

Terrell County Memorial June, 2015
Sanderson, Texas

Museum News

A Town Remembers

The Sanderson Flood of 1965



Rain had fallen steadily through the afternoon and night of June 10, 1965, at times a drizzle, at times the bottom seeming to drop out. A stalled thunderstorm in the hills and canyons of the Edwards Plateau west of Sanderson, Texas dumped as much as 11 inches of rain in that area by sunrise of June 11, according to local ranchers. Sanderson Creek and all its attendant feeders quickly filled up, pushing a mass of

water down the watershed, trying to find a way through the brush and mesquite-clogged waterways to empty into the Rio Grande. Each arroyo, ravine and rivulet fed even more water until the flood became a torrent. As the water moved along it took out fences, railroad bridges, telephone poles and scrub vegetation, creating a massive battering ram as it moved downstream to take out even larger structures.



Six miles west of Sanderson a long diversion dam channeled the deluge. The dike had been thrown up in the 1930s when the state was building US Highway 90, to force Sanderson Creek under one large bridge and save money, rather than fording the snaking creek bed with two smaller bridges. As water from the creek rapidly filled the area behind the dam with its narrow outlet, the earthwork soon collapsed in a roar and an even larger wave of water and debris headed toward the hapless town.

Just west of Sanderson two large draws, Three Mile and Red Mill, came crashing into the maelstrom of debris, bridge timbers, telephone poles and cross ties, punching the water into a black mass riding six or seven feet above the already-swollen creek, making a canyon-wall-to-canyon-wall battering ram some fifteen feet high and five football fields wide. The water swirled with whirlpools, eddies and currents, creating what one man said looked like a veritable tornado of water. Now the water had become a hideous black monster, ready to devour the

town of Sanderson.

Peto Perez was just a fifteen year-old kid, that summer. Slim Muller had given him a summer job pumping gas at his Red Bluff service station. Peto didn't have his license yet and since he lived across town from his new job he got his father to give him a lift to work. He didn't have to be at work until 7:00 a.m., so they left the house at 6:45 a.m. and made their way through the dark streets to the service station.

Had they lived anywhere else it would have already been light, but it had been raining all night and the atmosphere was a thick, muted gray. As they approached rain-swollen Sanderson Creek, Peto looked back upstream and saw something odd. The water in the creek stretched bank to bank, lapping at the top, but that wasn't what he was looking at. In the drizzly gray twilight he just could make out a dark line across the top of the swiftly flowing creek, rising high above the creek bank, like a wall of black iron. From his perspective it didn't seem to be moving.

"What is that?" he asked his dad.

Mr. Perez looked away from the road and back to where Peto was squinting. He, too, squinted to identify the oddity, then his eyes widened in horror. "That's water, Hijo," and he quickly added, "we need to warn everyone!"

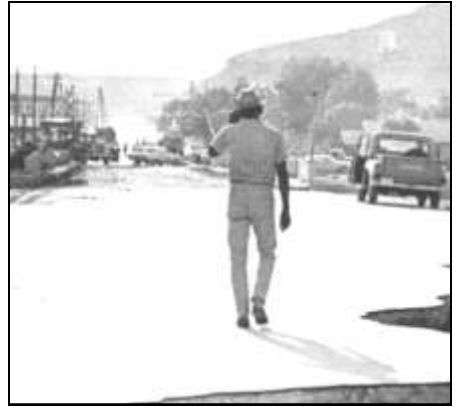
Peto could not believe his eyes. The black wall was boiling and writhing, six or seven feet above the already full creek. It was pushing debris ahead of it, like a giant bull dozer, actually moving faster than the creek water below. Everything was simply blotted out as that massive wave moved forward.

Mr. Perez gunned the engine and sped down the streets nearest the creek, blowing his horn, both of them screaming at the top of their lungs, trying to wake up the neighborhood. Many of these people were their family members. They saw lights go on and heads appear at windows to hear their message, "Get out! Get out! Run to the hills...the water is coming!"

When the black wall hit Sanderson, it swept away the outlying homes that clustered along the creek. Many folks had stayed awake that night, fearing that the water would jump the creek banks and come into their homes. They breathed a sigh of relief as the water level dropped and they thought the worst was over. Even the officials thought there would be no more problems with the creek that night since the rain was finally abating.

Then, without warning, the water rose rapidly, six to eight feet in just five minutes. The deluge had arrived!

Though many had evacuated earlier, there were some stubborn holdouts who



did not wish to leave, and others who simply did not get the warning. Those folks now found themselves in mortal danger. Some scrambled to rooftops to escape the water. Others were forced to tear holes in their ceilings to get up and out to safety. Still others were horrified to see their adobe homes crumble in the raging torrent, only to find themselves cast headlong into the flood. Trying desperately to find something to hold onto, many saved themselves, but others perished in the black waters.

One young boy, who had been sleeping with his family in a collapsing motel on the creek bank, grabbed for a tree but had to let go when he saw a snake sharing the limb. He grabbed at another tree and saved himself, but watched as his parents and four siblings washed down the creek and were lost.

One grandmother saved her tiny granddaughter by stuffing her into the top shelf of a closet. The tot's father, however, only a few yards away and rushing to get to them, was lost to the flood and his body never found.

Bodies were found clear to the Rio Grande, including a man at Eagle Pass, some 176 miles away, and an infant washed ashore at Laredo, almost 300

