

**The Verde River Flood of February 20, 1993
as recalled by John R. Parsons
February 18-20, 2013**

It was 20 Years Ago Today that we were flooded out of our place in Cottonwood. That was the event & catalyst that brought up to Rimrock and the building of our Straw House. As single days go in our lives, February 20th, 1993, has to rank right up there in the litany of Significant Life Events.

Below is the story in five parts.

20 Years Ago Part One (Written 2/18/13)

Everything was quiet 20 years ago tonight. Two Dear Friends from Flagstaff came to visit us on Blue Sky Drive in Cottonwood. We had a great party well past midnight.

The following day, a light rain began. We sat on the deck and talked about "rain on snow." Little did we know that morning what would unfold on the 19th of February, 1993.

The rain came harder. The river began to rise, slowly at first but then faster at a worrisome pace of rise. By the time day began to turn to night on the 19th, we knew not what was to come.

History would be made. Lives would be changed. Nothing would be the same.

As we look back on this idyllic 18th of February before yet another incoming storm, it brings back a lot of memories--some sweet and some not-so-sweet, about the same day 20 years ago tonight.

20 Years Ago Part Two (Written 2/19/13)

If Feb. 18th was the "calm before the storm" 20 years ago, Feb. 19th was a day of major change.

The morning began just fine & dandy. We and our Dear Friends sat on the deck watching the tame Verde River. A light rain fell from low gray clouds. As the day progressed, the rain grew harder and kept falling without a break. The river began rising, slowly at first.

By mid-afternoon, it was out of its normal banks and people were becoming concerned. By 6 pm, it was clear that something was really wrong with The Verde. The rate of rise was alarming. Meanwhile, the rain didn't let up. It grew harder and rained in sheets.

We made a few phone calls and our heart sank--it was raining in Chino Valley, Prescott and Williams. It was one of those rare El Nino years when the normally dry Upper Verde had a lot of snow on the ground. It was raining on the Chino Valley snow.

We could see the hand writing on the wall and an indescribable feeling of cold dread began to creep into our heart. It was too late to get anything out of the floodplain in front of our place--the ground was already a mud bog and the water was rising fast. As night fell 20 years ago today, I stood in the rain shivering and looking at the river in the day's last light wondering what the night would bring. I prayed the river would stop rising. It didn't. Twenty years later, I remember those moments as if they happened today.

20 Years Ago Part Three (Written 2/20/13)

The night between February 19th and the slow, leaden dawn of February 20th was easily the longest night of my life. Susun was gone visiting Daughter Sarah in California. I stayed wide awake the entire night. The flood came down The Verde with a vengeance. It turned out to be the most water recorded at Clarkdale since records have been kept dating back generations. It seemed like an ocean of water had been let loose as the brown, muddy flow filled the river's floodway and then began to claw even higher and farther afield. We watched in fearful awe by flashlight as the river level quickly surged past the January 8th high water mark. The rise just kept on coming.

As the river swelled the sheer weight of the mass of water began snapping mature cottonwood trees like matchsticks. Susun's riverfront property included many cottonwood trees that had been killed by the nefarious instream sand and gravel mining operations which were shut down in September 1989. The flood wiped every one of those tall, dead trees away. As each succumbed, it did so with a snap and crack that sounded just like an old-fashioned cannon shot. The noise of those trees snapping reverberated across the roiling, debris-choked, swirling, smelly waters.

Even though flat water isn't supposed to make any noise, trust me, flood waters make a strange noise that's all their own. It is as if the flood is a living thing and you are hearing the sounds of its breath growing ever closer.

But what can you do about a flood? Nothing but watch in fear, if not terror. You have absolutely no idea when the river will peak and at what level. For all you know during a night like that the river will just keep coming up and up.

Your imagination plays tricks on your brain at a time like that and soon your emotions are running wild and raw with irrational thoughts.

