THE NIGHTMARE 1986 FLOOD

It's a kind of specific job hazard that goes with work at the Corps of Engineers: You wake in the dead of night, filled with dread, from a nightmare in which the rains pour down unceasingly, unmercifully, filling all available lakes — and the rain never stops. Sometimes in the dream you are the one in charge, the one who has to make the no-win decisions in which, inevitably, uncontrollable torrents of water flood cities, towns, and farms, while you watch helplessly.

The nightmare came true in the Tulsa District in the closing week of September 1986, when unprecedented rains put the District's flood control system — and its staff — to their severest test.

As much as 25 inches of rain — in some cases, more than normally falls in a year — fell over eastern Oklahoma. Every river in the District's Arkansas River system flooded. Flood control lakes filled to the brim. And still the rains fell.

When runoff exceeded the system's capacity, extensive flooding occurred. Some disaster areas, such as Bartlesville and Tulsa County, were just downstream from Corps dams.

Angry flood victims blamed embattled District engineers, but other residents turned out in record numbers to fill thousands of sandbags airlifted by the Tulsa District.

Despite their best efforts, the fall 1986 floods left $283 million in damages, including $63.6 million in Tulsa County and $40 million in Washington County (which includes Bartlesville), Oklahoma. Two people died, and 43 counties were declared disaster areas.

Keystone Dam flood gates earned their money with the workout they received in the 1986 flood, while workers monitored rising flood waters throughout northeastern Oklahoma. The Tulsa District distributed sand bags by the truck load during the 1986 flood.

The only good news was that it could have been far worse. Without the Corps flood control system, damages would have been in the range of $1 billion, perhaps three times worse than actually occurred. Corps' analysts compared the storms' potential damage to the 1943 flood, when the Arkansas River swelled as much as 8 miles wide and 26 people died in the watershed then sparsely populated.