

A Community of Great People



Columbus Junction on Sunday Morning. Photo by Donnie Bean

**By John Carpenter
Gazette Staff**

Sometimes when I'm back in Emmetsburg I'll run across someone from my past who is also back home visiting. When I tell them I still live in Columbus Junction, their general response is, "I can't understand why you would have wanted to live in such a small town all these years." Well folks, last week answered that question. I had the opportunity to witness something that could only happen in small town Iowa. I have attempted to start this story a number of times. I've made notes, tried to put them into some type of order, thought about the lead and ending, then finally tossed all of my notes into the waste basket and decided to just go with what I saw and felt. So following is an account of the events in Columbus Junction during the flood of 2008. I know it's rambling, but it's the only way to tell it.

The event began on Monday of last week when the city was alerted that the water coming our way could possibly exceed the record river height of 29' that we received in 1993. The city administration, public works employees, police department, the fire department and county emergency management authority met to begin preliminary plans to handle the coming flood. A meeting was called for early Tuesday morning to begin the fight.

On Tuesday it was decided that a levee would be built along Highway 92 to the existing levee, then continue north by raising the existing levee until it met the railroad grade. Work began around 10:00 a.m. on Tuesday, and by nightfall the levee was approximately half completed. On Wednesday morning work continued on the levee, and at the end of the day the two levees were joined on Highway 92. To the casual observer this is what happened, but there is much more to the story. What will not be reported in outside news agencies is the response of the people of the community who dedicated their time, resources, energy and can-do attitudes to accomplish such a monumental task. Following is what I witnessed:

The work originated at the fire station. On Tuesday, as the work began on the levee, local contractors came with their equipment. Food appeared from numerous sources,

and people came in waves. Young people, athletic teams, kids off the street who saw the need, they all came and began the laborious task of filling sandbags. Also, row after row of dump trucks, both privately owned and state and county trucks, came filing in filled with sand. People from all walks of life came, looking for a place to help. There was a look in their eyes that caught me. It wasn't a look of panic, nor was it a look of sadness, it was a look of determination. Regardless of the person's age, regardless of what role they were assigned, regardless of their profession, everyone had the same look. I've thought about it a number of times since, and finally decided that it was a look of pure determination. Everyone seemed to exhibit the same resolve, "We're not going to let the river win without a fight." And a fight the river got.

As sandbags were filled, they were carried by hand to pallets. Forklifts then placed the pallets on trailers. Whenever a trailer would pull out headed for the levee, large numbers of people would jump on and ride to the destination. There they would hand toss the bags onto the plastic which had been placed over the levee, and jump back on the trailers and head back for another load. At the levees more volunteers were on hand to help stretch plastic over each completed section. Dump trucks were lined up in rows dumping sand to where the levee ended. After the sand was dumped large end loaders would move in to move the sand to complete another section of the levee.

Back at the fire station women were arriving to help prepare and serve food. Volunteers were on 4-wheelers delivering bottled water to the workers. City administrators were organizing and directing the work, and our police department worked diligently to keep traffic under control and open lanes for the trucks and trailers of sandbags. And this was not for just one day, work continued on the levee at this pace throughout the week.

On Friday the control center was moved to the American Legion building. All of the food supplies and preparation activities moved there. Trucks began delivering sand to the Legion parking lot, and sandbagging continued. As one group of people

filling sandbags would tire and step back for a rest, another fresh wave stepped in. Filling and delivering sandbags never stopped. Also, the city began building a lime levee around the water plant. By Friday afternoon reports were being received on road closings. It became impossible to travel north or east from Columbus Junction. Fredonia was cut off from Columbus Junction, and there were no routes available to Muscatine or Davenport. Travel to Iowa City was very limited.

While this was going on, city officials kept in constant contact with state weather personnel monitoring the expected river crest. Early Saturday morning the city learned that the crest was going to exceed earlier projections, and a code red call went to all residents asking for any available help to sandbag. By 7:00 on Saturday morning an army of citizens appeared, and work continued furiously. Problems were developing along the railroad tracks which formed the north side of the levee. The grade is primarily stone, and the water was seeping through the stones and causing it to crumble. By late morning all volunteers were called off the levee and returned to the American Legion. It then became a wait-and-see situation. This was the most frustrating time, as everyone wanted to do something, but regrettably there was nothing to do but wait.

Then it happened. Sometime Saturday night or early Sunday morning the combination of the railroad grade crumbling and the larger than expected crest of the river caused the levee to give in. Water flowed into the east side of town. Only the top of the bowling alley and the roof of the senior center were visible. Six to eight feet of water stood as high as the Econ-O-Mart, and water stretched to the CarQuest building. Monkey Run Creek flooded, and water covered Highway 92 and Walnut Street. And despite all of the efforts, water entered the city's water plant. There was nothing that could be done about the areas that were flooded, but the city immediately contacted the Tyson plant and arrangements were made to pump water from their system to the water tower. Hoses were stretched across the water connecting the plant's water system to a fire hydrant which allowed water to flow to the water tower. City residents had lim-

ited water by Sunday evening, but with the addition of a second pump from a fire truck, water service returned to normal by Monday morning. The city issued a boil order for the water. The water is safe to use for bathing and laundry, but consumption is not recommended at this time.

Although this story appears to have a disappointing ending, it doesn't. The levee helped give businesses additional days to vacate, and allowed the city more time to prepare for the flooding. The response of the citizens has given a new sense of closeness and optimism to the town.

The overwhelming support from our neighboring communities has demonstrated to us what great friends we have. The dedication and professionalism of our city government and city employees have given everyone a heightened level of respect for the work they do. The order that was maintained by our Police Department was so extraordinary that no injuries or accidents were reported during the crisis. The resources that our Fire Department, Ambulance personnel, and county emergency personnel brought to the situation far exceeded anyone's expectations.

I'm sure that I have left out some details. There were too many things happening to be able to record everything, but, in my view, the crux of this story is: GREAT PEOPLE may stay in the background during good times, but GREAT PEOPLE rise to the top during hard times. And after witnessing this past week, the next time someone asks me why I have stayed these many years in this small town, I'm going to answer: "Because it is truly A community full of GREAT PEOPLE." (See pages 5-8 for a special section dedicated to the people of the Columbus Community.)

The City water is safe to use for bathing and cleaning, however you are urged to not use the water for cooking or drinking. Bottled water is available at various locations around the community. Please call the Gazette Office for water locations. The city administration has issued a boil order for the community until further notice.

Also, there are a number of retail businesses who have sustained considerable damage, and will be struggling over the next few weeks as they work to restore their businesses. All citizens are urged to continue to shop in Louisa County. Groceries are available at Las Lupitas, New York Dollar Store, Rey de Reyes, and the Economart's sister store, Jack and Jill in Wapello. Wapello also has sister stores for Hy-Vee Pharmacy, Subway Restaurant, Casey's General Store and Dollar General. Please patronize these businesses as Louisa County needs your patronage now more than ever.



Groceries available in stores on Main Street.

Relocations and Temporary Closings

Lowe Insurance Agency has relocated to: 224 Main Street, 728-3313, hours are: Monday-Friday 8:00 am-5 :00 pm

The Dairy Sweet will not reopen until back on City water

Englert Chiropractic Clinic has relocated to the Old City Hall in Columbus City 728-2359

Integrity Dental has relocated to Dr. John Helscher's Office at 205 South Marion Avenue in Washington, Iowa. Please continue to use their Office number of 319-728-8100.