Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How it Changed America Study Guide

Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How it Changed America by John M. Barry

Contents

Plot Summary

In the spring of 1927 the Mississippi River valley region floods in what is perhaps the greatest natural disaster in the history of the United States. The flood and its aftermath will profoundly change government, society and race relations in the region.

The vast flood covers a huge amount of land in water up to thirty feet deep, displacing about one million people in a nation of 120 millions. Flooded areas are roughly equal in size to Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Hampshire and Vermont combined. Thousands die, and over a quarter of a million blacks live in refugee camps for several months. The Red Cross feeds nearly 700,000 refugees for weeks. Many people of all races leave the area permanently.

The flood ends the South's planter aristocracy, initiates a wave of black migration to the North and lays the foundation for what will ultimately become the Federal government's New Deal intervention in the region. The book covers several decades of regional development and politics prior to the flood, establishing the historical reasons for settlement patterns and investigating in detail the rationale behind the area's "levees-only" river containment policy.

The book initially focuses on several individuals important in early river development and illustrates how they, in concert with the times, influence the policies that will lead up to the disaster. The actual flooding is then considered, with particular attention focused on the levee failures. The aftermath is explained both in the immediate effects to the region as well as the larger national significance.

Prologue

Prologue Summary

This nonfiction book begins with a dramatic retelling of events prior to the flooding of 1927. Prominent Greenville, Mississippi, citizens gather at the house of Seguine Allen, chief engineer of the Mississippi Levee Board, for a social party. One guest of particular note is LeRoy Percy, former Senator and local business magnate. The event is overshadowed by the rain and wind of an enormous storm and by the continually rising waters of the great Mississippi river - waters threatening to top the levee system protecting the town. After some discussion, the party ends. Most attendees travel to town and walk along the levee system, examining the structure and the situation. Though clearly concerned, the people are unaware of the huge catastrophe that will develop in the immediate future.

Prologue Analysis

The Prologue begins with a two-page map of the Mississippi River drainage basin. It sets the tone and mood of the remainder of the book. Though the events are dramatized, they are historically accurate and serve to put a human face on the events described in the remainder of the book.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

The Mississippi River is massive, draining a staggeringly large basin. It is the longest river in the world, and by any measurement among the largest. It reaches from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico, from New York and North Carolina to Idaho and New Mexico. It drains 41 percent of the continental United States, including all or portions of thirty-one states.

During the nineteenth century, the prevailing attitude is that the Mississippi River can be controlled if the laws of nature governing the river can be understood. Two engineers in particular are tied with the early development of the Mississippi River, James Buchanan Eads and Andrew Atkinson Humphreys. They are the two most influential men to work on the river.

James Eads arrives in St. Louis in 1833, at thirteen years of age. The boat he arrives on explodes just off the wharf, and Eads and his mother and sisters swim ashore. He father joins them later. His early childhood is one of privation and poverty. Eads takes odd jobs, educates himself in science and engineering, learns chess and becomes an advanced player. After a few years his family moves on, but he remains in St. Louis on his own at age sixteen. Eads starts a river salvage business, using a diving bell with pumped-in air to walk along the bottom of the Mississippi River salvaging from sunken ships. He designs much of the equipment used in the salvage operations, and within a few years he becomes rich. He also buys, in 1856, a snag-removal contract and spends a great amount of time near, on and literally in the river. Also in 1856, his mother's first cousin, James Buchanan, becomes president of the United States.

During the Civil War, Eads assists in keeping Missouri in the Union, and he designs and builds eight ironclads, which assist in the war effort on the Mississippi River. At the end of the war, Eads is among the most influential men in the Mississippi valley. At the age of thirty-seven, he retires a wealthy man and marries his widowed cousin. He soon returns to other business pursuits.

Chapter 1 Analysis

Chapter 1 introduces Part One - The Engineers, the first of nine named sections of the text. Although Chapter 1 provides some background and data regarding the magnitude of the Mississippi River, the chapter is in essence a concise biography of James Buchanan Eads, one of the principle engineers of the first structures to control the flow of the Mississippi River.

Eads' many accomplishments relating to the river are detailed in subsequent chapters. Eads is presented as a driven man who is demanding and exacting. He is viewed by

others as often unreasonable and rigid, a man who will concede nothing to his adversaries.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Andrew Atkinson Humphreys is born in 1810 as the only child of a wealthy and influential Philadelphia family. He has a desire to achieve fame and the recognition of the world, and he enters West Point and graduates from the Army Corps of Engineers.

Humphreys briefly fights in the Seminole wars in Florida, but he becomes ill in 1836 and resigns from the army. In 1839, he is appointed to the Corps of Topographical Engineers. In 1845, he is appointed to the U.S. Coastal Survey, a post he retains for six years.

In 1850, Congress authorizes a survey of the lower Mississippi River. Humphreys seeks the appointment to complete the survey. However, he has competition. A well-known engineer named Charles Ellet, Jr., also seeks the appointment. Eventually, Congress divides the funds and apportions half of the funds to each engineer.

The Mississippi River is incredibly powerful and complex. Its natural course, from Cairo, Illinois, to the Gulf of Mexico is 1,100 miles. During this vast distance, it drops in elevation only 290 feet, slightly more than three inches to the mile. It runs through numerous winding S curves, creating whirlpools and carving out holes that can reach depths of hundreds of feet. During floods, the current can reach eighteen miles an hour. Much of the riverbed is below sea level. This creates a tumbling effect on the river's water.

The river carries an extraordinary sediment load, depositing perhaps as much as two million tons of sediment in the Gulf of Mexico each day. The natural course of the river is in constant flux as this sediment load piles up, creating new Mississippi River delta land and blocking effluents.

In attempting to control the flow of rivers, engineers have three basic methods - levees, outlets and cutoffs. Levees are simply heaped up walls of earth that direct the water. Outlets are man-made channels that drain river water down artificial channels. Cutoffs are straight channels cut through the middle of existing S curves to speed the flow of the river. All three methods have been used on rivers throughout the world. Which method is primarily useful for the Mississippi has been a matter of historical debate.

Ellet quickly produces a comprehensive study of the river, though it is short on fieldwork. Andrew Humphreys executes extensive scientific fieldwork, gathering a huge amount of data from careful measurements. In 1851, Humphreys becomes ill and his surveying work is suspended. Ellet officially submits his report, which is widely acclaimed. Ellet proposes a comprehensive approach to river management, with improved levees, enlarged outlets and additional reservoirs. Humphreys takes Ellet's work as a personal affront.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Chapter 2 presents more background and data about the Mississippi River and the area in which the lower Mississippi flows. The chapter also introduces Andrew Atkinson Humphreys, one of the principle engineers of the first studies of the Mississippi River. Humphreys is described as an intense, driven and arrogant man who is insulted easily and is very slow to forgive perceived wrongs. Along with Eads, introduced in Chapter 1, Humphreys is to exert a dominant influence on the development of the Mississippi River delta over a considerable period of time.

Ellet and Humphreys, two engineers, both present a river survey proposal to Congress. Congress decides to divide appropriated funds between the two men, directing each man to proceed independently to produce two reports. Ellet receives his funds and relatively quickly produces a report containing a minimum of new data. Humphreys is angry that the funds have been divided, and he works diligently at gathering new data from direct observation. Humphreys becomes convinced that his report could be scientifically important in a general sense and devotes long hours to research.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Ellet publishes his report. In 1853, Humphreys receives an appointment to study European deltaic rivers and spends 18 months in field studies. Upon his return, he publishes a pamphlet attacking Ellet's study. In 1857, Humphreys reopens the Mississippi survey office in Washington. In 1860 and 1861, Humphreys spends a great deal of time compiling his report and gathering new field data. Finally, in 1861 amidst the civil war, Humphreys publishes his Mississippi River report. The report quickly wins acclaim in Europe, but due to the civil war, it is not widely received in the United States of America.

Humphreys is thereafter appointed brigadier general and placed in command of a combat infantry division. In combat he proves ruthless, cold and profligate in the expenditure of his troops. Humphreys basks in the acclaim of his superiors and the press and disregards any criticism.

After the war, Humphreys' report becomes the most influential document written about the Mississippi River. Humphreys delights in the prestige and fame, and he ruthlessly attacks those who disagree with his conclusions - particularly Ellet. In retrospect, the Humphreys report is complicated, in fact corrupted, by Humphreys' desire to be right and his desire to produce a masterpiece of science.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Humphreys is again presented as an extremely egotistic man who cannot abide being wronged. As a combat commander, he exults is heavy fighting and bloodshed and appears to care little for the welfare of his troops. Humphreys apparently finds fulfillment in combat and military leadership. Although the book portrays Humphreys as particularly vicious and uncaring in combat, he is generally remembered as a brilliant tactician and an extremely capable and competent combat leader.

During the war, Humphreys rises to prominence as a soldier and leaves behind any vestiges of the scientist. He is characterized as intellectually corrupt, an unlikable and petty man, who is chiefly opposed to Eads because of Eads' superior mind and worldly successes. Humphreys views his own river report as the final word in hydraulics engineering, and in coming years he will defend it against any new, contrary, findings.

Ellet's work is influential primarily because it is presented early and therefore exists unchallenged for many years. Ellet's report is largely based on a synthesis of observations from various drainages around the world, rather than on direct observation of the Mississippi River.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Humphreys becomes the chief of engineers of the U.S. Army in 1866. During the 1850s, Chicago is the focus of railroads, and St. Louis is the focus of steamboats. The two transportation and freighting methods are in an intense competition. Bridges over rivers become controversial as they favor railroads over steamboats. Bridges are generally criticized as dangerous and as hazards to river navigation. Due to the civil war, railroading gains prominence.

Eads proposes a bridge over the Mississippi River. His design proposes new materials and methods and is very controversial. Eads energetically defends his design against all criticism and marshals his financial resources. Eventually, Congress authorizes the bridge, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers approves the design. Bridge construction starts in 1867. It is hoped that the bridge will marry railroads to steamboats.

In 1873, Eads gives a speech addressing the problem of moving shipping through the mouth of the Mississippi River. Since the early 1700s the mouth of the river has frequently been choked with sandbars and other navigation hazards due to the huge volume of sediment deposited in the region by the river itself. The Corps of Engineers has been trying to solve the problem for forty years - without success. In 1873 the Corps of Engineers is trying to build an expensive canal to allow shipping to bypass the river mouth. Eads criticizes the project and proposes, instead, that a series of jetties should be built in the river mouth. The jetties are essentially a series of long piers built into the river mouth, which would serve to narrow the river and thus increase its current. The increased current would increase the river's scouring of the bed, thus deepening the channel and preventing further sediment buildups.

Eads and Humphreys come into immediate conflict. Humphreys attempts to have Eads' bridge project cancelled as a hazard to navigation. Eads appeals directly to President Grant, and President Grant tells Humphreys' superiors to allow the bridge to proceed. The bridge is opened to the public in 1874.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Humphreys emerged from the war as less of a scientist and more of a military man. He has difficulty in realizing that the management of the Mississippi River will not be conducted as a military campaign. Eads' bridge, still in daily use, is the result of Eads' triumph over Humphreys in the financial and political arenas. In addition to the bridge, the two engineers violently disagree on the correct methods to use to gain some control over the river. Their disagreement is to have serious repercussions throughout the following century.

Eads will receive great public approval because of his project to open the mouth of the Mississippi River to shipping. The fact that his project will be successful at small cost is enough to cause the public to pay attention to Eads' opinions in the future.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

The river's use in commerce is severely limited by the shallow areas around the river's mouth. The channels are frequently changing, and other navigational hazards make shipping difficult and, often, dangerous. Humphreys champions canals, which have been unsuccessfully attempted since 1837, and dredges, also unsuccessful. He wants the work supervised by the Corps of Engineers. Eads proposes a series of jetties to concentrate the river's current, which will scour the riverbed and prevent sediment buildup, and he wants to lead the building of the jetties.

