The Great Flood of 1951

A Letter from
Catharine Wright Menninger

edited by Virgil W. Dean

"O

n July 9 rain again fell in torrents all across the anguished watershed. As much as seven inches fell within twenty-four hours in some places; ... By the evening of July 10 the Republican, the Smoky Hill, the Kaw, the Blue—all were raging out of their banks again, angrier than ever. And the end was not yet! ... When the Kaw finally crested here [Manhattan] on Black Friday the thirteenth it was 17 feet over flood stage and its angry waters tore through the entire downtown business district, swirled across more than 200 blocks of residential district..."

Many weeks after the flood went down, the valley of the Kaw remained a stinking, dreary mess. ... The landscape had long been familiar to me, yet I found it now strange. All up the valley of the Kaw once-green bottoms were transformed into gray dune-streaked wastes dotted with fetid pools, streaked with muddy rivulets, heaped with all manner of debris, including the wrecks of houses and barns. In the worst places the stink of death still mingled with that thick acrid dust which, of all the various forms of flood's aftermath, was common denominator. Wherever men moved, or the wind, powdered silt born of recent liquid mud drifted high into the warm late-summer air and hung there, a yellowish-gray shroud over a soil dead of drowning."

Kenneth S. Davis, River on the Rampage

Virgil W. Dean, who took his Ph.D. in U.S. History at the University of Kansas, is a historian and editor for the Kansas State Historical Society and an adjunct assistant professor of history at Washburn University. He was born on the banks of the Marais des Cygnes River in Olathe, Kansas, just three months before the '51 flood.

During the flood of 1951 the Red Cross was instrumental in rescuing and caring for victims in North Topeka.
During the spring and summer of 1951 Kansans in all corners of the state had their mettle tested. “The combination of the longest period of consecutive daily rainfall and the greatest annual precipitation on record,” wrote historian Homer E. Soocolofsky, “had produced the most extensive, prolonged and calamitous flood in the history of Kansas.” When it ended in late July, tens of thousands of folks in the Arkansas, Cottonwood, Kansas, Neosho, Marais des Cygnes, Solomon, Saline, Smoky Hill, and Verdigris River valleys had to pull themselves out of the mud and start over. “It is now obvious,” wrote one state official in the wake of the deluge, “that the Great Flood of 1951 was a disaster of a magnitude unequaled in the history of this country.”

In addition to devastation that took more than twenty lives and caused an estimated $2.5 billion in damage statewide, the 1951 flood was to change the Kansas “waterscape” forever, not so much from the destruction wrought by the river’s rampage as by the construction of new dams, reservoirs, and levees designed to harness the fury. Flood control projects, such as the proposed Tuttle Creek Reservoir, overcame pre-flood opposition and carried the day, as did those in many other parts of the state. Unfortunately for the vocal opposition in the Blue Valley northwest of Manhattan, the Great Flood made “Big Dam foolishness” look not so foolish, and many Kansans in the weeks and months to follow would echo the refrain, “It must not happen again.” They agreed with Catharine “Cay” Wright Menninger who wrote: “Do hope we get some flood control measures through while this is fresh in our memories.”

But relief and recovery were still the main concerns of people such as Cay Menninger, wife of Dr. William “Will” C. Menninger, as the swollen Kansas River reached its Topeka crest on “Black Friday” (July 13) and began its slow withdrawal. Mrs. Menninger, who moved to Topeka, Kansas, when she married Dr. Menninger in December 1925, engaged in a variety of civic activities, including the League of Women Voters, the American Women’s Voluntary Services during World War II, and the American Red Cross. As chair of Volunteer Services of the local Red Cross chapter in June and July 1951, Mrs. Menninger kept quite busy during the flood, working eighteen- to twenty-hour days, according to her husband, during the height of the emergency.

When she found time to contact her “Relatives and Friends” via the letter printed on the following pages, “order reign[ed] but there was still much ‘heartbreaking work yet to do.’ A copy of the original type-written letter was given to the editor of Kansas History by Connie Menninger, Menninger Foundation archivist and daughter-in-law of the correspondent. The following document is transcribed as it was composed, most likely at the typewriter, by Cay Menninger nearly a half century ago. Obvious typographical errors have been corrected, but punctuation and sentence construction have not been altered.

