

The Lehi Flood of 1983

By Julian Mercer

In late 1981, I lived in the Lehi Tenth ward and had been called to be in charge of the ward Emergency Preparedness Committee, which meant coordinating our planning preparedness with the Lehi Utah Stake and the city, specifically the Fire Department. Jim Smith was our direct city coordinator. As I recall, he was also the volunteer fire department's officer.

With emergency preparedness the difficulty is trying to anticipate all possible scenarios, and come up with a plan to mitigate any serious effects. By 1982, Jim was able, through the city, to buy hand held radios for each ward in the stake. These were for the wards to use, but were still property of the city and when emergency preparedness meetings with Jim were held, we would bring our radios for practicing how to use them and how to communicate properly. Each radio was also equipped with a scanner, so we could listen to the calls from the county dispatch, which enabled us to be aware of what was going on in the city regarding any emergency. As part of the ward organization, we appointed block captains who had direct supervision of specific neighborhoods, and held our own planning meetings.

As the winter of 82-83 progressed, it became evident with each passing day we were going to have spring flooding, especially within the Tenth Ward boundaries because both Dry Creek and the Waste Ditch run through our ward. Dry Creek runs under State Street and the freeway north of the Lehi Elementary school and then is piped through the school playground to 100 West, and then south through the ward.

In meeting with Bishop Rick Farrer and the ward council in early spring of 1983, I requested a load of sand be brought in and dumped on the corner of 400 North and 200 West with at least four hundred sandbags. The Bishop agreed with the sand, because that would be brought in free by the city, but he said we could not afford

400 sand bags. He suggested 40 or 50.

On May 18, 1983, we had a meeting of the ward Emergency Preparedness Committee. It was decided we should begin filling and placing sandbags the next evening, Sam Wycherly was one of our black Captains, and because his back yard is very close to Dry Creek, he was very adamant in calling his neighbors to meet the challenge. None of us had a clue about sandbagging. We weren't sure what a sandbag looked like, how big it was or how full it should be. Some thought perhaps plastic grain sacks would work, and inasmuch as Jim Smith was in the dry farming business, he would have access to such sacks. As we finally began the actual process, we soon discovered that if we used grain sacks, we could not fill them full, otherwise it would take three or four people to lift one sack. That was pretty much the same situation with all the sacs, as we needed to tie them and have them easily moved by one person.

In the meantime, we had made arrangement with Bill Anderson to purchase three hundre bags, but as it turned out, the bags he sold us were only half the regular size. We finally got word that the stake had over three hundred bags stored in the basement of the Stake Center. Also, many people in Sam's neighborhood had purchased bags for their own use. We were still struggling with the concept of sandbagging and how best to undertake the daunting task.

The purchase of sandbags by the individuals presented our first major problem, because those people wanted to use the bags for their own homes, but by this time most of us on the committee soon realized this could not be an individual effort, by having each resident trying to protect his own home, but we must work together to keep the water in the ditch, thus protecting everyone. The beehive concept soon came to fruition. The battle could not be fought from house to house, this would be an impossible task.

By Friday, 19 May, we had filled nearly 1,500 bags, and had placed most of them along Dry Creek behind Leora Barney's house, the old Vess Evans home. We felt we should fill another thousand, however, the Bishopric was again concerned with

the cost, so we didn't buy more. We had also filled all 300 bags the Stake had purchased. It was our plan to fill every bag we could lay our hands on and then stack them in strategic locations ready for wherever they were needed. Luckily, the city finally provided us with the necessary sand bags.

Our first night of flood watch was Friday 27 May. It was almost a party atmosphere as almost everyone from the ward was on the ditch in anticipation of high water, but no flood came. The next day, we had a meeting, with our committee and city officials in the fire station. I was decided we should talk to Mr. and Mrs. Robert Hubbard, whose house and property were adjacent to the ditch for permission to come in with heavy equipment to clean the ditch. They had refused to allow the City to clear the ditch earlier. Bert Wilson and I talked with them, and they gave their permission. It think they could now see how critical the situation was becoming. Jeff Cooms was to dredge the ditch that afternoon, however, he never made it.

