

# Memorial Day Means Storms in Tulsa

## 1976 Flood Took Heavy Toll in Lives, Property

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Although most people think of Memorial Day weekend as a time to get out and enjoy the first holiday of the summer, it has been a wet weekend for most Tulsans in the last 10 years.

Rain has dampened the Memorial Day holiday eight times in the last decade, according to records kept by the Tulsa World.

Two of those holidays brought record rains and flash floods that caused millions of dollars in damage and left thousands homeless.

Monsoon-like rains, floods and death have played an important role in the history of Tulsa, despite the millions of dollars spent to control the flow of area creeks and rivers.

When flash floods roared through Tulsa on May 27, it was just another chapter in a story without end for many Tulsans who live in low-lying areas around the city.

Despite the work that has already gone into the Mingo Creek flood control plan, that area of the city was again hardest hit in the holiday storm, which caused an estimated \$150 million damage to Tulsa homes and businesses.

Oddly enough, Tulsa was last hit with a major flood on Memorial Day, May 31, 1976, when 14 inches of rain fell over two days. Three people died in that storm as tornados, high winds and torrential rains blasted the Tulsa area.

Hardest hit during that storm were mobile home parks along North Mingo Road and the Marina Apartments at 21st and Mingo. About 750 homes were flooded and storm damage topped \$25 million.

Civil Defense officials reported flood waters three to five feet deep up to five miles from Mingo Creek during the storm.

Flooding has been a problem in the Mingo Creek area since construction along the creek began.

As early as 1959, a group calling itself the Carland Acres-Mingo Creek Committee asked the Tulsa City Commission to begin a flood control project along the creek.

The Army Corps of Engineers started trying to control flooding in the Mingo Creek area after a flood in June 1974, which damaged nearly 700 homes and caused \$11 million in damage.

However, the initial project was not completed in time to prevent the 1976 Memorial Day disaster. The first phase of the project was not finished until June 1979.

What Corps of Engineer officials hope is the final solution to Mingo Creek flooding is on the drawing board. The corps hopes to receive approval soon for a preliminary engineering study of a proposed \$131 million flood-control project.

The corps hopes to build 23 detention ponds and widen 7.5 miles of the Mingo Creek channel. If the project is approved, it could take six to seven years to complete, corps officials predict.

The National Weather Service said Sunday morning's storm dropped a record 8.74 inches of rain at the official measuring station. A second round of showers later in the day pushed that 24-hour record to 9.24 inches.

The previous record of 7.54 inches was set during a July 27, 1963, storm which caused extensive flooding over a wide area of Tulsa. An anonymous

Tulsa "rainmaker" claimed credit for the devastating storm.

In the late 1950s, two floods on the Arkansas River brought death and destruction to the Brookside area of Tulsa, which was also stuck by flooding Sunday.

The Arkansas hit a near-record level in Oct. 5, 1959, when it peaked at 22.04 feet, well above the 15-foot flood stage.

"The water spilled over its banks and pumped up through sewers," said Allen Bryan, a technician for the reservoir control section of the corps.

"People in the Brookside area have told me that the water pressure pushed manhole covers up 6 inches, and 6 inches of water flowed out from the holes."

The Arkansas reached 21.06 feet during a storm on May

21, 1957.

The method for measuring the depth of the Arkansas River was changed in July 1953, raising the measured level by 3 feet.

Historians claim the Arkansas hit its highest level on June 13, 1923, when a flood level of 19.8 feet was measured. Using the earlier measurements, the October, 1959, flood would have measured 19.04 feet.

Another flood on May 25, 1908, raised the Arkansas to 18 feet, flooding much of West Tulsa, Sand Springs and Jenks.

Both the 1908 and 1923 floods came before the Arkansas River levees were built. Hundreds of residents in low-lying areas were driven from their homes, and unscrupulous entrepreneurs were accused of trying to "stampede" anxious

homeowners into selling their property at low prices.

Homeowners were urged by a member of the Tulsa Real Estate Board to hang on to their property until agencies working to build permanent levees had the chance to further their plans.

