

07-31-1976 Estes Park CO – Michael O Conley and Willis Hugh Purdy – LEOs -Attempted Rescue Flood

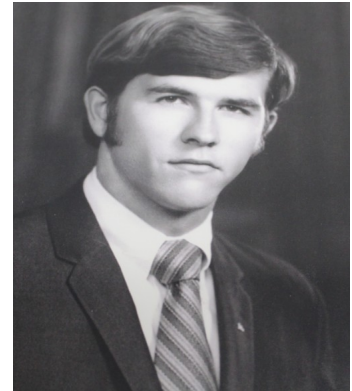
Officer Michael Owen Conley

<https://www.odmp.org/officer/3332-officer-michael-owen-conley>



Estes Park Police Department, Colorado

End of Watch Saturday, July 31, 1976



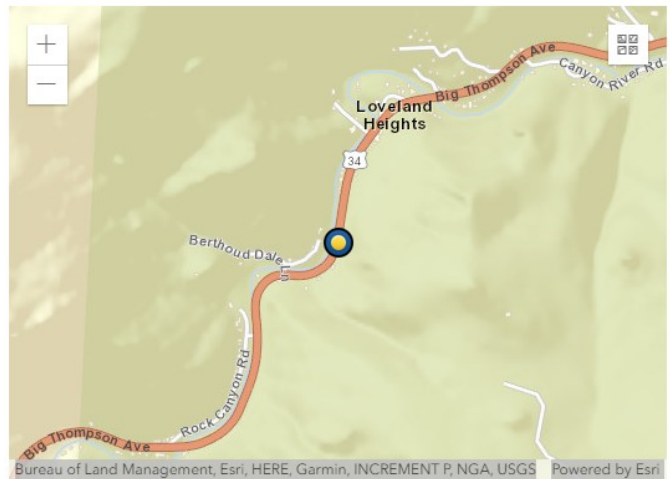
Michael Owen Conley

Officer Michael Conley and Trooper Hugh Purdy, of the Colorado State Patrol, drowned while assisting victims of the Big Thompson Flood.

Officer Conley was off duty at the time and in the area of Big Thompson Canyon when he heard of the need for help. He offered his assistance and was responsible for the rescue of at least 60 people before being killed in the flood.

Officer Conley was survived by his wife.

Natural Disaster, Off Duty, Water Rescue



Sergeant Willis Hugh Purdy

<https://www.odmp.org/officer/10904-sergeant-willis-hugh-purdy>



Colorado State Patrol, Colorado

End of Watch Saturday, July 31, 1976 Tour 26 years

Willis Hugh Purdy

Sergeant Hugh Purdy and Officer Michael Conley, of the Estes Park Police Department, drowned while assisting victims of the Big Thompson Flood.

Sergeant Purdy had been stopping traffic from entering a flooded area when when his vehicle was swept away by flood waters near Drake, Colorado

Sergeant Purdy had served with the Colorado State Patrol for 26 years.



Sergeant Willis Hugh Purdy

<https://csp.colorado.gov/csp-fallen-officer-legacies>

July 31, 1976

Sergeant Purdy had finished his shift when dispatchers informed him of severe weather problems in the Big Thompson Canyon, west of Loveland.

As Purdy proceeded into the canyon, he ordered evacuation in the lower areas below the canyon, a decision that saved hundreds of lives. Purdy encountered the torrent coming from the Devil's Gulch tributary of the Big Thompson River and was attempting to turn himself and others away from it. Purdy's last words to dispatch were at 9:15 p.m.

Purdy was found on a sandbar eight miles below the point where he was last seen. Purdy's patrol car was found two miles east of Drake at the bottom of a pile of eight cars. The only identifiable object was the metal key ring still in the ignition.

Purdy entered the Patrol May 22, 1950.



Big Thompson Flood Victims Memorialized

<https://www.denverpost.com/2006/07/31/big-thompson-flood-victims-memorialized/>

July 31, 2006 By Monty Waley | mwhaley@denverpost.com | The Denver Post

Big Thompson Canyon – Rocky Craig says he was able to save several lives 30 years ago only because State Patrol Officer Willis Hugh Purdy saved him first.

Purdy ordered Craig and his friends to turn back from the lower stretches of the Big Thompson Canyon on July 31, 1976, as the swollen and surging Big Thompson River began to overwhelm homes, cars and people.

"I saw roofs, camper tops and other things that never should be in the water," Craig said.

Craig remembers Purdy standing in the middle of the canyon road, giving orders while the river was starting to cover the road behind him. "He got us out of there, probably just in time."



From left, Julie Kronenberger of Denver and Karen Samson and daughter Cindi Mayhugh, both of Iowa, lost relatives in the 1976 Big Thompson Flood. Survivors unveiled a plaque at Viestenz-Smith Mountain Park on Monday.

Craig and other survivors of the Big Thompson Flood returned Monday to remember those who died in the state's worst natural disaster.

They helped unveil a 7-foot-tall high-water mark to commemorate the flood, which claimed 144 lives, including Purdy's.

Positioned at Viestenz-Smith Mountain Park, just south of Drake, the marker stands in front of the original power plant destroyed by the flood. The marker is a monument to the power of the floodwaters, which at some points of the canyon reached 20 feet high.

