

J. S. MURRAY
360 Washington St. S. E.
Salem, Oregon 97302
26-22

TRUE STORY OF A FLOOD
AS TOLD BY MARY HIGLEY HOPKINS, WHO WAS
BORN NEAR OREGON CITY, OREGON, JUNE
15, 1853
As told to her daughter, Grace

In the fall of the year 1861, when I was a small child, eight years of age, I lived in the old historic town of Champoeg, Oregon. This little town was situated on the banks of the beautiful Willamette River, and boasted of having three stores, which contained everything from groceries to hardware. In the back were piled shingles that were hand-made, which farmers had brought in and exchanged for provisions. Each store contained a small assortment of medicine such as vinegar-bitters, cherry pectoral, castor oil and pain killers.

There wasn't any real post office, the mail being brought in on a steam-boat which came in every other day. The mail was then taken to one of the stores, and the merchant, as he opened the pouch, would call out the names he read on the envelopes, and from the crowd, which quickly had gathered, the owner would come forward to receive his mail. Really in those days, it was quite an event to receive a letter from back east, for it took many months for a letter to come so far. We had no railroads in Oregon at that time. Our furniture was mostly home-made, although many things were shipped to us around "The Horn", or brought by emigrants who had crossed the plains.

My father (Harvey Higley) was proprietor of one of the stores I have mentioned. It was the tallest building and the newest of the business houses. In the rooms above the store was the Free Masons' Hall. Our home was several blocks from the store. Uncle (George Smith) lived upon a high bluff, the nearest to any one else to the river. Often we children would go there to play. Aunt Lizzie (Smith) would always caution us never to go too near the edge or we would roll over the bluff and get drowned.

One day father came home to dinner wearing a very serious look and I heard him say to my mother: "The river is rising faster than I like to see. It may go over the banks but hardly think it will do any material damage though". After dinner he went back to the store. My brother (Martin), sisters (Amanda, and Willamina) and I went to school which was taught by Mr. King. Early in the afternoon, our attention was attracted by hearing some small pigs squealing. Looking out the window, we saw puddles of water on the ground. A farmer was taking his pigs from a pen that was now under water. Our teacher, Mr. King, stood looking out of the window for several minutes, wearing a look of uneasiness upon his face, then turned and spoke to his pupils: "Children" he said, "get your wraps; school is dismissed. Now I want you to go right home and don't you loiter on the way."

When we arrived home, mother was gazing out of a window anxiously trying to keep her tears from falling. The tiny sack she was making for baby brother she hurriedly cast aside in her anxiety. When we saw her so distressed it began to dawn upon our small minds that something of an unusual nature was about to happen. Not long after this father walked in ordering mother and the older children to put everything that was on the floor up higher, as the river was rising very fast now and it might possibly come over the threshold.

Then back to the store he hurried. Mother had six or seven trunks which she had brought across the plains with her. These trunks standing on the floor lined against the wall of her large bedroom. Upon chairs we piled the trunks. Valances of the four posters were thrown back over the bed, also clothes that were hanging low. There were only two baby buggies in town, which were two-wheeled, long tongue affairs. A family by the name of Bethman had one, and mother the other, which we were very proud of indeed. We children hoisted this buggy upon the bed too, as it must be saved by all means. Mother meantime was taking care of things in the kitchen. The last thing I remember doing before we left the house was to climb upon mother's bed and hang my little old ring, the only piece of jewelery I possessed, on a nail. I don't know why I did this, unless in my excitement, I thought in so doing, I was saving a priceless possession. I never saw my little ring again.

A few minutes later father returned and said: "Uncle George's house has gone over the bluff into the river. Get the children ready dear and bring them to the store, as it is much larger and stronger than any of the others in town. Just about an hour before dark mother took us to the store. Upon our arrival there, father bade us to stay down stairs until he had put away a few things which belonged to the Free Masons, then we were permitted to go up. Mother had brought a small feather tick with her from home. This she told brother to carry up-stairs for the young children to lie on in case we were compelled to stay there all night. Up to this time no one seemed to think the flood would prove to be any ways serious. In a short time a few more of the towns-people came up and joined us. Later on others came untill all the chairs in the hall were filled with women and children, the men remaining down stairs to watch developments.

