

## This Month in History: Ashfall!



May marks an event that is oft remembered in the Pacific Northwest: the 1980 eruption of Mount St. Helens. A ruinous product of this eruption was ashfall: small, jagged pieces of rocks, minerals, and volcanic glass that erupted from the volcano and blasted over 60,000 feet into the air. These abrasive particles fell as far as Minnesota and Oklahoma, but **Eastern Washington was especially hard hit**, with an ash blanket as deep as 6 inches in places. Many **residents will tell you** that hours after the eruption, ominous clouds raining gritty ash plunged communities into darkness.

*[Mount St. Helens Erupts], May 18, 1980. Private Donation, Washington State Archives.*

Ashfall can collapse roofs, eliminate roadway visibility, ruin crops, clog machinery, electrical circuits, sewers, and filters - in Washington, over \$1 billion in property and economic losses were caused largely by ashfall. Our Eastern Regional Branch holds the City of Spokane Finance Department records, which include a record of how much ash removal and recovery cost the city, and to what degree FEMA assisted in paying for it all. From these records, we know the City had to pay for new bus engines, new pumps for the water treatment plant, and new oil filters and air filters for the hospital, police cars, and county vehicles.

*Mount St Helens is a Pain in the Ash, 1980, Department of Transportation Collection, Washington State Archives.*





Just cleaning up the streets was a major task, and where to put the ash was another major issue. In several cases, the ash was sent to solid waste, and lagoons had to be built to prevent the ash from getting into the river. Eventually, Spokane City workers were dispatched to assist the city of Ritzville in ash cleanup, because neither Ritzville nor Adams County could keep up.

*[Spokane City workers sweeping Mount St. Helens Ash. Monroe Street Bridge in the background], May, 1980. Spokane Municipal Government, Finance Department Photographs.*

At right, Trooper F. P. Swan of Spokane District 4, Detachment 2, models his ash covered uniform after a long day.

*Trooper F. P. Swan of Spokane District 4, Detachment 2, May 18, 1980, Washington State Patrol Photograph Collection.*



Above, it's easy to see how dangerous roadways had become. The truck is stirring up a great deal of ash, yet is moving slowly on this residential street. Many travelers were stranded due to lack of visibility.

*[Truck driving through ash, Spokane], May, 1980, Spokane Municipal Government, Finance Department Photographs.*





This Chevrolet Impala is only one of the many State Patrol vehicles destroyed by ashfall. While much of the damage to cities was eventually paid by federal and state assistance or private insurance, about a quarter of the remaining damage was left for cities to fund.

*[Chevrolet Impala covered with ash], May 18, 1980, Washington State Patrol Photograph Collection.*

While it looks like a lovely winter scene, a Spokane street, over 300 miles away from the blast, is blanketed in ashfall.



*[Spokane street, covered in ash], May, 1980. Spokane Municipal Government, Finance Department Photographs.*

Despite the devastation, Washington communities pulled together and took care of cleanup. Fortunately, today, even with the threat of eruption, the State experiences rapid population growth and economic success. Many **lessons were learned**, including a healthy respect for this force of nature!