ANNALS OF DISASTER
AUGUST 9, 1993 ISSUE

BATTLE ON THE *SNY*

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In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, the levees built to protect New Orleans from the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain were breached, allowing water to rush into the city streets. In this piece, from 1993, James B. Stewart reports on how the people in his home town of Quincy, Illinois, came out to fight the Mississippi as it threatened a levee that had stood firm for more than a century.

On Wednesday, June 30th, at about 10 P.M., as Alexander J. House turned in early for the night, he heard the first drops of rain on the metal roof of his house, in Payson, Illinois—a farmhouse that was built by his great-grandfather in the nineteenth century. Just before going to bed, House had gazed out over his pond and the rolling fields to the west, where the land descends toward the Mississippi. There, in a basin formed by the old Sny Channel, which runs parallel to the east bank of the Mississippi, lies some of the richest farmland in the world, fourteen hundred acres of which belong to House and his family. Over the fields that night he'd seen an ominous bank of black clouds, confirming local forecasts of potentially heavy rains and thunderstorms.

House was hoping to fall asleep quickly, since in only a few hours he had to be up to help load trucks with calcium carbonate, a white mineral that his company extracts from the high bluffs defining the floodplain of the Mississippi. Like many farmers in the area, House is also a businessman: he helped found and co-owns Quincy Carbonates. After graduating from Kenyon College and the Loyola University business school he could have moved to Chicago, St. Louis, or some other big city. (At thirty-five, he is tall and handsome, with dark-blond hair. The *Times Magazine* once ran a full-page photograph of him in an article on bachelors. He has since married.) But, he says, "I grew up in Payson and always knew I'd come back." Though he does a fair amount of farming himself, he rents out his Sny acreage to Kenneth Crim, a powerfully built forty-six-year-old, who farms not only House's land but also nearby land belonging to his own mother-in-law.

That night, as the thunder crashed and the rain beat more heavily on the roof, House couldn't sleep. Finally, around midnight, he got up to look outside. Worried about getting the trucks in for loading, he dressed, jumped into his own truck, a Dodge Ram four-wheel-drive pickup, and headed west toward his plant. Along the way, he noticed that power failures had plunged the area into darkness. By eerie, sudden flashes of lightning, he could see that ditches and creeks were overflowing. When he got to Illinois Route 57, which runs from Quincy—the commercial hub of the area, fifteen miles to the north along the old Sny Basin, it had turned into a rushing waterway. At 1 A.M., House got into a front-end loader and started digging a drainage ditch to protect his plant. "Basically, there was a wall of water coming at us," he says. Farther south, on House's farmland, Ken Crim got up to watch the deluge, and thought, Holy shit.

About eleven o'clock, in Quincy, Robert Nall, the sheriff of Adams County, seeing the torrential rains, got into his unmarked squad car and drove out along some of the country roads north of town. Gazing upward periodically through the windshield, the sheriff, who is fifty-one, saw what he describes as the "most spectacular show of lightning I've ever seen." It lasted not the usual minutes but hour after hour. As the severity of the storm became obvious, he headed down to his office, on the first floor of the Adams County Courthouse, and began calling his deputies, sending them out on the roads to look for dangerous conditions and for any cars that might have been swept off in the deluge. From around the county came reports that creeks had burst their banks, flooding roads to the point where the roads had all but formed small rivers themselves. When Nall went home, at about 2 A.M., rain was still falling, and he had the ominous feeling that worse news was to come.

Around seven the next morning, Leo Henning, the operations manager for Quincy's WGEM TV and Radio, got up and checked for damage in his basement. He found that several inches of water had collected overnight. Henning, a native of Chicago, may have been one of the few people in Quincy who slept through the storm. Like many people there, he didn't ordinarily give much thought to heavy rains. Quincy's founders, back in 1822, had the foresight to establish their river port on some of the highest bluffs on the east bank of the Mississippi. From the old dock areas along the riverfront, where stern-wheelers once called regularly, the streets rise steeply to the east. From the buildings surrounding the old town square, high above the river, and from WGEM's offices, in the Hotel Quincy, which is just around the corner, one has sweeping views across the river of miles of the fertile lowlands of Missouri. Those lands, and also vast tracts both north and south of Quincy, with their farms and with the towns and hamlets that dot the landscape, are protected by an elaborate system of levees and drainage districts. Seeing the water in his basement, Henning recognized a story. Two years ago, WGEM Radio had shifted to a twenty-four-hour news-and-talk format, and this was more than a routine weather bulletin.

Overnight, Quincy had received a record six inches of rain. Some areas to the north had been drenched even more heavily. The Mississippi, which typically rises or falls an inch or so in a twenty-four-hour period, had risen two feet. The downpour, coming after what had been an unusually wet spring, left Henning, Nall, Crim, House, and just about everybody else in and around Quincy wondering the same thing. Would the levees hold?

From my apartment, on the Upper West Side of New York, I was wondering that, too. Quincy is my home town. I was born there, in Blessing Hospital, in 1951, and spent nearly all my life there until I graduated from Quincy High School and went on to college. My father is the national sales manager of WGEM, where he has worked for most of his life, and he and my mother still live in a comfortable subdivision on the south edge of town, which looks out over a white farmhouse and a red barn across the street. That's about as close to a farm as I came, growing up in Quincy. At Quincy High, the largest club in school was the Future Farmers of America, whose members headed home right after the last bell to help with chores, leaving sports and other extracurricular activities to the city kids. My first job was as a reporter at the Quincy Herald-Whig, where I worked during summers. One of my first assignments was covering the Adams County Fair, and I can still discuss the fine points of Duroc and Poland China hogs. I also learned something about floods: I especially remember one in the late sixties, when my high-school friends and I helped throw sandbags. I returned to Quincy to see the flood of 1973, which damaged large areas of Missouri across from the city. Now, twenty years later, I knew my immediate family in Quincy would be safe, since they were on high ground. But in May I'd seen the high river level lapping over a just completed riverside park in Quincy, and I'd heard from my parents about all the rain since. I knew they were worried, and I decided to go out there. As I flew up the Mississippi in a commuter plane from St. Louis, I saw that the familiar landscape had been transformed.

