

The Flood at Split Rock

East of Highway 51, where the Bois Breval River runs into the Half Moon Flowage lie the remnants of Split Rock, abandoned for nearly twenty years. Only scattered fragments remain. The old police station, a one story brick building built in the late 1950s stands, but most of its interior walls are gone. A stately brick Victorian with a round turret is intact, though the roof bears more holes than tiles and has started to peel away from the house. Grass has grown over the pavement of most of the streets, and only a slight difference in elevation separates them from lawns and fields. Three walls of a self storage building stand, but the rest of the building, roof, interior walls, garage doors, are gone. Here and there are fragments of other buildings, a wall, a cement brick foundation, a chimney. The facade of the Lutheran church lies on its side. There are a few cars, rusting, tires flat or gone, windshields smashed. The remains of the town are on a county road a few miles from the main highway, and few people visit them, or even know they are there. The Bois Breval runs past them, bucolic, serene. Near the town, the river is wide and marshy as it enters the flowage, supporting painted turtles, red-winged blackbirds, cattails, and milkweed. In spring and summer it is quiet and picturesque. But this is where the trouble started.

Twenty-five years ago, in late spring, late April or early May, it began to rain. It started as a light shower, but quickly grew into a heavy storm. For forty eight hours water tumbled out of the sky, and in those forty eight hours Split Rock received half a normal year's rainfall. Slowly, the Bois Breval widened. The water carried mud and silt that stopped up the west end of the Half Moon Flowage, and the river washed over its shallow banks and began moving towards the town. Then, in the second twenty four hours, the water flowed freely from the river, and the flood swept through the streets, filled basements, floated cars away, and washed the shoots from the ground of nearby farms. Telephone and power lines were uprooted. David Korbiev, one of the town's two realtors, was electrocuted as he stepped out of his office and into a pool of water in which also lay a downed power line. People moved up to the second floors of their houses if they had them, and onto the roofs of one story houses, office buildings, and shops. Janice Folsom, who ran a small organic grocery store, was drowned as she tried to walk from her shop to her house. Korbiev and Folsom were the only two deaths directly caused by the flood.

During the last twelve hours, the rain slowly tapered off. The town had seen flooding before, but this was the worst anyone could remember. The people were bewildered—many simply stayed in the top floors of their houses, eating the remnants of their food and staring out of their windows. More than half the town was without electricity, but fortunately, the weather was temperate. People rose and slept with the sun. Those with boats ventured out from their homes, rowing across the floodwater and greeting one another, but a sorrowful sloth had overtaken most, and for more than a week after the flood, little was done. Finally, a few enterprising people reached the outside world by phone and began rowing to the edge of the floodwater where trucks with food and medical supplies had stopped. The supplies were carried into Split Rock by kayak, canoe and rowboat.

Slowly people began to stir. Pumps were brought in, trenches were dug, and the stoppage at the west end of the flowage was cleared. The water levels were still dangerously high, but with the river moving again, the town was drained. People began to clear the debris from their homes, and during this time, if you walked down any of the town's residential streets, you would see on the curbs piles of furniture, television sets, tables, sofas, waterlogged boxes of books, photographs, and decorative knick-knacks piled high, softened and split by water, and, as time went on, dusted by mold.

Three weeks after the waters receded, the mosquitoes came. Though most of the homes and streets had been drained, there were still ponds of stagnant water dotted throughout the town, and from these a dense insect cloud rose. After a couple of days, nearly everyone in town had the large, painful welts left by their bites. Farmers on the edge of town couldn't keep the mosquitoes away from their animals. Every step outside a building became an onerous burden. The mosquito cloud seemed to be of one mind, moving en masse, surrounding people, blanketing the sides of buildings, carpeting cars.

Because of the town's relative isolation and lack of financial resources, help was slow in coming. But, after two weeks of infestation, trucks arrived with insecticide, pumps and large water tanks. Standing water was drained as much as possible, and the breeding grounds filled with pyrethroids. The mosquitoes were never banished completely, but their numbers were reduced, and people could leave their homes and arrive at their destinations only occasionally showing the large welts.

