

Survivors Recap 1965 Flood at Historical Society Meeting

The historic flood that struck Prowers County created a different world 50 years ago. With the June 18, 1965 flood, just about every life in the area was impacted by the devastation wrought by excessive rains and the subsequent floods. Many residents who attended the Thursday, June 18, Prowers County Historical Society meeting at the Big Timbers Transportation Museum, described their ordeals from the flood, many of which carried similar circumstances. Close to 50 persons were on hand to hear the survivors relate how they and their families responded to the crisis. As you viewed the faces of the speakers, you could remove a half a century from their features and view them as youth or young adults in their teens, twenties or thirties and still recognize the strength and vitality they displayed when they were pressed to the limits for their existence.



Of those common elements were descriptions of how quickly the flood waters moved into their neighborhoods, streets, farms and homes. Quite a few said they were taken by surprise by the rapidly rising flood waters, how what began as a slight trickle from a leak in a basement window turned into a hellish scenario when the windows broke and their basement was engulfed in river water. Others spoke about the difficulty of deciding what to save and take and what to leave behind as they were forced to move to higher ground and safer quarters. Some saw the water come pouring in through their doors, while others described how the rising water just slowly seeped in under the rugs in their living room floors.

One man described his solitary adventure at his recently refurbished home, ever seeking higher ground through the night, finally getting warmth by wrapping himself around a roof-mounted chimney vent, heated by his furnace that survived the floods.

Many tried to escape the waters in their vehicles, seeking higher elevation, only to become stalled and stuck, having to walk to their destination or use a rescue boat to reach safety. Many others spoke about living without electricity for over a month, waiting for downed lines to be restored. Some mentioned the depth and breadth of rain-swollen streams and rivers in their areas, with measurements as deep as 70 feet for what had previously been a minor creek.

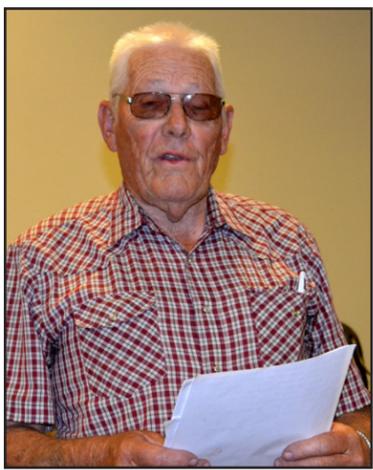
Some other common threads of their experiences were typified by the way in which strangers opened their doors to others, with at times as many as 28 people surviving in one house. The mixed aromas of river bottom mud and farmland silt and feedlot manure all rolled together in one unforgettable smell that would be identifiable for the rest of their lives, was highlighted numerous times.

Statistics on any event will only tell a small portion of the story, but the environmental and economic impact on the county describes a major catastrophe. As written in the latest Prowers County Historical Society newsletter: six people died, 150 were injured or became ill with 23 requiring hospitalization. Nine dwellings were completely destroyed, 122 sustained major damage with another 1,317 were damaged at some level. Fifteen trailers were destroyed and 117 damaged. Ten farm buildings were leveled and 25 damaged. Seventy-two small businesses were destroyed and in some manner, 1,662 families in Prowers County, the hardest hit county in the state from the flood, suffered some form of loss.

Linda Hawkins, the President of the Historical Society, acted as moderator to the speakers who recounted their experiences for the gathering. About half of the audience indicated through raised hands that they had been Prowers County residents the day of the flood. The following narratives have been edited for space in this article.

Oscar Noble's daughter, Sharon, read from one account he had of the flood and its impact on Greens Jewelry in downtown Lamar. Days after the flood, he noticed that the floor of his business was sunken. The base flooring consisted of sandstone blocks, laid on top of raw dirt. Once the waters receded, the current eroded the dirt and the blocks sank to a lower, uneven level and the store had to be rebuilt.

Linda Harbor lived with her family about 30 miles south of Granada near the county line. She recalled everyone having to get tetanus shots due to their exposure to the waters, having had to walk through them to get from one house to another. She noted that her brother had emptied the family's rain gauge three times in 24 hours, which indicated at least 15 inches in that time span.



Pete Clark read an excerpt of the flood from a book he published. He and his family were living around Goodales, about 10 miles east of Big Timbers and a little north when the flood came. He noted that all the creeks and canals were stressed from the 21 inches of rain that fell in his area one night. The creeks south and east of Lamar over flowed the Granada, Cat, Mud, Clay and Butte were all over the banks, but the Amity Canal, which was only 200 feet from his house, held firm. He and a friend had to drive to Eads to get groceries for his family. Mud Creek carried a lot of big rocks down between the train tracks and Lamar by the dam, near Ft Bent Canal and the head gates of the Arkansas River.