Besides the dead, the flood injured 250 people, while more than 800 were evacuated by helicopter. Also destroyed were 418 homes and businesses and more than 430 vehicles. A candlelight vigil Monday night also helped mark the 30th anniversary of the flood, which severely tested the fortitude of the 2,000 or so residents of the canyon, said writer Sharlynn Wamsley.

"They are a hardy group, and they have survived and put their lives back together," said Wamsley, who compiled several survivor stories for a book.

After being turned away by Purdy, Craig and his teenage friends sought refuge in a cabin farther up the canyon. Soon, it was crammed with 37 people, all seeking shelter from the horrific storm, Craig said.

At one point, Craig left the cabin to help people stranded in their cars by the high water. He was almost swept away himself by the rushing tide.

"It just wouldn't quit," Craig said. "I was scared, and my life flashed before my eyes – but being 18, it went by fairly quickly."

It took a few days away from the storm for Craig to realize the danger he was facing. "I broke down because I couldn't believe what happened or what I did for some other people."

But, Craig said, he wouldn't have been able to lend a hand if not for Purdy.

"He helped me out, and I helped them out. It kinda makes sense."

Officer's Last Call In Big Thompson Canyon

[HTTPS://COLORADORESTLESSNATIVE.BLOGSPOT.COM/2010/01/OFFICERS-LAST-CALL-IN-BIG-THOMPSON.HTML](https://coloradorestlessnative.blogspot.com/2010/01/officers-last-call-in-big-thompson.html)

JANUARY 30, 2010 By Rob Carrigan, rob carrigan1@gmail.com

"I'm stuck, I'm right in the middle of it, I can't get out...about half mile East of Drake on the highway. Tell them to get out of the low area down below. And soon as the water starts picking up ... (static)... high ground..." Colorado State Highway Patrol Sergeant Hugh Purdy's last radio transmission at 9:15 on July 31, 1976, recorded by a dispatcher in Greeley.

ONLY ITEM ALLOWING IDENTIFICATION OF PATROL CAR WAS KEY RING FOUND STILL IN IGNITION

A fierce, sudden, but long-lasting, thunderstorm dumped nearly 12 inches of rain in four hours in the Big Thompson River watershed on the eve of the Colorado Centennial celebration.

The river rose 19 feet above normal and raged through the narrow canyon killing 144 people, destroying 418 private residences and 52 businesses (138 other homes had additional harm), accounting for more than \$35.5 million in damage. This earned it the title of the worst natural disaster in Colorado history.



Sergeant Hugh Purdy was off duty and had been watching the Olympics with his wife at their home in Loveland, but was called by dispatcher Jay Lorange, when two of the men under his supervision were dispatched at either end of the canyon upon initial reports of rockslides on U.S. 36, according to David McComb's 1980 book "Big Thompson: Profile of a Natural Disaster".

Officer William Miller, who was at the upper end of the canyon near Estes Park, responded to a citizen's report of rocks in the highway and Officer Tim Littlejohn, who, at the time of the call, was cruising just south of Fort Collins was asked to assist.

Miller became the first to officially report flash flooding when he radioed the following from the upper end of the canyon.

"Advise, we have a flood. The whole mountainside is gone. We have people trapped on the other side. I'm going to have to move out. I'm up to my doors in water! Advise, we can't get to them. I'm going to get out of here before I drown!"

Miller was able to abandon his car and scramble up the hillside to high ground and relative safety.

At about the same time Miller was reporting this, Purdy asked Officer Littlejohn, who had made as far as Drake in the canyon, to stop and setup a roadblock to turn travelers back down the highway. Meanwhile, Purdy continued on toward Drake.

Littlejohn armed with his loudspeaker and flashing lights tried to warn people in Drake to flee for their lives. In his car pushing through the high water, he was able to make it up the grade to Glen Haven. "The officer kept his wheels ahead of the water as it covered the roadway. He could hear the deep rumble of large boulders as they ground together in the



**Sergeant
Hugh Purdy**

dark water, the clatter of rocks bounding off cliff sides, and the splintering of wooden houses. Over his radio he briefly talked to his Sergeant," wrote McComb.

Purdy continued on to see for himself what those under his charge were reporting, but ordered an officer following to turn back and cut off entry into the canyon from below. At 9 p.m. Purdy warned of a sudden rise in the river and told the Patrol to warn those in Loveland and below the narrows of the coming surge.

His next and final transmission told of his own dire circumstances.

Purdy's car was found crushed under a slide of rock and mud near his last known location, two miles downstream from Drake, along with eight other cars.

According to highway patrol reports, the only item that allowed identification of the patrol car was key ring found still in the ignition. His body was discovered on a sandbar, eight miles downstream.

Officer Littlejohn was able to get his patrol car to high ground and spent the night in Drake helping as he could in the aftermath of the deluge. Later, his car became a focal point for the helicopter evacuation.

"I'm grieved when I think I didn't save more people, but how could I imagine what was coming down? I had trouble getting people to believe the feeble excuses I had, much less something of that magnitude. Now, I regret turning people back down the canyon, because we all know that anyone caught in the canyon had no chance. There was no way to foresee where the danger zones would be. Nobody really knew until it got there," Littlejohn related in an oral history interview afterwards.

