Pinhook Struggles To Reclaim Community

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By Anthony Schick
Columbia Missourian

"And I heard a voice from heaven, like the voice of many waters, and like the voice of loud thunder."

Revelation 14:2

PINHOOK - The people in Pinhook knew when a flood was coming. There were signs. Deer stopped wandering out of nearby woods. Water started creeping through the cornfields.

When a flood came from the west, as it started to before this year's devastating flood, the water rose high and fast.

Year after year the stretching Mississippi River neared Pinhook, rarely reaching homes but often swallowing roads and isolating the town. When it flooded, the only way in and out — the only way the kids could get to school — was riding a flatbed trailer through the water. Jim Robinson Jr. hitched it to the back of his John Deere and the village would load it up with overturned buckets and milk crates for seats.

Debra Tarver, now 54, remembers piling onto her father's flatbed with her brothers, sisters and other kids in the village. From a distance, the tractor seemed to float as its tires, sunk to the hilt, churned through bloated river. Tarver sat dangling her legs off the side and feeling the water between her toes.

Her father would turn and yell from up ahead in the tractor: "Don't get too close to the edge." Her mother would say over and over: "Oh, this is not good."

Over roads unseen Robinson Jr. navigated the water, up to the brink where his cousin George Williams waited in the East Prairie District school bus he drove for 40 years. Between Robinson's eight kids, Williams' 10 and the others, there were enough kids in Pinhook to fill the bus.

"He and George, they never missed a beat," Tarver remembers. "And you couldn't see the roads. How he'd done it, I don't know."

That was life by the river. The people of Pinhook knew when a flood was coming, and they knew what to do when it did.

But it never came like this.

The Birds Point levee breach

On May 2 this past spring, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers blew open the Birds Point levee, flooding 130,000 acres of Southeast Missouri. Massive rains and snowmelt had swelled the Mississippi River to a record 61.72 feet in the area, forcing the corps to enact the controversial plan of blasting open portions of the levee in the hopes of preventing unexpected levee failures and uncontrolled flooding up and down the river.

Missouri officials staunchly opposed the levee breach. The state attorney general sued, claiming valuable cropland that would take generations to recover. Headlines soon reduced the issue to whether the corps should save farmland on the Missouri side of the river, or Cairo, a town of 2,831 across the river in Illinois. The nearly 200 people living in the Missouri floodway, including those in the village of Pinhook, were largely forgotten in the debate.

The levee was blown. The surging water caused millions of dollars in damage to homes and public infrastructure throughout the spillway.

In the weeks following, Pinhook residents remember photographs of their submerged homes circulated in the national media as examples of the flood's destruction, but their village received only a passing mention amid discussion of devastated farmland. As it turned out, nearly all of that farmland returned to production in time for the harvest, faster than anyone expected.

The corps spent seven months rebuilding the breaches in the levee and has promised to continue that work in the spring, eventually restoring the levee to its full height.

But the village of Pinhook has not recovered or received any help to rebuild. Its homes remain mired in mud, its residents scattered. The 30 or so folks who have long called Pinhook home now want to relocate as a community somewhere out of reach of the perpetual floods. But they need government assistance to do so, and almost eight months have passed with little progress.

"Dear God ... just get me to the bridge"

The people in Pinhook had little reason to think the threat from the river would be anything beyond the usual this year. The homes in Pinhook sat on a ridge, higher than most anywhere else in the spillway. Residents hadn't had to evacuate since 1973, and that flood didn't destroy the town. The only other levee breach was back in 1937 — before the village even existed.

The corps informed Mississippi County officials about a possible levee breach in mid-April, about two weeks before they blew it. County Commissioner Carlin Bennett made the rounds to farmers and residents, letting them know about the possibility. He informed George Williams, and over the next week fielded several calls from Pinhook residents who wondered whether to evacuate. Plans to blow the levee were not yet firm, but Bennett told them evacuation was a good idea. The residents were reluctant.

"The water was rising up against the levee. It wasn't over the top yet," George Williams says. "I've seen water over the top of that levee, and they didn’t blow it."

So Pinhook waited for official word. That didn’t come until five days before the levee breach. By then, Pinhook was surrounded by enough water that many residents had already left, and their possessions were stranded.

