**Transcript: 25 Year Anniversary of the Great Midwest Flood: From the Bottoms to a Bluff**

**{Intro Music}**

**[Cassie Ringsdorf]** I'm Cassie Ringsdorf and this is the FEMA podcast.

**[Lucy Engbring]** You know it’s funny - anybody who was 25 years old today, they don't know anything about it. It's just unreal that someone doesn't remember it.

**[Cassie Ringsdorf]** The year is 1993. The Branch Davidian Stand-Off in Waco, Texas captured our attention for months. The first beanie baby was sold in the U.S., and the original Jurassic Park movie dazzled us on the big screen. Grunge was still in, and plaid everything could be found everywhere.

The summer of ’93 also marked one of the largest, costliest floods in U.S. history. I can remember it vividly – I was 11 years old, living in Davenport, Iowa, a community nestled along the Mississippi River, on the border of Iowa and Illinois. That summer, a large part of our downtown was underwater, bridges across the river were impassable, and the iconic minor league baseball stadium downtown—then known as John O’Donnell—had almost completely disappeared under floodwaters. It was all anyone talked about, and even as a pre-teen, I recognized this disaster was a big deal for our community.

It was a big deal for nine states that summer – losses to homes, businesses and critical infrastructure ultimately totaled an estimated $16 billion dollars. That’s billion, with a b.

Stories of devastating loss and hard-fought recovery could be heard across the Midwest after that summer’s flood, but one that often sticks out among the others is the story of Valmeyer, Illinois.

A quintessential small town about 25 miles outside of St. Louis, Missouri along the Mississippi River, Valmeyer had seen flooding before. As the river rose in the summer of ‘93, a flood fight was waged by local residents that kept the waters at bay.

Until the evening of August 1. Recently, I had a chance to sit down with Former Valmeyer Mayor Dennis Knobloch, who described that night, and how the disaster and its hard fought recovery unfolded, from his firsthand perspective.

[Dennis Knobloch] The Sun was going down. It was probably eight to 8:30, I guess somewhere in that area when I started to notice that my feet were getting wet, so the water was starting to come over the South Flank of the Fountain Creek Levee at that spot and we did some radio communications and at the same time it was starting to come over a little bit further west on the same part of the levee. So it was decided at that point there was a lot of floating debris that was coming across that it was just too dangerous for the trucks to keep coming. And, we couldn't put those fellows in any more danger. So we called off the truck brigade and decided it probably made sense for us to get off of the levee as well. By that point it was dark. It was getting was probably 9:30 or so.

So they brought the road grater from the west side. It was the county engineer and IDOT engineer and the equipment operator picked me up on the way by. We couldn't drive the engineer's vehicle any further because the water was coming over three or four foot deep by that point coming across the top of the levee. It was just that we got out with a motor grader. When we did, at that point, I called into town. I said, sound the sirens because whoever was left in town at that point, it was only the emergency personnel we had already several days before that issued a mandatory evacuation order where we called for the people to be out of town at night. So I said, get the emergency folks to the east side of town. Get them up on high ground because it's possible, we still didn’t know. The water at that point was just running over the top of the levee.

Was it going to stop? Something down deep was still telling me, we're not going to flood. It was probably around midnight when the county sheriff called me and he said that he had been up in a helicopter from St Louis, that they had given him access to a helicopter and he was, he had gone over the levee in that area. And he said he saw what he felt was a breach, so we just kind of sat back and waited at that point. It was probably about 4:30. We, with our emergency personnel, we would take some little short trips out into town just to see if we could see what was happening. And about 4:30 we noted the first water then coming into town.

It was really hard at first a lot of the people gathered at the water's edge just to see what they could see. We had a lot of people that went up onto the top of the bluff because you had a good vantage point of the town from up on the bluff looking down, but really all you could see in a lot of cases was just a portion of a house sticking up over the top of the water because there was so much water in the town. Yet it wasn't until the water went down and people could get to their homes. They weren't dry yet, but they could either walk in with waders or go with a boat to their properties. And they could start to see the damage. I had a little bit more access to that because I had buddied up with the folks from our local power company and they two or three times a day went up with a helicopter to monitor all of their power grid and all of their utilities. When they made their trip up, they would always ask if I wanted to go along. So I was up at least twice a day in a helicopter or monitoring the town and could see, you could easily see that there were going to be some problems. We knew early on within the first couple of weeks that a majority of the properties were going to have substantial damage and that it was either going to be a problem for people to go back in and make repairs due to regulations or it was going to be psychologically a problem for people to go back in, because for a lot of people this was like a punch in the stomach to them that they knew they weren't going to want to go back and build a house to have to put up with something like this possibly again.

**[Cassie Ringsdorf]** In the flood’s aftermath, hundreds of homes were substantially damaged and over 90 percent of buildings in the town were damaged beyond repair. Smart resilient recovery became a priority for local officials to ensure something like this would never happen again.

