Norwegian-American Studies and Records

VOLUME IX

NORWEGIAN-AMERICAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION
NORTHFIELD, MINNESOTA, 1938
INTRODUCTION

To the country at large and to the Dakotas in particular the following account of the tremendous Missouri flood of 1881 should indicate that the continued drought of the past few years, which has been a calamity of far greater magnitude, is not necessarily one past redress. The moisture-laden snows may bring floods again to these regions. My father's story of the hardships he experienced that winter and spring was, regrettably, written in Norwegian, though he wrote beautiful English and, as he was a native American of pioneer stock, used English in his everyday speech. This translation has been undertaken because his account is a page of Dakota history, because he told it entertainingly, and because the courageous pioneering of brave men and women should be made known to their children and their children's children. My father, Halvor Bjørnson Hustvedt, first set foot on Dakota soil in the year of the Custer massacre.¹ The fires of Custer's last bivouac on the edge of civilization at Yankton had just turned to ashes, and traces of his camp were still plain when my father reached the scene where for five years he was to be a young pioneer pastor among the first white settlers of the Dakotas. The measure of his courage and

¹Hustvedt was born, reared, and educated in America. He went as a young pastor of twenty-three to serve these first Dakota settlers on the James and Missouri rivers, decades before the latest influx of immigrant settlers on the upper reaches of the James, of whom Rølvaag writes in his Giants in the Earth. The Bergen congregation, the first congregation organized in the Dakotas, belonged to the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Synod of America, whose college was situated in Decorah, Iowa, and of which Hustvedt was a graduate, as well as of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. He was a native of Wisconsin, where in 1843 his parents had settled in Dane County, fifteen miles from the site of the capital, Madison, which at that time was a mere village.
endurance is given in his account of walking thirty miles through snow up to his knees, the last fourteen of them with one foot largely incapacitated through an accident.

I

It was the memorable winter of 1880–81. I call it memorable because, during that winter, there had been a snowfall such as has never been seen before or since, in the memory of man, to this day. We had then lived in Yankton County, Dakota Territory, for four years and I had traveled about quite regularly, in four counties, through summer and winter, in good and bad weather, but always on horseback or in a buggy—never in a sleigh, and that for the very good reason that there never had been any sleighing. This, then, was the fifth winter and to begin with promised to be like all the others. But after the New Year it began to look different. The earth was at last hidden by a white coverlet and this remained. More and more snow fell and the going became heavy. But a sleigh was rarely to be found in this locality at that time and we were obliged to get along as well as we could; there would always be a way out. If it was impossible to use a vehicle we could always saddle the horse or resort to the locomotion of the apostles.

On the seventeenth of January I left for a conference in Decorah, Iowa, and reached my destination without undue trouble the following day. But on the homeward journey, a couple of weeks later, from the first moment on it began to look a little dubious. The customary schedule was followed fairly well until evening. This was Monday, January 31, 1881. We reached Algona about on time but there the conductor, Jim Hogan, then a resident of Decorah, received orders from the superintendent of the division at Mason City for the passengers to detrain and to return, himself, with the train to Mason City as quickly as he was able. News of snowstorms in the west had given rise to the fear that the train to continue westward it might become snowbound on the open prairie, where at that time the distance between stations was sometimes considerable. Tuesday evening the train from the east again reached Algona, reasonably on time, but weather conditions were about the same as the day before
and the conductor (L. L. Cadwell, who at the time of this writing still lived in Decorah) received the same orders as Hogan had the previous day. Our hope of resuming our homeward journey was blighted. The train made the return trip and we remained where we were.

That night it snowed without pause and late Wednesday a three-day blizzard began, which put a stop to all efforts to resume the run. A snowplow, coming from the west, was stuck fast in a cut—and soon both it and the engine were buried in a mighty drift. As long as the storm lasted it was useless to attempt anything to improve the situation and it later became apparent that the directors of the road practically had left this stretch of the C. M. & St. P. Railway to its own fate for some time.