"The wall of water moved so fast that, even had Highway 34 not been washed out, the only avenue of escape was up the canyon walls. Vehicles and buildings became death traps for unsuspecting campers," according to reports by National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Of those killed, 41 lived in the canyon. The rest were visitors to the area. Five victims reported as dead have never been found. One man reported as missing turned up, alive and well, living in Oklahoma in 2008. **Photo of Highway 34 by W.R. Hanson, U.S.G.S.**

Bill Dye Honored As Everyday Hero

<https://www.eptrail.com/2011/05/17/bill-dye-honored-as-everyday-hero/>

May 17, 2011 By JULEY HARVEY

Estes Park mayor Bill Pinkham thanks an emotional Bill Dye in Drake on Thursday, for his service to Estes Park and America. Dye was honored by his friends, community and Denver 7 Everyday Heroes.

When Bill Dye showed up last Thursday at the monument honoring the life-saving officers who were killed during the Big Thompson flood, he might have thought it's just another day of caring for the area in remembrance of Colorado State Patrolmen Michael Conley and Hugh Purdy. Not so. Dye was the one being honored, by Channel 7, as an "Everyday Hero."

Every week, Denver's Channel 7 salutes Coloradans who are making a difference in their community. The 7Everyday Hero Award is televised weekly at 10 p.m. by 7NEWS anchor Mitch Jelniker. Jelniker came to US 34, below the Drake fire station, at the monument near mile marker 76, to salute Dye, as a Coloradan who initiates solutions, motivates others, represents or serves working families and works on a nonprofit basis.

That describes Dye perfectly, according to his friend of more than a quarter-century, Jim Fretz, who nominated Dye for the award.

"It's supposed to be a surprise," Fretz said, but he had to balance letting people know, with keeping it a surprise.

Fretz works for CDOT and became friends with Dye through the adopt-a-highway program. Dye has adopted stretches of Colorado 7, and most especially the monument on Highway 34, to caretake, in both his name and that of Joe Z. Dye. Fretz said that during Dye's travels through the Big Thompson Canyon, Dye observed the monument and decided to help take care of the memorial to those "who took care of our own."



Estes Park mayor Bill Pinkham thanks an emotional Bill Dye in Drake on Thursday, for his service to Estes Park and America. Dye was honored by his friends, community and Denver 7 Everyday Heroes.



Bill Dye explains the photos of his service during the Second World War to assembled friends and family on Thursday. Dye was recognised by Denver's KLTV Channel 7 as an Everyday Hero for both his military service and his continued community service, cleaning along South St. Vrain Avenue and near the Big Thompson Flood memorial in Drake.

That has not always been easy. Maintaining the area once got Dye into a patch of poison ivy.

Dye retired from State Farm Insurance as a manager, but did not retire from community service. He continued his many volunteer efforts. He served as historian for the Colorado Chapter of Chartered Casualty Property Underwriters for 40 years, displaying the chapter's historical records at many functions, including the national convention in Denver in 2009. An annual scholarship in his name was established in 2008, to help those pursuing insurance education.

Serving others and maintaining history come naturally to Dye, a World War II veteran and survivor of the battle of the Coral Sea. Fretz said Dye, at 19, was among the crew ordered to bail off the USS Lexington, after the aircraft carrier was torpedoed in the Coral Sea. The Lexington had sailed out of Pearl Harbor the day before the Japanese attacked.

Fretz said that when the order to abandon ship was given on the Lexington, Dye wanted to go back for his wallet. It had \$26 in it. Officers would not allow him to retrieve it, and Fretz said the wallet is still on the ship.

"He'd been invited to have dinner in Pearl Harbor, and he was so mad he'd missed it," Fretz said of the ship's being deployed before the attack. "He thinks (they) had wind of it happening and wanted at least one carrier out of there."

Among Dye's war mementos are a picture of the battle of the Coral Sea and one of the signing of the treaty ending World War II. Dye has donated memorabilia to 10 museums. Fretz said Dye regularly gives talks on Veterans Day, and is still donating time, memorabilia and money to various organizations. Dye has also been doing the adopt-a-highway program for almost 30 years, picking up trash and beautifying the area.

Fretz nominated his friend for the Everyday Hero award in December of 2010 and heard from the television station about the award three months later. Since then, Fretz tried to organize a big surprise for Dye, including having family members, including his wife, Lois, and daughters Carrie, Dayna and Julie, there for the recognition.

The monument Dye tends is a tribute to Officer Michael Conley

35 Years Gone Survivors, Family, Friends Remember Big Thompson Flood

<https://www.reporterherald.com/2011/08/01/35-years-gone-survivors-family-friends-remember-big-thompson-flood/>

August 1, 2011 By MADELINE NOVEY

Phyllis (Conley) Marks still has the pair of blue suede heels she wore the night of the Big Thompson flood.

She and her husband Michael were driving up the Big Thompson Canyon on July 31, 1976, when the river's water rapidly rose, threatening to wash aside everything in its path. Going along in their Oldsmobile, the couple stopped in front of a fallen boulder on the

road. Mike was an off-duty police officer and called Colorado State Patrol to warn them not to let anyone drive up into the canyon. Then he told Phyllis to climb the mountain across the road from where they were staying, at Drake's Waltonia Motel on U.S. 34.

So she did.

Mike went back to help others get to safety. He would not survive. Phyllis did.

Crossing the street, Phyllis waded through the angry waters and fell into a ravine. She pulled herself up on a perfectly placed rock and out of the water and climbed the nearby mountain face.

"That's when Jackie and I met," Phyllis said Sunday at the event held to mark the 35th anniversary of the Big Thompson flood.

