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Montana's Worst



Natural Disaster

The 1964 Flood on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation

by Aaron Parrett

IN THE SECOND WEEK OF JUNE 1964, the worst natural disaster in Montana's recorded history descended on the state in the form of heavy rains that quickly turned once picturesque creeks into raging, mile-wide rivers. Dams, roads, and railroads washed out, homes and ranches were swept away, and thirty people died. The area affected by the flooding amounted to nearly thirty thousand square miles, or roughly 20 percent of the state. By Thursday, June 11, President Lyndon Johnson had declared nine counties in northwest and north-central Montana a federal disaster area. When mopping-up operations ended, damages stood at an estimated at \$62 million.¹

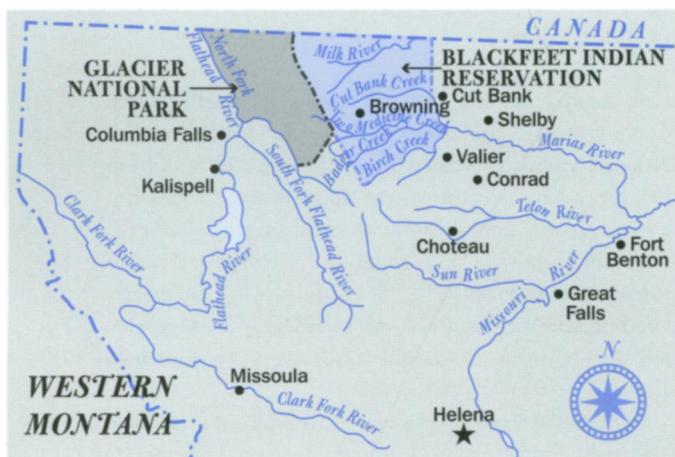
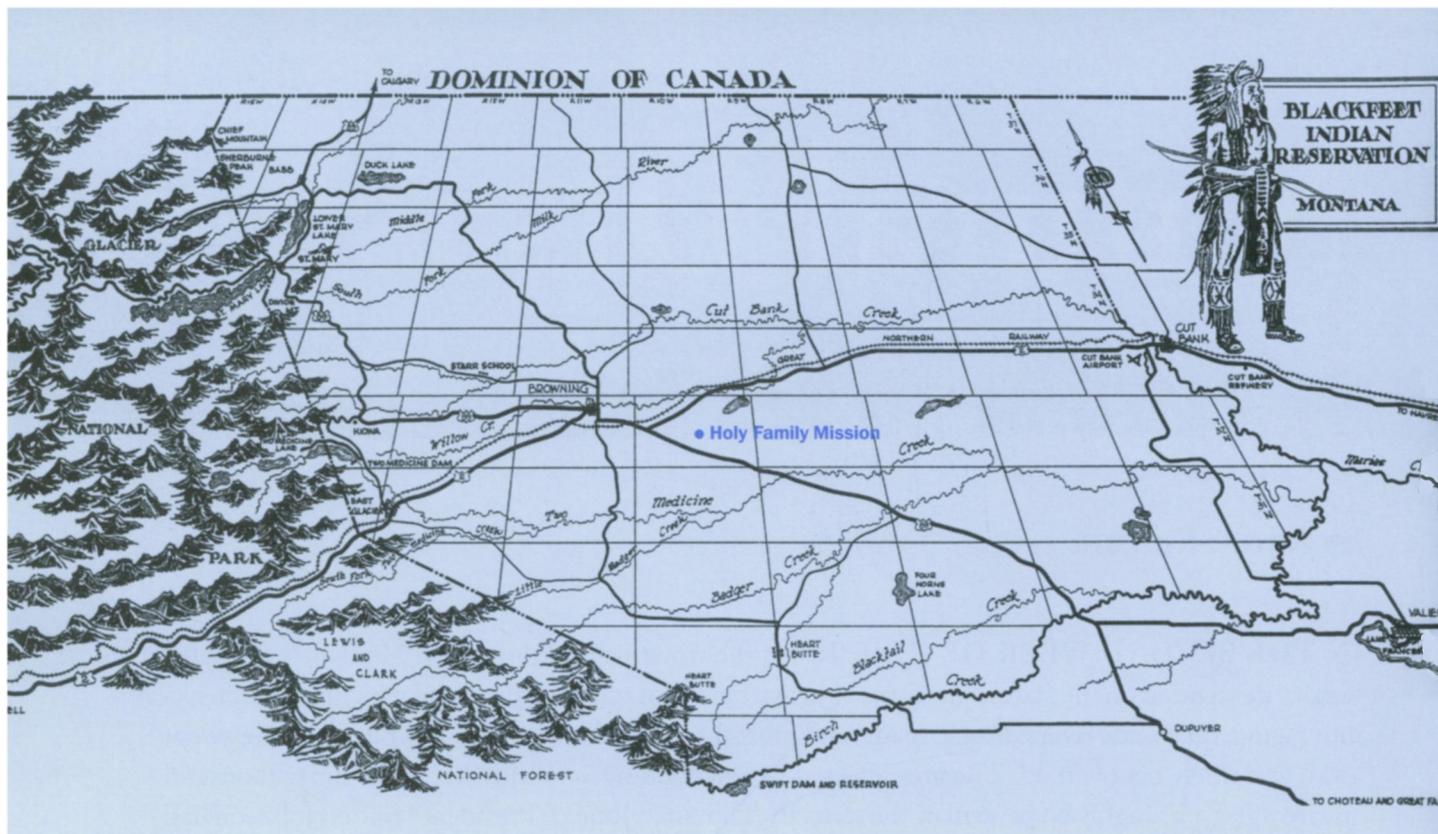
In its official report, the United States Geological Survey (USGS) offered a comprehensive analysis of the meteorological and hydrological conditions that created the flooding. The first and most important factor was the inordinately heavy precipitation that preceded the storm. While precipitation levels were normal from January through March, and mountain snow pack was actually less than normal through March, heavy snowfall in April brought mountain snow cover to well above average by the end of the month. In early May an unusually heavy snow-storm deposited record snowfall. Also contributing to the flooding were below-normal temperatures from March to May that delayed significant snowmelt. By the end of May the nearly saturated soil in the mountains could absorb little additional moisture.²

