

"A Wall Of Water Pouring Over The Railroad Tracks—"

Two Horseback Riders Met By Lexington Man

By N. A. Leach, Portland

As a boy of seventeen I moved with my parents to Morrow County (then Umatilla County) in March 1884. We settled on a bunch grass farm of 320 acres in Blackhorse Canyon. I attended school and worked at the carpenter business for a number of years and in 1893 I entered the mercantile business with my brother-in-law, R. A. Nichols. I also bought wheat on the Heppner branch for Kerr Gifford & Co., Portland exporters. In 1903 I was offered a job as manager of the warehouse and county agents, with headquarters at Walla Walla.

All of our household effects were shipped to Walla Walla by train, and on Sunday, June 14, 1903, we were visiting with relatives at Lexington, who lived on the west side of Willow Creek, near the railroad tracks.

It was a hot and sultry day, so in the late afternoon I decided to go outside to get some fresh air. On leaving the house I heard a terrible roaring sound coming from the direction of Heppner. I had never heard anything like it before, so I ran up on the railroad track where I had a straight view up the creek for about two miles.

From this point I could see a wall of water pouring over the railroad tracks. Nothing like this had ever happened before, to my knowledge, so I knew we were in for trouble . . . lots of it. I rushed back to the house and succeeded in getting my family and friends out and on the high railroad grade that passes through this part of town.

By this time the water had begun to back up behind the railroad bridge that crosses the creek at the south end of town. It was only a few minutes until the weight of the water snapped every piling in the bridge and on came the rushing water.

Our little party passed on up the track and onto higher ground. Just as we reached this point someone said, "Here comes two men on horseback."

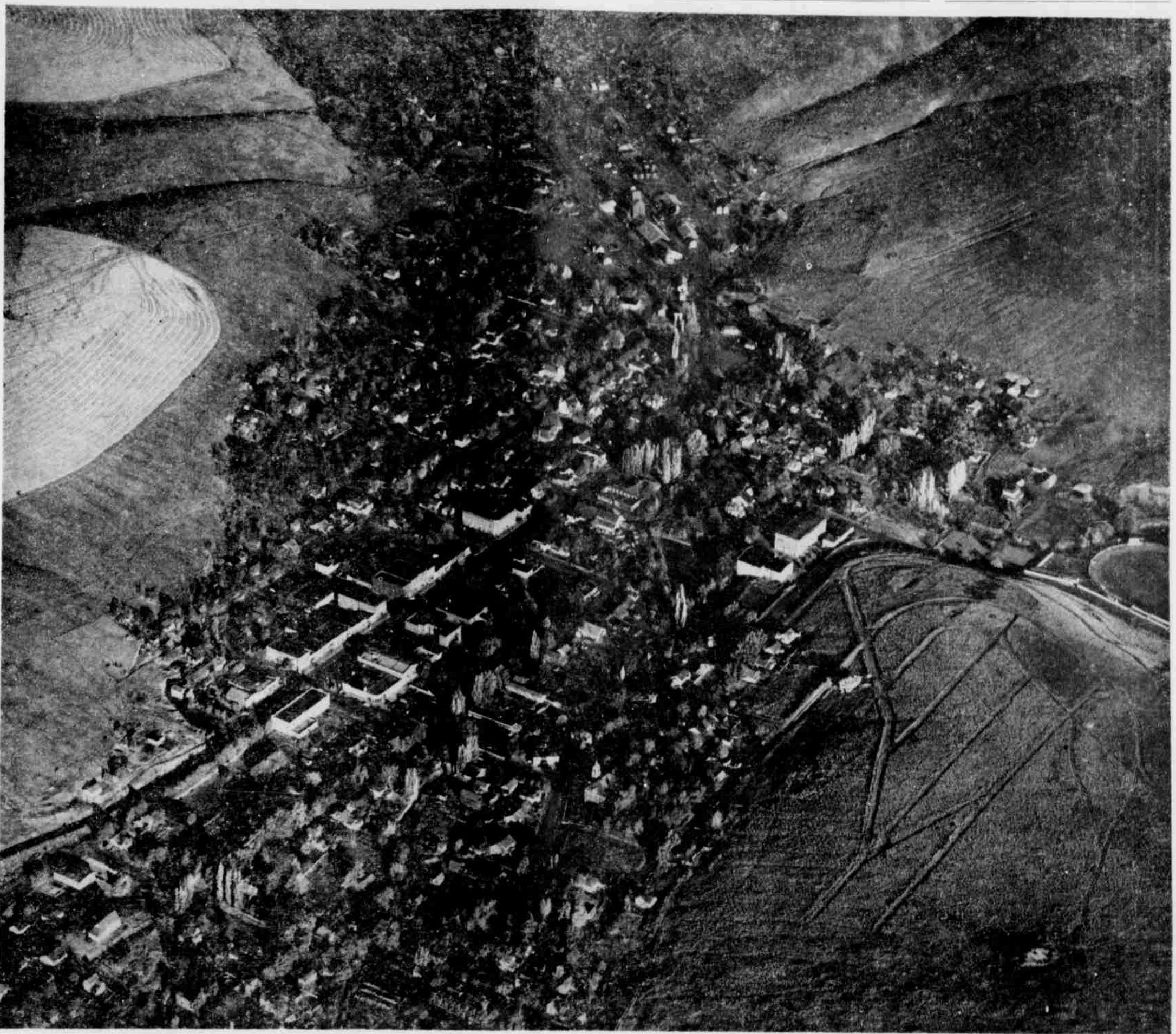
It was Les Matlock and Bruce Kelley on their famous ride. They wanted to know how long it had been since the water passed, and I recall it, I told them about fifteen minutes. They immediately left for the Reaney place below town, as one of their horses was about fagged out.

