

## Moving a Community in the Aftermath of the Great 1993 Midwest Flood

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During my high school tenure in the second half of the 1960's, many hours were spent in World History class studying the battles of World War II. Even though many of these skirmishes had taken place less than 25 years earlier, they, like most of the information in our school textbooks, seemed like "ancient" history because they occurred prior to my existence on this earth.

My perception of Valmeyer, Illinois's previous encounters with the Mississippi River was much the same. Valmeyer was incorporated in 1909. The St. Louis Valley Railroad had built a line through the area at the turn of the century. Businesses and homes sprang up in support of and as a result of the railroad's presence. At that time, farming also provided a good livelihood for many individuals. Bountiful crop yields were a by-product of the rich, river bottom soil. Valmeyer's location at the base of the towering Mississippi River bluff to the east provided its residents with breathtaking scenery every season of the year. What a wonderful place to live!

Valmeyer lies about three miles from the main channel of the Mississippi—out of sight, out of mind. Flooding was not a concern for anyone in the community until 1943. In late spring of that year, floodwaters overtopped a small agricultural levee and spread across the community, bringing life in Valmeyer to a screeching halt. Graduation ceremonies for the Valmeyer High School Class of 1943 had to be postponed because the school grounds were covered with nearly three feet of water. Cars had to be abandoned, and boats were used to travel the Village's Main Street. As floodwaters receded, residents quickly shoveled out the mud, washed

down all their belongings, and moved back into their houses.

Residents of Valmeyer had battled the Mississippi River and suffered a minor setback, but they still felt victorious because they were all settled comfortably back in their homes. However, less than twelve months later, the River was once again knocking on the door of Valmeyer's homes. Not only did these folks endure the wrath of the Mississippi in 1943 and 1944, but also in 1947, when the streets of Valmeyer were flooded once again. This series of floods—three in five years—had not produced major devastation, but it definitely had Valmeyer's citizens looking over their shoulders for the muddy Mississippi's next visit.

This series of floods caused such severe damage to crops and farmland that local farmers lobbied the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) to "fix" their problem. Legislators secured the necessary funding, and construction began on a new levee system along the entire western boundary of Monroe County late in 1947. This levee, which would protect approximately 60,000 acres of farmland plus the Village of Valmeyer, was completed in 1950 and was touted as one of the best ever built by the USACE.

In 1973, high river levels created some seepage problems, but the 23 year-old levee was strong enough to withstand the Mississippi, and no flood waters reached the community. The levee was doing its job, and with every dry day that passed, Valmeyer residents gained more confidence in the effectiveness of this earthen structure. Valmeyer's brushes with floods were relegated to the pages of "ancient history."

By the early 1980's, I had married a High School classmate and purchased a home in Valmeyer, where we were raising our three children. As a homeowner living in a floodplain, I knew that anyone who carried a mortgage with a federally insured lender was required to have federal flood insurance on their home, in an amount at least equal to their outstanding mortgage. As a member of the local business community, I had become painfully aware of the negative effects created by the federal floodplain restrictions recently adopted by our village council. Adoption of these regulations allowed property owners in Valmeyer to purchase federal flood insurance, but these regulations also carried with them a set of restrictions on future development within village limits. Requiring new construction to be built one foot above the base flood elevation would have resulted in new homes standing 10 feet above the ground on stilts or earthen mounds. Following the adoption of these regulations in the early 1980's, new construction in Valmeyer was nonexistent. A group of business and political leaders began meeting to study the federal floodplain restrictions in an effort to find a solution to the halt in new construction.

Since its completion in 1950, our levee system had successfully held back the waters of the Mississippi. Why couldn't it be certified as acceptable? The USACE performed a cost study to determine whether it was cost-effective to raise the levee to meet 100-year flood standards. Their study concluded that it was, but efforts to raise the approximate \$8 million construction cost proved fruitless. For the time being, the building moratorium had to continue.