Jackie (Henning) Vaverka was in the canyon on vacation with her aunt and uncle, her two cousins and their family that night. Having hiked the mountain across from the Waltonia many times before with her parents, Vaverka knew the route well and climbed ahead of her six companions.

They veered away from a fallen power line, but she and Marks found each other and pushed on.

Vaverka was 18 and Marks 24. As the more-mature one, Marks thought it was her responsibility to care for Vaverka, but that wasn't the case.

"She took care of me," Marks told the more than 100 people who stood and sat in folding chairs and on rocks to hear her and others speak at the memorial ceremony next to the Big Thompson Volunteer Fire Department just below Drake.

Two years after the flood, Vaverka was hiking up the same mountain that had saved hers and so many other lives when she found the blue suede high heels Marks had thrown off that fateful night.



Phyllis (Conley) Marks, a survivor of the Big Thompson river flood of 1976, looks up while speaking at the 35th annual memorial of the flood Sunday evening at the Big Thompson Volunteer Fire Department near Drake. Marks lost her husband Michael Conley, an Estes park police officer, in the flood and gave a message titled "Time Does Heal." (Photo by Sam Noblett)



Bob Ault, former police chief of Estes Park, bows his head during a prayer Sunday at a 35th anniversary remembrance held for the Big Thompson flood of 1976 near Drake. (Photo by Sam Noblett)

On a trip to visit another friend, she drove from Nebraska to Colorado Springs to return them.

Sunday was the first time in 10 years — since the 25th anniversary of the flood — that the close friends had seen one another.

When asked if it seemed possible that 35 years had passed, Vaverka said, “Yes and no.”

Yes, in that she has grown up, had kids and lived her life, and no, because sometimes, she said, it feels like yesterday the flood devastated so many.

Near the end of the memorial service, the Revs. Harvey Ruesegger and Jim Sheets read the names of the 144 flood victims — 139 died and five were presumed dead.

As they heard the names of loved ones read aloud in the quiet dusk, people flipped on their little electric candles and sat — some solemnly, some with eyes closed and a few with tissues in hand to blot their tear-splashed cheeks.

When Sheets read aloud the last two names — Edna May and Fred Woodring, of Estes Park — Ruesegger asked everyone remaining to light their candles.

With that, little warm lights lit the memorial area and thunder boomed in the distance, as if to hearken back 35 years. Madeline Novey can be reached at 669-5050, ext. 516, or mnovey@reporter-herald.com.

Strong Storm Was Unique

Even today, future atmospheric scientists are studying the storm behind the 1976 Big Thompson flood in Colorado State University professor Richard Johnson’s graduate-level meteorology course.



**A teddy bear sits on the 1976 Big Thompson Flood Memorial during the service held Sunday near Drake marking 35 years since the flood took 144 lives.
(Photo by Sam Noblett)**

Johnson didn't move to Fort Collins until 1980, but immediately knew of the wall of water that rushed down the Big Thompson River and killed 139 people and presumably five others. He heard of the tens of millions of dollars in property damage, and heard about the heart-wrenching reports over the radio.

And in it all, he learned what made the storm on July 31, 1976, so unique.

Survivors said ominous and dark clouds foreshadowed the events of that fatal Sunday.

A Canadian high-pressure system pushed into the upper Midwest, Johnson said, and brought with it a strong up-slope flow from the East to the West into Colorado. With the increase in elevation into the Rockies, air cooled, condensed and turned to rain. But this was not your average rain.

"This was the darnedest rain I was ever in," then-Capt. William Thomas of the Colorado State Patrol told the Reporter-Herald in 1996. "Raindrops as big as the average man's thumb coming straight down, lukewarm, and not an ounce of wind. It was hard to breathe, incidentally, there was so much water in the air."

Loveland got no rain that day, but 10 inches drowned the triangle between Estes Park, Drake and Glen Haven.

A strong low-level jet, or current of wind, in the low atmosphere fed the storm and exacerbated rainfall, Johnson said.

Colorado storms earlier this summer produced 2 to 3 inches of rain, he said, and some weak Canadian high-pressure systems moved into the area, but nothing quite like the one that fueled the 1976 storm.

Since then, the storm that dumped 10 inches of water and flooded Fort Collins in June 1997 has come close or shared similar tropical characteristics.

Radar capabilities have improved significantly since the Big Thompson flood, Johnson said, with warnings of flood going out almost immediately.

Even so, the specifics of flash floods are difficult to foresee.

"You can predict there is a likelihood of extreme rainfall, but to be able to predict where it might convene is impossible given the current science," Johnson said. Madeline Novey can be reached at 669-5050, ext. 516, or mnovey@reporter-herald.com.

Trooper Credited For Saving 'Hundreds' Of Lives During Deadly Flood Honored

<https://www.9news.com/article/news/local/trooper-credited-for-saving-hundreds-of-lives-during-deadly-flood-honored/73-579224377>

July 31, 2018 Author: Mike Grady KUSA

A couple of CSP troopers lifted the cover off a new blue sign that reads "In Memory of State Trooper Willis Purdy" on Tuesday. The story behind that sign was made in the 70s, but continues to resonate today.

A group of friends, family and admiring Colorado State Patrol troopers came together in the Big Thompson Canyon on Highway 34 west of Loveland to honor CSP Sergeant Willis H. Purdy.

"Forty two years ago today, he gave his life in service to the people of Colorado," Colorado State Patrol Chief Matt Packard said.

