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FROM THE  
DIRECTOR OF  
**THE JOY LUCK CLUB**

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# Army Corps Blows Up Missouri Levee

By **A. G. SULZBERGER**

EAST PRAIRIE, Mo. — Ruben Bennett, his back bent and his fingers gnarled from a lifetime of labor, has lived all of his 88 years on an expanse of rich farmland here, just below where the Ohio River pours into the Mississippi. He survived his share of floods — including the record-setting one that swept away his boyhood home — but he has never run from one, until now.

For days he returned repeatedly, despite a mandatory evacuation, with the hope of riding out another major flood in his longtime home above his shuttered grocery store. But under threats from law enforcement officials, and the cajoling of his family, he finally agreed to retreat. As [explosives tore open a protective levee](#) Monday night, he waited for the news that his home has been destroyed.

“I can’t tell you how I feel, because there no feeling for that,” he said hours earlier, sitting in his daughter’s house — nearby, and safe from possible flooding — where he has been sleeping on the couch. “I hate it so bad.”

The Mississippi River, already at record levels here, keeps rising, fed by punishing rains. As the flood protection systems that safeguard countless communities groan under the pressure, federal officials executed a fiercely debated plan to destroy a part of the levee holding back the river in the area Mr. Bennett calls home for the greater good of the region.

With a flash of light and a massive rumbling that shook windows miles away, the [Army Corps of Engineers](#) set off explosives at 10 p.m. along the first of several sections of the earthen barrier, sending 550,000 cubic feet of water a second across the 130,000 acres of farmland known as the spillway. There were 90 homes in the spillway, but under the cover of darkness it was impossible to gauge the initial devastation. “This doesn’t end this historic flood,” said Maj. Gen. Michael J. Walsh, who commands the Mississippi Valley Division of the corps, explaining that the river may rise again in a few days. “This is not the end, this is just the beginning.”

Col. Vernie L. Reichling Jr., commander of the corps' Memphis District, said the blast was successful, calling it "historic as well as tragic."

The move was a desperate effort to lower the river, which had climbed to about 61 feet in nearby Cairo, Ill., to head off calamity up- and downriver. In Illinois, the pressure on the levee created a geyser, forcing the evacuation of Cairo. In Louisiana, there was concern about whether levees could survive a record flood.

And it raised a new risk in this part of Missouri, which had challenged the plan unsuccessfully in court, because any water filling the spillway would put pressure on an untested secondary levee that protects more populous communities.

Some of the 200 residents in the spillway have argued that the young shoots of corn and knee-high carpet of wheat offered evidence enough that the area was worth protecting. Their claims will be soon be forgotten as the attention shifts downriver. But for these people, some of whom watched the blast, the flooding represents the beginning of a long process they say will drastically change their lives.

Just days after a farmer and his wife celebrated their 40th wedding anniversary saying goodbye to their newly built home, they planned to return to the area Tuesday to see if there was anything left. Another farmer spent the evening worrying that the sudden onslaught of river water had stripped and scarred the prized soil that gave the land its reputation for bounty. And an old man, stubborn enough to try to stick out the flood, spent the evening just trying not to think about the only place he has ever called home.

These residents, each with lifelong ties to the area, were divided about the decision to blow up the levee. But what they shared — beyond that streak of stoic perseverance native to farm country — was a sense that the value of their work had been diminished.

"This is our industry, this is our factory, we grow food for the same folks trying to blow up our levee," said Cathy Allred, sitting alongside her husband, Larry, at a friend's guest house, where they are living.

After growing up in the spillway, Mr. Allred left, working many jobs before persuading his wife to return to the country to farm. Six years ago, they built a house with their savings — about \$100,000 — but were unable to get a mortgage or insurance because of the flood risks.

They enjoyed the change of pace: while Ms. Allred, 60, would stroll the property with the grandchildren looking for arrowheads, Mr. Allred, 59, would stalk for the dusty blackberry brambles that used the fences like growing stakes.

But on the anniversary of their marriage four decades ago, Ms. Allred sat alone on the floor of her empty home while her husband was on the porch, too emotional to come inside. He remained angry and distrustful at the way the federal government went about choosing which community to sacrifice. "I poured my whole life into that farm, and I'm 60 years old and I don't want to start on anything else," he said.

Down the road was the old brick home, hand-built 40 years ago by Milus and Wanda Wallace. This was what they were trying to save when Mr. Wallace, 60, who survived cancer a few years back, traveled to federal court to testify in support of a lawsuit to prevent the Army Corps of Engineers from blowing up the levee.

But less than a week later, en route to sell his cows, because he had no place to put them, he says that he was wrong, that the river has left no choice but to sacrifice the area where he has lived since he was born. He is one of the fortunate ones whose house is insured, but they plan to relocate.

"It's the ground that can never be replaced," Mr. Wallace said. "They don't make any more ground, and this ground in the spillway is the best in the world."

The spillway was a different place when Mr. Bennett was a child. The land was covered in trees, until it was stripped by a lumber company and sold off in stump-covered lots at \$17 an acre for farmland, like the 40 acres his parents cleared to feed their eight children.

The record-setting 1937 flood — the only other time the levee was intentionally breached — destroyed his family home.

Staying to raise a family of his own, he watched the area transform into thriving cropland, rich with corn, soy and wheat. He ran a grocery store and a tire repair businesses that made him the best-known man in the spillway. A decade ago, he closed the store, and his wife died. But he remained. So did the risk of flood.

Usually, when the river caused trouble every few years, he just carted his possessions to the second floor and prepared to muck out afterward. When he sneaked on to the levee to get a final look at the river this weekend, he saw that this flood was different.

"I've never seen him scared before in my life till they talked about blowing the levee," said his son Barry Bennett, who runs a tire shop in East Prairie. "It got to him bad."

*Malcolm Gay contributed reporting from Charleston, Mo.*

