

**Augustana Endowment Society**  
**Historical Reflections from May 2025**  
**by Janet Moline**

**Memories of 1965 #3**

Last month at the April Endowment meeting I mentioned how Friendship Fair had to be postponed a week because of the flooding Mississippi River. The lecture scheduled by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. scheduled for April 28<sup>th</sup> in Centennial Hall was cancelled. We told about the praise the Augie students received from Mayor Muhlemann. If you missed hearing it, these columns can be found on the Augustana Endowment website.

After that meeting Endowment sent out a request to members asking them to send me any of their recollections. Here are some of the responses.

Caran Johnson said "I recall walking across the Centennial Bridge and spending hours sandbagging. Rumors flew. We were not sure if it was true, but we feared that rats would travel up through the sewage pipes and come up through the toilets. Think this made our bathroom visits very brief!

Carol Horstmann's brother Bob worked on the flood project in Rock Island but Carol can't recall how.

Alice Traylor wrote. "I was a 9th grader at Washington Jr. High; officially a Freshman but the High School was 10, 11, & 12th grades. The flood was BIG news. I remember being out of school. All who were able were asked to fill sandbags. I helped do that and then I remember being at the Armory and in a line handing sandbags from one person to the next. We were on the north side of the armory and water was lapping at our toes. I remember the water as roiling and dark.

Deb Robb remembered filling sandbags in Rock Island.

My brother, Ken Ahlstrom wrote, "I remember we were somewhere in the west end of Rock Island filling sandbags and building a wall of bags. This was about a half-block north of one that had been constructed earlier. As we were working, a wave of water about 6 inches high started coming toward us. In a few minutes all of our work was pretty close to being under water. Another memory was a bunch of us driving upriver to a large factory on the Iowa side. Can't remember what it was - Ralston-Purina (?) and bagging between river and the company."

Marcia Wetzel was able to locate the articles found in the Dispatch. The Obs article I shared last month was the same as the original in the Dispatch. One strange reference in the April 26, 1965 Dispatch was to the arrest in East Moline for disorderly conduct by a passenger on a special flood-viewing photographic tour from Chicago. So college and high school kids were risking getting typhoid and adults from Chicago were on a train tour!!

The April 27<sup>th</sup> Dispatch stated that the Red Cross had bunk space in the Augustana Gymnasium for 180 MacMurray College students but only 4 or 5 of them showed up for sleeping. Apparently the students returned to Jacksonville later in the evening. Augustana had cots available for any out of town volunteers but arrangements had to be made through the Red Cross headquarters.

During my college years I kept a journal of daily life. Here are the references to that week.

**Thursday, April 22, 1965**

"Scooted over to hear Jan Edmund's and Debbi Miller's concert. The school has been asked for volunteers to fill sandbags—1,000 have to be filled." (Side comment: thousands more would be filled.)

**Friday, April 23, 1965**

"Some of the kids went down to the levee to help sand bag. Ken (my brother) said he was going to do it from 12-8. Holly said that one could just stand and watch the water rise. I still haven't seen it yet. I guess I will have Ken take me there to look over the place."

**Saturday, April 24, 1965**

"The water still rises but we have 2½ feet to go—men are sandbagging around the Rock Island City Hall. New Boston has urgently asked for sandbaggers. It is raining out now and with the 2" of rain from last night and the storms from today have added more water."

**Sunday, April 25, 1965**

"Tiredville---I can't tell you how completely exhausted I feel---a good feeling yet one of incompetency---we have been sand bagging all afternoon and evening at the Rock Island sand pile at 4<sup>th</sup> Ave and 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> Sts. A Mr. C.R. Heimbeck was kind enough to give us a ride home and fed us."

**Monday, April 26, 1965**

"...helped to make sandwiches for the Salvation Army at South.Park (Presbyterian Church). At last the water barrels in the basement (at Westerlin) are filled up—they have been stored for a national emergency and who would have time to fill them then." (I was disappointed that more residents kept working and not helping to sand bag.)

**Tuesday, April 27, 1965**

"Had my back wrapped today but it feels much better---but then I just went to Bettendorf for a couple of hours today. Everyone here thinks of flood, flood, flood and we are all at our wit's end—the tension is very high—we're sore and tired and sick of it—plus we have nothing to think about other than sandbagging. Meanwhile WQUA is sponsoring a Sandbag Shindig for which \$10,000 has to be raised by business and private donation to be mentioned over the radio.... for E. Moline, Moline and Rock Island kids—well baloney—the kids here don't want some dumb program—better the money be given to some charity to help the folks affected get cleaned up...." (Side comment: The idea was

heavily criticized. The May 19, 1965 Observer column called "Reaction" by Jack Fields had the following: "...the radio station announced a meeting of area high school and college students to appropriate the money already collected---nearly \$5,500." (One idea accepted by all involved was to put plaques at each end of the Centennial and Memorial bridges to memorialize the efforts of youth against the flood of '65. I don't know how the rest of the money was used.)

### **Wednesday, April 28, 1965**

"...I'm eager to get back to classes---the dikes are holding, worked at the City Garage this morning and afternoon.... My aunt and uncle called from Rockford. My uncle wanted to know "how could I pick up a sandbag when I can't even pick up a bean bag!" Good grief! " (Side comment: I did weigh 98 pounds then.)

### **Thursday, April 29, 1965**

"Let it be said that this was our finest hour" This was our call tonight when we heard that girls were needed to fill sandbags in Milan because of a broken dike. Well the dike didn't breach---only a couple of bubbles so we came back right away. We mobilize like a bolt of lightning, the bus was filled 3 to a seat and standing up. The sandbags ran out so we were going to hitchhike back but Woodie Acord came along and we piled in his little car and came back here---Barb Almberg, Ruthie Anderson, Mary Ellen Carlson, Sharon Johnson (and me)---the Swedish brigade---made the scene and left....."

### **Friday, April 30, 1965**

*---no more flood notes in my journal.*

I had saved an article from the Good Housekeeping magazine entitled "the teenagers who save a town" by Charles and Bonnie Remsberg. I didn't have the month dated so I contacted Special Collections at our Library and sure enough, they too, had a copy and said it was the September 1965 issue. It said,

"When the surging flood threatened to destroy Rock Island, Illinois, they came by foot, cab, car and bike. Some were dropouts, others were students. But all had one thing in common---they wanted to help" "Nearly half were girls. Most were teenagers from Rock Island's Augustana College and two high schools."

If you would like to read that full article, contact Special Collections.

I'll close with one paragraph from that article:

"At ten p.m. Wednesday, April 28, the feared flood crest began rolling past Rock Island. It stretched a mile wide across the river and fifty miles long and it brushed river markers at 22.48 feet---seven feet above flood stage...Yet not a drop of water crept into downtown Rock Island, and only a handful of homes suffered any damage....it was the young people who broke the back of the flood...."