Purdy was wrapping up his shift on July 31, 1976 when he received a radio dispatch of severe weather in Big Thompson Canyon.

"My mom called me up and said 'your dad is not home,'" said Mark Purdy, son of Sgt. Willis Purdy, recalled on Tuesday.

His father was rushing to help people evacuate the Canyon as torrential rains caused a flash flood that claimed 140 lives.



Credit: KUSA

"Part of that story is his last radio communication," Packard said. "He said, 'I'm not going to make it out of here. Warn everybody below. The water is coming and they need to get out.' That transmission, that order, that directive is credited with saving hundreds of lives."

Sgt. Purdy's last transmission to dispatch was at 9 p.m. that night. His body was later discovered on a sandbar.

"His family has the ability to say without question he saved hundreds of lives," Packard said.

"I'm willing to bet a Colorado State trooper will make a traffic stop here and they will see Sgt. Purdy's name and this sign and remember what he did," Packard said. "He's continuing to influence our organization in doing what's right."

This is a moment for a hero's son to reflect on the actions of his father.

"He loved what he did," Mark Purdy said. "I'm guessing he knew what the potential was when he headed up the Canyon with the amount of rain that was falling, but he didn't hesitate. I knew he wouldn't. To try to do what he could to save people."

Purdy is one of 28 troopers who have been killed on the job.

Val Mccullough: Fires, Floods And First Responders

<https://www.reporterherald.com/2020/11/07/val-mccullough-fires-floods-and-first-responders/>

November 7, 2020 By VAL MCCULLOUGH

That morning, I had no idea what the next 24 hours would bring.

It happened decades ago, but I remember it still.

I generally worked at the Larimer County Mental Health Clinic a half-day on Saturdays — from 10 a.m. to midafternoon.

That Saturday morning — with two of our kiddos having dibs on our cars for their summer jobs — our family was short a car, so Bill drove me to work.

We agreed I'd start walking home at 3:15 p.m. and Bill would pick me up somewhere along the way.

That afternoon — as I walked toward home — I felt an unusual humidity and mugginess in the air. The overcast sky hung heavy.

Back then — in 1976 — almost every afternoon clouds billowed upward, then broke loose in a refreshing thunderstorm.

But not that day.

Within the next 24 hours, the Big Thompson Flood of 1976 would kill hundreds of innocent people.

Why do I write about a July flood as winter approaches?

I'm writing this because I see parallels between floods and wildfires in Colorado. Both destroy in the blink of an eye.

For readers unfamiliar with the Big Thompson Flood, here's a recap. The night of July 31, 1976, a 19-foot wall of water roared down the Big Thompson Canyon, killing 144 people, demolishing 418 homes and 52 businesses costing millions of dollars of damages.

In 2013 a second flood took eight lives in Colorado, again costing millions of dollars in damages.

Following the floods, repairs have been made over the decades to make the canyon safer. I also write this because I'm in awe of our first responders who risk their lives trying to save us both in fire and flood.

Will we be sending them to infernos or floods every year?

Sadly, not all first responders make it home to their families.

Colorado State Patrol officer Michael Conley and State Trooper Hugh Purdy saved over 60 people from drowning before the 1976 flood took their lives.

The public also responds to catastrophes with open hearts. Businesses and individuals offer free food and shelter and they're also heroes.

But because we keep doing the same thing over and over, I see no reason why next year will give forests a pass when it comes to wildfires.

Certainly, forest floors need a real cleanup job, and public agencies need to step up to the plate.

But we — as citizens — also need to step up to the plate.

Most of us live emissions-heavy lifestyles, leading to decades of drought and warm winters which stresses forests and increases likelihood of fires.

Our warmer winters have led to a population explosion of bark beetles.

Now, even if we take our feet off gas pedals or give up that emissions-heavy trip to Hawaii — things won't change overnight.

But we must start somewhere.

Often, we don't know where to start because it's hard to wrap our heads around complex solutions.

It's even harder to face the ominous threats facing us.

Sometimes, a little gallows humor helps.

So, here are a few enjoyable quips from a climate website, http://www.die-klimaschutz-baustelle.de/climate_change_jokes.html.

- Why does the climate want privacy? It is changing.
- Two planets meet. The first one asks: "How are you?" "Not so well", the second answered "I've got the Homo Sapiens." "Don't worry," the other replied, "I had the same. That won't last long."

And from Trevor Noah, host of The Daily Show:

"You know the crazy people you see in the streets shouting that the world is ending? Turns out, they're all actually climate scientists."

It's been said that a joke is truth wrapped in a smile.

Let's smile and tackle whatever comes our way.

The Big Thompson Canyon Flood of 1976

<https://barryeisenbergauthor.com/blog/the-big-thompson-canyon-flood-of-1976>

by Barry Eisenberg

I recently heard about a 45th anniversary memorial service for victims of the Big Thompson Canyon flood. Here's how the flood was reported in the in the **Coloradoan**: On July 31, 1976, the skies opened up over the Big Thompson Canyon, setting off the deadliest natural disaster in Colorado history that claimed 144 lives... A year's worth of rain fell in 70 minutes. Clouds piled 12 miles into the mountain sky unleashed a deluge, setting off the most powerful flood since glaciers retreated 10,000 years ago. The chaos along an otherwise trickling Big Thompson River... carved out a chapter in the history books as Colorado's deadliest natural disaster.