As the river rose ever higher under the stilts that supported Susun's 8x40 old mobile home, we were convinced the water would soon simply float the structure away.

We had long since watched that night as all of our own personal possessions floated away from the floodplain. Since Susun's place was so small, we had stored everything we owned in a variety of trailers and containers in the floodplain, foolishly thinking they would be out of danger "based on previous historical flood events." HA! In a few hours that night, I watched everything I owned at that time simply vanish.

Some other Dear Friends came in the wee hours of the night in answer to my frenzied phone calls. I don't know what any of us could have done but at least we stood together with our puny little flashlights watching the relentless river rise.

We heard sirens screaming in the distance between the cannon shots of the trees snapping. We knew many others lived in houses much lower and closer than we and we knew they were in trouble.

The police and fire departments were totally unprepared for a flood of this magnitude. They didn't know what to do. Luckily, David Lash clearly saved the lives of many of the people of Bridgeport with his jet boat heroics that night. If not for his whitewater boating skills, there is no doubt in our mind many would have perished that night.

Before the flood reached our large chicken coop, we let the hens run free and they wisely headed to high ground wondering where to roost.

Throughout the night, they provided the only moments of levity as we would occasionally stumble on one of the disoriented hens and they would flee squawking loudly in protest.

Everything that night was so surreal in ways that can't be put into words. The mix of emotion, reality, adrenalin, fear and loathing created a unique mental chemistry that somehow stretched those long night hours into what seemed like an eternity as we prayed and hoped for the river to peak somewhere, someplace, somehow.

I can't remember just how close the water came to floating the trailer away. I seem to recall it was within 12-18 inches.

Finally, when all of us were so thoroughly drained we could barely speak to each other, someone muttered, "It's peaking."

Someone else said, "Nah, you're dreaming, man, wake up." The first person's voice got louder, "NO, man, I'm not dreaming, it's peaking."

We all ran to his perch to peer with our flashlights at what he saw and, yes, there was a one inch difference between one point and another. We huddled transfixed staring mute at that small spot.

Sure enough, the inch turned to two inches, then three and four and more and by the time it was six inches lower than its high water mark we were high fivin' and jiving' and screaming and hollerin' and dancin' around like we were possessed.

After we have screamed and yelled until we were hoarse, we all stood in a circle and joined hands and prayed and a few of us began to cry in great big heaving sobs. We hugged each other and we stood limp as those steel gray low clouds began to gather the first light of February 20th.

By that time, the river began to drop even faster than it rose. The USGS eventually determined the flow at Clarkdale reached 53,200 cubic feet per second with an official gauge depth of 26.39 feet.

As dawn grew brighter all our Dear Friends left and I fell into a fitful sleep thinking the worst was over. It wasn't.

20 Years Ago Part Four (Written 2/20/13)

Not long after I fell into that fitful sleep, there was a loud banging on the sliding glass patio door, "WAKE UP, WAKE UP, GET OUT, YOUR TRAILER IS GOING TO FALL OVER!"

At first I thought I was having yet another really bad dream but the yelling and the banging continued and scared the daylights out of me. After rubbing my eyes who should I spy but Dear Friend Marsha F. freaking out on the deck while yelling at me and pounding on the glass.

I slid the door open and she literally grabbed my by the shirt and commanded, "Get over here and see this."

Oh, oh, that's when my heart sank even lower than it had been during the dark long hours of the night before. The water reached maybe 12-18 below the floor of the mobile home. It didn't float away. However, the water was high enough for long enough that it totally saturated the uncompacted fill slope upon which the heavy 8 by 40 mobile home sat.

As Marsha and I stood there dumbfounded, we could see the cracks widening into gaps in the soil upon which the mobile was situated. The structure had already begun to list toward the river. The whole hillside was spongy soft under our feet and cracks were forming everywhere we looked.

