

THE BREAK-UP ON THE MISSOURI.

Scenes and Incidents at Benton—A Night of Watchfulness and Fear.

[From the River Press Extra of the 4th.]
Last night was a genuine sensation in Benton. Yesterday afternoon dispatches from Ft. Shaw and Rock creek indicated that all the tributaries of the Missouri were over their banks, and logs, ice and water was pouring down, tearing out bridges, and overflowing the adjacent lands.

The great amount of snow which was known to have fallen all over Montana, and the continuance and exceptional warmth of the "chinook" wind, gave the "old timers" an intimation that we of Benton would soon get an accumulation of water, ice and debris which might prove disastrous. And stories were told of former floods, and ice gorges that were likely to form. Only a few of the knowing ones kept awake, and the town went to sleep in blissful ignorance of danger.

At half past seven the water began to rise, and at 9 there was a foot running on top of the ice. This did not increase very much more for a couple of hours, when it was noticed that the whole body of ice was raising, indicating that the water had got under it. It kept on raising till 11 o'clock, when it had risen five feet. Suddenly it began to fall again, indicating there was a gorge above, and then began a feeling of alarm, which grew more and more intense as the water kept falling. The alarm spread, and parties were at once dispatched to rouse the town. Soon the alarm became a panic. For it was known that just above town, at a point across the Island to both bluffs where the stream is narrow, was just the point for the ice to gorge, and the fears that so much would accumulate as to flood the town when it broke, were by no means groundless.

By half past twelve the town was thoroughly aroused. Women and children were hurriedly removed to places of safety on the hill; wagons were removing families, trunks, valuables and household goods to places of safety. Men lined the river bank, and woman were nervously picking up the odds and ends about their houses for removal. Wagons were rumbling about the streets, and occasionally the sounds of ice crunching and cracking, often with a noise equal to a piece of artillery; men were yelling and shouting, and all making a din like a new pandemonium. McDevitt hastily rode up to the Island to examine the condition of the river at the point where the ice gorge was expected to form, and also to see what assistance could be rendered to the sole inhabitants of the island, Mr. Roosevelt and wife. But Mr. R. seemed to feel no particular cause for alarm, and McDevitt came back to report that a gorge was forming at the lower point of the island.

By this time the town was thoroughly alive, and a congregation of anxious spectators lined the banks of the river, while in the channel was a heaving groaning mass of ice, as yet unbroken, but giving every indication of momentary disruption; the water now rapidly rose till the banks were full to the very brim, and the river had reached that point where more rise would certainly overflow, and cause a damage difficult to be appreciated. Suddenly there was a heaving and cracking and groaning, and with a mighty rise of ice, which threw masses over on the top of the levee, it broke into fragments, and slowly began to move.

By half past two o'clock the ice had partially ceased coming, and the water was falling rapidly again, indicating another gorge had formed somewhere up stream. But the danger that had been apprehended had evidently passed, and those with good nerves stated for their beds.

All this time the women and children, who had been deposited in various houses on the hills, were agitated with all the fears which such an occasion was certain to arouse. Mr. Brinkman's residence was filled to its capacity, and not even standing room could be obtained. Considering the nervous nature of the occasion, and the fact that the occupants had been routed out of bed at midnight and carried, many of them half dressed, to a point of safety for their lives, there was not much noise of the hysteric order, but generally a suppressed anxiety to know the worst. The heterogeneous mass of babies, children, women, trunks, bundles and trinkets, seems ridiculous enough on the day after the battle, but seemed full of portent at the hour of danger.

At 5 o'clock the water was again up to the top of the bank, and the quantity of ice coming was positively enormous, and it was a grand sight to witness the irresistible power displayed by the mighty current, and the crushing and groaning of its icy burden, which was tearing down at eight miles per hour. This installment of ice was evidently from above the falls, for though it had been very thick and heavy, it showed evidence of terrible pounding and grinding. Drift wood accompanied the mass, though not in the great quantity that might have been expected.

Fears were entertained that it might gorge again, in which case there was good reason to expect the flood would rise over the bottom and sweep everything before it to ruin. But soon the river began to fall and the ice began coming thinner and by nine o'clock this morning all danger was passed, for the river fell five feet in two hours.

T. C. Power & Bro.'s warehouse on the levee, in front of the store, is filled with agricultural implements, wagons, and Indian goods, and fears were entertained at one time

that the crashing ice would rise high enough to tear it down. The people at the store kept anxious watch, but fortunately the fears were groundless. Had the water raised two feet more, the loss to this firm would have been very great, as nothing could have withstood the force of the mass of ice and water which would have been hurled against the building, and warehouse and contents would have been swept away in a moment.

Following up the river, to see the nature of the ice-flow of the preceding eight hours, we found the edge of the levee covered with huge cakes of ice, but no damage was visible to speak of until the ferry was reached. The small ferry-boat owned by Lynch & Flynn was carried away by the first movement of the ice and crushed into kindling wood, for not a vestige of it remains. The large boat of Smith & Castner was thrown up on the levee, and left uninjured, owing to the fact that the "dead man" pulled out, throwing all the tension of the cable on the end to which the boat was attached, pulling it ashore, leaving it lying endwise on the levee.

Ice is thrown all the way along on both banks of the river up to the lower point of the Island, where the effect of the gorge was unmistakable. Here large masses of ice were thrown up in every conceivable shape, and indicated a mighty struggle in the breaking.

On the Island, where is the residence of Mr. Roosevelt, we found the occupant calmly viewing the situation, feeding his chickens, and taking the matter of his temporary isolation quite as a matter of course, and seeming to enjoy his Robinson Crusoe-like existence. He expects to be able to cross by tomorrow, but the boiling mass of water and ice separating him from the main land did not appear this morning to give much encouragement. The pack of ice along the edge of his Island showed his escape to be a very narrow one.