When I began the homeward journey I had bought a through ticket and had about two dollars in change. During our stay in Algona we were refunded the unused share of the ticket. But it did not, of course, go far under the circumstances, and I would have been badly off if I had not been so fortunate as to meet acquaintances, who had both the desire and the funds to give the needed help. In Mason City I had run across Professor Chr. A. Naeseth, at that time a pastor of Beaver Creek and other congregations in Rock County, Minnesota, and Pastor E. Dale, who had recently moved to Brule Creek, Dakota. Dale acted the part of capitalist during our difficulties and lent both Naeseth and me the necessary funds. Just before his departure for Decorah he had received a check for one hundred dollars, which he turned into ready money when he left for home. We three kept each other company at the hotel in Algona, the Bongey House, but time hung heavy upon our hands and, to me at least, the situation looked desperate. When the weather cleared at last I was determined to set off afoot, particularly as one of our fellow-prisoners, Jesse Turner of Rock Rapids, had decided to do likewise. Naeseth was willing to join us but Dale declared that, for him, it would be a physical impossibility and because he had lent us both money we two others at once agreed that it would be disgraceful to leave him in the lurch, so the plan was abandoned. Turner, however, started off all by himself.
At last, on Tuesday of the second week, February 8, we three started off in a hired conveyance and reached Emmetsburg, at that time the second station west, in the evening, after many difficulties and misfortunes. We had eaten our midday meal at Whittemore. The next day we drove on in the same fashion and in the evening reached Spencer. Immediately outside the town we met a snowplow which was working its way eastward. We had just stepped into the hotel at Spencer when it was rumored that the snowplow had broken down, necessitating its return to Sanborn for repairs. This would be a splendid opportunity to travel a little faster and more easily as it was reported that the railway had just been cleared these twenty-six miles. We and others who were weather-bound here found our way to the station without delay and anticipated with pleasure the progress we should now make. But, no thank you! The conductor refused to take us along; and he who has had no experience with a fellow of that sort in those days has only a faint idea of what an autocrat may be. But the thirty to forty of us were not to be trifled with either, and it took no long argument to change his mind. He took us along and in an hour we had reached Sanborn. At Hartley, the station just below, we caught up with Turner. He had traveled this distance on his own two legs and was very glad of the opportunity to ride a little way.

The next day we again hired a team; it took us to Sheldon, where we remained from early in the forenoon till the evening when, for the first time in many days, a train was sent up from Sioux City to pick up the many passengers gathered there. Dale and I stepped aboard but Naeseth remained, as he was traveling in another direction.

On the way down to Sioux City it began to snow heavily again but we reached our destination without any particular difficulty between ten and eleven at night. Until then the train from Sioux City to Yankton, with which we were to continue, had covered its accustomed run and had left Sioux City that same afternoon. So we went to bed with the happy assurance that now, at last, our troubles were over.

But our reckoning proved false. During the night all the cleared spaces drifted over once more and all the railroads were
in a worse plight than ever. Even the Dakota Southern was entirely blockaded and did not reach Sioux City again until a long time later. When, a day or two later, we realized that this avenue was closed, we crossed the Missouri River to Covington on the Nebraska side with the intention of taking the C. C. & B. H. R. R.* to Ponca and walking from there over into Dakota. But this, too, proved futile. This railroad was a small narrow-gauge which, undiscouraged, had continued its labor while all others were stalled. On this particular day they had been obliged to send the snowplow out, the only one which was at hand. But it had not gone very far before it lay on its back in the ditch—and there it remained for the time being.

We were, therefore, obliged to return to Sioux City, where we were meanwhile received with the heartiest hospitality by Pastor Eisenbeisz, one of my classmates in St. Louis, and his charming wife. We expected to go on by livery team again the following day but found that the road was closed by a quarantine in Jefferson, where smallpox was raging. So we stayed in Sioux City for another two days. At last it was arranged that the mayor give us a pass through Jefferson and we left once more after a five days' stay in Sioux City. As was to be expected, the going was far from easy and it was four o'clock in the afternoon before we finally reached Elk Point, twenty-one miles from Sioux City. Here Dale and I were obliged to separate. His home was only seven or eight miles from there and mine was about thirty miles away in another direction. He was probably not well supplied with money—I did not inquire—and I was an absolute tramp, literally without a cent in my pocket, although I had borrowed thirty dollars from him.

Under the circumstances there was but one thing to do—to walk—and that the sooner the better. I started off with Dale, carrying my bag, which I delivered into the express agent's care, and then continued on my way towards home. Light and care-free I followed the rails which lay the whole way on the open ground, so they were not badly snowed under. But eventually walking began to grow heavy and I was pretty tired when I

*The Covington, Columbus, and Black Hills Railroad. *K.H.*
reached Vermillion a little after ten o’clock. And I was hungry as never before.

