



The Riverside Motel was swamped during the 1964 flood, when the Rogue River peaked 14.5 feet above flood stage the morning of Dec. 23. Huge swaths of the Rogue, Applegate and Illinois river valleys were stinking mud pits in the aftermath.

Once in a while, the mighty Rogue overflows its banks

1964 flood was a 'total life-changing event'

By Jeff Duwel
of the Daily Courier

The Rogue River churned itself up to over 23,000 cubic feet per second and 11 feet on the gauge in January, a mighty, muddy sight and its highest mark since December 2016.

But that was 9 feet below flood stage.

Imagine eight times more water.

The worst flood in recorded history on the Rogue River came in 1861, the same year California's Sacramento Valley was under water for months.

The Rogue flowed at over 170,000 cfs and reached a stunning 43 feet.

Grants Pass didn't hardly exist in 1861, so the floods people can relate more to are 1927, 1955, 1964, 1974, 1997 and 2005.

The 1927 flood hit 32 feet, 1955 was 32.6, and Jan. 1, 1997, was 25.5 feet.

Flood stage is 20 feet.

No other flood disrupted as many lives as the 1964 monster, which rose about 9 feet higher than the New Year's Day Flood of 1997, at the time the first big flood in 23 years.

The river gauge was adjusted 1 foot in 1983, so the December 1964 flood would have been 35.15 with the current gauge.

It was caused by heavy rains over four days, covering a large December snowpack.

Today, boat captains for Hellgate Excursions point out the high mark of the flood in Hellgate Canyon, 50 or 60 feet above summer levels, and at the old Robertson Bridge. A plaque along the Rogue River trail below Grave Creek Bridge also marks the astonishing flood level.

The river peaked 14.5 feet above flood stage early in the morning of Dec. 23, 1964.

Huge swaths of the Rogue, Applegate and Illinois river valleys were stinking mud pits in the aftermath, recorded in the Daily Courier: "Mud, slime everywhere. Walls and entire houses vanished. Debris everywhere. And still a lot of water."

"It was a total life-changing event," said Markeith Wittkopf of Grants Pass, in a 2004 article on the 40th anniversary.

Wittkopf was 18 and recently married when her parents' home on Fielder Lane near the town of Rogue River was swept away.

"We stood on the railroad tracks and looked, and it was just all river. When the river went down, my brother, Frank (Palmerton), my dad and my sisters went down there and there was nothing left."

Lynnette Palmerton of Grants Pass, Frank's widow, recalled she could still see the second story of the house around midnight on Dec. 22. She and Frank were months away from being married.

"They took a few things out of the house, but most of it they put upstairs thinking it was safe," she said. "But they lost most everything, most of their family pictures, and they didn't have any insurance."

Fielder Lane was among the hardest hit areas — several homes were swept away and all were damaged.

Flooding occurred in Washington, Oregon, Idaho, California and Nevada, but Southern Oregon and Northern California were hit hardest. The tales of damage from the Eel and Klamath rivers in California are legendary, and the Daily Courier ran a photograph of the devastated town of Klamath, California.

The storm killed 40 people in five states, caused \$1 billion in damage and left 7,000 people in Oregon homeless. No lives were lost in Josephine County, however.

Nine years earlier, the flood of 1955 spurred the effort to build flood control dams on the Rogue, and the 1964 flood only reinforced it. Lost Creek Dam was completed in 1978, and is capable of storing enough water



A house is hung up on Robertson Bridge in the flood of 1964 as Grants Pass High School students survey the damage.

to trim roughly 5 feet off a flood the magnitude of the 1964 flood.

More recent, notable floods:

- Jan. 1, 1997. The Rogue crested at 25.5 feet in Grants Pass, following days of rain on top of soaked soil from 19.94 inches of rain in December 1996.

The 1964 and 1974 floods were slightly bigger, but '97 was the first large flood many locals had experienced.

The Josephine County Swift Water Rescue Team stayed busy on New Year's Day, evacuating stranded residents from homes along the Applegate and Rogue rivers.

The Applegate devastation appeared worse than the Rogue.

From the Applegate River Bridge on Redwood Highway, looking upstream, the river looked like a lake almost a mile wide, where a huge blueberry orchard grows today.

Upstream, the river carved two new channels through Applegate Golf Course, washing away topsoil, numerous trees, and three small ponds. It left hundreds of cubic yards of large rocks on the course, washed down from a county gravel pit.

Along the Rogue River, Fielder Lane once again took a big hit. The home of Ernie and Deneen Phillips was flooded nearly to the roof.

- Dec. 30, 2005. Not an epic

flood, it is still the largest this century. The Rogue crested at 24.09 feet at about 10 p.m. on a Friday, four feet above flood stage and the biggest flood since Jan. 1, 1997.

Flooding occurred all over Jackson and Josephine counties. The Applegate River crested just over the 13.2-foot flood stage at Fish Hatchery Park, while the Illinois River crested 6 feet below the 35-foot flood stage at Kerby.

Along Fielder Lane near Rogue River, a nightmare repeated itself. Homes there were wiped out in the flood of 1964 and badly flooded again in 1974 and 1997.

"Ernie (Phillips) is flooded, up to the windows," said Frank Kimmel, who helped his brothers Kevin and Keith and friends remove belongings of their mother Daisy at around 9 p.m.

"His house got flooded first." They referred to Ernie Phillips, who spent \$80,000 for refurbishing after the 1997 flood swamped his house to the rafters.



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