

Radio station reported Swift dam failure



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(Photo: Courtesy photo)

Bob Norris, Jerry Black and Bob Hauser of KSEN. Norris and Black were at the station during the 1964 flood.(Photo: Courtesy photo)

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Bob Norris and Jerry Black were working at a small regional AM radio station called KSEN in Shelby when Montana's biggest flood on record hit June 7 and June 8, 1964.

Station employees suddenly found themselves covering a national story around the clock, but it remained local to them.

"I never saw anything like it in my life, and never thought I would," said Jerry Black, 79, who is retired and living in Arizona. "It was the most devastating thing to ever hit northern Montana. Farms and ranchers were isolated, no telephone lines, no way to get out.

"So when we went out with the mobile units in our cars, we talked to literally hundreds of people who were in real trouble," Black said.

The dam-busting flood of 1964 occurred 50 years ago.

The small team of announcers and secretaries at the regional AM station worked continuously for four straight days, performing reporting duties along with public service while serving as a vital communications link in the pre-Internet era, when there was no Twitter, Facebook or emergency alerts via smartphones to warn people they were directly in the paths of massive walls of water following the sudden failures of Swift and Two Medicine dams.

Besides that, power and telephone lines were washed out, along with roads.

"You're amazed how powerful the water is and how quickly it can rise," said Norris, one of the announcers. "Just the massiveness of it was something else."

Norris was on the scene when the overflowing Marias River overran the large metal Sullivan Bridge southeast of Cut Bank. "Water cut so high it just turned that whole bridge sideways right into the river," he said.

Just that year, Black, the station manager, had ordered five mobile radio units for use in vehicles and a couple of portable units that could be used anywhere.

The new equipment arrived a week before the floods came.

"That was a real coincidence and a real fortunate break," Black said.

The portable radios proved to be invaluable in the monumental task of reporting the far-flung story and communicating information to residents of the Golden Triangle in the critical hours following the natural disaster, particularly for those living on the hard-hit Blackfeet Reservation.

Radios were installed in automobiles, and KSEN workers went out and covered the flood. They also took to the air to report what they saw. And one of the units was left with Vita Marsh at the Valier gymnasium.

"She got a lot of phone calls from people in the area that were in trouble that were affected by the flood and were cut off because all the roads were flooded over," Black said. "She broadcast messages people wanted to get out to the people. So it was extremely useful. Without it, they had no way of communicating outside the area."

Station announcers not only reported the news, they relayed desperate requests for help and information on missing people, with phones ringing continually at the Shelby office. Sometimes, Norris said, announcers served as air traffic controllers for pilots, who were listening, too, directing them to areas in need of assistance.

Those who discuss the flood today inevitably mention the KSEN call letters or Norris when they share their memories of the flood, some of which come from hearing stories on the radio rather than seeing the events for themselves.

"They were doing a live commentary about a gentleman that was in a tree," recalled Browning's Nora Kennedy, who also remembers Rainier Beer shipping water to the Blackfeet Reservation in beer bottles.

Water was rising and rescuers were trying to reach the man in the tree, Kennedy said. Kennedy was 7 when she heard the story — on the radio. Today, she's with Blackfeet Tribal Emergency Response.

"I never knew what happened to him," Kennedy said.

"They rescued him," replied Joe Bird Rattler, 77, Browning, who helped form a rescue crew to search for victims in the wake of the flood.

During the flood, KSEN reporters flew in airplanes, along with local pilots.

Along Birch Creek, says Norris, 75, who lives in Arizona today, residents would light fires to illuminate runways so pilots could land at night.

When Swift Dam on Birch Creek broke, the radio station was called and broadcast the news and a warning to evacuate immediately. The cascade of water down Birch Creek claimed the lives of 19 residents of the Blackfeet Reservation.

"It was so devastating at the time, and all we were doing was trying to help people so they could make it out," Black said. "It was a terrible disaster, but on the other hand it really brought people together, too. Everybody was helping out one another all they could."

Bird Rattler and others recall Norris reporting, from an airplane, that Swift Dam had failed.

Actually, Norris was on the ground at the time the dam broke, but he still had a hand in reporting the story.

Jim Farrar, a local pilot, flew over the area and spotted a wall of water.

"And he described that wall of water coming down Birch Creek," Norris said. "It would hit telephone poles and light poles and just take 'em out like toothpicks. It would hit ranch houses and just blow 'em up."

Norris went up to the airport in Shelby and got on the radio with Farrar. Norris held a telephone up to the speaker on the radio receiver so Farrar's account could be recorded back at the radio station. The reporting was then broadcast on air.

"1964, we didn't have all the high-tech stuff you have nowadays," Norris said.

Farrar was viewing the disaster from a four-seat Piper. "Then you'd hear me in the background talking back to him," said Norris, who was on the ground. "So I've got the telephone in one hand and the microphone for the radio in the other."

For a few years after the flood, Norris used to play a condensed version of that report on the anniversary of the flood.

The first year, he made the mistake of only saying at the beginning of the tape that it was from the 1964 flood, and the phones started ringing. In subsequent years the station made it clear.

"You'd have to interrupt it now and then and say, 'This is a recording from 1964.'"