These conditions combined with an unprecedented weather system that swept into the state in early June. According to the United States Weather Bureau's official report, when June began, "moist air from the Gulf of Mexico was spreading north and north-northwest over the western plains and central Rocky Mountains." Through a phenomenon known as "orographic lifting," this moist air

mass moved against the mountains in northwestern Montana, where cooler temperatures caused heavy rain. Ordinarily, moist air masses originating from the Gulf drop their precipitation on the eastern slopes of the Rockies. But this was no ordinary rainstorm: the air mass spilled over the Continental Divide and generated what the Weather Bureau referred to as a "lee-side storm" of nearly unfathomable magnitude. A 1995 USGS report suggested that such a storm occurs only once every five thousand years.³

In practical terms, the storm's arrival meant that places ordinarily reporting modest rainfall logged seemingly apocalyptic amounts for the twenty-four-hour period between June 7 and 8: 8-plus inches in Browning, 10 inches at Lake McDonald in Glacier National Park, 13 inches southwest of Augusta, and 11 inches at Heart Butte. It also meant major flooding occurred, especially on the Flathead River on the west side of the mountains and the Sun and Marias Rivers and their tributaries on the east. As the flooding developed, the media focused its attention on the cities of Great Falls and Kalispell, where damage was dramatic and easily documented from air and land.⁴

On June 7 and 8, 1964, the worst natural disaster in Montana's recorded history occurred as a massive storm dropped heavy rain on late-season mountain snowpack. The resulting flood covered roughly 20 percent of the state, but the Blackfeet Indian Reservation suffered the brunt of the disaster, with thirty lives lost, hundreds of homes and ranches inundated, and the reservation's infrastructure severely damaged. Among the property destroyed was the bridge over Cut Bank Creek six miles west of Browning, shown at left on June 9.



a good example of how media coverage failed to make clear that the brunt of the disaster hit the reservation. Though the article noted “at least 30 were drowned, 100 were missing and over 1,200 were left homeless,” the brief text made no mention of the reservation and the accompanying photos of Great Falls seemed to suggest that the victims were from the Great Falls area. A *Newsweek* article that appeared a few days later focused on the damage to the reservation, but the accompanying photograph, which had no caption, showed a bridge washed out by the Teton River south of Choteau, forty miles away.⁶

Without question, however, the worst of the damage occurred roughly one hundred miles northwest of Great Falls on the Blackfoot Indian Reservation, where “raging rivers destroyed 265 homes, 20,000 acres of hayland along the creeks, two large dams, . . . irrigation facilities on which 37,000 acres of cropland depended, barns corrals, sheds, and livestock, all bridges and much of the Reservation road system, and, most tragic of all, claimed all the casualties of the entire flood area, thirty lives.” As Bob Norris, an announcer for Shelby radio station KSEN, put it: “Tragedy was to be found everywhere, but if any single segment of the population was hit and hit hardest, it was the Blackfoot Indians on the Reservation.”⁵

The way the flooding affected the Blackfoot Reservation versus the way the public perceived the event exposes an interesting disparity. A two-page photo spread in *Life* offers

1. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, “Report of the Flood of June 1964 in the Upper Missouri River Basin in Montana,” in F. C. Boner and Frank Stermitz, *Floods of June 1964 in Northwestern Montana*, U.S. Geological Survey Water-Supply Paper 1840-B (Washington, D.C., 1967), 1–4. The \$62 million is the equivalent of \$367 million in 2003 dollars. Robert C. Sahr’s Consumer Price Index Conversion Factors, oregonstate.edu/dept/pol_sci/fac/Sahr/cv2003.pdf, accessed September 18, 2003.

2. Boner and Stermitz, *Floods of June 1964*, B13, B5, B6. In an August 11, 2003, telephone interview, Boner noted, “When you have rainfall on top of existing melting snow, you are facing a potential flooding situation.” In early June 1964 an unusually heavy rain fell on late-season snowpack.

3. *Ibid.*, B18; Charles Parrett, “Regionalization of Annual Precipitation Maxima in Montana,” in *Association of State Dam Safety Officials 1995 Annual Conference Proceedings* (Lexington, Ky., 1995), 654.

4. Boner and Stermitz, *Floods of June 1964*, 10, B29–B45. Although the dam at Hungry Horse Reservoir controlled flooding on the South Fork of the Flathead, the “Flathead River upstream from Flathead Lake underwent the most severe flooding of modern times. All main bridges upstream from Columbia Falls were washed out or rendered unusable.” *Ibid.*, B66–67.

