in the cemetery. "It's a trying, a testing time to have to go through this all over again."

About 1,500 people were buried at the Hardin Cemetery, once a pristine landscape nine acres across and now a muddy lake where minnows and snapping turtles live alongside broken headstones and toppled graves. The disaster was all the more astonishing because Hardin is not even a river town. It is some five miles north of the Missouri.

Since it was founded in 1810, the cemetery had survived tornadoes, floods and the Civil War. No other cemetery in the country has been uprooted like this, officials of the American Cemetery Association say. Local people see the occurrence as near-biblical.

"It makes you think, 'What is God saying to us?' " said Bess Meador, a retired nurse with two husbands in the cemetery. "What is it we're doing that we shouldn't be doing? You look at that cemetery and you feel so helpless."

Whether a resident lost a direct relative or not, everybody lost someone. Just about everybody in the cemetery was kin.

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So far, the remains of about 200 people have been found, stored in open barns and refrigerated trucks at the county fairgrounds and at a nearby farm. About 90 have been identified. **Painful Memories**

It is a slow, painful task, more common to a plane crash than to a flood, that has required survivors to come in and give disaster volunteers any identifying information they can remember about their relatives.

Two boxes of tissues sit on the counseling desk for the shower of tears as people dig deep for old memories. Mr. Wolfe had to call up painful details about his only son, Christopher, a stillborn, who would have been 18 years old this year and whose remains are among the missing.

"They wanted to know what kind of casket, what color casket," Mr. Wolfe said. "What color his eyes were, what color his hair was, what he was wearing, if he had a little pillow in his casket."

Some people were able to give only the barest description. Some could only remember that a relative had a gold tooth or a hip replacement. Others remembered everything. One man's survivors remembered that he was buried in his Kansas State shorts, with a Timex watch and had a slide rule in his shirt pocket. The relatives of another man said he had a tattoo on his right arm that said "Irene."

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