3. “Summary Statement,” Great Flood, 1951, box 16, Correspondence, Edward F. Arm Administration, Records of the Governor’s Office, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society.
The floodwaters crested on July 13, ravaging homes, businesses, and roadways in North Topeka. Clay Menninger described the tragedy in her letter: "Two dikes had broken just below the Brick Yard Bridge. The next day [Thursday, July 12] more dikes broke, including one that flooded Oakland. People had 1 hour to get out of there."
1724 Collins Ave.
Topeka, Kansas
Thursday evening

July 19, 1951

Dear Relatives and Friends,

So very many of you have written us and been thinking about us, that I thought you might be interested in hearing about our experiences in the last two weeks. We so much appreciated your letters and phone calls, although today I read the letters again—and really understood what was said. This is the first time in weeks that I have not thought about what we must or should or should not or could not do in Red Cross. It is so wonderful to wake up in the morning and see the sun shine. Yesterday it was cooler, but rainy and I would prefer the heat and humidity just now.

Today Helen Jacobs and I got passes and walked up onto Topeka Avenue Bridge—it is much higher than the two railroad bridges and two traffic bridges that went out in the rush of water. Only trucks can get passes to go through North Topeka. One or two people who have been over there say that it is like a deserted village. The water line was so high it was hard to believe, large structures were so torn and twisted that I wondered if a bombing had taken place. We watched one woman pushing muck out of her living room and across her porch into a yard that was like a hog wallow just after a heavy rain.

Bill [William C. Menninger] and I saw very little of the water. The morning we got home from Dallas I drove down 4th St., onto the [Kansas] Avenue and as I glanced into the rearview mirror I was startled to see water between 2nd street and the high part of the Kansas Ave.—Melan Bridge. Then for 3 miles there was water. As we flew in from Dallas [July 14] we asked the pilot to circle, but since they would do that as soon as they left Topeka, he would not do so. As we flew out on Wednesday night [July 11] we had gone over North Topeka, and then right over our house which was a thrill, and there was a wide river, but not actually into North Topeka. It is still hard to believe, not seeing it, that it could have happened. WCM [William C. Menninger] went out one morning with Uncle Karl [Dr. Karl Menninger] who had helped set up First Aid stations. At that time there was a 3-block long line of men passing sandbags to the weak spots around the water works. It must have been an impressive sight. One of the women told us that there was a sort of chanting going on when she was out there in the hazy dawn one morning with the [Red Cross] Canteen.

Our Canteen did a thrilling job. They were the first of our women pressed into service. The weekend of June 23 we had 13 people overnight in the Hayden High School. Our Canteen women prepared sandwiches and coffee for the sandbag fillers and the dike watchers for two days then. Again, June 29–July 2 they went to work. About 5:30 PM Jean [Mrs. Willard] Noller—our Red Cross Volunteer Services Vice Chairman (hereafter VS Ch.)—this was only July 10—who was just ending the first day of the Blood Mobile visit here and supervising

6. "Relatives and Friends" was actually struck out on this copy by hand, and the names of some friends, Rhoda and Jack Pritzker of Chicago, were written above.

7. As they had done during previous disasters or times of emergency, the Red Cross provided a variety of services during the flood crisis. In 1951 it provided rescue services and transportation, mass shelter, food and clothing, and medical care during the flood, as well as much needed aid in the reconstruction process thereafter. See Behind the Lines (Washington, D.C.: American National Red Cross, 1951); Catharine W. Menninger, Reflections: A History of the Kansas Capital Area Chapter of the American Red Cross and Its Predecessor Organizations (Topeka: Kansas Capital Area Chapter, ARC, 1981).

8. When North Topeka dikes burst in the early morning hours of Thursday, July 12, a total evacuation was ordered. By the following day, when the river reached a record crest of 36.4 feet, disaster had struck four hundred city blocks north of the Kaw and some fifteen thousand people had been moved to higher ground. See Topeka Daily Capital, July 12, 13, 15, 1951; see also a special "anniversary" issue, ibid., July 13, 1952.

