A REFUGEE’S STORY

The Mississippi Valley Flood of 1927

As Seen by A Box-Car Refugee

On the morning of April 21, 1927, the Mississippi River broke through the levee at Mounds Landing, which was approximately 12 miles north of Greenville, Mississippi. The fire whistle alarm that the levee had broken sent the citizens scurrying to higher ground and some fleeing the area by train. The city of Greenville was flooded the next day. The Mighty Mississippi flooded approximately 16.5 million acres across 7 states, dislocating 637,000 residents. “It was estimated that 330,000 people were rescued from rooftops and other high ground as the water levels rose.”[[1]](#endnote-1) The flood affected 185,495 residents in Mississippi and destroyed 41,000 building and flooded 162,000 homes.[[2]](#endnote-2) Fred Chaney said “[t]he historic flood disaster of 1927 fell upon the Delta country and the members of my family became refugees in railway box cars in front of our flooded property near Greenville. It was a Delta catastrophe that drowned some, left thousands destitute and obliterated a full crop year for those it did not kill or ruin. During the flood’s early stages, my mother ran a Red Cross kitchen for rescue workers in the chain of box-cars.”[[3]](#endnote-3) A picture containing text, outdoor

Description automatically generated

Figure 1 Carnegie Public Library, M.M. Painter, Photograph Collection, M$C\_msflood1927\_beulah\_0090

Brodie Crump wrote “Mostly Old Stuff,” a column for the *Delta Democrat-Times* in Greenville, MS describing stories associated with the Flood of 1927. The following story was included in Brodie Crump’s May 19, 1947, column about the Chaney family and the Flood of 1927. A picture containing text, tree, old, vintage

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*“One day in early June of ’27, Mother, Daddy and I decided to risk the vagaries of wind, weather and outboard motor, so we set out for Winterville to pay a social call on our friends Dr. and Mrs. W.R. Eatherly…Not long after our Winterville voyage, we went over to Metcalfe to see the Chaney family, Lottie, Pa-Daddy [Rife Chaney], Fred and “little-Rife [Rife, Jr.].” They were living in a box-car, and Mrs. Chaney was cooking for a lot more folks than her own men. Here, in that carbox we seemed to find the Delta’s sense of humor at its very best. The Chaneys could look out the car door and see all they owned in ruins. The water stood at the eaves of their home, their big commercial incubator was wrecked, and their peach orchard, which had budded out a second time when the water fell in May, had been killed, definitely, by the June rise. Yet and in spite of all this, the Chaneys could laugh, and did. Mr. Chaney told us about Steele, the Y & M V representative for Metcalfe, and his daily reports on the stage of the water to the Chicago office. “Water stationary,” wrote Steele every day. Mr. Chaney, who watched him filling the reports and who also watched the water, and had seen it creeping daily, from the boxings to the floor-boards, asked him how he knew the water was “stationary.” Steele replied that he had a gauge. Mr. Chaney asked him where he kept his gauge, and was told that he had it nailed on the back end of the boat which was tied to the car door.*

Figure 2 Carnegie Public Library, M.M. Painter Photograph Collection, M$C\_msflood1927\_greenville\_0042

*Naturally, if the tow line was long enough, the gauge would still have registered “Stationary” while the water was washing across the ridge-plank atop the box-car.*

*It had not been all laughs for the Chaneys, but they were surely making the best of a bad situation. For instance, on the night that the water was coming in, Mr. Chaney had gone down the road to Dulaney Clark’s (Mrs. Chaney’s brother) house, about half a mile this side of where Mary and Gordon House live now, kicked the door in, waked up the family, loaded them into his automobile, and by the time he got them into the box-car in Metcalfe, their bed-room furniture was floating in the house they had just vacated.*

*Metcalfe village was a scene of demolition. Fringed by the high banks of Deer Creek in the east, and the low banks of Black Bayou to the west, there had been vicious cross-currents and tumbling torrents caused by the great drop from the creek to the bayou, until the flood water had levelled ”[[4]](#endnote-4)*

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Wade Frame, a friend of the Chaney family recalled when she was three years old during the flood, “I was in the boat between my house and the Locust Plantation big house [the Locust Plantation was in Greenville, MS. Leroy Percy lived on the edge of the boundary of the plantation] which was so tall off the ground a man could walk under it without bending over. So, we were high and dry at Locust Plantation, but it was just across the road from our modern A picture containing text, old, white

Description automatically generatedhouse. During the flood “the black people would be taken up on the levee for safe keeping.

And they asked all the plantation people to bring their black people up. But we didn’t take ours because at Locust we had a huge two-story barn and they made bales of hay to make rooms on the second

Figure 3 Carnegie Public Library, M.M. Painter Photograph Collection, M$C\_msflood1927\_greenville\_0036

story…They had “separate rooms to give them some privacy. We were on the raised plantation house and they were in the second story of the barn.”[[5]](#endnote-5) Wade Frame said that she and Helen House Pilkinton were great friends and she lived at the Locust Plantation with her. Ms. Frame noted that Fred Chaney’s mother and father also lived at Locust after the flood because they lost everything in the flood.

According to Helen House Pilkinton, stories of the Chaney’s living in a box car “was one of our big stories in the family. But just mother telling it about Aunt Lottie and Uncle Rife, but I always had the feeling that they were nearly swept away, they made it to the box car, and they had to live there.

…I remember the flood of 1927. Clearly and distinctly. Well, I remember that daddy, it was ultimately cause of his death when he was 48. But I remember that he was out in February freezing rain on the levee. They had every man and boy out there sandbagging the levee. They had turned out the penitentiary as I remember, and daddy was in a tent for a week in February in

that kind of weather. A picture containing tree, outdoor, ground, old

Description automatically generatedWe had a big old-fashioned house a block from the courthouse and there was a side door and I remember standing there in the back hall and seeing them bring daddy in and he was deathly ill with pneumonia…Every day we would get in the car and ride from Cleveland to where the water had gotten to. And you know it didn’t look deep. It was just edging up. Be just like the water in your yard. But it was you know on the road and we would see how much further the water had gotten toward Cleveland. And I remember every day. And well I don’t you know I was too young to think of it as being scary.”[[6]](#endnote-6)

Figure 4, Carnegie Public Library, M.M. Painter Photography Collection, M$C\_msflood1927\_greenville\_0043

Donnis Chaney Huckabee, niece of Fred Chaney said that her father, Rife Chaney, Jr. worked for the Levee Board and “got cut off down at Rosedale. And the only thing that Nanny heard from him was, how was his dogs. Don’t let his dogs drown.”[[7]](#endnote-7) A group of people in a tank

Description automatically generated with medium confidence

Fred Chaney claimed that he worked in Mississippi River Flood Control work, but Ms. Huckabee had never known of him working. Wade Frame believed he did a lot of boat rescuing people from their roof tops.

Figure 5 Carnegie Public Library, M.M. Painter Photograph Collection, M$C\_msflood1927\_hollandale\_0050

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Fred Chaney described the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 in his unpublished manuscript titled “A Refugee’s Story.” The manuscript is one of the many documents and letters included in the Fred Chaney Papers located at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History in Jackson, MS. It is thought that Chaney authored this story between 1949 and 1953 which he described as a time he was “free” and no longer a patient at Mississippi State Hospital.

References to Chaney’s “A Refugee’s Story” is noted in the 1977 Pete Daniel book Deep’n As It Come: The 1927 Mississippi River Flood, p.19, and in John M. Barry’s 1997 book Rising Tide, The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America, Pgs. 205-206.

**The language, description of life and tragedies, and references to the individuals in the story was acceptable during this time-period. However, the outdated attitudes and language is now unacceptable. The following manuscript is included in its entirety and has not been edited.**

*A REFUGEE’S STORY*

*The Mississippi Valley Flood of 1927*

*As Seen by A Box-Car Refugee*

by Fred Chaney

*“And so the water had broken through at last and now on and on it came death and destruction riding it’s yellow crest. For weeks it had pounded--pounded--pounded--against the levee barriers that man had thrown up to protect the cities and civilization that he had reared in the valley--pounded with the relentless fury of an enraged beast--lifting its tawny mane to toss higher and higher until now at last it had ever-topped every obstacle that opposed its advance and was free to spend its pent up rage on those who had held it in check. The mighty Mississippi was reclaiming its own--the Valley that it had made--the valley whose riches it had stored through the centuries and that had been appropriated to the uses of man--it was spreading an all-engulfing embrace once more over that Valley.*

*For weeks the flood had threatened--for weeks the puny pygmies of the Valley had swarmed to the protection of their levee defenses--disputing the right of this giant river’s passage across what seemed by Nature’s law to be it’s own right of way. The pygmies had contested valiantly but there was nothing in their ingenuity and cunning to match the primitive might of the flood and toward the middle of April their levees begun to crumble. In Missouri--in Kentucky--in Tennessee--in Arkansas--in Mississippi--in Louisiana the strain had proved too terrific--the dirt walls were yielding before the onslaught and the yellow flood water was abroad in the lands of six states.*

*Flying before this stark mad river--panic-stricken new at last went the people of the Valley--seeking refuge from an enemy that sought out and found every hiding place and every cranny. On the roofs of houses--even in trees--they went scurrying to their places of temporary safety. On and on it came covering everything. Millions of dollars worth of property disappeared from view almost in the twinkling of an eye. The green and rose and the gold of the early beauties of Spring were blighted beneath the waters that now buried them in their depths.*

*Yet, even as the encroaching waters rose there begun the work of rescue and relief. Hundred of boats went darting across the treacherous cross currents and rapids seeking the refugees. Airplanes soared close above the surface searching out the marooned to lead boats to their rescue. Here and there the swift danger trapped some frail craft to its doom--here and there some house went to pieces before the onrush carrying its clinging occupants to a watery grave. But such things were not discussed. Such reports only caused the rescue worker to redouble their efforts and take even greater chances. Man was saving his fellow man.*

*At six o’clock this morning we received reports that the levee had given way at Mound’s Landing--a spot some sixteen miles North of where we lived. In no previous flood had the water ever gotten over the banks of Deer Creek near which our home was situated but it had been evident from reports in the paper and from the record-breaking flood crest of the river itself upon the Greenville gauge that this was to be no ordinary high water. Mr. Dubbs, division Superintendent of the Illinois Central Railroad with headquarter in Greenville, had sent a dozen box cars to be shunted off onto a side track near our neighborhood. We waited for reports to arrive of the water’s progress. They were no long in coming.*

*From Scott we learned that quite a few tenants had been drowned near the scene of the crevasse and that many people were turning North into Bolivar county taking their live stock with them. A telephone message from Lament informed us that around 8 o’clock the water had begun to rise over the Egypt ridge territory and was flowing into Williams Bayou. We knew then that the flood would reach unprecedented levels and we began to move our beds and furniture into the box cars. Later we got the report that the water was in Dr. Eatherly’s house in Winterville and was rising rapidly. After five o’clock there were no more phone messages from any community North of us--the lines had been swept out.*

*In our community of Metcalfe many farmers took their live stock into Greenville to pasture them upon the safety of the levees and to provide what further food stuffs they needed by arrangements with dealers in Greenville. Special trains had begun early in the morning to move people out of town to points North of the flood territory. Several big steam-boats prepared to carry the inpouring refugees to concentration camps South of Vicksburg and on the La. Side. Everywhere were scenes of seething with anxiety and doubt as to what the outcome of this thing was going to be written plainly in the faces of most. Many wished to stay but fear drove them on--the city being practically evacuated by night fall.*

*One of the last telephone calls that we received from Greenville said that a fresh rise was on its way down the river behind the crest of this one and that there was no telling to what height the water would go or how long it would last. Despite this we decided to stay and trust the safety of the box cars to see the thing through. At nine o’clock we could hear the rustle of waters in the woods a mile North of our box car haven. It sounded not unlike the rising rush of the first gust of wind before an oncoming storm and a shiver shot up and down my spine as the rustling noise grew louder and its true significance plumed the depths of my mind. There was no escape for us now. Upon my father’s suggestion I went back to get an axe to use in a emergency to break out the walls of the car, and make a raft of them if the water came too high.*