The two men go head-to-head in a series of political maneuvers and public speeches. At first, Eads faces nearly unanimous opposition, but his persistence and intelligence allow him to gradually gain favor with the public and the politicians. Finally, by offering to pay for the work himself and accept governmental reimbursement only upon success, Eads is allowed to proceed with his ideas. However, he is limited to the river's South Pass - a smaller and less important channel. While the political maneuvering continues, Eads begins planning his series of jetties.

Chapter 5 Analysis

The relationship between Eads and Humphreys becomes personal, and in large part the rivalry continues because of a mutual hatred and contempt. It is unfortunate that these two engineers cannot put aside personal differences and work together toward a successful policy of river management. Instead, in the coming years, various committees will piece together an unsuccessful strategy of river containment relying on levees only.

Through Eads' superior politicking, he gains permission to pursue the construction of a series of jetties to increase the river's natural riverbed scouring action. A series of very public and acrimonious debates between Eads and Humphreys result in the complete alienation of the two engineers. It is unfortunate that the two engineers cannot find some common professional ground. Their personal relationship will not allow a useful agreement on river management to emerge for several decades.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

In 1874, in response to widespread flooding of the Mississippi, Congress creates the U.S. Levee Commission to create policy aimed at preventing future floods. The commission is chaired by G. K. Warren, a Humphreys loyalist, and in 1875 it reaches conclusions largely in conformance with Humphreys opinions. It rejects reservoirs, cutoffs and the engineering theory that led Eads to propose jetties.

Below New Orleans, the Mississippi River comes to Head of Passes, where it divides into three main channels, Southwest Pass, South Pass a l'Outre and South Pass. Each extends into the Gulf of Mexico. In 1875 Eads tours the area of the passes, and after three days of study he is prepared to begin construction on the jetties. He quickly raises capital and begins construction.

First, Eads places a miles-long series of piles that define the future course of the pass. Then the jetties are completed with huge willow mattresses, assembled on land and then sunk into the water by attaching weights of stone. Once in place, they are bolted onto the series of piles. Over time, the river deposits sediment into the willow mattresses, effectively making them into solid barriers.

Confined between the jetties, the flow of the river increases. The increased flow escalates the river's scouring activity on the riverbed, and the depth of South Pass quickly increases.

In 1876, Humphreys sends Charles Howell, recently promoted to major, to perform an official inspection of Eads' progress. Howell makes a show of taking soundings and then leaks word that the pass is only 16 feet deep at high tide and that a new sandbar is forming just beyond the end of the jetty. Eads unsuccessfully attempts to have the official report quickly released.

Amidst growing public criticism, Eads' friend E. V. Gager pilots his ship *Hudson* at full speed through the channel. In full view of hundreds of reporters, the ship successfully shoots through the channel as the tide is going out. Shortly thereafter, the official report is released showing the channel to be 16 feet deep, without a new sandbar forming.

Though financial difficulties remain, Eads continues to build the jetties, and eventually South Pass reaches a depth of 23.9 feet, better than the 20 feet depth required. The Corps of Engineers' project is abandoned. In 1879, the jetty project is successfully completed. Humphreys and Eads continue to publicly antagonize each other, and Eads publishes a lengthy article attacking Humphreys' Mississippi River report.

In 1879 Congress creates the Mississippi River Commission. The commission is dominated by Humphreys' associates and quickly reaches rigid positions. The

commission develops a levees-only policy, which will prove to have disastrous consequences.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Chapter 6 concludes Part One - The Engineers, the first of nine named sections of the text. Ellet has opposed cutoffs, and proposed outlets, reservoirs and levees. Eads has opposed outlets and reservoirs and proposed cutoffs and levees. Humphreys has opposed outlets, reservoirs and cutoffs and proposed levees. Since levees are the only feature all three men propose, and since Humphreys judges them sufficient, the commission focuses on levees. Furthermore, Humphreys uses his personal influence to ensure that the newly formed Levee Commission will reject Eads' ideas in favor of his own.

Eads' jetties prove to be successful, further enhancing Eads reputation. However, Humphreys continues to involve himself in politics and subterfuge. The Mississippi River Commission is dominated by Humphreys' associates, and the commission manages to muddle together a levees-only policy, rejected by Eads and Humphreys both, which will become the disastrous going-forward strategy of river management.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

In 1841, Charles Percy moves his family to the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta. He gains influence, wealth and power. When Charles Percy dies in 1851, his brother, W. A. Percy, takes charge of family affairs and continues to increase the family's wealth and influence.

Eads success in opening the river to commerce allows the river delta area's commerce to flourish. Delta lands are incredibly productive, limited only by access to capital for development. The railroad companies install lines that cross the area and bring capital that spurs development. From 1884 to 1889, the railroads develop the area quickly.

After development establishes the area's capability, labor shortages appear. W. A. Percy institutes widespread sharecropping and relatively enlightened treatment of blacks to attract huge numbers of workers to the area. For example, W. A. Percy prevents the Ku Klux Klan from operating in Washington County, and lynching is largely prevented.

After W. A. Percy successfully establishes his family as a preeminent power in the region, he dies in 1888. His son, LeRoy Percy, takes over the leadership of the family. LeRoy Percy is an insightful and well-bred man, accustomed to power and wealth and possessed of a keen insight into business. He practices law, hunts with Teddy Roosevelt and maintains personal friendships with three U. S. Supreme Court justices. LeRoy Percy serves as a U. S. senator, director of a Federal Reserve Bank and director of the Rockefeller Foundation. He is also a trustee of the Carnegie Foundation.

Chapter 7 Analysis

Chapter 7 introduces Part Two - Senator Percy, the second of nine named sections of the text. This chapter gives the background of the Percy family. LeRoy Percy plays a dominant role in the political and economic arenas of the river delta. He is presented as a capable, ruthless and intelligent businessman who assumes a prominent role due to his family's background and embraces and enlarges his influence and wealth. Percy's father and grandfather influence much of the early history of Washington County. Percy in turn inherits the vast social influence and financial resources of his family.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

In the early 1900s, demand for cotton surges. The Delta region is able to supply a great amount of cotton, limited only by available manpower to cultivate and harvest crops. The role of U.S. cotton laborer is traditionally filled by blacks. LeRoy Percy feels that an alternative labor source would be preferable for the Delta. Percy wants white workers, but he will not consider the poor white workers from surrounding areas, since he considers them inferior and believes their presence would exacerbate racial tension.

Instead, Percy joins with other local growers to attempt to import white European laborers. Percy focuses his attention on Italian workers. In the same period of time, Percy makes the acquaintance of President Theodore Roosevelt. They meet on a hunt (incidentally, the same hunt that gives rise to the 'Teddy's Bear' toy), and thereafter Percy frequently dines at the White House. This relationship will prove beneficial to Percy in the future.

Over time, Percy brings several thousand Italian workers to the Delta. Percy finds their labor superior. However, race relations between Italians and others are not particularly good. Furthermore, complaints of mistreatment and debt peonage reach the Italian Ambassador, who demands a Justice Department investigation. Mary Quackenbos is appointed to perform the investigation. Her confrontational and controversial investigation, opposed by Percy, results in the arrest of one of Percy's chief business partners.

Percy meanwhile makes several controversial speeches advocating better treatment of blacks and urging education for black children. He then visits the White House and requests that the President Roosevelt intervene in the Quackenbos investigation. The President suppresses the report, removes Quackenbos and appoints another investigator who exonerates Percy's partner.

Chapter 8 Analysis

LeRoy's ability as a shrewd businessman, aware of social situations and equally aware of how to control them, is illustrated. He is presented as not personally racist or sexist, but as a man capable and willing to take advantage of racial and sexual tensions to further his own ends. Nevertheless, LeRoy considers blacks to be inferior laborers. For example, while Quackenbos' investigation is perhaps flawed in some respects, her general observations are certainly valid. LeRoy attacks her on several fronts, including accusing her of being a hysterical woman without the ability to grasp the facts.

Although Quackenbos' report is suppressed at home, it is secretly forwarded to the Italian government. The Italian government responds by posting signs in railroad depots warning emigrants away from the Delta. The damage is done. Of the 8 million

immigrants entering the United States between 1892 and 1906, only 2,697 list Mississippi as their intended destination.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

In 1903, James K. Vardaman is elected governor of Mississippi. He is a blatant racist who espouses intimidation and racial hatred. Even so, the Delta offers blacks a relatively safe and prosperous area in which to live, largely because of Percy's influence. When Vardaman seeks a U. S. Senate seat in 1908, Percy helps defeat him. However, Percy's involvement expends much of his influence, and he loses much of his political capital outside of the Delta.

In 1910, another U. S. Senator dies, leaving two years of his term unfilled. His successor will be selected by the State Legislator. Percy decides to attempt to gain the appointment. There are several contenders, but eventually they are reduced to two - Vardaman and Percy.

In a series of backroom dealings and influence peddling, Percy wins the special election. A local paper reports that the caucus is the most disgraceful political episode in state history. Another U. S. Senator, Theodore Bilbo, subsequently emerges to become one of the most hate-filled and blatantly racist Senators in the history of the United States. In the 1911 primary election for Percy's seat in the U.S. Senate, a Bilbo-backed Vardaman defeats Percy in a landslide election. Elsewhere in the South, racial hatred propels other openly racist men into positions of power in the government.

In 1912, the Mississippi River runs higher than it ever has, threatening to top levees along its length and crashing through levees in some areas. In one location, the river threatens to top the levee before additional sandbags can arrive. The white foreman orders the black convict laborers to lie down along the top of the levee and use their bodies as human sandbags until the actual sandbags arrive.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Chapter 9 includes 16 pages of black and white plates, presenting forty photographs and diagrams. This chapter also includes a substantive amount of information about the racial tensions present in the Delta region. Although LeRoy's ascendance to victory would be regarded as illegal and disgraceful in today's political arena, the book points out that the process is commonplace politics for the time.

LeRoy's political victory will propel him to a national stage for only a brief period of time. Within a few years he will retreat, politically and socially, to the Delta region. However, his time spent in Washington brings him to the acquaintance of many politically important people.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

At the outbreak of World War I, the Delta area is still largely undeveloped due to the persistent lack of manpower. In most of the poorer areas, crime is rampant, and murder is commonplace. Against the backdrop of crime among the poorer areas, Delta business flourishes, and the rich acquire vast fortunes. Greenville boasts numerous restaurants, hotels and society clubs, and it becomes a center of fashion and culture.

Greenville's public schools are exceptional, spending lavishly on both white and black students. Percy's influence is felt everywhere, and the society in which he lives in many ways mirrors his values. However, times are changing, and as the Delta area grows, Percy's influence diminishes.

Nationally, technology, war and the advent of a new sexuality are changing the very fabric of society. Many react by establishing clubs to stabilize and preserve the established order. Prior to World War I, for example, the Rotary Club is established in Chicago to try and re-create the sense of small-town community.

The desire for community is seized upon and used by President Woodrow Wilson. Wilson uses it to push forward his own agenda, passing the Sedition Act and assisting in the establishment of the American Protective League, the National Security League and the Allied Loyalty League. All of these feed names of suspected individuals to the government for investigation. In 1919, race riots erupt in twenty-six major cities, including Washington and Chicago. The riots are followed by extensive labor strikes, mass arrests and general social upheaval. Unions are demonized, and civil liberties are curtailed. "The *Salt Lake City Tribune* asserted, 'Free speech has been carried to the point where it is an absolute menace'" (p. 139).

As bombs explode in major cities, J. Edgar Hoover is appointed to run a new area within the Justice Department. Most of the violence ends in 1920 as the Justice Department arrests thousands of so-called dangerous aliens. Congress enacts laws restricting immigration. Books and movies, including D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, enjoy wide popularity and portray blacks as little more than dangerous and savage beasts. Against this national backdrop of racial hatred and fear, the Ku Klux Klan gains enormous influence and becomes a wealthy organization, controlling governments at all levels across the nation.

