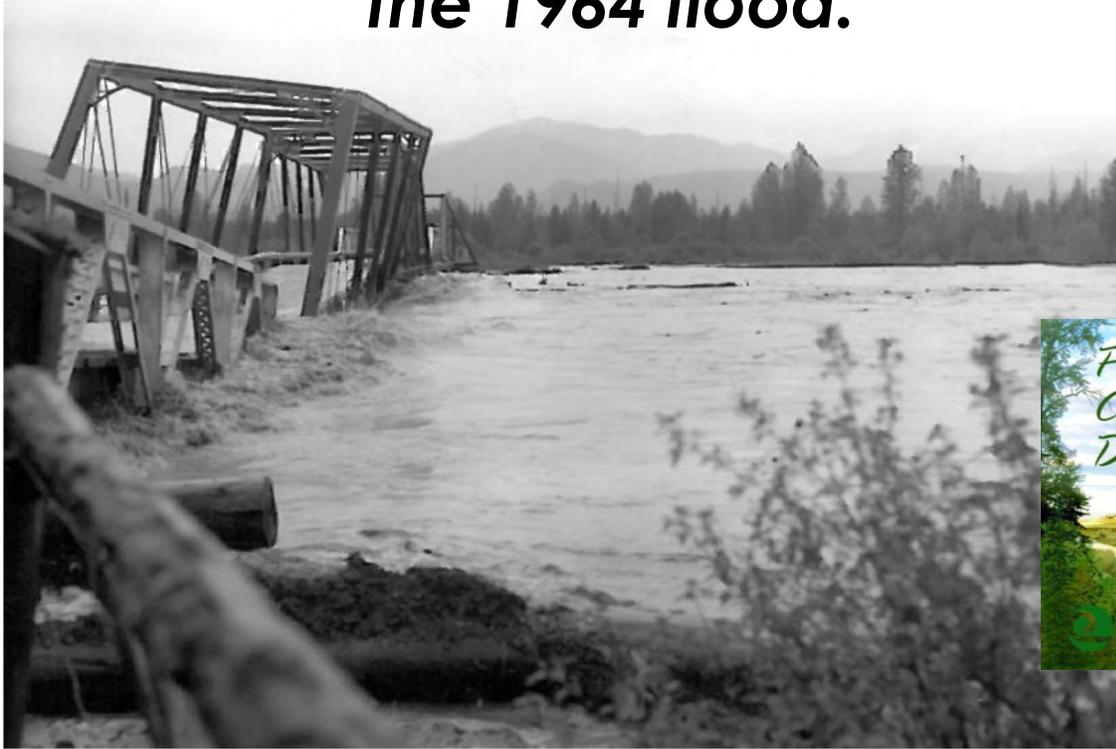




The Flathead Conservation District
is commemorating the 50th anniversary of
the 1964 flood.



