

Skagit River Floods

Historical Newspaper Articles

1895 – 1969

Presentation by: Dan Berentson & Larry Kunzler
Skagit County Commissioners, 2/14/2005

PURPOSE

“The farther backward you can look, the farther forward you are likely to see.” – Winston Churchill

- The purpose is to preserve the past for the future for use in the present.
- Our written past was being lost.
 - Skagit Valley Herald, Skagit Argus and Courier Times all have lost the 1909 flood event articles.

ARTICLES OBTAINED FROM

- Skagit Argus & Burlington Journal
1909 – 1969
- Skagit Valley Herald 1895 – 1969
- Courier Times 1904 – 1951

STATUS

- Skagit Argus & Burlington Journal – Published
- Courier Times – Published
- Skagit Valley Herald – Indexing Complete
- Final Index – April 1, 2005

ISSUES

- All flood events
- Flood Control Meetings
- Fish Related Articles
- Dam Building In Skagit County
- History of Agriculture
- History of Logging
- Erosion Control Projects
- Community History
- Diking and Drainage Issues
- Interesting Anecdotes

Price of Groceries

Chase and Sanborn's		Coffee	1-lb. Bag...	25c
COFFEE DEMONSTRATION SATURDAY!				
Tenderleaf		Tea	Black, Large Size.....	29c
Seedless	Raisins		4-lb. Pkg.	19c
	Snolike	Toilet Tissue	3 rolls.....	10c
	Baker's	Cocoa	1/2-lb. Can.....	10c

Source: Courier Times 4/9/36

Crossman's Market	
FREE DELIVERY EVERY DAY	
FRIDAY, SATURDAY	Phone 3881
GOOD LOCAL BEEF	
Roast	Lb. 15¢
GOOD MILD CURE	
Bacon	In Piece, Lb. 19¢
FANCY CLEAR	
Salt Pork	Lb. 15¢
GOOD LOCAL BEEF	
Short Ribs	Lb. 10¢
SEASONING	BULK PICKLED
Bacon	Pig Feet
Pound 15c	2 pounds 25c
... Better Meats ... Better Service ...	
at CROSSMAN'S	

Source: Courier Times 8/17/39

IMPORTANCE OF HISTORICAL RESEARCH ON THE FLOOD ISSUE

- Can help clear up public's perception of what must be done.
- Can help government agencies correct mistakes passed down through the decades.

STEWART WHITEPAPER

JAMES E. STEWART

**SKAGIT RIVER
FLOOD REPORTS AND
ASSORTED DOCUMENTS**

**A CITIZEN CRITICAL REVIEW
WHITEPAPER**

By:

Larry J. Kunzler

2/14/04

River Flood Report

RIVER FLOOD REPORT REPORT TO BE MADE

A public hearing will be held in the Commercial Club at Mt. Vernon, Washington at 1 p. m., Wednesday, November 26, in connection with a report on preliminary examination of Skagit River with reference to its floods which was directed by the Act of Congress of May 31, 1924.

The purpose of the hearing is to give interested parties an opportunity to present their views and any facts that may have a bearing on the solution of this problem.

The information desired includes the following items:

(a) Frequency, duration and height of floods including (preferably shown on maps) areas subject to floods of different heights.

(b) Detailed estimates of the damage caused by floods to various interests.

(c) Cost of levees (dikes) already constructed and annual cost of maintaining same.

(d) Suggestions as to the methods considered most desirable for flood relief.

(e) Amount of cooperation to be expected on the part of local interests in carrying out any comprehensive scheme for flood relief.

While for accuracy of record all important facts and arguments should be submitted in writing, oral evidence will be heard.

NOVEMBER 20, 1924

While for accuracy of record all important facts and arguments should be submitted in writing, oral evidence will be heard.

Source: Courier Times 11/20/24

E. L. KNAPP STATEMENT

COUNTY OF SHAGIT
State of Washington
Office of County Engineers

Shagit Valley, Washington
November 24th, 1924.

W. J. Harden, Chairman,
Office of Engineers
Was Department
Seattle, Washington.

Sir:

In compliance with the request of Mr. H. B. Willis, Chairman of the Shagit River Improvement Committee, I have prepared a brief outline covering two of the subjects upon which you desired information for your meeting Wednesday, November 24th, in the question of flood control of the Shagit River system.

The two subjects upon which I have been requested to prepare data were first, the frequency, duration and heights of floods, including area subject to floods of different heights, and second, suggestions as to the methods considered most desirable for flood protection or prevention.