Amy and I were there on that fateful day. And as much as that day has become powerfully etched in my memory, so is a phone call I had about the experience three days later.

In the summer of 1976, Amy and I took a four-week cross-country camping trip, setting out in the second week of July. Amy's Dad was rightly concerned that my old hand-me-down Toyota, aptly nicknamed Rusty, could give us trouble, so he lent us his relatively new Dodge Dart. Off we went with our blue tent, sleeping bags, a Coleman stove and lantern, and an abundance of excitement about our first adventure together.



Cross country camping tent

Our plan was to take a slightly southern route out west, then head north from Los Angeles to San Francisco and take a northern route back to the east coast. Armed with a stack of AAA maps, our goal was to travel through at least thirty states along the way.

Amy's brother Mike and his then-wife Pat were also taking a cross country trip that summer. They were traveling in a van, which was large enough to accommodate a bed and all the basic supplies for extended travel. We had planned to rendezvous in Colorado in late July. Amy and I had assumed that wherever we met them, most probably at a national park, Mike and Pat would stay in their van overnight while we would set up our tent in the park's campground.

Mike then told us that when he mentioned his plans for a cross-country trip to some colleagues, one said that his family owned a small cabin on the ridge of Big Thompson Canyon which they weren't using that summer. He insisted that Mike and his family stay there if we thought we'd be in the vicinity. The key was under the mat, he said, adding that we should make ourselves feel at home.

Given the generous offer of the cabin, we planned to meet Mike and Pat on the morning of July 31 at Big Thompson Canyon. After settling into the quaint two-bedroom cabin, we drove down a steep and narrow road to a visitor parking area at the base of the canyon. On the way down, we guzzled Mountain Dew and sang along with Peter Frampton as he crooned *Baby, I Love Your Way* on the car radio.

Formed by the Big Thompson River, the canyon is part of the Estes Park system. It was an awesome sight. Towering granite walls emanate from the complex boulder formations along the riverbank and rise majestically skyward, forebodingly steep in some areas.

We walked along the riverbank's giant rocks, all the while taken by their breathtaking size, some fifteen feet in length, some considerably more. We later learned that some of the boulders weighed over 100 tons!

The weather was perfect and the sky was clear as we started our hike. About an hour later, in mid-afternoon, a light rain started to fall. It was just a drizzle and we continued our hike through the canyon, following the riverbank and trails along the way. Kayakers and rafters were delighting in the mild rapids, and the more experienced hikers, loaded with camping gear, were in seventh heaven, traversing the bigger boulders and wading through the shallows.

It was at once tranquil and spectacular. The canyon walls had an enveloping contour. It felt like we were being shielded, protected. At the same time, we were awestruck by their height and splendor. The shimmering sun added vibrancy to the earthy tones of the magnificent landscape.

As mid-afternoon gave way to late afternoon, the rain began to intensify. It transitioned from a sprinkle to a moderate rainfall in what seemed like seconds. The more serious hikers took all this in stride. They had all the gear necessary to keep dry and wouldn't want to sacrifice a moment of outdoor pleasure because of something as innocuous as rain. The few kayakers we passed didn't seem to be heading toward the riverbank.

We decided not to brave the rain. We didn't have our jackets, and in any case, we wouldn't get back to the cabin until close to dinner time, we thought. It took us a while to retrace our route and get back to our car.

By the time we got there, the rain had grown far more intense, pelting the car windows in a way that rendered the windshield wipers useless. We drove up the steep roads and got back to the cabin, situated close to the canyon ridge, and dashed the very few feet from the car into the cabin, getting completely soaked.

As the evening wore on, the rain grew even more forceful. Pounding thunderously against the roof and windows, it sounded like tympanic chaos, brutally unrelenting. The lights, the phone, the pelting rain... the cabin seemed possessed. But being young and adventurous – well, if we're being honest, oblivious and immature – we thought it more fun than worrisome. We cooked some spaghetti, topped it with marinara sauce, and there was our dinner. We discovered a stack of board games in a cabinet and had a fun hour or two playing Monopoly by candlelight.

At some point in the late evening – I can't recall when – the rainstorm abated. We took a deep breath and even laughed at the predicament. And, wow, we thought, how lucky we were to have gotten out of the canyon just in time. At that moment, "how lucky" meant that we avoided getting totally drenched. We had no idea that we were lucky on a whole different level of magnitude.

The next morning could not have been more beautiful. The sky was cloudless, gorgeous, and the sun radiated a soothing warmth. Because of our travel schedules, we were not able to head back into the canyon for more sightseeing and hiking. Mike and Pat and Amy and I packed up our respective cars, said our good-byes, and went our separate ways, steering around downed trees and large branches as we drove out of the area.

Back then, our only media device was our car radio. We kept the radio on the FM band for music, picking up reception from whatever local stations we were in transmission range of – rock, bluegrass, country – lots and lots of country stations out west. We rarely listened to AM radio news reports. We had no idea about the tragedy that took place at the Big Thompson River in the canyon just below the cabin. We did see some emergency vehicles and related activity as we left. But being young and carefree, we didn't pay much attention.

Amy and I generally called our parents every few days to check in. A day or two before we got to Thompson Canyon, we had spoken with our parents and we let them know where we would be over the next few days, adding that we might stay in a nearby cabin or camp out along the river.

