The 2013 Colorado Flood Oral History Project

Ruth M. Alexander
Public Lands History Center

The floods that swept across Northern Colorado in September 2013 were extraordinary in their severity and scope. Floodwater damaged and destroyed homes and businesses, mountain towns and transportation networks, ditches, dams and bridges, oil and gas drilling sites, farmland, and natural areas across seventeen counties. Eight people lost their lives. This was a hydro-geologic event, as heavy monsoonal rainfall over many days produced both devastating floods and perilous landslides. State and local officials have estimated the monetary cost of the flood to be over two billion dollars.

Recognizing the significance of the flood to the state of Colorado, the mission of the 2013 Northern Colorado Oral History Flood Project was straightforward: we sought to gain knowledge about the 2013 flood from those who experienced it directly so that water managers, government officials and citizens might handle flood mitigation, preparation, management and recovery more effectively in the future. Colorado’s water and emergency managers proved themselves to be individuals of remarkable skill and dedication during the flood and in the period of acute recovery. Looking toward the future, they hope that “lessons learned” from the 2013 flood will become the basis for improvements in policy and practice. This oral history project emerged to support these interests and grew out of a collaboration between the Colorado Water Conservation Board (CWCB), the Water Resources Archive at CSU’s Morgan Library, and CSU’s Public Lands History Center. Funded by the Colorado Water Conservation Board, the 2013 Northern Colorado Oral History Flood Project aligned closely with the CWCB’s commitment to conserving, developing, protecting, and managing Colorado’s water resources for present and future generations. More specifically, it sought to facilitate the CWCB’s interest in promoting long-term flood protection for the people, towns, homes, landscapes and industries of Colorado.

Dr. Ruth M. Alexander, Professor of History and Council Chair of the Public Lands History Center, served as PI on this project. Naomi Gerakios (M.A. History) was the project’s research coordinator. Ms. Gerakios arranged and conducted the oral history interviews, with help from History M.A. students Tessa Moening, Zach Lewis, and Mitchell Shaefer. Dr. Alexander and Ms. Gerakios wrote a final report on the project for the CWCB and the WRA.

The interviews conducted for this project highlighted the work and perspective of individuals who held direct professional or official responsibility for flood mitigation,
preparation, response, and recovery in 2013. In contrast to post-flood oral history projects in Boulder and Lyons that focus on victims of the flood, this project selected a group of informants weighted heavily toward those with direct responsibility for flood management and recovery during the 2013 disaster. Among this group were climate scientists, water and stormwater managers, municipal and county administrators, dam engineers, emergency managers, search, rescue and recovery personnel, disaster relief personnel, and wild land, park, and resort managers. We included a small number of interviews with victims of the flood who required the services of rescue and recovery specialists in order to balance the perspective provided by informants who experienced the flood in a professional capacity. The collected interviews (thirty in number, some involving multiple informants) offer significant qualitative data that may help professionals and officials in all areas of flood management prepare for and respond to future flood events. Scholars and researchers who wish to evaluate the 2013 flood will likewise find the interviews to be a rich resource. In addition, the interviews provide a valuable resource for citizens of Colorado who may wish to learn about the potential ravages of floodwaters and about the choices communities can make to lessen their vulnerability to flooding. The digital recordings and transcriptions of the 2013 Northern Colorado floods will be held as a permanent collection in the Water Resources Archive at Colorado State University. The collection will demonstrate the CWCB’s investment in documenting the history of flooding and in promoting a comprehensive understanding of flood events.

It should be noted that this project built on a precedent set in the late 1970s. Between 1976 and 1978, Dr. David McComb, now an Emeritus Professor of History at Colorado State University, conducted oral histories of forty-one individuals affected by the 1976 Big Thompson flood. The informants included both flood victims and people who participated in rescue and recovery. The recordings and transcriptions of the 1976 flood are in a permanent collection at CSU’s Water Resources Archive. They became the basis for McComb’s book, Big Thompson: Profile of a Natural Disaster (1980) and have been used by many researchers, along with the published book, over the past several decades.

The project’s key findings were as follows:

1. Communities defined by geographic watershed, municipality, and county must work collaboratively to create and implement master plans for maximal watershed protection and floodplain management based on the best available scientific data and sound administrative practices. Buy-in from multiple stakeholders is essential. State offices and agencies play a critical role in facilitating the development of watershed coalitions and other watershed planning efforts at the municipal and county level.

2. Communities must improve communication capabilities within and across agencies, jurisdictional boundaries, and with the public. Communication technologies must be continually assessed for situational effectiveness. Communication needs to be assessed with regard to all
stages of flood management, from mitigation and preparation to rescue, relief, and recovery (short and long-term).

3. The core features of effective preparation for flooding include: educational outreach to the public; multiple communication technologies and media; regular mock disaster training; team building; and mutual aid agreements reaching from the local to the county, state, and regional levels. All of these elements of flood preparation need continual assessment and improvement.

4. Successful rescue and relief builds on effective training, communication, and mutual aid. It also requires the ability to suspend disbelief in the face of extraordinary damage and the capacity to work “off-script” to invent solutions to unforeseen and unimaginable problems.

5. Effective recovery requires skilled coordination and innovation. Services and programs reach from the national level down to the state and across counties, municipalities, towns, and rural enclaves. Recovery programs do not always overlap or intersect cleanly. They do not always reach clients in need. Recovery managers as well as clients reported frustration with existing systems. Improvements in recovery programs appear to depend often on individuals who are willing and able to innovate and to build bridges across organizations that might otherwise work at cross purposes.

6. Recovery must aim for long-term resilience that is social, civic, and environmental. Climate change is likely to increase our exposure to high hazard weather events. Recovery that sustains communities, governance, civic engagement, and ecosystems will facilitate resilience in future disasters.

7. The commitment, good will, and skill of Colorado’s water and emergency managers is extraordinary. So too, Colorado is fortunate to have citizens who are invested in effective disaster mitigation, preparation, relief, and recovery through voluntary efforts. The good efforts of individuals and organizations emerge, fundamentally, from our human capacity to make choices, to engage in scientific discovery and moral reasoning. We need to honor and support these capabilities so they will protect us (and the natural systems on which we depend) from harm whenever possible and will work to maximum benefit for all when disaster strikes.