

# Flood of the Century

## The 1913 Deluge of Gore and District

Contributed by Stephanie Herring of the Gore Historical Museum & Hokonui Heritage Research Centre to mark the 100th anniversary of the flood. All illustrations in this article are from the collections of the Gore District Historical Society.

'I start this letter some 3 weeks ago but did not finish it then & there is a [of] lot news since then. The Mataura Valley has experienced the largest Flood since white man came to [the] Colony. There has been no loss of human life as far as can be ascertained but damage to stock was enormous. ... [We] read the Daily Paper [the Mataura Ensign] with accounts from up country that the flood was going to beat the 1878 flood. No body believed it of course.'

Thomas Spence wrote the letter above to his parents in the Orkney Isles<sup>1</sup> days after heavy rainfall caused widespread flooding and damage throughout Southland, Otago and Canterbury in the last weekend of March 1913<sup>2</sup>.

Thomas may have earlier described the growing town of Gore to his parents, as it lies either side of the Mataura River, its CBD at the centre surrounded by a substantial residential area on the flat, the suburb of Jacobstown to the north and the hillside being gradually populated all on the western side with East Gore across the bridge. The wealth of the town had seen the establishment of a high school, hospital, athenaeum and substantial business premises within the past five years. The fertile land had made the town a rural service centre, and the railway a cross roads for traffic heading to Invercargill, Central Otago or Dunedin.

Thomas, a flax mill labourer, along with workmate Arthur Flett, had 'jacked up' their riverside hut on Friday afternoon heeding warnings of flooding. After tea that night they returned to the Mill moving everything as high as they could. Knocking off at 11.30p.m. they headed for a nearby hut to sleep. At midnight, alarmed at the river spreading over the flat, Arthur woke Thomas. 'Bother the flood', was Thomas' exhausted response. By 2.30a.m. there was six inches (15cm) of water in the hut. Looking out of the window they could not comprehend the wide expanse of the Mataura already over its banks rising much further. They raised their bunk on to forms and watched as the level rose to two feet (61cm) inside the hut. They were stranded, with a window to view the damage and watch the rubbish floating past '... straw, timber, dead sheep & sheaves by the cartload'. The water subsided but it wasn't until 7a.m. on the Sunday that they ventured out<sup>3</sup>.

Meanwhile trumpets, fire bells and even detonators woke residents of Gore before dawn. By then the Mataura River had overtaken riverside properties and rising levels in the north of the town saw the river breach railway culverts and began to create difficulties for residents escaping to higher ground with timber and debris in the rising rushing waters.

Less than two kilometres to the south, business owners inspecting the town centre saw little to be perturbed about. Within an hour they watched as the river broached across the railway line from the east along side streets and then, with horror, at 'an advancing broad sheet of water the full width of the [main] street' from the north of town. 'Safes were opened and books removed, goods were hurriedly shoved on

<sup>1</sup> From the collections of the Gore District Historical Society, GO2012.43

<sup>2</sup> [http://hwe.niwa.co.nz/event/March\\_1913\\_South\\_Island\\_Flooding](http://hwe.niwa.co.nz/event/March_1913_South_Island_Flooding) accessed 12 Feb 2013.

<sup>3</sup> From the collections of the Gore District Historical Society, GO2012.43

At the corner of Main and Mersey streets, these men were trapped. The flood had reached one foot (30cm) higher. This corner was especially dangerous as the floodwaters were coming from both the north and the east.

higher shelves and everything was done in the short time permitted to ensure the safety of stocks'. Between 7.00 - 7.30a.m. the Mataura rose two feet and was now beyond recorded levels of 1878<sup>4</sup>.

By 9a.m. the flood was at its height, up to six feet in the main street. 'Debris of all descriptions, sheaves, meatsafes, telegraph poles, fowls, loose timber and all manner of farmyard and backyard refuse was swirling down the current.' Main Street was impassable from north to south until mid-afternoon<sup>5</sup>.

That the town was taken by surprise is evident in the large number of people needing rescue. Many, however, remained trapped and spent the day either on their roof or in their ceilings. Forrest Stevenson (nee Hinchey), then aged four, later recalled. 'Well, I remember being wakened, hurriedly put into my dressing-gown and stepping out of bed into fairly deep water lapping the side of the bed. Men came on horseback and took my sister and me away to higher ground, leaving my parents clinging to the verandah posts. They too were rescued but only when the water was up to their necks.'<sup>6</sup>

Among the rescuers receiving praise were members of the visiting Barton's circus. Working 'like Trojans' they were amongst the first to raise the alarm by sounding their trumpets in the residential streets. Their horse riding skills came to the fore as 'they expedited the removal of many families. In some cases they carried two children in their arms, while as many as three others were placed on the horses' backs, the latter being guided by the pressure from the men's knees.'<sup>7</sup>

Horse and gig as well as makeshift rafts were used to ferry people to safety. One of the rescued wrote to the local newspaper thanking Mr. O'Neill and Mr. and Mrs. Henderson.

