



San Marcial and the floods of the Rio Grande

Originally published in El Defensor Chieftain newspaper, Saturday, September 6, 2006.

Copyright: © 2006 by Paul Harden. Article may be cited with proper credit to the author. Article is not to be reproduced in whole or placed on the internet without author's permission.

By Paul Harden
(na5n@zianet.com)

With the recent floods in Socorro County, it is natural to wonder about those in the past. Socorro, and all of the towns along the Rio Grande, have been plagued with floods at one time or another during much of her history.

Some of these floods have been extremely destructive. The "San Marcial flood" was particularly destructive. San Marcial, and several nearby villages, were completely destroyed in 1929 and 1937, displacing several thousand people.

THE MIGHTY RIO GRANDE

The lower Rio Grande, the *Rio Abajo* region, has been known for her floods since the early days of Spanish colonization. And, with the majority of Piro Indian pueblos built away from the river or high on a bluff, indicates these ancient occupants also knew and respected the Rio Abajo's unpredictable nature.

For years, the Rio Grande was called the "Nile of the Southwest" due to it's frequent flooding. Old Socorro Bullion and Socorro Chieftain newspapers report major floods, prior to 1920, in 1881, 1884, 1886, 1889, 1890 and 1911.

In the early 1900s, construction of dams along the Rio Grande had begun to control the annual spring run-off flooding. Elephant Butte was the first to be built, completed in 1921. Later came the dams at Caballo, San Acacio (today, mysteriously called *San Acacia*) and Cochiti. These dams indeed tamed the river, but still, the Rio Grande shows her might every few years yet to this day.

SAN MARCIAL

One can not think of floods in Socorro County without thinking of San Marcial, about 25 miles south of Socorro. Just about everyone knows the town was destroyed by a flood in 1929. However, there is much more to the story than that.

South of San Marcial were several small farming communities: Cantarecio, Paraje, San Albino, San Jose, Milligan Ranch, and Bosque Bonito. These villages were built on bends along the Rio Grande, a common practice for harnessing water for irrigation. The only problem with this method is high river water would flood the acequias, and hence the town.

These towns were ordered condemned and evacuated in 1917 for the construction of Elephant Butte Dam. In a few more years, these towns would be under the waters of Elephant Butte Lake.

Many of the families moved to San Marcial or Valverde, at the foot of Mesa del Contadero (Black Mesa), to build new farms and new lives.

As Elephant Butte dam was nearing completion, a huge flood along the Rio Grande inundated San Marcial, La Mesa and Valverde in 1920. Crops, farm lands, businesses, homes, and the AT&SF railroad tracks and yards, were heavily damaged. Further downstream, those that

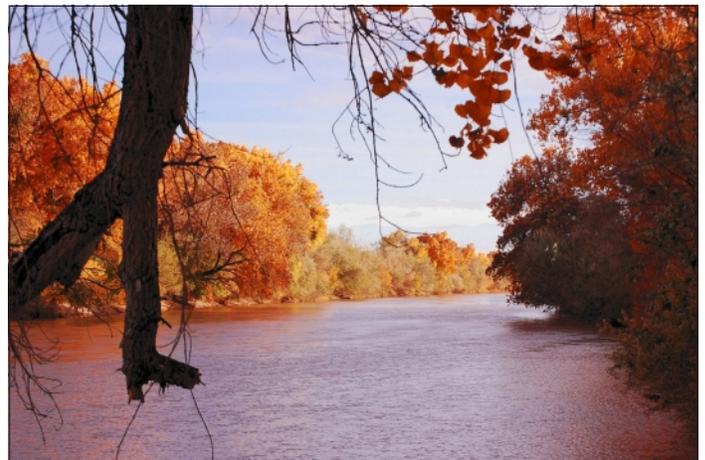


Photo by Paul Harden

The peaceful and lazy Rio Grande is deceiving. Over the centuries, the river has caused significant damage.

remained at the villages of Cantaricio to San Albino, found themselves homeless.

Following this flood, the State Engineer spent thousands of dollars repairing the levees and other flood control work around San Marcial. The people were assured that floods would be a thing of the past with the new levees and dams along the Rio Grande.

In spite of assurances that the Nile of the Southwest had finally been tamed, the Rio Grande had different ideas.

