

**Spring 1991 , Stream of History, pages 2 -9  
Jackson County Historical Society.**

**Plucky Newport by Clare P. Dowell**

(Editor's Note: Clare Phillips Dowell recently celebrated her 80th birthday at a party in Little Rock. She was born and raised in Newport, but after her marriage to Walter A Dowell, Jr., moved to Walnut Ridge where she lived much of her adult life before moving to Texarkana, Arkansas, where she and Mr. Dowell now live. Readers may remember the series of eight articles "What it Was Like: Newport, Arkansas- Not So Long Ago" by her brother, Admiral Neill Phillips, Stream of History, Vol X, No 3 to Vol XII, no, 2 July 1972 -April 1974.)

There are not a whole lot of us left who remember the floods in Newport in 1915 and 1916, and the fire in 1926. I have no recollection of the 1915 flood, but I do recall rather clearly the flood that inundated Newport in the summer of 1916.

After several days of torrential rains, it became apparent that the frantic effort of the able-bodied men and big boys who piled sand bags at every weak spot of the levee would be to no avail. On a hot day in August, the levee gave way and water surged into our little, low, flat town.

People who had two-story houses or attics had put things on trestles and tables and carried things into their attics and had done what they could to get ready, but those who lived in one-story houses that did not have high foundations had to look elsewhere for a place to live.

Our house sat on the corner of northeast Third and Pine streets. It had been built in the 1890s, and true to that era, was built on a high foundation with two stories and an attic. There were a number of dwellings in town that sat high above the ground, and it was to these that people fled.

I remember on that hot August day standing on our front porch with my 14 year old brother, Neill , and my mother and father. We saw a boat being paddled down Third Street. My father called out, "Where are y'all going? Where y'all headed?"

The man paddling the boat replied that they were going to a house on Pine and Rammel. Dad hollered back, "They're all filled up. Come on in here. We have plenty of room."

With that, the boat made a smart right turn between the iron gate posts of the fence of our front yard and glided up to the porch and out stepped, **Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Bowie and their children, Buddy who was about my age, 5, and Happy who was a year or two older.** Then the House Party began.

Our cook, Mary Green and her husband, D. lived on the place, but their little house sat almost on the ground. My father had Mary and D. bring their bed and personal possessions into our screened-in porch. With the addition of the Bowies, there were six adults, a teenager, a first grader and two pre-schoolers in the house. Mary Green was a wonderful cook. We kept chickens and a cow. We had probably been eating chicken for two or three days waiting for the flood to come. We didn't have the wonderful refrigeration then that we have now, and when the flood came we didn't have any ice at all. They took the cow to the farm and what chickens they thought we could eat were cooked or given away.

In our kitchen, we had a great big wood range like everybody had. It wasn't used much in the hot summer except on Saturday, when cakes, pies and bread were baked. Up in the corner of our kitchen, we had a kerosene (coal oil) stove. It smelled so bad when it burned, but it was a godsend in the flood. With Mr. Bowie's provender and Mary's skill at cooking, I'm sure that we ate better than anybody else in town.

The Bowies were so grateful to my family for taking them in that every morning D. Green would get in the big boat and paddle Mr. Bowie down to his store. They would go up Third Street to Main and turn left to go down to Front Street where Mr. Bowie's grocery store was located. I remember the plate glass window in front that said, "**A. Bowie, Groceries**". The men would check on things in the store and then load up the boat with anything edible that the water had not ruined.

My parents checked on other people to see how they were faring. Two hotels, the Columbia and the Hazel, both had upper stories. We learned that people were camping out and making do the best they could in those places, but I must say that at 817 northeast Third, we had it pretty good.

We little kids had a grand time. We were allowed to go in “swimmin’” as we called it on the days when the gate posts were about a foot out of the water, which meant we were probably in just about a foot of water. I think my poor brother was in charge. I know he hate that.

I don’t really remember exactly, but I think the water stayed in town three or four days, and then it began seeping back out. The clean-up was terrible. I don’t remember seeing anything ghoulish at all, but there were tales whispered around about seet dead animals floating down the street. I don’t think malaria was any worse that summer than it was other yeaars. We were all used to it. We didn’t like it, but we were used to it. As far as I know, there was no outbreak of typhoid or any sickness connected with the flood, but don’t know why. Good hygiene and sanitation must have been almost no-existent judged by our standards today.