Small streams were swollen to the usual size of the Mississippi, and in places the Mississippi itself sprawled all the way to the horizon, its old channel barely discernible from the pattern of trees and, beyond those, towns. Already, it was obvious that this was a flood like none I had ever experienced.

Even before Sheriff Nall left home on Thursday morning after the downpour, his phone was ringing with calls from people living in the low-lying farmlands around Quincy. They had little doubt about what the night's deluge meant. They'd been keeping an uneasy eye on the river since April, when the Mississippi first rose above the technical flood level at Quincy's lock and dam. That in itself wasn't unusual or worrisome; the river frequently rises above flood level following the spring melting, and the extensive system of locks and dams and flood-control levees established during the past century to contain the unruly river had led to a certain complacency. But this year, as the planting season came to an end and spring turned to summer, the river barely budged, and then, slowly but ominously, it began to rise. On June 25th, it had to be closed to barge traffic, and at the same time many of the locks and dams of the upper Mississippi, no longer able to contain the flow, were simply thrown open. Memorial Bridge, the older of Quincy's two bridges, was closed, its Missouri terminus, in an area unprotected by levees, having been submerged. No one in the area could remember when the spring floods had persisted into what is usually the dry season—a time when farmers customarily pray for rain to hasten the tasselling of the corn crop. This year, though, an unusually cool air mass had settled around a low-pressure system in the Pacific Northwest, drawing more cool air into the upper Midwest from Canada. At the same time, a high-pressure system over the Southeast had sucked hot, moist air from the Gulf of Mexico northward over the plains. Persistent storms had broken out where the two air masses met, along a broad band stretching northeastward from Kansas into Missouri, Iowa, and western Illinois. Because the jet stream remained further south than usual, these pressure systems, instead of breaking up and moving on to the east, had stayed put.

The most important of the calls to Sheriff Nall that Thursday morning came from some of the area's most influential citizens—the local levee commissioners, who preside over the drainage districts that line the Mississippi. Quincy sits at the center of a string of districts running from north to south along the east bank of the river. Hunt, Lima Lake, Indian Grave, South Quincy, and Sny Island. Just across the river from Quincy, in West Quincy, Missouri, is the Fabius River drainage district: it surrounds the western ends of the Quincy bridges. Of these six districts, the Sny Island, with a fifty-four-mile-long earth-and-sand levee, is by far the largest, covering about a hundred and ten thousand acres; in fact, its levee is the largest in Illinois, and one of the oldest in the country. Construction began, using mules and horses, shovels and manual labor, in 1872, and was completed three years later.

The area protected by the Sny Island levee includes some of the most fertile acreage on earth. The entire district lies in the floodplain of the Mississippi, and before the levee was constructed it was flooded routinely, collecting a fresh layer of silt each time. The rich, black, moist soil typically produces yields that are from twenty to forty per cent greater than the fertile upland soil of central Illinois, and those high yields are reflected in the prices Sny Basin acreage commands today—about twenty-five hundred dollars an acre.

When the levee was completed, the enhanced value of the newly protected farmland wasn't lost on neighboring landowners, some of whose farms were being flooded with the waters diverted by the Sny levee and drainage system, and litigation broke out almost immediately. No less a personage than former President Benjamin Harrison represented the Sny landowners, who ultimately prevailed before the United States Supreme Court. To administer the vast project, local farmers got a court order approving the creation of the state's first drainage district-and-levee commission, which financed the project by issuing bonds. To retire the bonds, local farmers and landowners paid an assessment, spawning a system that has been copied throughout the nation, and that led to the formation of numerous levee commissions, with commissioners elected by the local landowners. Alex House's grandfather Lowell House served as a Sny commissioner for many years. The Sny proved a model in other ways, too. Not since 1888 had the levee been seriously breached—a source of enormous local pride but also, perhaps, of some hubris. In recent times, most farmers in the area have carried hail insurance, but virtually no one farming in the Sny district carries flood insurance.

When Nall talked to the commissioners Thursday morning, they were getting worried but weren't panicking. They were beginning to organize preservation efforts in their districts, and already they could see that they would need more manpower. Sheriff Nall was someone they called not just to keep him posted about road conditions and the need for sheriffs' patrols but as a source of manpower, for Nall was their link to a relatively recent program in Illinois that provides prison inmates for local labor. The problem was that everybody, not just in the Adams County levee districts but all the way upstream, was clamoring for help. Nall said he'd see what he could do. If anyone could deliver, the commissioners thought, it was Nall, for he has been something of a legend in the area ever since he was first elected sheriff, in 1974. Nall had been a farmer himself, and one day, returning from the fields, he discovered that his house had been burglarized—practically everything was gone. As he tells the story, he called the man who was the sheriff at the time, and was told that everybody on the force was too busy to come out just then. A furious Nall grabbed his gun and, after some intrepid detective work, managed to round up a four-man burglary ring within a week and deliver them to the sheriff. "We could use somebody like you around here," the sheriff acknowledged, and Nall's career in law enforcement was launched.

Just after lunch on Thursday, Alex House, having managed to get his trucks loaded with calcium carbonate, got a call from Rebecca Jean Cox, at the Sny, as the Sny levee commission is generally referred to. House keeps a large bulldozer at his limestone quarry, and is on a list that the Sny keeps of people who are willing to volunteer their equipment in case of emergency. Could he get his bulldozer and bring it down to the levee to help reinforce it? House said he'd be right down, but when he reached Marblehead, a hamlet just north of the levee, a stream had overflowed its banks, flooding the bridge east of town leading to the quarry. The bulldozer was stuck.

