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A flood of remembrances: Johnstown, Pa., floats new attractions to lure tourists

June 10, 2008 12:00 AM



By Diane Stoneback The Morning Call (Allentown, Pa.)

JOHNSTOWN, Pa. -- Row after row of unmarked graves in Johnstown's Grandview Cemetery -- more than 700 -- are stark testimony to one of the most darkly ironic moments in American history.

The unidentified people buried here, and the remainder of the 2,209 victims who perished in the Johnstown Flood of May 31, 1889, spent their last full day on Earth observing Memorial Day.

What happened in Johnstown 119 years ago still is the nation's worst dam disaster and was the largest single day's loss of civilian life until the tragedy of Sept. 11, 2001.

When news of the devastation caused by a 40-foot-high wall of water roaring through the city first reached the outside world, the headlines captured worldwide attention.

Today, the stories of that tragedy, told in-depth by the Johnstown Flood National Memorial and the Johnstown Flood Museum, still are the "hooks" that draw visitors to Johnstown, a town of 24,000 that's about 90 minutes southeast of Pittsburgh.

They offer dramatic stories of havoc, human suffering and heroism caused by the flood, of the greed and callousness that helped pave the way for the South Fork Dam break and the careless development that would add to the speed of the water thundering toward the city that day.

But there's much more to experience in Johnstown. Explore beyond the basic "flood" attractions and you'll find both harsh and heartwarming stories about the trials European immigrants faced when they flocked here to make new lives. In fact, give it some thought and you'll realize visiting Johnstown is a memorable way to learn more about this country's industrial revolution and the people who fed its fires.

The American Red Cross' peacetime relief efforts in Johnstown really helped launch it as a key provider of assistance for communities and their citizens. Clara Barton, its 67-year-old founder, spent nearly five months in town directing the work of caring for victims and housing them in shelters.

You'll also find that a trip to Johnstown has the makings of an affordable, friendly and educational family vacation where an overnight stay won't break the budget, parking the car for an hour costs a

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buck and admission costs for its key attractions total \$10 per adult and \$4 or less for children, depending on their ages.

Even when you add in the cost of a round-trip ride on the Inclined Plane (a turn-of-the-century, elevator-style attraction that moves people and vehicles up and down the very steep Yoder Hill), the adult total cost is \$14 and the kid price is \$12.50 or less (depending on their age).

Part of Johnstown's comeback -- after the floods that earned it the moniker of "The Flood City" and its other major disaster, which was the closing of the Bethlehem Steel mills -- is based on tourism. New attractions are being added and attractive hotel packages have been created to draw visitors to the city that, admittedly, still shows ample reddish-brown traces of its rust-belt heritage.

The city's Heritage Discovery Center provides a fascinating look at the lives and backgrounds of the European immigrants who arrived at Johnstown's railroad station in search of the American dream. It's opening two new attractions this summer.

The first is the "Mystery of Steel" exhibit, which opens Saturday, with a three-floor gallery of photos. They provide a detailed picture of the industry that made and shaped Johnstown from the beginnings of the Cambria Iron Co. in 1852 through 1992 when Bethlehem Steel Corp. closed the Johnstown plants. By the end of 2008, a theater also will open at the base of the three-story gallery, enabling visitors to "feel the heat" and hear the sounds inside the steel mills.

The second is the new Children's Museum, with many hands-on experiences for children ages 3 to 10. Expected to open in late July or early August, the museum will enable children to splash in water while learning how to build a dam and get the sensations of venturing inside a steel mill and a coal mine like those riddling the Johnstown area.

But understanding all that has happened in Johnstown must begin with the most riveting segment of the town's history -- the worst of all its floods.

The May 31, 1889, flood tore through the Conemaugh Valley toward Johnstown with such force that it ripped trees out by their roots, obliterated and carried off entire villages and even lifted and carried massive train locomotives (weighing 170,000 pounds each) nearly a mile before dropping them and raging onward.

The logical starting point for a Johnstown visit is 14 miles upstream, at the Johnstown Flood National Memorial.