By 1:30 A.M. Sunday morning, May 29th, the water was very high and rising. We needed to take action to allow more flow. It soon became very obvious that the bridge at 400 north and 200 West was a major bottleneck. Therefore, without permission from anyone, we had Dave Turner use his back hoe to start the work of removing the bridge. We had Jerry Beck with his backhoe to finish the job, as Dave's hoe broke down. This relieved most of the pressure, allowing the water to subside. Before the campaign was over that night, we also removed all the foot bridges behind the Barney residence. It also became necessary to cut the bridge on 500 West and 500 North and the bridge on Lehi's Main Street, just west of the Maverick. Luckily we had already bagged the road. Christ Lind had tried to take the bags across the street for his own use, saying we would never need them. The water was now very high, but we were holding it in the ditch. Another ward member, Larry Demerit, also began gathering up bags for his own house. He was a convert from New York, so it was difficult for him to grasp the concept of working together, but he finally got the concept.

Later that Sunday morning, we received word the water was high, but we were

holding, except at Hubbards. The entire crew went to that location to do the necessary bagging, and found the water had filled Hubbard's yard and was several inches deep and heading to the road. As we were bagging, one of the Barney kids came running to tell us the bags had given way behind Barney's. We made a mad dash to the site, we worked to rebuild the sandbag wall trying to get the water stopped from running over the bank, but we were too late and the water was knee deep behind the homes. We finally had to bag around the homes. Water was also out of the ditch by Bert Wilsons, at 500 North and 100 West across from Blaine Adamsons.

As the night drew on, a serious problem developed at the intersection where Blaine Adamson lives, on the intersection of 500 north and 100 West. The water was out of the ditch and rising rapidly. city trucks were called in to reinforce the sandbags with sand, to no avail. the city finally decided more help was needed someone with heavy equipment, so a call was made to Tom Peck Trucking. Finally Pecks came with their equipment and trucks filled with sand and quickly built a diagonal dike in front of Blaine's house, as it was about to be flooded as the water was up to the top of a fire hydrant. Pecks also backed up the dyke we had in front of Leora Barney's house. My son Jeff, who was fourteen at the time, had been with me through the entire duration, as had many of the youth from the Tenth Ward and almost all of the adult ward members.

Jeff and I finally got home around 6 A.M. We slept until ten, missed an early morning Stake Priesthood Meeting. After I milked my cows and cleaned up, I was to meet with the Bishop at noon, but before going to the meeting, I made a survey of the ditches. Our work had held. For church, we had sacrament meeting only. The Bishop wanted me to say a few words as to status of our situation. We then dismissed the meeting and went back to work.

Many people came in from outside Lehi to help with filling sandbags and stacking them. Nearly seven thousand bags were filled on Sunday. All through the siege, we were fortunate to have so much help from people outside Lehi. But many also came not to help, but to see what was happening. Many of these people would

drive around barricades to get a first hand look, even though the road was supposedly close. One such person was driving by my car and ran into my door as I was getting out, damaging the door. This was a shock, as I was under the impression there were no cars on the road. Luckily the Sunday was a calm day with low water.

At the days and nights passed, the rumors began to fly. One rumor supposedly came from a family member of Beryl and Alvin Tibbetts who lived in Alpine. The relative called to tell tibbetts that a huge wall of water, carrying all kinds of trees, branches and garbage had just passed through Alpine and was heading to Lehi. The Tibbetts panicked and began loading their furniture and other valuables into their truck. Luckily, Gary Holmes was working with us and was members of our committee. He was also a water master for the Lehi Irrigation Company. When he heard the rumor and saw the panic, he was able to put a halt of it by using his knowledge and common sense. He said there may be a wall of water heading for Lehi, but it would never make it because Dry Creek was piped under the freeway and State Street. Both roads would totally impede the water, allowing only as much water through as it could be handled by the pipes, so there would be no danger from any wall of water.

Through the entire experience, we learned many things. Perhaps the most important lesson we learned was the willingness of so many people to come to the aide of others in a time of crisis. We also learned the importance of preparation and being organized and working together. I don't recall any anger, fighting or disagreements, as everyone seemed to realize the necessity of pulling together and working as a team. Nobody had all the answers, but it seemed the right answers came.

