

HUEY LONG

The Greatest Thing That Almost Happened



Edward Drobinski



HUEY LONG

By **Edward Drobinski**



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1 - The Great Depression in Louisiana

The Great Depression started earlier in Louisiana and the US south than it did the "educated" northern cities which were riding the crest of the Woodrow Wilson Federal Reserve's "easy money" policies. Increasing mechanization was making more and more people economically useless, and the growing disparity in wealth between plain working folks and the city slickers getting rich on that easy borrowed money put in the stock market was exploding.

In Louisiana the 1927 flood proved to be a pre-cursor, bringing the issue and the one-sided economy to the fore, but was unnoticed outside of the affected areas at the time. The Great Depression would soon become nationwide; predicted by no politician, except man-of-the-people Huey Long, who shouted it from the rooftops.

In 1927, twenty-five percent of the entire state of Louisiana was under floodwaters, and another twenty-five percent was threatened.



Huey Long speaking with reporters

During the Great Depression farm prices in Louisiana reached unheard of lows and deepened rural poverty.

The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 was the most destructive river flood in the history of the United States, with 27,000 square miles inundated in depths of up to 30 feet over the

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course of several months in early 1927. The cost of the damage has been estimated to be between \$246 million and \$1 billion, \$4.2-\$17.3 billion in 2023 dollars.



About 500 people died and over 630,000 people were directly affected. 94% of those affected lived in Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana, especially in the Mississippi Delta region. 127 people died in Arkansas, making it one of the deadliest disasters ever recorded in the state. More than 200,000 people were displaced from their homes along the Lower Mississippi River and had to live for lengthy periods in relief camps. As a result of this disruption, many of them joined the great migration from the South to the industrial cities of the North and the Midwest. Even after the waters had subsided, the migrants preferred to stay where they had moved, rather than return to rural southern agricultural labor.

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To prevent future floods, the federal government built the world's longest system of levees and floodways. Then Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover's handling of the crisis gave him a positive nationwide reputation, helping pave the way to his election as US President in 1928. Political turmoil from the disaster at the state level aided the election of enormously popular vocal critic of the wealth disparity, Huey Long as Governor in Louisiana.

As early as the late nineteenth century, the United States was well aware of flooding potential along the Mississippi, which drained 40% of the nation's area. The Mississippi River Commission was established by the federal government in 1879, with the directive to deepen the river channel, improve navigation, prevent major flooding, and increase river based commerce. This commission recommended raising extensive levees along its channels to contain the flow, dismissing the advice of experts such as James Eads, who had directed the Saint Louis Bridge project in the 1860s. These "expert" critics predicted that compressing a swollen river between walls would increase its destructive potential. That's kind of like saying that putting water in a glass makes it more dangerous to drink. Nonetheless, the "experts" had a diminishing effect on the

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recommendations of the commission, and after the disaster they disappeared or became unavailable for comment.

Flooding began due to heavy rainfall in summer 1926 across the river's central basin. By September, the Mississippi's tributaries in Kansas and Iowa were swollen to capacity. On Christmas Day of 1926, the Cumberland River at Nashville, Tennessee, exceeded 56.2 feet, the second highest recorded level of all time, second only to a destructive flood in 1793 had produced the record level - 58.5 feet.

Flooding peaked in the Lower Mississippi River near Mound Landing, Mississippi, and Arkansas City, Arkansas, and broke levees along the river in at least 145 places. The water flooded more than 27,000 square miles of land, and left more than 700,000 people homeless. Approximately 500 people died as a result of flooding. Monetary damages due to flooding reached approximately \$1 billion, which was one-third of the federal budget in 1927. If the event were to have occurred in 2007, the damages would total around \$930 billion to \$1 trillion, measured in 2007 US dollars.



Evangeline



Evangeline



Melville



New Iberia



Marksville Avovelles



Rayville



Delhi



Glendale

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The flood eventually affected Missouri, Illinois, Kansas, Tennessee, Kentucky, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, and Texas. Arkansas was hard hit, but less so than Louisiana, with 14% of its territory covered by floodwaters extending from the Mississippi and Arkansas deltas. By May 1927, the Mississippi River below Memphis, Tennessee, reached a width of 80 miles. Without trees, grasses, deep roots, and wetlands, the denuded soil of the watershed could not do its ancient work of absorbing floodwater after seasons of intense snow and rain.

In an unrelated flood a few years later, on Good Friday, April 15, 1934, 15 inches of rain fell in New Orleans in 18 hours. This far exceeded the abilities of the city's rainwater pumping system, and up to 4 feet of water flooded some parts of the city. This local rain related flood was not connected to the Mississippi River flooding.

Being the hub of Louisiana business and politics at the time, a group of influential bankers in New Orleans met to discuss how to guarantee the safety of the city, as they had already learned of the massive scale of flooding upriver. On April 29 they arranged to set off about 30 tons of dynamite on the levee at Caernarvon, Louisiana, releasing 250,000 cubic feet of water. This was intended to prevent New Orleans from suffering serious damage, and it resulted in flooding much of the less densely

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populated St. Bernard Parish and all of Plaquemines Parish's east bank. As it turned out, the destruction of the Caernarvon levee was unnecessary, as several major levee breaks well upstream of New Orleans, including one the day after the demolitions, released major amounts of flood waters, reducing the water that reached the city. The New Orleans businessmen did not compensate the losses to and of people in the downriver parishes.