On the day Pinhook evacuated, Aretha Robinson — Jim Jr.’s widow, age 72 — and her daughter Latoya Tate spent the morning about an hour north of the village in Cape Girardeau, raising funds for a new roof on Pinhook’s Union Baptist Church. The church was the only nonresidential building in town. It was the gathering place for weekly services and all other celebrations and served as the school for the few children in town.

Another of the Robinsons' daughters, Debra Tarver, had begun her day in Sikeston. She heard rumors from co-workers at Bootheel Counseling Services about the corps moving ahead with its plan. Concerned friends phoned her and asked what she was doing. She knew she'd have to make a decision about whether to evacuate.

Tarver's father had long been the patriarch of Pinhook, especially when it came to fighting floods. A lifetime farmer and an Army veteran with a grade-school education, Jim Robinson Jr. had friends in Washington, D.C., and testified before the U.S. Senate to try and have a gap filled in the Birds Point levee that led to backwater flooding in Pinhook year after year.

"Jim, he was top dog when it came to that stuff," Williams says.

But Robinson Jr. died in 2004, and Tarver, as village chairperson, assumed responsibility of knowing if and when to evacuate.

Now she called local emergency management and was assured she'd be notified if the levee was going to blow. Tarver wanted to see for herself, so she took a drive to survey road closures and rising water. As she drove, she saw farmers packing up equipment and heading for higher ground.

Then she got another phone call. It was her brother Donald in New York City. He'd seen on the news that the corps made the decision to blow the levee.

"Get your shit … and get out of there," she remembers hearing.

It was April 26 when Tarver and the others in town began evacuating, she says. By that time, water was already backing up into Pinhook, as it often did when the river was high. The time to get out safely was dwindling.

Aretha Robinson and Latoya Tate, up in Cape Girardeau, got the same phone call. They drove home immediately, passing evacuations already in progress along the way.

George Williams' son drove down from Columbia with a truck so that he could drive his father's belongings through the rising water. No one in Pinhook could find a truck to rent for evacuating. Bert Robinson, another of Tarver's brothers, said they had to drive an hour and a half to Poplar Bluff to find a U-Haul.

Some was packed but much was left: books, clothes, couches, televisions, toys, pictures, decorations and even cars.

Tarver, her mother, Aretha, and her sister Twan Robinson all had homes in Pinhook and started calling friends to come help. They went to Aretha's house first because that's where the memories were.

But there wasn’t much time for keepsakes, Tarver says. Just the essentials. They packed for hours, but dark was catching them and water was rising over the roads in and out of Pinhook.

Tarver was one of the last to leave, staying behind with her brother Bert Robinson to make sure everyone got out. Tarver drove out in a Toyota Corolla, following a nearby farmer who had a tractor towing a heavy load. She tried to stay close because she couldn’t see the roads and wasn’t used to driving through the water.

But her Corolla couldn’t keep up. Soon she couldn’t see the tractor or the curves in the road. The road seemed to drop off just before the bridge that led out to town. Water swayed her back and forth. It sloshed up near her taillights. If it reached the radiator, the car would stall.

She didn’t know what to do, so she did what people in Pinhook do best.

"Dear God," she prayed. "I know the bridge is up there. Just get me to the bridge."

She kept her foot on the gas as her Toyota churned through bloated river. Past the distance markers her dad used to navigate the unseen roads. Up to the bridge. Out to dry county roads.

It wasn’t until the next day, April 27, that a mandatory evacuation was ordered for the floodway. The county sheriff’s department and the National Guard helped evacuate more than 200 people from 75 homes. They did flyovers with heat sensors to make sure no one remained in the way of the levee blast. By 11:30 a.m. that day, though, enough backwater had surrounded Pinhook that no one could get in or out without a tractor, Tarver says.

Five days later, the levee blew.

That night, the Robinson family watched news of the levee breach together on CNN. Aretha and daughter Twan were in a fit of giggles most of the night. Maybe they laughed to keep from crying, Aretha says, because she’s never been one for crying. She’s one for fits of giggles. Latoya Tate, her older daughter, meanwhile, was bawling like a baby.

"Toya, stop your crying!" her mother told her.

"Why?"

"Girl, don’t you know every tear out your eye is more water in my house!"

