

Destruction astonishes witnesses and evacuees

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The floodwaters had crested by midafternoon Saturday, but amazement ran at full surge. A knot of locals clad in Carhartt pants, camouflage hunting jackets, ball caps and knee-high gumboots gathered on the plank-topped bridge where Petersville Road crosses Moose Creek.

The creek tumbled and rolled beneath their feet, the color of wine mixed with rust, fast and angry. The bridge was closed to wheeled traffic, barred by a flimsy screen of perforated orange plastic of the type common at construction sites.

There, pointed Ron Robbins, 64, who lives in a house atop a knoll nearby -- that's where the creek ran so hard and fast it washed the earth away from the piling, the very bridge foundation. A smell of creosote wafted up from the northeast piling, a stout piece of railroad tie surrounded by rushing water.

Don't know how they'll fix that, Robbins said.

Across the creek, and in it now, a small cabin coated in Tyvek insulation jutted from the water, surrounded by swamped trees and a small archipelago of drowned pickups.

The place belonged to Robbins' friend Tim Walker, who was absent, stranded elsewhere far up Petersville Road. Missing from the property, too, were an A-frame dwelling, a Honda automobile, a shed and a mid-1980s-model Chevrolet pickup with a plow attached and a dog inside.

The dog was an English spaniel named Storm, said Robbins' son Buddy, 30, who lives along the creek in a house on the east side of the bridge.

Now all that was gone -- the shed, the A-frame, the car, the truck and Storm -- and Ron Robbins explained what happened.

The shed went first. The water, which reached a good 150 yards beyond the creekbed in the dark early hours of Saturday, pushed the shed against the truck, which was parked in the backwater pool that had been Walker's front yard. Shed and truck together were pushed downstream into the bridge.

The elder Robbins, shining his million-candlepower portable light on the scene, saw the dog inside and threw rocks at the windshield, hoping to break it and somehow get to the animal. The battery powering his light gave out, he said.

"I went to change the light," he said. "I was gone 10 minutes. We were gonna see if we could save the dog. I came back and the dog was gone."

The water apparently forced the disintegrating shed, truck and dog underneath the bridge and sucked it all away downstream

Next went the A-frame, pushed from its foundation, lodged against the bridge, battered into scrap wood, sucked beneath the short span and spit out the other side.

Similar stories unfolded throughout the forests and fields between the Peters Hills and Hatcher Pass, stories of loss and confusion as the creeks and rivers rose overnight. A half-dozen small streams from Talkeetna to Wasilla overflowed their banks. The Susitna River turned from a muddy, braided channel to a roiling, log-bearing torrent of brown a mile wide.

At the Willow Community Center, 13 people had checked in as evacuees. Red Cross volunteer Rainey Miller said people started showing up at 1 a.m. Saturday.

Jerry Greschke, 62, arrived sometime after 7 a.m. He told his story in the center parking lot, still wearing the soggy snowmachine boots in which he beat a hurried retreat from his flooded home, a travel trailer. He steadied himself with one hand while standing in a pickup bed. With the other hand he grappled to slip a harness over his dog, Queen. A steady rain fell. The aroma of wet dog hung heavy.

"A million thumbs up for the Willow Fire Department," he said.

Members of the local fire station waded chest-deep through the backwaters of nearby Willow Creek to pull Greschke and two of his neighbors on Stinson Road to safety in an inflatable raft, along with their six dogs and a cockatiel named Dusty Rose.

"They had to make three trips," Greschke said.

The water was five feet deep and rising, he said. One volunteer firefighter, noticing Greschke lacked a life vest, gave Greschke his own.

"He gave me the life vest right off his back. Now, that's a hero," Greschke said.

Inside the airy main hall, at a folding table butted against a wall, Tom Rutigliano, a ham radio operator, stood watch over his radio kit, the communication link with the Emergency Operations Center in Wasilla and two other Red Cross shelters, one at Su Valley High School to the north, the other at Larson Elementary School to the south. Radio is more dependable than cell phones, he said, and resumed his vigil.

Volunteers Lynn Pannell and Bruce and Cathy Petrie moved in the center kitchen, preparing hot chili for the evacuees.

Richard Sonju, 64, also of Stinson Road, stood nearby, nursing a foam cup of coffee. His son-in-law and neighbor, Steve Frachey, 44, sat alone at one of many banquet tables arranged in the hall. The two men turned over events in clipped, muted words.

They evacuated their homes around 9 the night before, Sonju said. His home, he believes, still stands above the encroaching waters. He worried less about damage to his home than he did of being cut off by Willow Creek as it submerged and then scoured away the roadway.

"The thing of it is, we know we can't get back in. The road is gone," he said.

That may not be the worst of it. The beautiful yard he landscaped in front of his home is surely destroyed.

"It's all gone, to speak of," Sonju said.

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Illustration:

Photo 4: flood_kashwitna_082006.jpg

Photo 5: flood_montana_082006.jpg

Photo 6: 20AKAG104ALASKA_FLOODIN_082006.jpg

Graphic 1: Quote marks_082006.eps

Graphic 2: Flood_air_downtown_082006.eps

Graphic 3: 20MatSuFlooding_082006.eps

Illustrated by Ron Engstrom

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ILLUSTRATION SHOWS MAP AND DETAILS OF MAT-SU FLOODING.

AL GRILLO / The Associated Press

Mary Weys rows a rubber raft Saturday to get to her flooded home in Willow.

Photos by STEPHEN NOWERS / Anchorage Daily News

Buildings at the end of Main Street in Talkeetna were surrounded by floodwater Saturday. The National Weather Service said its station in Talkeetna recorded 6.68 inches of rain over the last week. More than half of that, 3.7 inches, fell on Friday.

Hydrologist Chad Smith of the U.S. Geological Survey made sure a floating water-current sensor was transmitting data before Smith and fellow hydrologist Jeff Conaway measured the volume of flow in the Kashwitna River on Saturday.

The waters of Montana Creek flowed through the Montana Creek campground at Mile 96 Parks Highway on Saturday. A few miles south, Sheep Creek Lodge fared much better, said lodge co-owner Phenie Miller.

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