When The Levee Breaks: Race Relations and The Mississippi Flood of 1927

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If it keeps on rainin', levee's goin' to break
And the water gonna come in, have no place to stay

Well all last night I sat on the levee and moan
Thinkin' 'bout my baby and my happy home

If it keeps on rainin', levee's goin' to break
And all these people have no place to stay

Now look here mama what am I to do
I ain't got nobody to tell my troubles to

I works on the levee mama both night and day
I ain't got nobody, keep the water away

Oh cryin' won't help you, prayin' won't do no good
When the levee breaks, mama, you got to lose

I works on the levee, mama both night and day
I works so hard, to keep the water away

I had a woman, she wouldn't do for me
I'm goin' back to my used to be

I's a mean old levee, cause me to weep and moan
Gonna leave my baby, and my happy home.[1]

These words come from the husband and wife blues singers Memphis Minnie and Kansas Joe McCoy's song, "When the Levee Breaks." First recorded in 1929, their song captured the turmoil, upheaval, and hopelessness that black people in the Mississippi Delta experienced as the river overflowed its banks in 1927. With the forced labor and oppression that the song's verses describe, it seems that black flood victims had nothing to win and plenty to lose. But the flood was not entirely a loss for the advancement of racial justice in the Delta. It also provided an

[1] Kansas Joe McCoy and Memphis Minnie, "When the Levee Breaks" (Columbia Records, 1929).

opportunity for black men and women to win several concessions toward recognition and equality.

The Mississippi Flood of 1927 is the most destructive American flood of the twentieth century, but it has received surprisingly little coverage in the historical community. This flood warrants further examination, not only because of the economic and psychological effects it precipitated, but also for its role as a prism through which historians can view the racial atmosphere of 1920s America. The flood brought out the best and the worst in both white and black Delta folks. Many of the time-tested tools of the racist and paternalistic white elites were reinvigorated by the state of emergency that the flood provided. But there was also opportunity for and instances of black agency and resistance that would have been impossible at any other time in history. This essay will examine the Mississippi Flood of 1927 in the context of a decade where notions of racial hierarchy were constantly challenged and re-affirmed. While one might expect the existence of racial injustices in the ostensibly conservative climate of the 1920s, there are also instances of black resistance and agency along with white progressivism in response to that injustice. The flood provides a unique opportunity to assess the progression of race relations in one of America's most transformative decades.

As mentioned above, despite the transformative nature of the 1927 flood, historians have paid surprisingly little attention to it. Two fairly early, but well-received histories barely discuss the event at all. George Brown Tindall's *The Emergence of the New South 1913-1945* only treated the flood in passing. He mentioned the valuable contributions that Red Cross relief workers made to the alleviation of pellagra when "in 1927, a great Mississippi River flood and an attendant famine brought the 'red horror' before the eyes of Red Cross volunteers."[2] His description of "*a*" rather than "*The*" great flood, and his discussion of the flood as an aspect of a greater story of pellagra eradication indicates that Tindall, like many early historians, failed to see the importance of the flood in the larger narrative of American history. Similarly, in Richard Aubrey McLemore's edited volume, *A History of Mississippi*, which covers the years between 1890 and 1970, the flood is only briefly discussed. After quoting the Red Cross report that called the flood the "greatest disaster this country has ever suffered," McLemore ironically only spends a handful of paragraphs describing the disaster.[3] To be fair, McLemore's work focuses largely on political history, but it is difficult to accept such a terse treatment of what was arguably one of the more psychologically and economically upsetting events in Mississippi's early twentieth century. Needless to say, these early works

[2] George Brown Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South 1913-1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), 279. Pallegra is a disease brought on by vitamin deficiency.

[3] Richard Aubrey McLemore, *A History of Mississippi*, Volume II, (Hattiesburg: University and College Press of Mississippi, 1973), 83-84.

provide disappointing and superficial discussions of the flood. No real comprehensive treatment of the flood would appear for several more years.

