

Two Notable September Colorado Front Range Floods



The former dance hall at Eldorado Springs Resort along South Boulder Creek September 4, 1938. Photo copyright by the Denver Public Library.



**North Fork Big Thompson River at Drake
September 13, 2013**

Photo courtesy of 9News.com

- On September 2nd and 3rd of 1938, flooding of similar magnitude to the recent flooding hit the Front Range of Colorado, from the Wyoming border south to Colorado Springs.
- Precipitation intensity of the two floods was comparable, with more precipitation recorded during the 2013 flood because of its longer duration. Some locations, such as Fort Collins, Morrison and areas east of Denver received more precipitation during the 1938 flood.

The U.S. Weather Bureau did a comprehensive write-up of the September 2nd and 3rd flood in the September 1938 Climatological Data Publication. This write-up can be found on the following page:

HEAVY RAINS IN COLORADO DURING SEPTEMBER, 1938

On the 2d and 3d, excessive rainfall in the mountains and the foothills sections of the South Platte, brought virtually every stream in this area to flood stage.

Some of the greatest 24-hour amounts were: Waterdale, 5.35 inches; Hawthorne, 4.42 inches; Ft. Collins, 3.59 inches; Longmont, 3.46 inches; Colorado Springs, 2.51 inches; Longs Peak, 2.77 inches; also many other places had similar amounts.

A veritable deluge poured down the South Boulder Creek Canon into the resort community of Eldorado Springs, which was literally cut in two. Fifteen cottages were broken into kindling wood and piled against trees and shrubs four miles down the canon. The dance pavilion and bath houses were completely wrecked and the swimming pool was nearly filled with mud, rocks, and debris. Eight automobiles were carried away by the powerful torrent. During the height of the storm, slides occurred which brought tons of earth and rocks into the canon just west of the town.

The downpour in the vicinity of Mt. Vernon and Bear Creek Canons was likewise one of major proportions. Its resulting flood waters, which inundated the town of Morrison, left death and destruction in their wake. The walls of the canon, for miles above and below Morrison, were littered with reminders of the destructive force of the ravaging waters: crumpled wrecks of automobiles; bodies of animals; household furniture; and the bodies of six flood victims—three women, one man, and two children. The morning after the storm, Morrison was a picture of desolation; most of the business district was in ruins; many of the dwellings had been washed away while others were badly damaged; streets were littered with rocks and debris, and pavements and sidewalks were buried under a thick layer of mud.

In Longmont, the northern residential district was under water. Southwest of the town the flood-swollen St Vrain Creek drove twenty families from their homes to higher ground.

At Louisville, flood waters inflicted damage in nine coal mining shafts. During the height of the storm, a physician and his wife, while driving home in their car, were plunged into a deep gap cut into the highway by the flood waters. The physician was severely injured and his wife was killed.

At Ft. Collins, most of the campus of the Colorado State College was under water and nearly all basements on the campus were flooded.

At Colorado Springs, flood waters from the South Cheyenne Canon, where the downpour was unusually heavy, carried away the \$10,000 Eighth Street bridge, and damaged city streets to the extent of about \$3,000.

Waters from prairie slopes flooded basements in the outlying Park Hill residential districts of Pueblo.

Highways and railroads were washed out in the Big Thompson and Boulder Canons. Paving on U. S. Highway 24 in the Cripple Creek district was torn out by waters from Waldo Canon. All roads to Cripple Creek and Woodland Park were washed out. On the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad the track was covered with slides and badly washed out underneath in a number of places; a bridge on the Dotsero Cutoff was also washed out. The Denver and Salt Lake Railroad suffered heavy damage near Plainview and Scenic in the Eldorado Springs district, and also west of Tabernash where numerous slides and washouts occurred on thirteen miles of track. Washouts also occurred near Louisville, Pierce, Ft. Morgan, and north of Denver on the St. Vrain Creek.

The overflow from Coal Creek flooded wide sections of Boulder County farm lands. The Big Thompson and Little Thompson east of Johnstown damaged crops considerably on the delta. Lowlands from Brighton to La Salle were inundated by flood waters from the Platte River and its tributaries. The damage to crops in the entire flooded area was exceedingly heavy, and no accurate estimate could be obtained.—J. O. B.