*As I started back for the car the water entered our yard from the rear in the direction of Black Baveu--and looking up I could see through the semi-darkness, under the light of the pale moon, an area that appeared white to my eyes against the background of the semi-darkness and that new covered all the territory to the North and much on both sides--an ever growing area of water that would soon claim the rest. Before I reached the railroad track the water was swirling around my feet! From somewhere out of the night rose the piercing wail of a negro woman’s hysterical scream.*

*April 24--*

*A tossing, seething yellow sea as far as the eye can reach in every direction this morning. Houses and familiar objects look grotesque and strange indeed--cut in two by the climbing oblivion of the water line. It has risen to within a foot of our car floors. There are hundreds of negroes in the second story of the cotton gin that stands to one side of the track upon which our cars were placed. They are still coming from the deep back woods territory. The night has been especially cold and unseasonable for this time of year and many of them have suffered from long exposure. Few boats are available around this settlement and these are very frail and flimsy to trust in the waters of this river whose width must now exceed fifty miles in many places and whose current is swift and treacherous.*

*The negroes who have managed to get out report that there are a great number still marooned in the low places of the back woods and that they are in danger of drowning. Several babies are reported to have succumbed from hunger and exposure. Soon we hope to see some boats from town that can go in search of those isolated upon their house tops and bring them relief before another night catches them in their helpless condition. The gin also is so overcrowded that it will be impossible for many of them to get fed for long--most of them saved little and are afraid to attempt to get back and make the effort to salvage anything else. They are waiting on some chance removal to Greenville.*

*Later on--the day has passed and no boat has come. The water continues to rise. My mother has rigged up an old oil stove in one corner of the box car and we have had a hot supper of grits and butter and fat meat. A family that have lived as near neighbors of ours for years--the Strouds--and another family that are relatives of ours--the Clarks--occupy the two box cars to the front of the one we have. They have saved little personal property and are hoping for a boat to come along and take them to Greenville to see what can be done for them there. The neighboring farmer families--the Lafoes--the Eatherlys--and others left before the water came and we, of course, have heard nothing of them since. We have talked it over and come what may have decided to stay if it is all possible. There are only three of us my mother--my father and I. My brother, Rife, was in Rosedale when the levee broke and the last word we received from him was that he was on his way down and would try to reach us. We hope he decided to give up that intention and turned back. There must be at least twenty five miles of practically nonnavigable water between Rife and us now.*

*April 25--*

*An early boat from Greenville came by this morning towing a larger flat boat. We told them about the negress in the back woods and they set off immediately. Along about noon they came back and unloaded about twenty darky refugees on the gin plat-form. One of those reported that he had witnessed from his roof perch and over-loaded skill turn turtle and had seen nine people drown before his eyes. The Clarks and the Strouds were taken aboard the boat and left for town. The water had risen now within about six inches of the level of the box car floor. I borrowed a battered batteau from one of the negroes and moved into the car that the Strouds had left. Here I was attracted by the frantically waving arms of Frank Cash an old Italian who had been running a small store on the outskirts of Metcalfe for some years. He was trying to attract attention from the roof of his combination house-store. He had been there for the past several days and nobody had seen him evidently as he was hidden from those in the gin by the solid walls of a seed house that came between. The boat from town had been unable to reach him I learned later as the water was shallow over roads to the approach to the propellers of a motor boat. There was too much risk of entanlement and danger to the lives of those already on board. So the boat from town had been forced to turn back.*

*I decided to get old grey haired Italian Frank to the safety of the box cars if possible. His rescue brought the first note of humour into a situation that so far had been one of unrelieved gloom, discouragement and tragedy.*

*I could not find anybody who wanted to help me go for him--he was heartily disliked by most of the negroes and they all professed to be unable to handle themselves in a boat. At last I found on old darky who owned a boat and whose religious scruples appeared to be the vulnerable point in trying to overcome his prejudice against Frank. His name was Mike Jackson. On one end of the cumbersome craft that he called his boat he had painted in red letters this biblical quotation--“The Spirit of God moved upon the waters”. On the other end stood forth in even larger scrawly lettering the designation “Norah’s Ark”.*

*“Uncke Mike” I appealed to him “Come help me get your boat out to Frank Cash. We will be doing the Lord’s work to save one of his children. Mike looked skeptical as to whether or not it might be exactly proper to consider Frank one of the Lord’s children but at last agreed to take the “Ark” and go with me for him.*

*The currents did some fancy things to Uncle Mike, the Ark and me before we had reached Frank and the precarious perch to which he clung but after prodigious exertion--some little praying on Mike’s part and quite a bit of knee shaking with fear on mine as the Ark shied uncertainly and trembling through the cross currents that boiled over the concrete road and by the fallen power line wires that surrounded Frank’s house--we at last reached him.*

*He was so over-joyed that the moment we touched his roof he ran down it at full speed and jumped flat-footed into the middle of the Ark--a pair of socks in one hand--a mangy cur dog in the other--the sole possessions from his store of worldly goods that he had managed to save. His headlong action came within an ace of swamping the Ark then and there. But after a few minutes of perilous rocking and reeling it responded to another one of Mike’s prayers and righted itself.*

*“Tank you--tank you--Mrsa Fred--I give you my dog” said Frank and he started toward me holding out the prize to be as good as his word “Sit down Frank and be still or that dog and all of us are going to drown” I yelled “Sit steady and let Uncle Mike do the praying and I’ll do the rowing”. We at last reached the box cars and I took Frank and his dog in to live with me.*

*Uncle Mike and his fervent praying reminded me of the story that was told on John Farrar during the high water of 1912. John lived in Bolivar County and enjoyed the reputation of being absolutely without fear. Indeed the established truth of his courage had become almost a legend around the Delta and constituted quite a story in itself. John, it was known, had not even quailed in the face of being buried alive. The facts of that notable happening will have to be recited first because they go hand in hand with the story of the high water incident.*

*Once, several boys, thinking to scare John into some show of fear had gotten him soused-lit-stewed--plastered--wheezy--cock-eyed and in other conditions of a state of helpless inebriation. They then had taken his limp body and placed it in a rented coffin and set this in a darkened room. When John begun to show signs of reviving they set the lid of the coffin on and screwed it down tight enough to resist pressure from within but not too tight to shut off the air supply.*

*At last John begun to wriggle somewhat vigorously inside his narrow walled confinement and setting half up begun to feel about with searchingly curious hands exploring the insides of his prison. The jokesters crowded close to get the full benefit of John’s reaction when he discovered his plight. If they had expected a yell for help or a frantic beating against the coffin’s sides they were rewarded with neither. John’s reaction was simple and philosophical rather than panic-stricken and frantic. “Well, I’ll be damned” they heard him say as he quit groping with his hands and lay quietly back down “Dead--and buried, well I’ll be damned”.*

*But the over-flow of 1912 accomplished what being “buried alive” had failed to do. It upset John considerably. He was out working with a party on the weakened levee when it broke. John and a negro were caught some distance away from the safety of the intact levee and directly behind the place where the crevasses occurred. They had barley time to climb a tree when the rushing water surrounded them. All that evening--all that night and the following day John and the negro clung in that tree. When they attempted to go higher to keep a look-out for help they found that a rattle snake that had also sought safety in the tree occupied the crotch of the limb just above them. The negro begun to pray--“Lord save me--save me Lord”--his supplications rose in a monotonous wail.*

*John looked at the flood water beneath and the venomous rattle snake above--then he looked at the praying Ethiopian-then he looked at the sky that was beginning to grow night-filled again and his renewed courage and self-sufficiency yielded at last. “Yes Lord” the negro later declared him to have said, “Save me, too--Oh Lord, damn it, you knew that I haven’t ever prayed before but save me too”.*

*April 26--*

*The side track upon which our cars have been placed is lower than the main track and the live stock that have not been taken to the safety of the levee wade ceaselessly up and down it in water that reaches above their knees--waiting for starvation to end their suffering. There is nothing that can be done for them--no dry place to swim them to--no food to give them. One of the most pitiful and pathetic things about the whole flood is the helplessness of the animals that have been trapped like these. Last night I heard them wading up and down past the open box car door--up and down--until my mind sickened at the thought of them out there upon their shallow trap of false safety. It would be merciful to kill them but we have no gun at hand to do it with and the common instinets of humanity balk at the thought of attempting to bludgeon them to death with a club.*

*At noon Steels--the depot agent--rowed down from his place which is about half a mile around a bend in the tracks and told us that there are about 50 negro refugees in the second story of the depot and that an old negro couple living near by had been caught by the water and drowned before they reached safety. When happenings like that are multiplied by the number of communities and settlements that this flood has engulfed (there must be at least eight or nine counties partially or wholly under water now in this state from the Mound Landing break alone) then some idea of the tragic consequences of this disaster in regard to loss of life, can be gained. There is, of course, hardly any way to reckon the property loss. It must reach into the hundreds of millions.*

*The negroes in the gin are growing restless with hunger now. We are wondering how long before they can be removed. Several boats from Greenwood reached here today. Mama, working her oil stove over-time managed to get together enough food to give them a hot lunch. We expected them back in this afternoon to spend the night in the vacant box cars but they did not show up. Either they are still out ranging the flood waters in search of the isolated and those who have not found a place of even such questionable safety as the depot and gin provide or else having found their rescues too numerous for the already over-taxed accommodations of the places around here and they have turned toward Greenville--hoping to reach it before night.*

*April 27--*

*This morning I borrowed Uncle Mike’s Ark and went with the negro proprietor of a store that is half under water and that is close to the depot to see if we could find any undamaged food stuff upon the upper shelves of his business establishment. We brought back a boat load of canned goods that the water had not reached and distributed it to the ravenously hungry negroes in the gin. It disappeared like fried snow flakes.*

*We went back after another load. My father told the proprietor that he would keep a list of what was issued out to the refugees and that if we came through safely he would be reimbursed for his goods by the relief agencies that we knew were organizing in Greenville.*

*Later in the day several boats from Greenville showed up and took some negroes out of the over-crowded gin and carried them to the levee in town where tents and temporary facilities for the relief of the refugees has been provided under the direction of Will Percy and others. The Red Cross expects to have an organization in complete control of the situation through-out the over-flowed district in a few days it is said and all danger of suffering for want of food will then at least have passed. Up until today our predicament had seemed to be one of little promise indeed.*

*Yesterday I tried to get one of the negroes who had come to the gin with a Victrola that he had saved to play a record to liven things up a little but he had only smiled faintly at the suggestion and said “S’cuse me cap’n but dis thing don’ feel lak singin”. He was probably bemoaning the fact that he hadn’t grabbed some clothing articles or bundled up a little food instead. However this evening after the boats from town had arrived bearing the news of the helpful activities that are in progress there and taking back a load of negro women and children he started his music box. I couldn’t make out the words that the squeaky old contraption was grinding out but if it is by any chance ‘the Deep River Blues’ they are certainly appropriate, because we all have them.*

*The excitement caused by the coming of the Mississippi flood to our county and community is comparable to only one other event that I have experienced. A few years back a negro preacher living on the plantation of Coleman Branton, a prosperous farmer who lives several miles North of Metcalfe arose one morning with the light of the religious zealot gleaming in his eye and declared that the Lord had appeared to him in a dream and told him to dig a well beneath the branches of a tree that stood near his cabin and that the waters would possess healing properties. He dug the well and news of it spread by the grape-vine telegraph of the cotton fields as rapidly as the waters of the Mississippi have spread over the Delta. Its effect was startling and electrical among the simple colored folk not only of the Delta but of the entire state and South.*