It was about 1:00 in the morning before I could cross the creek on the rails and a few ties of all that was left of the railroad bridge at the lower end of town. We had constructed a barbed wire telephone line from our store to the J. W. Beckett farm in the Eightmile country. I took our telephone and some dry batteries, hooked it up to the wire fence and talked to Mr. Beckett at the other end of our line. There was a similar telephone line from the Beckett farm to Heppner and he told me that he had just been talking to someone at Heppner and was told that they estimated about 500 people had lost their lives in the flood.

At a very early hour Monday morning, we met at the town hall in Lexington and organized a relief party. I was elected captain of the party and given a horse to ride, so we immediately started out up the creek.

By that time the water had all passed by and only a small stream in the bed of the creek remained. About a half a mile above town we picked up the remains of Mrs. Robert Hynd and a short distance farther, a boy by the name of Roberts—probably about sixteen years old. I do not recall at this time who the others were, but most of them were well known to members of our party.

At that time women wore high-top shoes and long hair. Otherwise there was no clothing of any kind on the bodies we picked



HEPPNER AS IT LOOKS TODAY, 50 years after the great flood took the center out of town. This picture was taken about four years ago and shows how the years have healed all the scars of that tragic June 14, 1903. Careful inspection of this photo will show some of the latest additions to the town missing among them the

Pioneer Memorial Hospital which is now located on the point of the hill at the right center of the picture. The years have a way of changing the face of any town, and only a picture taken today, could be strictly up to date. But, in general, this is Heppner in 1953.

"The Cloud Overhead Was As Black As A Stove"

Flood Experiences as Remembered by Mrs. Belle LeFort.

"We never knew what one day would bring forth," Mrs. Belle LeFort, who now lives with her daughter, Mrs. John Brosnan on Little Butter Creek, said in recalling the fateful Heppner flood.

"The cloud overhead was as black as the stove and in a half hour it rained as I have never seen it rain before or since," Mrs. LeFort said. "My neighbor, Mrs. Orin Farnsworth, and I called to each other but couldn't see each other in the darkness. Our homes were on the upper Main street hill and after it cleared we could look down and see the houses sailing like ships down Main street and then fall to pieces."

