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## **State Historical Society reflects on 1952 Pierre-Fort Pierre Flood**

PIERRE – For many people, the 2011 Pierre-Fort Pierre Flood brings back memories of the last time the area suffered a major flood – 1952.

The two floods have their similarities and differences. Both floods were weather-related. But while the 2011 flood is being called a “controlled flood” by officials with the state and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers due to record releases by the Oahe Dam near Pierre and others along the Missouri River, there was no dam in 1952. The groundbreaking of the dam came in 1948, but it wasn’t officially completed until 1964.

The South Dakota State Historical Society has a wealth of information about the 1952 flood available in the State Archives at the Cultural Heritage Center in Pierre, and it is also collecting information from the 2011 flood.

“The South Dakota State Historical Society collects, preserves, interprets and promotes the history of South Dakota and its people,” said Jay D. Vogt, society director. “We count on the assistance of the people who are experiencing this flood event to provide us with their stories, photographs, etc. We need to acquire this material now before it is lost.”

“We acquired the 1952 flood material over years, and we have some outstanding photos and film,” Vogt added. “The society continues to receive material, and events such as this year’s flood allow us to more effectively raise awareness about donating material to repositories such as the State Historical Society-Archives for long-term preservation.”

The State Archives has a number of resources on the flood of 1952, including books, articles, newspapers, manuscript and government collections, photographs and film footage. The photographs and film footage show the widespread flood damage in both Pierre and Fort Pierre.

“Film footage from 1952 is one of the most fascinating aspects of our Pierre/Fort Pierre flood collection,” said Chelle Somsen, South Dakota State Archivist. “Scenes in the film show the flood waters at various levels, Pierre and Fort Pierre businesses and residences, the highway and railroad bridges across the Missouri River, and views of volunteers making sandbags.”

Harold Schuler of Tucson, Ariz., and formerly of Pierre, wrote about the 1952 flood in his book “Pierre Since 1910.”

“In the 1952 flood, I and Maynard Sommer and many others were assigned to the Army DUKW, a large vehicle that operated on both land and water,” Schuler recently remembered. “We hauled many loads of sandbags from an area near the railroad tracks to the power plant, which is now the location of the South Dakota Discovery

Center. Anyway, many of us working hard saved the plant and, as a result, power was on during the flood.”

Heavy winter snowfall followed by above-normal spring temperatures caused the 1952 flood. Schuler wrote that between October and March that winter, 75.8 inches of snow hit the Pierre area – almost three times the average.

High spring temperatures then quickly melted the snow, overflowing creeks and rivers draining into the Missouri. On April 3, 1952, the level of the Missouri was 17 feet; flood stage, measured at the highway bridge, was 15 feet.

At that time, ice on the river was still holding. The ice broke on April 4 and the river dropped to 13.8 feet, but on April 7, the temperature climbed to 58 degrees and the river level rose to 16.61 feet. As in 2011, a huge sandbagging effort began in Pierre and Fort Pierre, with the flood stage expected to hit 22 feet.

On April 8, the temperature was 71 and the water level hit 19.35 feet. The next day, the flood stage was 22.87 feet. People in both towns were being evacuated from their homes.

The peak flood stage, 25.25 feet, occurred on April 10. The water was 29 inches deep in downtown Pierre on lower Pierre Street. Fortunately, the city’s main water well and power plant were diked and above flood stage, so both power and water were not lost.

The loss to homes and businesses in both towns was enormous. In Fort Pierre, 50 homes were destroyed and more than 100 more were damaged; every business building was at least damaged. In Pierre, the loss was estimated at \$2 million, with major damage to 104 homes and minor damage to another 111.

But Robert Hipple, editor of the Daily Capital Journal, summed up the feelings of people when he wrote in an April 15 editorial, “Pierre has met and sustained the worst disaster in its history. We are determined to go ahead and clean up and rebuild our town.”

For more information, visit the State Historical Society website at [www.history.sd.gov](http://www.history.sd.gov) and click on “Archives” in the menu and then “1952 Flood,” or call the State Archives at (605) 773-3804.

*The South Dakota State Historical Society is a division of the Department of Tourism. The Department of Tourism is comprised of Tourism, the South Dakota Arts Council, and the State Historical Society. The Department is led by Secretary James D. Hagen. The State Historical Society is headquartered at the South Dakota Cultural Heritage Center in Pierre. The center houses the society’s world-class museum, the archives, and the historic preservation, publishing and administrative/development offices. Call (605) 773-3458 or visit [www.history.sd.gov](http://www.history.sd.gov) for more information. The society also has an archaeology office in Rapid City; call (605) 394-1936 for more information.*