Then, as now, the Red Cross was on hand to help flood victims. Volunteer workers provided bedding, furniture and clothes for disaster victims, and opened centers in the Sand Springs line area to shelter the homeless.

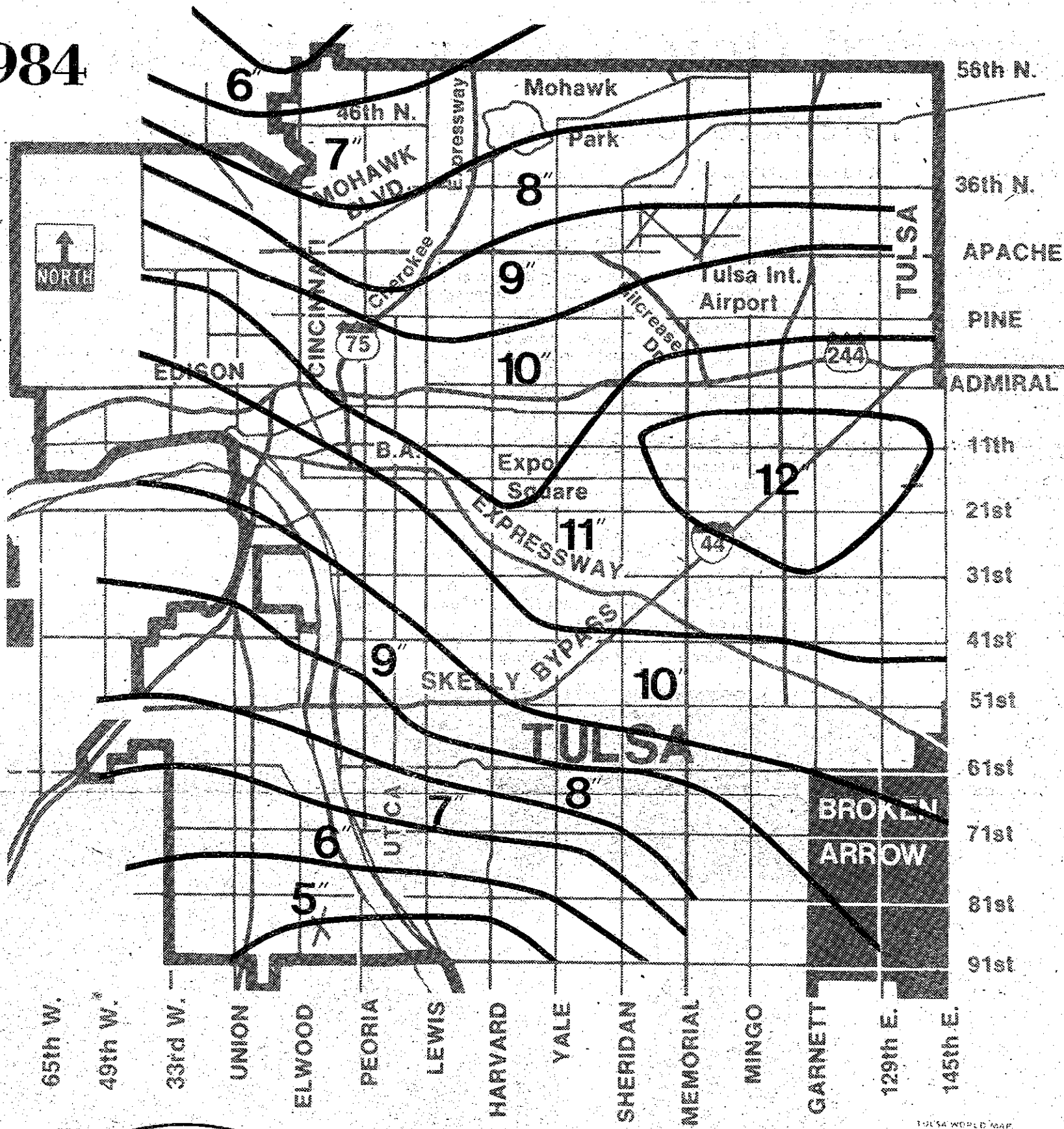
Fortunately for Brookside residents, the Arkansas River has not flooded since the Keystone Dam west of Tulsa was completed in September 1964.

