BOOK REVIEWS


The Johnstown flood occurred on Friday, May 31, 1889 and this book undertakes to portray some of the events and people associated with it.

Stripped of verbiage, prejudice, distortion and contradiction, the story of the flood can be found there but little has been added to what was already known and available in any good library.

The reader having noted the blurb on the lurid jacket is advised to turn first to pages 163-198 and read what this book has to say about the newspapermen who descended on Johnstown and muddied the waters. He will not be impressed by tremendous obstacles overcome by these men to get their stories through, but rather by what they put through. He will learn that, with a few notable exceptions, the correspondents showed imagination, and ingenuity in sending misinformation to editors who displayed much more interest in increasing circulation than in truth. The reporters seemed determined “to pile the most violent melodrama on a story which needed no embellishment.” Mr. O’Connor, the author, is himself a veteran newspaperman and is not above somewhat similar criticism.

Respected citizens of Johnstown who may have lived “in solid brick houses on the hill” will learn that they looked down on the garlicky foreigners who were commonly known as “Hunkies,” “Bo-hunks,” “wops,” “square-heads,” “krauts,” “micks,” and “paddies.” (Intent is not obscured by the ambiguity of the words “looked down”.) See page 21. The author thus serves notice of the viewpoint he will present. The length to which he goes is best illustrated on page 144. Writing of a child saved from the flood by a “mill worker,” he says, that although they lived in the same city for many years it was not surprising that she never saw him again, “when one considers the mutually exclusive social strata enjoyed by a workingman and the daughter of an upper-middle class mercantile family.”

The unqualified charge of neglect coupled with the mention of millionaires, which appears on the jacket also warns that the author will make this a class disaster. One knows instinctively that the Homestead riots will be dragged in and every device will be used
to make it appear that members of the club, which owned the dam, were personally responsible. The charge is thus levelled at many of Pittsburgh's most respected citizens, most of whom the author would have you believe were wealthy. (It would be more accurate to say that later in life many became wealthy.) Toward the end of the book, surveying his sinister creation with which he would condemn the members of the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club, the author seems to take fright or maybe he wishes to appear impartial, and writes, belatedly, "Perhaps the club was blamed over much . . . but the wealthy clubmen formed a smaller and more convenient target."

The author omits all reference to the following cases except in a general way, but he is aware that the charge of criminal negligence is dulled by the fact that the following legal actions were brought:—

Against the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club in the U. S. District Court. Known as the Jenkins Case.
Against 50 individual members of the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club in the Court of Common Pleas of Allegheny County. Known as the Little Case or No. 461.
Against the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club as a Corporation in the Court of Common Pleas. Known as the Little Case No. 462.
Against the Pennsylvania Railroad. Known as the Long Case.
Against Colonel Elias J. Unger, president of the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club. This suit was brought in Ebensburg, Cambria County and is known as the Strayer Case.
Against the Pennsylvania Railroad in Allegheny County. Known as the Tarbell Case.

The author, unwilling to relinquish his thesis of class discrimination, sums up the net result of these cases when he writes on page 235, "Not a cent was ever levied against the club or its members for the lives lost or the property destroyed. The awe of great wealth and political and economic power seemed to have precluded any concerted action, public or private, against the Pittburghers." (It is noted that he thinks in terms of Pittburghers in matters of lawsuits
but the members of the club were not all residents of Pittsburgh.\) 