In what they must have thought would be viewed as a legitimate address to the disaster, the US Congress passed the Mississippi Flood Control Act, which put greater stress on construction in the Mississippi Delta levee camps despite warnings about harsh living conditions and mistreatment within the camps.



By August 1927, the flood subsided. Hundreds of thousands of people had been made homeless and displaced; properties, livestock, and crops were destroyed. In terms of population affected, in territory flooded, in property loss and crop destruction, the flood's figures were "staggering." Great loss

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of life was averted by relief efforts, largely by the American Red Cross through the efforts of local workers.

Historians estimate that of the 637,000 people forced to relocate by the flooding, 94% lived in three states: Arkansas, Mississippi and Louisiana. In one location, over 13,000 evacuees near Greenville, Mississippi, were gathered from area farms, and evacuated to the crest of the unbroken Greenville Levee. But many were stranded there for days without food or clean water.

Following the Great Flood of 1927, multiple states needed money to rebuild their roads and bridges. Louisiana received \$1,067,336 from the federal government for rebuilding, but it also had to institute a state gasoline tax to create a \$30,000,000 fund to pay for new hard surfaced highways.

The US Army Corps of Engineers was charged with taming the Mississippi River. Under the Flood Control Act of 1928, the world's longest system of levees was built. Floodways that diverted excessive flow from the Mississippi River were constructed. While the levees prevented some flooding, scientists have found that they changed the flow of the Mississippi River, with the unintended consequence of increasing flooding in succeeding decades. Channeling of waters has reduced the absorption of seasonal rains by the floodplains, increasing

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the speed of the current and preventing the deposit of new soils along the way. The levees did not prevent recurrences of significant flooding, especially a major flood in 1937. To better study and plan for future situations, Lt. Eugene Raybold proposed laying out a physical hydraulic model to simulate the basin's response to various rainfall scenarios. Land was procured at the southeast edge of Clinton, Mississippi, and a 200 acre hydraulic model was constructed, matching to the river's flow from Baton Rouge to Omaha, modeling the confluence points of its major tributaries across 16 states. The work was completed during 1942, with some labor provided by POWs from Camp Clinton. The Corps used this model to accurately study river flows and mitigation strategies, but by 1970 it fell out of use. In the 1970s it was transferred to the city government of Jackson, and the Buddy Butts Park was created around it. It is presently little known, recognized, or used by the heavily black area, despite its proven accuracy.

Herbert Hoover enhanced his reputation by his achievements in directing flood relief operations as Secretary of Commerce under President Calvin Coolidge. The next year Hoover easily won the Republican 1928 nomination for President, and the general election that year. In upstate Louisiana, anger among yeomen farmers directed at the New Orleans elite for its damage of

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downriver parishes aided Huey Long's election to the governorship in 1928. Hoover was much lauded initially for his masterful handling of the refugee camps known as "tent cities." These densely populated camps required basic necessities which were difficult to attain, such as water and sanitation facilities. Hoover used a combination of bureaucratic resources and grassroots forces to give the tent cities the opportunity to become self-sufficient. This method presented difficulties, as rural leaders were unprepared to manage the chaotic circumstances found in large camps. This led Hoover eventually to place the relief camps under federal government supervision. Several reports on the terrible situation in the refugee camps were kept out of the media at Hoover's request, with the pledge of further reforms after the presidential election in 1928. His failure to deliver followed other disappointments by the Republican Party.

During the 1920s Europe and much of the rest of the world suffered economic troubles following World War I. Yet during this time the United States seemed immune to the chaos of the outside world thanks to the growth of new technologies and the rapid rise of consumerism. By the end of the decade, though, the American economy was in deep trouble. Protectionist trade policies and unchecked speculation, i.e. high risk, potential

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high reward investment made on borrowed funds, the declining value of wages, and overproduction in agriculture and industry combined to bring the Great Depression to the United States.

Capitalism, the great producer of wealth has an illogical, stained, soft underbelly which first came to notice during the Great Depression. While businesses seek to maximize profits, one common method of doing that is to pay proportionately less wages. The collectively lessened purchasing power of the workers, which concurrently lines the pockets of the monopoly owners, causes the workers to buy less products of the business monopolies, eradicating the owner's profits. That's it in a nutshell; simple, though acknowledged by none, excepting Huey Long. Long was not anti-business, not by a long shot. However, he recognized that their well-being was tied to the well-being of the worker-consumer. To this day, hearing the political nonsense attendant to the "learned" discussions of capitalism versus communism, one would think that Huey said it simply in ancient Sumerian; now a defunct language. In fact he said it in Louisianan, a language the "credentialed" have not yet found on their Rosetta Stones.

These structural problems surfaced throughout the 1920s. Most notably, real estate busts in California and Florida during the mid-1920s were devastating. For most people, though, these

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