I repaired to the Chandler House, where I confided my difficulties to the host and asked for a night’s lodging. Mr. Chandler was a very fat, good-natured man, cheerful as the day was long, a typical Boniface. Although I had been there only once before and we were, therefore, not personally acquainted, he was at once willing to take me in. And, though I had not mentioned that I was hungry, he routed one of the maids out of bed and she soon brought me a warm supper. It tasted delicious and so much the more because the maid was not the least bit cross but seemed to be in the best of humor, just as good-natured as the host himself. So I felt that I was not an unwelcome guest though I was an absolute stranger and came as a tramp. I slept well that night, tired as I was, and besides I could now at last expect to reach home the following day.

The next morning, on arising, I found myself quite lame. The evening before, about a mile out of town, I had stepped between two ties in crossing a bridge and had stretched the muscles of one hip, but had not noticed any bad results from it at the time. Now I was unable to lift my foot in the usual manner but was obliged to drag it forward.

After having eaten a palatable breakfast I started off afoot in brilliant weather and with the joyful certainty that before the day was ended I should again be at home after a month’s absence. There were fourteen miles left and eight to the first station. It was about eight o’clock when I began the last day’s march. For a short distance traveling was easy, but soon all traces of a road were gone and I was obliged again to take to the railroad tracks, which lay along the open prairie, buried under snow which reached nearly to my knees. The crust was quite firm, so it almost held me, but each time I lifted my foot it gave way and on my lame side I was obliged to lend a helping hand by taking hold of the trouser leg and giving a jerk each time the foot was to be lifted. I humped along in this fashion as well as I was able but it was not particularly fast traveling and it took me six hours to cover the eight miles. It was already two o’clock when I at last reached Meckling.
I went into Mr. Taylor's shop, the only one there, with the intention of getting something to eat. But the supply of provisions was in a sad state; the food was all gone. There was not a cracker or ginger snap, no cheese, no sausage, no dried beef left, nor cookies of any sort whatever. Meanwhile Mr. Taylor offered the suggestion: "I'll tell you what you do. You go over to the house and I guess Mrs. Taylor will find you something to eat." I did so and was well received. Mrs. Taylor set the table and I ate like a hero, perhaps rather like a thresher. Then, after thanking her in my best manner, I returned to the store. On my inquiry as to the condition of the roads out to Ole Olson Jetlie's, one of my parishioners who lived a mile and a half away from Meckling, Mr. Taylor answered, "If I were in your place I would sooner walk to Gayville than out to Mr. Olson's." Gayville was my home, about six miles away. I took his advice and found that part of the road somewhat easier than I had hitherto been accustomed to, but the twilight was falling before I reached home — tired but happy.

At home they had also found the situation desperate, as nothing had been heard from me for four weeks except for a telegram I had sent from Algona and that had been five days in transit.

Mr. Chandler I never saw again, as it was fourteen years before I returned to Vermillion and then he was dead. But I had sent him money from Iowa, where we had moved in the spring, and had received an answer stating that the money had been received.

All my work at home had, of course, been completely disarranged because of my long absence and it took a while before everything was restored to its former regularity. It would be more correct to say that during the remainder of my stay the work never did return to complete regularity; the weather and roads were in such a state the whole winter through that at times it was impossible to reach one's destination. And although I nailed together a sort of a sleigh which did indifferent service, I was often obliged to resort to the saddle or even to walking when there seemed no other means of reaching my destination. Once, at least, I was forced to give up when I had covered half the distance and another time I arrived so late that the parishioners
had returned home. So it went on through February and March until the flood came and put a stop to all intercourse on “the bottom.”