When House arrived at the levee, without his bulldozer, about twenty farmers and their relatives had gathered at Norman Brockmeyer's farm there, including Ken Crim; his aunt, Betty, his son, Eric, and his uncle, Harold Robbins. For House, looking out from the simple two-story white farmhouse that was being transformed into the levee headquarters, it was hard to believe that danger lurked just to the west. The season's heavy rains had left the vast fields of corn and soybeans luxuriant and vividly green, and a field of sunflowers blazed yellow in the distance. But the farmers' faces betrayed their anxiety. Ordinarily, the depth of the river at the Sny is about eleven feet; seventeen feet is considered the technical flood level. The Sny levee rises twenty-eight feet above the channel. Nobody knew the precise level of the river at that moment, but it looked to be about a foot below the top of the levee, or about twenty-seven feet. And it was rising at an alarming rate—about an inch an hour. Water was already seeping through the base of the levee into the fields, and the dirt road leading from the farmhouse to the levee had already turned into a quagmire. Worse, the National Weather Service had just issued a revised forecast, predicting a thirty-foot crest—a record—on Saturday, which was only forty-eight hours away. The evacuation of the entire Sny district had begun that morning, and was proceeding with amazing speed. People packed up their belongings for the trip to friends' or relatives' houses on higher ground. Animals, including those on some major hog farms in the immediate vicinity, were herded into trucks and driven to other farms for boarding. Some farmers, like Crim and House, simply took their livestock to market prematurely. In the background was the constant roar of trucks, laden with livestock, rumbling over gravel access roads.

In their years of farming, the group at the Brockmeyer farm had assembled an astonishing array of skills, from carpentry and veterinary medicine to the running and the repairing of heavy machinery. But most of them had never lived through a serious flood threat. They didn't really know much about levees. Because House had still been in high school during the last big flood, in 1973, he had to admit that he knew next to nothing. Crim had been a senior in high school back in the flood of 1965, and had done some sandbagging on this same stretch of levee, but then he'd gone on to Western Illinois University and subsequently farmed farther upstate, returning to the Sny area only in 1976, so he, too, missed the flood of 1973.

Fortunately, one of the early volunteers, whose farmhouse lay just beyond a row of trees, even closer to the river, was a man who had lived through every flood since 1947. His name is John Guenseth, but he's known to everyone in the area by his nickname, Peanuts, and some of his close friends have abbreviated that to Nuts. Peanuts is ordinarily a man of few words. He's thin, his angular face tanned and lined from decades of farming the Sny Basin. When he is asked a question, he tends to pause interminably, then answer in a deep, barely audible voice. Peanuts knew the river better than just about anybody. This was the first time he'd evacuated his family and animals. He himself stayed on in the farmhouse, but he recognized that it was perhaps just as well that his neighbors and fellow volunteers didn't know much about what it takes to raise a levee. If they did, they'd be staggered by the magnitude of the task.

Farmers Like Peanuts and Crim stood to lose not just their entire investment in this year's crop but perhaps their future livelihood as well. One of the reasons they didn't have flood insurance was that it would have added to their costs, and their profit margins were already razor thin. House had the resources to come back if the land flooded, but the others doubted whether they could. In any event, their farms and all the work they'd poured into them were here, and the river was here, too, threatening them.

Peanuts knew that a one-mile stretch of the levee lying just to the west of the Brockmeyer farm was a particularly weak link in the fifty-four miles of the Sny. Most of the Sny had been rebuilt in the late sixties to incorporate more sand into the levee, sand now being the preferred material for levee construction. Sand allows a certain amount of controlled seepage, and it is easily bulldozed from the base of the levee, even when wet, to increase the levee's height; indeed, by Friday morning about twenty-five bulldozers would be at work pushing sand from the bottom of the levee to the top along the length of the Sny. But, for some reason—none of the Sny's farmers seemed to know why—sand had never been added to this particular stretch. It remained an old-fashioned earthen levee, and Thursday morning's bulldozing had already proved futile there. The waterlogged muck just slid back to the base of the levee. The one-mile stretch also inclined toward the river in a long convex curve, which is particularly vulnerable to the forces of a current. Peanuts explained that to raise this stretch of levee would require a wall made of wooden boards, two boards high (that is, two and a half feet), supported by wooden reinforcing beams and backed by sandbags, with the entire structure draped in plastic.

"What if it doesn't hold?" House asked.

No one answered, since the answer seemed self-evident. Finally, Harold Robbins, who is about five feet ten and weighs about two hundred and ninety pounds, said, "You're gonna see a blue flame this long"—he held his hands about four feet apart—shoot out of this fat man's ass." That brought roars of laughter, which broke the tension. Robbins added, "You know, people think fat people can't run, but that's not true. They can run damn fast. They just can't run very far."

There wasn't any formal hierarchy to the levee-reinforcement operation; on the contrary, the volunteers got sensitive at any reference to anyone's being "in charge." But Crim seemed to possess a natural authority; he became the de-facto commander of this battle. On technical questions, everybody deferred to Peanuts. And House, mostly because he owned a cellular telephone, became the communications center, often working from the roof of his pickup. He got on the phone to various construction companies in the area, and soon trucks of lumber and gravel were arriving at the farm. Just restoring the road to the levee, so that the trucks could get to where they were needed, was a major engineering feat; tons of gravel had to be laid over the mud. Much of it sank and was soon covered with water, but in time a route was stabilized that could be traversed by four-wheel-drive vehicles.

As morning chores were finished and word spread through the area that help was needed, more and more farmers showed up, some from high ground many miles away. By evening, sections of boards were rising along the top of the levee as some seventy volunteers hauled the wood and sawed and hammered it. Somebody began calling this part of the Sny "the board levee," and the name stuck. Work continued through the night, though many of the original volunteers, who had been up since the storm broke the night before, were nearly dropping from fatigue. House finally quit at about ten to get some sleep and returned near dawn. Crim stayed the night. By 3 A.M. the first stretch of boards was in place. Still, as everybody knew, the boards were the easy part. The entire section now had to be buttressed with thousands of sandbags, each one of which had to be filled, moved along the levee, and put in place by hand. With the river now lapping just inches below the base of the boards, there was no way that even seventy farmers could outpace the river.