It began to grow dark and we heard some one from below say in a voice of horror that the porch had been swept away by the flood and that the water was creeping in. This struck terror to the souls of the now badly frightened women. Some were wringing their hands. Some cried and gathered young babes closer to their anguished hearts. The big building began to rock adding greatly to our terror. Some men started off to get canoes while others began to climb the stairs to get their feet out of the water, which was rising swiftly. Also they called to us words of kindly encouragement that all would be well and to try and keep a brave heart and that "we would get you out of the room. But how long the time seemed until the canoes came to our rescue. At last when they came, the orders were for only the women and children to climb in first. The building was now aloft. After we were taken in we struck for a higher place; to a hill where a family by the name of Newell lived who took us in. The men returned with the boats after more people until all had been rescued. We stayed at Newell's the rest of the night. Mrs. Newell told mother to take us up stairs to bed, as she could make room up there for the younger children. We were still greatly excited and preferred staying down by the glowing fire place and listen to the grown-up people talk which seemed very cheerful after our recent excitement. For awhile we lingered by the windows watching houses, still with lights burning in them floating slowly off down the river. We could hear people shouting as they passed by. The baker and his helper had stayed a little too long in the very small building which was called a bakery and were compelled to crawl out of the roof, and in their distress carried some kind of a light with them. Perhaps it was a lantern. This building turned completely around and then floated down the river. Several years later we heard that both men were rescued.

The next morning Mrs. Newell and daughter baked many pans of biscuits and made a quantity of coffee, and when this was ready we stood around a long table and ate our breakfast.

We were now homeless as the flood had swept it away, and we never saw it again, but the store building was found later one mile from where it stood, lodged in among hazel nut bushes. Immediately after breakfast, the men folks started out to find some place to take their families. A family by the name of Smith agreed to take us in until father could make other arrangements. Mr. Smith came back with father to where we were, and took us back to his farm in a lumber wagon, where we stayed for several days, till father could get word to an old bachelor friend, Martin James, who lived upon the red hills, not far from Champoeg.

Every morning while we were at Mr. Smith's, father would go back to where the town once stood and try and locate the place where his store used to be, as he had buried his money in the ground, in an old wood shed, back of the building, but it proved a hopeless quest as he never was able to find one cent of his money. The flood had washed out great holes there in the ground, and I suppose taking everything with it.

In those days there were no banks, and money in any great amount was usually buried in the ground, or hidden out somewhere. White men and red men were seen fishing in the muddy, washed out holes with long sticks which had hooks on the end of them, fishing around to see what they could find.

In a few days the river went down so we could cross it. Father sent word to his friend, Martin James, of our distress. Word came back to get a canoe and row across and he would meet us with a wagon and team on the other side of the river.

At last father located his store building and thought it best to stay one night in the building and gather up what we could that the flood had left us, so in the afternoon we were taken to the store building. We found a chicken coop containing a few chickens; also an apple house well stocked with apples which had drifted near the building. Needless to say that we dined on chickens and apples. All we found left in the store was two bolts of goods--one of toweling the other a bolt of the ugliest looking plaid woolen goods that you ever laid your eyes on. Near the corner a dead calf was lying. This was all we found at the store. Whether the half-breed indians had looted the place or the goods and things on the shelves, or if they had been washed away by the flood, we never knew. We passed a most cold and miserable night on the floor of the Free Masons' hall. We had a blanket spread down to lie on but nothing to cover us but the clothes we were wearing. The feather tick mother had brought from home was found just where she had left it before we hurried away from the flood. On the feather tick the children were made more comfortable.

In a canoe the next day, we crossed the river and found Martin James with his team waiting for us as he had previously promised. We clamored into the lumber wagon and soon were on our way to the farm. We saw many dead sheep lying by the wayside, which had perished during the flood. It was very rough traveling as the ground was soft and miry. The wagon wheels would not go to the hubs in some places. At last we reached the small farm house where we made our home until after Christmas. Every day while we were here father and Mr. James would go back to where Champoeg used to be to hunt for father's money or find some trace of our dwelling house, but as I said before, it was a hopeless quest.