From the Jim Crow South, a town grows

The Robinson family arrived in Pinhook in 1943. Like many in the Jim Crow south, they were drawn from their sharecropper's life in Tennessee by the prospect of cheaper land and less harsh segregation. Jim Robinson Sr. and five other black sharecroppers bought an 80-acre plot in Pinhook — land that was freshly cleared by local timber companies and selling as cheap as $16 an acre, Jim Robinson Jr. said in a 1998 interview with the State Historical Society of Missouri.

Their original land was not on Pinhook Ridge but farther west at a lower elevation, and it flooded often. Pinhook Ridge was owned and operated by whites, he said.

"My people were not allowed to own certain lands or live in town," Robinson Jr. said in his 2000 Senate testimony. "We were only able to purchase the land that the Mississippi River flooded."

Pinhook’s residents were relegated to the lowlands for many years. Their homes would flood, and a few times they had to move out and stay in town until the waters subsided. Robinson Sr. fought against the floodwaters and for civil rights for his people for many years and became a political player. After he died, Robinson Jr. continued the fight.

In past interviews and statements, Robinson Jr. recalled a Federal Housing Authority agent named Roy Cooper, who helped people in Pinhook obtain loans that were usually withheld from blacks at the time. Gradually, Pinhook’s residents ended up with more land, bigger tractors and better homes thanks to Cooper, who was "instrumental" in forming Pinhook.

"He was just saying 'Here is the pie. If you're man enough, you can get some of it,'" Robinson Jr. told the State Historical Society in 1998.

In the 1960s, as desegregration laws took effect, whites began moving away from Pinhook Ridge. Racial tensions were high; black children from Pinhook who went to school in nearby East Prairie weren't allowed in town after dark.

But there was an upside: The Christian Liberty District Association of Southeast Missouri — of which Robinson Jr. was executive secretary — bought land on Pinhook Ridge as it became available, platted it and sold it to low-income blacks. The modern Pinhook community was a combination of holdovers from the original

farmers — largely the Robinson family — and people who moved in after the Christian Liberty District Association bought land.

Bigmouth buffalo fish and a big, black cook pot

Tractors and farm sheds are tucked between Pinhook's modest homes, doublewide trailers and the more stately brick houses of Robinson Jr. and his brother, Lynell. Some residents in the community run small cash-crop farms, a handful are retired, and some commuted to Sikeston, East Prairie or Charleston.

Corn and soybeans were the commodity staples. But almost everyone grew or raised most of what they ate, from corn and greens to hogs. Bert Robinson remembers that he played every sport in high school at East Prairie except his favorite, baseball. That's because baseball season was farming season for the three Robinson boys.

Some families had 40 acres, some 20 acres and some 10, George Williams recalled. When he and his wife, Mary Louise, moved to Pinhook in 1952, the town was near its peak population of about 250. By 1990, because of children moving away, consolidation of farm work and people tired of the flooding, that number had dwindled to 50.

But always in Pinhook, you lived off the land and you lived off each other.

Anita Nance and Charlene Morgan remember that as they grew up, they didn't just belong to their mother, Dorothy Jarman. They were everyone's kids.

If they were at the Robinson house and Jim or Aretha were reprimanding their kids, Anita and Charlene were reprimanded, too. If you were at the Williams house and the Williamses were scrubbing tubs, you scrubbed tubs. Anita and Charlene spent a lot of time at the Williams house, and scrubbed a lot of tubs. They'd stay there when their mother had to travel to Columbia for medical treatments — sometimes she was gone for months at a time. Williams treated Anita and Charlene like his own 10 children.

"That's just what you did," Williams says. "It was a good community down there. Everyone helped everyone out and helped raise anybody's kids."

No one went hungry, either. If there was food, it made its way around — especially at the village fish fries.

Robinson Jr. used to love to go net fishing, Debra Tarver remembers. He, Williams and friends from all over would come back from the river with two or three trucks

brimming with catfish, carp and bigmouth buffalo.

The rest of the village would set up assembly-line style: Some would scale, some would skin. They'd pass the fish off to someone for gutting, then to others down the line for filleting, and then to someone who rolled and battered.

At the very end of the line was a big black cook pot.