A.C. Rowan who was with his family by Hard-scrabble Ranch along the river bottom got three phone calls about a wall of water coming his way. He and his brother Daryl, who was visiting, put as much furniture on top of tables, but water started seeping up under the rug at first. He saw his car and pick up truck float away once the waters reached him in full force. They decided to leave when a propane tank floated past them. I had bought an 830 Case Tractor with a lot of weight on it and my brother and I drove it to safety. He recounted that the deepening water had reached the fan blade and was throwing water into the spark plug, shortening out the engine. His brother, at six foot, five inches, took out a knife, grabbed the steering wheel and leaned over the engine and cut the belt. We had slow going for the rest of the way, but that was what was needed. I've never been so happy to see such a large man carrying a knife, he exclaimed to some laughter from the audience.

Clyde Kennedy from Granada recounted how he and his wife had been visited by her parents from England only days before the flood began. The family drove to higher ground south of town, but he decided to walk back to the house as there hadn't been any water in their area yet. We were told Wolf Creek was going to flood, but it hadn't happened at that time, so I went back in, he remembered. The water came up while he was at the house and realized he couldn't get back on foot, so he climbed the tv tower and from there went to the roof of the house where he waited until the water went back down. He later saw two men he knew who had come to check on him and they returned to his family.

Tim Weeks letter recounted how his family moved to the southern section of Paseo Place in 1964. He and a friend, like many other residents, were putting furniture and other items on top of tables in his house and noticed the water flowing in. Windows were breaking in the bottom of some houses, flooding all the cellars. We saw a 500 gallon propane tank that was loose on the water, rebounding off posts and poles and decided it was time to leave. He stated that Willow Creek, at the height of the flood was one mile wide and 70 feet deep, according to a follow up news article from C.V. Mills of the Lamar Daily News. He and a friend were cleaning other houses of debris after the flood and noticed one person had hundreds of baby fruit jars tightly sealed, and containing flood water they had apparently saved.

Inez Wills and her husband Jim had moved to Lamar from Spring field just days prior to

the flood. She recounted that they were unfamiliar with the town and had been driving in flooded streets until they decided to return to the Nazarene Church for shelter. Her husband went back out to help folks in the neighborhood and was asked by a woman to help save her piano and place it on a table, which he managed by himself. Years later, I was shopping at the Lassic when the talk turned to the flood. I recounted what Jim had done to several women in the store and one said that I was talking about her mother. I told her the man who moved the piano was my husband! Later, it took three men to take down the piano one man put up by himself.

Fred Neuhold and Linda Wilgar were neighbors and recounted their experiences from the flood. He lived near Clay Creek and recounted the fast moving waters that came over the land. Wilgar said she was 12 at the time and slept in the basement of her home, which started taking on water in the night. Her parents began storing items on shelves and tables when she said the noise of the water rushing past her house was tremendously loud. In just a few moments, there was 18 inches of water in the house. They could see some distant sandhills breaking up from the water and her family climbed a wire trellis to get to the roof for safety. Once the water had subsided, the family used coffee cans to free a horse that was stuck chest-deep in the water-soaked mud. They had no other tools at that point. They were evacuated from the old drive-in movie, taking the last boat out. Her brother was angry as he missed a chance to fly out later by helicopter. To this day she can still smell river mud in her grandmothers bottom dresser drawer.



Jillane Hixson, who lived on her family's farm south of Lamar was five years old when the flood struck. She read from an article pertaining to her family from the Lamar Daily News. Her father, Larry, had purchased several feed bunkers, each weighing about 2,500 pounds and after the waters receded, they were gone, had just been swept away by the torrent of water. She said the water took away most of the good topsoil from their property, as they were in line with the Willow Creek which was wide, fast and deep from the flood. Dad got \$50,000 in insurance from the corrals alone, but we could never get the topsoil back to its original richness, she explained.

Marianne McClure Gilbert lived in May Valley and her family managed to get to the higher ground around KLMR Radio. But the river was huge and we noted some horses were swimming by and later got out to high ground. By around 2pm the next day, a portion of the Arkansas Bridge was gone and we also saw a lot of propane tanks floating in the water. Folks had to go around to Prowers Bridge when they wanted to get back into Lamar for a while. Her family was at the Armory south of town and she and other women had to wear rubber gloves as protection against the Clorox and steel wool they used to scrub food cans clean of river muck and mud. The labels came off and we didn't know what was in the cans, but they were all used to provide food for flood workers and the National Guard who were in town helping, she recalled.