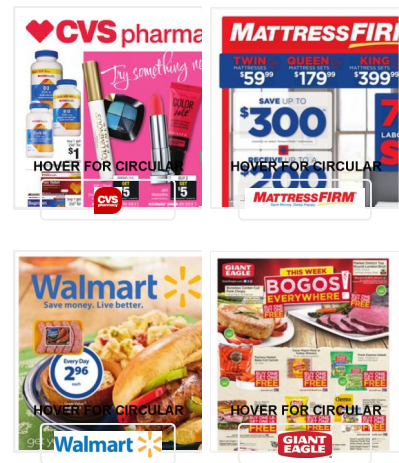
Here, you can see the remains of the South Fork Dam and walk out on portions of the earthen dam's north and south abutments, see traces of its spillway and scan bottomland that once was submerged beneath Lake Conemaugh. While standing next to the Elias Unger house on the memorial grounds, you can listen to a voice reading Unger's account of trying to save the dam in its final hours. He was then president of the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club, which owned the dam.

Inside the visitors' center, you'll see a mood-setting movie, "Black Friday," that's complete with the rumble of thunder and the sound of the torrential rains like those that drenched both South Fork and Johnstown on May 30 and 31.

Don't miss listening to the recorded, first-hand account of 92-year-old Dr. Victor Heiser. A sixteen-year-old when the flood struck, Heiser first saw the flood waters engulf and sweep his home away with his parents still in it. Then, he faced the waters himself as they smashed the barn sheltering him. Although he lost his parents, he survived by clinging to a section of the barn's roof as the waters roared onwards. The experience is all the more dramatic because you're listening while looking at a life-sized display showing his figure clinging to the roof section.

The streams and Lake Conemaugh (formed by the South Fork Dam) already were swollen from 11 days of rain that made May 1889 the wettest on record for the area. The lake's surface rose even

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- Working well
- Getting better
- Getting worse
- As flawed as always

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more overnight. By morning, the lake's level was nearly at the crest of the 72-foot high dam. Horrified, Unger and his crew of workmen feverishly worked to keep the water behind the dam.

Their last-ditch efforts included plowing the earth on top of the dam to raise its level, trying to dig another spillway to allow water to escape the dam gradually and plugging leaks breaking out all over the surface of the dam. But they could not compensate for past neglect and foolish changes made to the dam.

The visitor's center details the reasons for the dam's failure, including neglect by the fishing and hunting club, whose members included a rich consortium of Pittsburgh industrialists from Andrew Carnegie and Henry Clay Frick to Andrew Mellon.

Included in the fateful list of mistakes also are: lowering the level of the dam several feet so it was wide enough at the top to enable carriages of the rich Pittsburghers to pass one another as they crossed the dam; failing to repair an additional two-to-four-foot sag in the dam; building a fish trap across the spillway that became so clogged with storm debris that it could not function; never replacing the dam's original discharge pipes, which had been sold for scrap metal, and failing to maintain the stone "riprap" that covered the face of the dam.

In addition to the dam's basic problems, the area's hillsides had been stripped of forests that could have helped absorb excess rainwater that instead poured into the swollen lake, streams and rivers.

Finally, Johnstown's own industrialists unknowingly ensured that the force of flood waters striking the city would be greater because they narrowed the riverbeds leading into the city by using fill to create more room for buildings along the riverbanks.

Before leaving the area near the national memorial, drive to nearby St. Michael to see the massive three-story, 47-room clubhouse that housed members of the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club members when they retreated from Pittsburgh for rest, rejuvenation, sailing and fishing. Now owned by the National Park Service, the clubhouse is undergoing renovations and will be open sporadically during the summer, depending on the availability of park rangers.

Enter the next chapter of the May 31, 1889, drama by driving to the heart of downtown Johnstown for a walking tour of flood sites and to explore the Johnstown Flood Museum.

Collect directions for your walking tour at either the Flood Museum or Discovery Center and then take a look at buildings including: the First Methodist Episcopal Church (now the Franklin Street United Methodist Church), which withstood the flood and is credited with protecting several buildings near it from the flood wave; the John Ludwig House where Clara Barton stayed while directing Red Cross relief efforts; Alma Hall (then one of the city's tallest buildings) which sheltered 264 people who spent the night praying the building wouldn't collapse; and city hall, where an exterior wall shows the high water mark for the 1889 flood (21 feet) as well as those for the 1936 flood (17 feet) and the 1977 flood (8 feet).

