

ICE & WATER



The Flood of 1992 - Montpelier, Vermont



Gasoline pumps at Pierce's Mobil station opposite the Pavilion Building stand submerged.

SANDY MACYS, TIMES ARGUS

Chronology of the Flood of March 11, 1992

6:57 a.m. - A large ice jam on the Winooski River breaks loose above the Pioneer Street Bridge and travels through Montpelier. Ice jams just below the Bailey Avenue Bridge and dams the river.

7:05 a.m. - Filled with rain and snowmelt, the Winooski begins to overflow its banks along State Street and the North Branch begins backing up onto Elm Street.

7:15 a.m. - Water surges dramatically into low-lying areas behind Main and State streets, floating propane tanks from moorings, flooding parked cars and inundating store basements.

7:23 a.m. - Radio stations are notified of a flood emergency as first warnings are issued.

7:45 a.m. - Icy flood waters hit the steam heating boiler at MacPherson's Travel on Main Street and the boiler explodes, shattering the glass storefront and destroying the basement.

7:56 a.m. - Two to three feet of water is reported in front of Days Inn on State Street, where an estimated 100 people are stranded. Flood waters pour onto Main Street, stalling cars and making the road impassable. Backed-up water from the swollen North Branch flows upstream on Elm Street.

8:09 a.m. - Evacuations begin of hundreds of stranded residents, workers and state employees on Main, State and Elm streets. Some wade to safety, while others are taken out by boat or by fire engines and dump trucks.

8:30 a.m. - Gov. Howard Dean declares a state of emergency in the capital and closes state offices. The National Guard is called in to assist, and state police, game wardens and other public safety crews begin arriving to help in the disaster.

8:46 a.m. - A Red Cross emergency shelter is set up at the gymnasium at Vermont College.

9:00 a.m. to noon - Human chains of volunteers work successfully in frigid waters to save historic documents stored in the basement of the Pavilion Building. On Main Street, similar efforts rescue about 18,000 children's books from the basement of Kellogg-Hubbard Library and thousands of videotapes in the basement of the Savoy Theater.

10:07 a.m. - Power crews shut off electricity in downtown Montpelier because of high fire and explosion hazards from leaking fuel oil and propane. Many telephone lines are out. About 200 buildings in the downtown area are flooded.

3:00 p.m. - Backhoes and a crane move into place and begin dislodging the ice jam below Bailey Avenue Bridge.

4:57 p.m. - After getting the ice flowing, a second jam occurs, sending a surge of water back up into Montpelier to cause the worst flooding of the day.

5:10 p.m. - The ice jam is knocked loose again, and begins moving downstream.

5:17 p.m. - Huge ice chunks grinding downriver lift and twist half the trestle railroad bridge near Bailey Avenue off its foundation, leaving it perpendicular to the rest of the bridge and pointing downstream.

5:31 p.m. - The last ice clears the Bailey Avenue Bridge, and flood waters rapidly drain from downtown.

6:13 p.m. - Frigid weather and blowing snow descend as downtown Montpelier is cordoned off and a curfew is set. The city remains closed until noon, Saturday, March 14, as an army of workers, volunteers and municipal crews pump basements, remove more than 650 dump truck loads of debris and repair damage.



ETHEL GRANDFIELD

A backhoe works to break up the ice jam at the Bailey Avenue Bridge.



JACKIE HURLBURT

The pressure of ice and water causes the Washington County Railroad bridge to snap.



LIZZARI PHOTOGRAPHIC

National Guard troops and equipment arrive to help with evacuation and cleanup.

ICE & WATER: THE FLOOD OF 1992

Dear Reader:

On the morning of March 11, 1992, the city of Montpelier, capital of the state of Vermont, was inundated by flood waters from the ice-clogged Winooski River. Within one hour, the entire downtown was covered by several feet of muddy water. As the water rose, local and state emergency management personnel swung into action. On that day and during the weeks that followed, they worked around the clock to protect the lives and the property of the people of Montpelier. We can never thank enough all the professional men and women who came to our aid on that day. It is our hope that this book will partially tell their story.

