Pueblo's Flood in Pictures
A flash of lightning, a roar of thunder, the bellowing shriek of a siren whistle!—and all Pueblo knew something terrible was pending.

Tender leaves and budding branches had begun to curl in May's long dry spell. Unconsciously the citizens were daily glancing upward as if to almost beckon signs of approaching rain. With the first of June it came. On the second of June it came again. And on the third of June,—the Heavens emptied! Many a thirsting thing, from leaf to human being, will never thirst again.

During the supper hour while the rain was pelting down outside, the warning came. It was a telephone message from some place up the river and then thru the shower came the flash of lightning, the roar of thunder and the screech of the powerful whistle—a whistle that is seldom used except to notify of some momentous event. During the war it announced victories of American troops and the people smiled then when they heard its blast. But now—no war—it must be danger!

People hurried to telephones. From "central" or from newspaper offices they learned the cause of the continuous blowing, "A FLOOD IS COMING DOWN THE ARKANSAS RIVER!"

Police officers, firemen, deputy sheriffs, volunteers, hurried into the lowlands to warn the people to flee. Some heeded the advice and, seizing some small bits of personal belongings, hurried to higher ground. Others refused to leave, feeling themselves safe because of the levees along the river and because the river's usual spring rise had caused no damage in the recent past. Many of these perished as their homes were crushed to bits by the greedy waters.

Hundreds of persons rushed to the levees to witness the tremendous spectacle of a great wall of water rushing down the stream that most of the year is scarcely big enough to bear the title of "river". No one had any dream of the possible magnitude of the flood. While spectators were waiting for the tremendous sight, the angry waters tore a gap in the levee west of the city and the whole murky mess came pouring thru, overwhelming a region north of the river. This was about 8:30 o'clock. Then there was a scurry for safety as the waters came in between the spectators on the river bank and their refuge on higher ground. Those who had automobiles opened throttles wide and sped from the danger zone. Suddenly the magnitude of the danger appeared and many who thought themselves safe on their vantage view points were hurled into the seething cauldron and were carried with other human freight to their doom.

The waters continued to rise, they swept over the levees, broke thru the south banks and a region a mile wide was buried under a swishing, swirling mass of muddy water, averaging twelve feet in depth.

Then the lights all over the city went out, water had reached the huge generators at the power plant that not only supplied the city but served a territory 70 miles long to the east and 56 miles to the west. The shrieking siren was silenced—water had reached the boilers. Its silence was ominous.

For a while only the lightning flashes showed the fugitives their way. Then suddenly, and almost simultaneously over several parts of the city, a dull red glow was cast on the low hanging clouds. The glow grew in intensity, then the

Corner Main and Union. Center of the high water district.
yellow and red of crackling flames mounted upward as if seeking a vantage point in the sky where they might vie with the lightning for a place of horrible supremacy. Fire engines with gongs clanging sped toward the conflagrations but could not reach them for the flood waters were many feet deep around the burning structures. Even had they been able to approach within hose length of the flames, the fire fighting equipment would have been useless,—the city water supply was cut by the merciless enemy. The entire city seemed doomed, for what water was not able to destroy, it appeared that the fire would finish.

Suddenly the gentle downpour of rain became a torrent. But the fires did not diminish. Instead they seemed to blaze up the more fiercely, disclosing in ghastly silhouette men, women and children clinging to tops of houses sweeping by in the current and revealing many a struggling form in the murky depths floating near enough to be pulled out by rescuers or swirled out of reach to be crushed to death and buried in the mud of the receding waters in the valley.

"Boats!" came the shout. Automobiles hurried to Lake Clara in Mineral Palace park and brought back pleasure craft to help in the rescue work. Brave men sought to launch them but no boat could live in that wreckage filled tide. Several boats capsized and their crews had narrow escapes. Indeed, some few lost their lives. Boats were useless except in the quieter backwaters where remarkable rescues were made.

Men threw improvised ropes from second story windows to persons marooned on passing house tops or clinging to floating wreckage and some few thus were saved.