Then, you can spend an afternoon in the Flood Museum, which occupies the building that once was the city's second library. The first library was washed away by the flood.

Devoted to telling the city's own stories of the disaster, the downtown flood museum orients its visitors with its Academy Award-winning "Johnstown Flood" film about the calamity. It also contains a fiber-optic relief map that dramatically illustrates the path of the flood waters as they raced through the Little Conemaugh River Valley toward Johnstown and then struck the city.

Lake Conemaugh's three miles of water first began pouring over the dam at 3:15 p.m. Within 40 minutes, the lake bed was completely drained. Twenty million tons of water surged down the valley toward Johnstown, which was 14 miles and 450 feet below the dam's elevation. Sometimes, the wall of water was as high as 70 feet to 75 feet when it backed up before breaking through obstructions.

When the wall of water actually hit Johnstown shortly after 4 p.m., it was 35 feet to 40 feet high.

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Although some flood waters followed the normal river channel, the rest left the riverbanks and smashed into the heart of the city. That central wave also crashed into the steep hillside above the Stony Creek River after its first strike. It created a backwash that wiped out most of what hadn't been destroyed by the waters' initial hit.

In all, four square miles in the city's center were nearly obliterated. The arches and pilings of the Pennsylvania Railroad's Stone Bridge, which held when struck by the flood waters, collected a 30-acre pileup of debris, including remnants of buildings, trees and barbed wire (from another of Johnstown's factories) as well as animals and flood victims, both dead and alive. An ensuing fire at the bridge added to the terror by burning to death many victims who were ensnared in the mass of barbed wire and other debris collected there.

The Flood Museum's display and collections humanize statistics like the fact that 99 entire families were lost, 396 children under the age of 10 died, 568 children lost one or both parents and 124 women and 198 men were widowed.

Besides standing before the museum's massive re-creation of a debris wall that's filled with a tangle of barbed wire, branches, doors, windows, tools, people's possessions and bodies, you can read the headlines and read excerpts of stories that ran in the nation's newspapers and magazines. You can also glimpse sheet music, poetry and books chronicling the flood.

But the museum also showcases personal effects that tell the most moving flood stories.

You'll see the jacket worn by 9-year-old Bertha Moyer, who was swept away by flood waters but escaped death by freeing herself from the debris at the Stone Bridge and climbing the hillside next to it. Her parents were killed after helping Bertha and her siblings climb through the roof of their home.

You'll see the calico quilt John Burns used like a rope to pull people from the flood waters.

You'll see the trousers worn by 5-year-old Charles Barley, the only child in his family to survive the disaster. His mother and four sisters drowned.

The collection continues to grow, especially now that a "treasure chest" of personal writings by one of the town's leading ministers has been found. They will further enhance the human stories symbolized by such simple effects as the ceramic pitcher that was all the Zimmerman family had left after losing their home, the key ring of switchboard operator Hettie Ogle, who perished, and a single bottle of harmless-looking 1889 floodwater.

FLOOD FACTS

The Johnstown flood of May 31, 1889, is remembered as the worst disaster by dam failure in American history.

It caused the greatest single-day civilian loss of life in the United States before Sept. 11, 2001.

2,209 people died in the Johnstown flood of 1889, including 99 entire families and 396 children.

1,600 homes were destroyed.

Four square miles of downtown Johnstown were destroyed.

The distance between the dam that failed and Johnstown was 14 miles.

When the dam gave way, 20 million tons of water (about the same amount that goes over Niagara Falls in 36 minutes) went roaring through a deep valley toward Johnstown.

When it struck the city, the great wave was between 35 and 40 feet high and was moving at 40 miles per hour.

The force of the flood swept several locomotives weighing 170,000 pounds as far as 4,800 feet.


Johnstown has suffered two other significant floods (in 1936 and 1977) as well as many other smaller ones.

(Source: Johnstown Area Heritage Association)

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