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Durango's worst flood ever

Southwest Colorado was cut off by 1911 deluge



Photo by: Courtesy of Center of Southwest Studies

In this iconic photo looking south from the Main Avenue bridge at 4 p.m. Oct. 5, 1911, townspeople are checking the high water that is washing through what is now Rotary Park. By 9:30 p.m., the water was higher than the tops of the arches. The bridge, built in 1906 for \$32,000, was one of only three bridges in Durango that survived.

By Ann Butler
Herald Staff Writer

More than 100 bridges washed away. Several deaths. Railroad tracks, more than 300 miles worth, destroyed in every direction. All telegraph and telephone communications lost. Six feet of water rushing down 15th Street. Virtually all the crops in the Animas Valley destroyed. An estimated \$1.5 million in damage across the region.

Rainfall in semi-arid Southwest Colorado is usually a blessing, but in 1911, it was another story after 36 hours of rain dropped 3.42 inches of rain in Durango and 4 inches in Silverton. The storm centered on Gladstone, north of Silverton, which received a Western Slope record, a jaw-dropping 8 inches, a record that still stands today.

The deluge that resulted on Oct. 5 that year was described as the “worst flooding in history of

southwestern Colorado,” in the Silverton Standard & Caboose of Oct. 13, 1911. That’s still true today, 100 years later.

The Animas River was running at 25,000 cubic feet per second in Durango. The average for that gauge on Oct. 5 is 441 cfs.

The “remnant of a tropical storm in the Pacific,” as the state climate office described it, the precipitation was heavy throughout the region, resulting in flooding in every drainage system.

“The San Juan River changed from a pleasant, smiling stream to an angry, raging, terrific river,” the Pagosa Sun reported at the time, adding that two men died, homes were destroyed, all the bridges in Archuleta County were swept away, and the river carried the jail 35 miles downstream. There was no word as to whether the jail was housing any prisoners at the time.

Durango and Silverton were not only cut off from the rest of the world, but cut off from each other as well.

The primary concern was food and fuel shortages for the 3,000 residents living in Silverton with winter coming on, but fortunately, partial road and railroad routes to the north were restored within a week or two. Still, most travel was via burro and horse-drawn wagon.

“Before the end of this week, Silverton will have two ways of transportation open,” the Standard & Caboose reported Oct. 13. “Merchandise can be packed from Ouray to Animas Forks and brought down on the Silverton Northern, which got through to that point on Tuesday evening, and can also be hauled by wagon from Ouray to Red Mountain and brought down on the Silverton Railway.”

About 22 miles of tracks were washed out on the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad between the two towns, and Durangoans could travel as far as Hesperus to the west and La Boca to the east, both still in La Plata County, although the Lightner Creek bridge was later deemed unsafe because it was “sagging and rocking with the tide.”

South wasn’t an option, either, as the Animas, already high, was joined by the Florida near Bondad, taking out the bridges from there south.

The Pathfinder of the San Juans

If there was a hero after the flood, it was Otto Mears, nicknamed “The Pathfinder” because he built several toll roads and railroads in some of the most difficult terrain in the San Juan Mountains. The estimated damage to his infrastructure alone was \$25,000, about \$568,000 in 2011 dollars.

“Mr. Otto Mears is entitled to the thanks of the community for his promptness in repairing the damage to his lines,” the Standard said. “It is characteristic of the man, and these lines will add much to the convenience of Silverton and the entire San Juan for a long time before we have any other transportation.”

Mears didn’t stop there. After finishing the repairs on his own railroads— the Silverton Railroad, which went to Red Mountain and Ironton, and the Silverton Northern, which climbed to Eureka

and Animas Forks – the 71-year-old contracted with the D&RG to start repairing the railroad from Silverton south while another crew worked its way north. He paid the princely sum of \$3 a day, twice what his counterpart rebuilding the tracks from Durango was offering. A strike slowed that crew once it heard of the disparity, but nevertheless, the 22 miles of track were finished in just 63 days. The D&RG was back in business long before expected, thanks in large part to Mears' tireless efforts.

Where were you when ...?

"Flood-bound" became a new term in locals' vocabulary after the flood. For days, the Durango Evening Herald reported about people stuck somewhere in the area and unable to get out, or others trying to travel in from somewhere outside the area.

"John Kellenberger phones in from Telluride that he is now doing a ring-around-a-rosy act," the Herald reported several days after the flood. After trying to get to Silverton from Telluride and finding everything washed out, he returned to Telluride and tried to travel via Ophir, Rico and Dolores, returning yet again to Telluride when the roads were washed out that direction as well.

Chicagoan D.J.A. Ritchie was flood-bound at the Southern Railroad, the manager of the Linebarger store at Tiffany was flood-bound in town but hoping to start home soon, and photographer Frank Nicholson was the guest of Mr. and Mrs. H.O. Willis while flood-bound on his way to Telluride.

No matter the damage, Durangoans soldiered on.

The week after the flood, the stalwart ladies of the Reading Club of Durango announced they would hold their regularly scheduled meeting at the home of Mrs. Milton Kaufman at 1020 Third Ave.

Film lovers also rest easy.