*They began to pour in from all points of the compass to have their ills and sins washed away. Hacks and cabs in Greenville deserted their old accustomed stands and came to Metcalfe to haul passengers that rode in by the score on every train from the deport to the healing well. Negroes around upon neighboring farms left their ploughs in the fields, hitched their teams to wagons--threw in crude wooden chairs and benches and drove off to take the sick and ailing into the presence of the healer. A new Messiah had arisen and the day of rejoicing was at hand. Here was a man who could make the lame to walk--the blind to see. His fame would soon fill the world--had not the Bible said that Christ would return? In they came by the hundreds--indeed by the thousands. Metcalfe had never seen the like of this. Many of them were upon their last legs when they started the journey--many of them died on the way--some of them too--were cured ‘thy faith hath made Thee whole’--some of them threw away their crutches and abandoned the belief of years in their ills. Enough at least to keep the faith of the black people in their Messiah alive and growing. He had either ways too than through the cures he sometimes effected of nourishing their belief He would make the prediction while preaching that the waters in the well would change color and the next day it would be found to have assumed a reddish tinge or yellowish. There were whispers that this was not always the work of the Lord--who was supposed to make this demonstration as the official token and seal of the genuine commission that his servant here to a stricken and long-suffering people--There were unbelievers who hinted that the change in the color of the water had been effected with red soda pop or chemicals or some earthly substances rather than directly through the Divine will. But they were decidedly in the minority and one day the preacher gave such convincing and positive proof that even those doubters were convinced.*

*After the first few weeks following the healing well’s discovery a giant enclosure had been erected to accommodate the multitudes that thronged it’s site--a platform had been erected for the miracle worker to address this great open-air audience--a practise that soon became a daily rite. From this platform he told them that he had been sent to deliver them from their burdens and oppressions as well as from their suffering and bodily ailments--that he was the chosen son of God to deliver them and lead them out of the land of trouble and abominations.*

*One Sunday as he was preaching to several thousands--waving his arms in benediction over their heads and pointing toward the Heavens invoking the blessing from on high upon his people and his work he noticed a dark wisp of cloud floating near the orb of day. His audience was hanging open-mouthed and absorbed upon the message that fell from his lips. Here was his chance to clinch their belief in himself and his work to the last degree and he did not lose the opportunity. With the inspiration of unsurpassed eloquence he arose to the occasion ands thundered--‘now Lord of your servant’s speaking the truf--ef he’s informin’ you’ chosen people uv dis day uv de new Resurrecshun uv de part dey is to play--en ef I is de true annited an’ appointed deliverer an’ healer den--OH LORDY--OOOOooooHHHH F-A-T-H-E-R-----I WANT’S YO TO VEIL DE SUN”*

*His last words had been timed to make practically identical connection with the arrival of the cloud at the sun’s edge and as the darkening shadow now begun to spread over his audience--they threw up their hands and shouted Hosannas--yelled--screamed--shrieked--and went into transports of hysterical joy almost beyond belief. Hundreds fainted. Several died of heart failure and were credited like Elijah with having immediately ascended into Heaven.*

*The preacher’s hold on his people was not enforced with the steel of a fanatical zeal and faith. Negroes begun to come from New York and Chicago as well as from all over the South. A paper was started--“The Healing Water News” advertising the facts of the marvelous cures and relating the progress of the new Messiah’s movement toward a “New Freedom”.*

*But the “new freedom” promised too much--it proved his undoing--one night he mysteriously disappeared and whether he was snatched into Abraham’s bosom by designing persons or swallowed up in the changing waters of his healing well--or what happened to him--has never been learned. He just disappeared and with him went the greatest excitement that Metcalfe has ever known until the tumbling waters of the great Mississippi have been recently turned loose in our midst.*

*April 28--*

*Today a motor boat came by that has been ranging the flood waters close to the crevasse itself. It is extremely dangerous around there because the water is boiling through the break with sickening speed and for miles beyond there are terrific cross currents and eddies to be dealt with by the boats that have ventured that close.*

*My mother cooked the two men who occupied this boat a good hot meal and after swallowing unbelievable quantities of coffee they told us some things about the flooded country North toward the break. They looked more like refugees themselves than those fit to be bent on rescue work--and well they might--they had been out in their boat for seventy two hours engaged in the search for bodies and any hepless victims still alive near the scene of the crevasse. More than half a mile of levee had been washed away they said and the gap is constantly widening. Then they told us of one of the most harrowing experiences that I have ever heard.*

*Two negroes and a white man, they said, had been trapped about a mile back of the break when the dirt bulward yielded--in a fashion similar to that in which John Fanar and his companion had been caught in 1912. They ran to an old house that had been deserted by the owners and for a while thought they were safe but the water begun to rise higher and higher in their sanctuary and at last drove them up onto to the roof. A few minutes later the house begun to go to pieces. The foundations crumbled and they were left clinging to the roof. They knew that it would not support their combined weight for long and when it floated down into a near-by thicket they abandoned their perch and grabbed hold of a willow tree. The tree would not support their combined weight and one of the negroes dropped off and drowned. The water was constantly rising--constantly getting swifter-swishing beneath them making ominious gurgling sounds--and as night drew on and closed about them the top of the tree to which they were not desperately holding begun to settle definitely to one side--bending slowly--by barely perceptible degrees down toward the rushing menace of the flood. All that night the men clung in the leaning branches of that willow tree seeking to counter balance their weight against it’s leaning lop-sided tendancy. When dawn came at last it found them in the last stages of exhaustion--one of them indeed no longer able to stand and bend his weight against the tree but crumpled down into a pitiful heap against its trunk--the yellow gurgling water sucking at his helpless shape.*

*It was in this condition that they were found some minutes later by the men in the rescue boat that had stopped by our cars. These men had slept that night on the levee nearby unaware of the plight of the two there in the willow tree as close as a mile away. At dawn they had begun to cruise about and had found them.*

*Night as come on now and the men have gone back to town in their boat. Frank Cash has gone to bed. The live stock are wading restlessly up and down outside of the box car’s door--ceaselessly up and down--now and then one of the cows pauses to send out across the heedless water that plaintive deep sound with which they summon their young--the deep melancholy low catches at my throat and so does the gurgling sound that the river makes as they drag their weary hooves over the graveled foundations of the rail road bed. They are waiting for a death that will be ever-long in coming but that is none the less sure. I will carry the memory of the sounds that came to me from out of the night here to my grave and try as I can I cannot keep my thoughts off of those two men clinging to that willow tree--that false trap of promised safety bending slowly beneath their weight down to the gurgling sucking death just under them and I wonder if after the horror of that night either of them will ever again be the same. I know that I would never be.*

*April 30--*

*Frank Cash woke up this morning looking like an accident going somewhere to happen. I felt his head and found that he had a raging fever. I guess those of us who escape drowning will probably die anyhow of some malady brought on as an aftermath of our experience--fluctuation of the floating rib or something like that.*

*It would be a little worse than too bad to lose Frank now. He has practically made himself indispensible in the routine of our daily box car program. There are a number of canine refugees in several of the cars below our own and Frank has been scrapping up bits of meat and bread from the meals that man has been cooking the rescue workers and making use of Mike’s Ark every day to drop and down and feed them. Recently he was so touched at the sight of a big white-spotted cow among the victims of the opposite track that tears came in his eyes as he saw how the skin was beginning to peel off of her legs which had been for days in the water. “Mrsa Fred” he said, “Who b’long to dat cow?” “I don’t know Frank” I told him “Why?”------“ell”, he said “Whoever b’long to him ought to come kill him not leave him suffer”. Frank always says “him” or “he” when he means “her” but his heart is always right if his speech is sometimes wrong and I’m growing daily more proud of Frank--truly he was worth saving.*

*I found some aspirin-quinine--liver tonic--and calomel in some bottles and boxes that the Stroud’s had left behind and gave Frank a liberal dose of each. He thinks I saved his life so I guess I might as well act responsible and care for him.*

*As a doctor, however, I suppose I’m pretty much of a wash-out like the levee up there at Mound’s. Under my ministrations Frank seemed to be getting no better fast--so at noon I went up to the headquarters car and got my father and brought him down to see bed-ridden Frank and told him all that I had done for him.*

*“Well” said my father “That mixture ought to be about as agreeable, I imagine, as a diet of baseball bats and door knobs so I don’t see why the results haven’t been even more positive than the symptoms indicate. I believe the breath of life is still in him, however, so if you are still determined you might see what else can be done”.*

*I told him that Frank was too tough a proposition for me and that I would gladly yield my hand to him. So he brought out the hot water bottle. The Christian Science book and a few other things and made his passes and conjures and this afternoon Frank has responded like the Ark to one of Uncle Mike’s prayers. Indeed before sun-down he rose and begun to weep some more over the plight of the cows so now I am entirely satisfied. I know he is all right again. After supper he burst out in song as he prepared to carry food down to his dog charges—"ou calla me dago from Italy--sweeta banan-sella you sweeta banan try to get rich if I can” sang Frank. He was evidently thinking of the days that he had driven his one horse peddler’s wagon over the roads advertising the wares that made him his living and he seemed to me to be a typical exponent of the Latin races--buoyant, happy-go-lucky, care-free.*

*May 2--*

*Ed Lafoe came back from town today to see if everything was safe with his place. He brought Mr. Stroud with him. The report has gotten about that there are roving bands of robbers abroad over the flood waters at night--ransacking and pillaging the half-submerged houses. The day the levee broke many people put up scaffolding inside their houses and much valuable property was thus placed beyond reach of the flood waters. Now the pirates have come to complete the ruin and devastation--and to take what the river could not reach.*

*Eddie and Mr. Stroud found that their place had not been broken into so far--due, no doubt, to the fact that their property like ours is too close to the box cars and gin for the raiders to wish to take the chance of discovery as long as the pickings elsewhere promise anything. The negroes in the gin tell us that the local band of mauraderers have their headquarters in a two story house situated in the back woods territory. How they learned this is hard to say--by the grapevine telegraph probably which with these people is almost as magical and effective a way of communication as any system in the world. It is said that old time prisoners in penitentiaries like Sing Sing and San Quentin have a way of getting news to each other about the happenings within different parts of the great institutions even when they are in solitary confinement--a way that is mysterious and most uncanny. They all seem to know when one of their number is being prepared for the “walk” which in the jargon of the under-world means being sent from the death cell to the electric chair on the day set for execution. The utmost secrecy is observed concerning the carrying out of this grisly business by the prison officials but the grape-vine telegraph someway speeds the word and the hush that falls every where within the grim walls reveals only too plainly that the other prisoners know.*

*Some way these negroes have heard about this two story house in the flood waters of the back woods that serves as the rendezvous and hiding place of the pirate band that is now praying upon the remnants of possessions left behind by the victims of this flood. None of them will admit having been back there or to having seen anything--they just know it is there and like they say is filled with robbers and their loot and I, for one, will bet that it is, too. Generally speaking I’m not superstitious but I do believe in the almost unbelievable accuracy of word sent through the “grape-vine telegraph”.*

*This brings to mind something that one of the rescue workers related to us several days back. He said he was taking an old man off the roof of his house and helping him into the rescue boat along with the pitiful little bundle of goods that he had saved when the old man suddenly volunteered the information “Cap’n hundreds an’ hundreds of people drownded in this flood”--“How do you know so much about it?” the rescue worker demanded with a wink at the other young fellow in the boat who had come along to help him. “You’ve been back here for days on this roof all by yourself and haven’t talked to anybody”. “Nar sir”, “I sho’ ‘aint seen nobody since de water come”, admitted the old man, “But what I’se tel’ yo’ is de truf’ jes de same I’se heared de RUMOR”. I have seen more than one demonstration of the darky’s ability to gather reports from “rumor”.*

*May 5--*

*Ed Lafoe went back to town today after spending several days in his home. He came by the box cars and said the water had gotten just under the flooring of his house but had not come inside (the house is built on very high ground).*

*Mr. Stroud decided to stay in the box car with Frank and myself. His family is well looked after--staying in the Cowam Hotel in Greenville. The depot agent, Steele, has come back from town to stay with the Co’s property. He said that a relief train running over the C. and G. lines near Leland was wrecked in a wash-out the morning after the levee broke and some of the passengers and crew perished. A whole family of five--the two parents and three small children--were trapped in their house and drowned near Paducah, a small settlement close to Greenville. A man was electrocuted near Leland when the steel-hulled boat in which he was riding came in contact with some live wires that were down. A baby was born on the roof of a house the night the water came--the mother and baby were removed the following day and both are still living and thriving now in the refugee camp on the levee at Greenville. A few dead bodies have floated up against the municipal protection levee that surrounds the low North end of Greenville and have been removed and buried in the river. Floating drowned horses--cows and animals by the hundreds along with drifting dwelling houses and out houses of every description can be observed from the vantage point of any motor boat cutting across the Delta River waters.*