9. Dr. Karl Menninger (1893–1990) actually was Cay Menninger’s brother-in-law. Doctors Karl and Will Menninger, along with their father Dr. Charles F. Menninger (1862–1953), started what became the world renowned clinic (later the Menninger Foundation) during the 1920s.

10. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Topeka volunteers battled tirelessly, and successfully as it turned out, to save the city’s waterworks. See Topeka Daily Capital, July 16, 19, 1951; Topeka State Journal, July 13, 14, 1951.
Refugees from the south part of Manhattan were taken to emergency housing on the Kansas State College campus.

Workers from Topeka and surrounding areas joined together in the face of disaster. Cay Menninger related some of the efforts: "At that time there was a 3-block long line of men passing sandbags to the weak spots around the water works. It must have been an impressive sight. One woman told us that there was a sort of chanting going on when she was out there in the hazy dawn one morning with the [Red Cross] Canteen."

Supplies flown in to Forbes Air Force Base from all parts of the nation included food, blankets, clothing, drugs, and rescue equipment.

fighting to save the waterworks from rising floodwaters, volunteer workers stacked sandbags along the levee.

Volunteers worked around the clock filling sandbags.
the closing—called to say that the river was rising and
to alert the Chairmen.

Some of you may not know what Volunteer Services are. They are: Canteen who prepare food; Gray Ladies who act as hostesses, and in a way play a “Mother” role; Nurses Aides who work with Nurses; Motor Service whose members drive the station wagon and others who drive their own cars—or chapter rented cars; Staff Aides who do clerical work; Production Service which in our chapter sews, etc. We do not have any “Welfare Aides” here, or Recreation service. So far we have been unable to locate chairmen for these two jobs. Some 300 women work every month in Winter Veterans Administration Hospital, Topeka State Hospital and elsewhere. The Production Service has made or cut out and sent out to church groups for making, over 500 dresses for indigent State Hospital patients. The State supplies the materials—all patterns used are good looking—this is in normal times of course.

But these have been very abnormal times. Volunteers who were trained and active during World War II came to the front to help those who are active currently so that we had many quite well trained people ready to work. How they did so—and still are.

To go back to July 10. I called our Chairmen and asked them to stay by a phone. At about 10 PM when we were having a delightful visit with Dr. [Otto] Fleischman[n] and his fiancee, Dr. [Gisela] Ebert here at home the phone rang and we were off...." The Canteen opened up here in our kitchen. We used our largest pots in which to boil water and make coffee. We got Tom Sanders, our grocer out of bed about midnight and he brought us whatever we needed, making several trips—and he is not very well. Mrs. Jesse F. [Mildred T.] Casey ([her husband is] Mgr of Winter) and the Canteen Chrmn [Josephine K. Holcombe] and I worked until about 2 AM. In the meantime a couple of Motor Service and Canteen went off to deliver and serve what we had made. The Chapter President [J. Hambleton Abrahams, chairman, ARC Shawnee County Chapter] came over with his wife [Julia] about 3 AM and we planned a bit. Then they all went home, I made up a last batch of coffee in a big coffee maker rented from downtown, delivered by the police, and lay down on the davenport for a couple of hours.

At 8 [a.m., Wednesday, July 11] there was a meeting to make more plans as by that time it was still raining—very hard, and the “Authorities” thought that this was IT. How right they were. About ten AM the Canteen moved back into Hayden High. Evacuees began to filter in but still most people refused to believe the warnings. Such hurrying and scurrying and bustle and confusion while the plans were shaping up for the sheltering in the [Municipal] Auditorium of whoever would not be able to find a place to stay.

The most popular subject over coffee is the chaotic confusion. No one knew who should or could do this or that. The Canteen set up in the church basement at First Presbyterian and kept working fast—taking out coffee and sandwiches to the Fairgrounds—where they were filling sandbags and to the Waterworks, where they were piling them around the filter plants, etc. There was so very much to do and before one job was done, 10 others faced you. Everyone assumed authority of one sort or another—or there were great gaps in the chain of command and there was NO ONE who knew what to do or how to do it.

