

Flooding doesn't dampen islanders' spirits

Jefferson Daily Union , JUNE 16, 2004

KOSHKONONG — Jeff Schwanke sits on the front porch of his Blackhawk Island home, watching carp swim lazily by. A small fishing boat, equipped with an electric trolling motor, bobs alongside the porch, tied to the railing of invisible steps. Occasionally, Schwanke throws in a line, but on this afternoon, he is content to watch his neighbors pass by in flat-bottom johnboats, canoes and trucks with oversized tires.

This marks Schwanke's second flood since moving to the peninsula west of Fort Atkinson about four years ago, and by far the worst he's seen. However, Schwanke, like so many Rock River residents, is not overly concerned about the damage the flooding will cause his home or the obvious inconvenience it poses to him and his wife.

Despite logistical problems, many of the residents say the good things about living out on Blackhawk Island greatly outweigh the bad.

Seeing a Daily Union reporter and friend paddle up to his east-end yard in a canoe, Len Bannon gives a wave and a smile. He's sitting on a bench, placidly watching the waves lap the yardstick he has mounted on the riverwall to gauge water levels.

"I think I have about eight more inches before I'm in trouble," says Bannon as his visitors pull the canoe onto a tiny patch of soggy lawn.

For now, Bannon is more concerned with how he and his wife, Sandra, are going to get on and off the peninsula than he is about the threat to his home.

Bannon is principal for St. Joseph 's Catholic School in Fort Atkinson . When flooding on the Rock River and Mud Lake overtook much of his road, the Bannons were forced to live in a hotel until the end of the school year. Sandra still hasn't returned to the island, but she and Len are not as concerned about the flooding as many highlanders might think.

"The biggest problem is getting in and out," said Bannon. "At the dip in the road by the bypass, there's about 20 inches of water there, so I can't get in and out without hitching a ride from my neighbor."

Other residents of Blackhawk Island can only get to their homes by johnboats, canoes or other small watercraft.

Schwanke, like Bannon, says he and his wife and dog are getting along just fine under the circumstances. On this day, Schwanke and his dog sit on the front porch, which is entirely surrounded by water 12- to 14 inches deep. Schwanke seems content as he sips a drink and listens to the oldies station blaring from somewhere inside the house.

He, too, has about eight inches of leeway before water will begin to get into his home, which is already elevated. But rather than sweat it, Schwanke said, most people are just hanging out and doing the best they can to get on and off the peninsula, mostly to go to work.

"I kind of laid myself off so I could hang around here and take care of things and keep an eye on everything," said Schwanke. "It was just getting too hard for me to go back and forth, but my wife still does."

Schwanke says those residents who have chosen to remain on the island are committed to helping each other out, and watch each other's homes.

That's an attitude longtime Blackhawk Island resident Darrell Prisk shares. He and his family have been on the peninsula since the late 1940s, and have weathered some of the worst floods in the peninsula's history. On this day, he is one of the many residents with pick-up trucks big enough to ferry neighbors back and forth to high ground.

“The people who live here know there are too many ‘goods’ for the few ‘bads’ we have,” said Prisk. “I’ve lived through floods in the past and I’m going to live through them for the rest of my life.”

Prisk refuses the notion that Blackhawk Island residents are victims in need of outside help from the county, state or federal government. He says he believes they have all the help they need from among each other.

“I’ve got everything that I want here,” he said. “This is my mom and dad’s homestead and I’ll be damned if I’m ever going to move off. They’re not going to buy me off; they’re not going to tell me to move off. They’re not going to do anything to me.” (The full story appears in the June 16 Daily Union .)

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