In 1989, I was convinced by others in the community to run for Mayor of Valmeyer and continued to lead the efforts of the Flood Plain committee with the hope of finding some relief to the stifling regulations. My four-year term had passed, and we still had not raised adequate funding to improve our levee system or convinced bureaucrats that our levee provided adequate protection and should be certified "as is." April 1993 brought re-election to my second four-year term as Mayor, and I anticipated another four years of fighting floodplain restrictions.

In early 1993, river levels were higher than normal, but there was no concern in our immediate area. By June, that situation changed. Village Council meetings included discussions about the

current flood stage and procedures for procuring sandbags if needed. The first week of July brought our first taste of flood fighting. Sand boils began to develop along our levee system. Crews worked around-the-clock to fill and place sandbags and to monitor levee conditions. By the end of July, the Mississippi was inching closer to the top of our levee, but sandbag crews were always there to provide another level of protection. Every hour that passed brought us closer to a happy ending for our story, and our confidence was buoyed still more by the knowledge that we sat behind one of the best levee systems ever built in southern Illinois. Since its completion in 1950, that levee had kept Valmeyer dry, and we believed that it would surely continue to do so.

The beginning of the end occurred on the morning of Sunday, August 1, 1993, when waters overtopped and then breached a levee near Columbia, Illinois. Flood waters entering this breach headed directly toward Valmeyer. Around midnight, the Fountain Creek Levee, which was providing our last line of defense, was overtopped and eventually breached. Early on the morning of Monday, August 2, 1993, the first Mississippi River floodwaters reached Valmeyer.

Although our levee had kept us dry for 43 years, that streak came to a painful end. Members of the Valmeyer High School Class of 1943, who had to cancel their graduation ceremony, now had to postpone their fiftieth class reunion for the same reason.

It took several days for the water to spread throughout the Monroe County floodplain. At their height, the floodwaters reached depths of sixteen feet in some areas of Valmeyer. The main channel of the Mississippi left its banks and spread nearly four miles wide, cutting a path through Valmeyer and covering more than 60,000 acres in Monroe County. Swift currents prevented access through the town for nearly a week. Since the main channel of the Mississippi ran through town, water levels in town fluctuated as river levels changed. These fluctuating water levels, along with the swift current and floating debris, caused major damage to the buildings in Valmeyer. Water remained in some areas of town for more than two months. Structural damage was compounded because many of the buildings did not have a chance to dry out before freezing temperatures set in.

During the first several weeks of flooding, property damage was documented from the air and by boat. Neither of these methods revealed the staggering degree of damage discovered when the water receded and buildings could be examined more closely. According to Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) standards, over ninety percent of the structures in Valmeyer were classified as substantially damaged. Village officials knew the magnitude of loss would prevent many residents from repairing or rebuilding their homes and businesses. Some property owners had already made it known that they never wanted to tangle with the Mississippi again, and that they would be abandoning their homes for higher ground.

After several community meetings, it became clear that there would not be a sufficient number of residents remaining in their homes to support the tax base necessary to provide village services. If state and federal agencies offered property buyouts to Valmeyer residents, property owners would disperse to other surrounding towns, and it probably would spell the end of the community.

Regional Planning Commission representatives and FEMA officials had mentioned the concept of relocation. Not much was available in the form of planning tools or educational resources, but village officials decided it was worth a try, if it was the only way to ensure the survival of Valmeyer. A community meeting was held, the relocation concept was aired, and a majority of the village residents expressed an interest in moving to a new town site and pledged their support.