5. Helen West, *Flood: The Story of the 1964 Blackfoot Disaster* (Kalispell, Mont., 1970), 4–5; Bob Norris, sound recording of KSEN radio broadcast, n.d. [June 1964], Oral History 79, Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena.

6. *Life*, June 19, 1964, 38–39; “Montana: ‘The Dam is Busted,’” *Newsweek*, June 22, 1964, 30–31.

On the west side of the divide, the *Hungry Horse News* concentrated its coverage on the extensive damage to areas around Kalispell and Columbia Falls. Local newspaperman Mel Ruder even won a Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of the flooding. But aside from its normal reprinting of John Tatsey's column from the reservation's paper, the *Browning Glacier Reporter*, the *Hungry Horse News* made no mention of the reservation damage in the weeks following the flood. The *Browning Glacier Reporter* provided the best coverage of the events on the reservation, but its usefulness as a primary news source was limited by its small circulation and weekly publication schedule. The issue for the week of the flood came out three days after the worst had passed.⁷

The neglect of the flood's effects on the Blackfeet Reservation is a result of both the media's tendency to marginalize minority cultures and the contingencies of the event itself. For a few days, the reservation (already isolated and remote) was almost completely cut off from the rest of the world. While this isolation was largely responsible for the paucity of media coverage at the time, the lack of attention in later reports and in historical scholarship reflects the dominant culture's tendency to minimize or overlook such events when the worst of the damage is experienced by a minority population. Perhaps the most subtle way the history of minority peoples is suppressed is through unconscious neglect. Fortunately, the flood's fortieth anniversary offers an opportunity to recover its significance as Montana's worst natural disaster and as an event whose primary locus was the Blackfeet Reservation.

For Great Falls, the urban center closest to the reservation and the largest city in the state, newspaper coverage of the flooding began on Monday, June 8, when the city's afternoon paper, the *Great Falls Leader*, ran the bold headline "Sun River Threatens Great Falls." By Monday afternoon families were evacuating the Sun River district with assistance from Malmstrom Air Force Base personnel, civil defense units, and local government agencies. Great Falls citizens were able to move their possessions to the dry

storage opened at the local fairgrounds. Given that the Sun River did not crest until 12:45 A.M. Wednesday, the biggest difference between the flood's effect on the Blackfeet and Great Falls residents was in the availability of advance warning. Whereas many reservation residents had no time to plan an escape, citizens in Great Falls had at least twenty-four hours to vacate their properties and move their possessions to higher ground.⁸



Courtesy the artist

Although flooding was widespread on the reservation, the most devastating effects were seen on the two streams where dams failed: Two Medicine and Birch Creeks. Blackfeet artist Gary Schildt later drew his interpretation of these disasters, *Flooding River*, to illustrate Helen B. West's *Flood: The Story of the 1964 Blackfeet Disaster* (p. 37).

The morning paper, the *Great Falls Tribune*, began its flood coverage on Tuesday, June 9, with a lead article that focused on the local threat. This article mistakenly attributed the status of "chief troublemaker" to the Sun River rather than to the tributaries of the Marias, confusing readers about the flood's geography and reinforcing the notion that the Sun River was responsible for the deaths announced by the headline "Dam-Buster Floods Kill at Least 8; Fearful Residents Evacuate." A front-page sidebar described the "dam-busting floods that swept down Monday from Montana's northwestern mountains," but information

was limited because communication with the reservation had been broken. Only one other brief article, "Indian Families Isolated in 2 Browning Areas," mentioned the situation on the reservation.⁹

By June 10 headlines in both Great Falls papers were devoted almost entirely to the damage in the city and its outlying areas. The *Great Falls Tribune's* lead article ran under the dramatic headline "Rampaging Sun River Hammers at Southwest Great Falls Homes," while a front-page sidebar vaguely noted "deadly destructive floodwaters poured over lowlands at record levels Tuesday leaving at least 30 dead upstream, dozens missing, and hundred [sic] homeless." In this context, "upstream" made little sense, given that the flooding creeks and rivers that were responsible for the deaths sent their waters into the Missouri *downstream* from Great Falls via the Marias. Neither

8. *Great Falls (Mont.) Tribune*, June 8, 9, 1964. On June 10 the *Great Falls Leader* reported a peak water level of 24.6 feet at the Fourteenth Street Southwest Bridge, 5.5 feet higher than during the 1953 flood.

9. *Great Falls (Mont.) Tribune*, June 9, 1964. Eight of the state's major highways were closed, four of them on or near the Blackfeet Reservation. Closures listed in the June 9 *Great Falls Tribune* included U.S. 2 near Essex, U.S. 89 south of Babb, the Browning to Babb secondary road, and Montana 49 near East Glacier.

