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Looking Back:

Librarian Describes Louisville Free Public Library Flood Damage in 1937

by Jonathan Jeffrey

On 11 February 1937, a weary Edna J. Grauman<sup>1</sup>, head of the reference department at the Louisville Free Public Library (LFPL), wrote an interesting letter to her friend Margie Helm discussing the condition of her library after the great flood that inundated Louisville and many other cities along the Ohio River. She knew Helm, director of libraries at Western Kentucky State Teachers College, would be interested in conditions and how the library was being readied to reopen. The duo had known each other for over two decades through participation in the Kentucky Library Association and the Southeastern Library Association. Helm had served as KLA president in 1928-1929 and Grauman later acted in the same capacity from 1940-1941.

By the time Grauman wrote her letter, the damage at the LFPL had been assessed and work to clean and clear the public areas had been successful enough so that the library could open on 12 February. The damage had been extensive. Grauman noted that the bulk of the destruction occurred in the building's basement where many of the library's government documents and periodicals were housed as well as its museum. Water first entered the basement on Friday, 22 January. An effort to pump water out of the basement was successful, until the pump broke. The water continued to rise over the weekend eventually reaching within one foot of the basement ceiling in certain sections. Library employees were not allowed inside the building until 4 February. Officials estimated damages at \$130,000 system wide, but this did not include approximately \$100,000 in labor and services eventually rendered by the Works Progress Administration and other New Deal agencies. Any librarian who has ever faced a library-related disaster can empathize with Grauman's experience, as she wrote:

Wednesday 2/11/1937

Dear Margie:

I can't tell you how distressed I am about our library. The basement was filled with water – that means all of our files of bound periodicals, all the serial set, all patent office gazettes, patent office gazette indexes, annual reports, *Congressional Globe*, debates and record.

The water was rising at Beargrass Creek on Friday June 22<sup>nd</sup>. All Highland<sup>1</sup> people at Library went home at noon – Little did I think we would be under water at the library. In fact, I thought of packing a grip and going downtown to stay so I could be at the library. At 4 p.m. – cars stopped running. Saturday a.m. I telephoned Mr. Brigham<sup>2</sup> at 7:45 a.m. He said he was going into Library and if he needed me he'd give me a ring. Winifred Hutchings, Miss [Bernice W.] Bell and Ellen Harding were at the Library as they all lived near there.

Sunday morning Mr. B[righam] telephoned me from [the] Library – only way to get out was back – all rest was under water – He and some of the janitors and N.Y.A.<sup>3</sup> boys or Y.M.C.A boys were moving museum and what else would I suggest. They rescued our *Herald Post* newspaper files from there – at least they were saved and are most valuable as so few places have a file. Charles<sup>4</sup>, our head janitor, says they pumped the water out until 7 P.M. Sunday night – when the water broke the assembly room doors and rushed into the basement. He said it came in with a roar. Our janitors have been working like Trojans. I talked with Mr. Brigham after water began to go down but he advised us to remain away until building was

checked for safety.

Mr. Lindberg, steel expert – you remember him at Ashville conference – is here supervising reinforcing stacks.<sup>5</sup> The books swelled – burst basement level of stacks and stacks are sagging towards Mr. Brigham's office. All the books around that side and front and back of stacks are being rapidly removed – dumped large piles in Order, Catalog and front Lobby – that means from 1<sup>st</sup> floor, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>. You can imagine what our library looks like. I imagine it will be years before we recover – and when we do we'll be looking for things we once had.

At the present time O.S.<sup>6</sup> & Ref. rooms are like ice chests – the Museum is a terrible mess – but they saved many birds, butterflies, etc. out of it on Sunday Jan. 24<sup>th</sup>. These were in Ref. Dept. this morning. I had them all moved to the Watterson Room – that is a good place to keep them until we get straightened. The O.S. and Ref. Dept. proper look very good – but all of Ref.'s materials – at least as much of it is ruined unless J.W. Carroll<sup>7</sup> can save it. He says if he gets it to Philadelphia before it mildews – he assures one that it will be saved – He claims he saved Pittsburgh's material. I'll let you know how we come out. I was so proud of our library – it was such a pretty place – you should see it now.

We never seemed to have money enough before – goodness knows where we'll get it now but I guess some foundation or good will help out.

Today I was down trying to check on mail and straighten our newspapers and periodicals that have stacked up.

Shawnee Br[anch] library was completely under water – at least to top of highest book shelf – Marion Stoner<sup>8</sup> went there this afternoon and she said that one cannot imagine how that place is wrecked. You see it was in a temporary building.

