

Heroism consists of hanging on one minute longer . . . and throwing another sandbag.

by P.J.B. Reimer

Syd Reimer and his brother-in-law Norm Wiens, like many other inhabitants of the Red River Valley, have just been through one of the most harrowing months of their lives. The two are long-time residents of Rosenort, a Mennonite village on the Morris River 10 miles northwest of Morris.

Syd Reimer is a volunteer supervisor with the Mennonite Disaster Service and has had wide experience with floods and disaster cleanup. As a local councillor, Norm Wiens was one of the men in charge of organizing thousands of volunteer workers into efficient work parties in the fight against a flood that proved to be as serious as the Big One of 1950. For the first 10 days of the flood Norm was away from his flood duties for a total of 21 hours, and not even all of that time was spent in bed.

Both men admit that while the predictions called for a flood of major proportions, they didn't really believe them as late as a week before the flood water struck. By a strange irony, Syd had just dispatched 10 Rosenort MDS volunteers to Texas to assist with the tornado cleanup there. The men had barely begun working in Texas when they received word that their own homes in Rosenort were being threatened by flood waters. Needless to say, they lost no time getting back.

Actually, the conditions that make for a major flood in the valley were there for all to read: a long, cold winter with lots of snow, followed by a late spring and a sudden thaw. Most of the snow disappeared in two days. What the flood-troubled residents of the stricken area were reluctant to believe was the possibility of a flood of 1950 proportions. That, after all, was the legendary flood, the ultimate one by which all subsequent floods would have to be measured. No flood could ever again be that bad, they were convinced. And no flood was—until this spring.

The relatively serious flood of 1966 drove the provincial government of Duff Roblin to undertake the herculean task of building a floodway to protect Winnipeg from future floods. Ring dikes were built around the cores of Valley towns and



M.B.C.I. students sandbagging. Photo by Paul Kroeker.

villages which lay directly in the flood basin of the valley. The wisdom of these measures was first tested in the comparatively light 1974 flood. Few people, however, anticipated that the floodway and dikes would ever be seriously tested. But tested they were this year, and for a while it appeared as if the ring dikes would not suffice.

Even worse, of the 10,000 residents in the Valley, fully a quarter don't live within the ring dikes, and so are vulnerable even to minor floods. For individual farmers and outlying town residents the only protection are hastily erected sandbag dikes around their homesteads. With the flood waters at their highest forming a grotesque, sinister lake covering almost a million acres, the dikes towns and individual homes became minute, fragile islands so dangerously isolated that their inhabitants were ordered to evacuate. Only the flood fighters remained within the dikes, trying desperately to hold back the sullen waters.

Nowhere in the Valley was there a more courageous, more concerted community response to the crisis than in Rosenort, normally a thriving little farm and business community of about 500 people. In its century of existence, Rosenort has seen more than one flood come and go. When it comes to floods Rosenorters don't panic and they don't complain. They just go to work, swiftly, efficiently, intelligently. And they are always prepared to go it alone, although they accept volunteer help from the outside gratefully, as they did this time.

From beginning to end the Rosenort flood operation was locally controlled. While all the other communities in the disaster area came under the control of the government-sponsored Emergency Measures Organization, Rosenort preferred to rely on the Mennonite Disaster Service. There were no paid workers or military personnel in Rosenort, although literally thousands of unpaid volunteers answered the MDS call for help. Syd Reimer puts it bluntly: "We simply told EMO to leave us alone." MDS quickly proved that it could do the job. With such local stalwarts as Reeve Alvin Rempel, Frank Dueck, Stan and Franklin Plett and others leading the way, there was never any doubt about the success of the operation. Even the Holdemann people, who had formed their own organization, came to help after looking after their own places.

By the first Sunday of the flood over 400 workers were on the job filling sandbags from two mountains of sand in the center of Rosenort. As fast as the bags were filled, trucks hauled them to unprotected homes. By the time the diking was completed close to a million sandbags had been used. Some time was lost waiting for fresh sandbags to arrive, but by and large the operation moved smoothly. Up to 650 workers showed up daily during the peak period and all told

close to 4,000 volunteers worked at Rosenort. Students from CMBC and MBCI in Winnipeg were out in full force to help with the diking. Some volunteers came from as far away as Rapid City, South Dakota, where the MDS under Syd Reimer's direction had done such a tremendous cleanup job seven years earlier when that community experienced its tragic false flood. Some of the grateful recipients of that MDS aid were now here to pay back the debt. And some of them also promised to come back to help with the cleanup. Christian charity has a way of getting reciprocated.