THE FLOOD OF AUGUST 1929

On August 10, 11, and 12, 1929, extremely heavy rains in Socorro County quickly filled the river. By late evening on the 12th, the Rio Grande began to overflow its banks at San Acacia with floodwaters working their way towards Socorro.

What happened next can not be told any better than the original words from the August 17, 1929

Socorro Chieftain: *"Flooded Rio Grande Devastates Entire Towns; People Escape in Night Clothes – The first disaster occurring at 2:00 o'clock Tuesday morning (Aug. 13) when the highway bridge at San Acacia gave way sending a five foot flood through the town, giving many only time to escape to the foot hills to the west in their night clothes.*

*"Orchards, alfalfa fields with other valley crops in this district as well as at Polvadero and Lemitar are reported a total loss. From San Acacia to Lemitar, the water was spread out on both sides of the railroad **three miles from bank to bank.***

"With women and children safely out of town, men at San Marcial were fighting in the midst of crumbling structures in a last desperate effort to save their town from total destruction."

When the flood surprised San Acacia, word reached Socorro and San Marcial over the telegraph lines, allowing ample time for evacuations down river. Thanks to the railroad telegraphers, no lives were lost.

The AT&SF railroad brought up numerous trains from El Paso to evacuate the people from San Marcial – the most vulnerable along the Rio Grande. The roundhouse was used for quickly turning the engines around for the trip back south. Though only a youngster at the time, Henry Luera well remembers evacuating the flood with his family, because it was his first ever train ride.

When the flood waters began to recede, towns such as Guadalajara, Elmendorf, San Antonito and New Town San Marcial were virtually gone. Today, they are still gone. All other areas along the Rio Grande south of San Acacia received severe damage.

1896 Socorro Flood



Courtesy Socorro County Historical Society
A view down Manzanara Street from the train depot days after the 1896 flood.



Photo by Paul Harden
The same view down Manzanara Street today. The grove of trees from repeated flooding is where Blanchard & Co. and other business once stood.

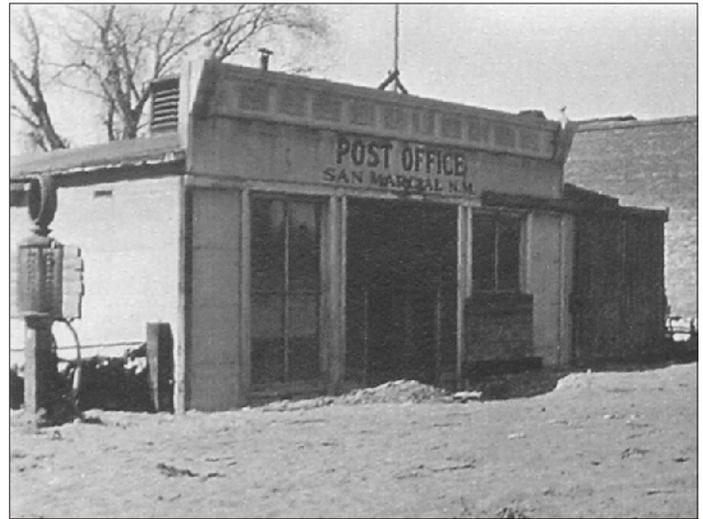


Courtesy of Socorro County Historical Society
The small ranching and farming village of Guadalajara, south of San Pedro, was destroyed in the 1929 flood.



Photo by Paul Harden

As a young child, Henry Luera remembers the Old Town San Marcial flood. It was his first train ride.



Courtesy of Don Hunter

The San Marcial Post Office sits in two feet of silt after the 1929 flood. Note the old gas pump on the left.

A week after the flood, New Mexico Governor Richard Dillon visited Socorro, issuing the following statement: *"The need for a whole-hearted response from the people of New Mexico is more apparent than ever. The survey has shown that there are approximately 1,500 people who have suffered from the flood. There are 200 homes entirely ruined, leaving their owners without shelter, and it can be said with very little exaggeration that there are practically no crops left between LaJoya and San Marcial."*

SEPTEMBER 1929

By September, two weeks after the flood, the reality of the utter destruction was setting in. For the people along the Rio Grande, things couldn't get worse. But, it did.