**[Dennis Knobloch]** Probably when everything turned the corner as far as I'm concerned was the second flood. A lot of people by that point, I would say probably 75 percent of our folks had a chance to get into at least a part of their property. Maybe not into the complete house or whatever they had, a business, but they could at least get in and see a little bit what damage they had. We had a lot of folks that went in and started what we call mucking out. They started shoveling mud out. They started pulling down wet plaster board to open up the walls, so things to dry out. Then when that the water came back up again, the second time in the second flood is we call it, there was even more damage that was done because a lot of those folks that had opened up the walls, it allowed that water to access even more of the homes and the properties and cause even more damage than the first round had, and that really, I think, was the turning point for a lot of the residents when they said that's it, you know, we've gone in, we've done what we felt we needed to do to point this in the right direction and be able to go back in our homes and now this comes and we can't take this.

So we could see that there were going to be a lot of folks that were going to head different directions. And if they were going to do that, we had talked this over at several of the community meetings and one of the questions was, what do you think about the town? Is it something that you would like to see continue on? A lot of the folks said, yeah, we would hate to see Valmeyer disappear. We knew that if we didn't do something to try to make an organized effort to relocate, people would probably scatter with the wind. So that's when we started toying with the idea of a relocation.

**[Cassie Ringsdorf]** Relocating the entire town?

**[Dennis Knobloch]** As much as possible. Yes.

**[Cassie Ringsdorf]** The entire town moved two miles away and 400 feet higher to be exact.

**[Dennis Knobloch]** Well, we were fortunate that we had a very good support team behind us. We had a good team of engineers and architects and we had a planner that was kind of leading the charge from that side of things that he had grown up in the town. His father had at one time been the mayor of the town and his mother still lived in the town and he had been involved in working on her house after the flood, doing some of that muck out that we talked about. And so he had direct contact with everything that everybody was dealing with here. And he was very instrumental in working and getting us to the goal that we needed with this.

A lot of it was just sheer determination from the folks, part of the residents. We told them from the very beginning, if this is something that you're serious about, about moving the town, you're going to have to participate, and we had people that got together for weekly planning meetings. We had around the table, we had school teachers, farmers, people who had absolutely no training in any kind of town planning or organization, but they knew what they wanted. They had raw ideas and then we had the people that were sitting across from them that could take those raw ideas and turn them into a plan.

The other thing that we had was the expediency that these people brought to the table because all of them were living in some type of a temporary living arrangement. Their entire life was a temporary living arrangement. They were either in a FEMA trailer, they were staying in the basement of their brother in law's house in a neighboring town. They were staying with a friend or a relative. These same people were going to church in borrowed facilities. They were going to a post office in a different town. They were going to a bank that was set up in a mobile home. So their entire lives were put on hold and what they wanted was to put things together as quickly as they possibly could and make this town happen.

**[Cassie Ringsdorf]** That's exactly what they did. In just about two years, approximately 300 homes and 25 businesses were acquired from old Valmeyer and relocated to the top of a bluff overlooking the Mississippi River. Using more than $8,000,000 from Fema Hazard Mitigation Grant Program along with funding from a number of other federal and state organizations.

Today, the new Valmeyer is a modern planned community of nearly 400 homes and more than 1200 people. New Valmeyer is a community that hasn't seen a flood since relocating, but whose residents still remember vividly the summer of ’93. I don't think much demonstrates that better than Dennis’ emotional words describing the disaster’s personal impact to him, but also his clear dedication to the town and its people through those days, months and years after the Great Midwest Flood.

**[Dennis Knobloch]** The one thing that I think tells of my personal situation on that afternoon when we issued the voluntary evacuation order in town, I was at flood command center working. The phone rang and whoever was answering the phones that day, I don't remember who it was, handed me the phone and said it was your wife. And the story goes back probably two weeks before this, the flood command center had become the morning coffee shop. The older generation, the retired folks would come there every morning, “okay, what's going on with the levees? Give us the updates. So we know.” We would actually have people that stopped on their way to work. If they worked in St Louis, they would come by because we were there 24 hours. So they had the chance to stop in every night, every morning, whatever.

So the big argument that was taking place in my house, we had bought a new piano for the kids for piano lessons. Two weeks before this, my wife said, “You're getting that piano out of the house. I don't care what you do.” And I said, “piano's not leaving,” because the last thing I wanted to do was be the person that people would look at and say the mayor is moving his piano out, it’s time that we do something. There's something bad going on here. So she called me up on that Sunday afternoon. She said, “I've got a truck with a bunch of people outside and they want to move that piano.” I said, “No, you're not moving it.” Hour later she calls back again. We discussed this on the phone for a little while and finally I said, “Okay.” I knew that was going to be the only opportunity for the piano to get moved because I didn't have time to do anything.

Well, one of the old guys in town every morning when he came in, he knew that this argument was taking place at our house, and he said, “well, mayor, your piano go up the hill yet in?” and every morning I would say “No Henry. That piano is not moving. It’s staying right where it’s at.”

On that Monday morning after this all took place, he comes in, he said, “Well, mayor, how are things going with the piano?” And I said, “Henry yesterday it went up the hill.” And he turned around and walked out and went home and packed.

So that was the kind of thing that I didn't want to happen, but at the same time, two weeks later, I was so damn glad that everybody did and they got their things out. So it was worth the argument that we had.

**[Cassie Ringsdorf]** We've linked to this episode on our FEMA Facebook page and we invite you to join the conversation in the comments. If you have ideas for future topics send us an email at fema-podcast@fema.dhs.gov. If you'd like to learn more about this episode or other topics, visit fema.gov/podcast.