Pete Daniel's *Deep'n As It Come: The 1927 Mississippi River Flood* offered the first attempt at a complete analysis of the flood.[4] This book provided an engaging and well-researched examination with a decidedly bottom-up perspective. Daniel relied heavily on oral interviews with the men and women, both black and white, who had experienced the flood firsthand. In addition to these oral sources, Daniel examined more traditional sources like personal papers, newspapers, and the official Red Cross reports and correspondences. The book is also well illustrated with nearly 150 photographs. But this plethora of illustrations and the book's relatively short length (only 151 pages), indicate that Daniel's work is more of a popular history than a work of professional historical analysis. Pete Daniel has published several insightful and deeply analytical works of Southern history, but this particular book falls short of achieving that same analytical success. His book poses more questions to the serious historian than it answers, but he makes a handful of intriguing assertions. It appears that Daniel's true purpose behind writing this book was not to discuss the social, political, and racial implications of the flood, but to use it as a didactic story of environmental awareness. His primary agenda is to show the folly in the Army Corps of Engineers' "levees only policy" for flood control, and the greater folly of trying to control the river at all.[5] But along with this environmental narrative, Daniel has carefully woven a story of oppression and abuse, coupled with instances of mutual assistance between the races. He concedes that "there were irregularities, exploitation, peonage, pilfering, sexual problems, and other abuses," but ultimately concludes "that during the emergency people rose above the restricting customs of race and caste."[6] This conclusion is admirably balanced, but it appears somewhat naïve. One must ask if the races united out of the goodness of their hearts or if both blacks and whites had ulterior motives in the civil treatment of one another. It is this issue of race relations, rather than Daniel's environmental agenda that provide the more fascinating aspect of the 1927 flood.

The second and more recent attempt at analyzing the flood is John M. Barry's *Rising Tide: the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America*. Although Barry is essentially a journalist and not a professional historian, much of his work, including this book and another influential volume on the 1918 influenza epidemic, exhibits a disciplined and engaging perspective on historically important concepts. Unfortunately, like Daniel, Barry fails to provide the deep historical

[4] John M. Barry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America* (New York: Touchstone, Simon and Schuster, 1997), 300.

[5] Pete Daniel, *Deep'n As It Come: The 1927 Mississippi River Flood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 50-51.

[6] Ibid., 11.

analysis that the flood requires. *Rising Tide* tries to make several grand assertions concerning the flood. First, Barry argues, that the flood destroyed the sanctity of "levees only" flood control, but in reality a rich and powerful debate over control practice had thrived in the Delta almost from its first years of settlement. Barry also sees the flood as the catalyst for the political career of Huey Long and the key to Herbert Hoover's presidential election. While the flood may have played a role in creating these popular politicians, there were undoubtedly other factors involved. Finally, on the issue of race relations, and most importantly to this paper, Barry contends that the betrayal and oppression experienced during the flood drove many blacks to abandon the Delta and move to northern cities. He argues, "the Delta, the land that had once promised so much to blacks, had become, entirely and finally, the land where the blues began."[7] It is difficult to believe that the Delta ever really "promised so much to blacks," and indeed the migration to the North had slowed greatly by 1927. Contrary to the historical consensus, expressed most comprehensively in John R. Grossman's *Land of Hope*,[8] Barry ignores the role of World War I, and points to the flood as the catalyst behind a migration that had largely ended by the time the deluge occurred.

Like Daniel, Barry's larger narrative treats the story of race relations superficially. He is concerned mainly with the story of the great men involved in the disaster including Huey Long, Herbert Hoover, and the Percys of Mississippi. From this perspective, any analysis of race relations takes place in the context of a section that focuses on the role of William Alexander Percy. Ultimately, black refugees become unwilling pawns in a great political scheme, providing a disappointing assessment of race relations during the flood. Despite the criticisms mentioned above, Barry's connection between black refugees and the larger political narrative of the 1920s provides insights for the analysis that this paper seeks to achieve.

The final and most insightful work of historical scholarship to emerge on the flood is Robyn Spencer's article "Contested Terrain: The Mississippi River Flood of 1927 and the Struggle to Control Black Labor."[9] Unlike Barry, who found the flood to be a major cause of the Great Migration, Spencer places the flood in the context of that migration. She argues that "growing labor scarcity due to out-migration of black laborers provided a context for increased determination on the part of planters to hold their laborers on the land."[10] Spencer sees much of the same abuse and oppression of flood refugees as an outgrowth of white elites' increased anxiety over the loss of their labor force. Spencer's article is the first to

[7] Barry, *Rising Tide*, 334.

[8] John R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners and the Great Migration* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989).

[9] Robyn Spencer, "Contested Terrain: The Mississippi Flood of 1927 and the Struggle to Control Black Labor," *The Journal of Negro History* 79, 2 (Spring 1994): 170-181.