Early Saturday morning, Dean Paben, the levee superintendent, again got on the phone to Sheriff Nall, and this time told him that the situation was getting desperate—the Sny needed bodies, as fast as possible. Nall hadn't had much luck rounding up inmates. A new experimental program had gone into effect up in Greene County, in which first offenders facing up to five-year sentences got drastic reductions in return for entering a highly disciplined, boot-camp-like program. The program had been overwhelmed with applicants from Illinois's prison population, and had become quite selective: inmates chosen had to be no more than twenty-nine years old, physically fit, and highly motivated. Reflecting the demographics of the state's inmate population, most of them were from inner-city Chicago, were black, and knew nothing about farming or the river. Still, Nall thought they'd make ideal levee workers. But when he reached the warden he learned that the prisoners available were already in Niota, Illinois, a small town to the north. Nall's nearly twenty-year tenure as Adams County sheriff gives him a certain clout, which other sheriffs can't match. Nall won't say exactly what happened but just says he "called in his chips." By midmorning, thirty of the boot-camp inmates, along with

fifteen prisoners from the county jail, were en route to the Sny. Nall called on the Quincy Salvation Army and the Red Cross to supply them with food and water, and both groups swung into action.

With the inmates on their way, Nall jumped into his car and headed for the levee. When he arrived, at about 8:30 A.M., sandbags were being filled and distributed, both by boat, along the outer edge of the levee, and by a human chain, inside it. "It looked like something out of 'Bridge on the River Kwai,' " the sheriff recalls. "The fear was there, all over their faces. I know most of these people. They had a look of tragedy." Nall himself grew up in Camp Point, a small farming community northwest of Quincy, but he didn't know much about the river—"I'm an upland guy," he explains—and to his eyes the situation already looked pretty bad. "There was heavy seepage all along the bend—I thought it was done, busted," he says. But then Peanuts came by. "He said it looked great," Nall recalls. "I didn't understand that."

Crim approached him, and asked, "Was you able to do anything for us?"

"I pulled strings," Nall said. "They're on their way."

Meanwhile, caught up in the spirit of emergency, Nall himself began hurling sandbags.

Crim, House, and the others on the levee heard the new arrivals before they saw them. As the prison van pulled up, the inmates jumped out, chanting and singing a rhythmic military cadence, and marched toward the levee. To the tired workers, the drug dealers and thieves were a welcome sight. They were smartly attired in white T-shirts and dark-blue trousers with orange stripes. More to the point, their biceps and chest muscles bulged. They formed a human chain and began heaving sandbags at twice the volunteers' rate, all the while continuing their singing and chanting. Their work was closely monitored by black-uniformed guards wearing dark glasses. All the other watchers were simply awed by the new workers, who showed no signs of tiring in ninety-five-degree heat. House was so impressed by them that late in the day he asked their supervisor if he might thank them on behalf of the other workers. As House recalls it, the supervisor snapped, "You certainly may not. I'm not satisfied with them. They were slacking. They ate like pigs—they didn't wait for everyone to be served." Indeed, he singled out one of the inmates and marched him down from the levee. "Drop," he commanded. The inmate fell into a half-raised pushup position over what House says was poison ivy. "Now freeze." The supervisor turned away and resumed his conversation with House. As time passed, House could see the inmate's arms begin to quiver, and finally he collapsed.

He wasn't the only one suffering from heat and exhaustion. In the best of circumstances, a levee in midsummer is a place to avoid. The moist bottomland breeds mosquitoes said to be the size of horseflies. There's no shade, and the sun, reflecting off the river water, is doubly oppressive. Humidity builds, and the levee deflects any river breezes. A few

workers sought relief by plunging into the water, but most of them shunned the river, unwilling to risk floating debris and ever-present water moccasins. Nightfall brought some relief, but work continued by flashlight and moonlight. Then, around midnight, someone noticed that the river's rise seemed to have slowed, and was holding steady at just under twenty-eight feet. Soon, they learned that a levee upstream had given way, easing the pressure farther south as water was siphoned off from the river onto thousands of acres in Lewis County, Missouri. It is a fact of flood life that someone else's disaster is good news downstream (a fact that has given rise, in the past, to some treacherous episodes of sabotage). At about 2 A.M., work was halted, and everybody except the prisoners and their guards retired to the Green Parrot tavern, in nearby Fall Creek. House started running an open tab, and pledged to keep it open for the duration of the flood. Forty-two thousand bags had been put in place in the last thirty-six hours.

The reprieve was brief. On Sunday, the Fourth of July, with fireworks displays and picnics cancelled throughout the area, there was heavy rain across the region. On Tuesday morning, the National Weather Service issued a forecast that had the Mississippi cresting at Quincy the following Sunday at 31.5 feet—three feet above the record. That meant that the entire stretch of board levee had to be raised, by the addition of more boards. Peanuts had never raised a levee more than two boards high. Now he called for a raise of three boards, but he didn't know whether such a levee could actually hold. The workers desperately needed more help, and House got on his cellular phone to WGEM.

The day after the heavy downpour, Leo Henning, upon learning how much the river had risen, went in to see Ralph Oakley, the station's general manager. "This is gonna be big," Henning said, and he asked that the radio station move to twenty-four-hour coverage of the flood. Oakley, whose family owns a controlling interest in the station, readily agreed, saying that it didn't matter how much it might cost. Henning rushed to beef up his small staff, securing the services of a disgruntled ex-employee of a competing station in town, and also those of someone who'd recently left WGEM in a huff. Reporters blanketed the area, and Henning threw open the line to callers. Over a period of twenty days, the station took thirty-four thousand calls, all answered on the air with no screening. Only two callers used any profanity. One ordered pizza—the only prank the station received.

News of the revised forecast had brought calls for help from all the levee districts. None of the levees along this stretch of the river, from Lima Lake to West Quincy and below, had been built to withstand a thirty-one-and-a-half-foot wall of water. Governor James Edgar called in the National Guard, but that move initially bred ill will. Local workers say they were furious when Guard contingents reported that they were there only to "monitor" work on the levees, standing by as others did the heavy labor. Nall, among others, got through to the Governor to complain, and the Guard contingent was soon

ordered into hill activity. Quincy took on the appearance of a war zone, with choppers ferrying troops from the airport to their barracks, in the high-school gym, and to the levees. Heavy transport vehicles rumbled through ordinarily quiet city streets.

Now everybody wanted the inmates. Nall got a call from Harold Knapheide, who owns Knapheide Manufacturing, a truck-bed and heavy-equipment manufacturer that is one of the area's biggest employers. Knapheide had a plant in West Quincy, Missouri, threatened by the rising water. "Bob, we're in trouble," Knapheide said. "We desperately need people. Can we get the inmates?"

