

THE DAY IT RAINED FROGS by James Dawson

Note: this article is based on actual interviews with survivors.

In the 1920s, Trappe was a quiet town of about 300 people, surrounded by cows, in the lower center of Talbot County on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Had you been there on the peaceful morning on the second of September in 1928, the thought would never have entered your head that all hell would break loose on a few hours.

And rightly so, since a quick scan of the flat horizon would have revealed no teetering boulders, simmering volcanoes, enemy smoke signals, or crimson sunrises. All was pleasant. There was no clue at all that in a few short hours, an event would occur so horrendous as to send the very watch dogs howling for shelter. An event that would be celebrated in headlines and remembered in poetry. However, that morning the sun rose bright and clear, slanting long shadows across the drowsing fields. But the day that promised fair, delivered frogs instead.

Trappe had always been a lazy Sunday afternoon kind of town, but part of its idyllic countryside was taken up by a frog pond just west of town created in the early 1920s by the growing town's poor drainage. If Trappe had a slough of despond that pond was it. That first year, the pond grew large enough for boys to skate on it and, in a summer or two, untold numbers of mosquitoes and frogs sported within its marshy perimeter. There were even unconfirmed sightings of muskrats. The wet summer of 1928, which included over ten inches of rain in August, had flooded the pond to record levels so that it covered nearly three acres. The frogs obligingly propagated and by September the pond was jammed with millions and millions of pollywogs. Frog tempers clashed like cymbals and all was chaos.

By noon of the second, the lazy town proved quite a contrast with the teeming pond. The last echoes of Trappe's church bells faded away and the town settled down to its normal Sunday afternoon affairs.

Piles of abandoned comics testified that the town was ready for a typical Southern Sunday dinner, but the thwacking of biscuit dough, the churning of ice cream freez*ers and the mist of frying chicken hung about the town in an atmosphere that was just a bit too humid and still for September. Several radios were playing, but no meteorological pranks were forecast and certainly no frog visitations. What a forecast that would have made: "Clear this morning, with scattered frogs this afternoon. Clearing by evening." Orson Wells would have been envious. In fact, there is a rumor that his infamous "War of the Worlds" radio broadcast was based directly on the Trappe incident. This is entirely possible because as everyone knows, both frogs and Martians are green. In any event, as Trappe sat down to dinner, there was unrest at the pond.

Trappe is still divided on the actual events of that day although all would later agree that suddenly it possessed enough frogs to last it until mid-century, if the demand for frogs was not excessive. Some said the frogs fell from the sky, others said that was nonsense, a patent impossibility, and that the frogs came to town of their own volition during the storm to create the illusion that it had rained frogs. Some claimed that some frog scouts were seen in town on Saturday scoping out the situation.

Others speculated that the frogs had buried themselves under the streets and that the rain flushed them out. Did the frogs do it for a joke or from some sinister intent? Could it have been revenge because the growing town was crowding the expansion of their foggy domain? One recent theory states that not only had the frogs been in town all along, but were hiding, perhaps under the mayor's front porch, to come out at some prearranged signal in some sort of amphibious assault. Or maybe all of these theories were concocted later to discredit the disturbing fact that frogs actually rained down on the hapless town in a Niagara-like deluge.

Nature had generally smiled on Trappe. But, perhaps all was not as idyllic as the countryside would appear and the frogs were an old world plague visited on the town by divine vengeance. Frogs were number two in the top ten list of plagues visited on Egypt as reported in the Old Testament. Was this a warning of biblical proportions or merely the result of bad drainage?

Proponents of the falling frog theory maintain that if a tornado can pick up a house, a waterspout could certainly snatch up some frogs. There are many confirmed reports of weird rains from around the world from ancient times on. Whirlwinds have been known to lift, carry and then drop a variety of small objects and debris. Besides frogs, there have been confirmed reports of beetle rain, crayfish rain, eel rain, fish rain, gelatinous matter rain, jelly fish rain, worm rain, baby alligator rain and even snake and spider rain. At least one of the above should give you the creeps. Gelatinous matter rain is particularly disturbing. Curiously, it has never actually rained cats and dogs.

Trappe was lucky it was only frogs. One eyewitness reported that at about two o'clock, any angry looking nimbus appeared in the north west which soon darkened the sky and that the pitter-patter on the roof tops was not rain but webbed feet. Several other eye witnesses reported that they actually saw little frogs falling from the sky. But just as many other witnesses declared that the frogs had come from the pond under their own power, not by air.

In any event, the devil cloud unleashed a downpour which may or may not have included frogs. In minutes, Trappe was under siege by the hopping green menace. A hard rain and wind followed, the sun came out and then things returned to almost normal. Except that now, Trappe was Frog City. By two thirty, the town was smothered with millions of tiny frogs measuring from half an inch to an inch and a half in length. The frogs, sure of victory, took advantage of the situation and began an organized march due East blackening the pavements and streets with their hopping bodies. A picket fence charge across Main St.

