

# The flood of '97 from a new perspective: the stories of the storytellers

By [Kerstin Kealy](#) on Feb 23, 2017 at 11:43 p.m.



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FARGO — The flood of 1997 — instantly a memory, image or story might come to mind.

Over the years, we've looked back at the way that spring changed this region forever.

As we get ready to mark the 20-year anniversary tonight, a unique look back at the flood.

The stories of the storytellers.

"The water came up on us probably about a foot overnight where we're at. Our dike it's at its top right now and running over. Six inches more. Gave up. Can't fight it no more," from an interview in 1997.

The flood of 1997 devastated the Red River Valley from south to north.

"What were you going to do? Where are you going to go? How are you going to get out? There was no place. We couldn't even drive a car," from an interview in 1997.

It was a natural disaster months in the making.

"No heat. Water in the basement, seepage. So, it's been a miserable day," from an interview in 1997.

A record-shattering 117 inches of snow set the stage for record-setting flooding that would change the region forever.

"You have to see this to believe it. It is beyond anything any of us have experienced. The most devastating disaster North Dakota has ever been hit with," said Earl Pomeroy, North Dakota House, in an interview in 1997.

"The water was just unbelievable," said Austen Schauer, former WDAY News anchor/reporter.

"It was just such a weird time," said Mike Sweeney, former WDAY news photographer.

"Such a surreal experience," said Chad Peterson, former WDAY News photographer.

"It impacted everyone," said Kevin Wallevand, WDAY news reporter.

For the reporters and photographers who covered the people and stories of the '97 flood, the memories come back in waves.

"It was usually 7 in the morning until 11 at night, I think for 28 days," said Wallevand.

It would be water in its frozen form that would paralyze the Valley, starting an emotional and exhausting battle.

"I was lucky the house didn't start on fire because the service had been blown off and the wires were arcing," from a 1997 Interview.

April 5, a blizzard and ice storm, it was when things kicked into high gear for WDAY's News Team.

"I think a lot of people realized at that point that we were in trouble because power was going out everywhere. Poles were snapped," said Kerstin Kealy, WDAY anchor.

"It was like what else could Mother Nature give us?" said Schauer.

For photographer Mike Sweeney and reporter Austen Schauer, the storm brought a quick lesson in the power of rising and freezing water.

"Wahpeton's flooded but it's frozen. It was just strange," said Sweeney.

As the water moved north, our news teams followed.

For reporter/photographer team Kevin Wallevand and Chad Peterson that meant days capturing the frantic battle to save the tight-knit Oak Grove neighborhood.

"Hearing police talking through their intercoms. Neighbors of whatever community come and help restore this dike," said Chad Peterson, former WDAY News photographer.

"I was shoveling sand into a pile in the driveway and I seen these people running at me saying 'get out of here.' I've never seen people run like that in my life," from a 1997 Interview.

"We just started noticing water going and it didn't take long before we couldn't keep up with it," from an 1997 interview.

- **More than 200 officers clear muddy protest camp, but 46 arrested** (<http://bit.ly/2mkJ4Ve>)

"Two hundred people sandbagging; you couldn't hear anything. Everyone was just like focused, we've got to saved this neighborhood," said Wallevand.

"It's just devastating," from a 1997 interview.

As the flood fight in the southern Valley unfolded, communities in the northern end of the Valley got an up-close look at the wall of water and the flood fight headed their way.

"And I was like oh my gosh, look at this. This is like a war zone," said Peterson.

"There were Guard troops coming down the road with their huge trucks busting through the ice. There was a helicopter from the Guard above us. People just looking like what is happening to our town," said Wallevand.

"This is something that this town was totally unprepared for," from a 1997 interview.

- **City of Fargo employee: let DAPL protesters 'drown in the flooding'** (<http://bit.ly/2mfu2Dk>)

"You're seeing these senior citizens are climbing into a front-end loader and getting taken to an Army vehicle to get taken out. It's just like, how is this happening? How did it happen?" said Peterson.

"Those scenes from Ada (Minn.) are forever burned in the minds of anyone who lived there," said Wallevand.

Just outside of Ada, a different flood battle. Ken Visser's frantic fight to save cattle that broke through frozen floodwater and were drowning.

"Busted loose. Help him, Scott. C'mon! We don't have much time. That's the pain right there. I guess if anyone has any compassion at all and watches an animal suffer and die," said Ken Visser, in a 1997 interview.

"A lot of people still remember that. That was an impactful story," said Wallevand.

In towns or rural areas, nothing was immune from Mother Nature's wrath.

- **Healthcare conversation dominates as Cramer town hall event draws overflow crowd** (<http://bit.ly/2mcKKmQ>)

"I remember seeing the church out there like a little island," said Sweeney.

"It was those aerial images that gave us the pure scope of this flood and just how much water there was. Forum photographer Bruce Crummy rented a plane with a friend and brought us in pictures—a harsh reality," said Kealy.

"You know this was a target rich environment as they say because there was just water everywhere," said Crummy, former Forum photographer.

"Watching Grand Forks on fire in the middle of all of this water. That was also crazy," said Peterson.

"The main thing in my mind as mayor of this city at this time is the health and safety of all our people. We have no differences at this point. We are all in it together and we will survive," said Pat Owens, Grand Forks mayor, 1997 Interview.

The Flood of '97 was deadly. For anchor/reporter Austen Schauer, even after 20 years, the emotions of two mothers and two daughters lost were fresh.

- **Dean Blais is back coaching in Grand Forks, but will it be for the last time?** (<http://bit.ly/2mkJV8D>)

"It was a mom and a 17-year-old daughter that were going to a rodeo and they had a horse trailer and there was a washed-out bridge, a little creek and they went right in," Schauer said. "And we were visiting with the sheriff and they were seeing what's going on and when they pulled the bodies out, he came back to us and he looked at us in the eyes and I'll never forget that his face was so white. It was like he had seen something horrible because he had. And then a week later, a pregnant woman had a 3-year-old daughter and the water was over the road. She turned right into Whiskey Creek and she died of elements. The next day the farmer found her and she was curled up in a fetal position with that little 3-year-old. And it wasn't good," said Schauer.

"I don't really feel like I knew at the time really what we were capturing," said Peterson.

"That's the one thing that we heard from the network TV crews and the national media that was in town was that they couldn't believe the community response," said Wallevand.

"There ain't much. Everybody's tired but everybody is pretty much helping everybody else out and doing the best they can with what they've got," from a 1997 interview.

"I remember how thankful everyone was," said Peterson.

- **Upset at Trump, Mexico voices 'worry and irritation' to U.S. envoys** (<http://bit.ly/2msJtUN>)

"I have to really say thanks that's got homes their own selves that are flooded and they're out here helping us. I really appreciate it. It brings tears to you that somebody else is helping you," from a 1997 interview.

"I think we live in an area where you do that and it's just expected that you're going to help," said Wallevand.

"I've hardly ever seen such a remarkable demonstration of courage and commitment and cooperation and basic human strength. And we are very proud to be Americans when we see what you have done in the face of this natural disaster," said President Bill Clinton in a 1997 address in Grand Forks.

"That was a winter and spring no one will forget," said Wallevand.

So many communities were affected by the flooding, unfortunately we weren't able to touch on them all, it was an amazing time.

Some estimates have damages from the flood of '97 at \$3.5 billion.