

Volunteers Fight Valiantly To Save Conway Dikes—Almost Win Battle

By JOHN VANDEVANTER

The break in the dike a mile south of Conway, which started from a muskrat hole and inundated some 4,500 acres of farmland between dawn and early evening yesterday, was one of the most heartbreaking features of a thoroughly heartbreaking week-end for Skagit county.

Volunteer workers, who had worked steadily since about noon Saturday, had miraculously held over two miles of dike against both breaks and overflow and were apparently winning their battle when the word spread.

At Bachelor's Home
First to feel the impact of the rampaging South Fork was John Miller, part time employee of the railroad, whose bachelor quarters were just above the break.

"The water was up to here before I got out of my house," Miller said, indicating his floating ribs. "I never did get my stuff moved upstairs."

Miller tried to cross the gap in his rowboat to the solid part of the dike running to the railroad trestle at Fisherman's slough, but the bottom fell out of the boat and he saved himself by grasping a fence post. Owen

Tronsdale and another man saved him from the waters, taking him to the railroad.

Navy Was There

News of the break reached Conway at about 6:30 a. m., shortly after a busload of naval air station sailors had been shipped in to bolster the tiring dike forces. Half of the busload of 40 sailors had started carrying sacks to the top of the dike between the bridge and the fire station—the other half had never had the chance to get off the bus.

Thought They Had It

Footsore, bleary-eyed and arm-weary, the 30-odd emergency workers thought they had won the battle against the rampaging Skagit, as they climbed the soggy dikes, carrying sandbags to overflow points west of the town.

"The river is dropping at Mount Vernon," came the report at 4:30 a. m. "It's been dropping at Concrete since one o'clock yesterday."

"If it starts dropping here we have a chance."

But still the river rose, necessitating a second or a third row of sandbags.

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Volunteers Fight

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Long Haul

Inaccessibility of the dike south of the fire hall alley made it impossible to haul sandbags in by truck, and the workers had to carry them on their backs through inky darkness on the narrow path for nearly a quarter of a mile to block the overflow or check "rat-hole" leaks.

Starting with bags holding nine shovels of sand, the men soon discovered it was too much—reduced it to seven—to five, and finally carried empty sacks to be filled from swamped fields below the dike.

On River Road

Most of the work, of necessity, was done on the river road dike, where distances of a city block or more were covered with sandbags from the road to the top of the dike, where a double row ran for a quarter mile or more.

Doctors, mechanics, school teachers, an ice-cream parlor owner, a trucker, high school boys—nearly every walk of life was represented in the crew which worked at the sack-filling station at the Fir bridge. Two large flat-bed trucks and two pickup trucks were busy hauling bagged sand along the road until about 4 a. m. when it appeared that the oozing dike might hold.

Dikes Like Jelly

Greatest fear was held for the dike behind the fire station, to which there was access from only one point below and from either end. Stumbling through ankle-deep mud, the men carried sacks to the top, tight-roping between the river and the side of the dike covered with blackberry vines.

Two bad leaks developed low on the dike, on which several hundred sandbags were piled.

Break Was Sandbagged

The breaking point was one of the first spots on the Conway dike to receive attention Saturday evening, when a crew of eight or ten made an attempt to stop what was then a "rat-hole" leak, about eight feet below the top.

Sacks were stuffed into the hole, after which others broke out and sandbags had to be piled all over the side of the dike—they held for about 10 hours.

No Time To Lament

There was little time to lament the more than 500 man hours of labor lost in the attempt to keep Conway dry—or the blisters, sore feet and aching backs as the men dispersed, carrying tools and empty bags to their homes, to other dikes and to a cup of coffee.

By seven, water was coming in force down the streets of Conway and the coffee and sandwiches had been removed from the fire hall. Only life left in the emergency center, which had been alive with tired jokes and more tired workers, was a shaggy black dog.

Move Upstairs

Unruffled, Conway residents began the job of moving upstairs, aided in some cases by volunteer workers too dumbfounded by the reversal to beat the water out of town.

The meat market proprietor evacuated perishable meat cuts, setting his barrels of herring on the counter—residents moved assorted articles, including washing machines, fish nets and anything they had time for.

Traffic Stopped

By 8:30 a. m., there were three feet of water boiling through town, which tied up traffic except for an occasional duck bringing the injured or stranded to high ground. A photographer or two, and the usual band of goggle-eyed tourists had held out to the last, but were finally driven to the railroad tracks.

The dog walked upstairs in the fire hall—and may be there yet.