

Museum News: Ernestine's Story

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A project I am working on for the flood memorial committee and the Museum is gathering flood stories for a book being compiled for the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Sanderson flood. Over the next few months I will be sharing some of these stories with you. Here is one of them:

Ernestine Rogers is a strong-willed business woman. Even though it was called Harvey's Restaurant, she was the boss.

Her day, that fateful morning, started before sunrise when her husband came home early from work to announce that he had to take their big car to Valentine to pick up a train crew. The track had washed away and the only way to get them home was to go get them. After Harvey left, she decided to just stay up and go ahead to the restaurant to open up. She knew that her cook, Juan Salazar, would already be there, making cinnamon rolls for the day.

It was near daylight and the morning was beautiful...it had rained all night, but now, the sky had cleared and it promised to be a glorious day. She decided to walk...the distance wasn't far...but when she got to the restaurant, she noticed that there were no lights on. For some reason, Juan had not arrived. She went in and turned on the lights, fired up the grill and started the coffee.

As she busied herself behind the counter, she heard a car honking its horn outside the restaurant. It was Bill Cooksey, the sheriff, and he motioned for her to come out. "Stine," He said, "here's my wedding ring and my watch...if I don't come back, please give them to my wife."



Harvey's Restaurant

Photo: Terrell County Memorial Museum

"Bill, what in the world is going on?"

Bill answered, "We're fixing to get washed away!" He had a bullhorn and said he had to go get people up to higher ground. He gave her the watch and ring and off he went.

As she put the ring and watch into the cash register for safe keeping, the door opened and two people came in, but they were dressed in nightclothes, robes and slippers. She said "Good morning" to them and they replied, "We don't know if this going to be a good morning or not...we just got put out of our motel!" They explained that the authorities had knocked on their door at the Sunset Siesta, just across the bridge, and told them that a flood was coming, and they didn't even have time to grab anything, they just had to leave. Ernestine commiserated with them and sat them down to steaming cups of hot coffee.

She went to the phone and called Albert Wiegand, who owned the Western Hills Motel on farther to the east of the Sunset Siesta and was a good friend. Inquiring as to what was going on, Albert said, "I don't know, but I am going to find out." Ernestine asked him to go by Juan's home and see what his problem was.

In a few minutes Albert walked in the door and announced that Juan was busy getting his family out of the house to higher ground and he would be there in a few minutes. Shortly, Juan arrived and began to make cinnamon rolls and get the kitchen ready for the day. When he finished, he said, "I have to go." Ernestine asked, incredulously, "You have to go? Where...?" He answered, "I forgot to get my mother out of her house. I have to go back for her." Ernestine replied, "But Juan, the water is already gushing over the bridge...you'll never make it." But he had to try, so he left to get his mother. Ernestine watched as his car went into deep water, but he got across the bridge, rescued his mother and returned to work, waterlogged but ready for what may come.

Then the flood hit and water began to pour into the cafe. Ernestine had a few anxious moments until it appeared that the water was only going to rise about six inches, and that she was not going to lose anything.

It did occur to her, however, that her son was spending the night at the Tronsons' place, who lived just to the south of the restaurant at the SP Bunkhouse. But even that fear was allayed as Condie and Dwight Tronson walked through the door with their rescuers, Mike Woods and another high school boy, and Mr. Tronson. They had waded through neck-deep water with the boys on their shoulders, to the safety of the cafe.

As they watched through the windows, butane tanks came hissing by as the gas escaped, and huge bags of wool from the decimated wool house flopped over and over in the current flowing down Oak Street.

There was no one who escaped the tragedy. Ernestine's waitress, Eloisa Falcon, was washed away with her kids. And, from their vantage point, Ernestine and her friends could see two SP porters, who worked on the passenger trains but were staying in an old passenger car in the railyards, as they climbed up on the roof of an adobe building to escape the water. Gradually the house melted from under their feet and they were thrown into the flood.

Almost immediately the electricity went off and with it the power to run the town's water wells. They were without power and water, but her stoves ran on butane and she could keep serving food. Albert Wiegand came up with a solution. He told Ernestine, "I cleaned the pool really good last night, gave it a scrubbing and refilled it with chlorinated water. The flood did not pour into the pool, so we can use that for drinking water." He brought water from the Western Hills' swimming pool and they used that for drinking water and coffee until the county pressed an old water well at the courthouse into action to provide water until the town wells could be restored.

Railroad officials came to Ernestine and asked if she could provide four meals a day to anyone working to get the railroad back in operation. The flood had destroyed the other cafes in town and hers was the only one open. So, for the next few days, they made food and hauled it from Longellow on the west to past Dryden on the east. But in the cafe, she put out sandwiches and coffee and closed her register...the food was free to anyone that needed a meal.

And, Ernestine noted that Sanderson missed an even bigger flood, had the dam at Eagle Field not held. She said the stadium filled to the top with water and if that dam had collapsed, water would have cascaded down the canyon from the north, causing who knows how much more damage and destruction.

As for Harvey, he made it to Valentine and got his crew, but when they got back to Longfellow, the water was too deep and they had to leave their vehicle and walk the remaining sixteen miles to Sanderson. All family men, he said they died a million deaths not knowing what they would find when they got home. Later, Harvey assisted Bill Cooksey in searching for survivors and the dead.

As soon as the Red Cross arrived, they arranged with Ernestine to keep her kitchen open and feed anyone that needed food. They kept the groceries coming and Ernestine did her part.

Then, when the phone company got there to restore service, she made an open ticket for their men to eat at the restaurant. She noted that her girls were away, visiting at Corpus Christi, but she had no way to let them know they were alright. One of the phone men heard of her plight and got her to come outside of town where a line was clear and let her phone her girls and relieve their anxiety about their parents.

Ernestine and Harvey Rogers played a key role in the continuing effort to help the town survive the flood of 1965. As a marshalling point for railroaders, Red Cross, telephone and other aid workers, Ernestine's restaurant was practically the headquarters for relief efforts. Harvey, along with Sheriff Cooksey and his deputies and other men, women, Eagle and Boy Scouts of the town, went out in search for victims of the flood and cadavers that had washed from the cemeteries, to rescue those still in danger and begin the massive cleanup. But for years, the pall of death hung over the community and a frightful feeling of doom would wash over many when angry clouds built in the west.