1964 Oral Histories:

**Do you know how powerful your
watershed is?**

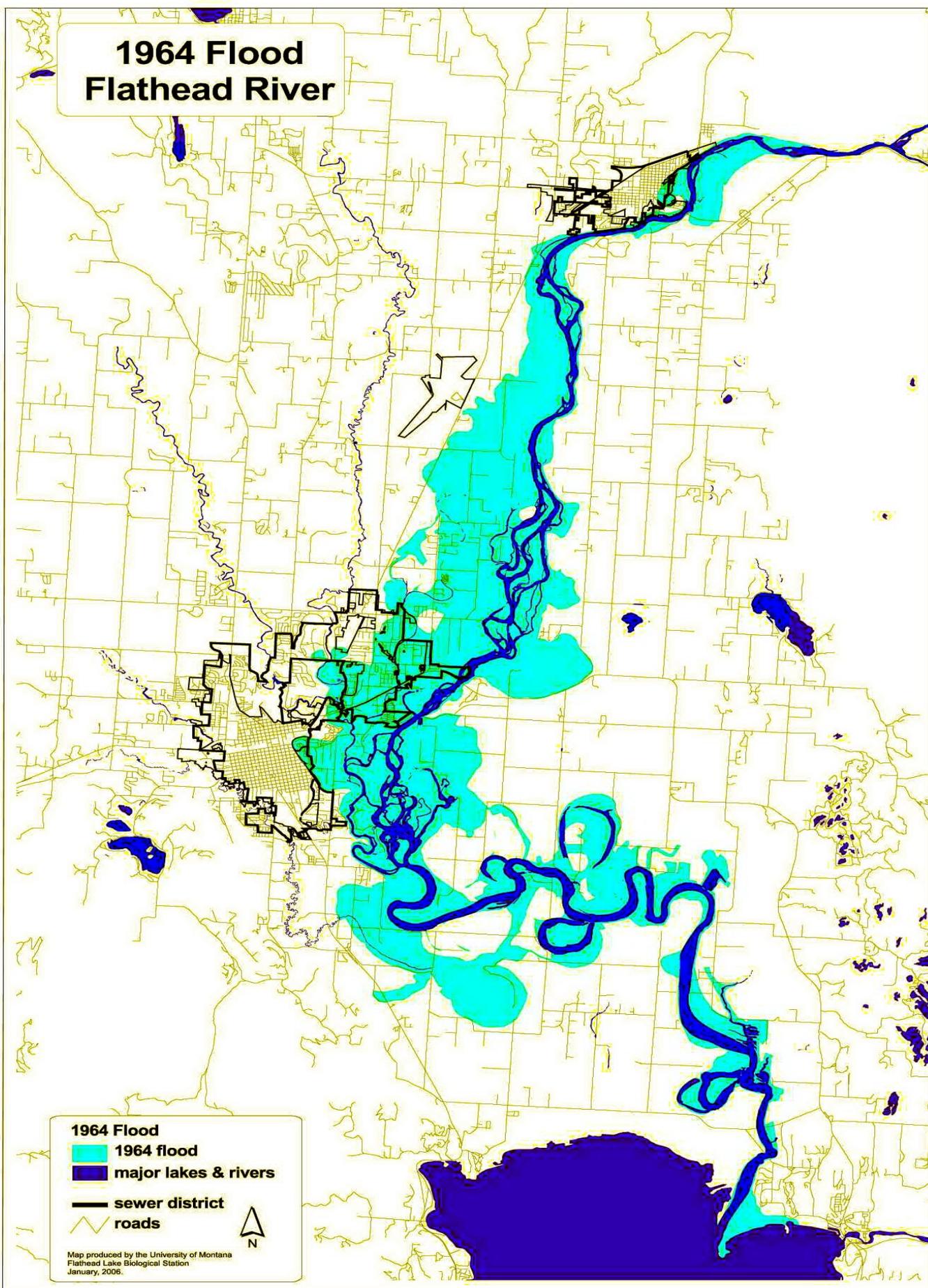


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1964 Flood Flathead River



1964 Flood

-  1964 flood
-  major lakes & rivers
-  sewer district
-  roads



Map produced by the University of Montana
Flathead Lake Biological Station
January, 2006.

Ron Buentemeier was 22 years old at the time of the 1964 flood living in Columbia Falls, Montana. He had just graduated from forestry school, and was going to work for F.H. Stoltze Land and Lumber Company.

That morning, the day the flood hit, I went to work. The other forester, Vic Darling and I made a trip up the North Fork to see what was happening. We had timber sales up there we were concerned about. The water was very high. We met with Ralph Thier, a retired forest ranger in his 80's, who lived at Trail Creek. We visited with Ralph at Hay Creek flats. Ralph said, "We almost lost the Trail Creek Bridge, but I got down there with a couple sticks of dynamite and took care of the stump." A tree, with the stump still attached, got hung up under the bridge. He blew it up so it would float on through.

Next we drove to West Glacier. I saw lots of water and lots of debris in the stream. Everyone was on high ground by that time.

The night before, in Columbia Falls, a lot of effort was put into moving people's mobile homes out. They hooked onto them with chains from some of Plum Creek's wheeled log loader that had forks on the front. They didn't bother to unhook the water or the electricity. They just went, in an effort to save people's property. There wasn't a lot of stuff saved because the water came up so fast. People tried to save their household items, but just couldn't get them moved out.