7. Tom Lawrence, *Pictures, a Park, and a Pulitzer: Mel Ruder and the Hungry Horse News* (Helena, Mont., 2000), 8–9.

News coverage concentrated on the flooding in Great Falls (right) and in the Kalispell and Columbia Falls areas west of the Continental

Divide. These reports attributed “chief troublemaker” to the Sun River rather than to the tributaries of the Marias River that flow through the Blackfeet Reservation.

did “upstream” clearly indicate that the majority of the missing and homeless were Indians. The article went on to repeat the misconception that the “chief troublemaker and record breaker was the Sun River,” reinforcing the notion that the Sun River was responsible for the destruction.¹⁰

A June 9 *Great Falls Leader* article was just as vague about the dams’ collapse. According to the paper’s lead article, “A Civil Defense leader said the bodies of 26 flood victims were found Tuesday in one area of Northern Montana.” Only later did readers learn that “all the bodies were found in Glacier County and most were taken to a mission south of Browning.” It would fall to the *New York Times*, famous for its fact-checking standards, to provide a more accurate description. A June 10 front-page *Times* article carefully separated events that occurred in the Sun River drainage from those on the tributaries of the Marias. Aside from a few sentences about the reservation in a follow-up article on June 11, however, even the *Times* remained vague about specifics.¹¹

By Thursday the newspapers’ views of the events were gaining clarity, but details took back seat to coverage of the cresting Sun River near Great Falls. To its credit, the *Great Falls Leader* devoted a front-page sidebar to the collapse of the dam on Birch Creek, offering chilling eyewitness descriptions of the wall of water that swept down the

10. *Great Falls (Mont.) Tribune*, June 10, 1964. Not until the final paragraphs on page 2 did readers learn that the victims were from outside Great Falls and the Sun River area. Even then, neither the reservation nor the ethnicity of the victims was mentioned. The article also confused details of the two dam failures. The *Life* article, which apparently relied on the Great Falls papers for much of its information, reinforced these misconceptions.

11. *Great Falls (Mont.) Leader*, June 9, 1964; *New York Times*, June 10, 11, 1964. The misinformation about the number of bodies recovered raised the ire of the Glacier County coroner, Bill Riddle, who stated that only ten people had been confirmed dead at press time on June 11. *Browning (Mont.) Glacier Reporter*, June 11, 1964.



valley. However, the article failed to point out that Birch Creek marks the southern border of the reservation or that, as a tributary of the Marias, its waters enter the Missouri at Loma, fifty miles downstream from Great Falls.¹²

In the aftermath of the flood, Great Falls newspapers continued to blur details in a way that subsumed the reservation tragedy into the record of the flooding at Great Falls. On June 14, for example, the *Great Falls Leader* reported: “At least 30 persons were dead, 38 missing and thousands homeless as the massive flood crest moved down the Missouri River over lowland areas past Great Falls, the state’s largest city.” Newswires disseminated this information nationwide, leaving readers to infer that the dead and missing were all victims of flooding on the streams flowing into the Sun River and that the flooding culminated in Great Falls. Newspaper coverage in the following weeks

12. *Great Falls (Mont.) Leader*, June 11, 1964.



MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

concentrated on mopping-up operations and flood-control plans.¹³

Within two months of the disaster, the *Great Falls Tribune* and the *Great Falls Leader* compiled a magazine-style edition of the flood coverage that sold for one dollar. The cover bore the title “Montana Flood 1964” in bold letters; its subtitle promised “The Story of Flood Week in Montana—June 1964.” As a rehashing of the newspapers’ flood coverage, the magazine was representative of the mainstream media news: it emphasized dramatic aerial photographs of flood-ravaged homes and neighborhoods around Great Falls, washed-out bridges, and shots of anguished survivors juxtaposed with scenes of somber officials gathered around planning tables. The text flowed in typical newspaper style: paragraphs seldom more than a few

13. *Ibid.*, June 14, 1964. The *Great Falls Leader* first used the phrase “chief troublemaker” in reference to the Sun on June 8.

sentences long jumped from locale to locale in an attempt to convey the sense of crisis wrought by the flood. Also typical was a dearth of details about the Blackfeet tragedies. Full-page photographs with brief captions filled two-thirds of the book, but only two photographs—one of Secretary of the Interior Stewart L. Udall shaking hands with “Old” Chief White Calf during Udall’s June 13 visit—were of Indians.¹⁴

Testimony at a special House subcommittee meeting in August 1964 further downplayed the flood’s impact on the reservation, focusing instead on the damage to urban areas and what could be done to protect them in the future. In his opening to the proceedings, Montana Congressman James F. Battin referred to Great Falls but made no mention of the Blackfeet. Bureau of Indian Affairs land operations officer Will J. Pitner submitted a financial summary of the reservation’s \$10 million in flood damages in lieu of a statement.¹⁵

Fortunately, there are two written accounts of the Blackfeet disaster: the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) official report filed by John R. “Bob” White in July 1964 and a short book commissioned by the Blackfeet Tribal Council and written by Helen B. West, an archivist’s assistant at the Museum of the Plains Indian in Browning. From these two sources it is possible to piece together events on the Blackfeet Reservation during the 1964 flood.¹⁶

In the mountains to the west of the reservation, the storm started sometime around midnight on June 7, feeding small streams that were already carrying runoff from melting snow. Though it rained throughout the day on Sunday, most residents registered no alarm. George Kipp even remarked to his wife that it was “a million dollar rain” in view of the drought of the last four years. Twenty-four hours later, rain was still pouring down relentlessly. In Browning, rain gauges registered nearly seven inches, half the average yearly precipitation of 14.74 inches.¹⁷

At eight o’clock Monday morning agency superintendent William W. Grissom waded into his Browning office. After sending home employees whose basement offices were swamped with several inches of water, Grissom drove to the agency’s auxiliary office, “the Barracks,” where he encountered the first intimation of impending disaster: a report of a man trapped by high water in the Two Medicine Valley about ten miles south of Browning.¹⁸

14. *Great Falls (Mont.) Tribune and Great Falls (Mont.) Leader, Montana Flood 1964* (Great Falls, Mont., 1964).

