



# The Great Freshet of 1903

## *A Morning of Terror Along the Pacolet River*

by William M. Branham

**A**t 5 a.m. on Saturday, June 6, 1903, Hicks Stribling, storekeeper at Clifton Mill No. 2, heard water gurgling below his second-story room in the company store. As water rose up to meet him, he scrambled to the roof and then to a nearby tree where he spent the next 11 hours. He was naked. As dawn rose and revealed his condition to a woman in a nearby tree, she offered her apron to restore his dignity.

Ben Johnson, a merchant of the settlement of Santuck, just below the No. 2 mill, drifted nine miles with his wife and two children, down to the raging Pacolet River on the roof of his house, only to see his family disappear over the Pacolet Mills dam in a swirling eddy.

These are two of the harrowing

stories of the "June Fresh of 1903" on the Pacolet River in upper Spartanburg County. When the waters subsided and the catastrophe was totaled up, there were more than \$300 million (today's dollars) in damages, 600 people left homeless, 4,000 without jobs, 70 homes swept away and 65 people killed or missing, some of whose bodies were never found.

In 1903, the ten miles of the Pacolet River valley between Converse (where present day U.S. 29 crosses the river east of Spartanburg) and the village of Pacolet Mills boasted a bustling community of 15,000 people. Seven major cotton spinning and weaving mills ranged from the giant 50,000-spindle Clifton No. 3 to smaller mills at Clifton, Glendale and Pacolet.

Five dams along the river supplied the necessary power to run cards, spinning frames and looms to produce a variety of cotton goods upon which the economy of Spartanburg County depended heavily.

Life in those mills meant hard work and long hours. But in off times, the pleasant Pacolet River provided swimming, fishing and Sunday picnics along its banks. The Electric Railway offered easy access to downtown Spartanburg and the shopping joys there. The Aug. W. Smith Co. advertised first quality men's suits at \$15, the John A. Walker Co. offered a splendid shipment of ladies' shoes and oxfords at \$1.50 a pair.

For entertainment, Southern Railway was offering a round trip excursion to Charleston for \$3.50, luncheon to be

served on the train and many excursions and special sights of Charleston available at special rates. For those traveling farther afield, the Southern listed the Washington and Southwest Limited, "the Finest Train in the World," composed exclusively of Pullman cars, drawing rooms, observation car, gentlemen's club and dining car to Washington, Philadelphia and New York without change.

In the national news, President Theodore Roosevelt had just returned to Washington after one of his Western safaris. The Post Office, even then, was in trouble. It was noted that many rural routes had been established, especially in the South, just for the convenience of a few congressmen and their friends and the expenditures of money for those routes was "almost criminal." A Superintendent Machen had been dismissed and arrested.

Internationally, the Russian persecution of the Jews continued.

And so it was that in busy, bustling Pacolet Valley in June 1903, the spring crops up the river toward Campobello and Fingerville had been planted and the rows of corn and cotton were well on their way. Early in June the welcome spring rains began. From its headwaters near Tryon, N.C., the Pacolet River meanders from a trickle, crossing the South Carolina line southeasterly to Landrum, growing larger through Clifton, Pacolet and on to the Broad and to the sea.

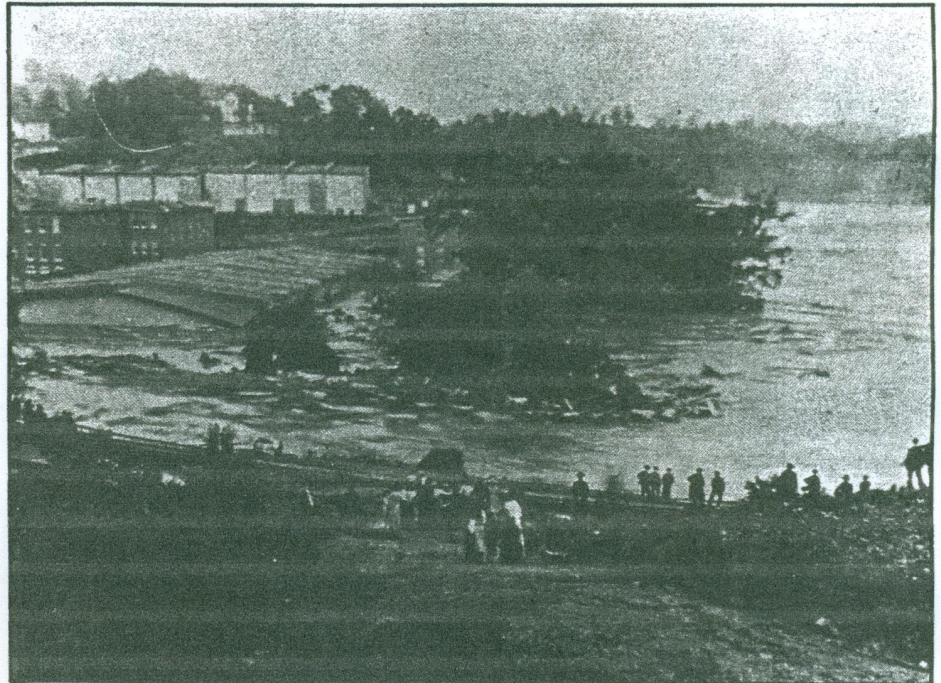
The settlers along its banks were accustomed to rising waters and most were fully prepared. Every year cattle were moved from bottomlands, machinery and tools put away. At the mills, no extra precautions were necessary as almost 20 years' experience brought knowledge of expected river behavior.