*May 8:*

*One of the real unsung heroic figures of this overflow is my mother. She was born with a natural and incurable fear of water. I have heard her say that when ever she got ready to sit down in a big bath tub of water and her feet would accidently slip and she would splash down in the tub--she would immediately set up a yell of bloody murder and call on the police--army--navy or anything for help. A form of hysteria that works on her and against which she has heretofore shown no more control than a kleptomania might in a room full of knickknacks. Maybe it is partially at least responsible for her being a Christian Scientist--she didn’t have to be baptized to join.*

*But today she braved the miles of seething water in between here and Greenville in a frail motor boat and went to the headquarters of the Red Cross organization that has been set up there and made arrangements for conducting a Red Cross kitchen in her box car for feeding the hungry rescue and relief workers that pass across our flood path daily now. Two of them, Harry Gaines from near Greenwood and Claude Garrett from near Cleveland have taken up their nightly residence in our box cars mainly, I think, because they like the cooking.*

*Others came by from time to time and mama has kept her asthmatic old oil stove working over-time trying to keep up their strength. It is just as true with relief forces as it was with Napoleon’s army that they depend for effectiveness on the condition of their stomachs and the part that Mama has played in the rescue work may not be as spectacular as some but it is none the less essential. Frank Cash has stuck valiantly by his guns as main assistant in the smooth running of the kitchen, too--or rather I should say stuck valiantly by his dish rags and soap since he is chief bottle washer and dish drier. Yesterday after a particularly hard siege with the dishes he sighed and said to my father “Mrsa Chaney, I usta work in de kitchen uv de Saint Charles Hotel at New Orleans but thisa here worsa dat.”*

*It will be easier on Frank now--Mama brought back hundreds of paste board lunch plates and these can be thrown away after using and do not have to be washed. The Red Cross has set up an effective emergency relief organization in town and provisions will come out regularly to us now. My father has offered his services as distributing agent--working without compensation for this district and he will be in charge of the Red Cross activities out here--the issuance of food and clothing and such other supplies as are sent to us. It will prove to be a thankless job, no doubt, like that of an umpire in a baseball game but I look for Mama’s box car emergency kitchen for the relief workers to in time rival in fame that which Willie Ariff is running for the destitute on the levee there in town.*

*May 11--*

*I borrowed Mike’s Ark this morning and went with a negro--Charlie Dorsey--over to Ed LaFoe’s yard to try to get several mules out of a cattle gap that was built near the entrance to the front gate to protect his wife’s flowers from roving stock. When the crevasse occurred Eddie had his mules driven up onto the ground of his high front yard. Charlie Dorsey had been going over in the evening to feed them some oats stored in the house. Yesterday several wandered over toward the entrance and wading blindly about in water over their knees plunged through the spaces between the iron pipes that had been laid side by side to form the gap.*

*We found them this morning exhausted from their efforts to free themselves during the night. However as we attempted to approach them they begun to plunge wildly about. We found we could do nothing toward getting hold of their legs and trying to help them out that way-so we got out of the boat and after about an hour’s work attempting to pry the pipes up from the cross ties in which they were embedded by crouching down in the water and tugging at them with our hands we at last hit upon the happy thought of looking for a pry pole to aid us in the task. We searched the shallow water of the yard by wading about and over in one corner found some more pipes that were loose. Then by slipping the end of one of these through the spaces of the pipes that made the gap we secured the necessary leverage and lifted them successfully out of their anchorage and freed the mules. Their legs were so badly damaged by the vain plunging about that they had done during the previous night that it will be some time before they recover but luckily they had broken no bones and stand a good chance of living to see the over-flow through now and no doubt relating in mule language to youngsters not yet born into the realm of muledom their experiences in the flood of 1927.*

*May 15--*

*Greenwood--at town over fifty miles East of the river from Greenville is a sister city of “THE PORT-CITY OF THE DELTA”. It is just on the edge of the hills and the flood waters did not reach over quite that far. We have learned from the occupants of various boats that have passed that the morning the levee broke and immediately following the arrival of the news at Greenwood a mass meeting was held by the citizens and thousands of dollars were subscribed and every boat available on the adjacent streams--The Sunflower--and Yazoo Rivers--was commandeered and sent into the submerged district. Railroad history was made that day, too. A train from the Mississippi coast loaded with boats sent up by the coastal towns of Gulfport and Biloxi broke all previous speed records tearing across several hundred miles with it’s life saving equipment and pounded into Greenwood a few hours after it had left the coast. It’s boat cargo was hustled out on tracks and down the banks of the Sunflower to be sent to meet the spreading menace of the flood. Mississippians were saving Mississippians. A great emergency brings out the finest traits in humanity.*

*A boat brought by a newspaper today. It was a week or so old and had evidently passed through many hands before reaching the box cars. It came from Rosedale another town from which a fleet of boats have come to help in the dangerous work here. The newspaper told in graphic language stories about the flood and stated that donations were beginning to pour in from all over the nation to aid the victims. Comforting news indeed. There will be multiplied thousands that need help not only immediately but for rehabilitation and reconstruction when the waters recede. The painful patience--wearing task of rebuilding the work of years will begin then for many thousands returning refugees.*

*May 18--*

*Harry Gaines is almost as original as Frank Cash. A hatchet-faced, squirrel-toothed individual about twenty years old he has brought a droll sense of humor to enliven things around our box car refuge. His home is in Sidon but the boat that he brought into the flood area was equipped and paid for by citizens of Greenwood. He says that there were two reasons he came over to help us--the first being that there were so many children in his family that recently after he came home from a late date he found that there was no longer any room for him in the house. The second reason he gave for coming was that he was just a little shy on gray matter and didn’t know any better. He said when they passed out brains he thought they hollered “Rain” and ran under the house and got short changed.*

*Harry and I were cruising about today and noticed a steel drum floating about half submerged. We took it in tow and when we reached the cars and hoisted it upon the platform. We found that we had reclaimed from the river’s maw about fifteen gallons of coal oil. More fuel for Mama and Frank. Harry said he thought he would go out and see what kind of luck he could have catching himself a house. That’s by no means a far-fetched witticism either because we rode into Greenville this evening and saw a small dwelling house which had been tossed by the swirling water into the branches of a tree. “All right Harry” Claude Garrett told him “There’s your house--we treed it for you, get out your rope and lasso it”. It looked as though you might be able to pick up nearly everything out of the river if you just kept traveling on. Nearing Greenville we saw a lot of bales of cotton floating around and drums and barrels of every variety. We examined a few of the latter but didn’t find any that contained the liquid that has that pick-up power on your spirit. We found that they have put the town under martial law to protect property from the invasion of night roving bands of vandals and that you have to get a permit to pass within certain sections of the city. The National Guard are the military custodians of the peace and proper conduct of things now. We skirted around through the grotesque looking suburbs and could see people perched in the windows of the court house. Thousands of negroes found refuge there during the first few days and nights after the water entered their homes. Some of them are still there. Passing back again around to the North side we saw that a course had been marked out for motor boats to travel toward the levee so as to safely avoid hidden obstructions such as fences built upon the property of the out-lying sunken dairy farms.*

*We headed home very late and darkness over-took us when we were only a little more than half way there but Harry guided the boat through the mass of looming trees and floating debris and the ever present danger of lurking stumps and snags (just beneath the surface) with the confidence of a veteran driver over familiar roads and under his skilled hand we soon raised the lights of the box cars upon the dark horizon. It was a welcome sight. It meant we were now in the open fields surrounding Metcalfe. Harry opened up then and “gave her the gun” for the rest of the way and we were seen slapping Frank Cash on the back and telling him the news, “Look out boy” Frank told me “You don’t know--your hands heavy--how deep de water ‘tween here an’ town--he’s on topa my head?”*

*“Gosh I reckon” said Harry, “It’s on top of heads piled on top of heads and the railroad bed is torn up and the cross ties still joined to the rails have turned side-ways and washed against the trees and look like an over-sized picket fence all the way along and the police in Greenville told us to take you and put you over on the other side of that fence for safe keeping”.*

*“Aw nar” said Frank “You tella da police I stay here and feeda da dog.”*

*May 21--*

*The authorities in Greenville sent out motor boat expeditions of National Guardsmen today with ammunition and rifles and instructions to kill all dumb animals that it would be impossible to save--animals such as those on the tracks outside of our box cars that have stood for days upon some false trap of safety such as that afforded by this track. Some of these have within the past few days wandered down to the depot and have eaten up the schedule board that hangs outside down there. Driven by the pangs of hunger they have also attempted to eat away the wooden walls of the depot itself. We have nothing but scraps to give them and these are not even enough for the dogs. In fact to feed them would be only prolonging their agony since there is no way to keep them from dropping into the river from exhaustion finally--they cannot stand there in water for week after week. The merciful thing to do is to kill them.*

*The two guardsmen who came out here in a boat were might poor marksmen, however, and made a rather neat mess of things before they finally succeeded in accomplishing their work. “What these guys need”, said Claude, “Is to do a hitch in the Marine Corp and get a little rifle instruction from Sergeant Casey. He’d teach ‘em how to knock a gnat’s eye out with that rifle back on the thousand yard sand bag rest before he was through with ‘em. That’s one guy that used to brag about how good he was and then prove it to you. He was so hard-boiled, they used to tell us, before we went out to shoot the range under him, that he spent his spare time teaching canary birds to sing bass. We heard some awful tales about that soldier before they turned him loose on us. They said that one day a man came into Casey’s home town riding two wild cats and using a rattle snake for a whip. The man drove up to the drug store on the main street and ordered a bottle of carbolic acid to drink--he washed that down with some iodine for a chaser. He boasted that they had tried to electrocute him in three states and each time he had blown out the fuse and walked away from the chair a free man so it wouldn’t do any good to arrest him for disorderly conduct. He was beginning to get the citizens sort of hot and bothered and stirred up when along about that time this Sergeant Casey, who was on a leave of absence from his rifle range duties in the Marine Corps came along AND RAN THE BAD MAN OUT OF TOWN.*

*When we finally did reach the range for our three weeks instruction and practice Sergeant Casey lived up to his reputation. He showed us how to shoot the rifle from prone position--and then from sitting position and at last from standing position--both slow and rapid fire and at varying ranges from a thousand yards down to two hundred yards. In sitting position you have to double one foot back under you and rest on it to shoot. If Casey caught you easing your weight off your feet he’d come along and plank himself down on your shoulders until you found the right position and held it. But how that guy could shoot that Springfield and how he could teach you to shoot it, too, before he was through with you.”*

*“This is Sergeant Casey” he told us the day we came on the range. “I’ve booted recruits through this range before most of you guys knew there was a United States Marine Corps--yet this is Sergeant Casey you’re looking at--I know you heard about me before you got here and you’ll hear of me when you leave, too, if you live through the next few weeks. I’m known throughout the Marine Corps and your Uncle Sam has got his Marines posted all over the world. You guys’ll be telling ‘em about Sergeant Casey, too, one of these days if you’re still able to talk when we part company. One thing, though, whether you’re dumb or not yo better make up your minds to, right now. It’s just this--when you leave this range--you’re going to know how to shoot a Springfield Rifle. Your Uncle Sam likes for his Marines to know that.”*

