

## Flood of 1951

July 13, 1951 has been called by some Black Friday. It was on this day that one of the most costly floods in Kansas' history swept down the Kansas River valley into the Missouri River basin. The Kansas River valley had flooded before but not with this magnitude and damage. During the period of July 9-13, some areas in the Kansas River basin received 18.5 inches of rain. The eastern half of the basin averaged 8 inches.



The flooding started above Manhattan on the Big Blue River. The Manhattan business district was eventually covered with eight feet of water. Downstream flooding continued in Topeka, Lawrence, and Kansas City. In Topeka, about 7,000 buildings were damaged or destroyed. The rising river waters caused transportation throughout the river basin to come to a halt. Roads were washed away, and railroad tracks moved. Communication lines were downed. Altogether one hundred cities and towns were affected; 85,000 persons had to be evacuated from their homes. Over 22,000 residences in the river basin were flooded and nearly 2,500 completely destroyed. Over 336 businesses were destroyed and more than 3,000 flooded. The flood didn't just affect the towns and cities, 10,000 farms also suffered damage. Topsoil from fertile fields was removed by the flood waters, while heavy deposits of sediment and sand were left in their place. The flood claimed 28 lives as more than 1 million acres were flooded. Total damage to the Kansas River Basin and in Kansas City Missouri and Kansas City Kansas exceeded \$725,000,000.

During the depression of the 1930's the federal government had proposed building flood control dams along tributaries of major rivers in Kansas. Part of the New Deal program, these projects would have provided jobs for unemployed workers and perhaps prevented downstream flooding. The Flood Control Act of 1938 had authorized construction of Tuttle Creek Reservoir, but no action had been taken. The Flood Control Act of 1944, the Pick-Sloan Plan had authorized the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Reclamation to coordinate plans along the entire Missouri River basin. Lack of timely action on the building of Tuttle Creek Reservoir. The Flood of 1951 was a direct result of that.

Business men and residents living downstream along the Kansas River increased the pressure on government officials to protect them from another flood. On the other hand vigorous opposition was



directed at officials from the local to national levels. Five small Kansas towns were to be inundated (Garrison, Stockdale, Randolph, Cleburne and Bigelow). At least four other towns would lose substantial earning power (Frankfort, Irving, Manhattan, and Marysville). Three thousand residents of the Blue River Valley would be affected by the dam. Fifteen hundred of these were farm families. Many of them cultivated these family farms for more than 85 years. Transportation facilities, including two railroads would have to be abandoned or moved. Numerous state highways and township roads would need relocated. Schools, churches, cemeteries, and public buildings were to be moved. Approximately 55,000 acres of the fertile farm land would be



The people of the valley fought to maintain their existence but in the end Tuttle Creek Dam and reservoir was built. Construction was completed and operation began July 1, 1962. Total cost was \$80,051,031. The Army Corps of Engineers estimates that since opening, Tuttle Creek Lake has prevented over three billion dollars in flood damages. However, the building of reservoirs along the drainage area did not bring a stop to the flooding. Again in 1993, the Kansas River and the Missouri River basins flooded. This time however, no lives were lost. The struggle between man and nature continues.



Photos of Irving and construction on Tuttle Creek Dam spillway courtesy of U.S. Corps of Engineers, Kansas City District, Manhattan, KS.

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