Over September 21-23, heavy monsoon rains, then called "seasonal cloudbursts," drenched the state, starting over the San Luis Valley in Colorado. Floodwaters barreled down the Rio Grande, causing massive flooding in Albuquerque and Belen on the 23rd. Heavy rains in the mountains west of Socorro caused the Rio Salado and other arroyos to severely overflow the Rio Grande in Socorro County on September 24th.

The September 28, 1929 Socorro Chieftain again tells the story. *"Second Flood Hits This Section; San Marcial and San Acacia Part of River -- A flood that occurred at 9:00 o'clock, and a second at 11:00 o'clock Monday morning, when the Rio Grande, breaking its banks at a point just a short distance above San Acacia, swept away railroad tracks and broke dykes has cause a property loss of millions of dollars in the flooded*

district which reached from San Acacia on the north to and below San Marcial on the south.

"This, the second flood to occur in this part of the Rio Grande valley within a month, has proved the most disasterous catastrophe to have happened within the history of the valley. Not a house is left standing in San Acacia.

"San Antonio to the south was badly hit when the dyke broke sending a flood of two feet high into the main street. Continuing on its rampage, the high waters is said to have reached a mile north of San Marcial at 5:30 Tuesday afternoon when the dyke broke sending a wall of water eight feet deep through the main street of the town. This added to the water that had been backing up from the south since Sunday."

Additionally, with US-85 under feet of water, all of the towns along the river, including Socorro, were virtually stranded from the outside world. Railroad tracks were also washed out, as reported in the Socorro Chieftain: *"With miles and miles of track washed out in Monday's disasterous flood, caused by high water of the Rio Grande, Socorro has been without either mail or telegraph service for six days, and from indications it will be weeks before train service can be restarted over this division of the A.T. & S.F."*

As soon as travel was restored, the Red Cross, the railroad, National Guard and other government agencies began bringing aid into the region. The State Engineer and the Bureau of Reclamation arrived to inspect the river, levees and diversion channels, trying to figure out what went wrong. They recorded in their final report, "There are no records, however, which show such

Another 130 families, not associated with the railroad, were left homeless. New Town was simply no more.

Prior to the 1929 flood, there were 2,000 acres of crops on the east side of the river at La Mesa and Valverde, and 1,250 acres of crops in San Marcial. Immediately after the flood, as today, there are none.

As a side note, shortly after the September flood, the Army Corps of Engineers arrived at New Town and recovered the safe from the San Marcial Bank. The recovered money was divided among those with accounts. (This was before FDIC Insurance). The stories of how thousands of dollars are buried somewhere under the mud at the site of the San Marcial Bank are thus untrue.

Not all of San Marcial was destroyed in 1929. About a mile to the west was the original town,

called La Plaza Viejo, or Old Town, and the village of San Geronimo. This area received extensive damage due to standing water, but did not experience the destructive currents of the floodwaters that destroyed New Town.

Being somewhat higher in elevation, the flood waters flowed “down hill” to the river and into New Town, draining the towns. The several hundred people remaining all buckled together and rebuilt Old Town and San Geronimo.

The following year, fields were planted and cattle freely roamed the former town site of New Town, now filled with grass and growing tamarisk. Still, the population of the area, estimated to be around 2,500 in 1929, had shrunk to about 600 by the 1930 census.

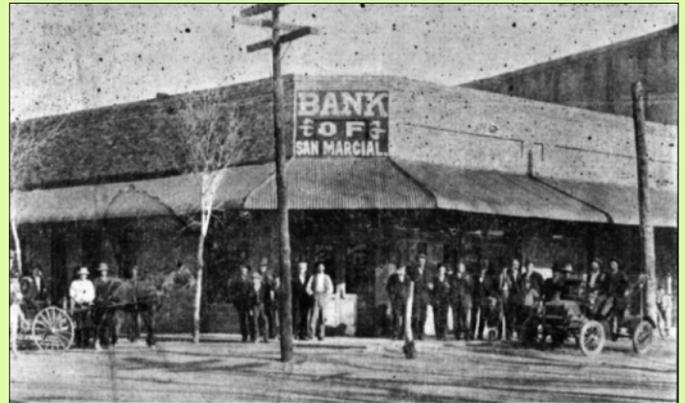
It took years for the Rio Abajo south of San Acacia to recover from the 1929 floods. Only one month later, the stock market crashed and the

Photos of the 1929 San Marcial Flood

Photos courtesy of Socorro County Historical Society; bank photo courtesy Don Hunter



New Town San Marcial a month after the flood, taken from atop the railroad water tank. The water soaked buildings all eventually collapsed.