I didn't call my parents again until three days after we left the canyon. My Mom answered with a tentative hello.

"Hi Mom," I said casually, much as I would on any other call to her.

Then my mother said my name. She said it slowly, questioningly, as though it was completely unexpected that I would be calling. There was a surreal quality to the tone of her voice. It sounded full of dread but with a just a hint, a breath, of relief. Then she hesitated, and a second later started to cry. To this day, I remember so clearly how she said my name. It's haunting.

At that instant, I assumed something horrible happened to someone at home. "Mom, what's going on? Is everyone ok?" Sobbing, her voice quivering, she asked, "Don't you know what happened at Thompson Canyon?"

"No. Other than there was a ton of rain. Really intense. Why? What happened?"

Then she said there was a terrible flood in the canyon. Lots of people died. They don't know how many, a big rescue effort was under way, but it was a lot of people, including campers. I was stunned. I felt horrified, not to mention stupid and ignorant. It never occurred to us that the rain we experienced would produce a catastrophe worthy of national headlines.

My mother then told me that my father and Amy's father were scheduled to leave that afternoon for Colorado. They had made arrangements with the local authorities to look at the bodies that had not yet been identified. A helicopter was going to take them to the place where the bodies were being held.

In the course of three unimaginably grueling days of knowing about the awful tragedy in Thompson Canyon and that we were there – conceivably in the campgrounds right on the riverbank – our parents were succumbing to the horrifying possibility that we were among those who perished.

While Amy and I were spending three fun-filled days circumnavigating the Rockies and drinking freshly brewed Coors in Golden, Colorado, our moms and dads were living through every parent's worst nightmare.

One hundred forty-four people lost their lives on July 31, 1976. More than 250 suffered injuries. Several hundred people had to be helicoptered out of the canyon the following day,

that very sunny August 1. Five people were never found, including two-year-old Rochelle Rogers and ten-year-old Teresa Graham.

While we were lucky in the most profound sense, so many were not. A slice of America was lost that day. People from all over the country. All ages. Chad Haskell was 5 years old. Valah Constance Greenlee was 84. Five people from the Mares family lost their lives, Renee and James Jr. and their three children, Allyson, 5, Ricky, 6, and Jamie, 8. Residents, campers, tourists... the ferocious rampaging torrent spared no one in its path.

And then there were the heroes, like Sgt. Willis Hugh Purdy. As reported in the **Coloradoan**:

"I'm stuck. I'm right in the middle of it. I can't get out..." said Colorado State Patrol Sgt. Willis Hugh Purdy in his last radio transmission before being swept away, killed by the water.

He's credited with saving hundreds of lives by issuing evacuations lower in the canyon.

Our parents' agony lasted three days. It was concentrated, intense, but mercifully short-lived. But for the families of 144 people, the pain, loss, and presumably feelings of helplessness have lasted 45 years. Thanks to the **1976 Big Thompson Flood Memorial**, families and loved ones have a common space to honor those they lost. Reading through the tributes, I am inspired by how many of those who lost loved ones in the great flood turned their attention to helping others. Their devastation opened their hearts. They know what soul-wrenching pain feels like and became moved to help others sidestep it or get through it.

Judy Seibert Kornegay lost her parents, Casper and Annie Seibert, who had visited Big Thompson Canyon from Texas. She shared her thoughts at a memorial service for the victims:

"I'll never quit missing my parents. I can only make use of past hardships... to help someone who is unfortunate and who is faced with similar difficulties of sudden loss. Then something good can come of what we have endured, and the world will be a better place because of it. The good we do each day for others can live on, long after the sadness has gone, and the pain has passed away. I love you Mom and Dad."

Amy and I will never know who, if any, of the people we passed on that July afternoon – those frolicking in the river or soaking up the sun and the freshness of the outdoors – didn't live to experience that next sunny day. Or if the parents of Rochelle Rogers have ever been able to enjoy a completely unconditional smile in 45 years.

There are moments in our lives that touch us in the most powerful of ways, visceral reminders of the importance of cherishing life. Amy and I grew a little older on that extraordinary day in 1976, and maybe a little wiser. My mother's anguished voice that day still rings in my head and my heart still aches at the thought of having put her through that.

But above all, I find it so inspiring that the families of 144 people have found purpose through their tragedy, gathering to honor and remember their loved ones on the anniversaries of the Big Thompson River flood, extending emotional generosity to uplift one another and through their bonds strive for inner peace.



1976 Big Thompson Flood, Colorado — Thirty Years Later

"I'm stuck, I'm right in the middle of it, I can't get out . . . about a half mile east of Drake on the highway. Get the cars out of the low areas down below . . ."

Last words received from Sergeant Willis Hugh Purdy, Colorado State Patrol. Sergeant Purdy was a victim and a hero of the Big Thompson Flood of 1976. Purdy had finished his shift when Greeley dispatchers informed him of severe weather problems in the Big Thompson Canyon. As Purdy proceeded into the canyon, he ordered the evacuation of the lower areas below the canyon, a decision that saved hundreds of lives. Purdy was posthumously awarded the Colorado State Patrol Medal of Valor. Two years later, a memorial was dedicated in the Big Thompson Canyon, which is located about 1.3 miles downstream from Drake, honoring Sergeant Purdy and Estes Park Officer Michael Conley.