"And everybody, anywhere, came and ate fish. Black, white, it didn't matter," Tarver says. "And what was left of it, they'd split it up amongst the families."

Out of those community fish fries grew the festival known as Pinhook Day. About 30 years ago, Robinson Jr. and some of the others in town got the idea to host a reunion. They invited everyone who'd ever lived in Pinhook and their relatives back to the village on Memorial Day weekend, and the people came in droves.

Outside there was football, basketball, volleyball and children running through yards to the playground. Inside Union Baptist Church, they gathered to visit, play Bible trivia and sing Gospel. Always the people would sing Gospel.

"I miss that more than anything," Tarver says.

Pinhook Day grew so big, she says, that they had to start charging admission so they could afford to feed everybody.

Each year, the town flooded with life as people returned home.

A 50-year effort to bridge a levee gap

Nestled between the two levees that outline the Birds Point-New Madrid Floodway, Pinhook floods when water backs in from the Mississippi River and nearby Ten Mile Pond. When the levee was built, a 1,500-foot gap was left as a drainage outlet. It also led to frequent flooding of Pinhook and surrounding farmland.

In 1954, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers gained approval to fill the gap and prevent the backwater flooding that threatened Pinhook every year, but the $107 million project sat pending for decades, its funding a point of contention. At one point, Pinhook residents — with a median income of about $15,000 — were told they would have to foot 35 percent of the bill.

In 1993, the local share was reduced to 5 percent, but another decade passed with no action. In 2002, Jim Robinson Jr. testified before the Senate regarding the project.

"I don't know how many of you have ever been through a flood and know what it is like to have raw sewage in your home," he said. "What it is like when you get out of bed in the morning to have to wade through that mess. To have your children live in it. For them to have to ride in a tractor-drawn open wagon through the water just to get to a school bus. My people should not have to live that way year after year."

A year later, work began to fill the levee gap.

But shortly after Robinson's death in 2004, the work stopped when the Environmental Defense Fund and the National Wildlife Federation sued over its impact on wetlands. In 2007, a federal judge ordered an injunction to stop work on the levee and restore the area to its previous condition. Nearly $7 million had been spent on filling the levee, and $10 million more was spent undoing that work, the Southeast Missourian reported in 2009. Water flowing through that gap before this year's levee breach narrowed the window for Pinhook's evacuation.

"My entire life," Robinson Jr. said in 2002, "I have lived with floods on the Mississippi River destroying what I have worked for."

As the water recedes, looters flood in

Six months after the flood, layers of mud cake the Union Baptist Church. They span the sinking floor and the toppled pews in waves like crackles of sprawling desert. The water rose to the ceiling. It tore out the wall panels. It toppled a piano. It shattered windows. It strew the mustard jars, ketchup bottles, plates and cups and forks and knives of past cookouts across the ground.

There's a Bible in that ground, a Bible thrown open by the floods and tossed under a pew and firmly implanted in Pinhook. Its binding is deep in the hardened mire of mud and carpet. It's open to a page muddied and torn at the edges. The text, faded and barely visible, is from the beginning of Chapter 14 of the Book of Revelation:

"*Then I looked, and behold, a Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with Him one hundred and forty-four thousand, having His Father's name written on their foreheads. And I heard a voice from heaven, like the voice of many waters, and like the voice of loud thunder."*

Down the road, the walls and windows are torn out of the house Jim Robinson Jr. designed himself and built with the help of the community. The interior walls are missing. Sheetrock, splintered glass and mementos cover a carpet mushy from months

of storing floodwater. Christmas lights and other holiday decorations overflow a wrecked storage shed outside. They litter the ground inside the house, too. Aretha Robinson loved holiday decorations.

As Debra Tarver walks through the patio and describes the holiday gatherings her mother hosted there, her voice begins to waver more and more.

A stuffed Easter bunny rests on the floor of what used to be the main hallway. It is water logged and missing an eye.

"Oh," Tarver says, looking at the bunny. "That was a gift."

What the flood didn’t take, the looters did.

Members of the Missouri National Guard kept watch over the homes and church while the water was high, but once the floods subsided, they left. Thieves entered Pinhook and took anything of value, anything metal. They took the garage door off the Robinson house, as well as the windows and copper wiring. They took furnaces, refrigerators and sinks. They took the bell from Union Baptist Church.

