

Red River flood—Manitoba (1979)



More than 10,000 homes were lost in the Red River Flood of 1979 creating the largest evacuation in history.

Winnipeg, Manitoba, 1950: the Red River, which flows north through the city, floods. It is a major flood, and the largest evacuation in history takes place as 100,000 people flee their homes. The 150-metre-wide river becomes a lake 65 kilometres wide and 100 kilometres long. More than 10,000 homes are lost. The damages are estimated to have been \$125.5 million, about \$1 billion in today's dollars.

The Red River flows north towards Hudson Bay from its origins in the United States, crossing a broad, flat plain in southern Manitoba. Rivers typically meander as they cross flat land, and the Red River is no exception. Because the Red River flows through such flat land, it is common for it to flood its banks. In spring, as the snow melts, there is an increase in water volume and flow. In some years, when there has been above-average snowfall followed by sudden spring warming, the amount of water released into the river in a short period of time can cause a severe flood that spreads across the flood plain. A spring with a lot of rain can further exacerbate the situation.

In 1826, such a combination of factors resulted in a major flood that caused the entire colony settled on the banks of the Red River to be evacuated. But the people came back to the site and built what eventually became Winnipeg. Major floods have occurred periodically throughout the city's history.

Since the flood that occurred in 1950 was not expected to be the last, a major engineering project was undertaken to protect Winnipeg from future disasters. A giant ditch was dug to divert flood water around the city. Eight communities south of Winnipeg built dikes to protect themselves from flood waters. In the spring of 1979, the river flooded again and reached levels even higher than those of 1950. The dikes held, the diverting ditch did what it was designed to do, and Winnipeg was spared.

However, the people living upstream of the flood protection system were not so lucky. Many houses were destroyed, and farmers struggled to evacuate or otherwise protect their livestock. The town of Morris was evacuated. Widespread flooding outside the dikes affected towns and rural residents of the Red River flood plain. The disaster resulted in millions of dollars in damage, but was estimated to have been about \$600 million less in damages than would have occurred without the flood protection system.

Additional reading

Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. "Winnipeg's Flood of '79." CBC Digital Archives. <http://www.cbc.ca/archives/entry/winnipegs-flood-of-79>.

Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. "A City Submerged: Winnipeg and the Flood of 1950." CBC Digital Archives. <http://www.cbc.ca/archives/entry/a-city-submerged-winnipeg-and-the-flood-of-1950>.

Province of Manitoba. "Manitoba Flood Facts." <http://www.gov.mb.ca/flooding/history/index.html>.

Passfield, Robert W. " 'Duff's Ditch': The Origins, Construction, and Impact of the Red River Floodway." *Manitoba History* 42 (Autumn-Winter 2001-2002). http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/mb_history/42/duffsditch.shtml.