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Descriptive

Reading

ON

Johnstown Disaster

W. H. Rau
Illustrated

BY

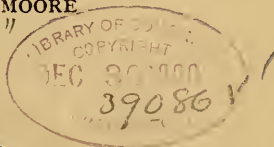
12 Lantern Slides

WILLIAM H. RAU
PHILADELPHIA
1890

A
DESCRIPTIVE READING
ON THE
JOHNSTOWN DISASTER

ILLUSTRATED BY TWELVE LANTERN
SLIDES

BY J. HAMPTON MOORE



WILLIAM H. RAU
PHILADELPHIA
1890

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ILLUSTRATIONS.

1. The Broken Dam, North, (Conemaugh Lake).
2. P. R. R. Bridge—Hunting for Bodies.
3. Main St., from Franklin Street ; Wreckage 40 feet high.
4. West End of Main street, showing Merchants' Hotel.
5. West End of Johnstown, showing the Morgue.
6. School House, Morgue and Wreckage.
7. Millville Morgue—Bringing in a Body.
8. Looking East, from School Morgue.
9. A Ruined Home.
10. Tree driven through House.
11. Wreckage, rear of Morrell Institute.
12. Relief Station, Johnstown Station, Pennsylvania Railroad.

JOHNSTOWN DISASTER.

Modern history presents no parallel for the awful calamity of the Conemaugh Valley. The great wave of May 31st, 1889, which swept out of existence hamlet after hamlet, and spread itself with terrific force over Johnstown—a thriving and populous manufacturing centre of Western Pennsylvania—horrified not only the people of this country, but of the civilized world. The sudden destruction of 5000 human lives, with the many millions they represented in homes, workshops and common property—the abrupt overthrow of an entire community with its life, its art and its ingenuity, right in our midst, shocked and stunned the people of this land, and thrilled their nobler impulses with commingled amazement and sympathy never experienced before. They stopped as of one accord, and from wonder at so unusual a demonstration of the power and force of nature, turned quickly to applying those blessings of relief and assistance which interested humanity ever vouchsafes the afflicted. Thus, there was presented to the world, first, a spectacle of death and distress of the greatest magnitude; and then, of the grandest benevolence ever witnessed in this land. In the annals of history this fearful disaster will correspond to the destruction of Herculaneum and Pompeii, but there will be no ruins to tell the story to the centuries to come. By the help of all the people and the determination of the survivors all vestiges of the flood are being removed. Again there

is life and thrift in the stricken valley, and a new city is building on the site of the ruined town. Men who come after us and compare the events of history will speak of the courage and energy of the American people ; and see in this event and its attendant circumstances, an illustration of human greatness in adversity, of which the ancient Romans might well have been proud. Fortunately for them, and for many of our own time, the camera of the photographer has preserved for all times, pictures of the flood—scenes of ruin and wreckage—now removed from sight forever.

1. The Broken Dam, North (Conemaugh Lake).

The flood was due to the bursting of the dam which confined the waters of the Conemaugh Lake in an area of about four square miles at the head of the valley, eleven miles above the ill-fated Johnstown. This lake was maintained for the pleasure of a number of wealthy Pittsburg gentlemen who constituted the South Fork Fishing Club and made their summer residences in the beautiful cottages and villas on the lake shore. The height of the dam was increased from time to time to extend the body of water ; and better preserve the fish that were maintained in it for the enjoyment of these sportsmen. The picture here presented represents a section of the broken dam showing in the foreground a part of the bed of the lake with nothing but a mountain stream coursing through it ; and the Conemaugh Valley sloping down towards Johnstown, in the distance. The tremendous pressure of water that broke through this insecure barrier, sweeping away whole towns in its path and finally covering Johnstown to a depth of thirty feet,

may be inferred partly from the gap here shown. The houses, trees, logs, railroad cars and human bodies picked up in the valley were carried into Johnstown and mixed up with the property and inhabitants of that place like so many sticks and feathers.

2. P. R. R. Bridge—Hunting for Bodies.—In about ten minutes the mighty wave which had rushed down the valley carrying everything before it with irresistible force, enveloped Johnstown completely in water, mud, sand and floating objects. So swiftly and suddenly did it come that all the people in the houses on the low ground were practically doomed. Frame, brick and stone structures, were picked up like chips of wood and hurled against each other with a power that quickly reduced them to fragments. Iron and stone tossed upon the waters like so much wood; and the foundations of the town were shifted like sand in the wind. But here the great wave divided and spent its force. The valley changed its course from West to North and the waters tearing across Johnstown, and rushing against the mountains scattered over the city, one half turning up the valley of the Stony Creek against the grade which eventually checked it, and the other pursuing its way down the valley of the Conemaugh through which all the water had to pass. In the pathway of these streams and of all the freight borne upon their angry waters, at the lower end of Johnstown, stood the new stone bridge of the Pennsylvania Railroad Company. This structure which helped to back the water over Johnstown, caught all the drifting objects that did not force their way over or around it, and when the waters subsided, fully fifteen acres of houses, cars, lumber,

iron and other material and human bodies rested compactly against it in the bed of the rivers. This picture was taken several days after the flood, at which time workmen had just begun to get the work of removing the drift fairly underway. It was estimated that 500 bodies were caught in this drift and either drowned, crushed or burned.

3. Main Street from Franklin Street; Wreckage Forty Feet High.—This was one of the sights to be met with on all sides after the flood. The pile of rubbish was deposited on the main street of Johnstown, and was held in place by the stout brick and stone buildings that escaped the direct force of the current. In this pile, which was forty feet high, there were not only human bodies, but household articles of every description, from the frying-pan to the family Bible. The Main street was lined with large stores and warehouses, like on any other business thoroughfare, but none of them escaped damage, and few remained on their own foundations. On these particular buildings many persons were saved, some flying to the roofs upon the suggestion of danger and others being taken on from buildings and timber as they floated by.