*He made us several speeches like that and backed them up with plenty of action--he didn’t waste any time waiting to get acquainted. --In a few days our shoulders were black and blue from the shooting in spite of the fact that we wore heavy shooting pads but we kept right on shooting. But Casey wasn’t a bad scout we learned after he became satisfied that we had learned a few things about how to handle our Springfields--After putting us through the mill he gradually eased the pressure on us and toward the last was “fronting” for us before the “brass hats” getting permission for different ones among his raw soldier boys to leave the range for a few hours. He showed us lots of other favors, too, toward the last and was as fair a fellow as any we ever had found. The last days we were on the range he’d line us up in formation after the day’s work and just before he gave the command for us to “Dismiss” following the bugle call he’d look up and down the line and begin grinning and say “You guys are onto me now ‘aint you? The old braggart and fire eater just turned out to be a puff of smoke, didn’t he? You ‘aint scared of me now are you soldiers? You know I’m not bad” --and then with the grin still sticking he would pause and drag out slowly “’A-W-Right I ‘aint bad--but just remember this--I ‘A-I-N-T-G-O-O-D T-H-O-U-H-G--I ‘A-I-N-T- G-O-O-D”. He’d emphasize that last statement so comically that everybody would be howling with laughter as he gave the signal they were through for the day-dismissed. A Prince of a fellow was Sergeant Casey, a guy that some of us will ever forget, and if He’d taught those National Guardsmen to shoot an army rifle, they’d never have botched things like they have here today. They wouldn’t have needed even one bullet for each animal in their mercy killing instead of two or three and four, sometimes.*

*But my relating this incident of the over-flow and giving this sketch of Sergeant Casey I do not wish to leave the impression that the work of the national Guard was ineffective. They have done an excellent job from all accounts of policing and patrolling the flood area protecting property and giving help by supplying equipment for the refugees on the levee-army tents-blankets, eats. They have rendered fine service--are still rendering it.*

*May 24--*

*“Ole Man River” --he don’t say nuthin’--he don’ plant nuthin’ He jes keeps rollin’ along”. The water has been stationary now for many days. It looks about two inches of being even with our box car floors--the slightest rise will put it inside with us.*

*Mr. Peets came over today from the great barn that stands on Cold Springs plantation and in which he has been living with many of his negroes since the water came. He says he hears that the high water of 1912 killed off the Johnson grass in many places and that he hopes it will prove to be at least that much of a blessing in disguise to the farmers here as the two worst enemies in this country not counting the boll weevil are Johnson Grass and Coca grass. These two pernicious grasses present stubborn problems that the farmers have racked their brains many nights attempting to solve. The long roots of Johnson grass are tough and hard to remove from the soil--Coca grass grows with incredible speed--as one farmer aptly put it--it is two days ahead of Christ. Christ rose in three days from the dead and if you chop the Coca grass out of your crop it seems almost to spring back into new life on the same spot over-night.*

*If the water does any harm to either or both of these enemies of the agriculturists then it may be truly in some respects a blessing in disguise. The rich deposit that the silt and other ingredients of the yellow stream will leave in many places will prove beneficial in renewing the strength of the land and if there is to be this additional benefit besides the picture of the flood will assume a brighter side in time.*

*The boat Mr. Peets came in caused a lot of curious comment among the occupants of the box cars when he first hailed into view. The Red Cross provided him with it to run supplies back and forth from Greenville where they are brought in by large barges-towing steam-boats to the refugees in his barn. The Red Cross has furnished my father with a little two and one half horse power Johnson motor to help him serve as their distributing agent to the refugees at Metcalfe--later on they may be able to send supplies in large quantities to Metcalfe to be issued out to those in need in the surrounding district and who will be moving back into their damaged homes when the water goes down.*

*The boat they loaned Mr. Peets was a roomy and well built skiff but was driven by the tiniest inboard motor I have ever seen. When he approached as he was sitting over this motor upon a stove and had a rain coat over his knees. The miniature motor runs so smoothly that you cannot detect a sound from it unless you are within a few feet. We saw Mr. Peets and we saw his boat but strain our vision to the utmost we could not see what was bearing him over the waves. “Well”, said Harry, “I’m spending my last day in those box cars. I’m moving into town and live on the levee. I’m beginning to see Spooks”--“Nar”, said Frank, “Stay with a us--thatsa no spook that’s Mr. Peets”. “Maybe it is Mr. Peets”, conceded Harry, “But what he’s riding in is sure spooky. I’m supposed to be an expert on motor boats and if you ask me that thing he’s travelin’ in ‘aint something sure enough”.*

*However, the “spook” is not the strangest craft that we have seen appear. There have been a legion of unique water contraptions, - “Necessity is the mother of invention” I can well believe it after viewing some of the improvised sea going conveyances inspired by this catastrophe.*

*My prize would go to the one rigged up by an Italian mechanic in Leland--Prime Sabatini. Prime is a mechanical genius. He is, as his name indicates the first of many children. His father--Charlie Sabatini claims that he is going to count his children to an even hundred before he dies. They are all named numerically and they are all mechanics. They seem to be born that way. Once recently a man took his ailing car by their garage to have it fixed and found that it was an Italian holiday of some kind and they were all out celebrating--all except the latest arrival a boy baby named, I think--Sixteenth--about two or three years old. He was the only one around the place besides his mother. The man said that he would try Sixteenth on his car and he swears that when he held Sixteenth up over his motor and put a wrench in his hands that he went to work tinkering with the ailing machinery and soon had it hitting on all cylinders again.*

*I do not know whether the man’s story is true or an exaggeration. Knowledge of the right uses of nuts, bolts, screws, monkey wrenches and gadget like that is in the Sabatini blood. A few days after the water came we looked out from our side-door Pullmans and saw Prime riding the crest astride two flat boats pontoons geared to a motor of some kind with an airplane propeller fanning them along at an incredible rate. The whole thing was painted a brilliant red. I wondered at first if Germany had heard about our condition and decided to renew the war and sent the famous Red Baron Von Rictefon to the Delta to reopen hostilities. Harry Gaines said when he saw Prime go shooting across the water on that double pontooned red oddity that he could appreciate at last how the country Irishman must have felt when he came to town and while looking down on the strange sights of the city from his hotel window saw two fire engines go racing by through the traffic below--“Get up Mike” he yelled to the companion that he had brought with him and who was fast asleep on the bed--“Get up and come see. They are moving Hell and two loads have already gone by.”*

*We went ranging over the flood waters in the wide open spaces today. Down almost to Hollandale at the other end of the county. The picture presented to the eye is practically the same everywhere. It is as though our county had suddenly sunk below sea level and the ocean had found it’s way in. There is only one piece of property in the whole county whose level proved above that of the flood--a plantation South of Greenville appropriately named “Highland”.*

*In places the current has been so swift that it has washed nearly everything before it--in other places it appears to be as calm and placid as an inland lake. Where the railroad track has run parallel with the direction taken by the water the road bed is supposedly intact for there are no signs of it’s having been washed out. But whenever it has faced at right angles to the water’s flow as in the sweeping bend here at home it appears to have been utterly destroyed--the cross ties and rails torn up and twisted in a manner reminiscent of accounts of Sherman’s march through Georgia. Many trestles have been swept away. They evidently could not stand the pressure of gathering drift and debris against their buttresses and like the levee after withstanding the accumulating weight for a time finally gave way. The railroads will have to dig deep into their pockets to put their trackage back in the same condition that it was when hit by this flood.*

*Leland the second largest town in the county presents a sight similar in many respects to that of Greenville--all municipal owned plants as well as streets--business district and residential sections have been smothered out with inestimable damage done. Many of it’s citizens have gone North to the refugee camp at Cleveland--some have come to Greenville--those who live in high built homes and who have boating facilities to get back and forth to the levee for supplies have stayed--but they are few.*

*Conditions in the other towns we saw appear identical. Estil--Arcola--and the small settlements like Metcalfe--all appeared about equally hard hit and all seemed so strange--their buildings sawed in two by the gleaming sword of disaster like distorted objects seen in some terrible dream. I suppose it is always so with occurrences that make mockery of the natural order or convert familiar things into things misshapen or grotesque--there must come sometimes this sense of unreality about the whole event. The mind refuses to accept it all. Riding past scenes in a motor boat which have been repeatedly impressed upon one’s consciousness as belonging to a certain environment or fashioned a certain way and then see them appear or more properly half appear in such freakish and unusual settings is too much not to induce a feeling of the fantastic into one’s reactions.*

*There have been some references made to blessings in disguise contained in the situation. At the risk of having myself branded as a malicious slanderer and other undesirable names I would suggest that one of these might be the construction during the rehabilitation period of a new jail at Leland. Of course coming from someone who is nominally a resident of Greenville this will be interpreted, I realize as local prejudice and an insult. Citizenry of Leland with the pomposity of little men threatening physical violence to those much bigger than themselves have occassionally promised the people of Greenville to grow across the ten miles that separates the two towns and take in Greenville as a suburb. People in Greenville have replied that if they ever thought there was a possibility of such a contingency arising they would float bonds and build a stone wall to prevent it’s happening.*

*The reason I think of the Leland jail is because of it’s connection with one of the most excitement provoking incidents in Leland’s recent history. A few years ago a resident of Pine Bluff, Ark., who had once been a resident of Leland--a mechanic and amateur aviator had been on a protracted spree in and around the city across the river but had in some way managed to escape arrest. A whimsical vagary of home sickness for the familiar sights and faces of Leland begun to intrude itself upon his mind. He drove out to the avaition field and with the proverbial lack that dogs the heels of drunk men and fools found a plane ready for flight and with no one near by at the time. Taking an extra fifth out of his car he climbed into the plane and before anybody could intercept him had taken off for a visit to his friends in Leland. On the way he hit the fifth some fatal blows and rode into Leland with a spirit of frolicsome playfulness animating his home-sick sentimental brain. Just as an announcement that he had come to town he looped the loop several times to within a few feet of the buildings in the business district--leveled off for two or three straight runs of a few feet above the heads of the people in the streets and wound up with the most daring exhibition of hedge-hopping and house grazing in general about which the people of Leland had ever read, thought or heard. Before he finally came to rest upon the field he had most of them in cellars, culverts, ditches or diving into Deer Creek. He was, of course, promptly arrested when he finally came to Earth and was immediately incarcerated in the Leland jail. The authorities thought he might sleep it off there perhaps in time for his trial the next day. But he slept it off quicker than that. Sometime between two and three o’clock during the night he roused himself and inspired by thoughts of rebellion against the unkind reception accorded him following his spectacular home-coming broke out of the Leland jail--went out to the landing field--climbed back into his borrowed plane and awoke the good citizens out of their dreams of safety by putting on a night performance of his matinee exhibition. Once more he had them looking for the low planes--this time in their pajamas. His night show lasted an hour or so--with the first streaks of dawn he flew straight for his Ark. home of Pine Bluff. He had had his visit to Leland. It may not have been so pleasant but was, to say the least, sensational.*

*May 30--*

*Over-flows like politicians make strange bed fellows--rabbits, raccoons, snakes and domesticated pets have all been seen drifting along on brush heaps together apparently on the friendliest terms with each other--glad that they are yet alive.*

*Tonight I was reading aloud to Mr. Stroud from some newspapers that workers out of Greenville brought us. The newspapers came there by steam-boat. The Lindberg flight is costing us a lot of front-page space. No doubt that was a record breaking flight but this is a record breaking flood, too, and we are depending upon the papers to help us get help. The government at Washington will no doubt roll through the motions of unwinding it’s red tape before long and after endless investigations we can expect something from that source--we are wondering what is to be done. We know with what effective results Uncle Sam has gone to the aid of unfortunates in foreign lands--not only the starving Belgians and Russians but many others and we are expecting him to move with the same friendly interest and sympathy at least to the assistance of his own people.*