About the first of the excitement, while a crowd was hurrying to the river, near Wetzel's store, a rumbling roar was heard from the head of the street. Everything was inky blackness, the people were in just the mood for a panic, and as the cry rang out "Here it comes!" a scattering occurred in which some ground and lofty tumbling was witnessed. One young gentleman struck his toe against a piece of board frozen in the ground, and extended himself at full length. This, combined with the nearing noise, completed the scare, and, picking himself up, with never a look to the right or to the left, he vanished in the blackness of the night, and it is reported this morning that he has not been seen yet. The crowd, after retreating some distance, stopped to await further development; the rumbling came nearer and nearer, and at last, just as another break was imminent, a wagon rounded the corner drawn by a pair of dejected looking cayuses, the driver sitting as calmly and sleepily on his seat as an old farmer on his way to town with a load of butter and "aigs."

The firm of I. G. Baker & Co. had a number of wagons on the river bank. While the excitement was at its height, and when fears were entertained that the huge masses of ice would be thrown on the banks, and destroy everything that chanced to be exposed, two of the clerks, with the sheriff and constable, started to get the wagons back. The tongue of one of them lay near a hole which had been cut in the ice, and which was about two feet deep and level with water, and one of the clerks, in attempting to attach a chain to the tongue, stepped into the hole. John got out pretty lively, wet to the knees, but said nothing to the others, who had not seen it. Then Al. came with an ax to get the tongue loose, and, stumbling, fell over the tongue, into the hole, emerging therefrom with the idea strongly impressed on his mind that the water in that particular hole was at least four feet deep. What became of the ax report saith not. The sheriff was the next one who tackled that wagon tongue, and he went for it with characteristic energy, but quickly retired with the water running down his boot legs. The constable, all this time, had been behind the wagon, prepared to throw all his weight in the scale when the pushing part came in, but, finding that things didn't seem to be working right in front, came around to see what the matter was. Grasping the situation and the tongue at the same time, he discovered the hole—in fact, he received very palpable evidence of its existence—and when he tried to get out he fell back in it his full length. But he finally scrambled out, and afterwards sought his domicile to try the effect of a dry shirt on his feelings. What became of the wagon and the hole, our reporter has not yet learned.

There is a general feeling of congratulation to-day among all citizens that the thing passed off without accident or damage to speak of, and the whole affair looks almost ludicrous, now that the cause of danger has passed away. But the escape was very narrow, and only a combination of favoring circumstances saved us from a disaster which had it occurred as apprehended, and which was reasonably expected after the great snow fall, and its rapid disappearance, would have had no feature whatever but destruction, and homelessness.

Four years ago, in the Middle and Eastern States, there were several disastrous ice gorges in the mountain streams. The most notable was on the Susquehanna, where the rise was so great as to cause immense destruction of property and considerable loss of life; whole villages were swept away, and the loss has hardly yet been repaired. So

that when we consider the great extent of the country drained by the Missouri, and the great body of water so suddenly poured into it, there is more reason for congratulation over our escape than of pleasantries over the pain.

Up the country the bridges from the canyon to Fort Shaw are down, and the mails will be delayed for several days. The Dearborn and Flat Creek have overflowed the surrounding bottom, till they are almost impassable, and fording is resorted to for miles, where the water covers the road. The little creek between Ft. Shaw and the Crossing is several feet over the bridge.

At Sun River, the ice broke up on Wednesday night, and the water and ice came in such quantity as to threaten the bridge and town, but it passed off without much damage and last evening the water had fallen, and was running comparatively free from ice, and all danger to the bridge is considered over. The bottoms this side the river are all overflowed, but there is but little damage that can accrue, for the reason there is little there that a moderate amount of water will hurt.

The coulees between here and Sun River are full, and the road is almost impassable, and we are informed by Manager Rowe that he reached here only with great difficulty. Between here and 8-mile Springs there is a body of water, stretching, with some intervals, for nearly three miles, through which he was obliged to drive, it coming, in places, above the bottom of the coach. He reports it as rapidly running off, but that its quantity is so great that it will require several days yet to get a passable road.

Our advices from Helena by telegraph inform us that the snow is rapidly disappearing, but no damage has as yet resulted, and advices from other points except on the Benton road show no serious damage. Our informant states that every precaution is being taken to prevent damage resulting in Helena, and there are no serious apprehensions at present felt. Coaches from 6 to 10 hours behind time.

The river at the Coal Bank, up to noon to-day, was only open by a channel. But dispatches received here at two o'clock this afternoon state that the river is rising very rapidly at that place.

Late reports state that the Sun River bridge is quite badly damaged.

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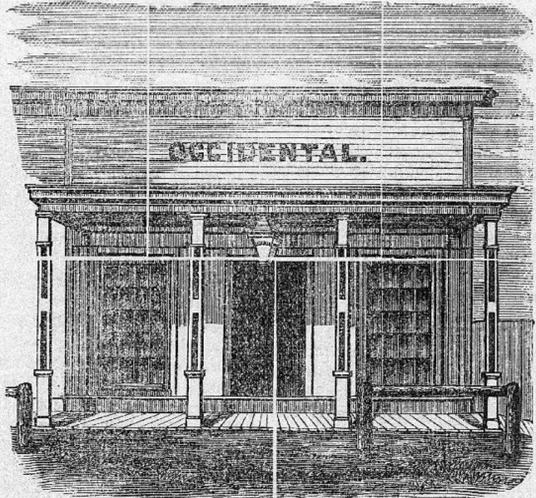
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