[10] Spencer, 171.

truly place the flood in the context of the social upheaval of the 1920s, and thus is helpful for the purposes of this paper. But Spencer's article also has some flaws. She relies heavily on black newspapers like the *Chicago Defender* and the Baltimore *Afro-American* as primary sources. These papers give a somewhat problematic perspective because both worked hard to entice blacks to leave the Deep South for the more progressive urban North. Spencer's work is based on the assumption that black refugees were forcibly contained in the Delta during the flood. While it is true that white elites hoped to keep as many black laborers in the Delta as possible, it is also true that many black refugees did not want to leave. This source bias is common in works of Southern history; this essay seeks to achieve a more balanced depiction of why black flood victims stayed on in camps in the midst of floodwaters rather than leaving for the North.

It is clear that the historiographical literature concerning race relations and the Flood of 1927 is relatively sparse. Those works that do exist provide incomplete depictions, but they have raised several issues that will be examined further in this essay. First, it has become apparent that the events surrounding the flood must be properly placed within the context of the political and racial climate of the 1920s. It is also necessary to provide a more nuanced and balanced treatment of race relations. Daniel and Barry have largely glossed over the issue of race in the flood while pursuing a separate agenda. Robyn Spencer has insightfully examined race relations and correctly linked it to anxiety over labor shortages, but her analysis appears lopsided and allows for little agency and choice on the part of black refugees. These problems and questions warrant a deeper and complex analysis of race, society, and politics in the Mississippi River Flood of 1927.

Flooding was no rare occurrence in the Delta; the years when the river did not flood were the real unnatural occurrences. William Faulkner eloquently explained, in his short novel that takes place during the flood, "the river was now doing what it liked to do, had waited patiently the ten years in order to do, as a mule will work for you ten years for the privilege of kicking you once."[11] Like Faulkner's mule, the Mississippi River delivered one swift kick to Delta dwellers in 1927 that they would not soon forget. Unusually heavy rain began to fall in the Midwest in the summer of 1926. Rivers in Kansas, Iowa, and Illinois began to reach flood stages by September of 1926. Throughout the fall and winter of 1926 and 1927, heavy rains continued in the nation's midsection and Mississippi tributaries in the South began to overflow. By early spring, unusually high rainfall continued, until eventually the levees, which the Delta's white elites had so painstakingly constructed to protect their cotton empires, began to strain under the pressure. At Mound Landing, eighteen miles north of the Delta's "Queen City" of Greenville, Mississippi, the levee broke open on April 21,

[11] William Faulkner, *Three Famous Short Novels*, "The Old Man" (New York, 1961), 115-16.

1927. In Greenville, church bells rang and fire whistles howled as white and black Delta dwellers, along with droves of automobiles, mules, and livestock, flocked to the synthetic high-ground of the levee tops. On April 22, the Memphis *Commercial Appeal* carried the headline, "Greenville Flooded; People Flee For Lives; Levees Snap Under Strain Leaving Path of Death and Destruction in the Wake of Worst Flood."[12] Greenville was the first city to be inundated and it would remain under the lens of national media scrutiny for the duration of the disaster.

Mississippians often remember those early days of flood relief with rose-tinted nostalgia. Mississippi senator John Sharp Williams remarked, "I sometimes think God lets great calamities fall on us in order that we may see, realize, and *remember*…that we are all, after all, *one*—in spite of differences of section, politics, religion, and race."[13] This was the time when Daniel argued that "people rose above the restricting customs of race and caste," when regardless of skin color, the "first concern was to rescue the perishing."[14] Black and white refugees were plucked from rooftops and carried to safety in integrated boats. The United States Coast Guard reported, "[T]he negro and the whites were cared for the same, all having the best of care that could be given on a small boat."[15] But the racial honeymoon would soon be over as the flood waters lingered and old racial strictures re-emerged. Greenville's chairman of the Flood Relief Committee was faced with the brutal reality of a lengthy disaster and he penned, "[W]hatever we had accomplished, recklessly and chaotically, those first few days of the flood, one problem…had not been solved: how could we feed the whites and blacks?"[16]

After the first few days, the National Red Cross took up the unenviable task of providing relief for the displaced flood victims. The intrusion of a national organization into the closed terrain of the South might, at first, appear to engender hopes of racially progressive relief policies. But the very structure of the Red Cross meant that such hopes would be stymied from the beginning. As Robyn Spencer noted, "The National Red Cross's commitment to grass roots mobilization and voluntarism allowed Southern whites to operate relief camps with almost total autonomy." [17] Total Southern white autonomy meant that the grip of racism, even under the guise of paternalism would be difficult to shake. The Red Cross argued that they "did not create the social conditions in the South…it is not their function to reform them."[18] The structure of the Red

[12] *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 22 Apr. 1927.