*A few years ago we lost our most prominent champion in the work of flood control--Congressman Ben Humphreys. During his life--he, with the assistance of others, notably Senator Ransdall of La. and Congressman Driver of Ark. had already secured passage of legislation (the Ben Humphreys Flood Control Bill) looking toward the ultimate solution of the greatest challenge to engineering skill of modern times--the proper harnessing and control of the flood waters of the Mississippi. This tremendous disaster of ’27 will focus more forcibly upon the national consciousness than has ever been done before the immediate necessity of carrying to it’s successful conclusion the work begun by Mr. Humpreys and others. To us the most important thing in the world is to see that that is done now as quickly as possible so that any future repetition of the disaster of ’27 will not lie like a menacing shadow across our beautiful and rich valley. The Mississippi Delta has often been called “The Garden Spot of the World” and even though the muddy currents of the ‘Father of Waters’ swirl today in muddy pools across the grave of Ben Humphreys in the cemetery in the flood smothered city of Greenville we believe that other leaders will arise to take the torch that in life he lifted so high and that through their continued efforts the great river will at last be brought completely under control and the Delta freed forever from the terror of flood. In imagination I can see a great army moving to the happy completion of that tast--an army imbued and led by men who have caught the spirit of Ben Humphreys, who have learned to love the Delta as he loved it and who, moving with the same steadfast resolute purpose through the use of brawn and brain to the reclaimation and permanent protection of “The Garden Spot of the World”. I see, in my mind’s eye, that great army moving to it’s task and the meaning of all the tremendous destruction and loss of life of the present flood assumes a deeper significance. Possibly such a sacrifice was necessary to arouse the Nation to an insight and awareness of the vision already caught by leaders like Mr. Humphreys and probably were he alive today he could see at this moment clearer than any other man that this flood will, in the course of future years, be looked upon as the sacrifice that people must always endure as the price of great accomplishment, for without a doubt something will be done after this for our permanent protection.*

*June 2--*

*“Where rocket green and rocket red in troubling pools of posing light with flowers of flame festoon the night”.*

*Last night we saw rockets shooting up from the direction of the river. We thought something must have happened over there and today learned that a boat caught fire and its occupants had been rescued by a passing steam-boat after they had plunged into the river to avoid cremation. It was the work of providence that the steam boat happened to be as close to them as that.*

*My brother Rife came down to join us today from Rosedale. He said he had heard that we had drowned and any number of other things so didn’t know whether he was the only remaining family representative or not. He had to come and see. A cousin, Van Chaney, came with him. They brought along an extra motor and boat and Van went back but left the boat and new ten horse power Johnson motor behind with us. The powerful motor makes the boat fairly whizz through the water. But I nearly had hard luck with it on my first trial run. With the big motor on back of the boat and my heavy weight besides the nose of the boat rode high and shut off my view toward the front.*

*I started out across the water that was kicking up big waves today in the open field spaces--due to a brisk breeze. Mr. George Metcalfe was coming directly to meet me--moving his family back from town along with a small two boat of provisions. I did not see him and rode right on into him nearly before I saw him. I jerked the control bar desperately and just grazed the side of his boat as he shot by. The big wave that I was dragging came within a narrow margin of swamping his over-loaded craft and threw gallons of water over everybody in the boat.*

*I turned around and headed back toward him as soon as possible to stand by for assistance if his rocking craft failed to right itself. He saw me coming and thinking no doubt that I was playing a mean practical joke on him with my fancy new boat--he picked up an oar and shook it threateningly at me. I’m glad he didn’t have a pistol. No doubt he thought I was saying to myself, “Well I missed bumping you the first time but I’ll get you now” and maybe if he had had a fire-arm my explanation and apology would have been too late in coming.*

*June 5--*

*Things came to a show down today between the forces of law and order and the raiders of the back woods today. Joe Norman--a negro boy came to see my father yesterday and told him about the theft of “a blue shirt an’ mah las’ pair uv B.V. D’S” from a trunk left on scaffolding in his mother’s house just on the outer borders of Metcalfe. My father agreed with Joe that the pirates were carrying things a bit too far and that he would see what could be done to halt their depredations. He went to town late in the evening and this morning deputy sheriff Shanahan came out to make a search in the flooded back woods for them. He wanted to use our new speed boat for the work and he and I went--accompanied by a negro who was familiar with the lay of the land--or rather, the water--back there.*

*We had no trouble locating the two story house. Water stood upon it level with the flooring of the second story. Several thieves saw us coming from their watch-out post on the gallery and attempted to get away in a skiff but we overhauled them and Mr. Shanahan made them turn back at the point of a pistol. We found the house heaped with stolen trunks--guns--furniture and various odds and ends of household possessions just as predicted by the negroes in the gin. A small ginger-bread colored man was suspected of being the ring leader of the gang--there were four young negroes in the house--and under questioning he finally confessed and implicated the others.*

*Mr. Shanahan had given me a pistol as soon as I had shut off the motor on our way in and I had held the gun on them while he put handcuffs on them. We then loaded them in their own skiff and keeping it in tow turned back toward Metcalfe. They were later removed to the jail house in Greenville to await trial when the flood receded and conditions permitted the holding of court.*

***[The language, description of life and tragedies, and references to the individuals in the story was acceptable during this time-period. However, the outdated attitudes and language is now unacceptable.]***

*I felt sorry for the little ginger bread colored negro but have no doubt that he is an incorrigible crook. He seemed much brighter and more intelligent than the others. He was amusing to talk to. “Tommy” I told him “I hear that you have been in jail before--“Yes sah” he admitted freely enough “Jail an’ de penitentiary too--dey put me in jail ‘cause I stole er nigger’s victrola--dey ought not to done dat ‘cause de nigger done already shot me’bout stealin’ hit.”*

*“That nigger might have killed you, Tommy”, I told him. “You ought to stop and think about the danger of stealing things before you do it.”*

*“Nar sah”, he said, “De Lord warn’t gwine to let dat nigger kill me--dat song ‘Bue Hebben” hadn’t come out den--de Lord shore gwine to let me live to hear dat.”*

*“Well”, I said, “When were you in the penitentiary?”*

*“I was in dere de fust time ‘bout four years ago”, he declared.*

*“Oh so you’ve been in there twice then.”*

*“Yes sah”--twicest but bof times I wuz in on de same ticket I runned erway an’got ketched.”*

*“Tell me about it”, I invited.*

*“Well dey ‘aint much to tell”, said Tommy. “One day I thought I seed mah chanst while we wuz workin’ close to some woods an’ I brok an’ run--I make hit to de woods awright an’ I thought I was er free nigger but dey went back an’ put dem dawgs atter me. Dey wuz three uv’em--de fus’ one say GO GIT HIM. GOT GIT HIM--GO GIT HIM--de nex’ one say “HOW OLD IS HE?--HOW OLD IS HE?”--de las’ one say ‘BOUT TWENTY ONE OR TWO--‘BOUT TWENTY ONE OR TWO”. When dem dawgs commence tawkin’ me over ‘mengst deyseves lak dat I seen dey had mah number an’ hit twant’t no use so I gen up. Den dey tuk an’ put me to wok in de cotton fields erway frum de wood-land an’ cause I had done runned erway dey made hit hart on me--de man say. “Son how much cotton is you ever pick in er day?” I told him “bout a hundred an’ fifty”--“Awright” he say “we teach you how to pick cotton.”*

*“When dey weighed up dat fust day I had er even hundred an’ fifty--‘Son’ say de man ‘de boll weevil musta get yo’ cotton didn’t dey?” I say “Nar suh”. He say “ Put twenty licks on him wid dat strap”.*

*“De fust lick lifted me off’n de groun’an’ do rest uv ‘em helt me in de air--de man say’ Now tomorrow don’ let de boll weevil git yo’ cotton’ De nex’ day I picked two hundred an’ fifty--de man say ‘Son yo done gone an’ let de boll weevil git yo’ cotton eregin”--I say “SAR?”--He say ‘put thirty lick on dis nigger wid dat strop--we teach him how to pick cotton--Befo’ I leff dere I could pick four hundred pound uv cotton jes’ as easy.”*

*“That’s what I hear Tommy”, I told him. “They say that if the water hadn’t come this year when cotton picking time was here you would be out picking four hundred pounds of cotton in the day time and stealing eight hundred pounds at night--they tell me that you used to gin every day--a bale every day”.*

*“Nar sah”, he said, “dey done tole you wrong. I don’ fool aroun’ no gin. I mistruses one uv dem things--sounds lak day sayin’ all de time de marchinery runnin’ “BALANCE DUE NIGGER, BALANCE DUE”.*

*June 7--*

*I have heard of some incredibly absent-minded spells in my life such as the one about the man getting off the train returning home from an extended trip and kissing his wife’s friend who with his wife had come to meet him and then shaking hands with his wife or the one about the man standing around the polling place the night of the election waiting to hear the returns and becoming involved in a fight. Quite a few blows had been exchanged between him and his opponent when someone inside hollered out that some new returns had just been received. The man promptly forgot the fight he was having--turned suddenly around and walked off to get the benefit of the latest news from his candidate--thereby getting himself neatly cooled and crowned by his foe. But I never put much faith in such stories until this morning after Claude Garrett arose from a spell of over-sleeping, yawned disinterestedly and walked straight out of our box car as if the water just below was a solid concrete pavement glistening in the morning sunlight instead of the very yielding, very wet thing that it is. When he had been fished out he said that for the moment he had entirely the forgotten the flood and was on his way to a restaurant in his native home of Cleveland to get breakfast.*

*Our chief diet, since the Red Cross has begun to feed us, is black-eyed peas. They must have found some way to grow them on the levee or under water. Otherwise I don’t see how they could have gotten so many of them. Their black eyes have begun to stare at me unblinkingly, but I am glad--Oh! So glad that we have them. I am like one member of the couple who ventured up in an air-plane for their first flying experience. When they had gotten some thousands of feet off Terra Firma, the girl looked down and becoming frightened, grabbed her escort’s arm and whispered “Oh! Tom, what a terrible thing to be way up here with this air-plane”--“Yes”, said Tom, consolingly, “But think what a damn site worse thing it would be to be way up here WITHOUT IT.” I sincerely don’t know what we’d do without black-eyed peas.*

*June 10--*

*There were uses for all the boats around here today except Mike’s Ark so I decided to take that and go out for exercise. I took Joe Dunn, a young negro lad, with me. Joe couldn’t row and he couldn’t swim so he wasn’t much value except as a study in ebony of ivory brightened smiles. We went almost to Greenville--the current helping us in places and driving against us in others. Directly after we had turned back a thunder shower came up accompanyied by a very heavy wind. I noticed that the waves were beginning to kick up high but gave them no serious thought until we were a mile or so out in the open away from the municipal protection levee--the waves then started to climb into hissing breakers and some of them broke over the hissing breakers and some of them broke over the sides of the small boat--the wind had risen to a shrill gale. Joe began rather frantically to bail and I began rather frantically to pull toward the submerged railroad track about a half a mile in front of us. I noticed that there wasn’t another boat in sight--they had all evidently tied up somewhere or had made it safely to the protection levee. Unfortunately the wind had caught us in what had been a wide open field before the water covered it and the waves had a fair crack at us. I laid back on the eight-foot oars but as far as the power I was able to generate was concerned it seemed that they might just as well have been two matches. It was a furious fight we waged--Joe with the bailing bucket and I with my futile oars. Now and then I would slow down my labors enough to risk a glance over my shoulder at the railroad track beyond. Each time it seemed as far away as ever and the breakers were getting ahead of Joe--filling up the boat. I could feel my strength going and I knew that not even a strong swimmer could live for long in these high chopping waves and the current that under-lay them. Besides if we managed to make it to the railroad track before the water we were shipping swamped us--I was not at all sure that we had found a place of safety even then. It looked as though a white ribbon of comparatively smooth water marked the track’s location and this contrasted to the churning tossing maelstrom about us. But this smooth narrow stip was only like that, I knew, because the current was pouring across the railroad bed so swiftly that it caused such a break at the surface and if we ever get there the question would be could we pull up against it until we were out of the waves and once within the limits of the narrow ribbon or swift water could we stay in that position without getting swept back into the waves again.*

*At last we made it to the edge and the most desperate fight that ever I hope to wage with a pair of oars begun. I pulled until they almost bent double but I could not gain on into that swiftly moving strip of smooth water. It seemed as though invisible hands were shoving the nose of the boat away every time it drew within a certain distance--and there back of me the waves were breaking viciously just at the edge of the smooth water--the hands seemed determined--“So far you shall come and no further”. But before I exhausted myself and allowed the boat to drift back into these hissing waves again I was determined to put up a struggle. I tried not to think about them--tried to hold my own and gain a little, if I could, and not lose my head. I pulled as hard as I could mechanically and let my thoughts race away from their surroundings and find escape if they might from our sorry predicament.*

