1950

The Mt. Pleasant Story

United States Department of Agriculture

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United States Department of Agriculture
Forest Service
Intermountain Region
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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
FOREST SERVICE
INTERMOUNTAIN REGION
Head of Straight Fork of Pleasant Creek - one source of the punishing Mount Pleasant floods

June 19, 1918, on this and similar gullied, denuded areas of the 17,000-acre Mt. Pleasant, Utah watershed, there began a dramatic serial story. This booklet is the first chapter. Others will be written in the years ahead, not on paper, perhaps, but etched into the daily lives of the local citizens.
Major 20th Century Floods in Mt. Pleasant, Utah

June 19, 1918 - 5 p.m. Cloudburst. One farmer drowned, and property damaged to amount of $100,000. Streets covered with mud, boulders, and debris. One house swept away and many smaller buildings destroyed. Fences torn down. Machinery, wagons, automobiles, and other implements scattered. Cellars flooded. Mud and debris spread over a large area of farmland. Fields and gardens ruined.

(Deseret News, June 20, 1918)

July 9, 1918 - 8:00 p.m. Second flood in three weeks due to cloudburst. City power plant out of commission since June 19 flood, was again damaged. Mud, boulders, and debris strewn over the town and fields. Ground floor of hotel flooded. Homes flooded. Several blocks of the railroad tracks covered with mud and debris.

(Deseret News, July 10, 1918)


(Deseret News, July 31, 1936)

(Taken from "Cloudburst Floods In Utah", Geological Survey Water Supply Paper #994)
JULY 24, 1946. July 24 has a special meaning for the Latter Day Saint people of Utah because it's the day when their forebears first set foot on the broad sagebrush valley where Salt Lake City, Utah now stands.

And so, like the people in many other Utah communities, the folks in Mt. Pleasant were getting ready to have a parade in commemoration of that eventful trek by Brigham Young and party into Salt Lake Valley 99 years before.

Mount Pleasant's main street was gaily decorated. Flags and banners curled lazily in the warm sun.

But tragedy was already being written. Black clouds east of town unleashed one of those typical Utah cloudbursts over the watersheds of Pleasant Creek.

Ominous rumblings from the vicinity of the mountain grew louder.

At 4:20 p.m. when the planned parade was about to begin, a torrent of mud, rocks, and debris spewed forth from the banks of Pleasant Creek and took over the town.
Mud invaded homes. It ruined furniture, interior decorations, stores of food, and flooded basements. Bridges were washed out. Chickens, pigs, and turkeys were swept downstream or smothered in their pens. Water supply lines were washed out. Electric power was interrupted. Gardens and crops were destroyed or damaged. Irrigation structures were knocked out of commission.
THE MAP SHOWS where the flood-producing storm struck the headwaters of Pleasant Creek which emerges from the Wasatch Mountains, meanders through Mt. Pleasant and on into the San Pitch River.

Watershed scientists of the Intermountain Forest & Range Experiment Station estimated that the flood tide travelled 8 to 12 miles an hour.

Samples of the mudflow showed 25 to 60 percent of sediment by volume of water when the town and adjoining farm lands were flooded.
THE FLOOD ROLLED IMMENSE BOULDERS along main street as though they were marbles.

Damages in and adjacent to the town were appraised at $106,000.

An observer at the power plant in Pleasant Creek believed this more serious than the 1918 flood, therefore the biggest one of all time for the area.

Total mud and rock deposited in town and on farmlands was 180 acre-feet.
STORES AND BUSINESS HOUSES were clogged with mud; merchandise was ruined. Business had to be suspended.
A MASS OF MUD, rocks, and debris, up to four feet deep covered parts of the town.
THE RUINOUS FLOOD was traced to sores like this on the Pleasant Creek watershed. Either completely barren or supporting plant life insufficient to absorb the intense cloudburst rains, such cancerous spots as you see in the picture were responsible for disaster.
THEN, DURING THE FALL OF 1950 the following matter-of-fact notice appeared in the Mt. Pleasant Pyramid: "Operations were begun by the Forest Service this fall to repair seriously eroded rangelands on the high ranges of the Wasatch mountains overlooking Mount Pleasant. The sick watershed lands were responsible in 1946 for the mud-rock flood that did $106,000 damage to the community of Mount Pleasant and surrounding farmlands."