As far as the little Bowie kids and I were concerned, we didn’t remember anything unpleasant about the floods. In fact, that winter when the levee was again threatened, my father sent mother and brother and Mary Green and me to my grandmother’s in Bateville. I was furious at having to miss all the fun. I was somewhat mollified when the levee held and I didn’t have to miss another House Party. Of course, there were manifold hardships of the mid-summer flood, but had Newport been flooded in cold weather, the suffering would have been far worse. I am sure that if that had happened, the people of Newport would have coped just like they did in the hot summer.

Just 10 years later, disaster struck Newport again. The first day of March 1926 was sunny and fairly mild, but a typical March wind was gusting. School had just taken up after the noon recess when the fire alarm sounded. The old Walnut Street School was just two blocks from the fire station at Walnut and Second. We could hear the siren and see the truck (if you hung out of the window far enough) as it rounded the corner from the fire station and then to Third Street where the library is now.

We hung out the windows watching and saw billows of black smoke. I heard one of the bos say, “Clar, it looks like it could be your house.” I just tore out, school or no school. I must say, I had plenty of company running the five blocks toward my house. My cousins, the Wilmans, Macks, Parishes, Hutsons, Watson, Gegorys, and other friends and neighbors who lived in that area, were all with me running pell-mell in the direction of what had become great flames and smoke.

By the time I reached my house, there was a rosy haze over everything. The air was smoky pink, and bits of charred paper and trash were blowing through the air. Our house was not on fire, but it was obvious it would soon be caught up in the flames. Mother was in the dining room piling silver and china in a clothes basket. She told me to go upstairs and get my clothes. On that day a carpenter was building a closet in my room. My clothes had been kept in what then was called a “wardrobe”. I hated it. Today that “wardrobe” would be called an “armoire” and would be highly desirable. I would give anything to have it now, but I hated it then. The contents of the wardrobe had been piled onto the bed. The nice carpenter just tied the four corners of the counter pane and trotted off downstairs with his pack on his back.

I was proof of that theory about people choosing the most ridiculous, unimportant things to save in the panic of a fire and leaving valuable behind. I had two party dresses, both carefully placed in a bureau drawer in the guest room all wrapped in tissue paper. I remember racing in there and looking at those dresses and thinking, “Oh, I just must save something more important than this. This is too frivolous.” I think I even shut the drawer!

One dress, a green taffeta, had been my Christmas party dress. The other was a pink chiffon, simple and demure with its only trimming a pink satin rose at the waist with a long green satin stem and leaves trailing the length of the skirt. I thought it was the prettiest dress I had ever seen, or ever had, and I was keeping it to wear to the most important dance we had that spring. Whoever that dance came, I was ready with my new dress.

Those who were not girls in Newport, Arkansas, in the ‘20s and ‘30s cannot appreciate the importance of this dress. Little Rock girls could attend their first Boathouse Dance and St. Louis girls were presented at the Veiled Prophet’s Ball. Newport girls had their first dress from the Eva Graham Shop and the pink chiffon dress was mine.

I dashed downstairs empty-handed, I think, and helped mother and the nice carpenter load up the car. Mother

and I drove out to east Newport to an acquaintance's house, unloaded, and headed back. We had to stop two blocks from our house because of the fire. We stood at the corner of Elm and Third and cried as we watched our dear old house engulfed in flames.

Fire trucks and able-bodied men and boys came from several neighboring towns to help the local people, but there just wasn't much they could do. The city of Little Rock actually sent a fire truck on a railroad flat car, because that was quicker than it could be driven over graveled two lane Highway 67. My uncle, R.D. Wilmans, brought in a crew from his Diaz farm and put them on the roof of his house with hoses and wet blankets and managed to put out fires as they started. My cousin, Jimmy Wilmans, related this in his memoirs (Stream of History, Vol XXIV, No 1, Summer 1987).