Dorothy Jarman, 79, had someone renting her house at the time of the flood. She’d moved out to be closer to hospitals a few years ago because of health problems and now lives in Sikeston with her daughter. Looters ripped out Jarman’s sink and furnace. The wood in the house is rotted and couches and chairs are overturned. A thick layer of hardened mud from the Mississippi’s backwash still cracks underfoot.

Jarman and her daughters wanted to save a set of keepsake encyclopedias they'd bought from a traveling salesman decades ago. The books were out of date and out of print, but they asked their renter to make sure and grab them.

Months after the flood, the encyclopedias are strewn across the house’s floor, swollen, stale and damp.

The front wall of George Williams' house is cockeyed, thrown off kilter by the water, leaving a foot-wide gap at the base.

"I miss my wife," Williams says of Mary Louise, who died in October 2010. "But I'm glad she wasn’t around to see what happened. I don't think she could have taken it."

Williams has only been down to Pinhook about three times since the flood.

"I worked down there for 57 years and ain't got anything to show for it but a broke-down house," Williams says. "But, thank the good Lord, we made it."

Bert Robinson visits every now and then. Sometimes it's to pull greens for his mother. The crops in Pinhook — as in the rest of the floodway — did surprisingly well this year. But sometimes when Robinson visits Pinhook, he says, he pulls his white Mustang into the driveway of what used to be his parents' home and just sits in his car, remembering.

After his father, Jim Robinson Jr., died, the community put together a memorial for him. They had a celebration as big as Pinhook Day when they dedicated it. This year, water wrecked the gazebo and most of the stones in the memorial. The main statue in the memorial was evacuated and taken into storage. Eventually they'll bring it out, when they find a permanent home.

The village planted about 30 flowering pear trees at the memorial, just outside the Robinson house — all donated from friends of Robinson Jr., Tarver says. When the flood came, the trees were just starting to get to a height where they'd really be pretty.

This year, for the first time, they all bloomed.

A matter of payments for a new Pinhook

"Pinhook is our home, and it is what I want to pass along to my children and grandchildren," Jim Robinson Jr. said in his 2002 testimony.

But Robinson Jr.'s children and grandchildren will never again live in Pinhook. The townspeople are searching for land and money to relocate together outside the floodway.

"He'd be fighting this," Debra Tarver says of her father. "He'd probably be fighting it harder than I am. I'm fighting my hardest, but I've got so much to do. He'd be on it 24 hours a day, every day."

Assessments of the village by the Federal Emergency Management Association estimated nearly every home's damage to be greater than 50 percent of its value, which means residents would have to elevate their homes on stilts if they want to legally rebuild there. FEMA offered up to $30,000 to each homeowner for those repairs. Pinhook's residents, many of them senior citizens, won't do that, Tarver says. FEMA also provided up to 18 months worth of rental assistance to those displaced. Most everyone in the village had home insurance but not flood insurance.

Pinhook residents are participating in a federal buyout for 21 properties, totaling $1.17 million, says Steve Duke of the Bootheel Regional Planning and Economic Development Commission.

On Nov. 8, the community finalized plans to apply for a Community Development Block Grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development. That relocation, which would cost an additional $1.43 million, would involve finding a 40-acre plot to build on in either Mississippi County or a neighboring county, outside the floodway.

"There's no guarantee anything will be approved," Duke says. "If it's not, we'll keep trying to find a source of funding."

If Pinhook gets money to relocate, it will have to come from the federal government, says State Rep. Steve Hodges, D-East Prairie, who grew up in the area and knows many of the village's residents personally.

"They are the responsible party for the damage," Hodges says, referring to the corps. "The state fought (the levee breach) tooth and nail. Not only does the state not have the money, I don't think they have the obligation either."

Every day that passes, Pinhook probably moves down the government’s priority list, Hodges says.

The next Pinhook Day

Pinhook's residents are scattered now as they fight for a new home. Many sought shelter with family in nearby towns. Tarver, her sister Twan and their mother, Aretha, rent a house together from a cousin in Sikeston. George Williams stays with his daughter. Others have found places with friends or houses to rent either in Sikeston, Charleston or further. Bert Robinson is staying in his sister Latoya Tate's basement. Aretha Robinson's pet parrot, Sam, is staying at Tate's, too. He was brought there during the evacuation, and Tate grew attached, so she kept him.