But late in the afternoon of June 5, the third day of heavy rains, the North Pacolet River began to swell on its way to Fingerville.

Around Landrum, the Pacolet took the waters from North Carolina and speed them on toward the sea. From Spivey's, Motlow and Obed creeks, the run-off raised its level to ten feet over the normal bed of the river. Waters rose to eight feet in the cotton mill at Fingerville and the machinery was destroyed. Just below Fingerville where the North Pacolet and Pacolet join, the water was higher. Further down at Buck Creek, 15 feet above normal, William Harden's grist mill was demolished and its timbers added to the



**Clifton Mill No. 1 after the flood. Three persons who fled to the top of the mill were swept into the river when the roof fell in (at right). Sightseers in their Sunday best were caught by photographer June Carr of Gaffney.**

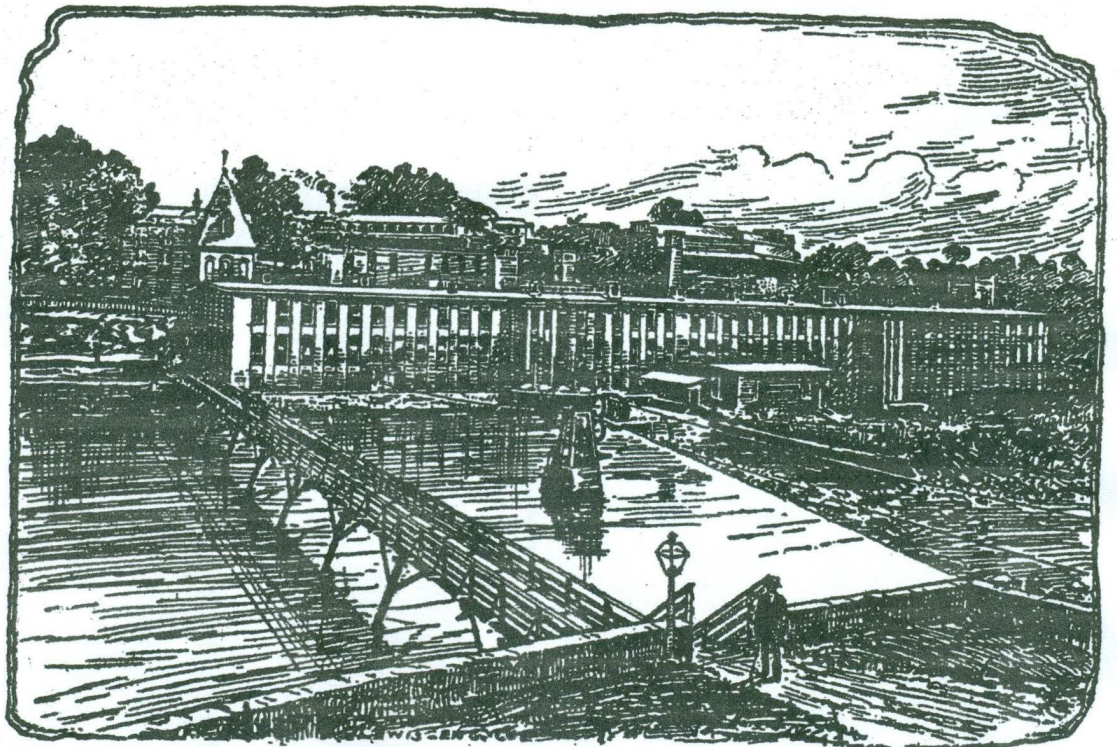


**Pacolet River at Pacolet during the flood. Two major mills were completely destroyed and a third badly damaged.**

tons of debris smashing down the channel. Lawson's Fork Creek, as it rushed through Spartanburg, carried with it the major Southern Railway trestle serving the city, dumping it in the river above Converse.