This book will also tell the story of the people of Montpelier and the hundreds, if not thousands, of ordinary people who came to their aid. As the waters receded on the evening of March 11, the people of Montpelier began the serious business of rebuilding their community. Offers of help, both financial and volunteer, poured into the city. Once again, we can never begin to thank—we will probably never even know—all those who helped us. That the city was open for business as usual within two weeks is a testimony to the success of their efforts.

For those of us who lived through it, the events of March 11 and the days that followed were an experience we will never forget. For myself, at least, they proved that even in the face of terrible adversity, people working together can still accomplish miracles. I hope that this book will help you understand what we did and how we felt during that time. Most of all, I hope you will enjoy it.

Sincerely,

Ann E. Cummings, Mayor

June, 1992



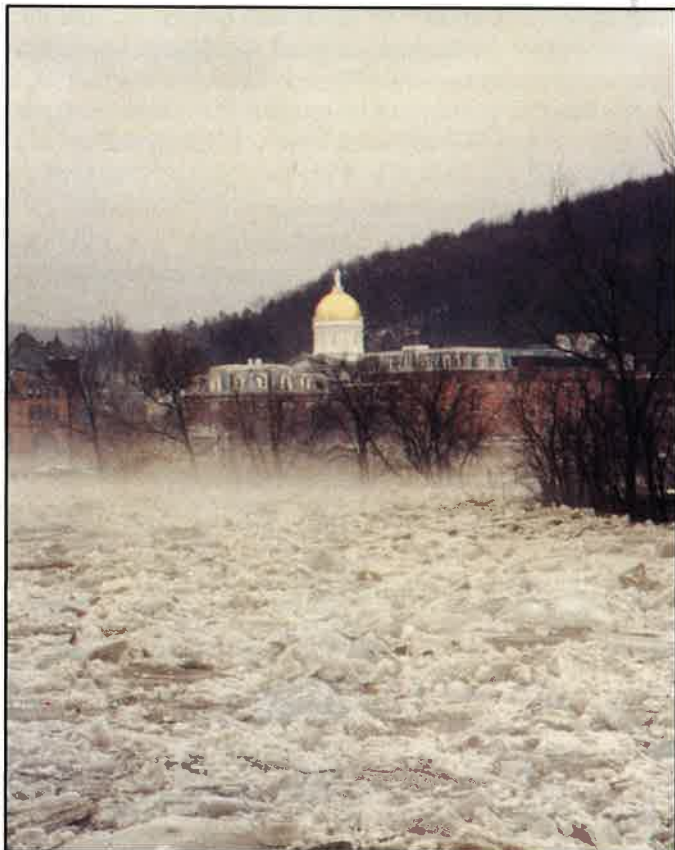
TOBY TALBOT, ASSOCIATED PRESS

Mayor Ann Cummings (right) escorts U.S. Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., and his wife Marcelle on a tour of the damage.



A view of the ice and the still-intact railroad bridge from the Taylor Street Bridge.

GEORGE J. WOOD



Looking west toward the State House.

SUSAN H. ROOP

As March 11, 1992 dawned, Vermont entered the fourth consecutive day of an early spring thaw and police in the state capital kept a watchful eye on the city's rivers. The North Branch was high and the Winooski was brimful of snowmelt and rain and choked with floating chunks of thick winter ice.

Minor spring flooding and ice jams had been a way of life throughout Montpelier's two centuries of history, and no one had an inkling this day was destined to be unusual. But at about 7 a.m., the groaning river of ice in the Winooski shuddered to a momentous stop just downstream of the Bailey Avenue Bridge. The ice had jammed, shutting the door on the river as decisively as the closing of a bank vault. With nowhere to go, the Winooski backed up, pouring calamitously over its banks into the heart of Montpelier.

In less than an hour, the two swollen rivers effectively shut down 120 businesses, left more than 50 residents homeless, threw the workings of much of state government into disarray, and caused upwards of \$5 million in damage. Miraculously, there was no loss of life, but the lifeblood of Montpelier's historic downtown was devastated by the second great flood to strike the city in this century.