We are supposed to open to the public tomorrow morning but I do not see how we can as there is no heat – we can take in books – that is the important thing at present time.

Well, I could write on and on about the library, but will close now.

Yes, we were lucky enough to have been out of the water – All Highlanders were indeed fortunate. It is terrible for some of our staff – one in Children's Dept. is completely underwater – lived in country – lost home, cattle, automobiles, another in Children's Dept. was under water. On the whole Ref. Dept. girls were fortunate.

When I get time, I'll drop you another letter – So long for this time,

Love,

Edna (Grauman to Helm 12 Feb. 1937)

An excerpt from the history of the LFPL corroborates Grauman's account of the damages and adds other interesting details:

The stacks presented a striking demonstration of the effect of water on books. These stacks are made of heavy cast iron. The weight of the four upper floors of stacks are supported by the heavy iron uprights of the basement stack. Most of the shelves in the basement were filled to capacity, since books had been moved from lower to upper shelves wherever there was space for them. The wet books swelled and exerted such a tremendous lateral pressure that many of the castings were snapped in two and more than half, had to be replaced, as a cost of \$4,000, which included the expense of shoring up the upper floors of stacks which sagged dangerously. Where castings were not broken or

bent, the books under pressure had bulged out and sprung from the shelves into the water which left them in the muck and dirt on the floor as it receded. (*Libraries* 162)

Although the library opened as Grauman said on 12 February 1937 with limited services, it was not until 22 September 1938 that the last of the renovation projects precipitated by the flood waters was completed. After eighteen months of “jumping at the blasts of carpenters’ hammers, of dodging paint and stumbling through piles of wood shavings, library habitues will again read in peaceful silence.” According to library director Harold F. Brigham, the library system had been “vastly improved by the repair work. And certainly in all features, the system is back on a working level equal with that of pre-flood days.” (“Library” 2)

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#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Edna Jeanette Grauman, a native of Marysville, Ohio, was born on 10 January 1898 to William J. and Martha Grauman. She began working for the Louisville Free Public Library in 1916 as an onsite librarian at Girls High School and later at Male High School; at that time the LFPL managed the city’s high school libraries. When the head of LFPL’s Reference Department Marilla W. Freeman died suddenly in 1925, Grauman was named as her successor and was granted a leave of absence to attend the New York State Library School. Upon her return, Grauman assumed the head of the reference duties and remained in that position until her retirement in 1957. She died on 5 November 1973.

<sup>2</sup> Margie May Helm, a native of Auburn, Kentucky, was born on 21 August 1894, the daughter of Thomas O. & Nellie (Blakey) Helm. She received a Bachelor’s degree from Randolph-Macon Woman’s College, a library certificate from the Pratt Institute in 1922, and a M.L.S. from University of Chicago in 1933. In 1922 she became assistant librarian at Western Kentucky State Teachers College, and the following year was promoted to head librarian, a position she retained until 1965. To honor Helm’s long tenure and outstanding service, Western Kentucky State College named the university library the Margie Helm Library in 1965. She was active in all aspects of library work in the Commonwealth. She died on 19 December 1991 and is buried in Bowling Green’s Fairview Cemetery.

<sup>3</sup> The Highlands in Louisville is a residential and commercial neighborhood centered along a three-mile stretch of Bardstown Road and Baxter Avenue that sits atop a ridge between the middle and south forks of Beargrass Creek.

<sup>4</sup> Harold Frederick Brigham (1897-1971) was the Director for the Louisville Free Public Library from 1931 to 1942. He left Louisville to become the State Librarian of Indiana, a position he held until retirement in 1955.

<sup>5</sup> National Youth Administration.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Glass.

<sup>7</sup> T.H. Lindberg of Snead & Co. of Jersey City, New Jersey, spoke in October 1936 at the Southeastern Library Association meeting in Asheville, North Carolina.

<sup>9</sup> Open Stacks room. Reference materials were segregated in a closed stacks area.

<sup>10</sup> Dr. Charles W. Carroll was quickly brought to the scene to assess the damaged books. Through his efforts approximately 25,000 books were shipped from Louisville to Philadelphia in three railroad box cars. Approximately sixty-six percent of these books were salvaged and returned to Louisville. Carroll had overseen a similar mass book restoration project after the 1936 floods in the Pittsburgh area.

<sup>11</sup> Marion Stoner worked in the Cataloging Department.

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