Although many communities expressed interest in relocation due to damages resulting from the 1993 flood, only a handful experienced any success with the concept. One of the things that contributed to the successful relocation of Valmeyer was citizen involvement. Within eight weeks of the day the first flood waters entered the village, seven different committees comprised of village residents were created. These committees included: the New Town Design Committee, the Infrastructure and Utilities Committee, the Housing Trends Committee, the Businesses and Commercial Committee, the Social Services Committee, the School Construction Committee, and the Finance Committee. Each committee was asked to meet no less than weekly and was given an aggressive schedule of tasks to complete in less than six weeks. Meeting nights

were planned when committees would meet at the same time and place to make it easier for Planning Commission representatives and village officials to provide any necessary supervision and technical assistance. During this process, more than 100 Valmeyer residents served as committee members, thus making their contribution to the planning efforts.

By November 10, 1993, these planning committees had completed a detailed preliminary plan. Village officials had signed a purchase contract on a 500-acre farm tract that was within one and one-half miles of the village and could accommodate all residential, commercial, and public areas. More important was that the relocation site was out of the floodplain, nearly 400 feet higher than the original town. Another community meeting was held at that time to present this information to Valmeyer's residents. By this time many of these people were residing in FEMAVILLE, an encampment of FEMA trailers set up in a neighboring town. These temporary homes could not be set up in Valmeyer, because the entire community was in the Mississippi River flood plain. Former residents of the flooded community were quick to accept the plan for the new Village because many of them had served on the planning committees, had helped create the concept of a relocated Valmeyer, and were looking for a way to get into a permanent home as quickly as possible. Even before a purchase agreement for Valmeyer's new home was complete, residents took a leap of faith by making a down payment on what would become their new home site. This allowed village officials to make a down payment on the property that would become the relocated village of Valmeyer.

Many hours were invested in this initial planning process and many difficult decisions had been made, but soon it would become evident that this had been the easiest part of the relocation project. Now, it was time to seek the assistance of the politicians and government agencies, and to secure the necessary funding. By April, 1994, most of the funding had been secured for the buyout of the flooded properties and for the construction of the infrastructure on the new town site.

It had been the goal of village officials to allow residents to begin construction of their new homes during the summer of 1994, so they could be settled in by Christmas of that same year. But due to complications resulting from the required

environmental assessment, this goal would not become a reality. Most residents would be forced to spend their second Christmas in temporary housing.

Without the injection of financial assistance from state and federal sources, it would have been impossible to complete this project, but these funds came wrapped in plenty of red tape. More than twenty-five different federal, state, and local agencies participated in the review process following the initial environmental assessment of the relocation site.

Three phases of archaeological investigations had to be performed on the site. Some lots had to be removed from the original plat because of infringement onto a state-designated natural area inventory site. Development plans had to be altered because of the possible presence of the endangered Indiana Bat. A detailed storm-water retention plan had to be developed by the village's engineering firm. Certain areas required extensive investigations and core drillings to identify possible underlying karst conditions. Additional funding had to be secured, and hours of legal wrangling had to be invested to clear the relocation site of an underlying mineral rights ownership situation.

All of these situations created delays in the start of construction activity. The temporary living conditions for many Valmeyer residents were less than ideal. Every month that passed without any infrastructure construction progress caused a few more residents to abandon their plans to return to their former town. Some of these people opted for an immediate cure by purchasing an available home in a neighboring community. Citizens of the flooded area were quickly tiring of their "temporary" lives. Most were living in "temporary" homes. On Sunday, they would attend Church services in "temporary" facilities. Students attended the "temporary" Valmeyer School that had been constructed on the county fairgrounds using portable buildings. Gymnasium space had to be borrowed from neighboring schools for sporting events and musical activities, and had to be scheduled at odd times to fit the schedules of the host schools. Mail was dispensed from a "temporary" window set up at the Waterloo Post Office ten miles away. Elections were conducted at "temporary" polling places set up on the county fairgrounds. Few things in the lives of these flooded residents could be considered permanent.

Village infrastructure was completed in a few areas of the new town site by April 1995. Infrastructure was completed throughout the village by the end of 1995. Residents began moving into their new community during that same year, and students were able to begin classes in their new school in April 1996. By the time all work was completed, about sixty percent of Valmeyer's residents participated in the move.