II

The circumstances under which we lived that winter were such that one would have supposed we should have anticipated the coming of spring with anxious foreboding. However people had lived there for twenty years and more without experiencing a serious flood. “The bottom” was twenty-eight miles long, its greatest width twelve to fourteen miles, and it never occurred to anyone that there might be a large enough volume of water to endanger life. Even two days before the catastrophe, when a warning had come from Yankton that there was real danger, there was no one who sought safety on “the bluff.” There would have been time to save both livestock and people the day before, but at that time there was no one who grasped how critical the situation was and each one remained where he was. To be sure, rumor had it that there would be at least three feet of water on the level prairie, but this was no doubt considered an exaggeration by most people. In the meantime preparations were made for the worst as far as possible. At our home, for example, the books, clothes, and so forth were heaped upon the piano; on tables, and in the beds; my wife and her sister, with the two children we had at that time, moved into the hotel, for our house was a cottage with no second floor. I, myself, put in most of the time constructing a flooring in that part of the stable where the ponies had, up to now, stood on the bare earth. How high above the ordinary level this floor was raised I do not know, but it must have been easily a foot and a half because that is the impression I have and I remember that it was with the greatest reluctance that the ponies climbed upon it when it was finished.

About two o’clock on the afternoon of March 28 the water rose suddenly in the “lake,” so that it began to flow in on both sides of the railroad tracks, but in less than an hour it had fallen again and we supposed that the awaited flood had been a mis-

\(^3\) This was Gayville’s first and at the time its only piano, a square grand. It showed marks of the flood waters on the under side of the case, though the strings and sounding-board had been spared. K. H.
calculation and that nothing more serious would happen. On the afternoon of March 30 we had once more taken possession of our home and the women were preparing the evening meal while I stood just outside, chopping wood. Suddenly I heard a scream from behind me up by the lake and turned to see what was the matter. Of what I saw in that direction I have no recollection, for in the next instant the water bore down upon me from the other side of the house and I only recall that the crest of the first wave foamed high into the air. At once the entire surroundings were covered with water. Each of the women took a child in her arms and fled back to the hotel. The water reached to their knees on level ground. I sprang to the stable and threw down hay to the horses as fast as I was able, and then followed the others, but before I reached my destination I was soaked up over the small of my back.

It was already dusk. Now there was no more opportunity to save anything. What the flood could carry with it must go. However, a pile of lumber, the property of the railroad, was warped into a haven on the platform behind Bagstad's store by some of us, just as it began to drift with the stream. It was only "fencing"; but we intended to build boats and had nothing better at hand. Later we robbed the stockyard for the same purpose.

At the hotel, which also belonged to Iver Bagstad, were gathered a number of families; all were above stairs, as the first floor was under water. Most of the men, if not all, were assembled at the store, which was built over quite a high cellar and where the floor was still dry. But after a while the water began to bubble up between the planks until it was six to eight inches in depth. Some of us stayed there all night, but others moved over to the hotel again. Very little was said, but grave faces bore witness to the serious thoughts which moved everyone's heart and there was perhaps no one in whose soul did not arise thoughts of God as the only helper in his plight nor who did not lift up his heart in a plea for safety.

It seemed at last that the water had reached its maximum height but a little later came a sudden rise again. This repeated itself several times and we kept a watchful eye upon the water
level by placing a pin in the stairway to mark it and then a few minutes later looking to see if it were still visible or whether the water had again covered it. We could not be blamed for our concern, when it is learned that it was just a matter of inches before the ice pack, which had grounded just above the schoolhouse, a block away, would be lifted over the bank and with its irresistible weight would sweep everything with it, houses and trees, animals and people and whatever was in its path. Flags of blue ice, three to four feet thick, lay packed a mile or two above us and we recognized our situation. God be praised, it did not come to the worst, although it was such a close shave that one of the huge blocks of ice broke in the side of the schoolhouse and covered nearly the whole of the floor. In like manner one or two of the dwellings nearby were slightly damaged and we heard the cries of the people. But there was no opportunity to go to their assistance. The water rushed by outside in strong currents and it was dark as in a sack. We had but the Father’s care to lean upon—we could only commend them and ourselves to His mercy. Who could say here as elsewhere, “So far, but no farther!”

As the night wore away a fierce storm came on and the cold became more intense, so that during the following day ice formed on the waters, strong enough to carry our weight anywhere between the houses and some distance away; but both to the north and south of us, where there was open water, the currents ran just as violently. We were marooned in the middle of a large sea, so to speak, as land was five miles away on one side and six or seven on the other.