Most of the other dwellings in that area were completely destroyed. My father and others were able to bring out a good deal from our house and from other houses, but there was no safe place to put things. We were told of mother's baby grand piano, propped up on the leg that was broken off in the moving, burning away in my Aunt Jo Bailey's yard across the street.

By early dusk, the fire had died down. A few charred telephone poles, chimneys, pile of rubble, and here and there a partial wall of a building, were all that were standing. I remember driving around in the dusk and looking at it all. I think it was pretty well conceded that the fire probably started at the handle factory across the railroad track. It then quickly spread to the residential area.

I think the fire's boundaries were roughly Front Street between Elm and Ash and then over to Fourth to the bridge, then it skipped over several blocks and started again in a sort of diagonal way over to Fifth and Walnut and down to Park Place.

We high schoolers had the best time that summer. It seems strange, but there was sort of a carnival spirit among us teenagers. It was a bit of a status thing. Those burned out assumed a rather superior attitude and an aura, we thought. Everyone had a hair-raising tale to tell, and who was to disprove it?

Out poor, beleaguered parents were so preoccupied and concerned with securing living accommodations and making plans for the future that discipline and supervision were delightfully lax for several weeks. My father and Alcorn Ferguson had Phillips and Ferguson Insurance Agency. They were absolutely covered up with claims that summer. He and Mother were so busy with plans for building back on our corner of Third and Pine that they left me on my own for those few weeks that spring. My father was able to rent a nice little furnished house on Newport Avenue, but I think they were probably vastly relieved when I was eager to go back to Camp Joyzelle in Monte Ne, Arkansas for 10 weeks.

These were two calamities that I lived through and remember, but both times the little town came back stronger and better than before. Charlie Burkett, Lockwood Burkett's brother, was a nice fellow loved and admired by everybody. After the fire, he coined the phrase, "Plucky Newport". It caught on and there were even billboards at the edge of town saying, "Entering Plucky Newport".

It might have been corny, and people from some neighboring towns said it tongue-in-cheek, but we who were lucky enough to live there knew it described a special little town and its special people.

Clipping from a 1926 Newport newspaper-  
In Society

Miss Clare Phillips was heartily welcomed home last night on her return from Camp Joyzelle. As soon as the word went forth, "Clare is here", a jolly crowd of the boys and girls of her school set out speeding to the home of her parents, Mr. and Mrs. S.R. Phillips, on Newport avenue, where they enjoyed an informal dance until midnight.

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**See Also Stream of History, April 1969. "Overflow!" by Lady Elizabeth Luker.**

Correct dates of the two floods were August 1915 and February 1916.

In August 1915, Cora Bowie was 6-7 months pregnant with Billy who was born in November 1915. Happy died a year later in November 1916. Buddy was 5 on Sept 3, 1915.

#### Batesville Historic Crests

- (1) 31.90 ft on 02/01/1916
- (2) 31.60 ft on 08/22/1915
- (3) 31.40 ft on 04/15/1927
- (4) 29.43 ft on 04/16/1945
- (5) 29.27 ft on 12/03/1982
- (6) 28.01 ft on 05/12/1943
- (7) 27.40 ft on 02/19/1938
- (8) 27.00 ft on 03/13/1935
- (9) 26.96 ft on 03/20/2008
- (10) 26.40 ft on 04/12/2008

31.9 Flood of record, February 1916 the river crested at 43.8 feet at the Lock 1 staff gage which is equivalent to a 31.9 foot crest at the newer gage on the U.S. Highway 167 Bridge. Life threatening situation. Much of the flood plain will be impacted. There will be numerous road closures, flooded homes, and evacuations will be needed. Levee openings should be closed.

See also: <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=5148>

#### Historic Arkansas Floods

The following table indicates historic flood years on Arkansas's seven largest rivers using USGS data from *Magnitude and Frequency of Floods in Arkansas* (1995). The data for these rivers was reprinted from an earlier report and ended with years 1980–1984. Stage levels and flows from numerous gauging stations were compared. In most cases, only floods from about two feet over bank full or higher were included. The number of gauge stations on a river and their dates of record varied. In some years, floods occurred only at one station, while in other years, flooding occurred at all stations on a given river.

**Key:** \* denotes significant flood; † denotes beginning year of data; ‡ denotes ending year of data