Before taking up these two subjects in detail, I wish to present a brief review of the work which has been carried on through my office along the lines of solving the problem of flood control in this valley.

In the winter of 1922, immediately following the flood of 1921, a mass meeting was held to discuss a system at which was formed a citizens committee on flood investigation. To this committee in a large degree, must go the credit for investigating and presenting the work which has already been done. They appeared before the Board of County Commissioners and urged that a levy of one mill be placed on the assessed valuation of Shagit County to provide a fund in accordance with law, known as the River Improvement Fund. It was also pointed out that this fund was to be used for the purpose of an investigation by competent engineers, into the past record of the floods in this valley, a systematic examination of the valley itself, and to gather such hydrographic data as was possible, in order that some comprehensive and practical development could be undertaken to as far as possible meet and successfully cope with future floods and minimize their damage.

In accordance with the wishes of this Citizens Committee above mentioned, a hydraulic engineer of wide reputation, Mr. James E. Stewart, was employed and in the fall of 1922 and the winter of 1923, he made a thorough preliminary examination of the valley and river system, and his exhaustive report is now on file in my office.

He has recommended, first that a flood warning system be installed second, that the silted out of the Egochamps be cleaned; third, that certain lower spots be protected fourth, obtain additional hydrographic data; and fifth, form a conservancy district.

"In accordance with the wishes of this Citizens Committee above mentioned, a hydraulic engineer of wide reputation, Mr. James E. Stewart, was employed and in the fall of 1922 and the winter of 1923, he made a thorough preliminary examination of the valley and river system, and his exhaustive report is now on file in my office. (Emphasis added.)"

*"Because of the limited funds available in time past, such technical data as has been gathered in this vicinity, has been very meager and **calculations of stream flow are at best only an estimate and accurate to within only 10 to 20%. The technical data so far gathered, has been done entirely by the USGS Department of Water Resources, and they have had to rely upon intermittent gage readings, observations and recollections of residents, and more or less disconnected precipitation records.**"*

Colonel Barden Testimony

MINUTES OF HEARING

held at Mt. Vernon, Wash., Nov. 26, 1924,

on Preliminary Examination of

"SKAGIE RIVER, WASHINGTON, WITH A
VIEW TO THE CONTROL OF ITS FLOODS."
(Flood Control Act of May 31, 1924)

*I would like to emphasize the point that Mr. Knapp brought out in his paper, that **before any really scientific plan can be prepared** for the protection of this valley from floods, **it is necessary to have more authoritative information than we now have as to the amount of water carried by the river in time of floods.** . . . The information that was collected by Mr. Stewart and given in his report to the committee was excellent so far as the data that he had to work upon permitted, **but that data was necessarily more or less inaccurate.***

1921 Flood Larger Than 1909?

DECEMBER 22, 1921

BIGGEST FLOOD IN SKAGIT HISTORY SAY OLD-TIMERS

The flood of 1921 is the biggest flood in the history of the Skagit, according to old timers, who recall the floods of 1879, 1888, 1907 and on up to the big flood of 1909 and the 1917 freshet.

Mrs. Dreyer, who lives west of town, tells of the big flood of 1888, when in some places the river backed up higher than this year. She says that not so much damage was done then because there were practically no dikes and the water spread over the lowlands more gradually.

Measurements at the Dalles, near Concrete, show that the flood water this year reached a point two feet higher than at any previous time in the memory of the oldest settler. Charley Moses says that it was the biggest flood, with the biggest volume of water ever carried in the Skagit.

At Van Horn the water was 14½ inches higher than it had ever been. In 1909 the river in the upper valley was only about two-thirds as wide as it is now. Hundreds of acres of land are being washed away every year, by both Skagit and Salko rivers. W. A. Ellison says he has been on the upper river for 21 years and this is the biggest flood he has seen or heard old timers tell about.

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Source: The Courier Times 12/22/21

Burlington 1909 Flood

along the Skagit. Burlington had about one foot of water in some of the streets, and there were many buildings over the town that were not even surrounded by water. Neither the

Thursday was a great day in Burlington and many talked of camping on the heights Tuesday night, but the change came about noon, the water went down rapidly and Burlington has perhaps received less damage then any other town on the Skagit.