Added beside the cries of people heard from all directions we also heard horned cattle, pigs, and horses, each in his own way yammering through the dark night and when the day at last began to break we saw that such creatures stood here and there, upon the snowdrifts, without food or shelter against the inclement weather. We could, however, do nothing for them that day—only pity their miserable plight—but Friday they received what help could be given. Food was furnished according to each one’s need, the cows were milked, and so on. Not until that morning was I able to visit my horses. They stood in water up to their
knees and John Olson Braaten's horses, which had been put in the barn on Wednesday evening, in the half which had no flooring, stood in water up to the middle of their sides. Fortunately the hayloft had just been filled and we got the horses somewhat on terra firma by placing sufficient hay under them. Hanging from the ponies' tails, as well as under their chins around the ring to which the bridle was attached, were huge icicles; I was obliged to fetch the axe before these heavy weights could be removed. Their feet were as cold as ice and I worked both long and diligently before I was able to rub warmth into them once more, but they sustained no bad effects from having stood in ice-cold water from Wednesday night till Friday forenoon.

For about a week we were chiefly occupied with taking care of our own animals and those fate had intrusted to our care for the time being—as well as with the building of boats from the scanty supplies at hand. There were plenty of nails, as well as tools, but there was a dearth of building material and that which was on hand lent itself but poorly to such use. Three or four small boats were built and then, at last, a large barge; but the work progressed slowly and it was only after many days that we felt we had a sufficient flotilla to attempt to row our women and children to dry land, in on the bluff. The water level remained about the same, but after a few days the ice began to crumble and we fell through every once in a while on our trips about in caring for the livestock. To begin with we changed to dry clothing, while any remained, after each such outing, until finally we walked about the whole day long in wet garments, paying no attention to the discomfort. And yet, as far as I know, none of us became ill or later experienced any bad effects from it.

When the barge was at length finished we thought the time had come to try to reach dry land with the women and children. This was on Thursday afternoon, April 7. We got the boats loaded and finally moved off slowly. But we had not gotten far when we realized that the journey must be postponed till the following day. Just outside the town lay a strip of ice, so strong that it would take both time and heavy labor to break a canal out to the open water, and it was already so late in the day that the mainland, which lay about five miles away, could not be
reached before nightfall. So we returned and both passengers and boatmen again took up their residence in Bagstad’s hotel.

The next day four or five of us went out again with the flatboat to make a way out to the open water. We gathered in the stern and forced the barge upon the ice, then moved into the prow, whereupon the ice broke under our combined weight. Thus we moved forward little by little, slowly but surely, until it neared noonday. We had just a little piece left in order to finish the canal when suddenly before our eyes appeared a sight which caused our hearts to jump for joy—steering straight towards us from the “open sea” came a yawl, which, under the firm stroke of six oars, propelled by adept rowers, made such speed that the water foamed about the bow. It was Captain Lavender and his brave men, who, ever since the flood came, had gone about early and late to bring unfortunate people to land. They were found in all sorts of pitiful situations—immured in their attics so they were obliged to chop a way out to the roof, or sitting on the gables of barns, both adults and children, for one or two days before help arrived, or perched in trees, and so forth. Yankton was in those days the winter quarters for the many steamers which in the summer time made regular trips up the upper Missouri as far as Fort Benton, Montana, perhaps even farther. There were, therefore, many of these yawls and they were all manned and sent out to the rescue of the unfortunates. This was one of them—and it had to be acknowledged that it was something else than our own boats. I still have a lively recollection of thinking it a proud sight when I saw it approach quietly, yet with such speed, the six pairs of oars in rhythmic movement, now glistening in the sunshine and again hidden by the waves. Real waves there were in the current outside, where the water in places had a depth of from fifteen to twenty feet.

The completed canal came in handy. The jolly boat was just able to pass through. It came from below, where it had made an unsuccessful attempt to reach Meckling, where everything was under water to a depth of nine feet and where 130 people were crowded into the loft of an elevator. They had not until now concerned themselves about us, they said, as they knew we were in no immediate danger and there were many others
worse off than we. Now they came to us because at the moment there was nothing they could accomplish elsewhere. As soon as they had had their dinner they took all our women and children aboard and steered a course to land. There all were cordially received by the nearest farmers’ families, who all were at the service of the fugitives with respect to food, clothes, and shelter.

We men were now freed from our greatest concern and had only ourselves to take care of and, if it became necessary, had boats enough of a sort to save ourselves, we thought. We could have left for dry land at once but felt we could not forsake the animals but must remain to care for them as well as we could.

