Beyond the Immediate Aftermath

(Missoula, Montana)

In May and June of 1908, Western Montana was inundated with 33 days of rain and snow. This culminated in the then Missoula River, now Clark Fork River, reaching a record high of 17 feet 6 inches of water. This is 4 feet 6 inches above what is considered major flood stage for the river. This record has yet to be beaten. The flood carried with it hidden poisons from upriver mining that weren't discovered until close to 100 years later.

Flooding at Its Peak

Newspapers, oral histories, and personal written reminiscences of the flood describe the event with an air of jollity and amusement. Watching the affects of the flood was likened to a sporting event or the circus coming to town. The long lead up to the flood allowed residents to evacuate their families and household goods to higher ground. Much less property than expected and no lives (according to most newspaper accounts) were lost during the flooding that occurred between June 5 and June 7, in Missoula.



Image 69.001, "Missoula house damaged during 1908 flood", 1908, Archival Photographs from the University of Montana, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of

Rebuilding

All river crossings in the city of Missoula were destroyed or made temporarily impassible. Over 12 homes were swept off their foundations and destroyed during their travels in the river downstream. The Northside residential area was completely cut off from the Southside business district for 24 to 48 hours before a temporary suspension bridge was constructed on June 7th, 1908. A sturdier suspension bridge was built at the Higgins Avenue crossing to the tune of \$9,000 while permanent bridges around Missoula were reconstructed or repaired. The flood was an expensive event to recover from, yet the entire tone of the newspaper coverage was patriotic and uplifting. Touting the strength and spirit of Montanans in the face of adversity.

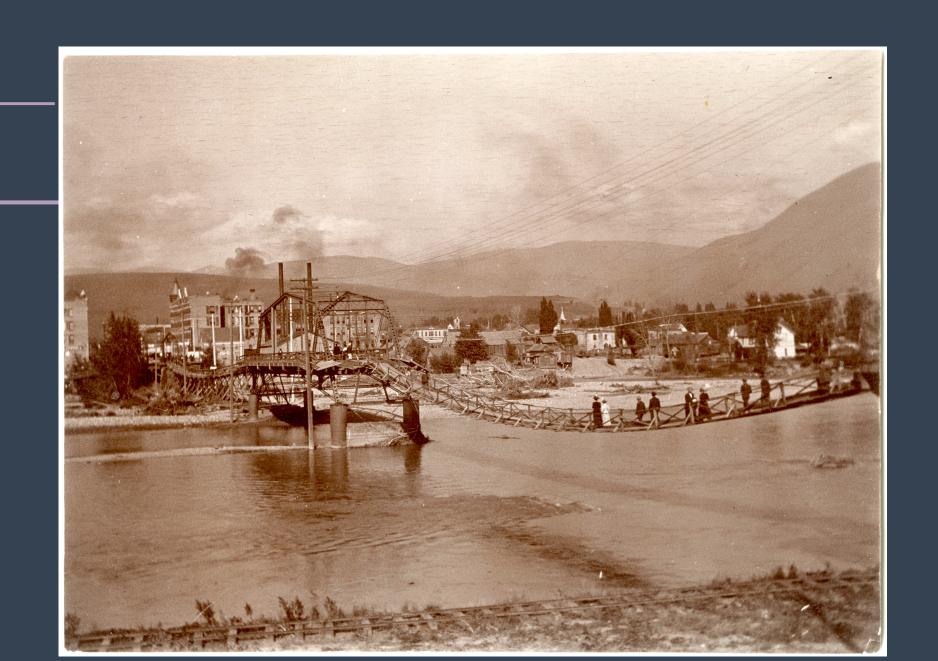


Image 486.IX.047.035, "Clark Fork River flood damage", 1908, Morton J. Elrod Papers, Mss 486, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana.

100 Years Later

It wasn't until the 1980s that the final consequences of the 1908 flood was uncovered. During the height of the flooding 48,000 cubic feet of water per second gushed over Milltown Dam's spillway at a height of 15 feet. The Dam held, despite all expectations, and in the process trapped around 3 million cubic yards of contaminated mining sediments that washed downstream from Butte and Anaconda behind its walls. These sediments settled into the Dam's reservoir and started to leech heavy metals into the wells and streams used by locals. The Clark Fork River watershed was designated a Superfund site in 1983 and the final clean up from the flood began.

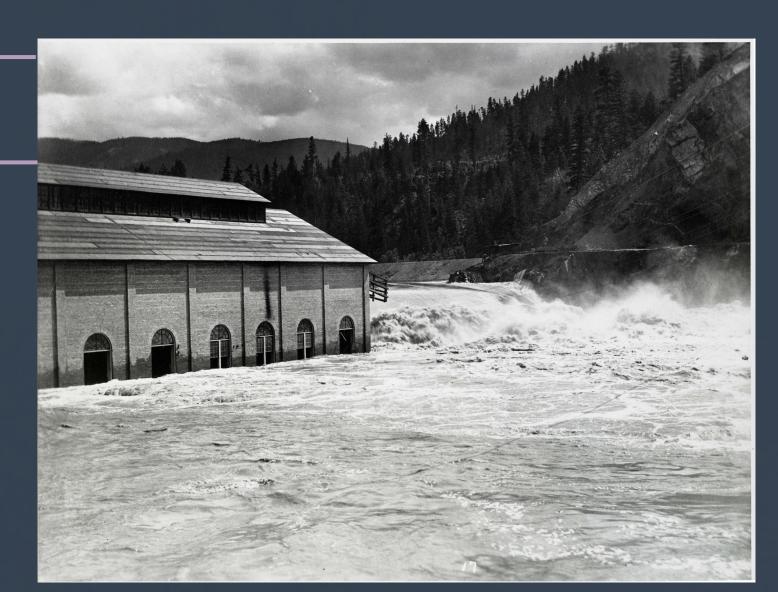


Image 84.0307, "Milltown dam during the flood of 1908", 1908, Archival Photographs from the University of Montana, Archives and Special Collections Mansfield Library, University of Montana.

Questions to keep in mind:

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

What flood do you remember? What do you remember about the community response?

At what other times has the community come together?



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