The mobile home appears doomed. We stepped back onto solid safe higher ground and made a plan. We had to attempt to save the contents of the mobile home before it toppled into the floodplain. We went to a neighbor's house and called all of our mutual friends. We needed major help and we needed it FAST. About 15 people answered the call immediately.

When we had all grouped up outside the mobile home we announced our plan. I would go inside and take the biggest risk. Several of the guys would take the point of the line and then we would pass stuff hand-to-hand while keeping our movement to an absolute minimum. I would try to walk as softly as possible inside the mobile home. Meanwhile, one of the group was stationed to watch the cracks at the same time they kept an eye on the angle of list of the trailer.

It was a very dicey proposition and, in hindsight, we should have NEVER attempted to do such a silly and foolish thing on behalf of mere "stuff" that was inside the mobile home.

Nevertheless, we all worked like we were under some sort of high speed spell and stuff flew out of the mobile home as fast as it could be passed up the human chain. No one cared what happened at the end of the chain and gradually a giant pile of helter-skelter stuff began to form.

The cracks widened, the trailer tilted more, people hyperventilated and worked fast and somehow we got the place emptied and all stepped back to safety. At that point, I'm sure it would have easily been possible simply to push the trailer over with one casual hand. I will never understand why it didn't fall into the floodplain unless we can ascribe it to one of God's Miracles.

None of us were hurt in any way but, looking back, it simply wasn't a smart thing to do. More than one of us could have been badly injured or worse by implementing such a stupid plan.

Once we were all safely away from the trailer than was essentially balanced on a hair trigger edge, we then made a plan on how to store most of the stuff and everyone stayed together until we could stabilize the giant pile of personal stuff sitting in the road beside the place we once called home.

At that point, Susun and I were officially homeless but she didn't know it yet. I knew she was returning that night so I tip-toed out onto the tilted deck one last time to tape a note to the door that said, "Susun, we don't live here any more. Come to Brad & Kate's."

Once everything was stabilized and stored in neighbor's houses and shed and under tarps, Brad stuffed me in his truck and handed me a beer and said, "Take it easy, John, we've got you covered from here."

He took me to their place in Cornville and I sat in a corner and simply stared blankly into space for much of the remainder of the day. I think I was in some form of shock by then but didn't really know it. All I wanted to do was sit very still and not move. The whole weight of not having a home any more hit me really hard 20 years ago today.

I had read about people who lose their home to fire or flood or tornado and had heard about how traumatic it is for them. But there's no way to know what that means until it happens to you. That's when your own demons come home to roost. All I could do that day was sit and ache with this strange numb pain that pervaded my being.

I couldn't cry and didn't have the energy to be angry.

Gradually, I began to come around later in the day and we three talked about how to deal with Susun when she showed up. What kind of reaction would she have? Would she be emotional? How would she handle being homeless? What should we do?

We finally decided that we should simply sit together and stare at her when she came through the door and not say anything. Just be. Then we'd see how she was doing and go from there.

Sure enough, around nightfall, we heard her drive up. She had obviously been to our former home and knew where to go.

She came through the door and saw us sitting there like cows in a pasture with dumb blank looks on our three faces. She paused. And then she threw her arms into the air and yelled out, "Does this mean we get to move to RIMROCK!"

And that's when we three all exhaled in unison and everything was OK and we hugged and high fived and the party began. Finally, I could let my emotions out and boy, oh, boy did they come out as we hugged and danced and shouted and partied until we all four fell down into a deep, deep sleep.

The next day we moved our six foot by 8 foot travel trailer to our land in Rimrock and began a new life.

Our lives changed forever 20 years ago today. It took us a long time to fully understand what really happened with that flood and how it impacted our future forever. But first there was The Red Cross, FEMA, The National Guard, depression counseling and more.

20 Years Ago Part Five (Written 2/20/13)

After the first flush of adrenalin wore off, reality set in.