*It’s queer the things you will think about in trying circumstances like that. I thought about the time on the circus grounds when Rife, who was about ten years old at that time, grabbed the well-dressed, well perfumed little negro girl and kissed her--just an uncontrollable impulse, I guess--and then when he was mighty sick as a child one summer and nearly scared my mother to death by asking for somebody to read to him out of the “God-book” as he called the Bible and she went and changed doctors. I thought about the time when after quite a long visit away from home somebody had asked “Rife, did you get home-sick?”--“Why me”, he said, “I go home, well”--and then fool thoughts begun to race through my head that might mean something to a psychiatrist but to me meant only that I was thinking of something besides these angry snarling waves just back of the thin ribbon of smooth water into which we were trying to climb. My mother’s poultry ranch ruined by flood--looks as though it might be a good idea on a poultry farm to put electric lights in the chicken houses and turn them on at midnight--maybe you could fool some of the hens into laying twice a day. Little boy way out in the country when asked if he had ever heard of God said--“Yes--‘aint his last name Damn?” But then I certainly ought to be praying and not thinking of things like that--and in the Ark, too, Frank Cash had tried to get me not to go out for any distance in this old tub. Won’t eat any more black-eyed peas now--had begun to love them, too. Ask the blessing, “Lord look down at us and grin-back ears and all pitch in”--why couldn’t I think of anything except what was sacrilege in this tight place?--just like when you are scared of lightning you feel wicked and your thoughts fly in uncontrolled directions--that’s the way I was. Maybe I was becoming crazed with exhaustion. What a pretty pair of legs she’s got--and lips that have the power to bring bliss and forgetfulness. Hell, every sweet in life will be gone from me forever if I drown--won’t it? Well pull on these oars until your back breaks--pull fool--pull or you’ll never again know any kind of intoxication of the senses-you’ll be a dead one, do you hear? Do you believe you know anything better for yourself, that way? Well, no matter what you believe about that you know what’s on this side and you want to stick to that bad as it may sometimes get to be. Death, some have said “Is just a beautiful adventure”, but I’m having adventure enough now.*

*Old man Calluiet didn’t want anybody calling him “Old Man”--wanted to be called “Kid”--funny old man--So help us God I don’t believe that I’ve ever been this tired before--there are blisters on every fractional portion of my hands and fingers. Everybody says that drowning is the easiest way to die--but that’s a thought I want to forget--or is it? “Raccoon up de ‘simmon tree ‘possum on de groun’ ‘possum say ‘you son-of-a-bitch rain them simmons down’ Rife telling me that when we were boys one morning lying in bed. Our father in the next room--over-hearing, saying angrily, “WHAT is that you say, young man?”----“I--I--I-- say rr-r-acccoon up de ‘simmon tree ‘possum en de groun’ the possum said you SON-OF-A GUN rain them ‘simmons down”--That don’t rhyme--Well, neither does jelly for your stomach--so much in life don’t rhyme. I wonder how long before I’ll collapse. The poor negro will drown too. Look how kind of ashen he’s become beneath the black. Maybe when they find our bodies if they ever are found they will think that he’s white, too. I remember my Uncle Charlie in Rosedale used to have a setter bird dog that he had trained to go down town to the post office and bring back the mail--she’d bring it back in her mouth and never slobber on it, and Margaret the cripple would pull up by her long setter’s hair--I wonder if that dog didn’t go to Heaven? I hear they are short of labor in Heaven--have to take in the stars and moon and hang out the sun and push clouds around all day. More sacrilege. My mind is mean and wicked--the things I think about here in this crisis proves it. Nothing in a grave-yard that will hurt you but the negro said “Them es dat’s so dey may be sumpthin in dat graveyard dat will make yo’ hurt yosef”--HOW MY BACK HURTS--I’M SCARED--I’M A DAMN COWARD and I always thought way down deep in me that I never was--that the reason I never get anywhere was because I just let myself drift and that I could go places if I wanted to--really wanted to try and now here I am pulling--pulling--afraid to drift now--AFRAID I’m going to DROWN--my spine is tingling with little electric sensations that make me keep on pulling in spite of the hurt. Remember the man in Rosedale--a weak puny little man--running out of the burning house with a piano because the fire had reached a closet where the hunting shells were stored and they had begun to go off. I’m scared like that--it’s a wonder these oars don’t break--“Nigger why don’t you sing I’m throwing twelve pounds from the hips on down just listen to the cold steel ring.” “Comin’ for to carry me home. You shall be free when de Good Lord set you free”.*

*We used to peep through the cracks of the girl’s dressing room at the swimming pool when we were ten or twelve. An old Lady’s voice shrilling from a vine-covered house out into a street--“Get that baby out of the sun, Jack-ass”.*

*What in the Hell is mind and memory and why do I think of these things just because I’m scared of these muddy hissing waves of water?--the little boy sliding down off the roof of the house hollering--“Lord save me--save me” and then “Never mind Lord--a nail got me now”. In the Marine Corps you have to give your first name, middle initial and last name--Jesus H. Christ--John R. God--like that. She had thirteen spades in one hand but passed because her off-suit was weak. She?? I wish it was a she in this boat with me instead of this nigger. This romantic fight for life is all, going to waste--But no--I don’t wish it either--damnest sight I ever saw was a bull frog kissing his mother-in-law. I love rotten filthy jokes--the one about the Red of Jacob--Hills of Zion--Valley of Lebanon and the Bells of Joy. My father once got Mike Jackson to drink two bottles of a “new beer” that he had bought for the store--it was Pluto Water. Baboon kissed the monkey’s sister--kissed so hard he raised a blister”--I didn’t know water could look like that--there the waves are right in front of me as we are tossed up and down--to the sides, everywhere--can’t keep my mind off of them no matter how hard I pull and my brain races to other thoughts--if we can just keep on the top-side of them a little longer maybe the wind storm will blow over. I don’t believe it is as strong now as it was. Maybe we are not going to shuffle of these mortal coils after all but I’ll never put foot in this clumsy old trap any more even if Uncle Mike has got it blessed and sanctified. “The spirit of God moved upon the waters”--I guess I have always kind of defied God. But I won’t try to change just because Death has been blowing it’s breath in my face today. No, I won’t be any different but I am tired and maybe I’ll get rested again--my thinking is going over-board--man over-board--give him a rope.” “Give him Hell, I’ll sell it to him”--the nigger on trial said his name was ‘Stack o’ dollars” and his parents names were Nickels and Dimes. Feel like I’ve been dragged through Hell and beat over the head with a soot bag--“give me hills to climb and strength for climbing”. Give me some dry land or the sight of those two box cars again and the strength to climb out of this boat! “The moving finger writes and having writ moves on nor all your piety nor all your wit shall lure it back to cancel half a line nor all your tears wash out a word of it”.*

*A negro baseball pitcher named Anchor Line used to take a box of ashes out to the pitcher’s box with him and when he rubbed the ball around in the box and cocked one toe*

*straight up at a cloud and let go all you could see was a streak of ashes. “Thy Father who are in Heaven Hallowed be Thy Name” I wonder what Joe is thinking about? His mama, I guess or more like some little nigger girl--more likely even still his Jesus-negroes are so often sincerely religious--and the waves are quieting down--no longer climbing into that angry hissing break--we never have forced our way into the middle of that smooth strip of gliding water but we have kept further in than the waves could come. I feel that I’ve passed my endurance limit hours ago--but it must have been minutes. I’m quitting and laying down in the bottom of the boat. The wind has stopped that shrill whistling sound and is beginning to lay. The waves are not high enough to capsize us now and when some boat passes Joe can give them a chain to tow us into the box cars. This has been the closest call I think that I ever had and I’m going to sleep the sleep of the good and just for a while at least.*

*June 13--*

*Mama took her first vacation from constant cooking today and went visiting. She must certainly have found her water wings. If any of us would have ever thought that mama would be capable of using a sea-going craft like Mr. Peat’s “Spook” to put out upon the broad bosom of the Mississippi river to go visiting then we would just as soon have been willing to think that the river would turn around and flow backward. Yet that is what happened today. This flood has brought some radical changes--turned miracles into realities--the impossible it does immediately--the miraculous takes not much longer.*

*About three miles beyond the Peat’s headquarters at the Cold Springs barn lies the McQueen place. The house is built high off the ground and is situated on the banks of Deer Creek--and Deer Creek’s banks themselves form a high ridge. So the McQueens stayed in their home. Today Mama went with Mr. Peats to visit them. They took along a young negro boy nick-named “Boots” who had been staying as a refugee in the barn. “Boots” was to serve as deck-hand on the “Spook”.*

*The visit down to the McQueen’s was made without incident--greetings and flood gossip was exchanged and then the three passengers started back. They had come about a mile along the route facing their barn and box car home when there suddenly appeared from the direction of the levee an ominious bank of storm clouds. Moving across the center of these and dangling toward the water were three conically shaped cloud masses. The three cloud funnels swept toward them with amazing speed. They turned their boat into a clump of trees that they were passing and shutting off the tiny motor made the boat’s nose fast to a large tree. Anxiously they awaited developments. To be hit by a tornado in such a craft as the “Spook” out in the Mississippi river would be a tragic blow indeed. They watched the storm marching across the wide wastes of the flood waters in their direction. “How does it look to you Boots?” Mrs. Peats asked the young negro doubtfully--“Hit looks purty briefly to me Mr. Peets--purty briefly--yes sah--deys too much excitement over dere in de West to suit me”, declared Boots. Mama said it had begun to look pretty “briefly” to them all--when with one of these freakish inclinations often exhibited by storms of the tornadic type the agents of destruction veered sharply back again toward the levee and missed them a considerable distance. At that so many high waves were kicked up by the straight blow that followed the tornado’s passing that their boat was in danger of being swamped and except for the tree break-water and anchorage would have been.*

*Later we got the report that the storm had struck with particular vicious force and destructiveness South of Leland over-turning half-submerged houses by the score on the out-lying plantations and sinking some boats. It marched across the river proper from the point where Mama and those in the “Spook” were, and tore things up with abandon through the flood covered Ark. Delta. We learned this from accounts in some belated newspapers that arrived afterward. The storm appeared to gather force as it went--finally striking directly into the heart of Saint Joseph Mo. and practically leveling the business district. Natives said that a lurid yellow light appeared in the skies South of their city. The lurid light gleamed sinisterly for a few minutes--growing sinisterly brighter. The citizens knew that something terrible impended--a few seconds later a roar like that of an avalanche broke upon their ears and then the horrow was upon them--leaving a city of death and destruction in it’s wake.*

*Truly the three horsement are riding the reaches of the South during 1927. What are they? FIRE?--PESTILENCE?--FAMINE? or FLOOR STORM. WAR OR EARTHQUAKE?--what does it matter--what difference does it make? When disaster or death hits you there’s not much use worrying about what form or name it appears in. There’s nothing to do about it except take it. Most of the victims of this disaster are taking theirs like that. “Death comes with a creep--or he comes with a pounce--but whether he’s slow or spry--it isn’t the fact that you’re dead that counts BUT ONLY HOW DID YOU DIE?”--and then to remember--“When the one Great Scorer comes to write against your name--he’ll write not whether you’ve won or lost--BUT HOW YOU’VE PLAYED THE GAME”. Many of the flood sufferers do not know or have never heard of the poems in which these words are found but they know and use their spirit just the same.*

*June 20--*

*Harry Gaines has a talent that almost amounts to genius for finding and saving dogs. Hardly a day passes that he doesn’t show up with some “Mongrel--pup--whelp or hound or cur of low degree” that he has plucked from a house-top--drift-heap or in-between places. There are practically two of our box cars now devoted to the use of dogs--the two end cars. Harry saves them and Frank Cash nurses them and feeds them. Very touching and very trouble-some--because we are from time to time interrupted with the yowling excitement of a dog fight. It begins usually from a local argument in the corner of one box car between two dogs and rapidly extends itself over the reaches of that whole car and then with the leaping contagion of galloping consumption is caught up by the dogs in the next car and carried to lengths and points where it is no longer funny. have tried the experiment of uncoupling the cars and getting up enough power from the combined motor boats available--Harry and Claude’s inboard marine motor--the Red Cross’s two and one half power Johnson--Mr. Peats’ “Spook” motor and the ten horse power Johnson Van Chaney loaned us--to urge these cars further down the side track but it was no go. Not even under the added inspiration of Uncle Mike’s two-oared Ark and high-powered praying would they budge.*

