

VALMEYER: 10 YEARS LATER



News-Democrat file photo

The Great Flood of 1993 left homes and businesses in the old Valmeyer either in ruins or with major damage.



News-Democrat file photo

Then-Gov. Jim Edgar and other state and local officials stood in a truck to view flood damage in the old Valmeyer.

'WE COULDN'T TRANSFER THE CHARACTER OF OLD VALMEYER TO UP HERE. WE KNEW THAT.'

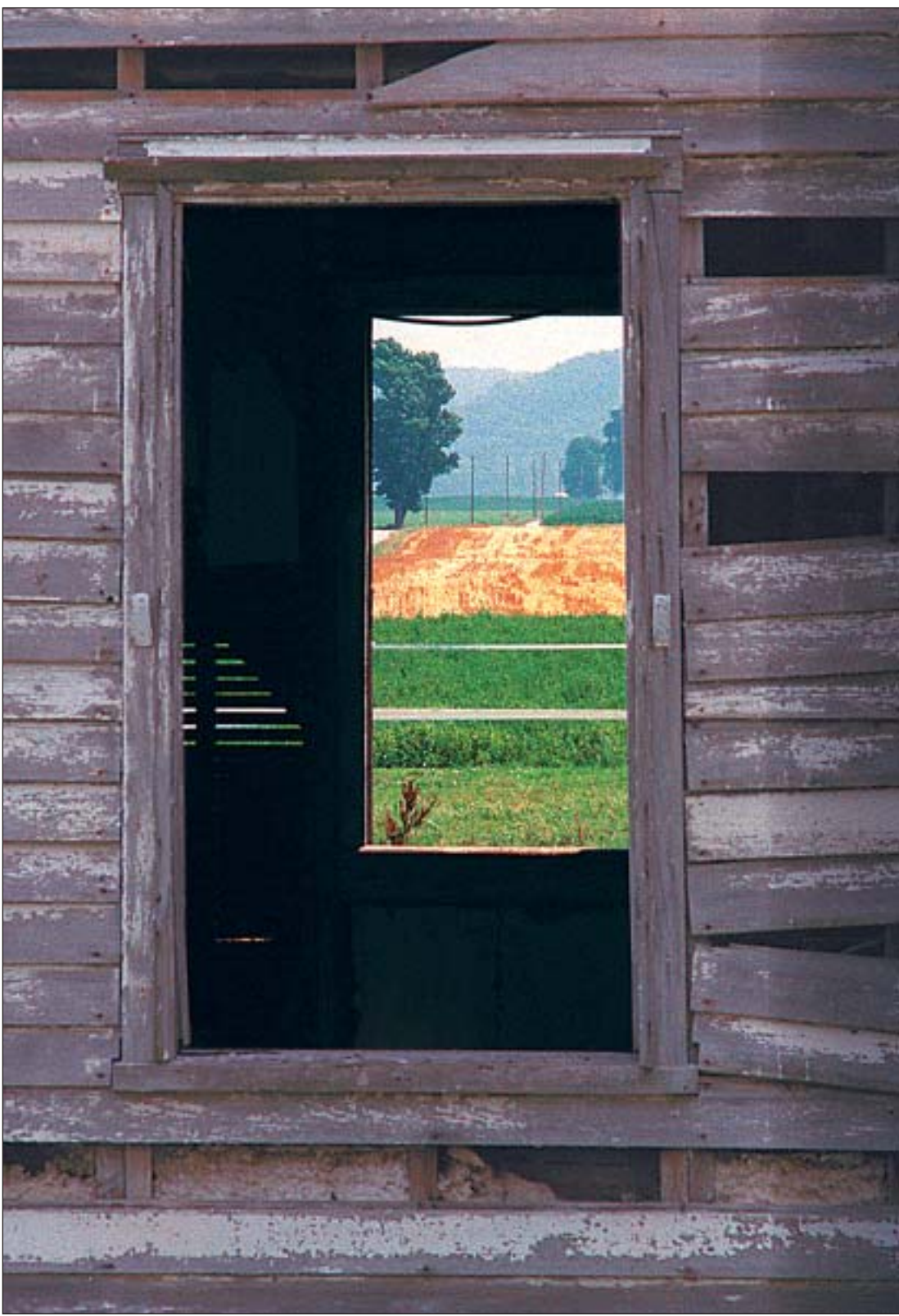


GEORGE PAWLACZYK/News-Democrat

The new Valmeyer, above, has paved roads, but some residents said it doesn't have the same character as the old village. At right is the former home of Mark Bertram in Harrisonville. Floodwaters reached about 6 inches above the sills of the second-story windows.



STEFANIE ANDERSON/News-Democrat



GEORGE PAWLACZYK/News-Democrat

The ruins of a house destroyed by the flood near Valmeyer remain standing 10 years later.

FOCUS | Some residents like the feel of the new Valmeyer, but others prefer the old village

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village he helped create and serves as its \$200-a-month, part-time administrator, admits, "We couldn't transfer the character of old Valmeyer to up here. We knew that."

'Not a real town'

The new Valmeyer became an official village when refugees from what experts considered the worst flood in 500 years fled the bottom land of old Valmeyer and followed Knobloch to the top of a bluff about two miles away.

The Mississippi River cannot reach this 500-acre site, even if the levees fail again.