Chapter 10 Analysis

Chapter 10 summarizes the society and culture of the Delta region around the time of World War I. The chapter is seminal in understanding how the extreme racial discrimination which will follow the flooding can be not only tolerated but actively promoted by those in political power. Based only on an understanding of today's political

and racial paradigm, the results of the 1927 disaster are impossible to understand. This chapter provides, therefore, critical background for a solid understanding of the book.

Criminal activity in Mississippi is among the highest in the nation at this time, and crime in the Delta is exceptionally common, particularly murder. The book suggests this is a condition caused by racial inequality and the extreme poverty of the region. The book promotes the idea that President Woodrow Wilson manipulates national racial tensions for his own political advantage. Chapter 10 is well annotated, and the book's notes section includes some interesting reading.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Although LeRoy Percy has been the dominant political force in Washington County for many years, times are changing. Many men think it is time for Percy to surrender his authority and influence, and they decide that a sure road to success can be found in embracing the Ku Klux Klan.

In 1921, a Klan klavern is organized in Washington County. Its leaders stand in direct conflict with the society that Percy has helped to create and desires to maintain. Percy, his wife a Catholic, squares off against various Klan representatives in public speeches and appearances and by writing letters to prominent citizens and newspapers.

Although the Klan does not gain an immediate foothold in Greenville, its influence is strong in towns and counties close by and throughout the entire nation. Although Percy resists, the Klan gains in strength and influence. However, it never gains control of the local government. Nationally, the Klan makes huge gains in power through 1924. By 1926, though, it is in rapid decline, largely due to the conviction of the national leaders on charges of rape and murder, and the Klan virtually ceases to exist by 1930.

As the Klan fades from prominence, Percy emerges as a victorious voice of reason in the region. In 1925, he is governor of the Federal Reserve Bank at St. Louis, a trustee of the Carnegie Foundation for International Peace, on the board of directors for the Rockefeller Foundation and well connected in local, state and national political circles.

Chapter 11 Analysis

Chapter 11 is also well annotated, and the book's notes section includes some interesting reading. This chapter details LeRoy Percy's fight to keep the Ku Klux Klan out of the Delta. He is largely successful simply because he is able to slow the tide of racial hatred until the national Ku Klux Klan falls into disrepute. Percy's objection seems to be based mostly in practical reasons. He feels that better race relations lead to better productivity from black laborers. Although Percy is largely successful in his efforts to restrict the Ku Klux Klan, his success comes at the price of a diminished political stature in the region.

The chapter also presents a brief overview of the history of the Ku Klux Klan, focusing on the second national Ku Klux Klan movement of the 1920s and 1930s. This second movement includes a good deal of anti-Catholicism, and Percy's wife is Catholic. Many Ku Klux Klan organizers express the opinion that this is the reason for Percy's resistance to the movement. Percy, however, realizes the Ku Klux Klan will not be good for social or economic reasons, and he opposes it on pragmatic terms.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

In 1922, the Mississippi River is rising. Based on a misunderstood bastardization of Eads and Humphreys' analyses, the Mississippi River Commission has established a policy of levees only, on the mistaken belief that the levees will direct the river's current in such a way as to deepen the river's channel. For decades, levees have been constructed which eliminate river reservoirs and outlets. This creates new farmland but also restricts the river and increases its flow. The flow, however, is insufficient to scour the riverbed and deepen the channel.

River flooding in 1912 and 1913 demonstrates the failure of the levees-only policy, but few choose to interpret the events correctly. Indeed, even Percy uses the flooding to obtain Federal money for further levee construction only. Policy reviews subsequent to the flooding generally recommend that the levees-only policy should remain in force and that levees should be strengthened and heightened. In 1921, the Cypress Creek outlet is sealed off, eliminating a vast natural reservoir.

When the waters continue to rise, in 1922, to and beyond record river heights, Percy strips his plantations of workers and assigns them to heighten the levees. He galvanizes local attention and focuses work on preserving and strengthening the levees, for which he obtains limited Federal funds and assistance. The levees at Greenville hold, though tributaries to the Mississippi flood due to backwater. The levees below New Orleans do not hold, and tens of thousands of refugees flee the flooding waters. As the down-river levees are failing, the river height in New Orleans drops dramatically, and the worst is over.

The Mississippi River Commission draws the conclusion that its policies are correct and that the only failures are due to substandard levee construction. Other engineers disagree, noting that the river height above Cyprus Creek is unremarkable. Only below the Cyprus Creek area are the waters at record levels, and nowhere is the volume of water remarkable. Although controversy and argument follow the 1922 flood, nothing substantial changes in river management.

Chapter 12 Analysis

Chapter 12 concludes Part Two - Senator Percy, the second of nine named sections of the text. This chapter recapitulates the history of flooding in the Mississippi River region prior to the 1927 flood and also summarizes many of the decisions that lead to the levees-only policy which will prove so devastating to the region. Much of the information presented has been previously presented in the book in greater detail, but it is here again summarized for clarification.

Many of the floods prior to 1927 are large in area but have little economic or social impact because the areas flooded have not yet been settled. The flood of 1927 is so important because, beyond its record-setting volume, it impacts areas that have become economically important to the nation.

The lack of federal intervention may seem puzzling to modern-day readers. The chapter includes some information, which will be later amplified in the book, to put this federal stance into the framework of the time.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

The first recorded flood of the Mississippi River dates to 1543, recorded by Garcilaso de la Vega, a member of Hernando de Soto's expedition. The winter of 1926-1927 is exceptionally wet. As early as September 1927, dozens of streams from Iowa to Illinois flood. Even as the rains keep pouring down, General Edgar Jadwin, chief of the Army Corps of Engineers, states that the Mississippi levees are in acceptable condition.

Although river flows and depths in early spring are setting records across the entire drainage basin, this information is not compiled or noted by the Weather Bureau or the Mississippi River Commission. River flood height depends on many conditions - chiefly the volume of water moving and the speed at which it is moving. The slower the flow, the more dangerous the flood. Slow rivers exert pressure on levees over a longer period of time, and slow rivers carrying large volumes of water increase in height.

River flow is typically measured in 'cfs,' or cubic-feet-per-second. The cfs rating is obtained by multiplying the average speed of the current by the river's cross section. As the cfs increases, the river's depth will also increase. The Mississippi in flood increases 50 or more feet in depth from the river's normal height, and the Mississippi's flow has been measured at roughly 9 miles per hour.

Chapter 13 Analysis

Chapter 13 introduces Part Three - The River, the third of nine named sections of the text. The chapter beings with a two-page detailed area map of the 1927 Mississippi flood. Chapter 13 also includes a substantive amount of somewhat technical detail regarding river flow, flooding and hydraulic engineering. This information is extremely useful in understanding later chapters' discussion of regional flooding.

Methods for measuring river lengths and volumes are presented, including a section explaining what is meant by flow-rate measurements. The book in general uses the measurement of cubic-feet-per-second, a rate of flow measuring how many cubic feet of water are moved through a riverbed in one second's time.

The quicker the flow, the greater the amount of water moved. Rapid flow causes scouring activity, which can theoretically remove sediment from the river's bed, deepening the channel. In practice, the Mississippi's flow is usually not sufficient to scour more sediment than is deposited by the river. Particularly at the river's mouth, this leads to a gradual filling of the river channel by the sediment the river carries.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

In the Delta during the 1920s, times are changing. The pace of technological and social change is rapid. Unseasonably high rivers in 1926 have prevented a large amount of annual levee maintenance and repair. Winter and spring storms in 1927 are extensive, full of precipitation and violent. Early in the year, tornadoes and high winds damage levees. Wave action on rivers throughout the region also damages levees.

Levee sabotage is feared. Individuals living on one side of the river could almost completely eliminate levee failure flood to their region by causing the levee on the other side of the river to fail. Early in 1927, communities begin to patrol their levees with armed men. Guards in Marked Tree, Arkansas, shoot four men trying to plant dynamite. Shootings continue for months.

As rivers rise and rain continues, local levee boards start operating continuously to try and strengthen local levees. Spring flooding in the upper Mississippi drainage basin, coupled with minor levee failures, start to destroy property, kill people and devastate large areas.

Early in 1927, more than one million acres of land are under water, including downtown Cincinnati and Pittsburgh. Oklahoma City is threatened. Over 50,000 refugees are living in temporary housing across seven states. The river is still on the rise, making it certain that flood levels will exceed those of 1922.

Tornadoes move through twelve states, and violent storms and rain continue. This storm system is the storm described in the Prologue. A levee in Arkansas is dynamited while levee guards fire on the saboteurs. As much as fifteen feet of water covers two millions of acres in Arkansas. The rain continues unabated, with as many as 15 inches of rain falling over major areas in 18 hours. The 1882 flood had covered 34,000 square miles to an average depth of 6.5 feet. The river is carrying far more water in 1927 than it had in 1882.

Chapter 14 Analysis

Chapter 14 begins a long discussion of the flood of 1927 by focusing on the weather causes of the flood. In short, an unusually wet and cold winter is followed by rapid warming and record-setting rainfall across most of the Mississippi River drainage basin. Although local data from Montana to Ohio suggests record-setting river levels are probable, no national summarization of these data exists, and no national advance warning is given. After the 1927 floods and other weather disasters, the national government will begin to take a more active role in national coordination and compilation of reported local conditions.

The chapter also includes a brief but interesting discussion of typical daily life in the 1920s, noting that socially and technologically the pace of change during that period of time is extremely rapid.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

A basic levee is simply a long mound of earth piled along a river to contain the waters. The levee systems along the Mississippi, however, are engineered and built to high standards. Between the normal riverbed and the levee structure is an expanse of land, often a mile or more wide, called the batture. The batture is typically deliberately forested to protect the levee from current scour. At the end of the batture is the barrow pit, from which the earth comes to erect the levee. The barrow pit serves as a dry moat and is typically 300 feet wide and 14 feet deep. The barrow is separated from the levee by the berm. The berm is flat ground, usually 40 feet wide. The levee proper is placed into a purposely dug trench called the muck ditch, to firmly weld it to the natural ground. The levee crown is at least 8 feet wide, and the sides have a three-to-one slope. Thus a 30-foot-high levee will be at least 188 feet wide, with an 8-foot crown and two 90-foot sloping sides. The entire levee is planted with thick grass to hold the soil, but no other growth which would impede inspections is allowed.

The land side of critical levee stretches is further strengthened by a banquette, an additional layer of earth which would make a 30-foot-high levee nearly 300 feet in width. Several construction flaws can threaten a levee, but most levees fail due to water pressure. Waves washing over the tops of levees quickly erode them. The river current can scour the base of the levee. The biggest danger, however, is simple pressure. The longer the levee contains the river, the more saturated and weaker the levee becomes. Vast water pressure can also scour out small tunnels beneath a levee, causing a miniature geyser to erupt on the far side. These are known as sand boils and can quickly scour away enough material to cause a levee to collapse.

As the water level continues to rise, more and more gangs of men, mostly black, are set to work to maintain and reinforce the levees while veterans are enlisted to guard the levees from sabotage. Black laborers are rounded up by police and forced to the levees to work. If a black man refuses, he is beaten, jailed or shot.

At Dorena, Missouri, 1200 feet of government-specification levee fail, despite the Mississippi River Commission's insistence that government levee is impregnable. Attempts to save the White River levees are abandoned, and one mile of levee near New Madrid, Missouri bursts apart. Levee guards in New Orleans shoot and kill suspected dynamiters. Tornadoes and storms continue, striking the lower Mississippi region. The Arkansas, White and Mississippi continue to rise.

Finally, the Mounds Landing levee fails. Water has been seeping through the levee for days, and sandbag walls have been erected but are not sufficient to stop waves from constantly washing over the top of the levee. Then the levee collapses, and the entire local area is quickly submerged.

Chapter 15 Analysis

A summary of levee construction is presented to illustrate that the failing levee system is not merely haphazard mounds of dirt, but a carefully engineered and constructed system of earthworks that is impressive and deemed impregnable. In fact, water during normal river levels is low enough that it cannot be seen by observers standing at the top of the levee.