15. House Committee on Public Works, *Hearing before the Special Subcommittee on Montana Flood Damage of the Committee on Public Works*, 88th Cong., 2d sess., 1964, 2, 16.

16. West, *Flood*; Bureau of Indian Affairs, “The Blackfeet Flood,” 1964, typescript produced by the Billings Area Office, copy in the Montana Historical Society Library and Archives, Helena (hereafter MHS). Neither report was written by an Indian, but the Blackfeet Tribal Council had made it clear that its intention in commissioning West was to produce an account that focused on the Blackfeet perspective. West, *Flood*, preface.

17. West, *Flood*, 5; Bureau of Indian Affairs, “Blackfeet Flood,” 1.

18. Bureau of Indian Affairs, “Blackfeet Flood,” 3.



MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

According to news reports, most of the bodies of those who drowned were taken to the flooded Holy Family Mission on Two Medicine Creek (above), a few miles southeast of Browning.

Appointed superintendent only three weeks prior, Grissom had spent ten years working in soil and moisture conservation and range management on the reservation. He was intimately familiar with the region's topology and geography and knew that streams would soon be at flood stage. He was also well aware that many of the reservation's sixty-five hundred residents lived near the creek bottoms that provided pasturage and a ready supply of firewood.

Within an hour of the first notice of the high water, over a dozen agency employees were racing to Two Medicine Valley, Badger Valley, and other drainages to alert residents and provide assistance to those in danger. Because telephone service had failed in various parts of the reservation early that morning, agency employees relied almost entirely on two-way radios to direct rescue efforts. According to the BIA report, Superintendent Grissom's desk became the "nerve center for all the rescue work in the field." Radio station KSEN also was instrumental in communicating essential information and established itself as one of the reservation's only links to the outside world. On the air, KSEN coordinated messages among the sheriff's offices, ham radio operators, and rescue workers—a crude but effective means of transmitting information.¹⁹

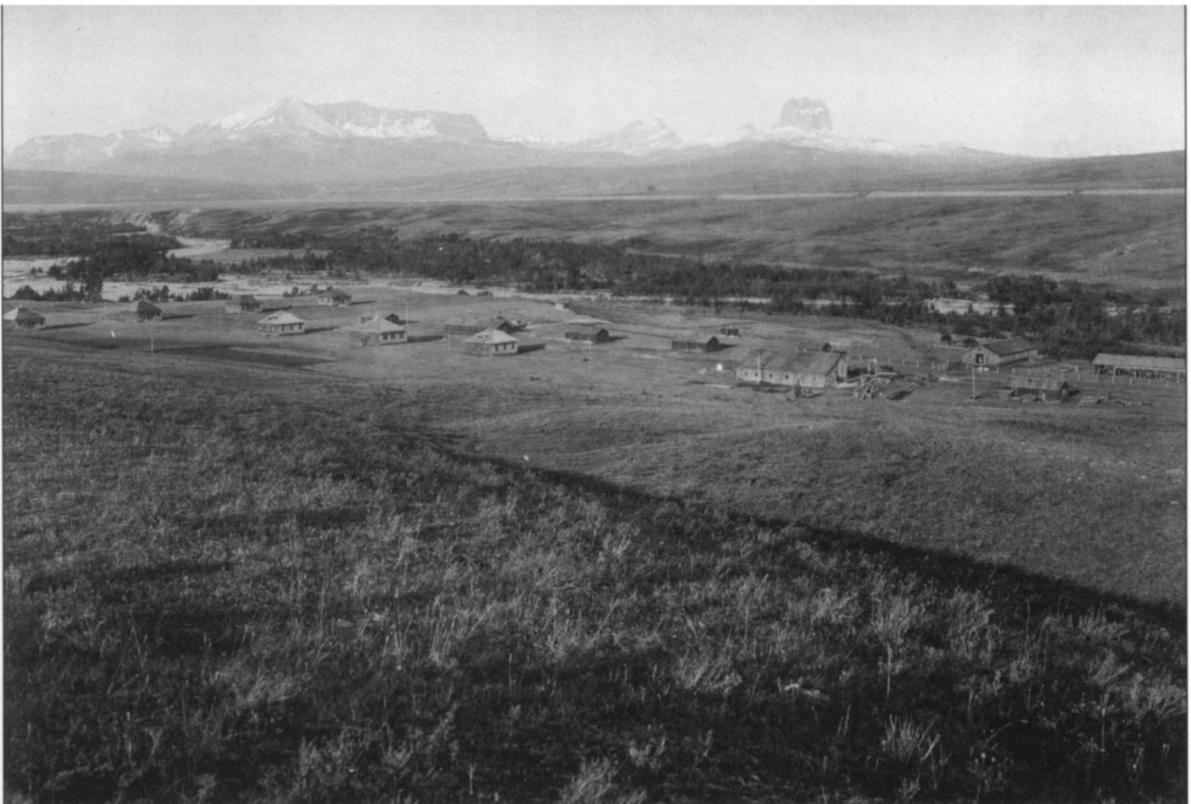
Meanwhile, crew members for the Blackfeet Irrigation Project had been out 6:30 A.M. cutting the water flowing into canals. When water master John Reid saw that Badger Creek was rising at a frightening rate, he radioed the project office at the Barracks. By 7:30 project personnel had begun warning people along Badger Creek to evacuate. By 9:30 Superintendent Grissom had dispatched two bureau school buses to the flood zones south of Browning to pick up evacuees—one went into the Blacktail Creek and Badger Creek drainages and the other to the Two Medicine Valley. Although high water trapped the first bus in the Grandview School area, the other gathered several loads of refugees and brought them to the relief center set up in Browning.²⁰