(Courtesy of The Colorado Law Enforcement Memorial Book Online: <http://www.cslp.state.co.us/academy/arc/fallen.html>)

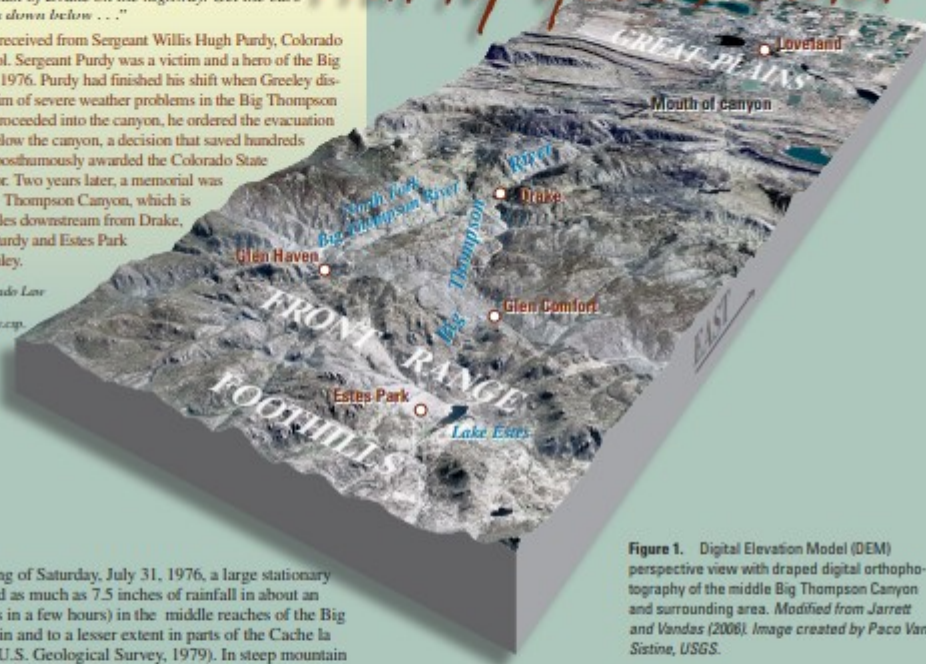


Figure 1. Digital Elevation Model (DEM) perspective view with draped digital orthophotography of the middle Big Thompson Canyon and surrounding area. Modified from Jarrett and Vandas (2006). Image created by Paco Van Sistine, USGS.

Introduction

In the early evening of Saturday, July 31, 1976, a large stationary thunderstorm released as much as 7.5 inches of rainfall in about an hour (about 12 inches in a few hours) in the middle reaches of the Big Thompson River Basin and to a lesser extent in parts of the Cache la Poudre River Basin (U.S. Geological Survey, 1979). In steep mountain terrain with thin or no soil, this large amount of rainfall in such a short period of time produced a flash flood that caught residents and tourists by surprise. The sudden flood that churned down the narrow Big Thompson Canyon scoured the river channel that night, caused over \$35 million in damages (1977 dollars) to 418 homes and businesses, many mobile homes, 438 automobiles, numerous bridges, paved and unpaved roads, power and telephone lines, and many other structures. The tragedy claimed the lives of 144 people, including two law enforcement officers trying to evacuate people in danger, and there were 250 reported injuries (U.S. Geological Survey, 1979). Scores of other people narrowly escaped with their lives. More than 800 people were evacuated by helicopter the following morning.

July 2006 revisits the 30th anniversary of the Big Thompson flood—one of the most deadly flash floods in Colorado's recorded history (Jarrett and Vandas, 2006). Many residents and visitors who were present in the Big Thompson Canyon on July 31, 1976, recall the flood with vivid memories. This fact sheet presents a summary of the hydrologic conditions of the 1976 flood, describes some of the advances in U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) flood science as a consequence of this disaster, and provides a reminder that extreme floods like the 1976 Big Thompson flood have occurred in other locations in Colorado in the past and will occur again. The USGS conducts research and operates a Nationwide streamgage network to help understand and predict the magnitude and likelihood of large streamflow events such as the Big Thompson flood.

The Flood

A complex system of thunderstorms produced intense rainfall from about 6 to 7 pm (MDT) on July 31, 1976, in the Front Range foothills of Colorado's Big Thompson River (fig. 1) and Cache la Poudre River Basins in Larimer County. This Saturday night marked the eve of Colorado's 100th anniversary of Statehood, and at the height of the tourist season an estimated 3,500 people were enjoying the cool beauty and recreation of the mountain canyons, unaware of the unusual and unique atmospheric conditions that were occurring.

The topography of the affected area is characterized by narrow canyons bordered by steep, rocky, mountain slopes (fig. 1). On July 31, 1976, a moist airmass began pushing westward from the Great Plains on the east side of the Rockies. During the afternoon, the moist air rose up the mountain slopes and the unstable air began to build into thunderstorms; a schematic illustration showing the cause of the storm and flood is provided in figure 2. Large thunderstorms formed along the Front Range and began to dump heavy rain on the region about 6:30 p.m. This event turned deadly when high-altitude westerly winds, which are usually strong enough to push thunderstorms eastward and out of the area, were unusually weak. The thunderstorms stalled for more than 3 hours over the Big Thompson Canyon, and built into a gigantic thunderstorm system. The thunderstorms produced as much as 12–14 inches of

Click HERE: https://pubs.usgs.gov/fs/2006/3095/pdf/FS06-3095_508.pdf