



# REMEMBERING THE FLOOD

## Ten years ago our town's true colors shined through

BY LYMAN HAFEN

On New Year's morning 10 years ago, more than 20 families in the St. George area woke up in their comfortable homes without a clue that within 10 or 11 days, those precious homes would be gone, carried away on the dark waves of a merciless flood. During those first days of 2005, a perfect storm was brewing in Utah's Dixie, an anomaly of weather that would ultimately conspire to send more raging water down the Santa Clara River than anyone could remember.

Those of us who lived here at the time still remember those days well — not only because of the unbelievable sights we witnessed both live and on television, but because of the way this community rallied in a spirit of compassion and good will. As the river undercut the foundations of homes and destroyed many, the streets could do nothing to undercut or destroy the community spirit that defines rural life in Southern Utah.

Sometimes, when I read or hear the kind of mean-spirited comments that appear in newspapers or on the radio, I try to remind myself that such thoughts do not truly reflect the goodness, the kindness, the concern and the grace manifested

during the mid part of January 10 years ago. It was a time when total strangers dropped everything to help one another and their neighbors, a time when our community's true colors shined through.

Friday, Jan. 7, 2005, was one of those rare days in St. George when dancing white flakes float out of the sky and accumulate like a satin blanket on the red sands of Dixie. For hundreds of school children returning home that afternoon, the snow was received as a wonderful miracle. In fact, it was welcomed by everyone who had hoped or prayed for an end to the drought that had hung over this region for several years. Over the previous weeks, steady rains had soaked deep into the soil and turned the gray hills green. The possibility it might be too much of a good thing was a part of the excitement.

What we didn't realize was that those wet weeks leading up to the second weekend of January 2005, and the heavy snow that followed, and the massive wildfires of the previous two summers that had denuded so much of the Santa Clara drainage of vegetation, were part of the convergence of the elements that would create

the disaster. In the worst natural disaster in property loss in the history of the area.

On the night of Sunday, Jan. 9, after the early morning snowfall Monday, the Santa Clara River began to swell. The stream, known to most locals as a creek, is little more than a trickle most of the year. Its normal average January flow is 5 cubic feet per second. Hardly anyone, in their wildest dreams, could have imagined the volume of water (ultimately growing to more than 6,500 cubic feet per second), the magnitude of power or the intensity of horror that would be generated by the little stream when all the right elements aligned to transform it into a monster.

Just after mid-day on Tuesday, Jan. 11, the raging Santa Clara River finished undercutting the bank beneath a large home in Santa Clara, then swallowed it up and swept it downstream in a heartless way that would be repeated many times over the next several hours. By Wednesday, more than 50 families in the St. George-Santa Clara area had either seen their homes disappear in the muddy torrent or were displaced because their homes had been rendered uninhabitable.



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Those of us who lived here at the time recall those days well — not only because of the unbelievable sights we witnessed both live and on television, but because of the way this community rallied in a spirit of compassion and good will. As the river undercut the foundations of homes and destroyed many of them, the storm could do nothing to undercut or destroy the community spirit that underlies life in Southern Utah.

Sometimes, when I read or hear the kind of mean-spirited comments that often appear in the newspaper or on the radio, I have to remind myself that such thoughts do not truly reflect the goodness, the kindness, the concern and tolerance manifest

during the mid part of January 10 years ago. It was a time when total strangers dropped everything to go to the aid of their neighbors, a time when our community's true colors shined through.

Friday, Jan. 7, 2005, was one of those rare days in St. George when dancing white flakes float out of the sky and accumulate like a satin blanket on the red sands of Dixie. For hundreds of school children returning home that afternoon, the snow was received as a wonderful miracle. In fact, it was welcomed by everyone who had hoped or prayed for an end to the drought that had hung over this region for several years. Over the previous weeks, steady rains had soaked deep into the soil and turned the gray hills green. The possibility it might be too much of a good thing was lost in the excitement.

What we didn't realize was that those wet weeks leading up to the second week-end of January 2005, and the heavy snow that topped them off, and the warm rains that followed, and the massive wildfires of the previous two summers that had denuded so much of the Santa Clara drainage of vegetation, were part of a convergence of the elements that would create

the perfect storm, resulting in the worst natural disaster, in property loss, in the history of the area.

