



The Republican River Flood and Tornado of 1935

A first hand account of a time
when news travelled slowly
and flood control was unheard of
on the Great Plains.

By Helen (Cappel) Fidler

We grew up along the Republican River in the Perry, Nebraska neighborhood, six miles west of McCook, or seven miles east of Culbertson. Our home was south of the railroad tracks and the highway which ran parallel to each other. South of our home

about a mile the Republican River wound its way east from somewhere around Limon, Colorado. One branch was on either side of the Arikaree River. The South Fork Republican and the Arikaree joined at Haigler, in the far southwest corner of

Nebraska. The north fork of the Republican joined the south fork Republican at Benkelman. Of course these main rivers picked up many drainage areas and ditches all the way across Colorado and Nebraska.

The area was just recovering from a long and desperate time of drought. The dust storms had covered the midday sun many times. We grade school children were sent home from school midday because of the dirt that came in from the south. Even after the wind quit blowing the dust continued to filter down for a day or two afterwards. Any sign of a rain cloud made everyone so hopeful! When the passing clouds actually dropped some rain on us, we felt a great relief both in mind and body. So when we started having rain storms in the spring of 1935 everyone was so relieved and made great plans for crops, gardens and our lives.

Of course, at that time there was no such thing as flood control. In fact, there really weren't that many rains. Often times the local ditches would overflow onto fields and areas of some roads, but everyone knew which ones would overflow and where the overflow would be. We simply adjusted plans and/or travel elsewhere. Usually,

these overflows were for only a very few hours.

But this year it seemed different. The rains started in mid May and just kept coming. Oh, there were brief times between rains when the topsoil would dry off; but it was putting water into the parched ground so that little by little it was beginning to get saturated. It looked so good for the grass pastures and the crops, when we could get them into the ground. It was a busy time with the end of the school year in a farming community.

In about the third week of May the whole area had good soaking rains. I remember the lightning and thunder that accompanied the rains and many wind storms, usually in

late afternoon or early evening. Of course, our very existence depended on our watching the weather and trying to outguess it.

One morning my two brothers, Glen and Charley by name, went to the pasture to get the milk cows and work horses. They came back with the report of the river being out of its banks and running on the pasture. It kept raising for several hours and came up on our land farther than it had ever come before. The next day of this lowland flooding we got messages via neighbors and the telephone that the



Helen Cappel
eighth grade, 1935

river had surrounded the Miller house, our neighbors who lived one mile east and three quarters south of the highway. It even went over the threshold into the kitchen.

The Charley Miller family lived really close to the river south of the Perry elevators. In dry times their home seemed ideally located. It was close to the river with nice trees and lush grass. To have the river water come that far up to the house had never happened before. Not one old pioneer had ever seen so much water so high. The Miller family had five small children. I believe the oldest boy, Charles was in the fifth grade. He was such a nice boy and always looked “neat” and well groomed. There were Charlotte and Nadine too. They were in the next lower age groups and therefore not very big yet. Charles was very active and was always throwing something or running. He would have been a good athlete!

Usually we all walked home from school in the afternoon. Sometimes all of us walked the same road south to Perry. Sometimes, we Cappels went west from the school house so that we didn't walk so far on the highway with the traffic (ha). Usually we got a ride to school in the morning. Sometimes we rode only to Perry and walked from there, always with other

children, usually with the Millers and a family named Paris, who were neighbors from the south.

When some flooding came, the Millers were very concerned about their dairy herd in the pasture. Ralph Miller, an uncle from McCook and a hired man were out there many hours helping manage the herd, getting the milking done and getting it hauled to town to the dairy for processing and bottling.

The next day the river water receded and we went to see the Millers. The little ones had been sick with the mumps and the measles one right after the other. Mother Miller didn't believe it possible to move her sick babies

and children into someone else's home, not even Grandmother Miller's home in town! Her sister was visiting her and they chose to stay there with their sick ones. They made changes, getting out of the water on tables until the water went down. The flood waters receded after about four hours and the family took back their house from the river. They lived as normal as possible in a wet house.