Oh my God, Nall thought. It was hard enough shuttling the inmates around the Illinois side of the river, but West Quincy was in another state. Go to Missouri and abandon the Illinois taxpayers? Nall shuddered at the possible political fallout. He did make some calls, but, as he expected, the idea was scotched. So he called WGEM and issued a plea for volunteers to go to West Quincy. And that evening, when his own inmates—inmates from the county jail—returned from a twelve-hour day on the Illinois levees, he asked if any of them would volunteer to work in Missouri. To his amazement, ten of the men did. After getting them to sign hastily drafted forms stating that their participation was strictly voluntary, Nall and the inmates piled back into the sheriff's van and crossed the river, where they bagged until midnight.

The plea on WGEM had brought scores of volunteers to West Quincy, and the success of the radio appeal wasn't lost on workers at the other levees. By now, everyone in town was listening, and the radio gave city dwellers a sense that this was their fight, too—probably the first flood in recent memory of which that could be said. Many Quincians had never been to a levee, and were only dimly aware of the city's dependence on the surrounding farm areas. Because of its proximity to the river, Quincy prospered first as an agricultural center and then, after the Civil War, as an industrial base. As the city's industry grew, Quincians came to think of themselves less and less as dependent on their agricultural hinterland. Yet their demeanor—friendly, easygoing, slow-talking, genteel—betrays their river heritage and their links to the South, to cities like St. Louis and Memphis. They tend to look askance at places like Chicago, where people seem too hard-edged and aggressive. At the same time, they sometimes dismiss the local farmers, especially those from Missouri, as rednecks.

This time, however, Quincians from all walks of life responded to House's radio appeal, including two lawyer friends of House's, Mark Drummond and Jon Barnard, who worked at one of Quincy's leading law firms. Drummond, in fact, had once represented Peanuts in a legal matter, but Peanuts didn't recognize him now, dressed in work clothes for sandbagging. The lawyers found themselves alongside the prisoners, hurling sandbags. At the behest of Quincy's mayor, Chuck Scholz, a center to make sandbags was opened at Quincy University, and an appeal for labor there went out over WGEM. Thousands of volunteers showed up to shovel and bag—so many that some had to be turned away.

Quincians also descended on the Salvation Army and Red Cross centers to make sandwiches. At the Sny, more than a hundred people from the city turned out, which caused some of the farmers to look at their urban neighbors in a new light. "People in Quincy, well, they'd always acted like they were above us," Crim says. "They thought they were cosmopolitan, like it was Paris or something." He admits that he came away with new respect for the city people. "They just pitched in, working real hard, like everybody else."

Almost without noticing, WGEM became a part of the story, serving as the central means of communication throughout the area. House became the unofficial correspondent reporting on the board levee: he made regular calls to update listeners, ask for help when it was needed, and also ask for supplies such as shoelaces, drill bits, and fresh water. He was given a special phone number that could put him right on the air. Other people called the station to offer services. "We've got fifteen- and sixteen-year-old girls willing to babysit down at Fifth and Cedar," Debbie from Quincy reported. A woman called to complain that the Red Cross wouldn't accept her homemade brownies, on the ground that it took only packaged food. "Ma'am, I'd just take those brownies and stand down by the levee, and I bet you won't have any trouble getting rid of them," Henning responded. He was now spending eighteen- and twenty-hour days patrolling the levees, keeping listeners updated, and coördinating the coverage. In a red tie and blue suspenders, he was easy to spot on the muddy slopes.

A constant problem at the Sny was figuring out just how high the river was at any given moment. "That's been a big fiasco," Crim says. "No one can give you any absolute river stages or elevations. You can get men on the moon, but you can't get an accurate river stage." So after the Corps of Engineers reported a nearby measure of twenty-nine feet House took a piece of lumber, sharpened one end, calibrated its length in feet and inches, and plunged it into the submerged slope of the levee, marking the level at 29. Now they had a ready measure they could rely on. It confirmed that the river was still steadily rising.

Bad as the situation looked at the Sny, it was even worse upstream, where the river would crest sooner. That day, Nall got a call asking for more inmates from a levee commissioner named Kent Deter at the Indian Grave drainage district. "He screamed at me," Nall says. "It was barely holding. They were desperate." Nall already had his contingent of inmates at the Meyer levee, farther north, which protects the Lima Lake district. All he had left in the county jail was suspects awaiting trial who had been denied bail—some of the most dangerous criminals in the county. Nall was afraid they would escape, but he'd heard the desperation in Deter's voice. He put them in leg chains and personally escorted them up to Indian Grave to dig sand. There and at Meyer, the inmates and other workers continued to work furiously, in continuing rain, with the river rising.

Then, on Friday, July 9th, at about 5:30 P.M., a fifteen-foot-long stretch of fence backed by sandbags on the top of the Meyer levee, similar to the board levee on the Sny, keeled over from the force of two feet of water that had risen along its side. The breach quickly sucked the underlying levee into the adjoining fields, and widened to a hundred feet within two hours. Many of the workers near the site wept, including some of Nall's inmates. Others simply dropped their tools and left in silence.

At the Sny, the river suddenly started dropping. It went down more than six inches on House's stick, easing the pressure on the workers' still uncompleted stretch. They knew that there could be only one explanation: a levee break upstream. "You really feel bad," Crim said later. "You bought some time, and maybe this will put you over the hump. But they've battled just as hard as you have, and worked just as long, and done everything they could possibly do, and they've lost. You know how you'd be if you were in that situation." But what Crim said when he heard the news confirmed was "Great. I'm going home to catch some sleep." He had been up for thirty-six hours.

In past floods, a levee break the size of Meyer's, flooding more than ten thousand acres, might well have been enough to end the crisis, sending the river level on a steady downward course, but this time it brought only a brief respite at the Sny. Because of continuing heavy rains in Iowa, the National Weather Service actually raised its crest forecast to 32.5 feet at Quincy, though it did postpone the crest date to the following Wednesday. This forecast eliminated any margin for error at the Sny, where the top board had been intended merely to provide a backsplash for waves. At thirty-two feet, that board would now have to help contain the river itself, complete with waves. Worse, after examining the height of the water and comparing it with the distance from the top of the levee, someone dared to ask whether the existing sand levee really was at the twenty-eight-foot level it was supposed to be. Careful measurement showed it to be almost a foot shy—information that nearly caused panic along its length. Crim had to issue orders for an unprecedented fourth board to be added.