Nyack Flats, and the Blankenship Bridge were hit hard, of course. When the water got down to this side of the canyon, it started to spread out to Columbia Falls and south, that's when it started involving lots of homes and farms. I knew several people whose homes got flooded. Most of the people who lost their homes were in shock, I mean they lost everything.

Sometimes after the water went down, people would find freezers or something that had floated along. They'd call and try and get ahold of whoever lost it. A lot of people put their valuables in the deep freeze thinking it's heavy, air tight, and it's not going to float away. It'll be here when we come back, but then it would float away. The house wasn't there anymore.

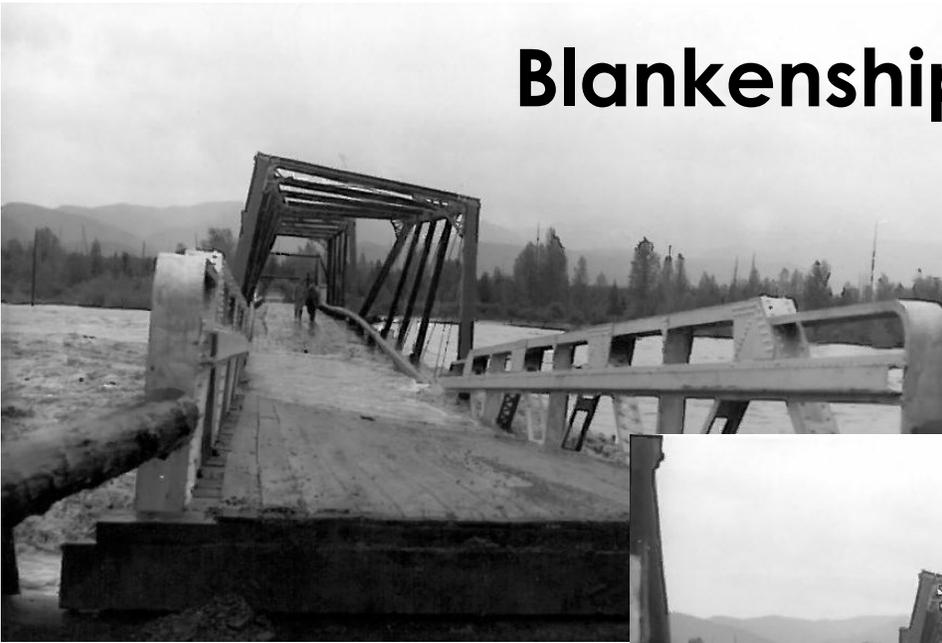
There wasn't anything normal about the next few days because a lot of our men couldn't get to work, people were trying to help other folks save their homes. It was pretty devastating. Businesses ran on a limited crew. Everyone was out helping someone. You've got to remember there weren't near as many people here in 1964 as there are today, so folks were trying to help other folks. The water started going down on the third day, but it took quite a while for it to go down. There was a lot of water. I was small in 1946 when something similar happened. This was more water than there was in 1946, and a lot more people. It caught people by surprise.

There was a weather guy named Ray Hall, I think that's his name, he predicted the big rainfall and he tried to get people excited about it. No one listened until it happened. The Upper South Fork got a heavy rain so they knew it was on its way.

Things have changed so much since then because now we have the Office of Emergency Services. In those days you didn't have anyone telling you it was dangerous to get in there and help. You knew that was the case, and people just went to help anyway. I dislike the hype they build up about weather storms that are coming. I've lived here most of my life, and you just need to be prepared for it. In this case, some people were saying it's going to be bad and they weren't being listened to. We need to realize that Mother Nature can be really cruel and not underestimate what she can do.

Community spirit back in those days reflected around granges, dances, picnics. If someone had tuff luck and their house burnt down, people got together and helped get it back up. I've always said that we lost that. Times change. Maybe we're more affluent.

Blankenship Bridge, 1964



Jerry Mahugh was 19 years old in 1964. He's a third generation resident of the Flathead Valley. Later that summer he would go to work at the Creston Experiment Station, where they ran experiments on wheat, hay, and various grains. He was interested in farming, and did whatever they wanted him to do, from mechanical work, to driving tractors, and hand harvesting crops.