Thru this maelstrom rode burning piles of timbers from a blazing lumber yard. They lodged momentarily against frame houses and set them afire; then swirled down the stream to ignite other materials until it seemed that oil had been poured on the water and the whole seething mass was converted into a roaring Flades that, mocking the works of puny man, threatened to take the entire city and many who escaped the flood fled to spots they thought safe from fire and water. By the light of the blazing ocean one could see here an arm clutching the air above the surface of the water; over there a leg; further off, maybe a human head. No way to save them; they must go to their watery graves with scores of others whose bodies may never be recovered.

From over the roaring, blazing sea came screams of the perishing, heart-rending in the terror stricken tones that soon died away in deathly silence.

A crash! And some building fell into the water when logs pushed by the current battered down the walls and carried with them many humans who had sought refuge on the roof.

And oh, the noise! Added to the roar of the water and the crash of thunder were the warning signals of automobiles with mufflers cut out, hurrying this way and that, carrying sick and injured from the flood district to be cared for in private homes, churches and public buildings; the cries of children running hither and thither seeking parents from whom they had become separated; the calls of parents searching for their little ones; the screams of the hysterical, made so by their awful experiences or the loss of a loved one snatched away by the rushing current.

Next the water seemed to hesitate and then recede. All breathed a sigh of relief which was soon cut short, for the flood, apparently not satisfied with its debauch, rose again and to greater heights and those who had thought themselves out of the danger zone turned again to flee.

The streets, lighted only by the flashes of lightning and the glow of the fires that had become so bright that one could distinguish faces, were filled with long lines of fugitives trudging from peril. Some carried a few belongings and others came empty handed and the rain beat down upon them all as if the elements were not content with heaping one misfortune upon them.

Then came the warning that the Fountain river was bringing additional water from the north and Paul Reveres were sent to hurry the families, residing near its banks, out of the way. About midnight this flood came, tore out great chunks of the banks, wiped bridges out of sight, pulled railroad lines into the swirling deluge as it plunged southward to join the Arkansas in one tremendous spree.

All thru the night confusion reigned. All night long did the rescuers work. Would daylight ever come? After hours that seemed like centuries came the gray of dawn, long delayed by the low-hanging, darkened clouds. Early birds,
One of the early pictures. No place to pitch a tent.

Second and Santa Fe, looking west—and wet.
undaunted by the peltering rain, broke forth in song, unmindful of the great havoc wrought in the night and people began a survey of the destruction. The waters had gone part way down, uncovering wreckage, tho the roar of the currents of both the Arkansas and Fountain still was foreboding.

'Twas the first Saturday in June, but there was no half holiday. The survivors had a task that must be performed with speed.

Telephone and telegraph communication with the outside world was out. Railroad lines were broken. No word of the situation could be sent outside and the world could only guess from the contents of a few brief messages that went out over the press wires before they too went down, what had happened here. Yet no matter what weird imaginings these bulletins conjured up in the minds of readers, they scarcely could be exaggerated, for only those who witnessed the flood from its beginning until the waters receded and then surveyed the destruction could really conceive of its proportions.

An appalling sight greeted the survivors that Saturday morning. Where hundreds of small homes and business houses had been, now was a vast sea of water, mud and wreckage. Parts of houses, pieces of household goods and even baby carriages floated in the receding whirlpool that disclosed bodies of dead horses and cattle, and, once in a while, forms of human beings. Thru it all the rescue work continued. Men, drenched to the skin, rowed here and there in boats in the now calmer water, taking persons marooned on some flimsy place of safety to the shores of the "lake" and searching the ruins for dead bodies which they dragged out and hurried to hearses waiting to carry them to improvised morgues. Often they found persons severely injured and rushed them to waiting ambulances. Men, wearing hip boots and armed with long poles, probed wreckage and piles of mud at other places and pulled human forms from the slimy mess. The force of the water tore clothing from the bodies of many of the victims and the flesh was bruised and cut by the swirling wreckage.

Persons separated from relatives rushed this way and that inquiring of all they met if they had heard of So-and-So. Here was a little dog all covered with mud running wildly in every direction, gazing pensively into faces, and trying to find his master. No telephones were available to send word home or to other relatives and the anguish of those at home, fearing for the safety of some loved one, added to the sorrow and strain of the morning.