The next day. The river ran closer to her banks again. The whole neighborhood was relieved for them. This was the week before Memorial Day.



Helen
May 2003

That threat was over and we all went about our day-to-day business feeding little chickens, tending gardens, cattle, horses and milking .

Communication wasn't like it is today. We had neighborhood telephone lines. The general ring meant for everyone to get on the line. We had a squawky battery radio that we listened to only for special programs, no "updated" news like we have today. The railroad brought news into town of things urgent or newsworthy. The Burlington trains were a familiar sight going past our farm several a day. The railroaders called Dad the alfalfa man.

News trickled in this way about the heavy rain up west. The rains seemed to last two or three days but seemed so far away we hardly considered it to be more than "news" and possibly in several days the Republican would raise and flow full again.

We considered the vast valleys between us and the general feeling was that the water would be well spread out in all the lowlands before it would ever reach us!!

The night of May 30 had been high school graduation in McCook. The thunder and lightning storm that came in, as the commencement was over, made everyone hurry home again. At that event there was talk about the railroaders bringing in news of a large rain unheard-of in Colorado and even in southwestern Nebraska. I think everyone was anxious about hearing of rains bigger than any Midwestern citizen had seen. The morning of May 31, 1935, I

was concerned about eighth grade graduation in McCook. We could see more water in the pasture lowlands than ever before.

The morning of May 31, more water than ever before could be seen when the men rode horses to the pasture to bring the cattle and horses home. They could see where the water was eroding a new little river in our pasture where it didn't make a bend in the river at the west edge of our farm.

At about 9 a.m., cousins came to see the water. Four of us walked down through the lane to the pasture at the south edge of the farmland. We splashed around in our bare feet looking only at what was ahead.

We were having a good time exploring the deep places when one of us heard a yell and looked back toward the house. Dad was on the roof of the cow shed that was part of our barn. He was frantically yelling for us to come back. The water had moved in on the low land between us and our house.

Mother Cappel was worried that we were going to be caught in water too deep to get back home and she was waiving a dish towel to attract our attention. We did walk in water almost waist deep on me in a couple of the low places. The older ones held my hand so I wouldn't fall in the deeper water and they made me run with them to get home more quickly. Indeed, two or three hours later, we wouldn't have gotten back.

This water and flooding was all strange



Looking west from the drive shows the old barn and chicken house (foreground). Since flood control, the Republican has been claimed by countless mature Elm trees. Note the distance the river is from the homestead. Usually it seemed “a far piece”, until May 1935.

and new to us land lubbers.

There were many telephone calls from people in town trying to find out how bad it was at our place. We were owners of popular picnic grounds on the river that were nice and many people used to come through our yard to have picnics “down on the river.”

Many people drove out to see the sights this morning. They drove into our yard, looked and exchanged high water stories with our family and then went back to town. This truly was a phenomenon to see such a wide river in our part of the country.

Among these people was news about another effort to get the Millers out of their house. So we drove to Perry to watch. There was a crowd gathered in the roadway off the highway by the elevators. By now there was water across the county road halfway up to Perry from the river. We took two cars and Wayne Shepherd was with us. (He was going to help with the farming.) I remember

that a Dewey Wright, who I believe had a second hand furniture store in McCook was there with a huge stallion. Someone had a row boat, a rare thing at that time. The men figured that if they tied the boat to the horse upstream that he could swim with a rider on his back at an angle across the water and get to Millers’ house. They could get the family in the boat and could get out at an angle somewhere east of there.

However, the water was so swift then, they hardly even got started when the big stallion was floundering to keep himself upright in the water. He was fighting for footing so they had to turn back right away. There were many, many suggestions but Nebraskans just weren’t equipped to deal with water and it was getting higher all the time. Men would drive stakes at water’s edge and within minutes the stake would be covered. Just nothing would work.

They tried to get the Dinges to come out of their home. They were an elderly

grandma, a middle-aged son and a daughter. The water was only to their yard and they were a mile from the River. So, “no, thanks, they would prefer to stay in their own home.” They were close to Perry and if need be would drive to the railroad for safety.

