

Bandy Center books chronicle Paris flood



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The floods that ravaged the Midwestern United States last summer left behind widespread destruction and billions of dollars worth of damage. People living in Paris experienced a similar, unexpected misery almost a century ago.

Water gushing into basements caught everyone in Paris by surprise during the third week of January 1910 as the Seine swelled to a level not seen since the 1650s. Soon the river was overflowing through huge portions of the City of Light. The force of underground water shattered the foundations of buildings and scattered paving stones through the winding streets. Thousands of Parisians forced out of their homes by the river's rapid rise found themselves in emergency Red Cross shelters and soup kitchens. Electricity, a relatively new amenity in this modernizing city, quickly fizzled and thrust people into the dark for days. In streets where water stood several feet deep, moving around Paris became a challenge often requiring a boat. When the stations and tunnels for the 10-year-old subway filled, the system shut down completely. For weeks after the Seine receded, Paris sat in ruins.

Despite the drama, this is a largely forgotten episode in the history of Paris. I've examined all of the material on the flood held in French archives while researching a new book, *Paris Under Water: How Paris Survived the Great Flood of 1910*. To my delight, I also discovered through an Internet search that Vanderbilt's W.T. Bandy Center—a remarkable resource for scholars of French culture which I have used for previous research—houses one of the largest collections of rare material about the 1910 flood anywhere in the United States. I contacted the Bandy Center's staff in the fall of 2007 while still researching in Paris. When I finally came to campus in summer 2008, they generously provided me with everything I needed.

Much of the information about the flood found in the documents held at the Bandy Center was preserved in pictures.

When dozens of photographers went into Parisian streets documenting the tragedy, they captured hundreds of dramatic images. Many appeared in commemorative booklets sold for one franc even while the waters were still high. These printed compilations of a few dozen photographs per booklet served as a tangible memento of the flood for those who lived through it. Seeing the



Houses and buildings mostly underwater are shown in the foreground, with the famed Eiffel Tower in the background during the flood on 1910.

pictures somehow made this unbelievable event seem real.

The Bandy Center holds five of these remarkable booklets from a larger series titled *Paris et ses environs: inondations de janvier 1910 (Paris and Its Surroundings: the Floods of January 1910)* published by A. Taride, a company which also printed postcards and city maps for tourists. Capturing the anxiety of the moment, the images show how Parisians struggled to cope with the high water in a city that appeared to be crumbling around them. A viewer sees streets torn up, buildings encircled by water, and people's precious belongings bought with years of hard work now scattered and caked in mud. We also witness people improvising ways to move around, sometimes on rafts but often on wooden walkways quickly erected throughout the city.

The Bandy Center also holds a booklet from the studio of the well-known French photographer Pierre Petit titled *Paris inondé (Flooded Paris)*. Unlike the more journalistic images from Taride, Petit's pictures transform the flooded cityscape into a work of art. They draw our eye down long rows of trees or lampposts, and they use reflection and mist to create a beautiful effect. Petit aestheticizes the broken city, ironically making the flood look attractive despite the human tragedy. In photographs devoid of people and focusing on ruins, he presents Paris as an empty ghost town, not the modern urban capital that it was in 1910.

Finally, the collection houses a very rare folio-sized book called *Paris inondé: la crue de janvier 1910 (Flooded Paris: The High Water of January 1910)* published by a leading Parisian newspaper. It tells the story of the flood in words, but the pictures it provides are some of the most powerful of any I've seen throughout all my research. They show the entire range of Paris' experience during the flood, from the pain of devastation to the intense drama of rescue to the hard work of rebuilding.



Boats tethered along the Avenue Montaigne in Paris during the flood.

One photograph says much about the city during those days: an elderly man putting a few coins into a collection box labeled "For the Flood Victims."

Of course, the whole story of the 1910 flood is more complicated, involving looting and hoarding as well as scenes of rescue and neighbors lending a helping hand. But the pictures have survived as evidence of Parisians at their best and how they came together to save their city in a moment of crisis.



A raft carries some Parisian ladies to safety during the flood of 1910.



A Paris gentleman drops money in a charity box for victims of the flood.