

The Summer Flood of 1931 by Hugo Leggatt

Every so often the heavens open, delivering more rain than we are used to. Landslides occur, roads close. Once people can get out of their houses, discussion inevitably turns to how the most recent flood compared with the previous one – or the one from our youth – or that mythic one of folk memory. And nowadays we can always throw in a knowledgeable comment about climate change.

The following edited description of the great summer flood of 1931 was supplied by Eileen Rodgers to the late Victor Smith in the early 1980s. Perhaps it can serve as a gauge against which to measure our contemporary floods.

“ Summer holidays and six school girls travelled down by lorry and the Victoria Hotel bus with four tents (three bells for sleeping and a smaller one for the kitchen) and all our gear. We set up camp on a steeply-rising field, across the road from the lagoon – an ideal spot for early and late bathing, boating and all the other delights of a seaside holiday.

We spent a wonderful five days in glorious sunshine, even entertaining our parents to dinner on Boxing Day. So much did they approve that they were amenable to our attending the dance that evening at Fairy Knowe Hotel. We spent a delightful evening there, then like Cinderellas, on the stroke of midnight in two boats we rowed away to our Wilderness camp.

The sky had become very black, with not a star to be seen, and the atmosphere was sultry and oppressive. On reaching the landing stage, great drops of rain began falling fast and furiously. So, hastily bidding our escorts goodnight, we kicked off our shoes and gathering up our long skirts, made a dash for our dark tents. Hastily drying off, we fell into bed, tired out, and slept through a violent rain storm, waking late to a very wet landscape, a turbulent lagoon and lashing rain.

Nothing daunted, and clad in bathing costumes, rubber bathing shoes and caps, we sallied forth to our kitchen tent to cook an enormous breakfast. (Oh yes, in those days we all wore little rubber tight-fitting shoes to avoid cuts from shale and sharp stones, and head-fitting rubber caps with chin straps, which looked rather cute really.)

And so the day began ... and the rain fell and fell and fell ... We ran and walked in the teeming rain, which continued unabated throughout that day and night, and thought it all great fun !

A second day and third night passed in much the same way as the first, but on the third day, 29th, the lagoon, with a terrible roar, burst its banks, and a stream suddenly rushed down the hillside, sweeping our kitchen tent, stoves, pots, and our large biscuit tins of food away into the lagoon, and out to sea ! Luckily we had other food in our sleeping tents but we made a dash to the little General Dealer Store which stood alone at the bottom of the Village Green. From there we phoned our parents, who were naturally alarmed as we were completely cut off from the outer world.

A section of the road from the Heights gave way; there were two or three landslides blocking all traffic; the concrete causeway at Kaaiman's River had been swept away by the tremendous force of the water. Also there had been a terrific landslide before the Kaaiman's train bridge, which completely blocked the railway and held up a passenger train with sixty tourists on board in the Wilderness station. The tourists made a bee-line for the hotel, which was now bursting at the seams, with supplies running dangerously low. Mr. Grant was going out of his mind with the conditions prevailing.

Fortunately the General Dealer offered us her small storeroom, together with some bales of hay and dry blankets ... and the rain went on throughout that fourth night and right up until noon on the fourth day.”

(Victor Smith recorded that over 500 mm of rain fell and that the river reached a height of 3,2 m above sea level before the sand bar burst. This is about a metre higher than the level at which it is normally opened now.)

“It was a wonder that the telephone service remained open throughout the period, as George itself was flooded and, in certain sections of the town, conditions had been quite chaotic.

When the watery sun finally came out during the fourth day, we spent the rest of that day, and the next, clearing up the mess and trying to dry our things. To our great joy, around noon on the fifth day, two young men from George appeared. They had parked at Victoria Heights, climbed down the mountainside, over the landslides, and there they were ! Only two of us decided to attempt to return with them – clad in our bathing costumes, short jackets, bathing caps and rubber shoes !

An what a journey it was ! We got covered in mud negotiating the first landslide. Then, as we were crossing the Kaaiman’s bridge, it started to HAIL and the wind blew in great gusts – it was most unpleasant. Finally there was the climb up the sodden hillside to Victoria Bay Heights : it was so wet that one climbed two steps and slid back one.

Even when we reached the car our troubles were not yet over. The rain had scoured out great potholes, and every so often the car sank in these deepish pools, and we all had to get out and push. It took us four hours to reach the Victoria Hotel (now the George Museum) from Victoria Bay Heights, which should surely go into the Guinness Book of Records.

My mother was overjoyed to see me and bore me off to a boiling bath and a hot, hot toddy – the like of which I had never partaken of before in my life ... then I sank into a dreamless sleep.”

Postscript : In July 1932, seven months later, the Divisional Council reported that the Woodifield – Kaaimansgat – Wilderness road was the only road in the area which still had a few short, rough patches as a result of the December floods. These were being repaired.