Those were some of the recounts made by the flood survivors during the June 18 meeting of the Prowers Historical Society. Many safeguards have since been enacted to help ensure that a similar, 100 Year Flood never occurs in the region. Lamar, Granada and Holly municipal officials have been working with FEMA regarding upgrades on the levees in the county over the past several years, making sure the constructions will hold steady against future flooding. Area residents have witnessed some recent local flooding around La Junta and have made comments about the water rising in John Martin and how the Arkansas River is up on the banks as you pass through Las Animas. There is no guarantee it won't ever happen again, but increased organization, response time, communication and emergency planning can help lessen a future flood impact. We can also take assurance that in Prowers County, our residents will always be willing to come to the aid of those in need. *By Russ Baldwin.*

PMC Board Ends Dr. Portner's Hospital Privileges, Closing Las Animas Clinic July 31

Following a brief executive session which began the PMC board of directors meeting, Wednesday, June 24, the board voted unanimously to not renew hospital privileges for Dr. Barry Portner, effective immediately. Dr. Portner, in a brief phone conversation with the Prowers Journal on Thursday, said this has been the result of a three year legal battle with the hospital and he and his attorney, Mark Davis of Lamar, would issue a statement in the near future. The most recent discussion between both parties was held on June 11 in a special board meeting of the hospital board. Included in that meeting were board members as well as Don Banner, Hospital Attorney, Mark Davis and Dr. Barry Portner and Linda Siderius, Legal Counsel for MEC via telephone. No action was taken following that meeting.

The June 24 board meeting was held at the Wiley Community Center. The board voted unanimously to close the Las Animas Clinic because of an absence of financial viability. Chief Executive Officer, Craig Loveless, said that the clinic had not broken even over the past three years and with the retirement of a nurse practitioner at the clinic who is at the end of their career, it was recommended to be closed as of July 31 of this year. Loveless said there would be minimal impact to the hospital regarding ACO with the loss of the few Medicare patients who came to the clinic.

A change order contract with the construction firm, CPI was approved by the board. A conversion from fluorescent to LED lighting will cost \$56,240 and the firm expects the renovation project to go over its completion date by eleven days, given the recent heavy rains. CPI is also looking into potential asbestos abatement in a portion of the renovation project, but because the study is not complete, could not provide the board with a target cost or additional delays, if any.

The Prowers Medical Center Foundation has developed a way to raise additional funds, working with the Safeway grocery store. Safeway Community Giving Cards, can be loaded at the store as much as a customer wants when they make their purchases. There is no new cost to the shopper other than the initial \$20 cost for the card, purchased from Susan Lamont, Foundation Director. Board President, Julie Branes explained, The card will have that \$20 loaded onto it and you can load extra funds when you go through the check out. When the cards are used to pay for groceries, up to 5% of the purchase will go to the PMC Foundation. Craig Loveless added, There's no cost to the consumer whatsoever, it's just Safeway's way of contributing back to the Foundation. You just have to load the card before you spend it.

Gerald Parton, the hospital's QHR Regional Vice President provided the board with some developments on a national level for hospitals. Although it would not apply to Prowers Medical Center, Parton said there is federal legislation developing called the Rural Emergency Acute Care Hospital Act for facilities with under 50 beds. The Act would reimburse qualifying hospitals at 110% of their regional costs if they relinquish their acute care beds in lieu of holding beds and transfer patients to be admitted to another facility. These hospitals could hold a patient for 24 to 48 hours but all inpatients would then be transferred to an acute care hospital. Parton said the action could eliminate the need for surgeons at some facilities if it passes. He added that there's a trend in which higher deductible insurance is causing an increase in bad debt collections with the new insurance packages being offered. It's not because of uninsured patients, but those who are under-insured, he explained. Parton also mentioned a recent USA Today article, which he said he'd provide to the board regarding medical costs. Right now 80% of Medicare expenditures are being consumed by 15% of the population and most of that is in the last two days of life. He said he'd provide the board with the article for their review.

Board director, Julie Branes, said the members should review their meeting outreach policy at a future point as there has been scant participation by community members. She indicated that meetings have been held in Granada, Holly and now in Wiley through the hospital district, but because of the low turnout, the board should make a decision as to whether they should continue the practice or find a new alternative for reaching the population in the county.

CEO Loveless reviewed his list of action items for the hospital, starting with weather delays on the hospital construction. We've noticed there is a water buildup under the Physical Therapy gymnasium, but the company is putting down a clay liner to act as a buffer to the moisture and a sump pump will keep it dried to continue work there. Loveless noted that a joint, four-hospital meeting at Parkview Hospital in Pueblo is being held to review and develop a network of shared services and a Community Health Needs Assessment, held every three years by medical providers in the county is coming up in the near future. He also noted