Source: Burlington Journal 12/3/09

Burlington 1921 Flood

1921 December Flood

Monday night, December 12, the dikes east and southeast of Burlington broke. Tuesday morning at six o'clock the flood water covered Fairhaven Avenue, and in part the residence districts of the city. At this time the entire lowlands lying east, west, south and in part northwest of Burlington were inundated. The depth of water is on relative, the lamentable fact being that the area of low lands covered with water was wide-spread. That certain spots

Source: Burlington Journal 12/16/21

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

- FLOODS WERE NOT ALWAYS VIEWED AS SOMETHING WE NEEDED TO FEAR
- Before the mouth of the river began to be obstructed, the accumulating waters of the greatest freshets did not overflow the banks. (Source: [The Skagit News](#), 10/21/1895)
- These floods are fraught with no great danger and throughout the county where the dikes gave way there has been no loss of life and but little damage to property and the farmers are not at all discouraged or alarmed about the future. (Source: [The Skagit News-Herald](#), 11/19/06)

➤ . . . The citizens take the freaks of the river in a philosophical manner and are not in the least discouraged.
(Source: [The Skagit News-Herald, 11/19/06](#))

➤ We have done a little wading and done a little swimming,
And we hit for good tall timber when the river got to raging,
But we didn't lose our horses, our cattle, nor our women,
Though the water was rather wet and quite above its staging.
. . . So here's to good ole Mt. Vernon and the fertile Skagit
valley, We don't care for the river if she does go on a spree,
Let her fill her banks and gurgle, and boil, and foam, and
sally, It's the land of milk and honey she is kissing, don't you
see? (Source: [The Skagit News-Herald, 11/19/06](#))

THINGS TO BE DONE

After all, it might have been far worse. No irretrievable damage has been done. The thing to be done now is to clean up, begin the work of repair, and proceed as though nothing had happened. Skagit county has a glorious future and not even extraordinary misfortune can set it back for any length of time. The weak-kneed brothers will move out; those made of sterner stuff will stay and reap the rewards of grit and energy. It is no time for calamity howlers, and they should not be tolerated. Let them go their way; their places will be filled by better men.

No expense should be spared to put the county back to its

Source: Dec. 4, 1909 issue of "The Herald-Recorder," Skagit county's official paper published at Hamilton . Republished in the Courier Times 12/1/49)

1922 Attitudes Towards Floods Changed

JANUARY 5, 1922.

FIRE FIRST GUN IN FLOOD FIGHT

Permanent Organization To Be
Formed "To Improve
Skagit River."

"Let's do the job ourselves."

That the people of the county should take the burden of providing adequate protection on their own shoulders, was the opinion of H.L. Willis, who cited the accomplishment of the city of Galveston [Galveston, TX], which built its mammoth sea wall by bonding its own citizens without any outside assistance. He urged the adoption of organized effort as soon as possible and concluded with, "Let's do the job ourselves." (Source: *The Mount Vernon Argus*, 1/5/22)

1st Flood Committee Formed

Seven Men Will Investigate the Problem of Flood Protection In Skagit County.

The second step toward flood protection in the Skagit valley was taken this week by the appointment by J. Z. Nelson, of a committee of seven to form an organization for the improvement of the Skagit river. Mr. Nelson was named chairman of a mass meeting held here last week and was instructed to name this committee as soon as possible. After studying the problem carefully he has announced the following as composing the group for investigation of the problem: H. L. Willis, Mount Vernon, chairman; John Finstad, Conway; Charles A. Nelson, LaConner; Augustus Brawley, Mount Vernon; Hiram Stump, Edison; Charles Callahan, Burlington, and Will Knutzen, North Avon.

JANUARY 12, 1922.

problem: H. L. Willis, Mount Vernon, chairman; John Finstad, Conway; Charles A. Nelson, LaConner; Augustus Brawley, Mount Vernon; Hiram Stump, Edison; Charles Callahan, Burlington, and Will Knutzen, North Avon.

Source: Mt. Vernon Argus, 1/12/22

THE MORE THINGS CHANGE THE MORE THEY STAY THE SAME

WRITES ABOUT FLOOD CONTROL

John Finstad of Conway Offers Material for Citizens' Consideration.

John Finstad of Conway has written the following article for the Argus in which he takes up the control of the Skagit river. It is well worth the consideration of every citizen of Skagit county and even of the whole Northwest.

In recent years there has been some agitation for the purpose of controlling the floodwaters of the Skagit river, but as time passes on after a disastrous flood, the people of the valley easily forget that they ever had a flood, until another comes along. Then they will have meetings for some time figuring on dredging and straightening the channel, but in the end nothing comes out of it.