Bill had to go to Dallas that night and I was supposed to be a guest of honor at a fund raising luncheon of women. I should say—pre-fundraising luncheon. It was hard to know whether or not to go. But our crew

11. These and subsequent ellipses were placed in the original text by Mrs. Menninger; nothing has been omitted here or elsewhere.

12. "Tom Sanders" was Thomas S. of Sanders Market, 2616 West Seventeenth; and Dr. Fleischmann, who subsequently did marry his fiancee Dr. Ebert, was a psychoanalyst at the Menninger Foundation. "Winter" was, of course, a reference to the Veterans Administration Hospital, 3101 West Twenty-first; Dr. Jesse F. Casey was its manager or administrator. Abrahams was the elected chairman of the local chapter, but it is possible that Mrs. Menninger was referring instead to James W. Blazek, executive director, ARC Shawnee County Chapter. See Menninger, Reflections, 93; Polk's Topeka (Shawnee County, Kans.) City Directory, 1950 (Kansas City, Mo.: R.L. Polk and Co., 1950); ibid., 1952 (1952).
thought things were well set up so far as VS was concerned and that I should go. We did not know whether or not we would be able to get to the [Philip Billard/Topeka Municipal] airport for the water was coming up fast. In the afternoon they took up that landing equipment which made possible instrument landing. If clear our plane would land, otherwise not. As we drove in a taxi to the airport, there was almost bumper-to-bumper traffic sightseeing along the river road. WCM and I watched fascinatedly as we rode—pacing a long at 12 miles an hour, and guessing how much the river would have to rise to overflow into the Santa Fe yards and the nearby homes. Two dikes had broken just below the Brick Yard Bridge.

The next day [Thursday, July 12] more dikes broke, including one that flooded Oakland. People had 1 hour to get out of there. People who waited to leave North Topeka could not get trucks when they finally decided to leave. There were many trucks that came in from Forbes [Air Force Base] and they lined up on 8th St between Monroe and Jackson until sent to an address that was called in. There are many stories—you will no doubt read them in papers and magazines. W.E. Anderson was terrifically hit. I heard today (but what a thing Rumor is ...) that he lost $7500 worth of stuff. His warehouse was in N. Topeka, across Kansas Ave., from UP station. He was not home and when he tried to get trucks he wanted refrigerated ones. Even then it was too late to save much, not even loaded freight cars. He has released all his outfit and says he is going out of business. Ted Weidling, in Central National Bank listens to heart-rending stories all day and then takes a turn at the hqts.

Our delightful—and successful trip to Dallas was spoiled a bit for me. I felt more and more guilty to be away as the news came in about what tons of water had descended on Topeka. However, everyone who could dashed in to help in one way or another. Folks offered homes, food, etc. Several women took over the task of washing the few clothes the evacuees had worn out that needed it—until now Bendix [Corporation] has loaned and installed 20 washing machines for their use—10 at the High School and 10 at the auditorium. (Some of you will enjoy the fact that Harry Snyder, the long-time Park Commissioner did not know they had been installed until they blew fuses right and left. . . . Ain't that wonderful—but hard on the Red Cross Disaster Committee for a bit . . . )

Out of the mad disorganization came a job remarkably well done. Some 10,000 homeless individuals were taken care of in one way or another by the city. Purdue [B.] Graves and [Lester P.] Dittemore are in charge of recreation. They took all the children out to the Park today. Typhoid shots are being given by the thousands to the evacuees and many who work with them. I did not take them for all I saw for the five days after I got home were those I stumbled over as I walked the same old corridors and rooms that I had operated in in the Volunteer Office of World War II.

Some 900 people were housed in the Auditorium, about 300 at Masonic Temple, others at Lincoln School and some 9 churches. Under the Topeka Restaurant Assoc. and a couple of dieticians they were fed at the Auditorium and Temple. I suspect that we fed a number who were not evacuees. But I have increased respect for both paperwork—records, meal tickets (which we did not use) and Channels. . . . Now most of the church shel-

13. By Friday, July 13, “Three feet of water covered Phil Billard municipal airport,” and “all the three major airlines [Braniff, TWA, and Continental] serving Topeka were operating from temporary headquarters at Forbes Air Force base.” Topeka State Journal, July 13, 1951.