One of the flood's most tragic incidents occurred in the Two Medicine Valley. Around 9:30 A.M. agency road superintendent Elmer Morigeau was traveling along a gravel road roughly parallel to Two Medicine Creek, which was already out of its banks and creeping toward Highway 89, when he saw a flatbed truck with



Great Falls Tribune, June 14, 1964

Blackfeet elder "Old" Chief White Calf greets Secretary of the Interior Stewart L. Udall with a handshake during Udall's visit to review flood damage. Standing between them is Tribal Council Chairman Walter Wetzell, and at left is interpreter Earl Old Person.



On the windswept plains of the reservation, protected creek bottoms were favored locations for homes and ranches, putting many in harm's way during the flood. The buildings in the photograph above are part of a Blackfeet Irrigation Project work camp used during the construction of Two Medicine Dam and canals. The mountains in the distance are on the eastern edge of Glacier National Park.

twenty-one people crowded onto it swaying through water up to its wheel wells. Morigeau continued down the road, offering assistance and making sure that families were moving out. When he eventually drove back toward the highway, he found the truck in serious danger.²¹

Unable to follow a rough two-track through the meadow, the driver had driven into a depression and stalled. Two adults and three children managed to struggle to shore, but when the highway above the meadow washed out, water almost immediately rose to within a foot of the top of the cab, leaving sixteen people trapped. Currents "estimated at 25 knots or more" had formed both in front and behind the pickup, making it "impossible for the strongest swimmer to reach the truck from shore" one hundred yards away. Two Medicine Creek, normally a pastoral stream only ten yards across, now carried uprooted trees and buildings torn loose from their moorings. Morigeau radioed Grissom and urged him to send a boat.²²

In an attempt to rescue the truck's occupants, several people waded out to a high point of land and improvised a lifeline from barbed wire cut from a nearby fence and a spare tire as a buoy. The rushing floodwaters and torrential rain made communication difficult, and rescue attempts

failed repeatedly. According to one account, the occupants understood what the rescuers intended. " 'We understood all right,' Fay Grant said, 'But what could we do? The children were too little to send in alone [on the tire] and we couldn't go ourselves and leave them behind on the truck.' " In the end, rescuers pulled two people to safety and rescued five others by boat. In one of the few *Great Falls Tribune* articles devoted to the Blackfeet flood, Nellie Buel recounted the ordeal: "One by one Lucille's [Guardipee] children floated away. The baby first, two-months-old, who had been clinging to Lucille's neck, and then the others. Then Fay's little five-year-old floated away." The flood claimed the lives of nine people who had been trapped on the truck, eight of them children.²³

23. West, *Flood*, 22; *Great Falls (Mont.) Tribune*, June 11, 1964. West lists the victims as Rose Grant, eighty-four; Elaine Guardipee, four; Keith Guardipee, two; Alvin Guardipee, three; Terry Lee Guardipee, two months; Robbie Grant Jr., five; Rolanda Rose Grant, three; Galela Lynn Cobell, fourteen; and Lorraine Long Time Sleeping, five. In a July 23 letter to the editor of the *Browning Glacier Reporter*, Lucille Guardipee wrote: "I've been hearing rumors yet—people wondering why all my children drowned and why I didn't. I wish some of those people had been in my place at that time—they'd know the reason. . . . People are saying we were warned and why didn't we leave then? We were not warned. I sure wish people would quit talking because I feel bad enough and to hear these remarks and rumors makes me feel that I'm to blame for the death of my children. I tried my best to save them, but God took them. No one will ever know how lonely I feel. I don't want to hear any more rumors like this."

19. *Ibid.*, 31.

20. *Ibid.*, 7.

21. *Ibid.*, 10.

22. *Ibid.*, 12.



Despite efforts to evacuate people below Two Medicine Dam (above, June 9, 1964), nine residents drowned in the rising creek.

Like their counterparts in the Two Medicine Valley, early-rising residents along Birch Creek took note of the rising waters below Swift Dam, a rock-filled earthen dam built in 1914. By 10:00 A.M. the Merle Tatsey family, who lived ten miles below the dam, had decided that the situation warranted their leaving for Browning. An hour later, after securing the house and getting the children ready, Ramona Tatsey looked out the southwest window and saw huge trees along the creek being washed away. "They were falling like they were being chopped down," she later remarked. To avoid the wall of water they could see sweeping down the valley, the entire family, including the Tatseys'

elderly father, scrambled up a hillside in time to watch their homes destroyed. They then began walking toward Heart Butte. A truck that happened along drove them a few miles before becoming mired in the mud. It took them nearly seven hours to make it to the David Hall place less than eight miles away.²⁴

The Tatseys were fortunate in their escape: nineteen others died within minutes of the dam's collapse.²⁵ As Shelby radio station KSEN announcer Bob Norris later described the event, Swift Dam caved in with "a great cracking sound like a giant thunder and lightning bolt," and "thousands of tons of cascading water roared down into

24. West, *Flood*, 30; Bureau of Indian Affairs, "Blackfeet Flood," 17. At 157 feet high, Swift Dam was the largest dam of its kind in the United States.