To get an understanding of what it's like to live in a new town created by no less than seven citizens committees with the help of a federal government agency's computer, ask the residents who remained in or near the old town. They'll tell you what "up on top" lacks.

"After the flood, we bought a nice lot up in the new town," said Becky Heusohn, who still lives down below on Illinois 156 just west of old Valmeyer. In 1993, she was forced to commute in a bass boat, often ducking her head "because the high water put us just a few feet below the power lines."

A year after the flood subsided, Heusohn said she and her

husband, John, walked their new property atop the bluff and imagined living there.

"But we could just not bring ourselves to move on it," she said, "It just didn't feel like home. My little church, that was the only church I ever went to in my whole life, was in Valmeyer. I was baptized there. Both my parents were baptized there, my children, too. It was just something you can't replace. The church is gone. I saved a brick from it."

Only 23 houses that weren't destroyed by the flood remain in old Valmeyer, along with a few others scattered throughout the countryside. An estimated 45 to 50 people still live below the bluffs within what would be considered old Valmeyer.

In the new town's convenience store — Mike's Store & Service — Joe Sondag, who was born in Valmeyer, said one way to find out why people stayed down below is to drive out to one of the many, narrow dirt roads that cross cornfields near old Valmeyer. Then, turn your car off and listen.

"It's what you don't hear — people, dogs, cars," said the affable and lean 74-year-old who dresses in work clothes every day and still does chores at the store.

"Down below you can look out and see the weather coming from miles away," he said.

On a sunny afternoon last week, the only sound on one dirt road near old Valmeyer was the rustling of corn stalks in the breeze that comes down the Mississippi a mile away.

Legally, the old town is part of the new town and has the same mayor and village board. But there are those below the hill who feel the government up on top doesn't represent them.

"That's nothing but a subdivision up there," said Doug Bader, who lives in a house that narrowly escaped the flood waters. "That's not a real town." In 1993, Bader, a professional photographer, took more than 1,700 photos of the flood in Valmeyer.

Dan Sondag, who is distantly related to Joe, lives just up the road from the Heusohns, west toward the river. He, like others who stayed below, has strong feelings of distrust about the new village and its government, which rules over both Valmeyers.

"If it hadn't been for the federal government, that new town would never have been built. Now don't get me in trouble with the people up on the bluff," said Dan Sondag, a farmer.

But Joe Sondag, who likes to joke around, urged him on. "C'mon, get your name in the paper. Tell him what you really think."

Dan, sweaty from a day in

the fields, just laughed.

"Why did I stay?" he asked. "Why not? How can I raise livestock if I don't live by them?"

John Koch, who had just been awakened in the morning after working the night shift at his Missouri job, yawned. He lives in a large building in old Valmeyer that once was a store and maybe a tavern before that.

Officials in new Valmeyer said 500 to 600 of the old village's 900 residents moved to the new village, although many still below doubt the number is that high.

"Would I move up there? No, that's all right. This is home. My legs are both the same length. I can't stand on a hillside, so I couldn't live there," he said, joking.

'There's a lot to like'

Shannon Geringer never lived down below on the river flats. And thank you, she says, life is pretty nice in the new Valmeyer.

"We were attracted to here because it's much more affordable," said Geringer, while two of her three children, Jacob 6, and Emma 4, drew chalk pictures on the driveway.

"Listen, do you hear that? Birds chirping. They do that all the time. The people here are so friendly. We feel so safe," she said.

Lisa Schaefer, who also is not

from old Valmeyer, said that she and her husband, J.R., bought a house this year for \$130,000 that she said would have cost about \$180,000 near Waterloo.

"It was a lot less. We just love it here. Definitely," Schaefer said.

Becky Clark, who lives at the end of a short street in new Valmeyer, said she and her husband, Joe, came from outside the area in 1999 and picked the end of the street because the woods were in their backyard.

"We have deer and raccoons that come right up to the house. That's why we wanted to live here," she said.

Laurie Brown, Valmeyer's village clerk, said one aspect of the old village that did make it to the top was brotherhood.

"We don't have the old charm, we know that, but we still have the sense of community that we had back in the old town," Brown said.

Knobloch, the former Valmeyer mayor who now is the Monroe County clerk, said that whenever funds are needed for a civic cause, they are easily raised in the new Valmeyer.

"Sure, I miss it. I grew up where I could walk outside my house and see the train come right by. Now, we can hear it from up here but that's about all," said Knobloch, whose blonde hair earned him the nickname "Cotton."

"But there's a lot to like about the new village, and the old village."

As for one obvious reason for moving out of the flats — that the river might flood again — surprisingly there seemed to be little fear of that.

"No, we're not afraid to live here. Not at all," said Penny Bertram, who lives on a side road off Illinois 156 in what used to be Harrisonville, the former Monroe County seat. Like old Valmeyer a mile to the east, the tiny village of Harrisonville basically doesn't exist anymore.

"This is home, and we didn't want to leave, even though, I guess, the river could come back. Will come back," she said.

Brian Johnson, a sort of jack of all trades for Valmeyer, including serving as highway superintendent, said no one down below really fears the Mississippi. If they did, they'd have already left.

For Johnson, 53, who has lived most of his life in the old village, there was something besides the flood that already was bringing change to old Valmeyer. Something as unstoppable as the river.

"It's not just the flood. That was like an exclamation point," Johnson said, "People have changed. Young people, not the old people. Everybody's in a hurry. I prefer the old way."