Indeed, the levee system has held back many previous floods with relative ease. The system proves unable to withstand months of constant rain and record-setting river levels. Levee failures occur throughout the Mississippi drainage basin, with one of the worst happening at Mounds Landing, just a few miles North of Greenville.

Chapter 15 contains some of the most riveting passages in the book, as levee failures are described, with numerous eyewitness accounts quoted. Although most of the anecdotal scenes are brief, there are several of them, each told from a different point of view.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

According to estimates, several hundred people drown as the floodwaters rage through the countryside, though an exact accounting is never compiled. The crevasse at Mounds Landing is immense and quickly widens to three-quarters of a mile. The crevasse releases 468,000 cfs, more than twice the volume of Niagara Falls in flood. Within ten days, one million acres are underneath 10 feet of water.

The Mounds Landing crevasse is the largest single crevasse ever to occur anywhere on the Mississippi River. It floods an area 50 miles by 100 miles with up to 20 feet of water. Over 185,000 people are displaced by the flood. Nearly 70,000 of them will live in refugee camps, some as long as five months. The Red Cross feeds over 87,000 additional people outside of the refugee camps. Over 30,000 others leave the Delta area. Many more crevasses will open, devastating regions further south. In general, throughout the flood white people leave the area in the days leading up to the disasters, while black people remain behind and work, trying to prevent levee failure.

In Greenville, hope remains in an eight-foot-high protection levee that circles the back areas of town. When the waters from the Mounds Landing crevasse hit the protection levee, they explode into waves 15 feet high, swamping the levee and quickly building past eight feet in depth. Within minutes, the levee is washed away, and the town is flooded. The water released through the Mounds Landing crevasse will flood vast areas, but will also eventually flow back into the Mississippi River and continue south, breaking other levees and flooding other areas.

Chapter 16 Analysis

Chapter 16 concludes Part Three - The River, the third of nine named sections of the text. The actual flood through Greenville and the Delta is described in detail, from the failing levees through the flood stages. Numerous eyewitness anecdotes add to the interest of this chapter. Again, most of the eyewitness accounts are briefly related, but the quotes and stories are concise and pointed.

After the extensive background presented on Greenville in earlier chapters, the discussions of the city being flooded are particularly vivid. LeRoy Percy faces the flooding with a determination to rebuild. He does not concede defeat to the river and immediately begins to arrange for rebuilding funds from national banks.

Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary

The city of New Orleans is described in considerable detail, including its broad history, geography, flavor and culture. Particular attention is given to Mardi Gras and the role it plays in city politics. Several clubs of the social elite are enumerated and described. One such club, The Boston Club, is patronized by nearly all New Orleans bank presidents and also by LeRoy Percy. Members of the Boston Club, by virtue of the social status and financial power, will play a leading role in the way that New Orleans deals with the coming floodwaters. One club member, James Pierce Butler, Jr., is at the center of New Orleans money, society and power, and he will play a dominant part in the unfolding drama.

Chapter 17 Analysis

Chapter 17 introduces Part Four - The Club, the fourth of nine named sections of the text. Chapter 17 provides some background detail about the city of New Orleans. Although New Orleans is, itself, not flooded in 1927, it is the seat of a great deal of controversy, which is detailed in subsequent chapters. An understanding of the city and its society and politics is critical to understanding subsequent developments.

The chapter focuses on the social aspects of New Orleans, which are perhaps unlike any other city in the United States. Society is largely manifested in the Mardi Gras participation of various krewes, which have exclusive and discriminating membership. An individual person's social, and therefore political, influence is largely manifested by their position within Mardi Gras.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18 Summary

James Thompson is a newspaper publisher in New Orleans during the 1927 floods. Thompson, always seeking acceptance from the establishment, wants to be a member of society and the New Orleans clubs, but he is not able to penetrate the inner circles. Thompson, with a few others, controls access to news by selectively withholding information from print. Flood information and other unfavorable news items are routinely withheld, as Thompson and others fear it will damage the New Orleans economy.

St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana, lies on the Mississippi River below New Orleans. Continuous armed patrols begin of the levees in St. Bernard Parish. Locals are worried that New Orleans saboteurs will attempt to dynamite the levee downstream to relieve pressure on the New Orleans levee system.

Eventually panic spreads among New Orleans citizens, who can simply inspect the levees to see that the waters are rising. An exodus of people from the city and surrounding areas begins to take place. Isaac Cline, head of the U. S. Weather Bureau at New Orleans, issues warnings, called Flood Bulletins, which are generally ignored. Cline meets, unsuccessfully, with Thompson and others and demands honesty in news publishing.

Thompson and others meet as the waters continue to rise, and Thompson proposes dynamiting the levees south of New Orleans to prevent levee failure in the city proper. In one episode, lightning knocks out power to the New Orleans pumps, and furthermore rain delivers nearly 15 inches of water in just eighteen hours, putting portions of the city under as much as 4 feet of water.

Thompson's proposal to dynamite downstream levees begins to gain acceptance. One individual who agrees is James Pierce Butler. Butler is well connected in New Orleans and is a central figure in city society and politics. He is president of a powerful local bank and also president of the Boston Club. As such, he holds enormous influence over a variety of city boards and organizations. After a series of meetings between Butler and other prominent citizens, where all generally agree to dynamite downstream levees, Butler decides to involve public officials.

Chapter 18 Analysis

Chapter 18 is well annotated, and the book's notes section includes some interesting reading. The beginning of the decision to dynamite levees downstream from New Orleans is detailed in this chapter. The description of how this decision will be played out in more public and political ways is detailed in later chapters.

Additionally, the stranglehold exerted on the New Orleans newspapers by a small handful of individuals is discussed. This limited access to knowledge will have great impacts before, during and after the flood stages. The susceptibility of New Orleans to flooding, due to rain or levee failure, is great.

Chapter 19

Chapter 19 Summary

Plaquemines Parish and St. Bernard Parish lie along the course of the Mississippi River, below New Orleans. If the levees below New Orleans are purposefully destroyed, both parishes will be flooded. Both parishes are rural, largely swamp and lightly settled except for a slender strip of higher land near the ribbon of river.

Residents are fishermen, trappers and bootleggers. Bootlegging liquor is extremely profitable, and this illegal activity is the foundation of most of the political power and structure in the area. Discussions are held to determine whether the Mississippi River Commission will approve the dynamiting of the levee. One night, a skiff approaches a levee too closely, and the men aboard are shot at. One is killed.

An ad hoc Citizens Flood Relief Committee is formed in New Orleans to promote dynamiting the downstream levees. The Mounds Landing crevasse clearly demonstrates the enormity of the flood. As conditions continue to deteriorate in the entire region, President Coolidge appoints Commerce Secretary Herbert Hoover as chairman of a committee to coordinate all rescue and relief efforts. Hoover is also empowered to issue orders to the Army and Navy.

Thomson, in Washington, D. C., is actively presenting the case for dynamiting the levees. He eventually meets with Coolidge. Local papers recount Thomson's efforts to gain approval. St. Bernard citizens understand what is being suggested, and they begin to aggressively patrol the levee system.

During a navigational blunder, an oceangoing boat rams the levee south of New Orleans. Although an accident, the St. Bernard citizens apparently believe it to be a sabotage attempt. Meanwhile, Thomson has returned to Louisiana and attempts gain the support of Governor Oramel H. Simpson. After several hours of deliberation, Simpson agrees to the dynamiting.

Chapter 19 Analysis

If the levees downstream from New Orleans are dynamited, the Parishes of Plaquemines and St. Bernard will be largely destroyed by flood. Chapter 19 describes the two parishes' economies and lifestyles and includes their efforts at organizing to first resist the dynamiting and second gain promised reparations if it occurs. At first the citizens of the two parishes resist the dynamiting plan. Later, their political leaders realize the plan is going to happen regardless of their opposition. They therefore take a proactive role in trying to secure a promise of adequate reparation.

Chapter 20

Chapter 20 Summary

The social elite, led by Butler, continues to advocate dynamiting levees downstream of New Orleans to relieve pressure on the city's levee system. City attorneys issue a legal opinion supporting the dynamiting. Various city and state officials continue to meet to resolve issues and settle disputes. The outcomes are all in favor of dynamiting.

Citizens of St. Bernard and Plaquemines Parishes meet and officially demand full compensation in the event of intentional levee destruction. The citizens appoint a committee, which travels to New Orleans and obtains somewhat favorable terms for reimbursement. After a final round of debates, Governor Simpson signs the order. The levee will be dynamited in three days. Local business interests almost immediately rebound.

One night, groups of armed St. Bernard Parish men visit numerous prominent bankers, who have guaranteed reimbursement, in New Orleans. They intend to ensure the promises are kept. The implications are obvious. By now, the flood story has attained national prominence and is on the front pages of newspapers as remote as Salt Lake City's *Deseret News*. Levees are failing. 200,000 people are refugees, and rivers are still rising.

Hoover inspects the site of the future dynamiting with other officials. Their boat is fired upon from the levee. Eventually, all refugees have evacuated the lower parishes. Official permits are required to watch the actual dynamiting, and the social elite of New Orleans have obtained their permits and traveled via boat to the site. The east bank levee is dynamited in a series of explosions, releasing 250,000 cfs onto the lower parishes. The Glasscock levee on the west bank of the Mississippi gives way the day after the dynamiting, releasing pressure on New Orleans levees. The destruction of St. Bernard and Plaquemines proves unnecessary.

Chapter 20 Analysis

Chapter 20 concludes Part Four - The Club, the fourth of nine named sections of the text. The decision to dynamite the levees and purposefully create tens of thousands of refugees seems shocking. The book explains, however, that in the 1920s a dominant social belief is that men who are rich and powerful are not only financially superior to others, but morally and intellectually superior as well. Since these men promote the idea, it must have merit.

Chapter 20 includes the actual dynamiting of the levee downstream from New Orleans, which results in the flooding and virtual destruction of Plaquemines and St. Bernard Parishes. Because this flooding is intentional, and because New Orleans has nominally

guaranteed reparations, the subsequent Red Cross relief and rebuilding efforts will deny aid to the lower parishes.

Chapter 21

Chapter 21 Summary

Chapter 21 gives a brief biography of Calvin Coolidge. Coolidge does not personally involve himself in the flooding, instead appointing Hoover chairman of a special committee. Herbert Hoover's life is also described. Hoover is a well-known, wealthy, successful and accomplished engineer before he ventures to Washington. Hoover runs vast relief programs during and after World War I and becomes a well-respected organizer. He runs for president in 1920, losing but obtaining a cabinet seat as Secretary of Commerce. When Hoover is appointed to chair the flood relief committee, he sees it as a golden opportunity to gain favor with the American voting public.

Chapter 21 Analysis

Chapter 21 introduces Part Five - The Great Humanitarian, the fifth of nine named sections of the text. It is well annotated, and the book's notes section includes some interesting reading. This chapter provides background information on national politics, as well as a fairly extensive biography of Herbert Hoover, who will dominate the political aspects of the rescue and rebuilding efforts. Hoover is frequently referred to as 'The Great Humanitarian' in the press.

The information presented on Hoover establishes his credentials and influence in Washington. The discussion makes it clear why he is selected to lead the rescue and rebuilding programs. Although the remaining biographical information on Hoover is interesting, much of it is not particularly necessary to understanding his role in the remainder of the book.

Chapter 22

Chapter 22 Summary

Hoover quickly shifts the national discussion from disaster to organization. Under his guidance, the Red Cross sets up a headquarters in Memphis. Fund-raising drives are organized. Hoover sets up a special headquarters train, including a railroad car for reporters. Hoover carefully creates a potent publicity machine. He also makes red tape disappear, using his power to authorize broad programs. Order finally begins to emerge.