The book jacket states that this is a carefully documented account. That seems questionable, as for example in describing Andrew Carnegie as a "nabob" the author portrays him, along with others as "eager to try the simple life up in the remote Alleghenies." It might be noted that he had moved his home to New York City 22 years before the Johnstown flood and owned a cottage in Cresson next to the famous Mountain House in the Alleghenies and there his mother had died. Following her death, and two years before the flood, he had married and spent those summers in Scotland. A true picture of this unpretentious club is given by an unknown writer but the author seizes on a casual mention of music and resorting to reverse English would leave a picture of Andrew Carnegie "strumming a guitar in the moonlight." Then probably thinking of the flood the author goes far out of his way to report that Carnegie (presumably at Skibo later in life) had "eight footmen on the cash payroll with the solitary duty of pouring wine." (A statement needing amplification before belief, even if stated by Carnegie himself.) It might have been far more pertinent had the author, with his seeming knowledge of Carnegie, suggested that certain reports, condemning the dam may have reflected an old resentment on the part of the Cambria Iron Company against a club of which Carnegie men were reported to be important members. It may be recalled that just prior to 1875 Carnegie was confronted with the problem of finding a staff for a new factory designed to manufacture Bessemer rails, a process he knew nothing about. During a strike at the Cambria Iron Company in Johnstown, Carnegie personally persuaded the great engineering expert, "Captain Bill" Jones, to leave Cambria, and with him came the heads of every important department to staff the Carnegie-McCandless Company at Braddock. Three years later that plant as Edgar Thomson surpassed Cambria Iron in the production of Bessemer rails which had been their specialty. (Refer E. T. Co. production Nov. 1878.) One may well question many statements as unauthenticated. We would claim that Johnstown was settled in 1792 rather than 1800. On page 30 it is stated, "The dam stood 404 feet above the city." The Engineering News of June 8, 1889, page 518, states it differently, "The dam stands about 250 feet above the town of Johnstown." The topographical map of the U. S. Geological Survey
shows the dam on the 1500 foot contour, and the outskirts of Johnstown on the 1200 foot contour. This would mean that the dam stood 300 feet above the city. On page 34 we read that the Club sold membership for $2,000.00. It is interesting that another article published in June 1957 states that the initiation fee was $800.00, while a gentleman who has done more research on this flood than any other we know of, says simply "the initiation fee was $600.00." Of course if bed and board are added it makes an impressive figure. H. C. Frick was one of the incorporators of the club and it might be stated that this was two years before he was associated with the Carnegie companies. He never held office in the club and in view of what has been written it may be said on good authority that he never caught a fish in this country. (He did catch a small one in Scotland and it was such an unusual event his friends wanted to mount it.) It is also more likely that his interest in the Club was more to sell coke than to enjoy the simple life in the remote Alleghenies as stated.

On page 34 the names which follow are linked with the "nabobs" but with unusual restraint they are described only as "prominent." One may well question the intent with which they are introduced. If the reader assumes that John A. Harper was president of the Bank of Pittsburgh, it is a mistake. He was assistant cashier of the bank of which John Harper was president. His contribution to the relief fund of $30.00 may have been relatively large. P. C. Knox had been in practice only two years at the time his friends incorporated the Fishing Club and, at the time of the flood, his firm had been retained by the Carnegie companies for only two years. He probably sought the companionship of Frick more than the mountain air as stated. A. V. Holmes was not connected with the well-known banking firm of Nathaniel Holmes. He was the son of a surgeon and not until 1903 did he rate a listing in the city directory as a "real estate" man. His donation of $25.00 for relief of flood victims may well have been large. No person by the name of W. L. Dun could be found.

As the reader progresses, some of the stories of survivors have a familiar ring but without an index it is difficult to back-track to connect the sequence—as for example, one character tells her story in five different places. It is the story of a child of eight, as recorded 47 years after the flood. Mr. O'Connor is unwilling for the
story to speak for itself but displays his selective judgment by asserting that the remarkable detail could only be remembered by a sensitive and intelligent child. He would have us believe that this child aged eight and practically naked (who incidentally became a "baby" on the pitch) was thrown 15 to 20 feet by a workman from a mattress floating in a turbulent current. (The story does not say whether she was thrown from a standing or a reclining position but the reader is asked to note who caught her. Not the man you think. She went beyond him.) Truly remarkable.

The fact remains, that the people most interested did not believe that the South Fork Dam would break, but should it do so, they thought the force of its waters would be dissipated in the fourteen miles of its tortuous course before reaching Johnstown. No one could foresee that wire and wreckage would combine effectively to block the run-off through the unyielding arches of the stone bridge below the city or that fire in the midst of its backwash would destroy hundreds of lives. The verdict was against "neglect" but if it existed it should be shared by the club with the state, the Pennsylvania Railroad, Cambria Iron Company, the newspaper, city council and others.

Criticism of this book is by no means exhausted in this limited space. The honest presentation of the weather conditions, the fairness as to the identity and action of John G. Parke, Jr., engineer, and the description of Clara Barton's relief work are all dimmed by bias so evident elsewhere that one is left wondering as to motive.

Pittsburgh

Robert D. Christie

*Bibliography of Pennsylvania History*, compiled by Norman B. Wilkinson, edited by S. K. Stevens and Donald H. Kent (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1957, xxx, 709 pp. Index. $7.00)

Twelve years ago the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission published its *Writings on Pennsylvania History: A Bibliography*. This was a compilation of better than 6,000 "secondary materials" published through 1942; it has served as a useful reference tool for teachers and students of Pennsylvania's history as well as those who interpret this commonwealth's role in our country's past.