[13] *Red Cross Courier*, 1 May1928, 15.

[14] Daniel, 11.

[15] "Remark Sheet, Mississippi Flood Relief, 1927," U.S. Coast Guard, quoted in Daniel, 79.

[16] William Alexander Percy, *Lanterns on the Levee: Recollections of a Planter's Son* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941), 255.

[17] Spencer, 172.

[18] "The Flood, the Red Cross, and the National Guard," *Crisis* 35 (January 1928): 5.

Cross allowed for the ruling planter elites to dictate the nature of flood relief for black victims.

In Greenville, the ruling family was the Percys. LeRoy Percy was a well-respected former United States senator and constant advocate of old paternalistic approaches to race relations, which although racist, were often humanitarian. LeRoy Percy was a model Southern Progressive, a true exemplar of the values of the New South. He fought to raise the standard of living for Delta blacks by maintaining voting rights, raising wages and leading the Southern wing of anti-Ku Klux Klan forces. As his son explained, "He felt the Klan was the sort of public evil good citizens could not ignore."[19] Like all Southern Progressives, however, "all this he had done not simply because it was right and good; self-interest had operated too. He had needed their strong backs."[20] Although modern observers might scoff at Percy's self-serving paternalism, for all intents and purposes he had created in Greenville an island of dignity and respect for blacks in the sea of oppression that was the Delta. It is this perceived dignity and respect among the races that existed in pre-flood Greenville that would make the abuses to come even more unbearable.

LeRoy's son, William Alexander Percy, would have made an excellent Faulkner character. He constantly dwelled in his father's shadow and hopelessly longed for the type of glory his father had achieved in the construction of a Delta empire. John Barry notes, "Will was known only for being his father's son."[21] Indeed, his memoir, *Lanterns on the Levee*, is subtitled, *Recollections of a Planter's Son*. William Alexander Percy received his chance to emerge from the shadows and match his father's achievement when he took on the responsibilities of leading the relief efforts in Greenville.

With all of the drama and occasional stream of consciousness of a Faulkner novel, John Barry focused on W. A. Percy's struggle to live up to his father's reputation. In this context, Barry concludes, "Will Percy had failed." Not only did Percy fail to live up to his father's standard, Barry argues, he also managed to make a fiasco of the relief process, force Greenville blacks to move North, and ultimately dissuade black voters from Hoover's Republican party to F.D.R.'s Democrats. Barry, I believe, has placed too much blame on the shoulders of Will Percy. A closer examination of his relief work reveals good intentions and occasional racial progressivism, but ultimately the situation in Greenville thwarted any good intentions. As mentioned above, after assembling thousands of whites and blacks from both the city and the countryside on the levee and in the second stories of commercial buildings, Will Percy was faced with the dilemma of what to do next. For one group the choice was clear: "For the whites we

[19] Percy, 235.
[20] Barry, 308.
[21] Ibid, 302.

chose evacuation."[22] The question of "What should we do with the Negroes?"[23] was more difficult to answer. But despite Spencer's depiction of a story of premeditated and purposeful abuse from the beginning to the end of the relief experience, Percy decided that for black refugees, "Obviously for them, too, evacuation was the only solution."[24] In the Delta, the notion of removing black labor was blasphemy. Early on, Percy stood up to the planter opposition by taking the moral high ground, but his position would not remain high and dry for very long.