The plight of the Millers hung heavy with all of us. We did return to our own home about just before noon. Mother was baking bread and it was getting to be dinner time. All of us were restless and many strangers continued to drive in and out of our yard. My Dad (August) took a spade and casually put dirt over all the basement windows and packed it tight. The onlookers gave him many “guffaws” saying “You surely can’t think the water will get that high. You are a mile from the river!” and “You must be hard up for something to do!”

There was telephone gossip about a four foot wall of water coming from west of Culbertson, by Beverly. But remember, there were no official warnings like there is now. And all the lines went out along with the raging water, so unless someone was fast enough to get out, there wasn’t any news that was dependable and it all seemed so incredulous.

We fixed a rather quick dinner and mother got the loaves of bread in the oven of the wood cook stove. Glen was very restless and upset over the plight of our neighbors, the Millers. He finished before the rest of us and left the table. He went to

the kitchen door which opened to the west. He knew that Millers had mother, aunt, five children, Uncle Ralph and a hired man at their place and we couldn’t do a thing about it to help them. As he reached the open door, he yelled, almost a groan, “Oh, look at that wall of water!”

We all flew out to our screened in porch in time to see the four foot hog wire fence being carried and pushed upright in front of the wall of water on the west line of our place. Panic!! It was about three quarters of mile west, at the edge of our farm! Such terror. We had never seen water there, nor like that.

Gladys and Rosa, the two girls who could drive, were ordered to get the cars out and load the little ones. Others were told to go pick up the new baby chicks out of their coops in the orchard and dump them in the house. Dad saw the barn door swinging out on its top rollers and tried to roll it open to keep it from breaking off. I believe he managed to get the east one open some then the water came through in a torrent. By then we were jumping in the cars and very honestly, drove out of the yard with white water and foam lapping at the back wheels and the front ones on dry ground.

Now, as Rosa was the last out of the house after dumping chickens, she responded to the frantic telephone general ring. It was Mother Miller crying and begging someone to get them out. The water was getting higher very fast. While she was talking the wire snapped and the phone

went dead. Rosa came out and got in the car aghast! Mrs. Miller said they were going up in the attic then, and “For God’s sake couldn’t someone come get them out.” The line went dead as Rosa told her there was a wall of water coming! With bread in the oven and chickens on the floor, we drove out of the yard with water licking at the back wheels. We drove through water runningboard deep in places between the house and railroad tracks.

We got up on the highway, stopped, and got out to look at that awesome sight.

Any description would be inadequate.

All kinds of animals and buildings were bobbing up and down through our place. Horses were trying to swim, going through by our barn and being hit by huge muddy waves. They all looked like corks bobbing around wildly. There was the terrible noise of rushing water, animals making their bid to live and trash breaking buildings before our eyes. We saw barns, horses, sheds and whatever coming from the Millers.

We could see different colors of clothes show up on the roof of the dairy barn and



The Cappel farmstead as it is yet today. The house and barn and chicken house stand. New tenants have planted seedings and crops grow in the fertile Republican River valley. The photo was taken looking south to the river from the Burlington Railroad crossing in the spring of 2004.

then colors show up on the roof of the house. Then the wall of water was there. The barn started moving and washed into and against the trees and the house. It seemed to stop for a second and hope welled in our hearts, that it would hold there. But no—it couldn't with the force of the raging Republican river. In seconds we saw the dust and rubble go up in the air like an explosion. Then the house did the same thing. Just for seconds we saw "colored corks" bobbing and then nothing but huge seven foot waves of muddy water full of every kind of litter there was.

We were all speechless and frightened and so very sorry and sad. We watched for sometime as a whole new drama passed before us.

Everything imaginable came through our farm floating, fighting, bobbing, bel-lowing floundering, trying to swim in those tumultuous waves. The water was foamy as in a movie of the open sea.

No one spoke for a long time. Then we had to do something more than watch. The men tried to finish getting our milk cows over to the Stienke's, our neighbors north of us . They had a corral that we could use. The animals were "spooked" and very hard to handle.