Even the problem of providing food for the armies of volunteer workers was handled with simple dispatch. Ladies from all over the district brought boxes of sandwiches and gallons of beverages to the Rosenort Fire Hall, which served as combined operational headquarters, and dining hall. The local

Co-op store provided case after case of canned stew, etc. for hot suppers. On the second Sunday, the women fed 1,200 people in Rosenort. Even after the general evacuation order some women stayed on to look after the task of feeding the workers. In between, these gallant ladies also helped with the diking.

Like any serious crisis, a flood tends to bring out both the best and the worst in people. Most respond with selfless dedication, but there are always a few who get panicky and selfish. A few farmers tried desperately to dike right around their whole farm building area, a practise that was not permitted under flood regulations. One farmer actually started "high-jacking" loaded trucks by stopping them and coercing workers to dump their sandbags at his farm. When supervisors discovered this they quickly put an end to the man's selfish action. In Morris, where the RCMP made a house-to-house search



to make sure residents were complying with the evacuation order, they discovered more than a dozen women "hiding out" in their own homes. Tersely, they gave the women a choice of either evacuating or working on the dikes. All chose to dike rather than to leave.

The flood also had its funny moments. One flood organizer made a call to Winnipeg and unwittingly got connected with the wrong number, which turned out to be the Paris Massage Parlour. The startled lady who answered the phone was subjected to a barrage of requests rather different from the kind she normally gets.

In comparing this year's flood with the Big One in 1950, Reimer and Wiens agree that while this one was every bit as bad as the one in 1950, people were much better prepared for it. In addition to the ring dikes, there was an abundance of vehicles and equipment to draw on. One of the biggest and toughest jobs the flood fighters were faced with was that of transferring vast quantities of stored grain to dry areas. In the Rosenort community alone 250,000 bushels of grain were hauled by truck to unflooded places. Local residents generally are not happy with the poor supply of railway cars and the apparent apathy of rail officials towards this complex problem.

Now that the flood threat is past, Valley residents are busy assessing the damage. A preliminary estimate indicates that in the Rosenort area alone the damages will run to well over a million dollars. As vice-chairman of the Manitoba Disaster Relief Board, Syd Reimer's job in the months ahead will be to oversee and authorize compensation claims in the Valley. As always after the flood waters begin to recede, the mood and morale of most victims is low, even though they can expect to be adequately compensated by the government. Some residents are bitter and talk of moving, but going by past experience few will actually do so.

What bothers valley residents more than anything else, especially those not protected by ring dikes, is the depressing realization that any permanent solution to their chronic flood problem—such as building a floodway all the way from Emerson to Winnipeg, or alternatively, dredging and enlarging the bed of the Red River—is simply too expensive to be carried out for the sake of a few thousand Manitoba citizens. The best they can hope for is that the government will provide funds for such secondary measures as ring dikes for individual homesteads and the raising of foundations for existing homes. Reimer says that of the \$10 million raised for the Volunteer Flood Fund of 1950, there is still \$2 million left for such projects. Only time will tell whether these measures will be undertaken in time for the next flood.

Rosenort residents, like others in the valley, know that for them periodic floods

are as certain as death and taxes. All they hope for is that the respites between floods at least be long enough to allow them to recover economically and psychologically from these grim ordeals. The tough, resilient spirit of these Rosenorters can be seen in their plan to celebrate the end of the flood by filling their barge with locals dressed up in pirate costumes

and carrying wooden swords, and then challenge the military barge at Morris to a mock battle. A rather un-Mennonite gesture perhaps, but it symbolizes Rosenort's life-must-go-on attitude and its refusal to feel sorry for itself.

Self-reliance in the face of adversity is an old Mennonite tradition. In Rosenort that tradition is still very much alive. **mm**

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