And we did not suffer. Food of various sorts was still abundant and the cook, Julius Bjerkelie, was not niggardly in the serving of viands. As the situation was we had several cows to milk and could not take on the duty of gathering cream for butter—so we used it in all manner of ways, in pancake batter instead of sour milk, together with sauce or preserves, crackers and cream in place of milk and bread, and so forth. Cream was used “both without and within.” And I doubt that our respective wives had ever served the like of such coffee as Julius set before us daily. These days we banqueted at each meal and it was well that it did not continue for long or it might have been disastrous. To be sure, it was being wasteful of the cream, but there would have been no virtue in feeding it to the pigs either. For that matter the pigs, calves, and chickens were given more sweet milk during this time than they had ever had before or later would enjoy.

About my personal experiences of that time there is not much more to relate. A day or two later I made a brief visit to “the bluff” and found the family very comfortable. Again I spent some time in Gayville and when the waters at last receded, so that it was possible to get through, I drove my horses over to Louis Berven, where they were left till I later could take them to Iowa.

The previous autumn I had accepted a call to Worth County and it had not occurred to me to go back on this agreement although I felt it was a shame to leave the old field under such cir-
cumstances. But there was no prospect of getting back to a normal routine of living for some time and I felt my duty lay where I had promised to go. In the meantime, in the fall of that same year my successor, Pastor P. H. Dahl, arrived and has during all these years served faithfully and is still the incumbent. The vacancy was of about half a year’s duration.

It was our intention, at first, to travel overland to Canton but on reaching Centerville, in Turner County, we were forced to give up this plan as the bridge over the Vermillion River had been carried away and the water was still high.

For a couple of days we were the guests of Martin Schonhoyd, who lived near town. They had suffered no damage from the water but the flour barrel was empty and the mill could not be run as long as the waters were so high. We ground wheat in the coffee mill and bread was baked from that. The mill ground as fine as possible but the flour was still coarse and it was slow work to grind enough for the daily need. But, no matter, the food was toothsome and there was sufficient time to perform the necessary labor.

On Monday, the twenty-fifth of April, we returned again to Berven’s home and he later took us to Gayville where on the twenty-eighth we hired a livery team to take us to Yankton. There on the following day we were hospitably received by Lars Sampson and his wife, in whose home we remained until May 4. From Yankton we traveled by steamboat to Sioux City and from there by train to our new home.

The flood waters of the Missouri were still high and on the way down to Sioux City we saw, here and there, cadavers of horses and cattle and other domestic animals that had perished in the flood.

Of human beings there was but one person who had lost his life and he did not drown but was thought to have had a stroke. There were, however, many who had been in the utmost danger, some of them for days; for example, the brothers Hans J. Hanson and Ole Hanson and a number of their relatives on the maternal side, the Lundes. They were members of Bergen congregation, the oldest settlement in Dakota, and lived a few miles above Vermillion. They had been gathered for some time in Hans J.
Hanson's home, but later it seemed that it might be safer at Ole Lunde's, a brother of Mrs. Hanson, and they decided to move thither. Ole Lunde had maneuvered a boat to the doorsill and it had just been filled with women and children when the house suddenly loosed its hold on the frozen ground, lifted itself upon the water like a cork and floated off with the stream. And Ole was left in the boat with the precious lading. There was nothing for him to do but seek his own home, as he had intended in the first place. They reached their destination, but their only harbor was the straw roof of a shed and there they remained a long time, without food or shelter, until help came—when or in what manner I could not say.

The house and its occupants were not slow in covering the miles down to the place where the stream again flowed into its old bed in the bend south of Vermillion. There was the semblance of a dam down the high bank and the house was on the point of tipping over when it rushed out, but it righted itself and sailed on. Here the Missouri flowed (in its old bed) about straight north to Vermillion, which at that time was a steamboat landing, swung about to the east and then to the south again, forming a tongue of land several miles long and about a mile wide where it joined the Nebraska side. Through this narrow peninsula the Missouri dug a new bed and Hans J. Hanson was therefore the first skipper to sail the new channel. On this occasion the Missouri presented Dakota, at Nebraska's expense, with a considerable area but it also ended Vermillion's history as a steamboat landing. At that time the town lay on the flat, just under the high hills, and it was totally destroyed by the flood, which left only a couple of brick buildings. The town was rebuilt, but upon the hill, and the Missouri now hurries past several miles from Vermillion.