Tens of thousands of people are living on rooftops or in trees, hungry and wet. The few boats in the flooded areas are insufficient to mount successful rescue operations. Under Hoover's guidance, with the Red Cross as organizational power, boats are imported, commandeered and organized. Soon, thousands of people are transported to high ground, often to the levee itself. Eventually, nearly one thousand boats of all sorts will be organized in the relief effort. Flooding continues. In May, the levee at Cabin Teele, Louisiana, fails, flooding vast areas to the west.

Chapter 22 Analysis

Chapter 22 contains numerous rescue anecdotes and eyewitness accounts of post-flooding activities. It is one of the most interesting and compelling chapters in the book. This chapter gives a large amount of information on the process of national planning and debate that formulates Hoover's approach to flood rescue and rebuilding. Dominating the discussion, however, is Hoover's desire to further his political goals. It is interesting to note how much real power is given to Hoover to promote an adequate regional response.

Chapter 23

Chapter 23 Summary

Refugee camps, referred to at the time as 'concentration camps,' are established at appropriate places. They are generally designed to hold 10,000 people. Rain continues to fall. Several miles of the Bayou des Glaises levee fail. Approximately 105,000 people are evacuated. At Melville, the Atchafalaya River breaks through its levee system. At McCrea, 700 feet of levee fail. The final crevasse of the 1927 flood releases water rushing at 30 miles per hour.

June sees continued rain and a second flood crest moving down the Mississippi River. Many areas previously flooded in March and April again are inundated. The flood makes Hoover a national hero. Coolidge has done nothing, and does not visit the flooded areas though he is invited numerous times. Hoover is efficient, compassionate and effective. He also makes sure that national news knows of his successes. He gains the national spotlight and ensures a popular and bright political future.

Chapter 23 Analysis

Chapter 23 concludes Part Five - The Great Humanitarian, the fifth of nine named sections of the text. This chapter details the essentials of Hoover's rescue plans, which are put into motion even as levees continue to fail. In general, the states in the flooded areas are largely responsible for their own citizens and finances. Hoover's national approach is focused around the National Red Cross, the only organization deemed adequately established to handle a coordinated rescue and rebuilding effort. The approach is to coordinate nationally but execute locally. The National Red Cross will provide funds, personnel and information, but it is left to the local Red Cross organizations to actually execute the efforts.

In most areas, this approach is successful. The decentralized approach, however, will leave Hoover and the National Red Cross open to criticism if some of the local Red Cross organizations prove unsuitable to the task.

Chapter 24

Chapter 24 Summary

Chapter 24 presents a biography of William Alexander Percy. Will, the son of LeRoy Percy, is very different from his father. Will prefers books and poetry to business and hunting. The two men never see things the same way. As a teenager, Will avoids behaviors he considers sinful and resents much of his father's behavior.

Will's younger brother, LeRoy, Jr., is the son that LeRoy Percy has always wanted. He is boyish, rough and full of life. When LeRoy, Jr., is 11 years old, he is accidentally shot and killed by a friend with a rifle that LeRoy gave LeRoy, Jr. Will, apparently, blames his father for the death.

Will graduates from Sewanee at age 19, subsequently spending a year in Europe where he is ignored by his parents. He then graduates from Harvard Law school, returns to Greenville and practices law at his father's firm. He also actively pursues a career in poetry and develops a wide reputation.

Although Will speaks with his father nearly daily, LeRoy chooses to develop a strong relationship with his nephew instead of his own son - the nephew with whom LeRoy hunted, gambled and caroused. Will is a closeted homosexual, apparently having a sexual relationship with one of his black servants and making trips to European homosexual destinations. He never embraces the life fully at home.

During World War I, Will volunteers for service and serves in combat with distinction, although he is horrified and disgusted with war. He returns a captain, decorated with the Croix de Guerre, a Gold Star and a Silver Star. He resumes the practice of law. Though Will develops a working relationship with his father, they will never become close friends and always hold separate worldviews. Will is chairman of the Washington County Red Cross during the floods of 1927, and he is also appointed head of a special flood relief committee.

Chapter 24 Analysis

Chapter 24 introduces Part Six - The Son, the sixth of nine named sections of the text. This chapter provides a detailed biography of William Alexander Percy, referred to as Will in the text. Will will lead the Greenville, Mississippi, rescue efforts through a series of disasters which will culminate in the worst bungling, nationally, of the entire aftermath.

Although Will is a combat veteran with several decorations and has proved valiant and decisive under enemy fire, his organizational and social skills in a non-combat milieu are lacking. Prior to the emergency, his social influence is based largely on his father's reputation. He will not emerge as a man of his own.

Chapter 25

Chapter 25 Summary

When news of the Mounds Landing crevasse reaches Greenville several hours in advance of the floodwaters, panic spreads. Many with means flee the area. Almost all blacks, poor whites and a few business leaders remain. Will Percy heads an organization meeting where the city's response is planned. When the waters come, they quickly destroy the city's protection levee.

As the waters flood the city, LeRoy realizes his dreams are being destroyed along with the society he has helped to create. He feels that if the black labor force leaves the area, it will never return. Without black laborers, the Delta will never recover. He sets about using his connections and influence to raise money, both as contributions and loans.

Rescuers bring thousands of refugees from all over the county to the levee to join the thousands from the city already there. After several hours of rescue and organization attempts, Will declares a 'voluntary' martial law - essentially subjecting blacks to orders given by the National Guard.

Greenville is cut off from supplies, and serious food shortages are quickly obvious. Temperatures drop into the forties at night, and everything is wet and muddy. The levee is a madhouse, with miles of people in a row, no housing, no facilities of any kind and no prospect of change. The refugee population continues to grow. Then the city water supply becomes contaminated.

Will, nominally in charge, decides to evacuate the refugees to dry ground outside of the county. Over a few days, he gains the grudging support of other flood relief committee members. He does not gain his father's support. LeRoy speaks to flood relief committee members separately and then urges Will to hold another meeting. When Will calls the meeting, the flood relief committee members have all changed their minds. The black refugees must remain on the levee and with Washington County. There will be no evacuation. Will's influence suffers a severe blow from which it will never recover.

Hoover comes to Greenville and meets LeRoy and Will. Hoover has already agreed to the evacuation, but he quickly accedes to Will's changed plan, turning Greenville into a point of concentration of rescue and relief efforts. The first levee refugee death is reported in April. In Greenville during the ensuing days, looting becomes problematic, and an 8 p.m. curfew for blacks is instituted. A week after the flooding, approximately 4,000 whites remain in Greenville, living in the city on second floors or high ground. Commerce returns, and "the black market" starts doing thriving business. Nearly 13,000 blacks are still living on the levee. Another 5,000 are crowded into a warehouse. The National Guard patrols the levee camp with rifles and fixed bayonets. The blacks are imprisoned. They cannot leave the town.

Will continues to organize relief efforts, but he needs manpower. Humiliated by having to reverse his position, he turns cold. Under Will's management, the levee camp will become a slave camp. Weeks after the levee breaks, water is still pouring into Greenville. Will sets the black population to work to seal the levees and clean up the wreckage in the city.

Chapter 25 Analysis

Chapter 25 is well annotated, and the book's notes section includes some interesting reading. This chapter includes a rather lengthy and interesting section describing Greenville city life in the days and weeks following the flooding. It also details the city's reaction to the impending flood and describes how Will initially reacts nobly but is humiliated and undermined by his father.

The book suggests that LeRoy's behind-the-scenes erosion of Will's authority causes Will's rapid moral breakdown. Although it is interesting to speculate on what would have happened if Will's early evacuation plan had been carried out, this would only be speculation. Once Wills authority is undermined, Will appears to be unable to regain any semblance of control of the situation, which rapidly deteriorates. In fact, the only reason the general situation improves is because the flood finally ends and conditions naturally return to normal.

Chapter 26

Chapter 26 Summary

In the 1920s the national black vote could be a potent force in politics. Hoover, in particular, needs black support if he is to win the presidency. National black leaders contact Hoover and complain of the treatment of blacks in the Greenville area, urging him to take action.

Hoover understands the political ramifications of the situation. His main response is damage control, but he does issue refugee treatment directives via the Red Cross. Hoover also appoints a Colored Advisory Commission to investigate the allegations, selecting Robert Russa Moton as chairman of the commission.

Chapter 26 Analysis

National politics of the 1920s are described, particularly in terms of race. Hoover is portrayed as a self-seeking politician, rather ruthless in his dealings with blacks. The author also gives biographical information on Moton. Hoover apparently selects Moton because Hoover feels Moton will be easily manipulated. It is unfortunate that the book portrays only a single prominent black political leader of the time - Moton. Moton is furthermore portrayed as rather ignorant and easily fooled.

Chapter 27

Chapter 27 Summary

Even at the end of May, the Mississippi is in flood, with water flowing through most of the levee breaks. Regions flooded earlier are struggling back to normalcy as the waters recede. Greenville commerce has started again, and many citizens have returned to their homes.

Then the Mississippi begins to rise again, and areas begin to flood again. The Greenville protection levee is still in shambles, and Will becomes determined to seal several thousand feet of gaps before the rising water again floods the city. A series of increasingly acrimonious public meetings result in the city council declaring that black workers will be conscripted by force if they fail to volunteer.

The black community refuses this ultimatum, instead offering to self-organize work parties. This proposal is accepted, and the levee is sealed without the need of white armed guards to enforce labor. The water rises to ten feet in depth, but the sandbagged levee holds. The crisis passes. For a few days, racial tension diminishes. Even so, racial inequality is blatant. Whites keep most Red Cross food and supplies for their own use or accept the free supplies in bulk and later sell them.

Tempers grow short, and mud and filth are everywhere. Food is in short supply. Police again begin conscripting blacks for forced labor gangs, and any goodwill between blacks and whites quickly evaporates. LeRoy arranges for Hoover to address the black community, but the result is not noticeable. As the floodwaters continued to recede, there is a surge of violence against blacks in Greenville and the entire Delta region. They are robbed, raped and murdered, and national investigations center the blame on Greenville.

On one occasion, police shoot and kill a black man sitting on his own porch. The black community responds by stopping work. Will addresses them at a church gathering. Instead of trying to soothe tensions, he attacks the black community, accusing them of laziness. He even blames the death on the black community itself. The historical bond between the Percy family and the blacks is broken. Racial tensions run high, and Will responds by leaving for an extended trip to Japan, escaping the criticism.

Chapter 27 Analysis

Chapter 27 concludes Part Six - The Son, the sixth of nine named sections of the text. The incredible flood response in Greenville, Mississippi, is described in this chapter. Nationally, the response is somewhat successful, but in Greenville the response is basically a racial one, where whites stand armed guard over blacks, who are forced to perform unremunerated labor and live in unsanitary conditions. The book lays the blame squarely on Will Percy's inability to lead.

The Greenville situation is quickly reported to the National Red Cross, and reports find their way into newspapers across the nation. This, of course, reflects poorly on the National Red Cross and on Hoover's leadership. Hoover's visit to Greenville is motivated by self-interest more than by a desire to correct the situation. Hoover's damage control is largely successful, but it makes little difference to the Greenville refugees.

Chapter 28

Chapter 28 Summary

The flood stage at Cairo, Illinois, lasts six months, as does the flood stage at Memphis and Vicksburg. The flood stage at Baton Rouge lasts five months. In New Orleans the flood stage lasts only four months because of the dynamiting. Daily flood bulletins through the region are issued throughout the first half of 1927. The refugees of Plaquemines and St. Bernard Parishes begin to seek their guaranteed recompense. James Butler, center of power and finance in New Orleans, will make the determination of what will be recompensed and for how much.

Hoover and the Red Cross refuse to care for the refugees of the lower parishes, as they have been guaranteed care by New Orleans. Butler is not eager to spend money. The New Orleans financial elite subsequently spends an inordinate amount of time and effort to convince national business interests that New Orleans has never been in any danger of flood. In a series of startlingly revisionist moves, papers across the country are convinced or cowed into printing updated articles. This angers those parish citizens who have given up their homes to ensure the safety of New Orleans.