If the goal of the state and federal government is to curb the loss of life and property in flood prone areas and to lower the cost to government agencies due to flood events, changes to disaster policy require serious consideration. The system as it is designed now does not facilitate ease of participation by local governments and floodplain dwellers. From Valmeyer's experience, I can identify four key points.

**1. Time is the number one problem encountered after following a flood disaster.**

Those who have lost their homes and businesses are looking for answers as soon as possible. Most people are not willing to put their lives on hold for extended periods of time while they sift through inconsistent or non-existent answers to their questions. In the case of Valmeyer, this situation proved to be more of a problem for Valmeyer's business owners than for its residents. Even though many of our residents were dissatisfied with their temporary living conditions, they could still commute to their jobs outside the community. Those business owners who lost their commercial establishments to the flood, lost their livelihood as well. Many members of the Valmeyer business community had to close their business or move to neighboring communities because they couldn't survive the three-year wait for the relocation project to be completed. Only twenty-five percent of our original business owners were successful in making the transition to the new Village.

**2. Although the residential sector of our community was less affected than the businesses, time delays were still a problem for them.**

Some of those residents who moved to neighboring cities would have remained a part of the community had it not been for the construction delays caused by compliance with government regulations. It also

became evident that in other communities that experienced flooding people repaired their flooded properties and continued living on the floodplain because it was a quicker solution to their problem. They are now a liability for the government as they live in their floodplain properties and wait for the next flood disaster.

**3. A lack of standardization of policies and procedures from the local to the state to the federal level makes relocation a nightmare.**

Many times actions taken to comply with a state regulation force non-compliance with a federal regulation, and vice versa. Wandering through the myriad of government policies requires a full-time staff, and most small communities with part-time elected and appointed officials are not equipped for such an endeavor. During the time we were trying to accomplish the Village relocation, we also had to coordinate the buyout, demolition, and cleanup of more than 325 flooded properties. This is also a contributing factor when many communities decide it is much easier to ride out the storm and continue their lives on the floodplain.

**4. It is much easier to convince people that living in the shadow of a major waterway is a risk when they are standing knee-deep in flood water. It is also more expensive for government agencies to deal with situations like this in a reactionary mode.**

Following disasters, plans are quickly made, while resources and manpower are usually limited, forcing higher prices for labor, materials and services. Convincing people to move out of harm's way when they are not being held hostage by a runaway river would not be an easy task and success may be limited, but any success experienced would at the very least spare those individuals the agony of losing their home, possessions, and community to disaster. It does not take long for those touched by floods to forget about the risks associated with life in the floodplain, and, before long, they are once again settled comfortably into their flood-prone properties.

What we anticipated as a three- to five-year relocation project has now reached the 10-year mark. Much of our work is now complete. Our population is finally nearing the number of residents who lived in Valmeyer at the time of the flood. Students are able to earn their education and participate in

activities at the new school. Congregations rebuilt the three churches that were a part of the original Valmeyer, and they can now worship in their new permanent facilities. Mail can be picked up at the Valmeyer Post Office. Several businesses are functioning, but efforts are still underway to convince residents to start new businesses or entice new enterprise to the community. Real estate taxes have become more affordable as more new homes are built and the tax burden can be spread across a larger population base.

Many of the Elementary and Junior High students attending Valmeyer School regard stories of the 1993 flood as "ancient history" since they were very young or not yet born when that event occurred. Hopefully, the next generation will be students of history and learn from the experiences of their ancestors who battled the Mississippi River and lost.

Relocating Valmeyer from its former floodplain location to a neighboring bluff top some 400 feet higher in elevation has not been easy and recovery has been slower than anticipated, but one thing is for certain. When residents of the relocated Valmeyer hear a knock at their door, they no longer have to fear that it's their former destructive and uncontrollable neighbor—the Mississippi River.

## **Author Bio and Contact Information**

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