

# Memories of floods past

By Debra Jensen-De Hart Features Editor | Posted: Thursday, April 18, 2013 4:00 pm

It has been said that history repeats itself.

So, is that also true of severe weather problems?

That might depend on whether you live in a city with a river running through it and an area flush with streams and creeks.

Such as Beloit and vicinity.

Also coming into play is the amount of snow over the winter as it melts with the yearly thaw followed by spring rains.

Some years, all the elements fall into place in such a way that disaster strikes.

The question is, could this year be a repeat of 2008, or even 1973?

April 21 marks the 40th anniversary of the flood many may still remember in 1973.

That year it was Turtle Creek that overflowed its banks, spreading muddy waters along Gardner Street in South Beloit and Shirland Avenue, State Street and Broad Street in downtown Beloit and beyond. The heavy rains came over Easter weekend pounding an already saturated ground. Runoff water from hundreds of square miles to the Stateline Area caused Turtle Creek to overflow also impacting South Beloit, Shopiere and more, according to Beloit Daily News archives.

Factories, homes and the former Holiday Inn on Gardner Street were hard hit as the creek rose to nine feet high, according to the archives.

Tragedy occurred when Terry Miller, 20, of Roscoe, drowned as his car was swept from the Love Road bridge when the dam at Ledges Country Club burst.

Hardest hit downtown was Freeman Shoe Company. Losses to the company were estimated at more than \$2 million to equipment and 150,000 new pairs of shoes when the water rushed in to the facility basement on Shirland Avenue. The Holiday Inn reported more than \$100,000 in damages.

Residential areas with the most severe damage included Athletic Avenue in Beloit to Washington Street in South Beloit and the Canterbury Woods neighborhood near Turtle Creek in Beloit.

Roger Helser, now of Janesville, was the police chief at the time (1972-1977).

“Basically, that was totally unexpected,” he said recently of the flood.

Some of the downtown businesses had been accustomed to getting water in their basements when the river rose, but they weren't used to what happened that weekend.

"There was just so much water," he said.

The police department was on duty helping with safety measures, traffic control and more.

"There also was a danger in terms of fire. The water brought oil to the surface from the concrete and there was potential for fire," he said.

At that time, the police department was located in its former location on West Grand Avenue on higher ground and was not impacted.

"Worst hit was Freeman's," he said.

The water that filled downtown streets did not recede for a while and that meant officers needed to be on patrol.

"We had to help people get in and out of property and protect property against looting," he said.

Helser also said the department had just obtained a new video camera and he took footage of the flood in Beloit and in the surrounding areas.

On State Street, the son of a business owner, who became the owner himself, also remembered the flood of 1973.

John Stanton was in his early 20s at the time and was working at the arboretum in Madison. But he came home to help out at the store when the flood waters washed past Stanton Shoes.

The water came up to the store fronts along the street, but no inventory was ruined at Stanton's. An old Daily News photo on a bulletin board in the store shows father and son standing next to each other in front of the store with the water nearby.

Nancy Spelius, owner of Beloit Floral, now on Cranston Road, also remembers that weekend.

At that time, Beloit Floral also was located on State Street, a few doors down from Stanton's.

"I remember the water coming right up to the front door," Spelius said.

"Oh, it was scary, it was a ways from where it started," she said of the flow of water from the creek to several blocks away downtown.

In June of 2008, threats of flooding were again real for Beloit and the area.

This time, it was the Rock River being watched.

And those located near the river scrambled to fill or obtain sandbags — 40,000 in all for Beloit and thousands more for other areas of Rock County.

Stanton said he and his wife stacked sandbags in the outer front and rear of the store and moved some of the inventory from inside the place. But there was no damage done, he said.

The lagoon area of Riverside Park was impacted and about 60 homes in Rock County were damaged.

In 2008, the only downtown Beloit building to experience damage, however, was the U.S. Post Office, located just yards from the water.

Since then, precautions have been taken to protect the post office and more along the Rock River.

A seawall has been constructed, said Andy Hill, engineer with the City of Beloit.

The seawall is located behind the post office and runs along the river bank up into Riverside Park.

It not only will help keep river water at bay and out of buildings, it will help stop erosion, Hill said.

“More soil stabilization efforts also will be undertaken between Turtle Island in Riverside park and the Hendricks Memorial Bridge,” he said.

He designed the wall as part of the package of repairs and replacements paid for by the federal government after the 2008 flood that hit Rock County.

As this is written, the water level of Rock River is again under watch as more rain continues to be forecast for area.

*While the floods of 1973 and 2008 may still be in the minds of Beloit residents, they were far from the first such incidents in the river city.*

*According to Beloit Daily News archives, flood waters flowed through the city many times between 1844 and 1973.*

*Those years include: 1844, 1849, 1880, 1908, 1916, 1918, 1929, 1937, 1938, 1943 and 1959.*

---