

Impact of the Great Flood of 1927 on Clark County

“April showers bring May flowers”-- so goes the old saying. However, showers that fell in April of 1927 did not have a happy outcome for many. In that spring, unrelenting rainfall resulted in a flood that wreaked havoc on Arkansas and the entire Mississippi River Valley. The overflow became what was arguably the nation’s greatest natural disaster.

The Flood of 1927 brought tremendous destruction to the Mississippi River Valley, taking hundreds of lives and inundating over sixteen million acres of land. Water covered more than 13 percent of the state of Arkansas, damaging approximately 162,000 homes. About 700,000 people were displaced as water covered the land to depths of up to thirty feet. While damage in the Ouachita River valley did not rival that of locations in Arkansas’s Delta, this area did indeed feel the effects of high waters.

The great flood of 1927 actually began in 1926. Heavy rains in Arkansas, Oklahoma, and northern Louisiana during December 1926 resulted in the filling of the Arkansas and Red rivers to capacity. By February of 1927, most all area rivers were near flood stage. Then, in March, rainfall continued across the entire mid-Mississippi River drainage system. In April, torrential rains in Arkansas brought record floods to most streams, including the Ouachita River. The month’s rainfall total was among one of the heaviest one-month amounts ever recorded in the area.

With the heavy rains came reports of overflows. A stage of 20 feet at Arkadelphia was predicted on April 14 as the Ouachita’s tributaries grew “out of their banks.” The Caddo River was expected to be over the highway between Arkadelphia and Hot Springs by the morning of April 15, when the Ouachita stood at 21.7 feet. Travel between Malvern and Arkadelphia was blocked by several feet of water over the highway. The rainfall total at Malvern for April 15 reached 3.1 inches. The water continued to rise, and by noon, predictions of 22.5 to 23.2 feet downstream at Arkadelphia would make this overflow a record. The April 15 *Siftings Herald* proclaimed that “Arkadelphia is practically marooned as far as auto travel is concerned.” Water backed up near the Arkadelphia Milling Company, and Mill Creek was “out of banks and spread across the road.” Streams between Arkadelphia and Delight caused travel in that direction to be “at a standstill.”

The river rose to 22.8 feet before the waters began to recede. Reports of delayed agricultural activity and soil erosion were common. But just as it seemed conditions would improve, “A cloudburst in the Benton section last night (April 19) washed out half a mile of the roadbed of both the Missouri Pacific and Rock Island railroads.” This not only interrupted rail service, but also mail and telephone service, since telephone poles had been washed away as well. Malvern received 2.63 inches of rain on April 20 and 3.52 on April 21, and the Ouachita rose even more. According to one report, Donaldson was “under water for the first time in history.” By April 21, an area paper observed that “the floods are the severest in the history of Arkansas. The Ouachita River at Arkadelphia has set a new record, and is still rising.” The river reached 23 feet by that afternoon and continued to rise.

Finally, the rain stopped and authorities surveyed the overflow’s effects. Damage in the upper Ouachita River valley from the Flood of 1927 did not rival that of locations in Arkansas’s Delta region, but the waters directly impacted many in this area. Arkadelphia Mayor W.H. Allison reported to Arkansas Governor J.E. Martineau that while no locals died in the flood, there were 200 refugees and damages amounted to \$50,000. Red Cross statistics reported 180,000 acres flooded in Clark County, 2,000 individuals affected by the waters, and fifty people cared for by the Red Cross during the emergency period.