Long processions of refugees carrying some few belongings, continued to file up the streets seeking shelter from the elements that did not seem satisfied with their riot. Where too many went to one house, some moved on to less crowded homes and the owners hurriedly prepared coffee and breakfast for the sufferers and gave them warm, dry clothing. The court house, churches, schools were thrown open to provide shelter. Vacant lots and lawns were piled high with goods hauled out before the flood came.

The waters of the two rivers divided the city into three parts and communication, each part with the others, was severed for hours. All of the bridges over the Fountain river were carried away. Three bridges over the Arkansas remained firm tho covered with mud and debris and the streets were piled high with wreckage. Telephone, electric light and trolley wires, broken and twisted, mingled with the trash to add to the blockade of streets. The water supply was gone and there was none to drink or to cook with except that obtained from a mineral water well or other wells "newly discovered," or rain water caught in pans and buckets during the showers.

The gas supply was gone and in many homes it was impossible to cook because they were not equipped with stoves using coal or wood. Stores not in the flooded district were almost raided by persons seeking to lay in supplies before they were gone. With railroad communication cut it did seem that famine would follow.

Two passenger trains with their loads of human freight were trapped in the flood near the Nuckolls Packing plant. Cars were tossed about like so many paper boxes. Some lives were lost here but deeds of extraordinary heroism saved dozens who then sought refuge on the upper floors of the packing plant. Several cattle trains were in the freight yards and only a few of the dumb beasts survived.

Stores that once carried valuable stocks of goods were gone. Their walls had crumbled into the torrent and, with their contents, had been swept down stream. Other stores were filled with water, the goods were wet and covered with mud. Plate glass was shattered; only the gaunt frames of the costly show windows remained.
First and Main—Anheuser-Busch building still burning.

Half of Nuckolls Packing Company’s office gone into river.
All that afternoon and evening desperate investigation continued and then,—
that siren shrieked again! Persons who were in the flooded area hurried out.
The river was rising again and a large portion of the wrecked district was over-
whelmed a second time. The water receded once more only to rise again Sunday
afternoon when rains to the west drained into the river.

Almost the first to assist the police department were the members of Pueblo’s
unit of the National Guard and members of the Pueblo Post of the American
Legion. They, with dozens of men hastily commissioned as special police or
depuized by the sheriff, stood guard over the ruins to prevent looting, until state
troops and rangers arrived and the city was formally placed under martial law
Sunday afternoon. The volunteers were released to rest before they joined in the
work of reconstruction.

After the first few hours of investigation, the citizens turned to relief efforts.
The Elks’ Club at Fifth street and Santa Fe avenue for days was a center of this
sort of work. Immediately after the flood water poured into the city Friday night,
the members of the club started fires, brewed coffee and prepared sandwiches for
the relief workers and refugees. Saturday morning the club rooms were head-
quarters of the military, the police and fire departments and all the city officials.
Three thousand meals were served daily until the Red Cross, Salvation Army,
Knights of Columbus and military units got their organizations functioning to
their full capacity.

Red Cross headquarters were established in the Court House where a tem-
porary hospital was opened with many doctors and nurses in attendance. The
Y. M. C. A. building was thrown open, lodging provided for the weary and food
for the hungry. Officers were appointed to look after the distribution of food,
fuel and gasoline.

While all this was being done at home, residents of other cities were striv-
ing frantically to get into Pueblo over impassable highways. Above the murmur
of activity here sounded the whir of an airplane propeller as the craft, unable to
find a landing place, hovered over the wrecked district gathering first hand infor-
mation to spread to the world. Then motor trucks loaded with food, clothing and
medical supplies headed by army and state highway engineers working desperately
to open passage, set out from Denver and Colorado Springs. The first of twelve
trucks that left Denver Saturday, reached Pueblo Sunday afternoon, followed at
close intervals by others bringing food, relief workers and military units.

All this havoc was caused by a series of cloudbursts, twenty miles west of
Pueblo, falling over a wide territory drained by the Arkansas river. As the
crest moved toward Pueblo, it washed away much valuable farm land and miles
of railroad tracks. Another cloudburst occurred near Colorado Springs and it
drained into the Fountain river. Two floods reached Pueblo about four hours
apart.

On the night of June 2, two children residing in Irving Place were drowned
when a torrent fell and swept down Dry Creek.