Dad thought he had better get all of us over to Uncle George's which was about one and one half miles away. This is where Glen eventually lived and his son Dick lives there now.

It was getting dark and looked like it

would rain some more. We were afraid the creek north of us would flood. All we could think was "water." It was getting dark fast and we kept sliding around on that dirt road to Uncle George's. We had to get out two or three times and push by hand to keep from sliding into the ditch. It was so slippery from the rain the night before.

Finally we got to Uncle George's and the culvert was washed out. The wind was blowing hard and we all tried to run through the yard to the house. It was blowing so hard the older ones hung on to the smaller ones to get in against the wind.

We got into the kitchen and Dad had to use his body to get the door shut. All at once there was that terrible silence and no air. We all literally flew to the basement hardly daring to breathe. There just wasn't any air. Then everything broke loose. We stood with a coal oil lamp waiting and listening to the furious tornado outside.

After what seemed an eternity, the noise let up and Dad cautiously went up the stairs and looked. It was dark but the wind was only a whisper now. He told us we could come up, and slowly we made our way out of that little cubicle that had made us feel secure against the terrific wind.

After some time the darkness lifted slowly and the outside world was very grey and we could barely see. Gradually it got lighter and lighter and was extremely strange. We began to realize that it hadn't been night at all, as it was only five or six o'clock!

Dad drove west toward the Perry school house and tried to get to the Stienke farm, about one half mile west of the school house. The telephone wires were down across the road and travel was all but impossible. My two brothers and future brother-in-law Wayne were to have been at the Stienke farm. There were huge trees uprooted right next to Uncle George's house, so we were afraid something terrible had happened to the whole neighborhood. The car would go only so far because of the downed wires. The only travel then was by horse back. Someone met my dad and wanted him to go along with Mr. Stienke to check on the Zanders who were west of that and then to Franz Zander, wife and two babies who were north about one half mile. We waited a long time, then Dad came back. He broke down and cried. They found Franz Zander critically hurt and his wife and two little babies killed in the tornado. They had tried to get to the basement and were caught on the landing by the tornado. They were lying across the yard in mud and water. Franz was alive but stunned and couldn't move much.

They took them by horse and wagon to the Stienke farm where they were kept until morning.

My brother Charley's leg was in a cast, having broken it playing baseball. Glen and all the men there at Stienke's decided to try to milk the cows. They, too, were very nervous and one kicked Glen on the knee. They thought his knee was broken

but no one could go anywhere. He was in so much pain. They got him in a car, cut the wires that were down on the road and tried to get him to a doctor in McCook by the county road a mile north of the highway. The highway east of Perry was under water and we could tell no more that night.

The trip to the doctor with Glen was not successful. About a mile east of Uncle George's place a dry creek crossed the county road from the north. It was running water across the road much deeper than a car could drive through. They brought Glen back to Uncle George's house and left him to wait for the high water to go down. After a couple of hours they decided the water was lowered enough to not get in the car engine so they took Glen again and got through this time. He had a badly displaced knee but not broken.

The doctor taped it good for him and gave him some pain pills. That was about the first news the town had from our neighborhood as everyone was marooned at whatever place they happened to be. Glen and the others on that trip brought news of McCook being in the dark. Some men marooned in the light plant trying to get out and back into town. Merle Fidler (my future father-in-law) was one of the men marooned in the light plant. It was next to the railroad roundhouse, where he worked. There was no communication at all from the west or east and mostly just bits of information came in to McCook from the north, a long way around. And

no one knew what was fact or imagination.

We had 19 people in Uncle George's house from all over the neighborhood. We listened to cries for help out over the pitch black flood waters all night!! We put blankets on the living room floor and pillows along the walls for all the young people to lie down and hopefully get some rest and sleep.

About five O'clock in the morning it was showing light in the east. We were all up and tried to eat but, no one could. We got into the car and headed the one and a half miles to our home. The ambulance/hearse was in line with us. Men cut telephone lines and broke poles or whatever was easiest to clear the road. Then, the next concern was to get the ambulance loaded and back to town. Finally, we were on our way to our own home. It didn't look any different, as if nothing had happened the day before.