25. Many of the victims listed in the BIA report were children: Thomas Hall III, twelve; Margerie Hall, ten; Martha Hall, eight; Kathy Hall, six; Marlin Hall, four; Edward Hall, two; Jody Hall, one; Mrs. Tom Hall Jr., thirty-three; Peggy Bradley, eight; Jerry Wayne Thomas, three; Linda Arnoux, sixteen; Sam New Breast Jr., thirty-five; Mrs. Sam New Breast (no age listed); Patricia New Breast (no age listed, child); Ernest Laufer, fifty-eight; Gilbert England, forty-three; Ralph Oberlack, sixty-five; Joe Hamline, fifty-two; and Bean Theakson, forty-five. Bureau of Indian Affairs, "Blackfeet Flood," 14, 19. In addition to victims killed on Two Medicine and Birch Creeks, two men died earlier: Stanford Creighton, a blood man from Cardston, Alberta, died of exposure on Kennedy Creek after driving off the road, and highway crewman Ivan "Happy" Williams drowned in Divide Creek when he washed away in his truck trying to save fuel tanks near the creek. West, *Flood*, 7-8.

26. Norris, KSEN sound recording. Both Two Medicine and Swift Dams were otherwise stable structures subjected to sudden influxes of water that caused overtopping. The failure of Two Medicine Dam may

have been slowed somewhat by slightly better engineering. Both dams had a rock-filled core, but Two Medicine Dam also incorporated riprap in the form of log cribbing. Bureau of Indian Affairs, "Blackfeet Flood," 20. For a history and analysis of the surprisingly high rate of failure for earth dams, see Nicholas J. Schnitter's *A History of Dams* (Rotterdam, 1994), 158, where he states, "Of some 380 embankments constructed [in the U.S.] between 1850 and 1930, over 9% failed."

27. Bureau of Indian Affairs, "Blackfeet Flood," 19.

28. West, *Flood*, 38. The normal discharge at the mouth of the Mississippi River is about 610,000 cubic feet per second.

29. By afternoon Superintendent Grissom was able to arrange for a plane to make an emergency survey to determine whether any survivors were still in need of rescue and to assess damages. He had also requested assistance from Malmstrom Air Force Base, but the weather was too bad for helicopters to fly. *Ibid.*, 25, 28-30.

30. "Report on Civil Defense Activities in Montana during Flood 8-15 June 1964," typescript report by the Montana Office of Civil Defense, copy in MHS. White categorically stated, "The record also should make it clear that most of the destruction in the valley occurred before the dam broke." Bureau of Indian Affairs, "Blackfeet Flood," 22.

the valley, snuffing out homes and lives in a matter of seconds.”²⁶ Approximately thirty-one thousand acre-feet of water, used for irrigation and to supply drinking water to the town of Valier, rushed downstream at a rate of 880,000 cubic feet per second, overwhelming nearly everything in its path.²⁷ The resulting crest “reached a height of twenty to forty feet, sweeping all before it: trees, power lines, homes, cattle, horses and bodies of those who had no chance.”²⁸ A pilot hired by KSEN later estimated that a wall of water thirty feet high was making its way through the valley toward Highway 89 at a rate of twenty-two miles an hour.²⁹

According to the report filed by State Civil Defense Deputy Director Howard A. McKinney, authorities received word of Swift Dam’s failure at 1:00 P.M. In retrospect, there was little that could have been done. By the time it dawned on the authorities that the dam might succumb to the intense pressure of the water building up behind it, it was too late for house-to-house warnings because “bridges to the north had all been washed out.”³⁰

This 1940s photograph taken by Ella Mad Plume Yellow Wolf shows Two Medicine Dam intact.



MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

“Thousands of tons of cascading water roared down into the valley.”



Officials were also concerned about Two Medicine Dam, an earthen dam constructed in 1912 by the Bureau of Reclamation to provide water for the Blackfeet Irrigation Project. That morning agency engineer Mark Stout had dispatched Harvey Brown to check the dam, but high water already blocked Highway 2 through East Glacier and the Looking Glass Mountain Highway. Jack B. Dodd, assistant Glacier superintendent, volunteered to send a ranger from West Glacier. Around 11:30 A.M., the ranger reported that water was within two feet of the top of the dam. Stout quickly called KSEN, and a short time later reporter Frank Krshka reported in a live radio broadcast from East Glacier: “Last reports we had was that the water



J. J. Palmer, photographer, Glacier National Park, West Glacier, Montana

Contrast Two Medicine Dam on June 16, 1964, with the 1940s photograph above.

now is coming over the top of the dam and of course if it starts eroding behind the dam, the great fear is of losing the dam." Two Medicine Dam gave way around 5:00 P.M.³¹

Throughout the afternoon, rescuers worked feverishly in the Birch Creek, Two Medicine Creek, and Cut Bank Creek drainages. By the time residents near the Starr School began to evacuate, Cut Bank Creek was rising fast. Agency forester Robert C. Brown radioed for a rescue boat, but the aluminum craft with its three-horsepower motor was no match for the powerful currents. Abandoning the boat, expert horsemen Floyd and Gordon Takes Gun rode into the floodwaters with lariats and rescued twenty-seven people. By late afternoon, the water was too high for the horses, and a larger boat arrived to rescue the remaining families.