*So the dogs will be close here beside us to the end. As I have tried earnestly to point out it’s as great a flood as anyone could wish but drawbacks crop out from time to time not-with-standing. Not the least of these being the antics of our near box car neighbors and fellow refugees--the dogs.*

*Harry says that he has deliberately made a nuisance out of himself collecting dogs to get even with me for reading aloud to Mr. Stroud at night. Mr. Stroud has a glass eye and sleeps on the side that turns his good eye to the pillow--so I cannot tell from looking at his open glass eye whether he is asleep or not. I keep on reading sometimes a long while Mr. Stroud says that he likes it but Harry don’t ergo and presto--more dogs--multiplied numbers of dogs. Where Harry located them all is as big a mystery around here as the communicative powers of the grape-vine telegraph. Anyway I’ve quit reading aloud and hope that Harry will decide that we now have our full quota of refugee dogs and let any others that he may be contemplating adding to the box car kennels alone.*

*June 25--*

*Some more proof that the over-flow makes strange bed-fellows. Last night we were sitting around talking--figuring how many more weeks before the water would begin to go down and hoping that the dogs would enjoy a quiet night when there arose all at once upon the air cries of “Help--Help”. The cries seemed somewhat muffled as if they were from far away or from some throat enfeebled with exhaustion. Before the rest of us had taken in the significance of the cries and stopped wondering what it was all about, Claude and Harry had pushed off in the marine-motored boat and gone to find who needed help.*

*There was once located upon Ed Lafoe’s place an old-fashioned gin built in antebellum style. About the only relic remaining of the big structure of this gin is a massive column of bricks that rises to a height of seventy five or more feet upon the site and that used to serve as the smoke stack. A boat coming down this evening through the flooded area North of here--a fancy, expensive boat taken from the waters of Moon Lake near Clarksdale and sent by truck to the Northern extent of the flood waters some miles in Bolivar County beyond Benoit had been on it’s way to Greenville with two sight-seeing passengers. Darkness had over-taken them just North of Metcalfe and they had rammed head-on into this ancient pile of bricks that was once a gin stack. When Harry and Claude drew along-side of them their boat was beginning to settle definitely in the water. They took the two passengers aboard and managed to tow the disabled boat in before it sunk. Then they got the negroes out of the gin and all gave a hand to pulling the damaged craft out of the water and up into the gin platform. One of the men in the boat turned out to be “Dusty” Bullock--state traffic officer. He is the only man who has ever put me under arrest more than once. He twice “pulled” Charlie Allen and myself for speeding while we were on our way to Memphis. He seemed to have his eye peeled for us going and coming North and South--one of the times we were not guilty either. He was surely our Nemesis or something over the free use of Miss. roads. We had often expressed a wish to do him some bad turn if the chance for revenge ever came.*

*Last night my friends probably saved his life--my mother cooked him a hot supper and I shared bed-cover and a bed with him aboard a box-car of the Illinois Central Railroad Co’s that I have begun to feel as though I own. I thought about the rabbits and rattlesnakes that have been reported riding past sharing the same log or pieces of drift-wood with each other. Maybe if this over-flow lasts long enough I’ll make up with all my old enemies and quit harboring a grudge against anybody.*

*June 26--*

*Another gruesome story was washed into here today just as a reminder that along with the dogs, hard-drinking visitors and home-made life preservers, etc. We have to take that part of it, too. A negro woman living in the backwoods far to the South of Metcalfe had borne a baby into this topsey turvey world of the year (’27) one day before the water entered her home. Her husband had gone out to try to provide some way to have his wife and baby moved out of the path of the advancing flood. He never came back--probably he drowned.*

*Rescue workers did not find the woman and her baby until four days after the water had driven them to the roof of their house. The child still held in her arms and she would not yield it’s body up--she had become stark, staring mad.*

*There have been more stories than one of minds yielding under the strain of this thing,--yielding like the dirt walls of the levee.*

*June 27--*

*Today I went to Mr. Robert Ireland’s camp on the levee just on the outer Northern edge of town. While there I talked to two men that had come down from Memphis through the Arkansas flood country. They described conditions there as being relatively the same as they are here. No better--no worse. Nowhere has the water begun to recede South of Memphis.*

*In Greenville they have had the levee divided up into numbered precincts for many weeks past to facilitate handling of the refuges--various leaders have been assigned to each precinct including a doctor to guard against contraction and spread of disease and to see that as sanitary conditions as are possible are maintained. Recently they have resorted to the inoculation of the refugee’s against certain contagious maladies.*

*While visiting there upon the levee I heard this story. It was told to me by Mr. Ireland, who during the first terrible days was conspicuous for the heroic services he rendered in rescue work and who is now in charge of one of the levee divisions harboring refugees.*

*Authorities were busy, he said, vaccinating the people in one of the precincts--an old negro woman wandered from the area to which she had been assigned over into that in which they were vaccinating. “You can’t get yours here Aunty” she was told by someone. “You’ll have to get vaccinated in your own precinct.”*

*“Whar do white folks git vassinated?” she demanded*

*“Oh” said the worker with a grin “They get vaccinated*

*in the arm”.*

*“Humph” grumbled the old woman moving disgustedly away--*

*“Now ‘aint dat sumpthin’ white folks git dey vassination*

*In the de arm but niggers gotto get der’s in de pre--sink,*

*Pre-Sink.”*

*June 28--*

*And as the water at last is down and we come today to a city from which seemingly have been removed every vestige of the late departed tragedy. In gala attire this morning we find the erst-while water hidden streets of Greenville. The spirit of carnival over all. No water evident anywhere now except over the levee upon the river side--not even the traces of a lurking tear upon any of the faces. For today Greenville has remembered well their obligations as host to the visiting delegates of the American Legion that are holding their annual convention here--gathering from all parts of the state. Host, too, to the greatest band of notables that have ever gathered from throughout the nation to ride upon her thoroughfares and see her trees--the trees of Greenville--a source of pride to natives throughout the Delta--worthy ornaments of their “Queen City” growing more lovely with the years.*

*High above the visitors heads there stands the gracefully lettered sign proclaiming that Greenville today will honor in the spirit with which she receives her distinguished guests the traditions of her queenly title. There are other signs to place beside this to show that the homing bank of refugee hosts have not lost their sense of humor--signs that read “ARE WE DOWN-HEARTED??--HELL NO” and the laughter shows it.*

*From all over the Delta and many parts of the South have gathered the men who have interested themselves in the work that is ahead--the ultimate completion of the task that will mean prevention of a repetition of the South’s greatest disaster and bring joy to the hearts of the people of the Earth’s richest valley. Local men who have already devoted the best years of living to the attempt to accomplish that colossal engineering feat are here practically to a man, men like Leroy Percy and his son- Walter Sillers Sr. and Walter Sillers, Jr., Alf Stone--Will Whittington and the son of Ben Humphreys and others. Engineers like Charlie Allen and Seguine Allen who have given their lives to the work and who will carry on to the end. Truly the scene of the immediate passing of the flood water from Greenville focuses the eyes of much of the nation upon Greenville with happier effect than has ever been experienced before.*

*The closing scene takes place most appropriately across the levee upon the municipal concrete wharf. Several huge steel barges form a speaker’s stand moored there close beside the concrete’s sloping end. They are beautifully decorated and there standing above the waters of the river--(safely above them) we listen to the words of the high representatives of the great government upon whom we rely for continuing help so that there will come the mighty resources of the nation to make our possessions and our lives safe also from the river. It is a stupendous task-crucial and momentous--but the spirit of the speakers is cheerful and friendly to show that with the realization of the enormity of the work ahead we can move with the spirit to look up and laugh and lift through all difficulties.*

*I select parts of Will Percy’s--(Flood Chairman for our area) part of his introduction of Vice President Dawes as best exhibiting the spirit of good humor with which the people of Greenville and the Delta faced this crisis through as he said, “I first met our distinguished guest while serving as an humble Lieutenant in France. Someway it was conveyed to him that I was a linguist and could speak French. But when his summons came for me to appear before him I did not know what were the General’s impressions of me nor why I was wanted. I reached the high official presence completely perplexed and more than a little anxious. As soon as I was ushered in I started saluting in nervous haste, my knees much more prepared to go through the motions of ‘Home sweet Home’ than my trembling lips were prepared to utter any of the General’s needed French. He was sitting there with his feet propped up on a littered desk--his collar band open in a very unmilitary fashion and turned and snapped at me “For God’s sake Lieutenant stop that confounded saluting and be still--all this military cat and conniption humbug makes me nervous. What are you doing here anyway? “S-S-Sir,” I stammered “You sent for me”--“Well” he growled, “What did I want with you?” “Sir, that’s what I came to find out?”*

*“And so from that scene I gather the courage now to introduce this very distinguished city today from many parts of the South and America not as one of our commissioned officers overseas whose work helped materially to shorten and to end the tragic world war--not yet as one of this country’s greatest bankers and philanthropists, nor even as the holder of the lofty office which he occupies today--that of Vice President of the United States--no not these things--I prefer to introduce him to you instead simply as you know and love him “HELL AND MARIO DAWES”.*

*And I wish to select for the last thing that is put in this flood account of the greatest river disaster in the history of the entire Mississippi Valley and extract from the welcoming address with which Ray Toombs greeted the delegates of the American Legion convention earlier in the morning in the theatre uptown as best exhibiting the courage that was shown by the flood stricken sufferers of the Delta when he said--“After the greatest flood on record--after we had gathered up the remnants of the things that the catastrophe had left us we had not forgotten that months before this tragedy struck you members of the Legion throughout the state had decided upon Greenville for your convention city of this year. And so we sent out to you this renewed invitation--“GREENVILLE STILL WANTS THE AMERICAN LEGION”--and when your thrilling and inspiring answer came back in a short time--saying “AND THE AMERICAN STILL WANTS GREENVILLE”--we knew that this convention would be turned into a memorable occasion in spite of regardless of any obstacles.*

*“And so we welcome you today in a spirit of comradeship and fellowship to Greenville and the Delta--a section risen lately from the destitution of it’s most tragic months to hold up it’s head and smile with you and look forward to brighter, happier days ahead. Greenville and the Delta--a land toward which those of us standing on the threshold of life look upon still as the promise land for the fulfillment of their youthful hopes and dreams--still fraught with limitless possibilities--and a land to which those of us standing upon the rim of the fading day looking toward life’s sunset turn again with renewed consecration and devotion--Greenville and the Delta--God’s shadow-land--redolent with recollections of scenes that will never die because they cluster about things immortal.*

*“Inspired here today by your cheerful presence among us and by the thought that after the costliest of all national disaster we have drawn from out the boundless deep the courage to turn home once more to face the future undismayed and unafraid--Greenville and the Delta bids you welcome and takes you to her heart.”*

*Written by Fred Chaney[[8]](#endnote-8)*

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1. “The 1927 Great Mississippi Flood: 80-Year Retrospective” pg. 7, RMS Special Report 2007. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Levee Break, The 1927 Mississippi River Flood, Greenville/Washington County Convention & Visitors Bureau [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Fred Chaney, “*The Underworld of the Soul,”* pgs.8-11, unpublished manuscript, Fred Chaney Papers, Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDAH). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Brodie Crump, “Mostly Old Stuff,” *Delta Democrat-Times*, May 19, 1947. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Wade Frame, Personal Interview, September 11, 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Helen Pilkinton, Personal Interview, September 19, 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Donnis Chaney Huckabee, Personal Interview, October 2, 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Fred Chaney, “A Refugee’s Story,” Unpublished Manuscript, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)