But the *coup de grace* was to come at about 3 a.m. in the Campobello area some 30 miles upstream. Natives called it a "water spout," but it was evidently a

small tornado accompanied by a fierce cloudburst. There are no records of how much rain fell in an extremely short period, but it must have been horrendous. Sweeping everything in its path, a wall of water gained strength as it tumbled down the Pacolet Valley. Its first major obstruction was Clifton Mill No. 3 (now Converse) at the bottom of a gorge alongside the river just north of



Clifton Mill No. 1 as it appeared in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Part of the mill was swept downriver in the flood.

the Southern Railway trestle. Mrs. C.W. Linder describes the scene: "The five-story, 50,000-spindle mill trembled for a while, and then gave way. Like a hugh match box, it was carried under the trestle and on down the river." The dam gave way at the same time, and the water rose some 40 feet in a matter of minutes. The current there was estimated at 40 miles per hour. Mrs. Linder's house and others followed the wreck of the mill downstream. Three-quarters of a mile further down, Clifton Mill No. 1 awaited the onslaught. Warning had been given but there was little time to prepare. The wall of water thundered down the valley sweeping away everything in its path. All of No. 1 village within a hundred feet of the former river bank was destroyed. The torrent took away a third of the mill, inundating the lower floors.

The upper end of the mill was demolished, exposing crooked and bent machinery and broken timbers. Long dirty streamers of yard goods hung from the second and third story windows, the ends still attached to the wrecked looms. Portions of the dam and the turbines were gone. Three persons who had taken refuge on top of the mill were lost when a portion of the building collapsed.

The flood's greatest toll was yet to come. At Clifton Mill No. 2, Hicks Stribling was scrambling to his tree. Most of

the operatives (term used for workers) had been warned and had, in the few short minutes that the water took from No. 1 to No. 2, managed to flee to higher ground. But some veterans of the Pacolet just didn't seem to believe the calamity to come and stayed in their homes.

The fury struck No. 2. It took away half the four-story mill. Normally 100 feet wide at this point, the river had spread to more than 500 feet. Terrified men, women and children took to the trees, climbing higher and higher as the waters rose. Keeping them company in the branches were snakes, coons and all manner of wildlife.

Just below No. 2 lay the settlement of Santuck, about 16 crackerbox mill homes in a lowlying bend. Here is where the disaster took its greatest toll of life. John Merchant, a second hand in the card room at No. 2, saw his sister, her husband and three children swept away. The brother-in-law managed to catch a limb and be rescued. One of his children, a boy, was seen at Pacolet, nine miles down the river, fruitlessly crying for help as he was forced over the dam in the eddy below and lost. Mr. and Mrs. J.B. Findley drifted some five miles down the river with the debris. Mrs. Findley was lost. The rescue efforts at Santuck and the Clifton Mills were heroic. George Willis, 17, a weave room attendant at No. 2, and a friend spotted a woman clutching to sticks of

cordwood as she struggled to escape drowning. They commandeered a well rope, threw it to her, brought her close enough to shore and carried her packsaddle the hundred yards to higher ground. Hicks Stribling and his apron were finally rescued from the tree. Someone enlisted the help of a star Converse baseball pitcher who tied a string to a ball and threw it to the hapless refugee. A rope was carried over and Stribling finally made it to safety and clothing about 4 p.m. on Saturday.

Makeshift rafts were made from some of the thousands of cotton bales that were dumped from the warehouse by the force of the water. By tying ropes to the rafts and floating them out to the stranded survivors, most were saved, but some who couldn't hang on for eight hours were lost.

One black man had been offered a dollar for each person he rescued with his cotton bale raft. When he reached 99, he said he'd try for 100. On this last try, his bale overturned and he was lost to the river.

The greatest loss of life was at Clifton No. 2 and Santuck, but the greatest destruction of property was yet to come. Nine miles down the river, Pacolet Mills No. 1, No. 2 and No. 3 awaited the flood. By this time evacuation along the danger zones was complete and it was daylight. Spectators lined the banks.

First to go was Pacolet Mill No. 1, a four-story, 30,000-spindle mill that went down with a crash about 9 a.m. The crowds watching on the bank turned their attention to the adjoining mill, No. 2, half-submerged in the muddy waters. After about an hour, it shuddered and went under with a deafening roar. Pacolet No. 3 partially survived.

As the spectators watched, the body of a woman "cold in death" was carried downstream. "The horrified crowd watched as a small boy, clinging to wreckage near the woman, called for help as he passed before the eyes of the gazing but helpless crowd. An attempt was made to reach the child, but no one was able to brave the fury of the waters, and the little fellow was carried downstream calling pitifully for help."

By late in the afternoon, the waters along the river subsided and the work of picking up the pieces began. There were more than 600 homeless, without food, clothing, money or shelter. The regular supply routes along the Electric Railway were gone; Glendale was as far as it could go. There was no electricity. Most survivors were just too tired and dazed to do anything.