We went into the house and all was dry. The water came to within one inch of coming in the doorway. The house and basement were dry!

Mother's bread had finished baking as the fire had burned out. The little chickens were hungry and thirsty, but dry. As soon as mud was cleaned out of the brooder house the chicks were turned out, fed and watered, none the worse for the wear.

All that time people were coming into the yard, looking to see what washed in or washed out and visited, exchanging stories with each other. These visitors were all from

north of us where they had only small ditch flooding that was soon gone.

Everyone was out in the yard, along with our family who were moving 4 ft. of mud out of our barn. All were looking and searching by eye for something alive. Someone was sure they could see movement way down by the river trees. Soon everyone was watching and were sure there was someone in the trees. There was discussion among everyone about how best to get them. Not being positive about the chain of events, I believe the men walked and rode horses as far as possible up to the stream of water still running. The men decided a human chain would do it. So that was done with much struggle and time. They were victorious and one by one they got the two men out of the trees and up to some horses or a wagon. We brought them into the house where there was a bath and hot water waiting. They used a full bottle of mercurochrome on their many cuts and scratches and some salve for their sunburns. Clothes from our men were given them. Everything was given them from the skin out, as they arrived in only torn underwear.

We had food for them and little by little they told of being caught in a barn southwest of Culbertson trying to get their animals out and up to higher ground. They were washed away with the barn and animals. They came across the main river stream seven miles east. They spent a horrible afternoon and finally caught themselves up in a tree in our pasture. Needless

to say, they were in the top branches. When a greyhound came by they caught him up in the tree with them.

When the tornado came through there about 4:30 p.m. their tree was bent over into the water. They hung onto the tree along with the hound and were dunked over and over into the torrent. The hound was pure fate, as all through the terrible cold night over the water they clung to it for warmth.

As soon as they felt up to it, they were taken to a “Brother” Stienke further north, closer to the hills and relatives who would help them.

After we had our dinner and the dishes were done I was so tired I “sneaked” into the bedroom off the kitchen and went to sleep. I awoke to someone yelling to get the brooms and get the 2 car garage cleaned. The wet corn was swelling and breaking the side of the barn out! I actually “woke up” in the garage with Rosa, sweeping the floor as fast as humanly possible. Then we used every available means to get the corn out of the barn into the garage across the yard. All this time the men were scooping 4 ft. of mud out of the barn and the cow shed. From that time on we just felt like machines as there was no time to sit and rest all the remainder of the summer.

Because of the lack of communication it took news awhile to get around.

We found out after another day, that Ralph Miller had walked to a farm house on the south side of the river and prob-

ably four or five miles further east. He was completely exhausted but he told of another man and the Miller children, two girls and a boy that he had pulled out of the water and placed all of them up in trees at separate locations.

Help was shortly at hand and brought the survivors out on the south side.

However, the hired man, Charlotte and Nadine miller (the 2 little girls) were all they could find. Rescuers searched trees, banks and river for the missing Charles. He never was found. They reasoned that he was alone in a tree and probably got so cold and sleepy that he must have fallen out. Or perhaps the high winds toppled him out. There never was an accounting of Charles as I remember.