The new prediction prompted an even more intensive period of work at the Sny. WGEM broadcast another plea for help, and the National Guard brought in more troops and shifted some others. Hundreds of volunteers poured in from Quincy. They worked around the clock, under searchlights at night, and through pouring rain, which only made the heat feel worse. Most workers donned rain gear consisting of black plastic garbage bags with slits cut for their heads.

By Tuesday morning, they had just about completed the fourth board on the top of the levee. Sandbagging was well under way—about half a million bags had been put in place since the July 4th weekend—and they were working frantically to beat the crest. But then a dark bank of clouds loomed in the west, and a wind kicked in, adding to the destructive force of wave action and causing some waves to splash over the top of the new boards. "I thought we were going to lose it right there," Peanuts recalls. They'd worked through

heavy rains, but now large lightning bolts began hitting the area. Some of the workers flattened themselves in the mud for protection. "I thought, If we lose even one life, it's not worth it," Crim says. Crim got on a radio to House, who was up at the north end of the levee, about two miles away. "We've got a severe storm warning, with fifty-five-mile-an-hour winds," Crim reported. "You have to get off the levee. We're getting off." After Crim gave the order, all along the levee workers abandoned their bags and shovels and started trudging back to the Brockmeyer farmhouse. National Guard troops withdrew in a convoy of military transports that clogged the narrow, submerged road back to the farm. As House plodded back along the levee, with the river looming at his ear level, only inches from the top of the boards, he faced the possibility that nothing could stop the river this time.

Later, when almost all the workers had dispersed and the rain, thunder, and lightning continued, House stood alone with Crim on the porch of the farmhouse, gazing across the waterlogged fields at the distant levee. He recognized that the river had become an obsession—that his fervent need to hold it back was something that went beyond any rational calculation of his own interests. Now he thought that he'd lost, that his work and all the thousands of man-hours of heavy labor would become meaningless in minutes. "So this is how it all ends," House said to Crim, unable to conceal the bitterness in his voice. Crim looked at him, and said nothing. He just shrugged and turned back toward the levee.

The Meyer break on Friday had brought the national media to Quincy. When they arrived, many were pleasantly surprised. Not only was Quincy dry but it offered amenities not often found in Midwestern communities of its size. (Its population is thirty-nine thousand.) Many residents boast that Quincy was a city when Chicago was just a frontier outpost. As an old river port, it had its heyday in the mid-nineteenth century, when it was the site of one of the Lincoln-Douglas debates and served as an important stop on the Underground Railroad. Much of its architecture dates from the antebellum period. A large section of the central city is now a national historic district. Quincy has an active community theatre—Arthur Kopit's version of "The Phantom of the Opera" was on that weekend—and a symphony orchestra, in which Leo Henning played oboe for many years.

Most Quincians were of two minds about visitors from the national media. On the one hand, they were flattered by the reporters' interest and attention, and were eager to make a good impression, to show them a good time, and to be helpful. On the other hand, many of the reporters were rude, inclined to spend as little time as possible on the story, and, worst of all, error-prone. "I have to admit I was almost angry at some of them," Nall says. "We were there to work, and they were getting in the way. I said, 'Put those pencils down and start throwing some bags.' Most did, some didn't. Finally, I said to everybody, 'Look, they're just doing a job. Let's help them, let's get them to the key spots. Let's get them out of our way.' "

Exasperation may have peaked with a report by the CNN correspondent Don Knapp, who did a live broadcast from Front Street, which had flooded. Pointing to a facility surrounded by water, he warned that Quincy's water-treatment plant and drinking water were under imminent threat. In fact, he was pointing at the sewage-treatment plant; the water-treatment plant was on much higher ground, on the other side of the street, and was under no immediate threat of flooding. But worried viewers immediately began phoning WGEM, so WGEM issued its own report, assuring listeners that the water supply was safe. It was the first of many occasions on which local reporters found themselves correcting errors by others, with the result that many in Quincy came to question the accuracy of the national media on other matters, too.

In contrast, the *Times* reporter Sara Rimer, thirty-nine years old, outgoing and vivacious, quickly became a popular figure around town. Though she had never been to a levee, people admired her eagerness to learn, her thoroughness, and her accuracy. "I wanted the reporters to go away feeling they'd done more than just report, and I think Sara Rimer did," Nall says. "I respect her a lot. She got behind the tragedy and went for the human interest." Rimer also created some merriment at the Sny levee, which she visited, asking House at one point, "That Mr. Crim, he looks so powerful. Does he lift weights?" For the rest of the week, levee workers, convulsed by the idea that a farmer would lift weights, were ribbing Crim, asking him, in a mincing voice, "Do you lift weights?"

Rimer says she knew Crim's strength didn't come from the gym. "What I was struck by is that all the people in New York are pumping iron even though they push paper and answer phones. I don't want to put down New York men, but these were larger-than-life men. They were also such gentlemen. They'd carry you over a mudhole." Rimer, who is single, and the twice-divorced sheriff seemed to get along so well—he brought her a taste of some homemade deer sausages and met her at the Green Parrot—that some of the farmers on the levee speculated that they'd make a good match.

That Tuesday evening, thinking that the battle for the Sny was lost, Crim and House went home for some sleep. Before nightfall, however, Peanuts ventured back to the levee. Someone called out excitedly, "Hey, Nuts, I think it's falling." Peanuts quickly confirmed that it was. It dropped about six inches in twenty minutes. Overnight, it dropped two feet. Of course, that could only mean another levee break upstream. This time, it was the Indian Grave South levee that had given way, just above Quincy, flooding about nine thousand additional acres. Work crews rushed to a second levee at Indian Grave North, but that, too, soon gave way, submerging eight thousand acres more. House's stick indicated that the river had actually brushed up against the thirty-two foot mark during Tuesday's storm, and, against all odds, the Sny had held. Despite the breaks and the immediate reprieve, the National Weather Service renewed its prediction for a 32.5-foot crest, but put it back another day, to Thursday. "It just kept coming at us like a bouncing ball," House says.