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Dredge Necessary For Flood Control, Says James Squires

May 14, 1934

To the Editor of The Argus:

Regarding flood control of rivers of Western Washington, and especially the control of flood waters in the Skagit and Samish rivers, at present we have the most substantial dikes from the Conway country to Blanchard we have ever had, thanks to the generosity of Uncle Sam. And I think everybody concerned appreciates this dike work to the fullest extent.

But let us not forget that no matter how high our dikes are built, if these two rivers get "out of control" like all of us have seen them do in the past, we will have the same old trouble, only worse. In my opinion there are two things to be done, the necessity of which is so self-evident that no proof is required.

Those two things are: dredge and straighten these two rivers properly, and construct adequate spillways.

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Source: Mt. Vernon Argus, 5/17/34

UNDOCUMENTED FLOODS

- 12/20/17 **Mt. Vernon Herald** – This flood event preceded the December 30, 1917 flood meaning like the 1990 and 1995 floods the 1917 flood was a “double-pump” flood event. Second flood is always larger.
- 6/3/18 **Courier Times** – Small flood event but roads between Sedro-Woolley and Hamilton covered with water.
- 2/3/21 **Courier Times** – Small flood but large enough to break dike at Milltown.
- 2/14/24 **Mt. Vernon Argus, Courier Times, Mt. Vernon Daily Herald** – Flood almost as large as 1921 flood.

6 floods were identified in the news articles and none of these floods are reported by USGS or Corps .

February 12, 1924 Flood

Water Reaches Rim of Skagit River

High wind coupled with a heavy
rainfall caused the Skagit river to

yesterday. The stream nearly reached
the flood stage of 23 feet in 1921.

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the flood stage of 23 feet in 1921.

The outer dike near Burlington
broke early yesterday morning and

break at Dry Slough caused the water
to start over Fir island but not to
any great depth.

The outer dike near Burlington
broke early yesterday morning and
would have gone through the second-
ary dike but for the quick action of
the residents in that neighborhood
near Dr. Cleveland's farm.

Source: Mt. Vernon Argus 2/14/24

High Water Floods Many Parts Of District; Railroad Stopped

After several days of rain and chisling the flood had reached its crest,

The bridge over the slough at
Hamilton was washed out, and the
bridge to the Lyman ferry at Ly-
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their banks. Big areas of land in the
Burlington and Sterling districts
were under water Tuesday, and also
in the upper valley. All sloughs,

Sedro-Woolley and the river were un-
der water Tuesday afternoon.

Source: Courier Times 2/14/24

DAMS LED TO FALSE SENSE OF SECURITY

FLOOD CONTROL WILL NOT BE ASSURED UNTIL RUBY CREEK DAM IS FINALLY COMPLETED SAYS ENGINEER

Present dams on the upper Skagit River would not provide flood control for the Skagit Valley in the event of a flood like that of 1917 or 1919, a statement made to a special interview by assistant to Seattle City Engineer J. D. Ross, who was in attendance at a power banquet at day night.

A big flow of water in the Diablo basin in 1915 would continue over the same disasterous previous years, Mr. Ross said.

Existing dams on the Skagit River have the purpose in holding back sudden small freshets and also tend to maintain a higher water level in the valley during extremely dry years, but no safety from heavy

floods can be felt until the completion of the Ruby Creek dam, the final unit of the Seattle project.

The completion of this dam will render impossible even such floods as the one in 1815, which Indian tradition has it, submerged much of the Skagit Valley to a depth of fifteen feet, the engineer believes.

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It is hoped by the city of Seattle that money can be obtained

from the national government to assist with the construction of Ruby Creek dam, which is now being delayed on account of the

the present say not be a ten years. People of appealed to to get such the grounds

Skagit Project facilitated and dams assured solid granite ch are twenty any man can

in the construction of dam on the has been necessary 130 feet through rock to find

Source: Glen Smith, assistant to J.D. Ross, Seattle City Light Mt. Vernon Argus, 1/7/32

DAMS LED TO FALSE SENSE OF SECURITY

"People of the county have been awakened to the fact that existing dams on the upper Skagit do not insure against floods," he stated. "This is an opportune time to demand that something be done."