Just when all appeared lost, the town ducks massed for the attack and started unmercifully scooping up the invaders. The frog high command must have been gobbled up by about three o'clock, because there was panic in the streets and it was every tadpole for itself. Unable to escape, many were crushed under the wheels of passing Model Ts and the sound was likened to the popping of small firecrackers. There was carnage in the streets. A frog rout. Many more blundered into the path of bicycles, fell down cellars and piled up against buildings five and six inches deep. Just as the populace were venturing out of their houses, the remaining frogs, crippled, maimed and demoralized as they were, started for low ground though it would be days before the last stragglers left town. Regardless of how the town treated the frogs, it should be

remembered that even though the frogs attacked in cold blood (literally), at no time was a frog responsible for the loss of a single human life.

The news spread quickly, and people rode from all parts of the county to gaze with astonishment at the mess. It was impossible to walk there without having to wade through the dead and dying. The streets were choked with the bodies of the slain. Later that afternoon, the town itself was starting to smell like a dead frog which greatly curtailed tourism. Mercifully, the following day Trappe was cleansed by another shower this time *sans* frogs.

The event made the local paper, when on Sept. 8th, an article in the *Easton Star Democrat* screamed:

“MILLIONS OF FROGS INFEST TRAPPE STREETS-

“Killed by Pedestrians and Vehicles Of All Kinds, The Stench is Offensive On Sunday.-

“Last Saturday, Sunday and Monday Trappe became infested with a lot of small frogs. The streets and the sidewalks were literally covered with the little hopping animals, and millions of them were everywhere. It was at first thought they dropped from the clouds, but later investigation was responsible for the theory that the frogs were washed out by the recent rains and hopped their way to the dry surface of the streets.

“Back of the homes on the west side of the main street is a pond. Frogs are numerous here, it is claimed, and the weather being favorable for their propagation, millions were hatched out from the tadpole and sought the shelter of the grass. When the heavy rain came the pond was increased to several acres in size. The frogs moved eastward until they reached the sidewalk and street.

“They made their first appearance on Saturday, and by Sunday the dead frogs were mashed on the streets by passing vehicles and on the sidewalks pedestrians could not walk without mashing them. The stench from them was offensive until the shower washed them away. Even as late as Tuesday many little frogs were seen hopping about on the sidewalk and in the street.

“Many people from Easton and tourists hearing of the strange phenomenon motored to Trappe to see for themselves. They were amazed at the great numbers of little frogs hopping about. They measured them from half an inch to an inch and a half.”

And in the “Local News in Verse” section, they also published the following bit of froggeral:

“Millions little polly-wogs
Metamorphosed into frogs,
Rainstorm helped a lot to ‘drap’
In the little town of Trappe.”

It’s not exactly Shakespeare, but it did rhyme, sort of.

The following April, in a *Star Democrat* follow up, Trappe’s “famous frog pond” was declared a public health menace and \$500 was asked to lay 140 feet of drainage pipe. This being done, no frog was ever seen in town again unless it had a good excuse.

After the passage of three quarters of a century, can it be said that Trappe has learned anything of frog or frog of Trappe? Could it be that the town misunderstood their peaceful, foggy intentions? We will never know. Alas, the town has all but forgotten the incident. Or perhaps it does not want to remember. There is no plaque to commemorate the incident, no bronze statue with greenish patina to honor the slain of that infamous September day. No Homer sang of the green-fingered frog. No modern Aristophanes dramatized the day. He did write a play called "The Frogs", but it was not about Trappe. No Aesop moralized the event with a froggy-fable. No wandering minstrel would sing a "Green Sleeves" for Trappe. No Mark Twain would write a "Jumping Frog of Talbot County."

Yet it should not be forgotten. At the very least, Trappe should establish September second as Frog Day with parades, reenactments of the event, the crowning of the Frog Prince (no Grimm tale that), Little Miss Tadpole beauty contests, and much more. But keep watching the skies Trappe, not all of those dark clouds have silver linings.

News Flash: *The Farmers Almanac* reported in their 2005 issue on p. 254 that it rained frogs in Berlin, Conn. on Sept. 19, 2003. What Primo D'Agata thought was hail, turned out to be a load of frogs eggs dumped on his house as hurricane Isabel passed by. This was confirmed by a naturalist. D'Agata put some on a bowl of water and watched them mature. Even more curious was the fact that Connecticut frogs don't lay eggs that late in the year, so it was surmised that the eggs had come from a southern climate, possibly North Carolina.

Or maybe even Trappe, MD.

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The *Tidewater Times* is practically a local institution and has published many great articles on Delmarva in it's 54 year history. Thanks, *TT* for letting me use this one.