

Museum News: Stories from the Flood

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Ray's Story

The rain began to fall on June 10, 1965. All afternoon the clouds grew in the west and an ominous foreboding grew in those who governed their lives by changes in the weather.

Ray Hernandez worked for the highway department. He got a call from his supervisor to take some men and go watch the bridges on US 349, which ran from Dryden, Texas, up to Sheffield. There were a number of low-water crossings on that road and three bridges and there was always trouble when it began to rain. He got the call in the late afternoon, and he knew it would be an all-nighter. He told his wife Elida goodbye and kissed his 6 month-old and 2 1/2 year-old girls, picked up his men and headed to 349. All night they stood guard at the bridges, and when the water came down at the first bridge, it was a spectacular sight to see. The water rolled in, pushing a pile of debris ahead of it. When it got to the bridge, the debris launched the water some 30 feet into the air, a waterfall in reverse, and very quickly washed away the pavement leading to the bridge, putting it out of commission. It was a portent of things to come.

As dawn crept up in the east, Ray got an excited call from his supervisor to come back to Sanderson...the town was washing away. Immediately he thought of his wife and two children...their home was just a block away from the highway bridge that separated the main town from the barrio to the east.

When they got to the first bridge on the east side of town, they found that the approaches had disappeared in the maelstrom. They were forced to abandon their vehicle and walk around the cliffs to get back to town. As they came down into town, they discovered two little bodies caught in the brush. They decided to put the bodies out where they could be picked up by authorities. It was now that the concern began to grow in Ray's mind for his own family.

As he approached his house, he could see that the house still stood, but walls were gone and everything he owned had been swept down the canyon. Now the panic arose...where were his wife and children? Had they been swept away with the furniture? But, his fears were allayed when he got to his in-laws' house and discovered that somehow, with a house filled to the ceiling with water, she had managed to swim with her two babies to safety. Assessing that there was no danger to his family, Ray went back to work with a loader to clear the highway bridge of debris, then began the massive job of clearing the streets. His wife volunteered for the Red Cross, with no thought of the ordeal she had been through. Together, they did their part to return their community to some semblance of normalcy.

Rosie's Story

Rosie Martinez was a young mother and expecting her second child. She had eaten supper with her mom the night before and as she left to go home she noticed that the clouds were building. Soon the rain poured as a vicious lightning storm pounded the town. She and her husband went on to bed and the rain fell through the night.

Shortly before daylight they heard a pounding at the front door. It was Rosie's stepfather and he urged them to go to her mom's place, up out of the flood path. When they got there they discovered that her mom had decided to stay at work at the Club Cafe, which sat just over the bridge at a point where the highway curved to the south. They were in a safe location, but Rosie's mother was in harm's way.

From Rosie's location, she watched as the flood rammed into homes and businesses and began to sweep everything down the creek. It was a confusing time for her, with loud noises and people screaming for help. Then, almost instantly, she thought later, the rain stopped and the sky cleared...a beautiful day with clear, blue skies...and with death and destruction all around her.

Rosie's mother had not been so lucky. Her boss insisted that she go home, but as they drove to the highway bridge, they saw the wall of water rising. They had no time to go farther so they got out of the car and ran for higher ground. As they looked back they saw their car tumbling over and over down the creek. As luck would have it, a truck with a flatbed loaded with watermelons was sitting in the street. The two truck drivers lifted Rosie's mother up and onto the pile of watermelons to wait out the flood. But, the water was so deep that it lifted the truck and washed it all the way back to the Club Cafe. At this point, Rosie's mother succumbed to complete hysteria and began to scream and wail. The men said they had never heard such screaming from a human being. Deciding to abandon the truck, they rushed into the Club Cafe and found Rosie's husband already there. Between the three men, they managed to hold the door shut and keep the bulk of the water from entering the building.



Courtesy of Terrell County Memorial Museum

Meanwhile, Rosie took her daughter and went to her Aunt's house. As soon as the water went down, Rosie's mother joined them, still in a state of hysteria. Knowing nothing else to do, they went to the Church and praised God that they had lost no one in their family.