

Torrent Sweeps Away Baker County Town

by Gary Dielman

Ninety-nine years ago, the residents of Rock Creek heard water thundering down on the town but thankfully had time to flee to the hills, when the Killamaque Dam/Reservoir in the Elkhorns burst sweeping away much of the little town of Rock Creek, population 100. Flood waters flowed as far as Haines.

(The title and much of the information in this article is from the June 29, 1917, issue of the Oregonian newspaper, supplemented by the June 30, 1917, issue of the Baker City Herald.)



In the path of the torrent was the Eastern Oregon Power Company's hydro-electric facility on Rock Creek, a plant that still exists today, although no longer generating electricity. The plant itself suffered little damage, but the flume and transmission lines were demolished. Electricity to Haines and Baker was interrupted, including knocking out telegraph and telephone service. Baker's power was cut off from 8:30 a.m. until noon, when an auxiliary steam plant was put into service.

Initial reports estimated the wall of water at thirty feet high containing about 12,000,000 gallons that came roaring down Rock Creek Canyon carrying huge trees and boulders out onto the valley floor. No lives were lost, but for a while a fisherman was feared drowned but later accounted for. Fence lines, livestock, and crops worth thousands of dollars were swept away. Newly planted trout in Killamaque Lake perished. Even trains were temporarily delayed by deep water in the Haines area.

Inspection of the dam the next day revealed that just the top twelve feet of the dam, which was earth fill on top of the dam's natural lower end, gave way due to unusually high spring runoff of melting snow in the Elkhorns. Residents feared other dams might also burst. And they worried that loss of water from Killamaque Reservoir would cause further losses in the fall, when crops would have to go without irrigation water.

Initially owners of Killamaque Reservoir suspected a farmhand named Gray of having blown up the dam. But inspection of the dam soon cleared him of having any hand in the dam's failure.

The town of Rock Creek was located a little ways below where the namesake creek enters Powder River Valley. The creek's origin is Rock Creek Lake/Reservoir several miles southwest of the town. Killamaque Creek is a west tributary of Rock Creek and has its origin in Killamaque Lake located on the east side of Red Mountain.

Several of the glacial lakes in the Elkhorns have had their outlets augmented to make them higher to increase the acre-feet of water for irrigation in the summer. Years ago owners of Killamaque Reservoir had engaged miners to drive a 400-foot-long tunnel under the terminus to drain out even more water for irrigation.

The day after the flood the Oregonian reported, "Big forest trees were borne on the crest of the column (of water) and these became a weapon of the flood, striking buildings as battering rams. The flood reached Rock Creek at 8:45 o'clock (a.m.). The poolroom and store building of the Farmers Trading Company, the Toll House, the blacksmith shop and hall were destroyed, and only debris and a few tin cans are left to mark the site of the hamlet. A horse tied in front of the store was killed. Fences were all demolished, and as far down as Haines all of the bridges are reported to have been taken out."

At first Rock Creek residents thought the sound they were hearing was the wind, until they heard "snapping of telephone poles and grinding of debris," alerting them to an impending disaster. As quickly as possibly they took to nearby hills. The flood waters caught up with the James Ashwood family trying to escape in a wagon. The water rose so high it almost floated the family's wagon bed. Emery Powders, who was out irrigating his fields, found himself cut off from his house by flood waters. He had to travel all the way to Haines to find a road that would take him home.

Some other farmers and ranchers who suffered damage: H.P. Carter, Joseph Carter, Charles Castor, Frank Castor, Andrew Delong, Charles Long, H.E. McCullough, Arthur Polley, John Schmallerberg, John Simmons, Alva Spence, Ed White, and Harry Young.

It may not be common knowledge that the high lakes in the Elkhorn and Wallowa mountains are the result of glaciation. Hiking downhill from Twin Lakes in the Elkhorns years ago, I noticed grooves in several granite rocks rooted in the landscape. I came to the conclusion that other rocks caught in the bottom of a glacier had carved the grooves, as the glacier slowly slid southward.

Geologists speculate that during two periods of glaciation of North America—150,000 to 200,000 years ago and 10,000 to 30,000 years ago—glaciers carved out the high lakes in the Elkhorn and Wallowa mountains. Here are some lengths of the glaciers in the Elkhorns beginning with the longest: North Powder River 9.3 mi., Rock Creek 8 mi, Anthony Creek 7.5 mi., Dutch Flat Creek 7.3 mi., Pine Creek 3.6 mi., and Goodrich Creek 1.6 mi. The long North Powder River moraine has a classic shape and is clearly visible from Highway 30. (The internet program Google Earth, based on satellite photos, is an excellent way to view the moraines of the Elkhorns from above. A research article may be found at this website address: *Glaciation of Elkhorn Mts, Emily Geraghty.pdf*)

The little town of Rock Creek never quite rebounded from the Killamaque flood of June 28, 1917, that carried it away ninety-nine years ago.

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