



People stand on the banks of Cherry Creek during Denver's Great Flood on May 19, 1864. From the Library of Congress Digital Archive

Lessons from the flood of 1864

By Tom Noel

Long, long ago, the Arapaho warned the palefaces swarming into Colorado. After seeing the whites building in the dry bed of Cherry Creek, Chief Little Raven described for the newcomers how floods crashed down the creek unexpectedly.

Among the pioneers ignoring the Arapaho advice was William N. Byers, founder of Colorado's first newspaper, the Rocky Mountain News.

Byers first published the News on April 23, 1859, out of the attic of Uncle Dick Wootton's Western Saloon. A year later, Byers moved to his own building in the dry bed of Cherry Creek to express his commitment to both of the rival towns of Auraria on the West side of the creek and Denver on the east side.

Denver's first deadly flood struck on the night of May 19, 1864. Nathan A. Baker was in the Rocky Mountain News building that night and recalled being awakened by "a roaring noise."

"I looked out of the window and saw a wall of water six feet high rushing down the dry creek bed at terrific speed. Before we could escape from the building, the flood waters reached an embankment connecting the plant with the high shores of the creek. In a few seconds we were completely isolated, with raging water surrounding the building."

Rescuers threw ropes from the bank to

the stranded News staff who escaped the deluge by crawling hand over hand along the rope to shore.

That 1864 flood killed 15 to 20 people and did an estimated \$1 million worth of property damage.

Although Baker described it well, his account was eclipsed by the literary outburst from Professor Owen J. Goldrick. Best known as Denver's first school teacher, Goldrick moonlighted as a journalist. He produced a first-hand flood account unmatched to this day despite valiant efforts to capture the horror of the last month's flooding by intrepid Post reporters.

During the week before May 19, heavy rains had soaked the Cherry Creek drainage, saturating the ground. The result, wrote Goldrick, struck "about the midnight hour of Thursday, when almost all in town were knotted in the peace of sleep, deaf to all noise and blind to all danger, snoring in calm security ... while the full-faced queen of night shed showers of fertility, fringing the feathery cottonwoods with lustre, enameling the housetops with coats of pearl."

Then came "the great noise of mighty waters, like the roaring of Niagara, or the rumbling of an enraged Etna, bust upon us."

"Now the torrent, swelled and thickened, showed itself in sight, sweeping tremendous trees and dwellings before it — a mighty volume of impetuous water, wall-like in

its advancing front, as was the old Red Sea when the Israelites walked through it and volcano-like in its floods of foaming, living lava as it rolled with maddened momentum directly towards the Larimer Street bridge."

Even the inundations of the Nile, even Noah's flood, as Goldrick wrote, "were in danger of being out-deluged by the great phenomenon on '64."

Goldrick drew lessons from the disaster, as Coloradans hopefully will from last month's tragedy: "Men are mere cyphers in creation; the chattels of the elements, and the creatures of circumstances and caprice."

In the 1864 flood, Goldrick found providential warning: "Had we continued thickly settling Cherry Creek as we commenced, and thoughtless of the future, see what terrible destruction would have been our doom, in a few years more, when the waters of heaven, obeying the fixed law would rush down upon us, and slay thousands instead of tens!"

Learning a lesson from that great flood and several others that followed it, Denverites have given Cherry Creek much more room with a walled channel, a greenway and a grassy tree lined boulevard. As Coloradans rebuild, consider giving all our waterways plenty of roomy green space.



Tom Noel welcomes your comments at drcolorado.auraria.edu.