The 1992 event was very different from its predecessor nearly 65 years ago. The famous November, 1927, flood followed three days of torrential rains, and the destruction and death it caused—nearly 100 Vermonters lost their lives—were felt statewide. This time, except for a few



Some of the formidable ice chunks that clogged the Winooski.

MEGAN W. PICARD

other areas of localized river flooding, the damage was concentrated in Montpelier. And this time, it came with almost no advance warning.

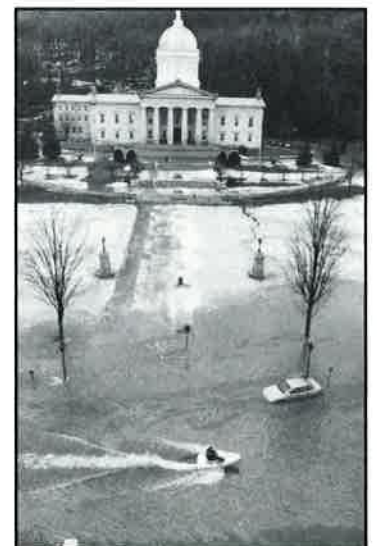
Montpelier Police Chief Douglas Hoyt was probably the first to have a sense that disaster was about to strike. Alerted at 6:51 a.m. to a report of minor flooding on Barre Street, he rushed downtown and reached the intersection of State and Elm by the historic Garage building about 7 a.m. What he saw alarmed him: Water was already rising into the parking area behind State Street. Driving to the Bailey Avenue Bridge, he encountered a bleak and foreboding spectacle of "broken ice for as far as you could see." It was not moving, and Hoyt knew then that the city was in for trouble.

The swiftness with which the flood struck will remain its most enduring memory for many victims. In just a few minutes, city streets were inundated and impassable. Cars stalled in the road, basement windows and doors blew out from the pressure, and propane tanks ripped free of their moorings, spewing explosive vapors. Ice floes three feet thick sashayed through town. With their bridges, side streets like Langdon and School suddenly resembled canals, the oddly scenic sight masking the destruction occurring in basements and ground floors of Montpelier's historic buildings.

Many residents, business owners and employees tried at first to stave off damage, rushing to rescue files and computers, basement inventory and stock. But gradually, the severity of the flood sank in—literally—on Montpelier. The

rising water filled basements and then surged to a height of two to three feet above ground level, as hundreds of people waded and dashed to safety or were taken by rescue boats, fire trucks and city dump trucks to dry land and an emergency Red Cross shelter set up at Vermont College.

By 8 a.m., the Winooski River had claimed the city, turning the downtown into a lake and the broad expanse of State Street into a roiling gray river. Only Vermont's 1859 State House kept its feet dry. Preserved by its prominent high location from the damage other state buildings suffered, it remained an eerie peninsula in the foggy sea that had submerged Montpelier.



Flood waters creep close to the State House, but its elevation keeps the capitol safe from harm.

SANDY MACYS, TIMES ARGUS



JANE WALKER RICHMOND

Parked vehicles are set adrift on State Street after the water rises.

The flood that stormed into basements and swamped cars in the streets left the city's downtown inaccessible by normal means. Montpelierites quickly showed their resourcefulness. By mid-morning, water craft of all sorts cruised the same streets autos had driven hours earlier. Vermont Fish and Wildlife and State Police patrol and rescue boats shared the waters with kayaks, canoes and inflatable rafts launched into the streets by business owners and onlookers.

Fred Wilber canoed to his record store, Buch Spieler on Langdon Street, and saved thousands of dollars of electronic gear by moving it above the flood waters. Bear Pond Books owner Michael Katzenberg and staffer Linda Lehman arrived almost simultaneously at the store in separate canoes but there was little they could do: Water already had risen over the two bottom rows of shelves.

The intersection of Main and State streets at times resembled a canoe jamboree, with boats beaching on the unlikely shore of the top steps of City Center. At the other end of town, at lower State Street, a swift current sweeping back into the Winooski below the ice jam made boating dangerous. Game wardens Bob Lutz and Jon Magnant from Enosburg, who were cruising the area securing buildings, probably became the first boaters ever to throw an anchor out on State Street, snagging a parking meter to keep from being swept down into the Winooski.