Despite Barry's contention that "Will had less tolerance for racial differences than his father," and the *Chicago Defender*, which characterized Percy as a man "whose prejudice against members of our Race is as bitter as gall,"[25] his original relief policies reflected a racially progressive point of view. He saw evacuation as the most humane method for providing relief to flood victims, but he immediately met with backlash from the planter elites. Will responded to such backlash with, "I insisted that I would not be bullied by a few blockhead planters into doing something I knew to be wrong—they were thinking of their pocketbooks; I of the Negroes' welfare."[26] With steamers waiting to carry the black refugees to higher ground at Vicksburg, LeRoy Percy convinced his son to reconsider evacuation and reconvene the committee to discuss the notion once again. The relief committee had unanimously approved Will's decision to evacuate, and there was no reason to believe that they had changed their minds. Unbeknownst to Will, his father and other influential planters had employed classic Southern politics and convinced the committee members to reverse their decision. Will Percy remembered, "At the meeting of the committeemen I was astounded and horrified when each and every one of them gave it as his considered judgment that the Negroes should remain and that we would provide for their needs where they were."[27] In conceptualizing race relations in the Flood of 1927, it is important to remember this incident. It shows the beginning of a change in racial thought even among Southerners. By 1927, many were almost willing to treat their black neighbors as human beings, but that humane treatment would always stop short of threatening the labor supply.

It is also important to mention that, in addition to "a group of planters, angry and mouthing,"[28] blacks themselves resisted evacuation. Will Percy explained, "At last the innumerable details for their exodus were arranged and the steamers, belching black smoke, waited for them restlessly at the concrete wharf. It was at this juncture that the Negroes

[22] Percy, 255.
[23] Ibid., 256.
[24] Ibid., 257.
[25] *The Chicago Defender* 24 June 1927.
[26] Percy, 257.
[27] Ibid., 257-58
[28] Ibid., 257.

announced they did not wish to leave."[29] Coming from Percy's memoir, one must examine this information critically, but it is indicative of a major problem with the historiography surrounding the flood and much of Southern historiography in general. For the most part, historians like Robyn Spencer, insisted that blacks in the South were always *forced* to stay in the Delta, few historians take into account that many black Southerners actually wanted to be farmers in the South. One influential text which discusses the Great Migration, James R. Grossman's *Land of Hope*, is among the few that removes itself from the narrative of forced and hapless action to one that reflects black agency. When historians list "push and pull factors" black migrants often become mindless pawns dragged around a map. Grossman argues that, for the story of migration "No list can implicitly weave together its various components to compose an image of the fabric of social and economic relationships which drove black Southerners," to leave their homes in the South. "Nor can lists communicate the fears, disgust, hopes, and goals that combined to propel blacks from the South and draw them northward."[30] Blacks in the Delta had a complex love-hate relationship with their homeland. They resisted leaving Greenville because, in a time of crisis they had historically looked to the community, both the black and the white community, for the support needed to weather hard times. Even if their white neighbors were racists, at least in Greenville they knew they were racist. To be transplanted into another community meant that blacks would have to deal with a new set of alien white oppressors. Barry and Spencer largely overlook the complex relationship that blacks had with their homeland, and thus they see any instance when blacks did not abandon the Delta as an instance of white-enforced immobility. It is important to keep this concept in mind while examining the resistance black refugees instituted against white abuses.

Stories of abuse emerged almost immediately after black refugees were contained in relief camps. There were incidents of inconsiderate taunting, for instance, "Whenever the steamer *Capitol* pulled away from the dock, its calliope routinely played 'Bye Bye Blackbird.'"[31] But there were also instances of severe curtailment of rights and liberties. For example, although he argued that it was for the sake of efficiency in food and aid distribution, Percy ordered that all blacks in Greenville move into the camps on the levee. At the same time, however, white residents were allowed to stay in their homes and had aid delivered to them, often by the black men who had been contained on the levee. In addition, unlike other camps where Red Cross aid was distributed with no strings attached, in Greenville, Percy declared, "No able-bodied negro is entitled to be fed at all unless he is tagged as a laborer."[32] But aside from these curtailments of

[29] Percy, 257.
[30] Grossman, 18.
[31] Barry, 312.
[32] *Greenville Democrat-Times*, 9 May 1927, quoted in Barry, 314.

mobility, liberty, and human rights, black refugees also experienced physical abuse in the camps.