Robert H. Park (deceased) was Supervisor of the Manti-LaSal National Forest when the land restoration pilot project was begun under his direction. Supervisor Park said that the first project included about 200 acres of deteriorated land in the head of Dry Pole Fork.

Here, he inspects a completed contour trench on the pilot project, the first step toward reclaiming this portion of the Mount Pleasant watershed. It is known as a "pilot project" because what has been done, and what happens on this area will guide future restoration of all the 1700 acres of damaged watershed land.
ANOTHER VIEW shows the area just after the trenching and seeding job was completed, about October 1, 1950. Supervisor Robert Park stands in a trench at the lower left to show its depth.

The entire trenching project was done by bulldozer -- no hand work -- at a cost of about $40 an acre -- probably the cheapest such flood control work ever accomplished on a national forest up to that time.

Competitive vegetation, like sagebrush was disksed from between the trenches before reseeding. Members of the Intermountain Forest & Range Experiment Station who designed the trenches, said that where plant cover has been depleted and where gullying and erosion have proceeded as far as they have on the Mt. Pleasant watershed, contour trenching and reseeding hastens the work of nature many hundreds of times.
There are about 1,700 acres of bare and gullied flood source areas on the 11,000-acre watershed.

This map shows the proportion of critically eroding areas to the total watershed area.

About 8 miles is the average distance from flood source to town.

CRITICAL FLOOD SOURCE AREAS

PLEASANT CREEK WATERSHED, ABOVE MT. PLEASANT, UTAH
A SCENE similar to that on the first page - taken in 1951, one year after the contour trenches were completed. The gully pattern has been broken up, thus erasing the flood path.

A CLOSER VIEW from above shows reseeded grasses and native weeds becoming well established both in and between the trenches, one year after the work was done.
TWIN "BEFORE AND AFTER" PICTURES across the top of the area just after completion of the contour-trenching-seeding operation above and below, two years later in 1952.

Contour trenching has broken up the gully system allowing the snow and rain water to be pocketed so that it will seep into the ground instead of running uncontrolled over the surface.

Healing is well under way. The area has been fenced. Under protection, a good plant cover will once again do its work of impounding snow water for gradual, normal release by spring and stream, into the valley.
A program of intensive improved grazing management, particularly for the critical flood source area where erosion has progressed beyond the state of natural healing, has been suggested as follows:

1. Construct contour trenches on 1700 acres of the critical source areas and restore vegetative cover.

2. Reseed all critical flood source areas and give them protection until range is restored to productiveness.

3. Provide, by reseeding on downstream areas outside the watershed, for range to take care of livestock now grazing in critical spots.

4. 6470 acres of the watershed land are in private ownership. Local people are taking action to have this critical area added to the National Forest in order that it may be restored, protected and managed with the larger area of National Forest land.

5. Construct 5 miles of drift fence to manage grazing use.

6. Road improvements and reseeding to reduce excessive runoff and erosion, particularly on the Sky Line Drive.

In addition to the reduction and elimination of direct flood damages, the Mount Pleasant community would experience a sense of security if a normal, regulated, dependable stream flowed from the canyon mouth. The program would greatly reduce a constant threat to human life and property. Scenic and recreation values as well as watershed values would be greatly improved.
THIS LUXURIANT GREEN GRASS on a sunny mountain slope of the Manti-LaSal National Forest, is a striking climax to this, the first episode of the story. As restoration work is extended to more parts of the watershed, new chapters are being written under mandate of the cooperative SMALL WATERSHEDS BILL passed by Congress in 1953.

Through cooperative effort by the Forest Service, the Mt. Pleasant City Council, the Soil Conservation District, and the local residents, freedom from floods will, in the coming years, become a reality. A significant start has been made. By working together, the entire sore area can be rebuilt, renewing its ability to send forth water for agriculture, power, and culinary use in the clear, steady flow that means healthy watersheds as well as to furnish forage for livestock and game.