Despite the influx of curious boaters, real dangers lurked in the water. In the first few hours, leaking propane and gasoline from vehicles and tanks created a hazardous situation. Emergency crews tested explosive vapors in buildings, and heavy concentrations of gasoline on the water created a fire risk, as did potential electrical short-circuits caused by the water. That no explosions or fires resulted was considered a miracle.

Facing page: Montpelier's main intersection at the height of the flood.

VYTO STARINSKAS, RUTLAND DAILY HERALD

Following pages: High water invades stores along Main Street and the basement of City Hall.

JYM WILSON, BURLINGTON FREE PRESS



VYTO STARINSKAS, RUTLAND DAILY HERALD

Boaters drift down Langdon Street.



ERIC G. BARDROF

Businessmen Fred Wilber and Mason Singer are assisted by East Montpelier firefighter Ty Rolland.



The Flower Market

WINTER
CLEARANCE

SAL

20-50 %



OBBLERS & SHOPPE

Robin's Peach Tree



A view of State Street from Governor Davis Avenue to Elm Street.

JIM BLOUIN



The sign at the Montpelier Gulf Station on State Street adds color to an otherwise bleak day. VYTO STARINSKAS, RUTLAND DAILY HERALD



SANDY MACYS, TIMES ARGUS

Tom Hanson, assistant chief of the Middlesex volunteer fire department, and colleagues use a rope to steady a boat ferrying employees from state offices.

Unlikely vehicles saved the day for many stranded workers and residents. On Elm Street, city dump truck driver Lee White made five trips to pluck residents from their porches and homes, driving on the sidewalk as water came above the bottom of the doors and seeped into the cab. Others got to safety holding on to ropes, or were ferried away in boats and canoes. Ralph Wright, speaker of the Vermont House of Representatives, toured the disaster area incongruously riding in the upturned bucket of a huge bucket loader.

Associated Press staff working in the second floor of the Thrush Tavern hiked up skirts and pants and waded through the dirty, icy waters, temporarily relocating to the Baldwin Street offices of their former competitor, the bankrupt United Press International. But in the tradition of captains who stay with a sinking ship, some fought the

flood. At the Vermont Historical Society in the Pavilion Building, a human chain of staff and volunteers worked feverishly to rescue 450 boxes of priceless historic documents and artifacts from the basement vault. A dozen volunteers, one still in a business suit, waded through knee-deep water rescuing foreign and classic films from the Savoy Theater's basement video store. About 18,000 children's books at Kellogg-Hubbard Library were brought upstairs by library users, including youngsters who rescued their favorite books.



JANE WALKER RICHMOND

Emergency personnel.



Main Street looking south from the Inn at Montpelier.

FRED EMIGH



The Illuzzi building on Main Street.

SHERRY RUSSELL



PAUL CROSSAN



Individuals are evacuated on Main Street.

ROBERT NIST



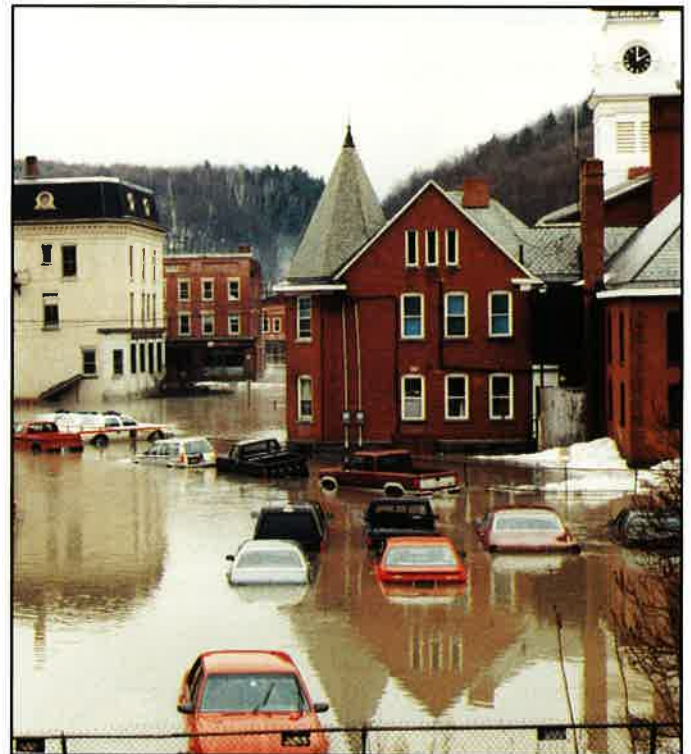
Bethany Church is reflected in the water that flooded School Street.