The Mississippi National Guard troops that guarded the Red Cross camp in Greenville received the most criticism from both black and white critics. A white woman recalled, "The Guard would come along and say, 'There's a boat coming up. Go unload.' If they didn't hurry up, they'd kick them. They didn't mind taking their guns, pistols out, and knocking them over the head."[33] A black man, John Butler, reported similar abuse, "negroes…were caught slipping out of camp and were…whipped, the men using a strap taken off one of their rifles."[34] In the eyes of many black and white Greenville residents, most of these crimes were committed by outsiders. The most notorious companies of National Guard troops were from Corinth and Lambert, Mississippi; they were not from Delta towns. Will Percy sent these two companies out of Greenville, admitting that they were, "guilty of acts which profoundly and justly made the negroes fear them."[35] The racial order in Greenville was steeped in the virtues of the New South. These ideals, instituted by LeRoy Percy in his struggles against race-baiters like James K. Vardaman, the Ku Klux Klan, and indignity among black Greenvillians, would not tolerate the type of racism instituted by National Guard troops. This is not to say that the white elites of Greenville were not racist, but to lump them in ideologically with the brutal racists found among the National Guard troops or the Ku Klux Klan is simply disingenuous. The legacy of these New South ideas made the abuses in Greenville even more painful for blacks who had remained loyal to that system.

Greenville blacks and the national media actively resisted much of the abuse discussed above. Despite the picture of forced encampment painted by Spencer and Barry, black men and women did not always obey. Evidence shows that many blacks resisted the order to move out of private residences and into camps, but critics of the flood have taken little notice. One case, in June, long after the order had been issued, Percy remembered, "The police were sent into the Negro section to comb from the idlers the required number of workers."[36] This shows that despite Percy's best efforts, black people in Greenville continued to occupy their neighborhood in the partially-flooded city. The racially progressive atmosphere of pre-flood Greenville had also allowed for the growth of a well-educated group of minister-leaders in the community. The Reverend E. M. Weddington was the pastor of the influential and physically imposing Mt. Horeb Church that stood at the center of black intellectual life in Greenville. Weddington is most likely the anonymous black minister who wrote President Coolidge saying, "All of this mean and brutish treatment of the colored people is

[33] Oral history of Mrs. Henry Ransom, quoted in Barry, 315.
[34] Mississippi National Guard, *Report of Flood Relief Expedition* quoted in Barry, 315.
[35] Letter from William Alexander Percy to Johnston, quoted in Barry, 316.
[36] Percy, 266.

nothing more but downright slavery."[37] Eventually Herbert Hoover, the executive branch's director of relief asked Robert Moton of the Tuskegee Institute to head up a Colored Advisory Committee to investigate the problems and abuses that black refugees presented to the Red Cross and the President's office. Greenville's racial atmosphere and the re-conceptualization of racism in America at large in the 1920s produced men like Weddington, and also created a powerful national outcry.

Black papers like the *Chicago Defender* carried sensational headlines like, "Refugees Herded Like Cattle to Stop Escape from Peonage,"[38] and "Deny Food to Flood Sufferers; Relief Bodies Issue Work or Starve Rule."[39] The *Pittsburg Courier* added, "Conscript Labor Gangs Keep Flood Refugees in Legal Bondage."[40] Robyn Spencer's article examines many of these black newspapers for insights on the racial situation in inundated Greenville. But as mentioned earlier, such a reliance is problematic. After carefully examining the policies and behavior of William Alexander Percy and his fellow Greenville whites, it has become increasingly clear that these papers may have exaggerated the degree of racial injustice in that city. While it should not be surprising that northern black publications took a special interest in the events in Greenville, some northern whites also focused their attention on the flood.

The Red Cross depended on donations to fund its relief efforts. It employed the young but extensive mass media system of the 1920s to orchestrate one of the largest funding drives in American history. The Official Red Cross Report took time "to remark upon the great services of the press—great in volume and in spirit—in behalf of relief work throughout the flood."[41] In addition the report noted, "Several chapters reported having raised almost their total fund through radio broadcasting alone."[42] The national media played an important role in raising awareness of the flood and thus opened Greenville's race policies to national criticism. One of the more unexpected critics that came into the fore was a white politician from Chicago.

On June 9, 1927, as William Alexander Percy struggled to curtail black liberties in Greenville, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* carried the story, "Charge of Short Rationing Negro Flood Victims Probed."[43] The article credits the *Chicago Defender* for exposing corruption and abuse in the distribution of Red Cross aid, but it mainly worked to ease the fears of local

[37] Anonymous letter to Coolidge, May 9, 1927, Red Cross Papers, box 734, quoted in Barry, 320.

[38] *Chicago Defender*, 6 May 1927

[39] Ibid., 4 June 1927.

[40] *Pittsburg Courier*, 14 May 1927.

[41] The American National Red Cross, *The Mississippi Valley Flood Disaster of 1927: Official Report of the Relief Operations* (Washington: The American National red Cross, 1929), 14.