Chapter 28 Analysis

Chapter 28 introduces Part Seven - The Club, the seventh of nine named sections of the text. The chapter includes a summarization of the flood stages of the major areas described in the book, and it makes interesting reading. The after-effects of the levee dynamiting downstream from New Orleans is described in detail.

The displaced residents seek the good-faith repayments promised by the leading citizens of New Orleans, but they are disappointed. The chapter presents the details of a variety of means used to reject the claims of the refugees. Most of the strategies are technical and are centered in process and law. This places insurmountable roadblocks on refugees seeking assistance.

Chapter 29

Chapter 29 Summary

New Orleans and its leading citizens have publicly promised the citizens of the lower parishes that they will be compensated for their financial loss. Butler will determine how New Orleans meets its moral commitment. In a series of political and legal moves, Butler issues many conciliatory and promising words, but in essence he ensures that the refugees will be swindled. Butler and his appointees charge the refugees for their care, pay out only pennies on the dollar for their losses and push them out of New Orleans as rapidly as possible.

He threatens any attorneys who take up refugees' cases with disbarment, refuses partial payments and disallows ongoing investigations. Refugees who need money are forced to settle quickly and definitively, often before they can return to their land to assess losses.

Butler uses a variety of means to limit payments. For example, when trappers file claims for lost income, Butler refers to their previous years' tax receipts rather than their sales receipts. Since many trappers fail to pay taxes on their sales, they cannot seek a fair compensation.

Butler's bank, however, is compensated handsomely for the temporary use of its yacht during rescue operations. Butler is so successful and brutal in limiting compensation payments that citizens statewide begin to resent him. Governor Simpson, facing a re-election campaign, is well aware of the outrage among the victims.

Chapter 29 Analysis

Butler and his hand-selected staff refuse fair treatment of the refugees. Chapter 29 details the abuses and many of the methods used by Butler to deny payment, explaining why the process becomes so onerous to the refugees. The reaction outside of New Orleans is one of outrage.

One of the most controversial methods Butler uses to limit payments is to refuse any partial payments or claims. In effect, a refugee is required to submit a single claim for all damages and, subsequently, receive a single settlement payment. Most refugees need immediate cash to purchase clothing, food and shelter, and their only source of funds is the repayment process. Simultaneously, most refugees are unable to return home to survey the damage and gather the required evidence to substantiate their claims. The end result is that many claimants settle for an immediate partial payment to put food on the table, sacrificing any possibility of a reasonable settlement in the future. Butler also arranges for his own people to create the processes and rules of the repayment board, effectively putting objections and appeals beyond the reach of refugees.

Chapter 30

Chapter 30 Summary

Governor Simpson and others attempt to find an acceptable solution to the repayment problems. The Reparations Commission is supposed to treat claimants fairly, but in reality it has no power. Simpson involves Butler in private and public talks. Butler makes promises, speeches and public pronouncements, but he continues to take no action.

Some large claimants with political or social influence, as well as claimants with ties to Butler, are paid off in special deals, but the average person is treated unfairly. Due to Butler's financial influence, newspapers start to run stories stating that the reparations are fair and timely.

In St. Bernard and Plaquemines Parishes, total claims reach $35 million. Only $12.5 million is accepted by the board, and less than $4 million is actually approved. From that, nearly $1 million is deducted as charges for feeding and housing refugees. Of the roughly $3 million that is actually paid out, over $2 millions goes to large claimants, leaving only $800,000 to divide between 2,809 claimants.

The two parishes are destitute, and starvation is a real and widespread problem. Butler and the Reparations Commissions launch a public relations program, which proclaims that the reparations are fair, successful and equitable. Some lawsuits are filed, but they are dismissed or otherwise disposed of. Large bonuses are paid to Butler's hatchet men. No bank, business or governmental agency ever makes a voluntary reparation payment. No charity drive is ever organized.

Chapter 30 Analysis

Chapter 30 concludes Part Seven - The Club, the seventh of nine named sections of the text. This chapter details the political response to Butler's refusal to pay honest reparations. In effect, the chapter states that Butler is in complete control, and even the state's governor is unable to alter the situation.

The refugees are cheated. The average working class person receives less than $300 worth of repayment in exchange for the total destruction of their homes and livelihoods. Although legal claims will continue for some time, Butler will effectively make very few payments. Nationally, newspapers condemn Butler's tactics, but that matters little to New Orleans. In the end, the refugees are largely not paid for the damages they sustain.

Chapter 31

Chapter 31 Summary

In September, much of the Mississippi River drainage basin lays in ruin and rot. At the site of most crevasses, the flooding waters have scoured new lakes. The Delta has the world's richest soil, but it is the poorest region in the nation. Hoover is placed in a position of power in the area, and he intends to make sweeping changes in the area's economy and society. Under his direction, packets of vegetable seeds are distributed to refugees, and home economists and agricultural experts teach captive audiences how to be more productive.

Hoover organizes a separate reconstruction corporation in Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi. He encourages bankers to invest in the corporations. The efforts are only partially successful, as area investments are far lower than expected, although nationally contributions are acceptable.

Although there is a national goodwill toward the flooded areas, less than one-third of the desired funds are gathered. Those funds that are gathered and made available are not well utilized. Most individuals no longer have any collateral that would enable them to obtain loans from the funds.

Hoover also establishes committees to determine what the future response to Mississippi flooding should be and to study methods on how to prevent damage from that flooding. This approach marks a sea-change in American politics. Most people, and certainly most politicians, of the time consider social involvement to be outside of the realm of government. Hoover enlists LeRoy Percy and Butler's assistance in muting criticism, and then Hoover again declares success. Although huge reconstruction problems remain, the nation views Hoover as a hero.

Chapter 31 Analysis

Chapter 31 introduces Part Eight - The Great Humanitarian, the eighth of nine named sections of the text. This chapter is particularly well annotated, and the book's notes section includes some interesting reading. Chapter 31 deals with long-term reconstruction efforts. Prior to the flood of 1927, the national government has not engaged in local humanitarian assistance. Most citizens feel that such behavior is beyond the scope of good government. Under Hoover's guidance and publicity, however, this opinion begins to change.

The flooded areas will be dealt with on a national level, and reconstruction will be a regional and governmental process. Furthermore, the future of the Mississippi River will be handled by federal government programs. This marks a sea-change in the national expectation of federal involvement in local conditions. Today, of course, most citizens

expect the federal government to assist in times of crisis, but that is not the typical expectation in 1927.

Chapter 32

Chapter 32 Summary

Hoover enlists the assistance of Moton to deflect criticism from the national black community. Moton organizes the Colored Advisory Committee, which conducts investigations in the flooded areas. The committee quickly confirms reports that blacks are systematically being held in labor camps against their will and are being forced to work. Hoover causes the report to be heavily censored. In return, he promises future assistance for blacks.

When Coolidge announces that he will not seek reelection, Hoover is the obvious candidate. Through a series of meetings, Hoover uses Moton and other black leaders to deflect criticism of his handling of the rebuilding of black communities. Hoover promises future resettlement funds for blacks in exchange for support from the black community. Hoover knows that such funds will never actually become available.

Chapter 32 Analysis

Chapter 32 describes Hoover's continued political ambitions. Moton is again described as at best myopic in his dealings with Hoover. Moton's committee performs on-site investigations of conditions and produces a report which states that racial discrimination and outright forced labor are indeed prevalent in several areas, notably Greenville.

Hoover quickly causes the report to be heavily censored before it is released. In return, Hoover tells Moton that rebuilding funds will be made available to black families. Although the report is only released in its censored form, the promised funds are never forthcoming. Moton, the only national black leader mentioned in the book, is portrayed as well meaning but nearly incompetent and easily fooled. Other biographical sources portray Moton in a vastly different light.

Chapter 33

Chapter 33 Summary

After the flooding comes a drought, then infestations of insects and worms, followed by an early freeze. Less than one quarter of the meager available crops are harvested. Tens of thousands of people develop pellagra, a disease of malnutrition. Subsequent rebuilding leads to extensive and systematic racial discrimination and political corruption. Although Hoover has fostered the Colored Advisory Committee, their plans and vision are extremely different. Hoover uses the committee as long as it is politically expedient, but he does not come through on his many promises. Meanwhile, Moton continues to support Hoover, apparently unaware that Hoover has no real intentions of making good. Hoover wins the presidential nomination.

Chapter 33 Analysis

Chapter 33 concludes Part Eight - The Great Humanitarian, the eighth of nine named sections of the text. This chapter provides more information on the long-term after-effects of the flood. The author considers many aspects, with a focus on the sociopolitical sphere.

The flooding is devastating, but the region will not quickly recover. A series of disastrous after-effects cause most of the crops which survive the flooding to be destroyed. Labor is in such short supply that, for the most part, the few crops which do survive are not harvested.

Severe food shortages and poor living conditions lead to widespread disease and malnutrition. Tens of thousands of people are afflicted. There are cases of starvation and near starvation in poorer areas. Thousands of people are without adequate housing or sanitation for months.

The supplies, food and medicine provided by the National Red Cross are received by local Red Cross administrators and then rationed to the citizens with little national oversight. As a result, some corrupt local Red Cross administrators sell the items for profit. In other areas, the items are used as blackmail to force black families to remain in the local labor market. Hoover adeptly manipulates the national media to ensure that only successes are reported, while failures go largely undisclosed.

Chapter 34

Chapter 34 Summary

The dynamiting of the levee below New Orleans is a tacit admission by local, state and federal government that the levees-only policy of Mississippi River management is a failure. New plans will allow the river to spread over larger areas. In effect, outlets and reservoirs will be used.

The legislation that will result will be the most expensive single piece of legislation Congress has ever enacted. The legislation is designed in large part by a Tri-State Flood Control Committee, which includes LeRoy Percy and Butler. Hoover heavily influences the committee. Hoover decides that relief to flood sufferers by Congress is inappropriate, and the committee adopts that position.

A long series of committee, Congressional and public meetings debate the appropriate scope of the legislation. Thomson, unasked, moves to Washington to engage himself in the debates. Eventually, the original scope proposed by the committee is largely adopted, and a new engineering approach is proposed, which will be national in scope. The law will undergo constant and minor refinements.

The law, by making river management a national concern, sets a precedent of direct and expanded federal involvement in local affairs. This reflects a major shift in what Americans consider the proper role of the national government. Governor Simpson is defeated in the election following the flood. Many local politicians are also swept from office. Within a few years of the flood, most New Orleans and regional banks fail. New Orleans itself never recuperates financially from the devastating losses caused by the flood. The city enters a long period of decay.

Chapter 34 Analysis

Chapter 34 introduces Part Nine - The Leaving of the Waters, the last of nine named sections of the text. This chapter covers a lot of ground and deals almost exclusively with the long-term and national effects that the flood will cause. The chapter is, in effect, a summarization of the ensuing several years in politics.

In summation, various national and regional committees are formed to pursue a new national strategy, and several minor commissions investigate aspects of river management and hydraulic engineering. Although many organizations are involved, the original suggestions of the Tri-State Flood Control Committee are largely adopted without change.

The enormous national effort subsequently focused on preventing Mississippi River flooding has a dramatic impact on the future role of the federal government. Prior to this period, most citizens feel that the federal government's role in daily life, including

disaster relief and humanitarian aid, should be severely limited. Instead, state and local governments and organizations like the National Red Cross are expected to provide these services.

The vast scope of the 1927 disaster proves that such local organization is unable to respond in a coordinated manner to a disaster of national scope. The public response to one million refugees living in camps for months at a time enables Hoover and others to expand the federal government's involvement into the realm of social engineering. Today, of course, most citizens expect the federal government to respond to any natural crisis with immediate rescue and rebuilding assistance. This sea-change in attitude first occurs immediately after the widespread Mississippi and tributary flooding of 1927.