ETHEL GRANDFIELD

At MacPherson Travel in the heart of downtown, owner Bob Fitzgerald was in his State Street storefront standing by the door before 8 a.m. when a horrendous explosion blew out his front window and sent glass shattering into the street. Dazed and in shock, he was evacuated by firefighters and only learned later that his steam boiler had exploded when it was hit by icy flood waters.

As the consequences of the flood sank in, Montpelier's business community and residents gathered in shock and consoled each other. At F.I. Somers & Sons Hardware, a huge summer shipment had been unloaded into the basement just the day before. Onion River Sports had virtually its entire summer stock of bikes—some 300—stored in the basement. The Drawing Board art supply shop had thousands of dollars of wood frames in the cellar. In the old Jailhouse Common on Elm Street, all the baking equipment at La Brioche, the New England Culinary Institute's bakery, was submerged, as were 7,000 bottles in the wine cellar.

Later, the devastation was compounded as many merchants, landlords and homeowners discovered that their insurance policies did not cover most of the flood damages.



WINNIFRED HARRINGTON

Numerous cars, such as these parked behind buildings on Elm and State streets, are immobilized by the rapidly rising water.



CRAIG LINE, ASSOCIATED PRESS

Lawyer Dot Helling, having evacuated her Langdon Street office, is assisted across Main Street by Montpelier firefighter Bill Huntsman.



MARK SASAHARA, BURLINGTON FREE PRESS

James Walters of the S.S.N. Montpelier moves a water-damaged copy machine to make room for more trash from Days Inn. Fourteen sailors volunteered to help clean up the submarine's namesake city.

Rescue and emergency crews descended on the state capital after Gov. Howard Dean declared a state of emergency. Meanwhile, city officials marshalled an armada of mechanical equipment to try to dislodge the ice jam. An 82-ton crane owned by Blow & Cote Construction, Inc. of Morrisville inched through downtown from the Pioneer Street Bridge to Bailey Avenue in a procession that took two and a half hours. Backhoes from Dubois Construction clawed at the ice as the crane hooked on to a 26-foot I-beam and dropped it like a pile driver.

In stops and starts, the river began to move in mid-afternoon, the ice groaning against the Bailey Avenue Bridge, shaking it with tremendous pressure. But just before 5 p.m., the ice jammed again, and a surge of water backed up into Montpelier to its highest levels of the day. At 5:10 p.m., the ice finally let go for good, and one section of Montpelier's 70-year-old, 60-foot-long railroad trestle bridge went with it, lifted off its pilings by ice chunks 20 to 30 feet long. It took half an hour for all the ice to finally clear. Like the contents of a bathtub with the plug pulled, by 6 p.m. all the water had drained out of Montpelier.



CHRIS GEE, TIMES ARGUS

Some of the residents evacuated from their homes pass the time at Vermont College facilities operated by the Red Cross.



SANDY MACYS, TIMES ARGUS

Gov. Howard Dean (left) and Richard Strome, director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency's regional office, brief the press on the status of recovery efforts the day after the flood.



SANDY MACYS, TIMES ARGUS

Postal workers sort through piles of drenched mail.





Inmates from the St. Johnsbury Community Correctional Center and their supervisors assist in the recovery effort on Main Street opposite City Hall.

KAREN PIKE RIESNER, BURLINGTON FREE PRESS

The end of the flood marked the beginning of a new ordeal. As temperatures fell along with light snow that evening, Montpelier faced the flood's bleak aftermath. About 45 residents were forced to spend the night in temporary shelter at Vermont College's gymnasium, while others stayed with relatives.

