REVIEWS

Indiana and the Great Flood of 1913

By Nancy M. Germano

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The great flood of 1913 ravaged much of the Midwest, including Indiana, where it killed around two hundred people and inflicted $20 million in damage. Despite its reach, the disaster has slipped through the historical cracks, lost between the more famous 1882–84 flood cycle and the devastating 1927 Mississippi River inundation. Historian Nancy Germano exhumes this forgotten crisis, using it as an important reminder of humankind's often-foolish impositions on environmentally sensitive lands. Her *Indiana and the Great Flood of 1913* should please devotees of Hoosier history seeking a concise overview of this disaster.

The flood's immediate cause was rain. Lots of rain. Terrific storms in March 1913 inundated lowlands and raised rivers great and small. The Wabash River, White River, and smaller waterways overflowed their banks, engulfing towns around the state. As Germano points out, those spring storms exploited a century's worth of naïve or shortsighted decisions that rendered Indiana more vulnerable to catastrophic flooding. Germano tells a familiar story of economy versus ecology. Early settlers drained water-retaining swamplands, cleared forests, and built on floodplains to make use of local natural resources or transportation networks. The more they developed the land, the more vulnerable they became to flood damage.

At the heart of Germano's book is a series of capsule studies of various Indiana communities before, during, and after the 1913 flood. Although Indianapolis receives the deepest coverage, most Hoosiers should find their hometown mentioned here. Each town Germano surveys, from Peru to

Indianapolis to Lawrenceburg, repeats a depressing pattern of human hubris that exacerbated the 1913 flood's impact. Some fascinating stories pop up along the way—the newlyweds who fled the inundation in their wedding outfits, a flooded-out circus elephant on the loose—but Germano's decision to touch on as many communities as possible limits such anecdotes to fleeting mentions.

After the flood came the cleanup. Germano details a comprehensive yet fractured relief effort that often pulled in conflicting directions. Local, state, and federal governments helped rescue stranded Hoosiers and initiate a rebuilding process. The American Red Cross also pitched in, along with innumerable private organizations and ad hoc Good Samaritans. With so many parties involved, it is no wonder that residents often had no idea who was in charge or who to listen to when it came to seeking shelter, procuring supplies, or re-entering flooded neighborhoods. As a result, Indianans vacillated between relying on individual choice and state authority, accepting or ignoring expert advice according to their own internal calculus.

Indiana and the Great Flood of 1913 provides a solid, lavishly illustrated introduction to the subject. At times, one wishes for more extensive probing of key issues that get mentioned but not explored. Germano's brief discussion of West Indianapolis, a low-lying, working-class district hit particularly hard by the flood, suggests that economic status, and perhaps also race, influenced rescue and relief efforts and one's vulnerability to flooding, without really exploring the subject. Similarly, Indiana's long-term response to the flood remains murky. Germano details many local, state, and federal flood-control proposals that emerged from the disaster while leaving it unclear as to which, if any, of these proposals were ever enacted. Considering how often floods still roar through the state—a point Germano makes in her final chapter—whatever waterways measures were implemented following 1913 have apparently failed to overcome mistakes made two centuries ago.

David Welky, University of Central Arkansas

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