[42] Ibid., 15.

[43] *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 9 June 1927.

blacks and whites who were infuriated over the news. The article cites the director of the Chicago chapter of the Red Cross, M. R. Reddy in saying, "the Negro colony of Chicago had been very generous in its contributions to relief funds, and the individuals were justified to ascertain that their offerings reached the proper donations."[44] The black community had grown increasingly influential in Chicago, and overall in the 1920s, urbanized blacks began to exert more political power than ever before. The fact that the Chicago chapter's executive secretary investigated the complaints of black donors indicates that organizations in northern cities played increasingly closer attention to the demands of a vocal and organized black community.

The increased political pull of urban northern blacks is further demonstrated in the involvement of Chicago's mayor William Hale "Big Bill" Thompson in the debate surrounding flood control in the months that followed the flood. In July of 1927, the *Tribune* wrote, "Thompson Calls Hoover Flood Control Plan Half Baked; Seeks Many Minds for Problem."[45] The article quotes the mayor as saying, "It will be a severe disappointment for the American people to find that after the horrors of 1927 we are but to return to the policies that made those horrors possible."[46] This begs the question, why does the mayor of Chicago care about flood control on the Mississippi River? Big Bill Thompson was one of the most notoriously corrupt politicians, not only in Chicago's history but in the nation's history. Under his reign, Chicago descended into the crime-ridden era of gangster rule that produced such events as the St. Valentine's Day Massacre in 1929. Thompson, Chicago's last Republican mayor, achieved success against the city's Democratic political machine by joining forces with Al Capone. But as a Republican, Thompson also owed much of his political success to the influx of black and largely Republican voters into the city. Although Thompson would have his contemporaries believe that "There Will Be No Politics,"[47] in his nationwide push for flood control and relief, in fact it was all politics. Thompson had presidential ambitions, and just as John Barry argued that Hoover used the flood to court black and racially progressive white voters, Thompson did the same. The involvement of such an out of place entity as Big Bill Thompson in flood debates is linked to the increased political influence of black voters and racial issues in the late 1920s.

By 1928, the communities of the Mississippi Valley, including Greenville, were drying out and on their way to recovery. Little did they know that a much larger economic levee was about to break in the stock market crash of 1929. The height of the flooding lasted only four months in the spring and summer of 1927, but that short period can provide valuable insights into the racial climate of the 1920s. First, the emergence of the Ku

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid., 27 July 1927.

[46] *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 27 July 1927.

[47] "Mayor Will Tour U.S. With Appeal for Flood Relief," Ibid., 9 Aug. 1927.

Klux Klan earlier in the decade and the institution of nativist immigration policies provide the image of a deeply racist society. But upon closer examination, especially in the case of the policies of the Percy family and Hoover's creation of a Colored Advisory Committee, race becomes a far more complex concept. The Percy family's New South paternalism demonstrated a variety of racism that directly opposed that of the Ku Klux Klan. The executive branch's creation of the Colored Advisory Committee, although they represented some of the most conservative black men and women in the nation, represented a growing recognition on the part of the federal government to the needs of the black population. The willingness to recognize black political influence was also made clearer through the lens of the Mississippi Flood. William Alexander Percy, the federal government, and even the mayor of Chicago exhibited increased interest in the political power of black Americans. The decade of the 1920s appeared to be a racially conservative period, but with the arrival of jazz and blues music into the white mainstream and the increased acknowledgement of black political power, it was also a period were Americans reformulated notions of race.

Returning to the blues that Memphis Minnie and Kansas Joe McCoy provided in the opening of this essay, it is necessary to ask if the levee really did break in 1927. A physical levee broke at Mounds Landing, Mississippi, but the metaphorical levee, it seems to have remained largely intact. The levee that held back the torrent of outrage over black oppression held for the time being, but it was severely weakened. Despite the disparities outlined in this paper, the Red Cross, and on a more local level, the Percys, were largely successful. They saved countless lives and when the flood waters receded, life in the Delta went back to normal. Men like Percy were able to patch the old levee of paternalism so it could last at least one more generation. But if it had kept on raining, so to speak, if the flood would have lasted longer, would the strains of racist relief policies forced black refugees to reach a breaking point? Could there have been a Civil Rights Revolution in 1927? It appears that both black and white society had moved much closer to that revolution, but in 1927 the chains of racism were just strong enough to keep it restrained.