'As soon as the first alarm was given Mr. Henderson got his gig and horse and started on rescue work. Altogether he accounted for about 40 rescues, including several bed-ridden men and women. At the height of the flood he had to cut the horse loose and abandon the gig to its fate. He managed to reach home in an exhausted state. Mr. W. O'Neill rescued about 80 women and children and kept going until he just managed to reach the Club Hotel and was drawn up on a fire escape rope. Unfortunately he contracted a chill and is now suffering from an acute attack of rheumatic fever. Altogether about 150 people found refuge in the Club Hotel and too much cannot be said for the kindness of Mrs. Henderson and her staff. They kept going through all the water until they were nearly washed of their feet in getting food taken upstairs to feed these unexpected visitors and by boiling a billy in a bedroom fireplace they provided everyone with a refreshing up of tea.'<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> *Mataura Ensign* 31 March 1913

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>6</sup> *Eight Daughters, Three Sons: Glenarary, Southland* pp.51-2

<sup>7</sup> *Mataura Ensign* 31 March 1913

<sup>8</sup> *Mataura Ensign* 4 April 1913



Above: The floodwaters were retreating and while it may look like these gentlemen had found a prime refuge, Gore was a dry town and the best they would've had was a cup of tea – perhaps.

The Gore bridge and a riverside home at about the height of the flood. The bridge and house survived but the outbuildings did not.

A view over the town towards the river as the floodwaters receded.



Inspecting the damage along Main Street on Sunday. Note the asphalt from the road on the footpath.

It is to be noted that floodwaters in the Club Hotel reached six feet (1.8m), the water entering the back door and windows and flowing out the front.<sup>9</sup>

The town's hillside residents rallied around to keep those rescued fed and warm and were ready to assist those who were rescued later in the day as an estimated half (1800) of the town's residents had their homes so severely damaged by the flood that they could not return home that night. Milkmen delivered free milk, and those who were able to contributed. This comment appeared in *The Mātara Ensign*.<sup>10</sup>

'Like many other greater calamities, there was a comic element noticeable. There were little men with clothes many sizes too large for them and big men with clothes which seemed strained to bursting point. Ladies' costumes, too, were in many cases something to be wondered at, and their coiffures had quite evidently received very limited attention.'<sup>11</sup>

In places the Mātara River stretched two miles (3.2 kilometres) wide across the valley floor. Destruction was district wide. In the town of Gore, initial estimates of damage ran to £100,000<sup>12</sup> but were never fully costed. H & J Smith's department store, only opened two weeks prior to the flood, had plate glass windows smashed by showcases and counters that had been moved by the force of the water entering the building. Other businesses suffered a similar plight. Some doors were burst open and goods flooded out. Like other grocers, Brownlie and Sons 'lost three tons of sugar, the whole being dissolved by the water, only the bags remaining. Salt met the same fate, while bags of sago and tapioca swelled and burst, leaving the contents unfit for use.'<sup>13</sup>

While much of the South Island suffered from flooding, the town of Gore wore a heavy cost. Newly metalled streets and asphalt footpaths were torn up and swept into water tables or forced to the side of the street. It took three weeks before power was restored and the town's only steam fire engine was severely damaged by overwork having to pump water to the reservoir to provide water for the township.