Well, I was going to college in Eugene, Oregon. I was a freshman, on my way home from school the summer of 1964, driving my 1952 Ford. I was kind of happy-go-lucky, ready to be home, ready to have a nice summer, ready to work, and ready to do something different than school. I was coming from Oregon, through Hot Springs, Montana headed towards Elmo. I came down the big hill, and saw the panoramic view of Flathead Lake. I couldn't believe it. The lake was chocolate brown. There were small houses, parts of houses, and entire trees, with leaves and roots still attached, just floating around. The thing that got me the most were all the dead animals. There were pigs and cows. I remember thinking all these dead animals, and all this trash, what becomes of that? I was in shock. I had no idea what happened. I thought, "Holy cow the dam must of broke, or it's been bombed, or something." I just didn't have any idea all this devastation had taken place. I continued on home. It was pretty dramatic. I really didn't know what happened. There was a lot of debris hanging out in the lake for several summers after that.

I got home, rushed into the house, and yelled, "What's going on?" My mom was there. My dad at that particular time, was in Evergreen helping people with their homes. People were trying to get their pets and prescriptions out of their homes. Dad talked about going up and down the highway between Snappy's and K-Mart in a boat. Evergreen was quite full of water.

We knew some people who had water in their homes. They lived on Willow Glen. Water in Evergreen began to dissipate fairly quickly. People began trying to clean out their homes, stacking junk in their yards, and tearing out sheet rock. The usual stuff you do after a flood. I remember people being shocked and in unbelief because nothing like that had ever happened before, not to that extent. Now, every spring people wonder, "Well, if we have a heavy snow melt, and have a warm rain, is it going to flood?" I don't remember anyone talking like that before 1964.

My folks lived by the Conrad Mansion on 5th Ave E. I walked down to Woodland Park. It was full of water. Some of the bridges over the lagoon had floated away. I don't remember seeing any picnic tables floating around, but it was a mess.

Several days later we drove up to West Glacier. I remember going in over the old bridge. I don't remember why. Maybe they had to clear out the new bridge. Maybe they had to check it. I remember a lot of logs sticking out from under the girting of the bridge, right almost to road level. Flood devastation was everywhere. Stuff floating down the river, building products, trees and whatever. There was still a lot of stuff coming down. There was a lot of damage in the park, bridges and temporary culverts.

I remember hearing about the bridge up at Meadow Creek Gorge beyond Spotted Bear. You can drive to it now, but when I was a kid you had to walk or fly in. The bridge is 110' above the water, and it was washed out. It's in a narrow canyon. So all that water, there's no place for it to go. So it took out that bridge.

I remember the train tracks being washed out through the Middle Fork. There wasn't anyone in the Flathead that died, but there were some on the East Side that did. People talked about that. You always wonder, will it happen again?



Evergreen



Bruce Young grew up in Flathead Valley on Flathead Lake's Caroline Point. He was 18 years old during the 1964 flood.

My family built StanCraft boats and had a Marina. My recollection of the 1964 flood is three pronged. First, I remember what the lake looked like. Second, I think of my dad, who was a pilot. My third recollection is helping a family friend clean up their house.

There wasn't anything unusual about that spring. It was actually a pretty nice spring. It did seem like we had a fair amount of snowpack in the mountains all right. I don't think anybody predicted Mother Nature was going to hang around with the warm rain and flush things out of the mountains. It rained heavily for days. I remember because I had been outside playing Legion baseball.

Apparently something let loose and the water just started coming up. It was like nothing we'd ever seen before, not in my 18 years at least. We'd never had flooding like that. Then all the sudden communities were under water, parts of Columbia Falls, parts of the Lower Valley, parts of Airport Road, and parts of Evergreen. You could literally take a boat from Woodland Park to the Airport, well almost. It wasn't something we were familiar with.