Two months passed. The summer was fairly dry. The June and July heat evaporated the remaining floodwater. Buildings too damaged by the floodwaters to rehabilitate were torn down. Some were replaced, some left vacant lots and large fields with only rectangular depressions to show where houses, shops and offices had once stood. The town library deaccessioned half of its books. A donation fund was started by the local branch of a big box store to replace electronics of local businesses and residents. A handful of people left the town for good, mostly those whose homes had been lost and who either couldn't afford to rebuild or did not want to risk falling victim to another flood.

Phil Chandler was the first townspeople to fall sick. His fever rose to 104 in two hours, and he lay in bed babbling about a woman named Rosa for a whole night. Sammi Yu was the first to die from the illness. Though her symptoms appeared two days after Chandler's, her fever spiked much more quickly and she died four days later. Nearly everyone in town was affected, but to different degrees. About half of the residents felt nausea, dizziness, a low grade fever that lasted five or six days, and either vomiting or diarrhea. For the other half, it was much worse—high fever, hallucinations, and, in the worst cases, seizures. For the half that felt mild symptoms, recovery was fast, within a week. For the unlucky other half, only two survived—Phil Chandler and Joanie Ames, a teacher at the local high school.

But even for the ones who were not carried off, the fever brought terrifying nightmares. Kelly Marculewicz dreamed she was roasting and eating her children. Martin Fitzgerald dreamed that he was being devoured from the inside by tiny, black predatory worms. Jack Volkov dreamt he set fire to his house with his family inside, then died trying to rescue them. Ann Rebane dreamt her teeth fell out and she starved to death slowly, time in the dream protracted long past a single night. The dreams were so vivid that even after the fevers subsided, the townspeople were afraid to sleep. They walked around in a constant state of confused exhaustion, forgetting to carry out the most basic tasks, sometimes even forgetting to eat, until they passed out from hunger. Doctors came in from the NIH and the CDC, and a makeshift convalescent center was set up in the high school. The consensus among them was that the illness was a form of encephalitis, but at least one of the doctors admitted to a local nurse that they in truth had no idea what they were dealing with. In any event, by the time the convalescent center was up and running, nearly everyone who had fallen sick had either recovered or died.

The Dodge family was the first to leave. Sharon had lost her husband to the illness, but she and her two children had recovered. Her home had been spared, but she couldn't find a buyer, so she moved in with relatives in Oak Park, Illinois. After that, the Corsettis moved. They had all survived, but their home was beyond saving, and they had no flood insurance. Francis Corsetti took a job managing a big box store in West Bend, Wisconsin. These departures ushered in a mass exodus. Only three families remained in town. Mike and Joyce Carroll dreamed of claiming as much land as they could from the abandoned houses and shops, but legal red tape and lack of interest in the outside world kept them from seeing any profits. The children of all three remaining families left for other parts of the country, either for college or employment, and returned as seldomly as their guilty consciences would allow.

Jim and Karen Turner eventually retired to Scottsdale, and shortly afterward Ken and Julie Waldt joined their children in Indianapolis. Mike Carroll died a year after the flood, and Joyce, Split Rock's last resident, died in her home of cardiac arrest four years later. Her body was discovered three weeks after she died by a lost UPS delivery woman whose GPS had malfunctioned.

Long after Joyce Carroll died, a pall hung over the abandoned town. Several developers over the years tried to make something of the land, but title companies found the tangled trail of ownership too difficult to follow. Eventually, as taxes went unpaid, the properties all fell into foreclosure, and the state tried to auction them off, but could find no buyers. There are still two family farms near the edge of town, but their barns have been moved or torn down, and the acres closest to town lie fallow. Local legend says that even the crows stay away from Split Rock, but I don't believe that. Nature takes no note of human misery.