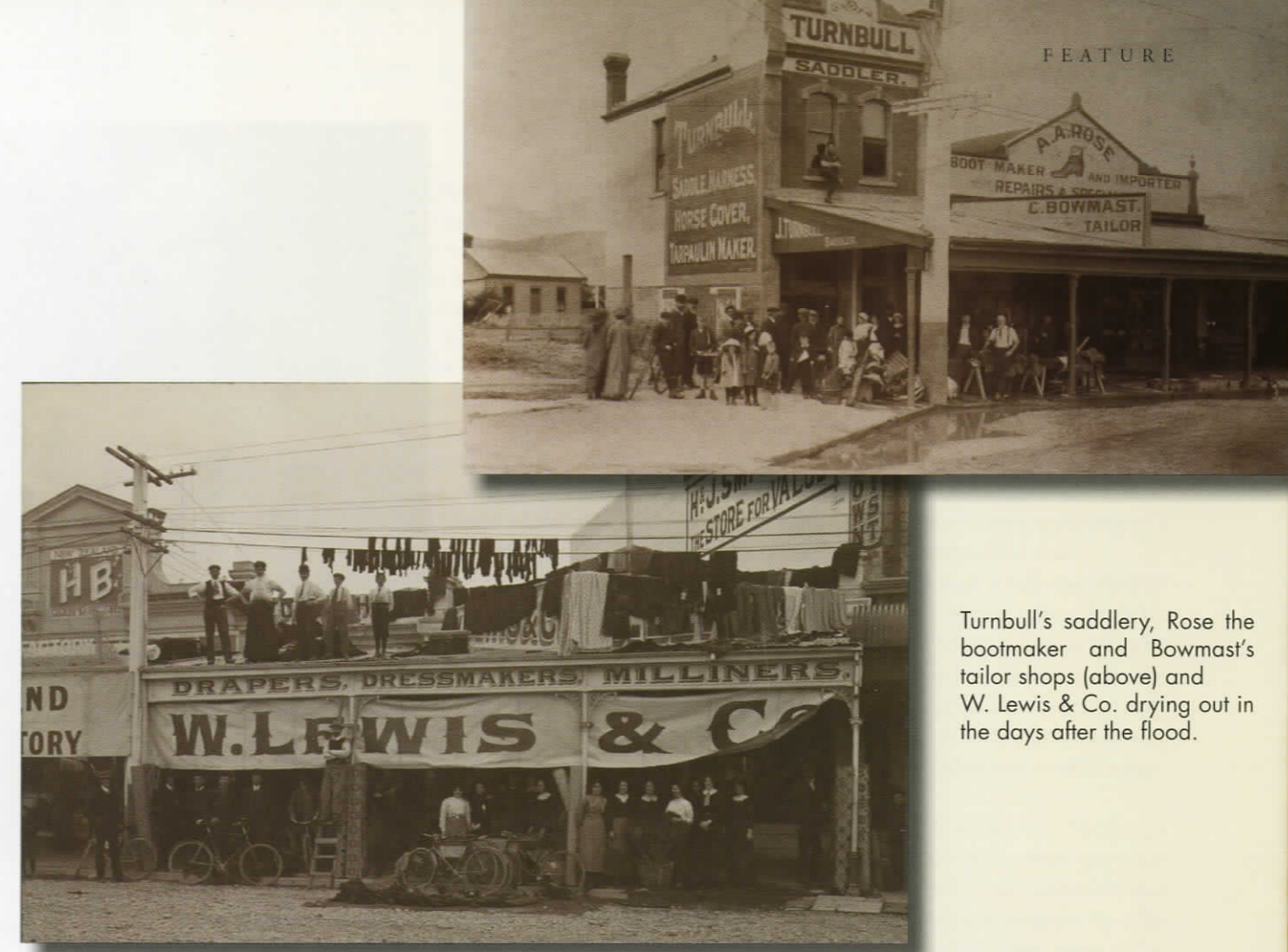
<sup>9</sup> [http://hwe.niwa.co.nz/event/March\\_1913\\_South\\_Island\\_Flooding](http://hwe.niwa.co.nz/event/March_1913_South_Island_Flooding) accessed 12 Feb 2013.

<sup>10</sup> *Mātara Ensign* 1 April 1913

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> (\$14,096,900 – 2008 NZD) [http://hwe.niwa.co.nz/event/March\\_1913\\_South\\_Island\\_Flooding](http://hwe.niwa.co.nz/event/March_1913_South_Island_Flooding) accessed 12 Feb 2013.

<sup>13</sup> *Mātara Ensign* 31 March 1913



Turnbull's saddlery, Rose the bootmaker and Bowmast's tailor shops (above) and W. Lewis & Co. drying out in the days after the flood.

Resulting water restrictions made the cleanup difficult for residents returning home. They found their homes in various states including, 'Our piano, just paid off, was lying on its back and the keys had floated to various parts of the house'. Contrarily, other things barely moved. 'Thinking the water would never enter our home, my mother prepared breakfast for any whom she thought might come if they were forced to vacate their homes. However, the set table rose as the water rose, and subsided in the same way, and was just as we left it when we returned to the house a fortnight later.'<sup>14</sup>

In the wider district some cottages were swept away in the fury in places such as Waikaia and Mātara. Industry was affected with the Mātara Freezing Works and the Paper Mills both being closed for a period. Farmers suffered heavy stock losses and found fences 'washed out and laid in tangled masses across the paddocks'. A further blow was winter feed rendered useless by the silt.<sup>15</sup> At this time Eastern Southland was a great producer of oats, supporting Flemings Creamoata Mill and those who had not already had their crops stacked, lost everything.

Bargains were to be had in Main Street the following morning. That it was a Sunday is notable as the sanctity of the day was rarely breached by trade. 'With the exception that a semblance of order was noticeable in the business establishments, there was little change in the interior of the shops this morning. Everything seemed to be still saturated with water and there was a constant drip, drip, everywhere. The whole of the main street appeared to be transformed into a huge sale. Country people were present in large numbers and every shop was crowded with customers eager to share in the "good things." Boot sales were being conducted busily on platforms arranged on the street fronts and water-logged boots were going off like hot cakes.'<sup>16</sup>

It wasn't until 1919, following delays due to World War I, that the first sod of the town's flood protection scheme was turned. In the interim Gore suffered two further but less damaging floods.<sup>17</sup>

Gore had suffered several floods in its earliest formation but, due to the town's infancy, the impact was less severe. Traditions of Ngāi Tahu whānui point to a long history of the river flooding. Kāti Mamoe ariki, Paroparo te Whenua, named the area Maruawai, Valley of Water after he witnessed a powerful flood in the fifteenth century and the area was used only as a hunting ground, never a campsite because of its swampy nature.

The Mātara River, while bowing to the town's flood banks, has not lost its temporary ferocity, periodically threatening and causing damage to the district. ■

<sup>14</sup> *Eight Daughters, Three Sons: Glenarary, Southland* pp.51-2

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> *Mātara Ensign* 1 April 1913

<sup>17</sup> *The Ensign* 2 April 1988