And with reality quickly came clinical depression. I was simply overwhelmed by all the circumstances. The newspaper called to talk to me about the whole thing. I said I felt like The Verde River had kicked me in the groin. At the time, that seemed like a very logical thing to say but people certainly looked askance at that comment. I did say it would be OK and we and the river would be friends again.

The Red Cross and FEMA, to their credit, were right on our case. They actually tracked us down and sent a team to interact with us. They recognized my signs of depression right away and referred me to a counselor. Meanwhile, they gave us emergency funds for some clothing and food. Those people really stepped up to the bat and took us under their protective wings. They were awesome, I will never forget their kindness and professionalism as long as I live. They "understood" in a way no one else seemed to be capable of understanding. They were like Family and they gave me a huge shoulder to lean on. The counselor was a master of his profession and he talked me through everything and gave me a clear flight path to escape the depths to which my Spirit had fallen.

Ironically, that year I was chosen to receive The Verde Pride Award because of things I had done for the river. I have very foggy memories of going to accept that award. I felt so empty and so useless. I doubt I was even able to muster a smile for the audience.

FEMA stepped up to the plate and gave us a cash grant to get our feet back on the ground. We used it as seed money to begin to build what became our Straw House here in Rimrock.

One of the weirdest things that transpired was a day when I drove over to the old place and there was a National Guard roadblock on Rocking Chair Road. I talked my way past. They said they were trying to prevent looting.

Well, as I drove toward our place, something didn't seem right. I could see someone was trying to mess with the place and I did a quick U-turn and headed back to the roadblock. I told the National Guard guys what I saw. Bear in mind these guys were wearing full combat camo with helmets, body armor, fully automatic machine guns and had a military Humvee with a tripod mounted machine gun on top. Man, those guys jumped into action like you see in a Hollywood movie and then went tearing down Rocking Chair road as fast as that Humvee would travel. When they reached our place, one guy manned the machine gun and the others jumped out and did a full military sweep of the property shouting commands, taking cover, jumping through doors. It was so surreal that it hurt my heart. I took pictures but I never developed them. It was something I decided I didn't want to see again.

Time passed. Eventually we settled into our little subsistence lifestyle in the 6x8 travel trailer. We heated basalt rocks on the stovetop to keep our feet warm at night and we watched Northern Exposure on a five-inch black and white TV powered by a car battery. By and by the cloud of depression lifted and we walked hand-in-hand into a proud new life. We made some great life choices that we still enjoy to this day.

That flood 20 years ago today was a classic life-defining moment. It was a bumpy ride coming through it all but we did OK. As we look back now, we are grateful for the flood. Without it, we would have probably taken the path of least resistance and who knows if this place in Rimrock would have ever come into being? The flood gave us great gifts and (in hindsight) great strengths. While we wouldn't willingly go through another such event on purpose, we are grateful that the events and circumstances unfolded the way they did. We are who and where we are today in many ways because of the flood 20 years ago today.

I've never told this story to anyone until now. I've kept it bottled up inside. This has been a very healthy experience for me to write out these five vignettes of how that flood unfolded and changed our lives.

I finally feel I have "squared the books" on the Great 1993 Verde River Flood. I feel much better now and I thank you for reading.

As nightfall edged closer this evening, I went outside and stood alone and quiet in the softly falling snow globe we call home. It seemed so poetically ironic that such a vigorous snowfall would be taking place on the precise 20th anniversary of the flood. I thought about the blessing of snow and the process of the annual renewal of the river and all the plants, creatures and people who love and call this place home.

I have been very Blessed by The Verde River. The Verde River brought my Sweetie Susun, created my Dear Friends, sparked much Adventure and leaves us all richer and more rewarded for each day we spend in its glorious watershed. As the snow falls tonight, it brings cleansing Lightness, Peace and Happiness to my Spirit & Soul!

Thank You, Verde River, May You Run Free and Strong Forever!

Many Cheers, John Parsons, PO 144, Rimrock, AZ 86335