15. Purdue Graves (spelled “Purdue”) was director of adult education for the public schools, and Lester P. Dittemore was supervisor of health and physical education for the public schools. Also instrumental in providing some recreational activity for refugees at the auditorium were Ruth Wood and Elaine Paulson of the YWCA and Frank McGrath, a Roosevelt Junior High School teacher. See Topeka City Directory, 1950; ibid., 1952; “3,000 Sign for Food and Care at Red Cross Center, Topeka State Journal, July 13, 1951.
ters have been closed. Grace Cathedral closed out today when 50 of its 100 original inhabitants moved into the auditorium.

Canteen closed operations only yesterday when the waterworks was safely out of danger after 10 anxious days. Gray Ladies still are stationed in the Aud. and Temple. Nurses Aides are in all of about 12 shelters. Motor Service is driving our Chapter Station wagon and two rented cars. One detail runs between the Aud. and Hospital with milk samples and waits for the test results, another carried a social worker around all day. Staff Aides are doing a noble job of trying to answer a million and one questions—now they want to know how to get back home and whatever they can do to clean an impossible amount of mud and stench and wreckage. Houses are off foundations, others have vanished. Mrs. Dugan has one two story house on her farm that was not there before the flood.

We are all glad the narrow Brickyard bridge is gone. We wonder how long it will take the railroad to be able to operate. Some of you know that when we returned from the wedding on June 21 we got to within 5 mile of Topeka, had to back away from a washout for 25 miles and then hire a cab to get home. About a week later on our first trip to Dallas we sat in the outskirts of Topeka for 3 hours while they tested the Rock Island tracks that were 6 inches under water, before our train crawled through. Then in order to get to Dallas at the right time Mr. Hopkins—our friend there—chartered a plane to fly us from Wichita. When we returned home, the train was routed over Missouri Pacific Tracks to Kansas City and we took a bus home. And now what a terrible mess Kansas City is in.

Our own home, the [Menninger] Foundation [located at 3617 West Sixth] and most of the area of Topeka proper is on high enough ground to be safe—we were disturbed at the number who have suffered so badly, at the threat of loss of water supply and sewage dispos-

16. This was the wedding of their eldest son Roy to Ann Catherine Colwell; the ceremony was in Morristown, New Jersey, June 16, 1951.

al—but otherwise most of us have not been endangered. However, the impact on the community of the loss of business in the lowlands in N. Topeka and surrounding country is hard to understand. The potato crop, the wheat and the corn are gone—that means no crops for this country side—it will be days before it can be tilled and by that time it will be much too late.27 Manhattan business district is ruined.

(This is surely "free association" and hope you can follow along and get some of the "feel" of what it is like.)

It is surprising to find how widely the news has spread. Marc Law learned from a Paris newspaper that the Sourd and Brickyard Bridges were out. . . . Dr. [Ralph W.] Coltharp had a house in Storey [sic] (over by Skinners) and the water was within 10" of ceiling.28 The only thing on the first floor that they saved was their piano. She tried to fly out with the two children the morning we flew in, but could not get on a plane. The planes were landing at Forbes. Such a business. A guard met us at the plane steps and stood with us until a bus took us to the gate of the Air Base. Glad we had the base

17. At this time potatoes were still a major crop in the Kansas River valley, especially in Shawnee, Douglas, and Wyandotte Counties. Statewide the wheat crop fell from 178 million bushels in 1950 to 126 million in 1951; while the yield per acre was down by only one and one half bushels, the number of sown acres that went unharvested showed a dramatic increase (1950: 13.8 million acres sown, 12.3 million harvested; 1951: 14.8 million acres sown, 9.7 million harvested). Corn production fell from 93 million bushels to 58 million, and potatoes from 1.06 million bushels to 36,000. Shawnee County farmers harvested 940,700 bushels of wheat in 1950 but only 496,200 bushels in 1951; corn production fell from 1,917,200 to 970,200; and the potato crop was virtually nil—131,300 bushels were harvested in 1950 from 305 acres; the next year farmers were able to harvest only 30 acres (610 acres planted), which yielded 7,800 bushels. See Kansas State Board of Agriculture, Thirty-Seventh Biennial Report, 1949-1950 (Topeka: State Printer, 1950), 336, 451, 459, 495; ibid., Thirty-Eighth Biennial Report, 1951-1952, 238, 253, 265, 299.