The day after the Sny levee survived the storm and the first thirty-two-foot crest, representatives of the Army Corps of Engineers descended on the levee. According to House, a Corps of Engineers captain had been there briefly the previous Friday, and had got off to a bad start by criticizing House for the way he was building the access road. "Are you putting down mats to keep the gravel from mixing with the mud?" the captain had asked.

"No," House replied.

"That's what the Corps recommends," the captain rejoined, in what House deemed an officious tone. "We have a supply at Rock Island."

"I bet we'll have this road done before you find the matting," House countered.

On this second visit, the captain had some new suggestions. Gazing along the length of the levee, which had taken such prodigious effort to build, he said, "We need to raise that board levee."

Crim and House were stunned, but shrugged and said, "O.K, what's your suggestion?"

"Well, we've got this giant dragline, and we'll just put it down there"—he pointed to the field adjacent to the base of the levee—"and get some dirt and make a new levee." Crim rolled his eyes in disbelief. There was no dry dirt within ten miles. And, even if there had been, anyone who tried to dig at the base of the levee would have just caused water to rush up, weakening the whole structure.

Crim says, with some exasperation, "He stands there telling us this, and about that time in came a National Guard pickup and tried to pull up. He buried it. Then this character says, 'Mr. So-and-So, getting out of this truck, is an excellent dragline operator. Excellent.' Now this numb-nuts just buried his pickup in the mud. And *he's* going to run the dragline for us? I said, 'Whoa! This is a very dumb idea.' "

Shortly afterward, House says, he came upon two Corps engineers bickering about the height of the river. "I can tell you pretty close," House said. "Thirty point five."

"How do you know?" they asked skeptically. "My stick," he said, pointing into the river's flow. "I marked it." One of the engineers waded into the water. After examining the rudimentary measure, he infuriated House by pulling it out. He later replaced it with a stick of his own, using the same principle as House's, and said that it was a Corps device.

From then on, the farmers and volunteers on the levee listened politely to the Corps's suggestions and then ignored them. For what they all thought, and Peanuts actually said, was that practically all the levees upstream to which the Corps had lent its expertise had met the same fate: they broke.

The new thirty-two-foot crest rolled through on Thursday evening, and the river stayed at just about that level all day Friday. Amazingly, the Sny, though increasingly saturated from the prolonged pressure, held. House, Crim, and the others at the levee couldn't help feeling a little euphoric. The fourth board had held. Work at the Sny now slowed somewhat, focussing on maintenance and twenty-four-hour patrol. Occasional "boils" popped up inside the levee—sudden geysers, triggered by the river's immense pressure—but Peanuts had assured everyone that as long as they ran clear they weren't undermining the structural strength of the levee. Still, they had to be contained behind rings of sandbags. And the vigilance couldn't let up, for the longer the river remained above flood level the weaker the levee became. House found that, for the first time in two weeks, he had some time to himself. Given the group's dependence on the expertise of Peanuts, he worried about the day in the future when Peanuts wouldn't be around. He thought that it would be a good idea to film their work on a video camera, in order to leave to future generations a record of how they had fought—and, God willing, defeated—the great flood of 1993.

Friday evening, House managed to get a seat on a National Guard helicopter that was patrolling the flood region from Lima Lake down to the south end of the Sny. From the air, the scope of the river's conquest was awesome. Nearly all the major levees, including several on the Missouri side of the river, had now broken. The Mississippi, normally contained in a channel less than a mile wide, was now nine miles wide in places. House trained his camera on the Sny levee as the helicopter passed it—a thin, suddenly frail-seeming bulwark, dotted with a chain of white sandbags, where workers were crawling like ants in places. The chopper crossed to the Missouri side near Hannibal, then turned north, toward West Quincy.

After Knapheide's call for emergency help, the West Quincy levee had made as much progress as the Sny, and it, too, had withstood the successive thirty-two-foot crests. Apart from a few boils, it looked strong. But House knew that the hours just after a crest are often the most dangerous ones, as the levee tries to adjust to the sudden shift in pressure. As House leaned out the open door of the chopper to get a better shot, he saw what looked like a trickle of water going over the top of the West Quincy levee. He couldn't believe his eyes. Suddenly, the trickle leaped into a torrent. He grabbed the pilot's shoulder and pointed frantically. The pilot radioed the authorities, then banked the helicopter over the levee so House could capture the break on video. Soon the grim news was on WGEM Radio, and later that night House's video was featured on television. Leo Henning, who was having a rare night off, was pulled out of the audience at the theatre's production of "Phantom," and went straight back to the station to coördinate coverage. "I ran up to the roof of the Hotel Quincy and started doing 'The War of the Worlds,'" he says. At intermission, the audience, many of whose members lived in or near West Quincy, was told of the break. Many burst into tears. As the news of the break spread, Quincians drove to vantage points along the river. Water quickly gushed west. Idle barges tethered along that side of the river were sucked into the breach, and one hit a fuel-

storage tank. Oil spread over the surface of the rushing water and soon erupted in a spectacular fire. When the flames subsided, the usual lights of West Quincy had disappeared: there was only darkness. "In the end," Henning says, "it was like West Quincy wasn't even there. It was like a black pit. You could see the lights of Hannibal, the lights of Quincy, the lights of Canton, but over there it was just jet black."

The Bayview Bridge, the last link between Quincy and Missouri, was closed immediately. Now there was no bridge crossing open between Burlington, Iowa, and St. Louis, a stretch of over two hundred miles. Greater Quincy was suddenly isolated from about forty per cent of its population, many of whom worked in, shopped in, and used the services of Quincy. The economic disruption was immediate and painful. More than any of the other levee breaks, the West Quincy disaster hit hard. Not just among the levee workers but throughout Quincy, a collective sense of despair seemed to replace the near-euphoric mood of cooperative enterprise. "It's devastating," Nall says. "You've done everything, and then you lose. You're let down, depressed. I talk to people, and they ask, 'Could we have worked harder? Was it our fault?' They felt so bad."