"During the night I was busy with my two girls, Zetta and Zilpha, and a neighbor girl who was visiting them when the flood struck. All three were sick to the stomach all through the night. The lights and the water went off, but they were restored in a couple

of days. "It looked like two-thirds of the town was gone when I went down in the morning. It was a wreck of animals, barbed wire, houses and debris. Terrible things had happened, almost past the imagination, and everybody went to work as in a dream."

Mrs. LeFort helped in the morgue where they layed the bodies on boards over bathtubs and cleaned and washed them as well as they could. The undertakers put them in caskets and they were buried, in most cases without funeral services. It was days before all the bodies were found and the ones found in the drifts of hill were well preserved. The body of Mrs. Jim Jones was the first to be brought in, about 9 o'clock in the morning.

Most of the houses then were built along the creek bank, with the back porches jutting out on the creek, easy targets for the raging water. The steam laundry, located on the creek in the upper end of town, held th logs, posts, animals and other flood debris for a spell and then crumbled, carrying all of the laundryman's family, who lived on the second story, to death.

The laundry owner, Mr. Krug, was downtown at the time and was so distraught with shock and grief that he, himself died a day or two later after wandering up and down the creek searching hopelessly for his family.

In another instance, a Mr. Fris to working with a crew of men on a pile of debris remarked, "Wouldn't it be strange if I were standing on my own daughter." The next day her body was found right near the spot where he had been digging.

The Bartholemew house was located on Main street near the bridge. Two trees in front of the house toppled, the house moved out on them as though they were a raft. Then it sailed up one block, turned the corner for a block,



PROBABLY THE BEST-KNOWN PICTURE of the Heppner flood is this photo of the T. W. Ayers house which stood on Chase street a few lots south of the corner of May street. This picture has been used many times by newspapers and magazines to illustrate articles on the flood. What not too many persons, except those who lived here prior to 1903, know is that the upper story of this house, minus the cupola, and considerably remodeled, still stands on Chase street and has been sheltering families for most of the 50 years since the flood. We wonder how many of the present residents of Heppner can locate it without help from some old-timer. It is also reported that there was once a very popular billiard room in the upper floor of this house.



WRECKAGE WAS SCATTERED as far as the camera's eye could see. This is looking northwest and was taken from somewhere in the vicinity of Main and Baltimore streets.

SIGSBEE STORY

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where the bridge crosses to the Courthouse. Luckily he managed to grab onto a tree which he climbed and where he remained in safety until the water had subsided. Fortunately it was a solid tree, for many were uprooted by the heavy, rushing water.

The flood ended Mrs. Sigsbee's career as a dressmaker. Having no place to stay she returned to the ranch of her parents, Mr. and Mrs. W. G. McCarty, at Sand Hollow. The following year she married Mr. Sigsbee who was in the process of buying Mike Gallo-way's studio at the time of the flood. Both of the men took many pictures of the flood.

From the Oregonian, June 16, 1903.

SUPPLIES GO FREE

Superintendent J. P. O'Brien of the O. R. & N., last night issued the following notice:

The Oregon Railroad & Navigation Company will handle and carry all supplies sent to the Heppner flood sufferers free of charge.

By order of Superintendent, O. R. & N. Co.

then changed direction and went down half a block. Mrs. Bartholemew and a boarder, Dr. Kistner, were taken out of the upstairs window when the house lodged on the next street.

Strangely enough, throughout the ride, it never jarred the piano enough to tip over a vase of flowers that was on it.

Everyone pitched in and did their share afterwards, Mrs. LeFort said. The women helped cook and those with homes took care of the homeless. We tried to forget it and go on living as before.

And at midnight, the day of the flood, the town clock struck 24 times instead of 12. It was said the weight of the water made it strike twice.