One night in mid-October, as Tate watched the World Series with her husband and brother, she noticed Sam was hiding under some crumpled newspaper in his cage. She realized he was trying to recreate the shelter he used to have in his old cage, which was lost during the evacuation.

Tate sat at her kitchen table and fashioned him a new hanging lean-to from felt, cardboard and two carabiners. She placed it in his cage, but Sam still preferred the

crumpled newspaper for the rest of the night.

"Even the bird lost his home in the flood, Lord Jesus!" she says.

Earlier that day, the Robinson family gathered around their mother's cooking, as they did so many times in Pinhook, and as they still do every Sunday.

Four weeks after the flood, residents once again held Pinhook Day. Their homes in Pinhook were underwater, so family and friends gathered in nearby Haywood City.

It wasn't really much of a festival, Tate says. Few showed up. But, if and when the town finds a new location, she says, "We're going to have the Pinhook Day of Pinhook Days. You watch. We're going to blow it up and y'all are invited."

In the meantime, they gather somewhere in Sikeston — Aretha's, Latoya's or elsewhere — every Sunday. When they come to Aretha's, she wakes up at 4 a.m. to start cooking. By noon, she's napping in the rocker by the front door. The scent of her cooking wafts in from the kitchen: Chicken legs. Beef roast. Candied sweet potatoes. Sweet corn. Turnip greens. Mustard greens. Corn bread.

"This is nothing," Debra Tarver says of the dinner spread. Then she spots one more item — her favorite — turnip bottoms. "Momma, you made turnip bottoms!"

"Mmm hmmm," from the living room.

"Most people don't like turnip bottoms," Tarver says. "But they ain't had momma's turnip bottoms."

Much of the meal came from Pinhook, where the residents still visit on the weekends to tend the crops. Former neighbor Joe Brown dropped off a couple of sacks of greens that morning and assured Tarver he wanted to be part of the town's relocation. Tarver's brother Bert had already brought a sack that same day — Aretha always finds someone to bring her greens.

In a matter of hours, the house is bustling with dozens of relatives: brothers, sisters, children, grandchildren, cousins and in-laws. Some gather around the table or mingle in the kitchen, some gather in the living room around Aretha, who's still in her rocker but lively as ever as they reminisce about Pinhook and recount their relatives sprinkled across the country.

Tarver sits in a lawn chair in the backyard, under the shade of an apple tree, snapping the stalks of off turnips and stripping greens from the stalks. She works through a five-gallon bag as her family shuffles in and out of the house, through the white screen door and down the steps. Cousins from down the street filter through the side gate. Soon, she's got a crowd around her of family and friends, all cleaning and plucking greens for future feasts.

Her 5-year-old grandson, Gavin, comes running outside with a fresh buzz cut and Lightning McQueen T-shirt. He follows orders and gives grandma a hug.

"Guess where I went to today," Tarver says, tossing a handful of greens into a blue plastic tub. "Pinhook."

"Is it all fixed?" Gavin asks. He picks up a handful of greens and begins to help his grandmother, yanking one leaf at a time from the turnip stalk.

"No, it's still broke," she tells him.

"We need to get the land fixed so we can have a place to live."

"I know, honey. Nana's working real hard to get us some land."

And then, if and when she succeeds, Pinhook will have its Day.

Top Photo: A Bible lays plastered in the mud where it fell on the floor of Union Baptist Church in Pinhook after the flood. Nearly eight months after the floodwaters went down, most buildings are still caked with mud and debris. The Bible fell open to Chapter 14 of Revelation: "Then I looked, and behold, a Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with Him one hundred and forty-four thousand, having His Father's name written on their foreheads. And I heard a voice from heaven, like the voice of many waters, and like the voice of loud thunder."

Editor's Note: This news report by Anthony Schick is reprinted with permission from the Columbia Missourian. Anthony is a graduate student in the School of Journalism at the University of Missouri - Columbia. He has been reporting on the flooding along the Mississippi River and the breach of the Birds Point levee since last spring. This article was published in the Columbia Missourian on Dec 22, 2011.

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