Over 600 homes were destroyed in Pueblo by the great flood while 350 other
houses and business blocks were so badly damaged that they were condemned.
The property loss in Pueblo was close to $16,000,000 to buildings, stock and equip-
ment while the loss of accounts and business will bring the total much higher.
Many of the city’s factories and all of its public utilities suffered heavily. The
total deaths will never be known. Nearly 100 bodies already have been recovered
but the list of missing is long. Three railroad yards were ruined and outside
connections were severed.

As the flood swept eastward it tore out hundreds of acres of rich farm lands,
put irrigation systems out of commission, ruined railroad lines, snuffed out addi-
tional lives and wrought immense havoc clear to the Kansas state line.

Official measurements of the flood’s height on many well known buildings
show that on the floor of the First National Bank building which sets high on
its foundation above the street, there were 15 inches of water. On the first floor
of the Postoffice building, also on a high foundation, there were 36 inches of
water. The high water mark on the Fulton Candy company’s building was 9 feet
6 inches; at the Electric building, 11 feet 11 inches; at the McCarthy block, 12
feet 6 inches; at the Central block, 12 feet 7½ inches; at the Union Station, 9 feet
10 inches.

Stories of narrow escapes, records of heroic deeds, tales of the flood’s fantastic
pranks galore—but there is not sufficient room in this book to recount the full
story of the flood of June 8, 1921.
A floating freight car caused this. Several miraculous escapes were featured here. 200 yards from railroad track.
Between Second and Third on Court.

Opposite Union Depot. Refrigerator car carried half a mile.
Santa Fe Avenue at River Bridge.

Union Avenue just below Santa Fe tracks.
Union Avenue, looking south.

Union Avenue, looking south—Remains of Fuschino building in foreground.
Clearing streets with steam shovels and army trucks.

In the Grove—Russian-Greek Catholic Church.
Part of the railroad's problem.

Off of Central Main—Several bodies found here.
Union Depot yards several days later.

Two two-story buildings gone.
This house traveled several blocks to get to the heart of the shopping district. Third and Main streets.

Santa Fe bridge standing, Rio Grande double-track bridge down and County bridge missing. Santa Fe Avenue at Arkansas river.
Old channel of Arkansas river at left; new channel going down Santa Fe Avenue. The Grove in the middle distance, where forty lives were lost. The Nuckolls Packing plant.

Denver & Rio Grande yards, showing overturned passenger train near bridge. Heroism by train crew and others saved two hundred lives. Seven lives lost. Water here was fifteen feet deep.

Lowlands east of Santa Fe Avenue and near Pueblo Smelter.
Another traffic problem.

Twenty-five horses drowned at Model Dairy barn.
Small break in levee at Victoria Avenue.

Colorado and Southern bridge across Arkansas at junction of Fountain (at left) and Arkansas rivers.
Missouri Pacific bridge across Arkansas.

Main Street between Second and Third.
Grand Avenue above Victoria.

Rio Grande lumber yards—were freight yards.
Nine hundred and seventy railroad cars were overturned or missing—one car was found six miles from starting point.

Baggage car from ill-fated Rio Grande train standing on its head.
Old Arkansas river channel to the left, new to the right. Sinclair Oil depot completely gone; Missouri Pacific round house saved.

Rio Grande freight yards south of C street viaduct.
Rio Grande freight yards.

Santa Fe freight yards.
Searching for bodies.

Second and Santa Fe. Fire destroyed large building on left corner.
Central Main street—one hundred dwellings gone.

Opposite old City Hall.
Four feet of mud at Third and Grand.

Nuckolls Packing Co. and pier of County bridge over Arkansas river.
Photo by courtesy of Air Photo Co., Denver, Colo.

Airplane picture of main business section of city. Entire district shown here was under water.

Santa Fe all the way.
Photo by courtesy of Air Photo Co., Denver, Colo.

Airplane picture from over Pueblo Smelter showing Santa Fe Avenue from river bridge to Pueblo Flour Mills.

Second and Main ten days later.
A changed sky line—several buildings missing.

Central Main street. Lizzie Ford and a lot of her tin sisters got a bath here.
Two hundred feet of Santa Fe freight shed roof on Second street.

Searching for human bodies.
The stocks of goods from stores on right side of street moved over to other side.

Ortner's foundry on left corner occupying quarter block completely gone. Grand and Victoria.
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