The Arkansas rose to only 6.65 feet during Sunday's storm, well below the 15-foot flood stage.



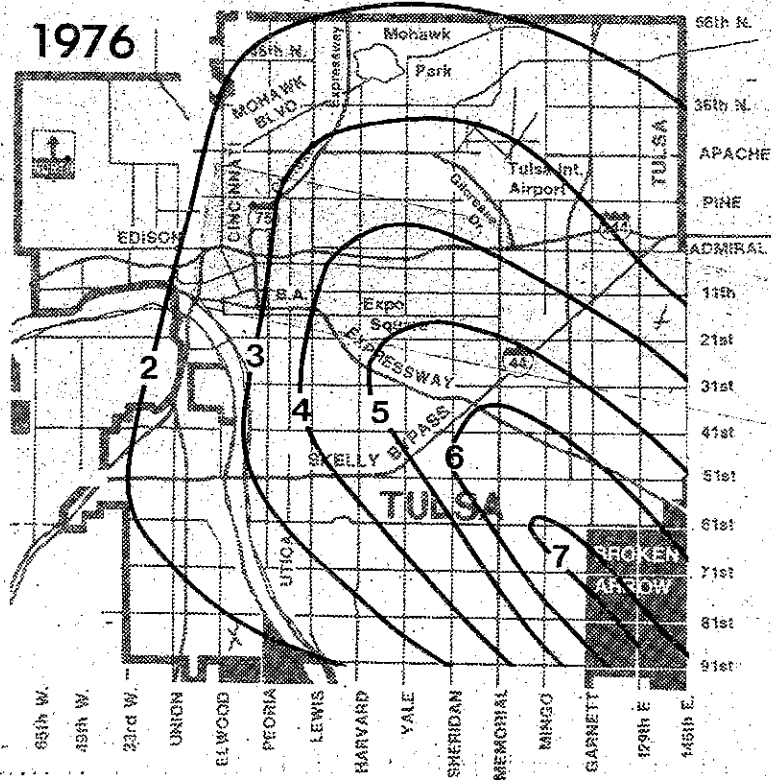
A rescue crew in a boat checks victims at Pine Street and Mingo Road in Tulsa's 1976 Memorial Day flood.

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## Similar, But Different Floods

Maps Trace Tales of 1976, 1984 Disasters

The Great Floods of 1976 and 1984 had their similarities. Both struck during Memorial Day weekends; both hit urban areas. Both brought death and destruction in staggering proportions.

In terms of intensity, the deluge of a week ago has no parallel in city history. It literally swallows its predecessor.

Two maps, prepared by the City of Tulsa's Hydrology Department, plot the rainfall story for both floods. The diagrams are based on the locations and contents of rain gauges posted throughout the city.

The hardest hit area in 1984 was the Mingo Creek area, be-

tween Memorial Drive and 129th East Avenue and Admiral Boulevard and 31st Street. That region received a foot of rain.

That same area was surrounded by 11-inch rains which fell between Pine and 51st streets and Yale and 145th East avenues.

Ten and 11-inch downpours cut a wide swath through the heart of Tulsa, especially in the Brookside area.

In 1976, the location receiving the most rainfall was a relatively small area between Mingo and Garnett roads and 61st and 81st streets, where storms dropped seven inches of water. An area between Sheridan Road and 145th East Ave-

nue and 41st and 91st streets received six inches.

In 1984, the Joe Creek area, between Yale and Peoria avenues and 21st and 51st streets, received nine to 11 inches. In 1976, that area received three to five inches of rain.

In 1984, the lowest amount of rainfall, four to five inches, occurred in far south Tulsa, between Elwood Avenue and Mingo Road and south of 91st Street.

In contrast, during the 1976 flood, except for the city's far southeastern corner, only two to three inches of rain fell in a several-mile-wide band around Tulsa.