

Staying Above Water

Fargo-Moorhead floods

People in the Red River Valley are known for their efforts to keep the floodwaters back through levees and sandbagging, then rebuilding after the waters receded.

In 2021, Fargo Lions Club member Mike Benson had an idea for a sculpture dedicated to the many people who have worked to save communities from flooding. *Spirit of the Sandbagger* is designed by visual artist Karen Bakke and constructed by metal artist Brock Davis. The work was donated to The City of Fargo by the Lions Club and viewers are encouraged to see themselves and their own efforts reflected in the silhouettes.



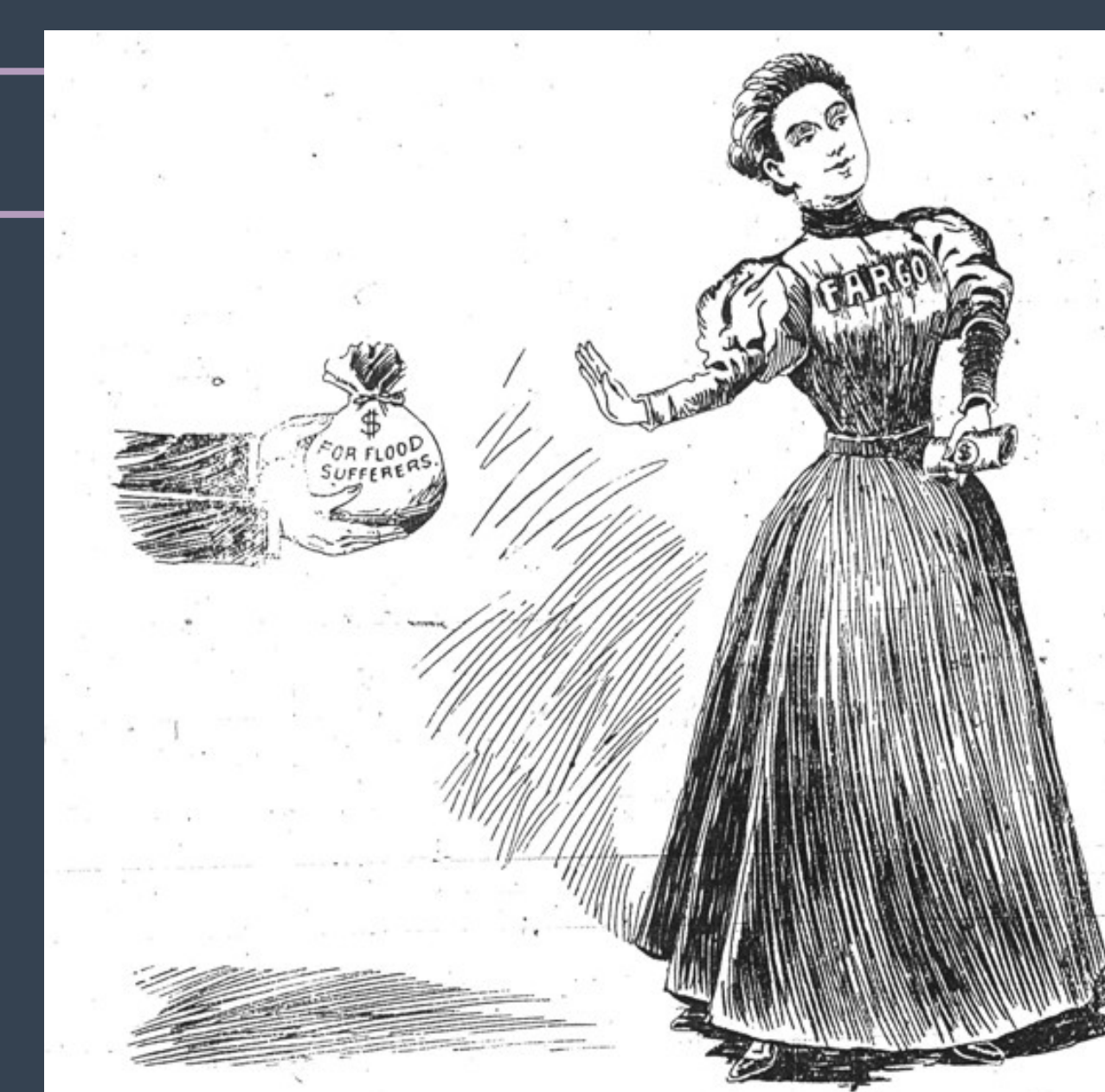
Detail of planning drawing, for Spirit of the Sandbagger by Karen Bakke.

1897 - Plucky Fargo

On April 7, 1897 the Red River rose to 39.1 feet, a record that would be unbroken until 1997.

“The poor people are the greatest sufferers as they in many cases lose their all. Hundreds of them barely subsisting before are driven from their homes, which, where not removed from the foundations, have been so badly wracked and water soaked as to be practically ruined.”

Holding onto the distinction as a plucky city taking care of itself after the Great Fargo Fire of 1893, the city refused federal aid and stated in a resolution, “that we do not desire government aid owing to action previously taken.”



"Plucky Fargo" Fargo Forum, April 17, 1897.



Flooded businesses on Broadway, Fargo, N.D., 1943. State Historical Society of North Dakota (00378-022).

1943 - Wartime Flood

In the midst of World War II, the Red River's worst flood since 1897 hit the Fargo/Moorhead area. Within days it rose to 28 feet, cresting at 34.3 feet on April 7th. The eleven day long flood forced 272 families from their homes and left most bridges across the river underwater. St. John's Hospital was completely surrounded by flood water and the heat was cut off. Instead of evacuating the patients a wooden ramp was built to connect the hospital to dry ground, patients were moved to the upper stories, and a bucket brigade of nurses removed supplies from the flooded basement.

The cities were saved from greater damage by federal programs that built dykes and a dam system at Lake Traverse downriver in the 1930s.

1997 - Sandbaggers

A wetter-than-normal fall in the Red River basin followed by multiple blizzards led to the 1997 Red River Flood. The thousands of sandbags stockpiled by volunteers in anticipation of a spring flood were not enough for the coming disaster. The flood peaked at 39.72 feet.

Some areas show the wear and tear of the flood, but nearby restaurants and other small businesses are alive and bustling. The tireless efforts from responders and volunteers making more sandbags and fighting back floodwaters helped keep the damages to a minimum.



Sandbagging, 2001, Fargo flood. Credit: NDSU Archives, NDSU Communications Office collection.

Questions to keep in mind:

At what other times has the community come together?

What flood do you remember?

What images do you often see used when remembering a flood?

Do you feel a specific story was more prominent?

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