4. West End of Main Street, Showing Merchants' Hotel.—Here again is an illustration of the manner in which the rubbish settled after the water left it. The Merchants' Hotel is seen standing, but badly damaged and forming a barrier against which the drift rested. Many people were saved in this house. The Hurlburt House, another large Johnstown hotel, did not fare so well, being more directly in the way of the current. In it men, women and

children perished, being caught by water and drowned, or killed by flying material. A few fairly preserved houses are noticeable along the left-hand side of the Main street, but these were all inundated. The roof and upper story of a frame structure in the foreground shows a freak of the flood, this remnant of a once happy home being carried from its foundations, no one can tell where, and deposited where it is now seen. The transferring of housetops to all sections of the city, and in fact, for miles beyond it, was a conspicuous part of the flood's work. Few of them were delivered whole, however, and had to be destroyed to make room for the workmen.

5. West End of Johnstown, Showing the Morgue.—Johnstown is hemmed in by hills, and for a brief space, while the flood was at its height, those hills held the water over it like a lake. A fair sectional illustration of this is shown by the hills rising in the background in this picture. The water covered land, houses and people, and the hills held the water until the damage was done. Imagine water poured in upon a crowded amphitheatre, and you have an idea what the flood in Johnstown was like. The objects here shown settled where they are, after violent wrenching and tossing on terrific currents. The school-house in the distance was submerged, but held to its foundation. At the time this view was taken it was being used as a morgue. In the mud, in the foreground, what is left of a square piano is observed, and behind it beds and bedding are to be noticed, mixed up indiscriminately with logs, wagon wheels,

chairs and barrels. Thus the home and the workshop were brought to a common level.

6. School-house, Morgue and Wreckage.—Here is a closer view of the school-house morgue just referred to. The wreckage here consists of almost everything in the way of household goods that can be thought of. Many bodies are still under these ruins, wet and bleeding. As bodies were taken out, they were carried around to the morgue, stripped and washed and held for identification. Many of them were not recognizable because of the nature of the injuries, and they were buried as speedily as possible, to prevent infection, and to make room in the morgue for more.

7. Milleville Morgue—Bringing in a Body.—There were four or more buildings known as morgues at Johnstown for weeks after the flood, and this is one of them. Workmen are carrying a body in on a stretcher, to be washed and laid out for identification. So frequently were bodies taken from the debris or picked up in the drift against the bridge, that little or no interest attached to the finding or removal of them. Men and women who would avoid such sights under ordinary circumstances, became used to them, and witnessed scenes like this with no concern at all.

8. Looking East From School Morgue.—The cosy homes on Prospect Hill, overlooking Johnstown, are to be seen to the east of the city, on the right of the picture. Beyond it are the Cambria Iron Works and the railroad bridge. In the centre of the picture a clearing is observed, unobstructed save by rubbish

of a light character. This clearing was made by the flood coming down the Conemaugh Valley, much this side of the point called Prospect Hill. The flood rolled right across the town at this point, and the clearing, which was built up solidly before, shows where the volume of water was strongest. The houses on either side that stood, held their foundations merely because they did not get the direct force of the blow. The manner in which they were tossed about, however, is pretty clearly indicated.

9. A Ruined Home.—This picture speaks for itself. It represents a ruined home. What has become of its former inmates, is a question. Where it came from, it would be hard to tell. On the first wave houses were borne into Johnstown in whole and in part, that had been picked up miles above. This house may have come from Woodvale, or it may be resting near its own foundations.

10. Tree Driven Through House.—The impossibility of immediately finding the foundations of any property is indicated by the surface here shown. The mud covers street lines, cellars, sidewalks and gardens to a depth of many feet, and these houses have settled where they are, at random. The interesting feature of this picture, however, is the tree driven through the house on the left. This is another freak of the flood. The tree was uprooted by the water, stripped of its branches and driven into the house in less time, probably, than it takes to tell about it. It would tax human ingenuity greatly to accomplish a similar feat in the same time.

11. Wreckage, Rear of Morrell Institute.—Scenes of this kind were to be seen on every hand.

In the earlier days of relief it was sometimes impossible to pass from one part of the ruined district to a point within one hundred yards of it, without climbing over just such mountains of roofs, houses and rubbish as this. One of the first things done, therefore, was to cut roads through to admit of the passage of men and horses. This was invariably accompanied by the finding of bodies and valuable property. Sometimes the obstructions would be of such a nature that huge derricks would have to be used to help remove the weight, but wherever it was possible without destroying valuables or bodies, the torch was applied and the rubbish burned. There was really no other method of getting rid of it.

12. Relief Station, Johnstown Station, Pennsylvania Railroad.—The promptness with which relief poured into Johnstown, as soon as the distress of the people became known, has been the subject of comment. Clothing and food were sent in great quantities, and distributed to the sufferers at convenient stations. This station happens to be the Pennsylvania Railroad station and the main supply station, used partly by the commissary department and partly as a morgue. Here General Hastings, who so endeared himself to the people that he has become known as "The Hero of Johnstown," had his headquarters. These men and women are now waiting for the distribution to begin. All classes before the flood come as one class now, to obtain food. There is no partiality, no favoritism, and rich and poor, are poor alike. It is a fact that all the people, even to a large extent from neighboring towns, had to depend upon these supplies. Money was practically useless for weeks, because there were no stores at which to buy.

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