On Sunday the search for the dead began. Many bodies were never found—washed down the river or buried under tons of sand and wreckage. One woman was found only because her knee projected above the sand. As the clayey silt dried out, flies attracted to the cracks betrayed the location of many dead below the surface. The victims totaled 65 with many families completely wiped out.

President Victor Montgomery of Pacolet Mills and his brothers, W.S. and Ben, together with a crew of laborers, struggled to save cotton and undamaged good from the partially destroyed Mill No. 3. But there was little to be salvaged. Most of value was on its way to Columbia and the sea on the waters of the Broad River.

By Sunday the sightseers had begun to gather. Though the Electric Railway was out, the Spartanburg livery stables were completely rented out of the flashy carriages and buggies so popular. June Carr, a photographer from Gaffney, loaded his bulky 8x10 camera and the fragile glass plates and journeyed to Clifton to record the devastation. Rubberneckers, dressed in their Sunday best, roved through the destruction carrying off spindles and bits of cloth as souvenirs.

Reporters from as far away as



**Clifton Mill No. 2 after the flood; there were 65 people killed or missing, 600 left homeless and 4,000 left without jobs.**

Atlanta descended on the scene. One issued a dispatch that made the national news concerning the destitution and deprivation of the operatives at the mills in Clifton. And this is where the egg hit the fan: Though both Pacolet and Clifton Mills had made special efforts to pay off employees so they could purchase food and clothing, and a relief committee had been formed that ultimately collected more than \$15,000 from as far away as Atlanta, Charleston and Philadelphia, a Judge Williams had reported on Tuesday the 10th that many of the operatives were without shelter or clothing, went to bed supperless and had been without bread part of the time since the disaster. He returned, he said, and simply confirmed the report that many of the operatives were on the verge of starvation and without shelter. He reported that he personally canvassed his friends and the neighborhood and gathered what food he could find, and he and his friends did what they could. "Nothing has been done for these people and conditions are getting very bad. Why the committee in Spartanburg doesn't loosen up is more than I can understand. These people need food and money, and they are not being treated right at all. Something should be done and done at once or we are going to have a lot of starving people on our hands."

This report brought forth cries of outrage both from R.H.F. Chapman, chairman of the relief committee, and from the newspapers who were not noted for their criticism of mill owners. Chapman said he had visited at both Pacolet and Clifton and had talked with the relief committee there and if such conditions existed, he didn't know of them: a head-in-the-sand condition common to many mill owners of that time. Ultimately the relief committee reported that all the money needed had been obtained and asked that further contributions be withheld. South Carolina Governor Heyward, a big spender, donated \$50. Thus a grand total of \$15,000 was available for 600 homeless and 4,000 unemployed residents of the valley.

No organized relief was provided for the hundreds of small farmers along the path of the flood who lost homes, stock, tools and crops. Federal aid to the victims amounted to one carload of food and clothing.

The Post Office Department came into its share of trouble. A big flap arose about the mail service. As mail came by train and bridges were out to the north, west and east, nothing was moving. It was Tuesday afternoon, after much vocal citizen and newspaper complaining, that mail finally arrived from Augusta.

Among the other rumors prevalent at the time was that the large dam at Lake Toxaway had broken, causing the surge of water. This brought heated denial from the management of Toxaway Company who wished to let it be known that everything "they did was in a first class manner and their dam had not broken . . . only a small pond had gone over its banks."

By Thursday things seemed to have settled down. The Southern Railway had repaired most of the trestles coming into town. Ferries were operating in a number of places along the Pacolet. The task of burying the dead was underway. One funeral was conducted via a special car on the Electric Railway from Glendale to the cemetery in Spartanburg. Many of the dead were interred in ground on a hill above Clifton Mill No. 2. The Board of Directors voted to rebuild Pacolet Mill No. 3 which had been only partially destroyed. Stock in the badly battered Clifton Mills held at 85 with no sellers. There were to be rebuilt later, with Mill No. 3 (now called Converse) on a higher level.

Today along the Pacolet Valley in the path of the flood, it's relatively quiet and peaceful. The only fulltime mill in operation now is at Pacolet Mills (formerly No. 3), a part of the Milliken empire. At Clifton No. 2, Tuscarora Yarns runs a small operation in a portion of the building. Clifton No. 1 is being used as a machinery warehouse. The foundation of Clifton No. 3 is barely visible above the broken turbines and remaining parts of the dam. Santuck is brush and forest. No one rebuilt there. Most of the stones in the graveyard are tumbled over and covered by weeds. Clifton village is a cluster of duplex mill homes, now converted to single family use, populated with retired mill workers and a sprinkling of younger families. Modern Spartanburg is creeping steadily closer. Only a mile from Clifton is the new Spartanburg County Broome High School and \$100,000 homes are being built nearby. But like Ole Man River, the Pacolet goes on. At night or on a quiet Sunday morning, the only noise is the rush of the water over the abandoned dams.

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