



Ice Dam On The Big Piney River

By Adlyn Willits

The time is around 1910.

Indelibly etched in the mind of young Joseph E. Ross was the very vivid memory of the threat of disaster.

It was winter-time and very cold. Joseph was living at home with his mother and step-father, Mr. Hamer, on their farm on the banks of the Big Piney River at Devil's Elbow, Missouri.

The river was carrying a lot of ice. It was constantly freezing, breaking, and floating downstream. At various places along the river it would jam up onto something and pile up high.

One such place was on the Big Piney River about 2 miles above Devil's Elbow. The ice began jamming up and piling up, higher and higher, wider and wider. And all the while it was freezing more and more solid.

Day after day the ice jam kept growing until it formed a huge dam all the way across the river from hill to hill!

The ice rose and the river rose—until it was about 40 feet high. (This was twice the height of the



Meadowbrook Lodge after the breakup of the massive ice dam on the Big Piney River during the winter of 1910-11. The dam attained a height of 40 feet and held back massive flood waters. Courtesy of Adlyn Willits.

floor in December of 1982. It was 28 feet high at this time.)

This was a phenomenon; it posed a very great danger to all who lived downriver. An ominous threat!

Day and night the ice popped and cracked. Sometimes it sounded like an explosion and could be heard for miles.

It was expected to break suddenly and cause a catastrophe! People were on the alert day and

night. They were afraid to close their eyes and go to sleep.

Men on fast horses placed themselves in danger, on guard where they could watch the ice. Day and night they stayed in the saddle in the hope there would be time to warn a few people!

The ice began breaking over in the heavy timber near the Deer place. This was in heavy, tall timber. Breaking, overflowing, tearing, and breaking, allowing a gradual

lowering of the water. It cleared out that forest. Ice kept breaking; and the river was running high. Huge blocks of ice rushed downstream.

People downstream began to breathe easier. They had prayed for a miracle, and they received one.

When the river receded to normal depth, it had carved itself a new channel. It's the same route it flows today at Deer Slew.