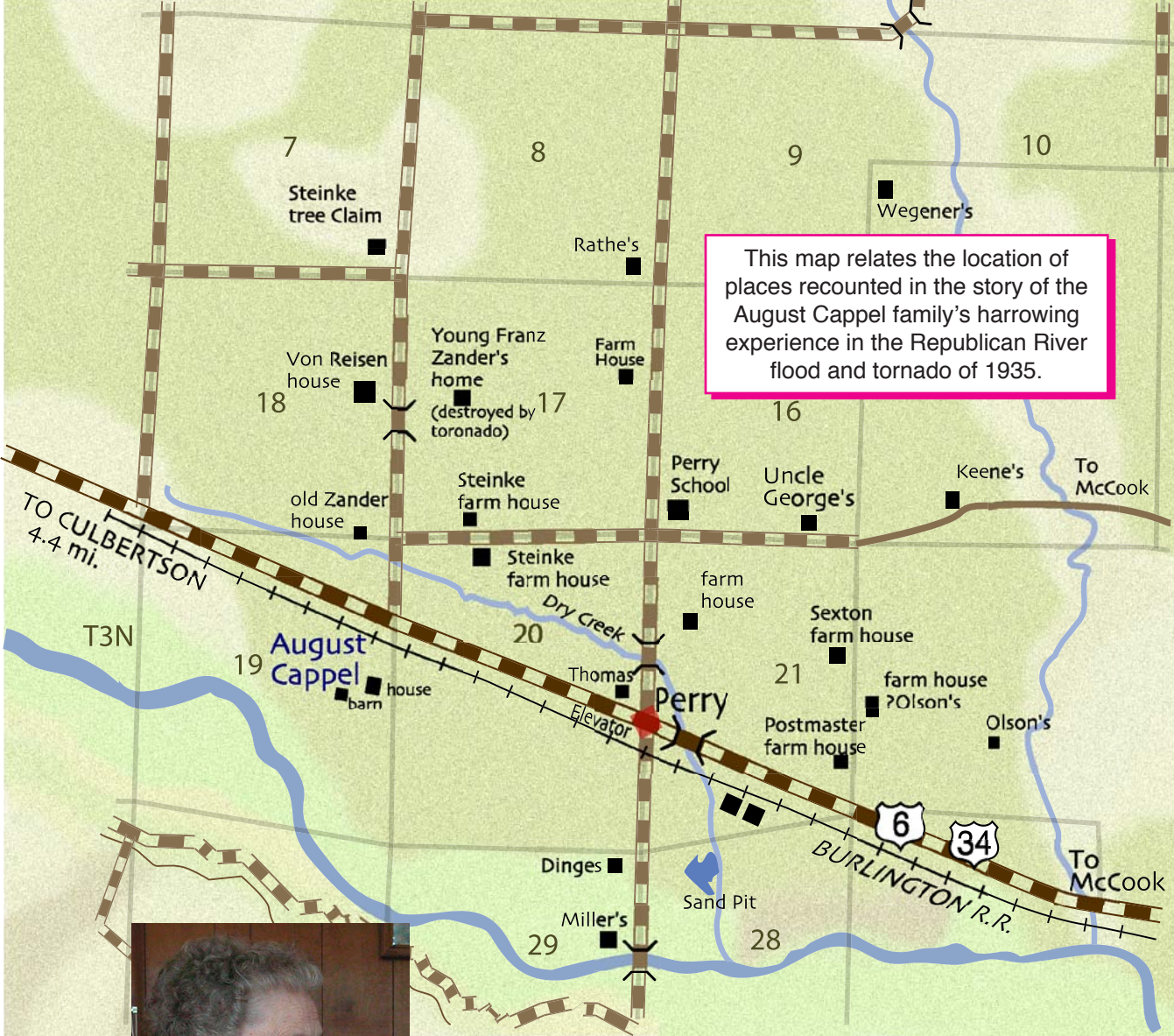
The girls were raised by their Grandmother Miller in McCook. Charlotte married and lived somewhere near South Carolina. She is deceased. Nadine Miller married Ray Fidler and they have their own mortuary in three towns and live in Spearfish, SD. where they run that mortuary.

About this story and the author

Helen (Mom) would recount portions of her story of the “flood and tornado” to us when anyone would broach the subject. Finally, in 1999, she put pen to paper and composed this story. She made only one rewrite before turning it over for printing. A few minor changes in sentence structure and just a couple of facts would be clarified. In other words, she had been composing this publication all her life!

She lived a full and rewarding life and passed away in October 2008 at age 87.

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Helen (Cappel) Fidler
(03/31/1921 – 10/10/2008)

ON THE COVER: The original structures of the August Cappel Home with the tree lined Republican river in the background. Photo taken in 2004 and given an old-time feeling of a period photo.

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