Merchants went into their stores to assess the disheartening damage. It was too much for some: Rather than reopen, Ray Alvarez decided he would sell his family's Capital Market, a city landmark, sadly noting, "We came in with the flood of '27, and we're going out with the flood of '92."

But with the next day came hope, in the form of a new flood, this time of volunteers. Trades people, state inspectors and carpenters tackled the daunting damage to wiring and heating systems, buildings and floors. Though still cordoned off, the city came alive when citizens from many communities rolled up their sleeves and dug in to haul out massive amounts of mucky trash from the city. The debris grew in astounding piles on city streets, bearing graphic witness to the flood's devastation—more than 650 dump truck loads in all.

The boundless energy and enthusiasm of the volunteers kept the city's spirits afloat in the dark days after the flood, as did an outpouring of flood relief donations large and small. National Life of Vermont contributed \$250,000, while donations from other businesses and individuals and proceeds from fund-raising performances and T-shirt sales boosted the fund to more than \$500,000.

Facing page: William Shouldice III, owner of the Country Store on Main Street, cleans up debris.

KAREN PIKE RIESNER, BURLINGTON FREE PRESS



(Above) A saddened Ray Alvarez bids farewell to the popular market his parents opened after the flood of 1927.

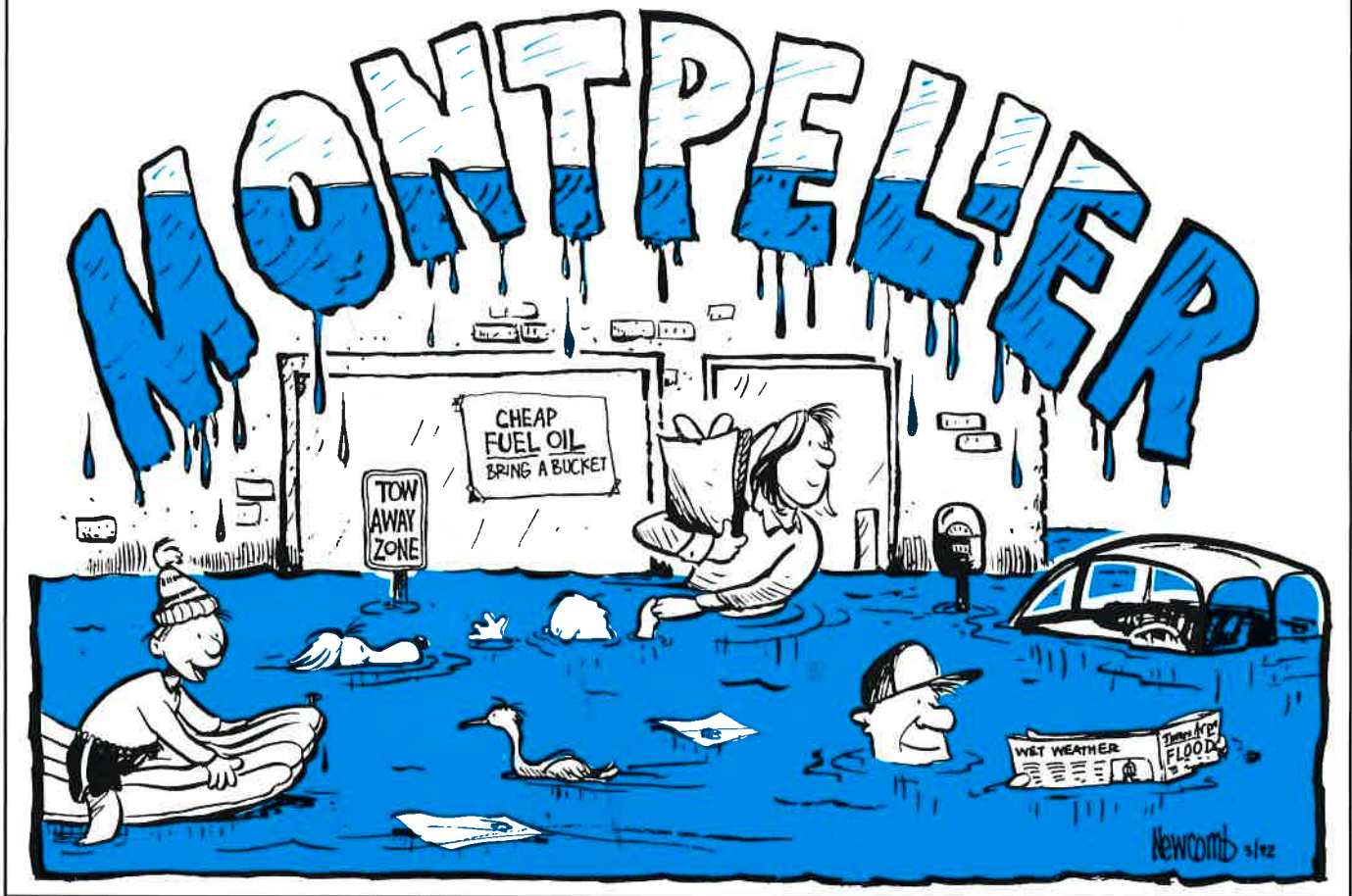
SANDY MACYS, TIMES ARGUS



(Right) Anna Bloom sorts through books hastily removed from the basement of the Kellogg-Hubbard Library.

MORGAN IRONS

ON YOUR NEXT FLOATING HOLIDAY
VISIT



This cartoon by graphic artist Tim Newcomb was one of the designs that graced T-shirts sold to benefit flood relief.



JANE WALKER RICHMOND

Montpelier residents reclaim their city during a celebration featuring clown John McSweeney on March 21 at City Center.

With the outpouring of support, signs of humor poked through the debris as the city slowly got back to business, though not back to normal, as buckled sidewalks and the presence of workers made very clear. Pastors in the city's soaked churches sermonized upon biblical passages of floods and high waters. Onion River Sports renamed itself "Under River Sports." Bear Pond Books put titles such as *Flood* and *The River Flows North* in the window. The Drawing Board art shop became the "Dripping Board."