On the night of Sunday, Jan. 9, and the early morning hours of Monday, the Santa Clara River began to swell. The stream, known to most locals as a creek, is little more than a trickle most of the year. Its normal average January flow is 5 cubic feet per second. Hardly anyone, in their wildest dreams, could have imagined the volume of water (ultimately growing to more than 6,500 cubic feet per second), the magnitude of power or the intensity of horror that would be generated by the little stream when all the right elements aligned to transform it into a monster.

Just after mid-day on Tuesday, Jan. 11, the raging Santa Clara River finished undercutting the bank beneath a new home in Santa Clara, then swallowed it up and swept it downstream in a heartless act that would be repeated many times over the next several hours. By Wednesday, more than 50 families in the St. George-Santa Clara area had either seen their homes disappear in the muddy torrent, or were displaced because their homes had been rendered uninhabitable. Losses of

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THIS SEASON GIVE SOMEONE THE

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public infrastructure and private property would mount to nearly \$200 million.

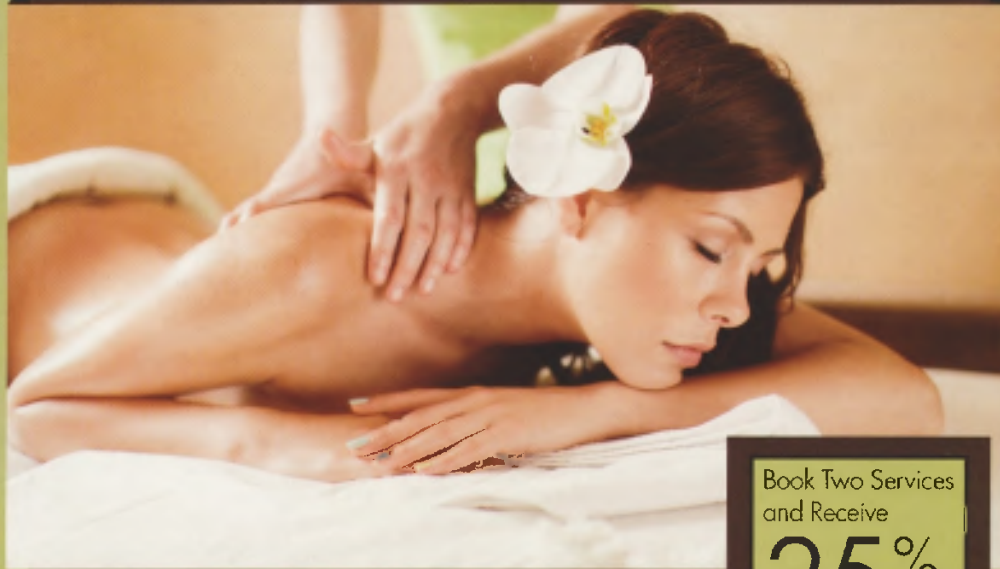
Most Southern Utahns got up that Monday morning and went to work without a clue of the tragedy building along the rivers. Those who were close to it immediately mobilized, and public servants and private volunteers jumped in to do what they could. As the morning progressed, more and more people became aware of the looming danger. By the afternoon, volunteers by the hundreds began pouring onto the scene. Yet in most situations there was little anyone could do but stand horrified and watch the river cut away precious farmland and work its way closer and closer to the foundations of homes built hundreds of feet from the original channel. As the main channel whipped from one side of the plain to the other, the banks, some as high as 40 feet, caved away at an alarming rate. There was nothing even the largest army of volunteers could do. Only the heavy equipment operators, who emerged as some of the greatest heroes of the day, were able to make a

difference.

Though volunteers could do little to stem the flow, they descended like angels into those neighborhoods where homes precariously hung out over the water. They worked feverishly hour after hour removing what they could from each home before the river devoured it. Dazed homeowners moved about in a state of shock, desperately trying to collect their thoughts and focus on what was most important to save in the few minutes remaining.

For many, the 2005 flood was a baptism into the fold of the so-called "Dixie Spirit," something they'd heard talk of, but now intimately understood and embraced in their hearts. The flood washed countless tons of silt, debris and precious personal belongings down the river, but in the process it uncovered the true gems of this community — the individual people, whether they were old-timers or new-comers, young or old, who make this one of the best places on Earth to live. They became part of the hallowed history of Utah's Dixie.

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