"The Isis and the Electric will have new films. Manager Probst, on learning the possibility of new films from Denver was slim, managed to exchange films not shown here yet with the picture people in Mancos," read the announcement in the newspaper.

While there's no question the flood did a great deal of damage, the accounts published in Denver newspapers presented a catastrophic picture before communications were re-established.

"The first reports to reach Denver appear to have been to the effect that the City of Durango was entirely washed away," the Herald of Oct. 11 reported of a Rocky Mountain News story, "and that all the men, women and children, and many of the town's dogs, were drowned."

A different newspaper story said circumstances were dire for the survivors.

"Another reported that such of the population as escaped death were starving," the Herald said, "and that unless lots of bread and a reasonable amount of pie was at once provided, there would be nothing here in the amount of humanity but a lot of skeleton relics."

Will it happen again?

The answer is when and not if, according to every expert consulted. And the danger is not just the rivers, but Hermosa, Coon, Junction and Lightner creeks, too.

“We could be like Arizona and get three 100-year floods back to back,” said Butch Knowlton, director of emergency preparedness for La Plata County. “I maintain a worry list, and certainly, there could be some big issues on Junction Creek. If it’s like 1970, when the storms didn’t dissipate, and the roads washed out, a lot of people are going to be isolated there. Falls Creek, Turtle Lake, upper County Road 204 – those folks are going to be pretty much trapped.”

While the isolation might not be as severe as in 1911, when La Plata County was cut off from the world, Knowlton sees La Plata County potentially being separated into four areas, separated by the Florida, Pine and Animas rivers. U.S. Highway 550 and County Road 250 would be underwater north of Durango, and U.S. Highway 160 would be covered by water from the Pine River to the east and Lightner Creek to the west.

“We could also see issues on the La Plata River,” he said. “Typically, rivers running out of those canyons have huge debris racks that can lodge on bridges or culverts. It’s difficult to map debris movement and accumulation.”

Gravel harvesting operations on the Animas have made the river channel able to carry a much higher volume of water, he said, and although the flood plain would remain much the same, the “lake” in the Animas Valley would be more shallow during a flood similar to that of 1911. At its widest point in the Animas Valley, the flood plain is estimated to be nearly a mile.

“We require more engineering to address those special concerns on the flood plain,” Knowlton said. “People pretty much understand that it’s risky and more expensive to build in those areas.”

While some parts of the train tracks were covered by water during heavy rains in 1995, it has been almost 40 years since a major flood on the Animas. But in any given year, the chance of such a flood is 1 percent, according to an Army Corps of Engineers report.

When that chance will become a reality is anyone’s guess. But it probably won’t be this week, with a cool sunny weather forecast for the week.

‘Adversity makes men’

In 1911, after all the damage reports were in, a writer for the Mancos Times-Tribune took a philosophical approach to the devastating event.

“Taken all in all,” he wrote, “the rains this season have inflicted great damage to the farmers and done a great deal of good. We still have enough for all of us to live on, so what’s the use to complain. Most of us can’t stand prosperity, and we will be better people by reason of our having less to squander and spend foolishly. Adversity makes men, but prosperity makes monsters.”

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Photo by: Courtesy of Center of Southwest Studies
This postcard from the Nina Heald Webber collection is a photo taken by Pen-Dike Studio after the Flood of 1911 destroyed 22 miles of track, including the road bed in many places, on the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad between Durango and Silverton.



Photo by: Courtesy of Center of Southwest Studies
This footbridge over the Animas River was being washed out at 4:30 p.m. Oct. 5, 1911, while people gathered to watch at the top of the stairs. The water level didn't reach its peak of 8 feet above flood level until five hours later.



Photo by: Courtesy of Center of Southwest Studies

The Lerader residence was washed off its foundation and is lodged against a tree. The Main Avenue bridge is to the far left. Reports at the time said, "This place had many fine flowers, shrubs, trees and a lawn. There is now no soil left, just stone and gravel."



Photo by: Courtesy of Center of Southwest Studies

The Flood of 1911 had already begun to recede when this picture of water rushing between two houses was taken.



Photo by: Courtesy of Center of Southwest Studies

Durango residents, far left, check out the remnants of a railroad bridge that was washed out during the Flood of 1911. The bridge was located near the spot where the U.S. Highway 160 bridge now crosses the Animas just south of the DoubleTree Hotel.

1911 Flood

After an already wet autumn, 36 straight hours of rain fell beginning at 10 a.m. Oct. 4, 1911. The next day, every river and creek in the area overflowed and caused significant damage in the worst flood recorded in Southwest Colorado since recordkeeping began in the mid-1880s. None of the reservoirs – Vallecito, Lemon or Navajo – had been built yet, so there was nothing to stop the rapidly flowing rivers and creeks.



GERMAN ROJAS/ Durango Herald

Historic floods

The Animas River has flooded numerous times over the last 100-plus years. The Army Corps of Engineers predicts that at some point, floods even more destructive than the historic granddaddy of floods, that of Oct. 5, 1911, will strike the area.



***42,000** Projected Standard Project Flood

***28,500** Projected Intermediate Flood

*As predicted by Army Corps of Engineers

Source: Department of The Army, Sacramento District, Corps of Engineers, Sacramento, California, 1974

GERMAN ROJAS/
Durango Herald