Nall himself was in his patrol car, coming home from the grocery store when he heard the news on WGEM. Then the city police radioed him. As soon as he got home, he flipped the television on and saw House's footage of the break. "I felt like packing it in," Nall says. "Shit, it's over now." But he went back to his car and headed for the Sny, the last major levee still standing. West Quincy, of course, had brought the Sny another reprieve—the river dropped two feet almost immediately, but anxious workers, including Crim and Peanuts, had gathered there to discuss the implications of this latest break upstream. They were soon joined by Nall, and they vowed not to let up, and to keep fighting to hold off the river. Nall says that the people there gave him renewed inspiration. "We still had the Sny," he says, "and as long as we had the Sny we hadn't lost."

Quincians were also bolstered the next day by a phone call to WGEM. Steve Cramblit, a sales manager turned reporter, answered the phone at about 8:30 A.M., and an operator said, "This is Air Force One calling. Will you take the call?" Cramblit was so astonished that at first he thought the operator was asking him to pay for the call—would Air Force One call collect? Then an aide got on the phone, and said, "The President would like to be on your radio station." Henning was connected via his car phone but opted to let his reporters in the studio handle the interview. Cramblit and three of his colleagues gathered in the studio, and at about nine-fifteen President Clinton, speaking from his plane en route to a governors' conference in St. Louis, came on the air. "I wanted to call you," the President said, "because your radio station has done such a remarkable job of coördinating the information, keeping people in touch, and keeping them up in the middle of this. I really respect your effort and appreciate it very much." One reporter, Rich Cain, mentioned how exhausted the National Guard troops and volunteers were, and asked if Clinton had considered bringing in federal troops—an idea that Clinton

later broached in St. Louis. When the interview was over, the veteran reporter Bob Turek told Henning it had been the proudest moment of his career. "I've done City Council meetings and zoning meetings and lost dogs for forty years," he said. "Finally, I got to say, 'Thank you, Mr. President.' "

As Nall watched WGEM's coverage of the West Quincy break, he had a nagging feeling that something wasn't right. One of the first people interviewed by Michelle McCormack, the WGEM reporter in West Quincy, was a slight young man who claimed to have been near the site of the break and to have warned unnamed "brass" that dangerous boils were present. No one had taken him seriously, he said.

Minutes later. Nall got a call from a county probation officer. The person he'd seen on TV, the officer said, had been released from prison after serving three and a half years of a seven-year term for arson. His plea had been guilty by reason of mental illness; in other words, he was some kind of disaster freak. Nall put his force and the city police on alert, saying that he wanted the man held for questioning. "I said, 'Grab this S.O.B.,' " Nall recalls.

When Nall reached the suspect at his home the next night, he said he was on his way to board a shuttle bus to the Sny. "I told him, I don't want to catch you anywhere near the Sny,' " Nall says.

Rumors immediately coursing throughout Quincy accurately reported the suspicion of sabotage and the identity of the suspect. There seemed to be a collective eagerness to abandon the presumption of innocence—a sense that somehow, if it could be shown that the workers had been betrayed by one of their own, they had not been defeated by the river itself.

At the Sny, news of the investigation led to increased patrols and a heightened sense of vigilance. House, Crim, and the others there recognized how easy it would be for one person with a shovel to undo their efforts; on the other hand, the force of the river was a constant presence just over their shoulders, and perhaps made them a little less willing to jump to conclusions. Nor did these developments, exciting though they were, interrupt the routine of holding off the river. Day after day, night after night, a band of farmers kept watch, sitting under a makeshift canopy of boards and plastic sheets, measuring the river's progress.

"A lot of people think the trouble's over, because we withstood the thirty-two feet, and there's nothing to do but monitor around the clock," Crim told me. "But you're still dealing with a thirty-foot river. If you'd ever told me I'd be sitting here hoping for a twenty-eight-foot river, I'd have said you were crazy. But now here I am. We're a long way from being out of the woods."

Sheriff Nall, too, warned that no one should get complacent; tears welled in his eyes as he described the destruction he had already witnessed, from Meyer to West Quincy. He said the experience had helped change the way he viewed his job. "My focus used to be, How many can we arrest and how many can we put away?" he said. "After twenty years, I'm thinking more, how can I help the community? What can I do?"

Late that week, an unsettling calm settled over the Sny Basin. The river began to creep lower, but, a week after the West Quincy break, it still held at something over thirty feet. Virtually all the farmhouses were now deserted, their usually neat lawns overgrown from the heavy rains, an occasional lawn ornament rising from them into the still, humid air. In place of the usual lively farmyard cacophony were empty barns and feeders. Magnificent stands of corn and soybeans stretched in waves toward the high ground in the distance. Gazing over the fertile expanse, Crim mused on the struggle. "Even if, God forbid, this thing breaks and floods, there will come a time when the water will all disappear," he said. "Some of the people will be back. I don't know if I'll be back, but the time will come, somewhere down the road, when everybody can move back. You'll pick things up and try to put them back together." Then he shrugged, and said he tries to stay philosophical. "We've done everything we know how to do. Evidently, we've done something right, wouldn't you say? We're one of the few still standing."

That weekend, the rains resumed, and slowly the river began to rise again. On Sunday the twenty-fifth, at 11:20 A.M., the Sny levee gave way from its base at a point right next to House's farm and Crim's house. By the end of the day, an area three times the size of Manhattan was inundated to depths of up to fifteen feet. The instant House and Crim heard on the radio that the Sny was weakening and might give way, they rushed to Peanuts' house to save what they could of his remaining belongings. Then they hurried to Crim's house to save his refrigerator. Even as they unplugged it, they saw water rushing toward them. They abandoned the effort, stranding the refrigerator in the middle of the kitchen, ran to the pickup, and sped out with the flood close behind them. Within minutes, the house and the farm were submerged. When they parted, on higher ground, House shook Crim's hand. "We fought the good fight," he said, for the board levee, their levee, never failed. Its thin line of boards and white bags can still be seen snaking across the surface of the vast, placid inland lake. ♦

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