Chapter 35

Chapter 35 Summary

Hoover is the Republican candidate for president. Moton turns to him for realization of promises made, but Hoover declines to help. In the following months Moton becomes aware that Hoover has made empty promises, though Moton will never publicly criticize Hoover. Other black leaders are not so forgiving, and Hoover loses a substantial amount of the traditionally Republican black vote. Still, Hoover wins the presidency in a landslide. Although he does receive the majority of the black vote, he has essentially split the Republican Party from the black vote.

The Delta is still devastated. As late as 1928, a year after the Mounds Landing flooding, the Red Cross is still feeding 12,000 people in Washington County. Blacks leave the Delta in increasing numbers and do not return. Within a year of the flooding, approximately one half of all blacks have emigrated. In fact, blacks leave the south in record numbers. Chicago is a principle destination.

In 1929, LeRoy Pratt Percy, LeRoy Percy's cherished nephew, commits suicide. Will flees the county, traveling to the Grand Canyon for a months-long stay. In 1929, Will's mother dies, and on Christmas Eve, 1929, LeRoy Percy dies. Although Greenville whites are in public mourning, a rumor circulates among blacks that LeRoy's final words were, "'No matter what you do, keep your foot on the black moccasin's head. If you take it off he's going to crawl away'" (p. 418).

In 1937, the Mississippi again reaches near record heights, but the new flood control plan proves successful. As the waters are rising, frightened Greenville whites want to again call out the National Guard, but Will Percy prevents it. Will Percy dies in 1941.

Chapter 35 Analysis

Chapter 35 concludes Part Nine - The Leaving of the Waters, the last of nine named sections of the text. This chapter details Moton's tardy realization that Hoover has abjectly manipulated him for political gains. Although Hoover's treatment of blacks will have eventual repercussions, they are largely outside the scope of the text.

The book mentions another episode of the Mississippi River in flood, in 1937, noting that the new national flood plans are successful in preventing damage. In Greenville, however, the social damage done during the 1927 flood causes racial tensions to run high. The chapter also includes some wrapping up material, including the deaths of LeRoy and Will Percy, and serves as a good conclusion to the book.

Appendix, The River Today

Appendix, The River Today Summary

The Mississippi River today is managed by a plan called Project Flood. The project features several enhancements to the 1920s levees-only plan. A large floodway parallels the river in the north, yielding an area 5 miles wide by 65 miles long as a natural reservoir. Stronger levees line most of the river. Cutoffs have shortened the river by 150 miles and increased its rate of flow. A large structure portions water between the Mississippi and Atchafalaya. Finally, a concrete spillway has been constructed above New Orleans to allow water to flow into Lake Pontchartrain. Still, the plan has problems and shortcomings and must be continually revised.

Appendix, The River Today Analysis

The appendix includes information on the Mississippi River management programs at the time of publication (1997), noting that to date they have been generally successful. The text was written prior to the 2005 disaster of Hurricane Katrina, which devastated New Orleans and the surrounding areas, largely in part due to the failing of the levees in the New Orleans vicinity.

Characters

Andrew Atkinson Humphreys

James Buchanan Eads

LeRoy Percy

James Pierce Butler

Herbert Hoover

William Alexander Percy

Robert Russa Moton

Objects/Places

Arkansas

Arkansas is a state bordering the Mississippi River. Arkansas suffers extensive flooding during the 1927 floods, primarily along the Mississippi, Arkansas, White and St. Francis Rivers. Arkansas is a member of the Tri-State Flood Control Committee, formed after the 1927 flooding to create a new strategy for dealing with the Mississippi River.

Crevasse

A crevasse is a breech in a levee caused either by sabotage or erosion. Crevasses are the result of levee failure, and they allow flooding water to leave the riverbed and pour onto adjoining areas. During 1927, a series of catastrophic crevasses lead to extensive flooding.

Delta

Also known as the Mississippi Delta or the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, the Delta is bounded on the west by the Mississippi River and the east by the Yazoo River. It extends from about Memphis on the north to the confluence of the Mississippi and Yazoo Rivers in the south, and it is about 7,000 square miles in area. It contains some of the world's richest soil and has historically been one of the nation's poorest areas. The Delta surrounds Greenville, Mississippi, and is the area described in much of the book.

Greenville, Mississippi

Greenville is a city in the Delta region of Mississippi, located in Washington County and named after the American Revolutionary War hero Nathanael Greene. The city's history during the 1920s is strongly influenced by the Percy family, which helps to establish an enduring local society based on racial tolerance. Greenville is the central focus of much of the book.

Ku Klux Klan

During the latter 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan is a national fraternal organization promoting moral regeneration and purity, as well as virulent racist, anti-Jewish, anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant values. Organized as a profit-making venture, it spreads rapidly throughout the United States. Eventually it collapses amidst scandal and criminality. Note that various other organizations, not referred to by the book, have used the same name.

Levee

A basic levee is simply a long mound of earth piled along the banks of a river to contain the waters if they threaten to flood. The levee systems along the Mississippi, however, are engineered and built to high standards. Between the normal riverbed and the levee structure is an expanse of land, often a mile or more wide, called the batture. The batture is typically deliberately forested to protect the levee from current scour. At the end of the batture is the barrow pit, from which the earth comes to erect the levee. The barrow pit serves as a dry moat and is typically 300 feet wide and 14 feet deep. The barrow is separated from the levee by the berm. The berm is flat ground, usually 40 feet wide. The levee proper is placed into a pre-dug trench called the muck ditch, to firmly weld it to the natural ground. The levee crown is at least 8 feet wide, and the sides have a three-to-one slope. Thus a 30-foot-high levee will be at least 188 feet wide, with an 8-foot crown and two 90-foot sloping sides. The entire levee is planted with thick grass to hold the soil, but no other growth which would impede inspections is allowed. The land side of critical levee stretches is further strengthened by a banquette, an additional layer of earth which will make a 30-foot-high levee nearly 300 feet in width.

Louisiana

Louisiana is a state bordering the Mississippi River. Louisiana suffers extensive flooding during the 1927 floods, primarily along the Mississippi and Atchafalaya Rivers. Louisiana is also a member of the Tri-State Flood Control Committee, formed after the 1927 flooding to create a new strategy for dealing with the Mississippi River.

Much of the book focuses on the flooding that happens in St. Bernard and Plaquemines Parishes, near the effluent of the Mississippi River, after the levee below New Orleans is intentionally destroyed. The book also provides a considerable amount of background on the state's social and political events of the 1920s, centered on the city of New Orleans.

Mississippi

Mississippi is a state bordering the Mississippi River. Mississippi suffers extensive flooding during the 1927 floods, primarily along the Mississippi and Yazoo Rivers, and focused on the Delta region. Mississippi is a member of the Tri-State Flood Control Committee, formed after the 1927 flooding to create a new strategy for dealing with the Mississippi River.

Mississippi is particularly hard hit by the flooding which centers on the Delta region, devastating the city of Greenville. The book provides a great deal of detail about the history of the state, along with information on its culture and social and political events prior to the flooding of 1927.

Mississippi River

The Mississippi River is the second-longest river in the United States (after only the Missouri River, which flows into the Mississippi River), at an approximate length of 2,320 miles. The Mississippi River is the largest river system in North America. Major tributaries to the Mississippi River include the Illinois, Missouri, Ohio and Arkansas Rivers. There are dozens of other large tributaries. The Atchafalaya River is a major outlet of the Mississippi.

The Mississippi River drains most of the area between the Rocky and Appalachian Mountains, excepting only the area drained by the Great Lakes. The Mississippi runs through or borders ten states, including Arkansas, Mississippi and Louisiana, and it empties into the Gulf of Mexico. The Mississippi River is generally divided into the upper Mississippi, above the Ohio River tributary, and the lower Mississippi. The flooding of 1927 is largely confined to the lower Mississippi area.

Through a process known as deltaic switching, the lower Mississippi River has shifted its effluent from time to time, because of continued sediment deposits which change the effluent landscape. This process has caused the coastline of Louisiana to advance into the Gulf of Mexico by many miles. In the spring of 1927, the Mississippi River breaks its banks at 145 places, inundating over 27,000 square miles to a depth of up to 30 feet.

Mounds Landing Crevasse

The Mounds Landing crevasse is a breech in the levee system near Mounds Landing, Mississippi, caused by levee saturation and erosion. The Mounds Landing crevasse opens on Thursday, April 21, 1927, at 7:30 a.m., and subsequently releases waters which will flood most of the Delta region up to twenty feet. Although only one of dozens of crevasses, the Mounds Landing crevasse is particularly devastating due to its location.

New Orleans

New Orleans is a city in Louisiana near the effluent of the Mississippi River. New Orleans is built between the river and Lake Pontchartrain, and it is protected from flooding by a series of levees. The city's society during the 1920s is strongly influenced by society and exclusive club membership. New Orleans is the central focus of much of the book.

St. Bernard and Plaquemines Parishes

St. Bernard and Plaquemines Parishes are in Louisiana and surround the effluent of the Mississippi River. They are downriver from New Orleans, and in the 1920s they are largely rural and undeveloped swamplands.

Themes

Hubris

Assuming that the Mississippi River can be controlled is hubris. Throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s, an irrational faith in the ability of engineering leads many to believe that nature itself can be fully understood and controlled. Men like Humphreys and Eads, while manifestly brilliant, are irrationally confident that they can fully understand processes as complex as hydraulics and turbulence. They further believe that a sufficient understanding would subsequently lead to the ability to completely subjugate natural forces.

This mistaken belief leads many engineers to the conclusion that the Mississippi River can be decisively controlled by the construction of strong levee systems, the levees-only policy which leads to the disastrous flooding of 1927 as the levee system collapses.

The mistake is realized only at the cost of thousands of lives, millions of livelihoods and hundreds of millions of dollars in damages. The realization that the Mississippi cannot be controlled as easily as people thought leads to a sea-change in national politics and a change in the fundamental view that most Americans have of their federal government's role in daily life.

Racial Inequality

The book chronicles not only the flood itself, but also the aftermath, including rescue and rebuilding efforts. The rescue efforts take place over several months, nationally, with operations lasting up to several weeks in any particular locale. The rebuilding efforts include national, regional, state and local efforts, which continue for several years.

The disparity of treatment during the rescue process between white and black refugees is startling. In general, whites are evacuated prior to flooding while blacks are forced to work on flood preparations under armed white guards. Whites receive priority rescue efforts while blacks are in large part left without assistance. The subsequent blatant discrimination in rebuilding efforts is focused on the Mississippi Delta region and the city of Greenville. The book chronicles numerous race issues, including racial discrimination.

The Mississippi River

The book focuses on the Mississippi River, its geography, history, locale and the strong influence it exerts on the land, the culture and politics. Many of the book's most beautiful passages describe the river in various stages and at differing places. Throughout the book, the Mississippi River plays a dominant role in the narrative, the structure and the

story. In fact, the theme of the river winds slowly but dominantly through the book in a fascinating manner, as a veritable literary metaphor of the way the river winds through America.

Style

Point of View

The book is generally presented in the third person point of view prevalent in historic writing. For example, "The Army board convened at St. Louis on September 2, 1873" (Chapter 4, p. 63). However, individual passages which report eyewitness accounts are often quoted as first-person anecdotes. For example, "[N]one of us was influenced by what the Negroes themselves wanted: they had no capacity to plan for their own welfare; planning for them was another of our burdens" (Chapter 25, p. 308). This gives a personal feeling to these passages, giving character to the individuals during the time.

Setting

The setting of the book is predominantly divided between two focused locales - the city of Greenville, Mississippi, and the city of New Orleans. The Greenville sections of the book include to a lesser extent Washington County and the entire Mississippi-Yazoo Delta region, while the New Orleans sections of the book often include St. Bernard and Plaquemines Parishes.

However, as various historical events are described, they are set in the locations in which they transpire. Because of this, the book's setting ranges from Washington, D.C., where much of the political response takes place, through all the range of the Mississippi River and its tributaries. This shows the national causes and effects of the 1927 flood. Whenever a new setting is mentioned for the first time, the book does an outstanding job of quickly outlining the salient features of the area.