Source: Charles Gaches, Mt. Vernon Argus, 3/17/32

SPEAKING OF DAMS

- Ross Dam first talked about in January 1922. (Source: *Argus* 1/12/22) Built with funding from federal loan. (Source: *Argus* 8/29/35) Completed construction 1949. (Source: *Burlington Journal* 11/14/63) Originally not planned for flood control. Up to people of Skagit County to provide funding for flood gates. (Source: *Courier Times* 1/19/22)
- Lower Baker Dam first talked about in 1917. (Source: *Skagit County Times*, 4/5/17) Began construction 1924. (Source: *MVDH* 2/4/24) Completed construction October 1925. Lake Shannon named for William D. Shannon, project manager in charge of building dam. (Source: *Courier Times*, 10/15/25) Lake Shannon 250 ft. deep and 8 miles long expected to take 6 weeks to fill up. (Source: *Argus*, 10/29/25) In 1927 dam raised 33 feet to a height of 293 feet. (Source: *MVDH* 5/11/27)

Speaking of Dams and Flood Control

➤ People recognized the importance of dam storage for flood control. John Finstead of Conway wrote: *“Supposing the upper 20 feet of this dam (Ross Dam) was reserved for flood control it would take care of the maximum flow of 50,000 (cfs) for at least twelve days. Stone & Webster are going to build a dam across the Baker canyon back of Concrete in the near future (Lower Baker). Here another lake will be created up to six or seven miles long. If 20 feet was reserved for flood control at this dam, Baker river would be eliminated from any flood danger from that source.”* (Source: John Finstead letter, Mt. Vernon Argus, 3/20/24)

➤ In the 1932 flood, at Baker River before the flood, water was 36 feet below the top of the dam, and at the peak of high water it flowed nine feet deep over the top of the dam. (Source: Courier Times, 3/3/32)

OTHER POINTS OF INTEREST

- Downtown Mt. Vernon went underwater twice, once in 1894 and again in 1897. *(Sources: The Skagit News, 10/21/1895, Mt. Vernon Argus, 10/15/21)*
- The substructure of the BNSF RR bridge obstructs one-sixth of the waterway. *(Source: Mt. Vernon Argus, 5/5/27)*
- Avon By-Pass proposal was dead on arrival at Skagit County because County could not afford it. *(Source: Mt. Vernon Daily Herald 5/21/37)*
- Dredging mouth won't stop high tides therefore concept was never implemented. *(Source: Mt. Vernon Argus, 11/5/36)* The tide at the mouth of the Skagit acts as a dam against the outflow of the flood river, slowing down the flow of water ...*(Source: Skagit Valley Herald 11/5/55)*

OTHER POINTS OF INTEREST

- Skagit County holds the world's record for oats production per acre. In 1935 on the farm of Jim Hulbert was produced 192 bushels. *(Sources: Mt. Vernon Daily Herald, 3/1/39)*
- On the farm of S.A. Medenhall was produced 12,800 full quarts of Marshall strawberries per acre an equivalent to 1,066 crates or nearly 13 tons. During the past several years there have been added an average of 100 farmers per year and the towns have prospered in a like manner. *(Sources: Mt. Vernon Daily Herald, 3/1/39)*

Skagit Best Farmland in Nation

SKAGIT COUNTY LEADS NATION IN SOIL TEST

Seven - Year Government
Probe Brings District
Handsome Tribute.

FROM GUNDERSON FARM

First Seven and Last Two Out of
Twelve Won Locally; Gunder-
son Farm 100 Per Cent.

The United States government has just admitted that Skagit county is the finest farming community in the nation, bar none!

In a series of soil tests extending over the past seven years, which has just been completed, Skagit county soil won nine out of 12 points. An assay of soil taken from the Gunderson estate, south of Clear Lake, was found to be 100 per cent perfect for general agricultural purposes. It was the only soil given a perfect rating.

Analysis of soil in this district took first seven places in the nation, the Cumberland valley, in Maryland, took the next three, and this county took the next two.

The tests were conducted by the United States department of agriculture.

Announcement of the result of the test was made to the Rotary club, Tuesday, by Robert Lord, of the Northwest Implement Co., during a classification talk on farm implements. It was greeted with enthusiasm by the Rotarians, all of whom already knew that this was the finest country in the United States, but who didn't realize how fine it was. Mr. Lord said he got his information from C. I. Hall, who in turn got it from a federal land bank official. The results of the test have not yet been officially announced as yet by the department of agriculture.

The county will receive some invaluable advertising from the test, the results of which will be broadcasted throughout the country.

Mr. Lord gave an extremely interesting talk, tracing the evolution of farm implements, from their crude beginnings to the present.

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(Source: Mt. Vernon Argus, 9/2/25)

First Avenue, 1897 Flood