18. Marc Law was the brother of Mildred Law, a senior administrator at the Menninger Foundation. He just happened to be in Paris, France, at this time. This information, along with several other items, were provide by Connie and Dr. Walt Menninger, Topeka.

Cay Menninger, chair of Volunteer Services of the local Red Cross chapter in June and July 1951.

Many civic organizations offered aid and comfort to evacuees and rescue workers. Cay Menninger recounted: "Some 10,000 homeless individuals were taken care of in one way or another by the city... Typhoid shots are being given by the thousands to the evacuees and many who work with them... Some 900 people were housed in the Auditorium, about 300 at Masonic Temple, others at Lincoln School and some 9 churches."

Evacues in the city auditorium.

More than five hundred children, all refugees, were kept busy in the city auditorium.

In the city auditorium canteen volunteers provided food and coffee to flood workers.

American Legion Auxiliary prepared food and clothing to distribute to victims.
for the Airport was under 4-6 feet. 19 at the Foundation were in evacuated area and some do not yet know the extent of their loss.

My job has seemed far away from it all. Mostly a matter of soothing ruffled feelings and reducing tensions—including my own (WCM was at home part of the time I was "working" and without his moral support and suggestions I would have been sunk)—after everyone had been on as nearly 24 hour duty as they could carry for several days. We got in from Dallas at noon [Saturday, July 14] and the phone was ringing. Could I come down immediately—no time for lunch and meet Dora Dean—who had been Red Cross Director during WWII and had been helping, and Mildred Casey. They said I had to bring some order out of chaos—as if anyone could. When I did suggest a few changes in the interest of efficiency I had people on my neck because after they had gotten everything started I came in fresh as a daisy—having missed the terrible part (was gone about 60 hours). They seemed to think I was critical of how they had done things and—oh well. Finally we all had a night or two of sleep, there was less to do, we all knew more about what we were doing, etc. Was up several nights till 2-3 and up again early. But as of this afternoon late I am on phone call only. What a relief. Everyone is feeling better.

How I wish I could pass on to you—our sons and daughter, some of the things I learned out of this: (But suppose that eventually you will have to learn it all for yourselves.)

1. Of paramount importance—to think carefully about how to present a matter so as to arouse the minimal amount of resistance—good salesmanship perhaps.
2. Fight hard to get basic channels and patterns of practice AT THE START—to avoid having to spend extra time undoing careless decisions.
3. Face to face deliberations are more apt to be successful than others, always provided that each understand not only the language but the INTENT of the other.
4. Smother hypercritical faculties, but keep ability to evaluate, specially in times of emergency.

5. There are times when the greatest service one can render is to get out of the way.
6. In registering to help—be specific about what you can do and when and how you can be reached and when you can report. (We have hundreds of names of those who last week said "I can do anything any time"—and there are many of our good friends who were not asked to work and are hurt. Yet, next week if we wanted to ask for Staff Aides, we would have trouble getting them. . . . It is much more fun to be in the middle of the excitement.)
7. No matter how bad it looks a confusion filled job can turn out well—I suppose like a poor dress rehearsal that precedes a good show. Area [Red Cross] has said that never on any disaster has its personnel seen a community keep such good control of the situation. That is a high compliment that we cherished to our hearts when things seemed to be at sixes and sevens.

Well, this is a pot pourri of thoughts about the last month. I didn’t mention lots of things that would interest you, but it is bedtime and I am ready for it. Last night I was so discouraged with how things were going—tonight all is so very well that I can rest with peace and so can many others here.

P.S. This is now Friday morning [July 20] and once again the sun is shining. I had a whole night’s sleep without responsibility and am in a civilian dress so feel like a different person. Today one of the area men will meet with our US Chairmen and talk about what has happened, what our job is further and what the rehabilitation will amount to from the point of view of the Red Cross.