Language and Meaning

The book is written in a straightforward and accessible style. Whenever technical discussions of levee construction or hydraulic engineering are presented, the author does a good job of presenting enough background information to make the technical aspects easily understandable.

Presented mainly through a typically distant historical voice, the book is interesting and easy to understand. The writing is targeted at a college-level reader with a typical contemporaneous background in United States culture and politics, and it includes a large amount of discussion on race and race relations in the southern states of the late 1920s. No specialized knowledge of politics or river management is required to understand the book.

Structure

The 524-page nonfiction text is divided into thirty-four chapters of roughly even length and also includes an area map, prologue, appendix, fifty-three pages of notes (including 425 separate notes), a selected bibliography, acknowledgements and methodology. The text is also fully indexed. A few maps of the Mississippi River are included, as are sixteen pages of black and white photographs and illustrations.

The chapters are divided into nine named sections, including: Part One - The Engineers (chapters 1 through 6); Part Two - Senator Percy (chapters 7 through 12); Part Three - The River (chapters 13 through 16); Part Four - The Club (chapters 17 through 20); Part Five - The Great Humanitarian (chapters 21 through 23); Part Six - The Son (chapters 24 through 27); Part Seven - The Club (chapters 28 through 30); Part Eight - The Great Humanitarian (chapters 31 through 33); and Part Nine - The Leaving of the Waters (chapters 34 through 35). These parts designate the outstanding players during the Mississippi floods, the people and elements that contribute to the social and historical outcomes of the event. "The Club" and "The Great Humanitarian" warrant two chapters each, as their roles run throughout the flood events of 1927.

In general outline, the text is arranged chronologically, though of course some sections deviate from this pattern to clearly explain historic processes. By interspersing narrative elements, such as eyewitness accounts, with accounts of daily life and of the sociology of the time, as well as facts and information about the great Mississippi River, the reader feels a comprehensive understanding of the events,

Quotes

"It was like facing an angry dark ocean. The wind was fierce enough that that day it tore away roofs, smashed windows, and blew down the smokestack - 130 feet high and 54 inches in diameter - at the giant A. G. Wineman & Sons lumber mill, destroyed half of the 110-foot-high smokestack of the Chicago Mill and Lumber Company, and drove great chocolate waves against the levee, where the surf broke, splashing waist-high against the men, knocking them off-balance before rolling down to the street. Out on the river, detritus swept past - whole trees, a roof, fence posts, upturned boats, the body of a mule." (Prologue, pp. 15 - 16)

"The valley of the Mississippi River stretches north into Canada and south to the Gulf of Mexico, east from New York, and North Carolina and west to Idaho and New Mexico. It is a valley 20 percent larger than that of China's Yellow River, double that of Africa's Nile and India's Ganges, fifteen times that of Europe's Rhine. Within it lies 41 percent of the continental United States, including all or part of thirty-one states. No river in Europe, no river in the Orient, no river in the ancient civilized world compares with it. Only the Amazon and, barely, the Congo have a larger drainage basin. Measured from the head of its tributary the Missouri River, as logical a starting point as any, the Mississippi is the longest river in the world, and it pulses like the artery of the American heartland." (Chapter 1, p. 21)

"To control the Mississippi River - not simply to find a modus Vivendi with it, but to control it, to dictate to it, to make it conform - is a mighty task. It requires more than confidence; it requires hubris." (Chapter 1, p. 21)

"Then Eads promised to 'undertake the work with a faith based upon the ever-constant ordinances of God himself, and so certain as He will spare my life and faculties for two years more, I will give to the Mississippi river, through His grace, and by application of His laws, a deep, open, safe, and permanent outlet to the sea.'" (Chapter 5, p. 77)

"Percy declared: 'The South must not be dependent for its prosperity upon the negro. There is not enough of him, and what there is is not good enough.' So he began to look for a source of white labor. In so doing he hoped not only to supply the region's needs but also to somehow escape 'The Negro Question.' One breed of whites he would not recruit: the poor whites from small farms in Alabama or Georgia or the Mississippi hills who were being driven off the land by economics. Percy did not seek them for two reasons: he considered them inferior to blacks, and he believed their presence would exacerbate rather than ease any racial tension." (Chapter 8, p. 108)

"Yet the Delta did offer blacks at least relative promise. Judge Robert R. Taylor of Indiana, a member o the Mississippi River Commission, pointed out that levees, by allowing the mining of the river's wealth, also allowed 'the negro to better his condition ... In considerable and increasing numbers he is buying land and becoming an independent cultivator ... Nowhere else in the South are as favorable opportunities

offered to the black man as in the reclaimed Mississippi lowlands, and nowhere else is he doing as much for his own up-lifting.'" (Chapter 9, p. 123)

"As the intellectual base upon which the world rested shifted, its moral pillars cracked. A new sexuality suffused the nation. In 1908 skirts touched the floor; in 1915 the word 'flapper' entered the language; in 1924 skirts touched the knee. The automobile and radio altered the experience of time and distance; the automobile also created sexual opportunities. In 1919, barely 10 percent of cars were enclosed; by 1927, 82.8 percent were. Jazz music was suggestive, wild, and lewd. In the nineteenth century, virtually every school in the country used McGuffey's Readers, anthologies that taught morality as much as reading, including the story of George Washington and the cherry tree. By Teddy Roosevelt's presidency McGuffey's Readers were losing favor. Instead, *The Rubbiybt of Omar Khayybm* was selling millions of copies; it sang of seduction and youth and the infinite present. Social commentator Mark Sullivan noted, 'Many an American adult in the 1920s remembered as a landmark the day he read Omar's line, "I myself am Heaven and Hell."'" (Chapter 10, p. 137)

"There is no sight like the rising Mississippi. One cannot look at it without awe, or watch it rise and press against the levees without fear. It grows darker, angrier, dirtier; eddies and whirlpools erupt on its surface; it thickens with trees, rooftops, the occasional dead body of a mule. Its currents roil more, flow swifter, pummel its banks harder. When a section of riverbank caves into the river, acres of land at a time collapse, snapping trees with the great cracking sounds of heavy artillery. On the water the sound carries for miles." (Chapter 12, p. 156)

"As of April 9, 1927, the upper Mississippi River from Iowa south was in flood; the Ohio below the mouth of the Green was in flood; the Missouri from Kansas City east was high; the St. Francis, Black, and White Rivers approached record levels; and the Arkansas was the highest since 1833. Below the Arkansas, the Ouachita, Black, and Red Rivers were rising; the Yazoo, Sunflower, and Tallahatchie in Mississippi, in flood for three months, were rising. And the Mississippi below the mouth of the Arkansas, also long since in flood, was rising." (Chapter 14, p. 187)

"Cora Walker, a black woman, lived a few miles south of the [Mounds Landing] break. Her home lay beside the toe of the levee. 'An airplane kept flying over, real low, backwards and forwards, ... told us we better get to the levee. A lady was coming to the levee, had a bundle of clothes on her head and a rope around her waist leading a cow.' Suddenly, the water arrived, tearing south. 'She and the cow both drowned. ... Just as we got to the levee we turned back and saw our house turned over. We could see our own place tumbling, hear our things falling down, and the grinding sound. And here come another house floating by. The water was stacked. The waves were standing high, real high. If they hit anything, they got it. Every time the waves came, the levee would shake like you were in a rocking chair.'" (Chapter 16, p. 204)

"It took three days for the water to reach L. T. Wade, deep within the Delta. But when it arrived, it covered the horizon. And it still came in force: 'The water just came in waves, just like a big breaker in the ocean, coming over this land. It was a really frightening

thing to see something like that. It didn't follow the ... It just came right on over and rolled over." (Chapter 16, p. 205)

"When America entered the war, Hoover returned to Washington. Woodrow Wilson named him food administrator, giving him vast if indirect powers over everything from pricing to distribution. He performed successfully enough that Louis Brandeis called him 'the biggest figure injected into Washington life by the war.' After the war, he ran a European relief program that fed millions. He used power well. After Polish soldiers had executed thirty-seven Jews, he ordered the Polish government to end such incidents. Since he could halt food shipments there, the government obeyed. John Maynard Keynes called him 'the only man who emerged from the ordeal [of the peace conference] with an enhanced reputation." (Chapter 21, p. 266)

"Will Percy wrote: 'For thirty-six hours the Delta was in turmoil, in movement, in terror. Then the waters covered everything, the turmoil ceased, and a great quiet settled down. ... Over everything was silence, deadlier because of the strange cold sound of the currents gnawing at foundations, hissing against walls, creaming and clawing over obstacles." (Chapter 22, p. 278)

"... along the lower Mississippi alone the flood put as much as 30 feet of water over lands where 931,159 people ... had lived. Twenty-seven thousand square miles were inundated ... As late as July 1, 1.5 million acres remained underwater. ...An estimated 330,000 people were rescued from rooftops ... The Red Cross ran 154 'concentration camps' ... A total of 325,554 people ... lived in these camps for as long as four months. An additional 311,922 people ... were fed and clothed by the Red Cross ... Unofficial but authoritative estimates [of economic loss] exceeded $500,000,000; with indirect losses, the number approached $1,000,000,000, large enough in 1927 to affect the national economy." (Chapter 23, p. 286)

"Soon he [Will Percy] issued a new order: 'The negroes in town outside of camp have done nothing toward unloading and transporting the very food they ask for and receive. This will not be tolerated. ... 1. No rations will be issued to Greenville negro women and children unless there is no man in the family, which fact must be certified by a white person. 2. No negro man in Greenville nor their families will be rationed unless the men join the labor gang or are employed. 3. Negro men ... drawing a higher wage [that $1 a day] are not entitled to be rationed." (Chapter 25, p. 317)

"The flood had put this land in his [Hoover's] power, power such as no man in modern America had ever had. He commanded every government department, including the military, and had de facto control over state governments; martial law or a near equivalent existed in much of the flooded region; the railroads, the broadcast networks, and such companies as Standard Oil, had all volunteered to obey him; and he controlled millions of dollars. His power was only temporary, but he knew how to use it. He soon developed a plan for massive rehabilitation that reflected his sense of how the world worked, and it involved the then new concept of 'human engineering.' He intended to apply such engineering to the nearly 1 million people in the region and change the way they lived." (Chapter 31, p. 365)

"In 1927 the Mississippi River had gone coursing once again over the land it had created, reclaiming the empire the Percys had taken. Then the waters left. In their wake black Delta sharecroppers looked north to Chicago and west to Los Angeles, and out onto the freshly replenished fields. There, in the fields, the Mississippi had deposited one more layer of earth upon the land." (Chapter 35, p. 422)

Topics for Discussion

How do Eads' early experiences in salvage on the Mississippi River enable him to understand the river in ways that Humphreys cannot?

Explain how the disparate views of river management proposed by Ellet, Eads and Humphreys gradually become synthesized into the official levees-only policy of early twentieth-century Mississippi River management.

Instead of controlling the Mississippi River, today's river management policy focuses on minimizing flooding and containing the river. Are these efforts likely to be successful over the long term?

Contrast the attitudes toward race of LeRoy Percy and his son William Alexander Percy.

What methods does LeRoy Percy use to largely prevent the Ku Klux Klan from dominating Washington County, Mississippi, politics in the 1920s?

Describe the physical process of levee construction, and explain the causes of levee failure.

How is the scope of the flooding in 1927 best described? In terms of area flooded? Lives disrupted? Future political influences?

How does the flooding of 1927 change attitudes toward the desired role of the federal government in daily life?

Are the residents of St. Bernard and Plaquemines Parishes naively trusting of the promise of reparations from the leading citizens of New Orleans, as portrayed in the book?

Is the book's portrayal of Moton a fair portrayal? What constraints are forced upon Moton in his dealings with Hoover? How could Moton have ensured a more favorable outcome for black families?

How does an understanding of the flooding of 1927 alter your view of more recent flooding disasters in the New Orleans area?

After reading the book, would you like to live next to the Mississippi River?