Tiny Crawfish Caused 1884 Levee Break and Crevasse

Look Taken at Conditions in Another Century

By CLAIRE PUNKEY (T-P Bayou Lafourche Bureau)

DONALDSONVILLE, La. — The rising waters of the Mississippi River and the careful inspections of the levees that blocked the flow of the mighty Lower Lafourche stream onto the land prompt a look back into the past to see what conditions prevailed in another century.

A quick glance back to March, 1884, reveals levee break and crevasse, with the tiny crawfish pinpointed as the culprit. Not only then and there, but at other times and in other places this little crustacean has been blamed for these tremendous breaks.

It was on March 20, 1884, that a crawfish hole caused the levee break in Ascension Parish in front of Oliver Beirne's plantation. Only two days earlier an old, abandoned crawfish hole collapsed a levee in West Baton Rouge Parish that had stood for 18 years.

That was a bad year for those who lived along the Mississippi. The levee caved in on March 15, causing the Virginia crevasse in Iberville Parish. The cause for that one was not attributed to crawfish, but to a rice flume.

LEVEE DAMAGE

Elsewhere, rice flumes were contributing to levee damage. A defective flume sent the flood waters of the mighty Mississippi over the St. James Parish plantation of John A. Stevenson.

Farther downriver, in St. Charles Parish, loose earth washed out of a rice flume on the levee and covered the Davis plantation.

The rampaging waters rushed through a crevasse created by the collapse of a rice flume in the river levee on the night of March 23 and flooded the Guidry plantation in St. James Parish. It took a week to get the gap closed.

On the following day the Elina crevasse, seven miles upriver, was caused by a rice flume washing out. And that was not all. There were many breaks.

CREVASSE CAUSE

Some of these occurred on Bayou Lafourche, with crawfish holes the cause of most of them. Two miles above Thibodaux they brought about the Jameson crevasse and accounted for the Gauthreaux crevasse four miles south of Napoleonville.

Lower Lafourche reported numerous breaks, and Lockport's vicinity had one. This happened five miles below that city and reportedly was caused by an imperfectly filled gap in the bayou levee.

A United States sternwheeler, the 110-foot long Patrol that year was piloted over the Bayou Lafourche flooded area in late March on its way to the site of a serious levee break on the Mississippi in the New Orleans area.

What brought this devastation about in 1884? The northern ice fields had broken up and taken refuge on the Mississippi. The heavy snows had melted and they too had taken to the river on a southern journey. Then there were torrential and excessive rains that added their burden to the ever-swelling stream.

FREE TO FLOW

There had been a time when the rising waters were free to flow over the land unimpeded by barricades, other than those designed by nature. But with habitation along the river came means of protection.

Angry at the confinement, the waters pounded the mounds of earth called levees, and occasionally they briefly won their way through. This is what happened in 1884.

During the Civil War both sides in the conflict used the levees to their own advantage, cutting into them when it served their purpose. It was not surprising then that in 1867 high waters successfully vanquished these earthen seclusions and overflown the lands causing millions of dollars in damages.

History recounts that 1882 was one to live in the memory of floods. Sugar plantations were hard hit, and it has been reported that on some of them the invading water remained until June. Lockport in Lafourche Parish and Pointe Coupee Parish were among those suffering damage.

FEDERAL HELP

The cost to the state for flood devastation that year was $15 million. The federal government moved into Louisiana to help the people who had left their homes to flee to high ground and who were trying to save the livestock they had taken with them.

The Nita crevasse came about on the night of March 14, 1890, and reached a width of 2,892 feet. A rice flume on the levee caused this disaster in St. James Parish.

Then in the present century there were many levee breaks in 1927. The Mississippi is a mighty river indeed, and the levees that resist its insistent lunge require constant surveillance.