In the midst of these efforts, the rescue of Les Heuscher, the first person reported trapped, continued. An employee of rancher Merle Magee, Heuscher had stepped out of his cabin around 5:00 A.M. Monday to find Two Medicine Creek up to his doorstep. He alerted the Magees, then waded over to shed to release livestock, but rapidly rising water forced him to climb a tree. By the time the Magees returned from Browning with help, the water was moving too swiftly for boats. Throughout the day Heuscher remained in his tenuous perch. At 7:00 P.M. the rescuers received word that the Two Medicine Dam had failed and that they had only twenty minutes to save Heuscher before the flood crest arrived. Their final attempt succeeded by a hair's breadth: "They pulled him into the boat, returned to shore, and watched as, a few minutes later, the crest hit, taking all of Magee's remaining buildings with it downstream."³²

Irregular communications compounded the difficulty of rescue efforts. The agency could at times receive calls, but none could be made. To alert the county welfare department and the Red Cross representative in Cut Bank, for

example, the "Browning police contacted the Cut Bank police department by radio. They asked the Cut Bank police to phone the officials Mrs. Babineau [head of the welfare department] wished to reach, and to request those officials to call Mrs. Babineau at the Browning police station." The same arrangement was used for other essential calls.³³

The isolation was not merely a problem of telephone connections: washed-out roads and bridges physically cut the reservation off from the rest of the world. Only Highway 2 to Cut Bank, though at times water covered, remained passable. Because of the reservation's physical isolation and the difficulty sending out communications, most of the rest of the state was unaware of the crisis. As White remarked in the last pages of his report, "Much of Montana wasn't well informed on the Blackfeet situation. . . . Great Falls and Kalispell attracted most of the attention of the news media."³⁴

Though the rain stopped falling sometime in the afternoon on Monday, June 8, the floodwaters did not begin to subside until around 8:00 P.M. By this time, the water released by the collapse of Two Medicine Dam had been absorbed by the Tiber Reservoir. Rescue operations continued throughout the day on Tuesday. By Wednesday the waters were receding and the long, laborious business of cleaning up began.

Those forced to evacuate their homes near Great Falls were able to return within a few days and begin shoveling mud from their basements and replacing damaged floors and furniture. The situation on the reservation was altogether different: many residents no longer had homes. Ten days after the flood, Superintendent Grissom reported 256 homes destroyed or damaged in the flood; 135 families were living in tents. One resident's comment captured the sense of resignation felt by many who had suffered through the flood only to find themselves homeless: "At first, everyone was joking and happy about their narrow escapes. Then, when they were told they could go home, everyone realized that there were no homes to go to." By June 25, at the urging of Senators Mike Mansfield and Lee Metcalf, Congress had approved \$12 million in relief funds, \$8.2 million earmarked for the BIA in Browning. Officials estimated at the time that



Courtesy the artist

Just minutes before the crest from the collapse of Two Medicine Dam arrived, weary rescuers managed to save Les Heuscher, who had been trapped by rising water more than fourteen hours earlier. Gary Schildt depicted Heuscher's situation in *Man in Tree*, in Helen B. West's *Flood: The Story of the 1964 Blackfeet Disaster* (p. 27).

31. Norris, KSEN sound recording.

32. West, *Flood*, 15.

33. Bureau of Indian Affairs, "Blackfeet Flood," 32.

34. *Ibid.*, 36.



Detail, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

In the flood's aftermath, the Blackfeet Tribal Business Council declared June 8 an annual day of mourning in remembrance of those who lost their lives. Above, flood waters from Two Medicine Creek still covered U.S. 89 and nearby structures on June 9.

a complete recovery on the reservation would take two years.³⁵

For weeks after the floodwaters subsided, volunteers combed the prairies and meadows for bodies in the piles of brush and silt along the stream banks. Only days after the worst had passed the Blackfeet Tribal Business Council voted to declare June 8 an annual day of mourning "in remembrance of those who lost their lives during the flood." A memorial service is held every June at the Museum of the Plains Indian in Browning.³⁶

IN RECENT DECADES multiculturalist scholars have begun to document how mainstream media accounts of events

35. *Browning (Mont.) Glacier Reporter*, June 18, 25, 1964; West, *Flood*. The September 17, 1964, *Browning Glacier Reporter* announced that 129 new homes were under construction in Browning and were expected to be "installed on site" before winter.

36. *Browning (Mont.) Glacier Reporter*, June 18, 1964; Trish Kuka, assistant to Chief Earl Old Person, telephone conversation, August 11, 2003. Martha Hall's body was not found until July 15.

37. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), 5. See Arnold Krupat's "Postcolonialism, Ideology, and Native American Literature," in *The Turn to the Native: Studies in Criticism and Culture* (Lincoln, 1996), 30-54, for a detailed discussion of this process.

become the semi-official narratives that eventually emerge as "standard" history, a process that overwhelms minority voices as the event is articulated and retold. As literary critic James Clifford has observed, "Whenever marginal peoples come into a historical or ethnographic space that has been defined by the Western imagination, their voices, points of view, and 'distinct histories' tend to disappear with astonishing rapidity." This process is not always an overtly sinister enterprise involv-

"Everyone realized that there were no homes to go to."



ing rifles or smallpox-infested blankets. Often marginalization results from a failure of awareness on the part of historians and the mainstream media. In the case of the 1964 flood, disregard for the tragic experience of the Blackfeet may have been partly benign due to communication difficulties and the geographical isolation of the area, but the end result has been a diminished understanding and appreciation of an Indian tragedy.³⁷ 

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