

My memories of the flood of 1935 - Betty Harrison Miller

I was eleven in 1935, the year the worst flood that the community of South Fork on the South Fork of the Republican River had ever experienced in the lifetime of anyone living then. There were stories supposed to be from the Indians that there had been a flood of that magnitude at least 100 years earlier, & that they had predicted the same to happen in another 100 years.

We had had a lot of rain that spring. My mother woke up at 4:00 o'clock in the morning & wondered what the awful stench she was smelling & what the roar was. There is a stench to a flood that is unlike any other thing you have ever smelled. It was hard to believe there could be such a roar, but there was. She got up & dressed & went outside. I do not know how she realized that the river was flooding, but she got us all up & dressed. As soon as it was light enough to see, we could hardly believe our eyes. The placid South Fork was out all over the bottom land. That river bisected our farm west to east. It was a raging, roiling torrent.

Our farmstead was definitely higher than the river bed, & there was second "raise" around 9:00 o'clock that brought the water to within 19 feet of our back door. We were concerned that it might get into the house, but it did not. It did get into a smaller house that was situated a little lower & to the east of our home. It got up to the corral edge, but did not get into the barn.

I was horribly fascinated at the amount of water that was sweeping downstream so fast, the waves looked so high to me. I stood & watched as the giant cottonwood trees along the riverbank went down & rolled over with the roots, still full of mud, straight up in the air, & then went rolling over & over as the wind blows a thistle along. I saw spans of bridges, roof tops of chicken house with chickens still on top going by. All kinds of boards & pieces of buildings. I could not believe this was the peaceful river we kids played in in the the summertime & skated on in the

wintertime. We felt so helpless.

The word got out that my mother had perished in the flood, we never did find out how that story got started.

After the water had gone down, my dad & brother went into a field that had flooded & buried dead animals whose bodies had backwashed into the field.

My job that summer was to herd the cattle - all fences from way up in Colorado to way down in Nebraska had been washed out. No farmer had time to replace them, they had to get the crops planted. I was allowed to ride a horse, & my instructions were to keep the cattle out of the river, if possible, on account of quicksand. In case they did get into the river, I was to watch & see where they went & follow where they were not in quicksand. Definintely NOT my idea of a fun summer!

There was a rural telephone line at that time, I do not know how it was powered. We had a wall telephone & everybody had their own ring, which consisted of a series of long amd/or short rings. The men would get together in the early spring & repair any damages to the line. We couldn't go anywhere but we could talk to neighbors.

My dad would take his truck once a week & go to town, driving into pastures & fields when he came to washed out roads or bridges. Neighbor ladies would call their grocery list to us & dad would get to the north side of the river at St. Francis. Someone there would take him to town, as he had to leave his truck there. He would shop for everybody & make the trip back home where folks came to pick up what they had ordered. It was an all day trip, all bridges were washed completely or partly away. The bridge a mile east of our place was only a skeleton.

That summer the folks who lived on the south side of the river

would drive to the river, wade across, & folks on the north side would meet them there & take the them to Sunday School & Church - or any other gatherings.

Our neighbor found a dead body on her property after the water had gone down & it had dried out enough that she could explore. I decided right then that I didn't want to go on the bottom land if I didn't have to.

It was an experience I will never forget, nor ever forget that Mother Nature still rules, & she can be kind of hard on us sometimes.