But the dangerous adventure of our friend Hans and his company was not yet over. They sailed along through the new channel and that with such speed that when they reached the

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4 The dammed-up waters had burst their confines just below Yankton, to pour down the valley with such force that the confluence of the James River did not swerve them from their headlong rush. The mighty current flowed across the James and cut a new bed for itself, ignoring the loop the Missouri had formerly made at this point. K.H.
old bed again the house shot straight across the river and landed on the opposite bank. The refugees then took a skiff that was just near enough completion to float and Hans waded through, shoving it forward till he had them on dry land. Though no lives were lost in the flood there was at least one instance of a sudden cure. There was a woman who for a long time had lain abed, though apparently well. (What the technical term for this disease is I do not know.) She had been in bed for many months, ate quite heartily, and did not look frail; but there was no use in trying to induce her to get up and she always required assistance when she sat up to eat her meals. But when the flood came and her home suddenly stood in the center of a mighty sea she jumped up and began to help. She even helped her husband carry the kitchen stove up the stairs and from then on there was never a question of a recurrence of her malady. She lived for many years after. Now she is dead.

It seems unbelievable that such huge masses of water could so suddenly cover such great spaces and it sounds like the sheerest fable when it is said that the water on open ground came like a tidal wave, that it rushed around the houses in whirlpools, that the scum frothed high into the air. But when one learns a little about the conditions of that time it does not seem so impossible after all.

That spring the Missouri began, as was its wont, to break up from above, perhaps far up in Montana, while the ice along the right side under the shady banks lay firm. The gathering masses of water broke the ice up down below and here and there dams were formed until the pressure became strong enough to break up the ice farther down again. One of these ice gorges had formed directly below Yankton, where the distance between the bluffs on both sides of the river was perhaps hardly more than a couple of miles, perhaps not even so wide. Here the masses of ice heaped themselves up until the water stood forty-four feet over the low water mark. When it at last broke the ice and water rolled down over the country in such volume that it stood as a huge wall for miles along its downward course. Before the pressure engendered by the imprisoned waters everything was

*Yankton had made repeated attempts to dynamite it, but it held. K.H.
washed away. The current swept through the large grove of trees just below. Trees several feet thick were broken as though they were matches. The flood rushed across the Dakota River (usually called the Jim River) and in a few minutes covered the whole great plain down to Vermillion, twenty-eight miles in length and several miles wide for most of the distance. The original depth diminished gradually as the water spread over wider reaches, but there was probably not a place on the whole "bottom" where the water was shallower than in Gayville, unless possibly along the banks in places. Between Yankton and Vermillion the Missouri was out of its bed and volumes of water in two huge streams poured down to the north and south of us with quieter water in between. As already stated there was about nine feet of water at Meckling, about six miles below us, in other places it was much higher, as for example along the bluff to the north. At the church in Bergen the water was at least nine feet high; it had reached far up into the pulpit.

Though the situation had looked desperate all escaped with their lives. But the loss of property was great, in some instances so devastating that families were left with nothing but the bare land, without livestock, without working tools, even without a roof over their heads. Horses, cattle, chickens, even house and home washed away by the great waters! Added to that, the silt left by the receding flood made practically all spring planting impossible; so there was little that could be garnered when autumn arrived. Nevertheless, general well-being now reigns throughout these parts and the inhabitants have lived in plenty for many years. Some moved over upon "the bluff" but the majority remained where they were, in many instances undoubtedly because there was no choice. Many there were who would gladly have sold their farms for a song to be able to get away, but no buyer could be found. Now they all are surely happy and well satisfied that there was no sale. The properties are now worth ten, fifteen, or twenty times as much as they then were offered for and the demand is not wanting.

At first the beggared communities received some help from the state, and subscriptions were taken among the brethren of their faith; but this was a bagatelle compared to the losses that most
of them had sustained. But it was a very welcome help which enabled them to conquer the first difficulties and gain a foothold once more. And it was not long before the settlers were independent and before they knew it they had an abundance of daily bread and were on their way to become people of means. Since then things have moved steadily forward in a material way and there were probably not a few among them who also received a spiritual gain through these experiences under the flood of 1881 and the times immediately following.