I was at home when the flooding started. I remember watching the marina's boat docks start to disappear under the water. As we watched the ropes get tight, we were asking ourselves, "What's going on here?" We had a lot of boats at the marina, and that water came up about 18" over our fixed docks and stayed there for a day or two. We needed to make sure the boats were safe, we retied them to cleats or pilings. We didn't end up having any damage to our boats. It wasn't particularly rough weather, as far as wind was concerned, so retying them wasn't a frantic job.

Our house wasn't in jeopardy. Flooding wasn't an issue for homes around the lake. Most people built back a little ways, but it sure was an issue in the Lower Valley, Evergreen, and Columbia Falls in low areas along the river. On the lake, it was just very surprising the water came up above those fixed docks. They'd been there forever.

My dad was a pilot. He kept his airplane at the City Airport. We knew the flood was peaking and he said 'let's take a look,' and so we did. We flew from Bad Rock Canyon down to Flathead Lake at the peak of the flood. We flew pretty low, so I had quite a bird's eye view. Flying up Bad Rock, I looked down at the highway. It was many feet underwater. This was the first notion I had of how big this flood was. I knew the river was usually 8-10' below the road. All the sudden it was washing the road away, right where you might stop and get that cold drink of water out of the spring. It was spectacular to see from the air. It's something one never forgets when you consider building in areas where you might have flood issues. Once you see something like that, you realize the power of water can change peoples' lives in an instance.

In Columbia Falls there were many houses with just roof tops showing. The river had widened out of its banks in many places, all the way to Flathead Lake, sometimes a mile or so out. There were cows standing in fields with just their heads above water. There were dead cows and pigs floating down the river with the debris. The logs were monumental in size. They'd been washed out of the edges of the river bank all the way down. I saw rooftops floating down the river. So many things that didn't belong in that river were floating down it. It was quite a floodplain.

The most remarkable thing was where the mouth of the Flathead River meets Flathead Lake. The density of the materials coming down was less than the density of the lake. The water literally buckled, making waves where those two densities collided. It looked like a rough ocean for 1-200'. It was quite remarkable. It was really something to witness that kind of power from water.

Then as things receded, I went out to help my friends clean their house. It was Bob Erickson's family. Bob was a contractor, and a very good one. They had a lovely home, and it just got hit by this flood. The water in that house was way up on the wall, I'd say six feet or so, at least, maybe 7'. We helped scrub mud off of the walls. Everything in the house was pretty much destroyed. Televisions, and furniture were ruined, and hauled to the dump. They had to tear down all the sheetrock and start over again. People really were quite resilient; they had to be. They took care of themselves. Everyone pitched in when they could. You didn't hear a lot of the let's sit on our hands and go boohoo. People just got after it, fixed it up, and hoped it didn't happen again.

So much debris washed down the river we called the lake the lumber yard. You could almost walk to Bigfork on trees and sticks. For a month or two after, when you were boating from Lakeside to Woods Bay, you went slowly, and weaved your way around sticks and logs and debris and things of that nature. The debris was just intense on that lake, and washed up on people's shorelines. I'll never forget the size of those logs, and thinking, "Gee this must have been logged 60 years ago because we don't have any trees this big anymore." By that time we all lined up for our Typhoid shots. That was kind of the scene at the lake for a while. The water was very turbid, very unclear. For weeks it wasn't its normal color, but the high water did recede fairly quickly.

Since then, they've changed some things. They've learned more about our snowpack, and monitor it a lot better. They have better computer models, and they treat things differently. If they think we're in a position to have those occurrences, they generally keep the lake and the river down in anticipation of such things. This hasn't happened again, all be it, in my opinion, Mother Nature rules, and it easily could. We dodged a few bullets, in a few big winters, so far, just by not having the collision of Mother Nature's warm weather, and hot rain. We've been lucky, in my opinion.

I think as we look around this county, and locally as well, we have a lot of non-sensitive land that can be built on and utilized in great ways, but we should be very cautious about building on sensitive land or floodplain land. We should be cautious about building on it, and the storm drainage that we're sending into it. It would treat us all better in the long run to approach our watershed in this manner. No question about that. It's not a question of if it will happen again, but when?



1964 Flood Photos





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