

Lethal Flood Not Washed From Memory

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that spring, the soil was so dusty.

On May 13, the river's flow at Max in southwestern Nebraska was 70 second-feet, the unit of flow measurement used in a 1937 U.S. Geological Survey report.

Then in the last half of May, the drought broke with two stretches of fairly steady rain that soaked the parched ground and filled the rivers and creeks to their banks, even causing some lowland flooding.

"It had been so very, very dry and we were so happy to see rain," recalled Elaine Blank of Benkelman, who was 9 and lived in Parks at the time.

By May 30, the Republican River's flow at Max had reached 11,000 second-feet.

Then came the cloudburst. The night of May 30-31, a year's worth of rain fell in a few hours in northeastern Colorado. The Weather Bureau, its official name then, had no official gauges in the areas of the heaviest rain, but a U.S. Geological Survey report says the cloudburst overflowed an empty stock tank that was 24 inches deep. Several other unofficial measurements in the teens were reported as well.

The water began cascading down the Arikaree River and the South Fork of the Republican River, which meet south of Benkelman in southwest Nebraska. At Max, just 8 miles downstream from Benkelman, the flow was 85,000 second-feet, nearly eight times the rate the day before and more than 1,000 times its May 13 flow.

The Arikaree is really a creek at Parks. "We'd wade in the creek," Mrs. Blank said. And that was in wet weather. Much of the time the riverbed was dry, and "you'd just walk across it," she said.

The wall arrived the morning of May 31. "My dad was totally deaf. He got up early that morning and he could smell something. He said, 'Something's the matter. We have to get out,'" Mrs. Blank recalled.

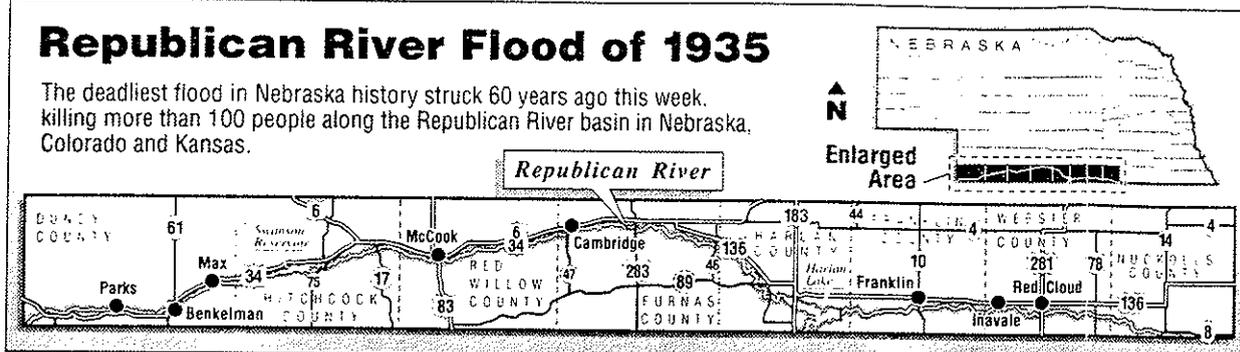
The rest of the family knew immediately that he was right. "You could hear this terrible roar," she said. The family ran for higher ground and watched in horror.

"It was just a wall of water," she said, echoing Mrs. McNiff's account of what happened 150 miles to the east.

They saw a railroad car "bash a

Republican River Flood of 1935

The deadliest flood in Nebraska history struck 60 years ago this week, killing more than 100 people along the Republican River basin in Nebraska, Colorado and Kansas.



GEORGE STANTON/THE WORLD-HERALD

house into toothpicks." They saw a neighbor, Archie Burks, struggling through the powerful current, trying to carry his 3-year-old daughter, Lois, to safety.

"It knocked him down and swept her out of his hands," Mrs. Blank said. "He made several dashes to get her and he never did get her."

Lois Burks is one of seven Dundy County residents listed on a monument at the Benkelman cemetery as missing from the flood. Another 10 are buried there around the monument.

Before the flood, Parks had a bank, a school, a couple of grocery stores, a hotel, a lumberyard and a gas station, Mrs. Blank said. Now it is little more than a post office and a small cluster of homes along a few dirt streets.

"It just wiped Parks off the map," Mrs. Blank said. "Everyone wanted to move to higher ground."

Dorothy Mattison spent her 11th birthday on higher ground. Her family lived in Inavale, which had water several feet deep running down main street. They fled to Red Cloud and watched the river's fury from a hill.

"There were boxcars washing away and dead livestock and horses going by and just about everything you could imagine," Mrs. Mattison said.

The devastation followed the river all the way across southern Nebraska and into Kansas. Word spread, but reports were incomplete and inconsistent, with phone lines down in the flood and communication primitive by today's standards. Many could not anticipate the magnitude of the danger, or did not believe the incredible reports.

McCook was high enough above the



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FLOODING: Cambridge, Neb., was among the Nebraska cities hit hard by the 1935 flood of the Republican River.

river that the town itself escaped the brunt of the flood, but the water and power plants were inundated. In Cambridge only 20 houses remained on their foundations and 76 people were rescued from atop submerged houses

by boats.

West of Oxford, two families fled to their attics, but kicked holes in the roofs and climbed out as the water kept rising, according to a newspaper account quoted in the U.S. Geological

Survey report.

"Presently the houses began to float but only went a short distance before the bottoms struck trees or other objects and began to roll," the newspaper story said. "Their human loads were thus dumped off into the swirling waters. Sometimes they would be successful in grabbing some objects, only to be brushed off like flies by floating debris. Thus it was a continuous fight until overcome by sheer exhaustion, rendering them an easy prey for the angry water."

Only the 1913 Easter tornado in Omaha rivals the flood among Nebraska's most deadly disasters. Reported death tolls from both events vary, from 94 to more than 100. The U.S. Geological Survey report on the flood lists 94 dead in Nebraska, six in Colorado and 10 in Kansas.

The cost estimate, \$13 million counted in Depression-era dollars, is almost meaningless today. Other numbers tell the story better: 8,100 livestock and 46,500 poultry lost in Nebraska; 341 highway miles and 307 highway bridges damaged, not counting county bridges.

The Burlington Route railroad's main line from Denver to St. Louis and Chicago was wiped out. The flood washed out 41.5 miles of roadbed and made many more impassable. Ten bridges were destroyed or damaged.

"The railroad tracks looked like a bunch of twisted wires," said Archie Jones, 86, of Benkelman, who lived near the river in St. Francis, Kan., at the time.

The river's banks are full today at the end of another wet May. The National Weather Service warned Saturday of possible lowland flooding near Guide Rock. For the past 40 to 50 years, though, flooding has been controlled by a series of seven dams operated by the Bureau of Reclamation and Army Corps of Engineers along the Republican and its tributaries.

Mrs. McNiff and other survivors of the 1935 flood gathered Saturday at the Lincoln Hotel in Franklin. About 80 people came for the reunion, and about 20 survivors shared reminiscences with the crowd.

"We had just a lot of people that told of their experiences," Mrs. McNiff said.