At noon on Saturday, March 14, the city officially reopened. In the following weeks, flood sales and a "Flood-buster Celebration" brought huge crowds, eager to buy goods and show their support for merchants and the city.

The full impact of the flood on the city remained to be seen. But as spring turned the corner, it was clear that Vermonters had rallied with the same indomitable spirit that so moved native son Calvin Coolidge after the flood of 1927. And hopes for recovery, so dismal in the immediate aftermath of the 1992 disaster, were once again flowering in the state capital.



ELANOR I. ABRAMS

Humor at the Pyralisk coffee house.



JANE WALKER RICHMOND

Firefighter Bill Huntsman gives a playful signal to a group of boaters.



ERIC G. BARDROF

A Montpelier fire truck makes its way through the intersection of Main and East State Streets.



PETER PEARSON

One of the many automobiles enveloped by the high water.



NEW ENGLAND TELEPHONE

Utility workers, including employees of New England Telephone, help the city return to normal.



JANE WALKER RICHMOND

Members of the Mid-State Business and Professional Women, helping out at Minuteman Press on State Street, pose with Marilyn Quayle, a member of the advisory board to the Federal Emergency Management Agency and wife of the vice president of the United States. Left to right are Peggy Moon, Mary Fries, Minuteman owner Jeanne Clark, Janet Leonard, Quayle and Judy Chase.

"Ice and Water: The Flood of 1992" was produced by volunteers working in cooperation with the city of Montpelier, the Vermont Historical Society and Vermont Life magazine. All aspects of production were free-of-charge, so that the complete proceeds would benefit flood relief efforts undertaken by the Montpelier Flood Relief Fund and the Red Cross.

"Ice and Water" Committee: Janice Abair, Paul Carnahan, Alan Grigsby, Ron Kowalkowski, Irene Raczy (chairperson), John Savage, Tom Slayton, Ron Wild. The committee gratefully acknowledges: Andrew Nemethy, writer; Maureen O'Connor Burgess, graphic artist; Leahy Press, printer; and everyone who donated photographs to this project.

A videotape of the flood, titled "Montpelier: The Flood of '92," was also produced to benefit flood relief efforts. It is available in local stores for \$14.95.

Funded and Printed by Leahy Press, Inc.