Don’t think that I mentioned that the volunteers that I have mentioned who are organized into their var-

20. Specifically, the praise came from Walker Millner, manager of the midwestern area, who visited Topeka on Wednesday, July 18. “In my experience,” said Millner, “I know of no flood disaster of this kind where I have seen co-operation of all units and volunteers to this extent. The citizens of Topeka should be commended for their excellent work.” See “Red Cross Sees Cost of Relief at Near 3 Millions,” Topeka State Journal, July 18, 1931.
Many businesses and homes were destroyed in the flood while others survived but required massive cleanup. Cay Menninger described the devastation: "One or two people who have been over there [North Topeka] say that it is like a deserted village. The water line was so high it was hard to believe, large structures were so torn and twisted that I wondered if a bomb had taken place. We watched one woman pushing muck out of her living room and across her porch into a yard that was like a hog wallow just after a heavy rain."
ious services make up the “Volunteer Services”. It is a confusing terminology and I believe is soon to be modified somewhat, for of course there are many other volunteer workers in Red Cross than those under our jurisdiction. I do not believe that I mentioned that I sit on the Executive Committee of our local Red Cross as Chairman of the Volunteer Services, along with the Chairmen of Junior Red Cross, Nursing, First Aid and Water Safety and Disaster. Mildred Casey who is mentioned often above is the person whom I appointed to represent me on the Disaster Committee. That is why we have both [been] involved so heavily and so constantly. The Disaster Committee is supposed to have a set of committees: food, shelter, clothing, sanitation, public information and etc. Ours did have—sort of, but no one was as ready as we should have been. Our Services are to key into the corresponding committees and where there was none Mildred and I related them to the Disaster Committee. But as of last night we figured out how to do it the way it is supposed to be done. However, we were told by folks who have been through the confusion of many disasters that ours was less than most, AND even when there was the best possible organization—in anticipation, there was still great confusion at first because so much happens so fast that it cannot be handled in any sort of systematic fashion.

As I said above WCM was wonderful. He felt badly that there was nothing to do. But he certainly could not lay sandbags—or fill them, and that was most of the job except for truck driving. But he listened to Mildred and me and gave me tremendous moral support, much sane advice when I am not sure I was quite as calm and objective as I needed to be, he tended for himself—even on vacation. In short without him to lean on I couldn’t have kept going as long and hard as we HAD to operate.

While the water is mostly out, North Topeka people will not be able to return home for along time—a couple of weeks at least. Some have no homes to which to go and must be planned for. Our Bertha [Dandridge] (who cooks for us) was proposed by someone to the Mayor [W. Kenneth Wilke] for handled [sic] the hunting of housing for North Topeka colored folk. She is so pleased. Everyone wants to help so badly and when there isn’t a job they get mad at Red Cross. So hope we can retain some good will. Also everyone who cannot get the kind and amount of help they need is upset. However, by and large, to have so much damage done to so many people, things are in good standing at this point and people are working hard in ways of many sorts to get things back to normal. Do hope we get some flood control measures through while this is fresh in our memories.21

Bye for now. Very affectionately,

Cay [Menninger]

Sunday [July 22]—Order reigns but heartbreaking work yet to do.22

P.S.S. Please—our boys, take a part in community affairs. Maybe not a large part, but do something to contribute. Leadership is so very scarce and so desperately needed and cannot be involved at the last moment—if completely without orientation to the overall organization. Of course, we are SURE you are leaders!

(Thanks to the flood I have lost more weight—150#)

P.S.S.S. Forgive length, there is so much to say. Also excuse errors. [KH]

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21. As previously mentioned, many different “flood control measures” were under consideration in the state and region during this era. Some large and small projects had been completed, but many more had been held up by a combination of economic, social, and environmental concerns or issues. Perhaps the most controversial was the Tuttle Creek project, but many more at places such as Perry, Milford, Council Grove, Strawn, and Marion would gain additional support in the wake of the Great Flood of 1951 and join Cedar Bluff and Kanopolis as the sites for dams and reservoirs.

22. This line was handwritten above the typed “P.S.S.”