The San Marcial Bank shortly before the flood. It was the last bank in Socorro County – all others had failed by 1929. Yes, the money and safe were recovered.



Over 100 homes in New Town San Marcial were hopelessly damaged. Due to Elephant Butte Reservoir at capacity, the flood waters in San Marcial had no place to drain. When they finally receded, the town was buried in two to three feet of silt. The soaked buildings collapsed under the weight of their roofs.



AT&SF Division Shops in San Marcial

All photos courtesy of Socorro County Historical Society

The biggest loss in the 1929 flood was the Atcheson, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad Division Shops in San Marcial. Tracks were washed out, the roundhouse heavily damaged, and the machine shops for overhauling the steam locomotive engines buried under several feet of silt. After the flood, AT&SF discontinued operations in San Marcial, transferring railroad workers to the shops in Albuquerque, Belen, and El Paso. Without the railroad, there were no jobs and no reason to rebuild San Marcial.



Standing water still surrounds the AT&SF yards and the roundhouse at San Marcial months after the flood.



Several feet of silt reduced the once well furnished AT&SF machine shops to worthless heaps of trash.



Staff and guests at the associated Harvey House wait for the flood waters to recede and a rescue.



Temporary tracks through the silt and mud were built for removing the rolling stock from San Marcial.

country slid into the decade-long Great Depression. Jobs were scarce. Most of the people along the river had to rebuild their homes, their farms and their lives with little outside assistance. The floods financially ruined hundreds of families.

It was also a time when everybody learned to help everybody else. When one slaughtered a pig, they would share it with as many as they could. In turn, when a few stalks of corn were ripe, it was shared with neighbors. It's a spirit along our part of the river that remains today.

The flood of 1929 was considered the worst in New Mexico's history. However, eight years later, the mighty Rio Grande roared again.

THE FLOOD OF 1937

In May 1937, a heavy spring runoff and heavy spring rains again overflowed the Rio Grande.

After the 1929 river improvements, the Bureau

of Reclamation estimated the Rio Grande could now tolerate 12,000 cubic feet per minute before breaching it's banks and levees. However, in 1937, over 35,000 cubic feet per minute, or three times the flood stage, roared down the Rio Grande into the Socorro valley. Like the recent 2006 floods, with the arroyos and diversion channels beyond capacity, the water had no place to go, except to fill low lying areas.

During the 1937 flood, hundreds of homes, ranches and farms were again sitting in several feet of water. There was a virtual lake over two miles wide extending from Bernardo to San Marcial. Polvadera and Lemitar were especially hard hit. A break in the levee northeast of Polvadera sent rushing waters through the area, destroying the nearby village of Chimisal. Only the old school house and a few crumbling adobe structures remain today of Chimisal, north of Polvadera. Much of Polvadera was also destroyed.



Courtesy Department of Agriculture, Herbert Yeo Collection
An aerial photo of the San Marcial area and Black Mesa, looking north, following the 1937 flood. The flooded area north of Black Mesa inundated the farming communities of Valverde and La Mesa.

In Socorro, the deep floodwaters stopped at the railroad tracks, elevated by AT&SF following the 1896 flood. Still, water rushed down Manzanares Street, flooding the plaza.

The most damaging aspect of this flood was again at San Marcial. The residents of Old Town and San Geronimo watched as the river overflowed its banks, flooding the San Marcial area. Again, it was a double whammy. Floodwaters from the river flowed into the valley from the north, while the overflowing Elephant Butte Reservoir back-flowed into San Marcial from the south. Being flooded from two directions at once, several feet of water quickly covered the streets of the two villages, including the main road – the old El Camino Real.

As the floodwaters began to rise, Miguel Gonzales entered the San Marcial Church at Old town to save the statues of the saints and the statue of San Miguel. After all, it was his father, Genio Trujillo, that had traveled to Juarez, Mexico in the 1890s to purchase the statue of San Marcial for the church. The entire Gonzales families, and the items saved from the church, retreated to Trujillo's ranch house, located atop a hill near the Gonzales Cemetery. Miguel Gonzales' son, Patricio (Pat) Gonzales, remembers watching his beloved home in Old Town disappear under the rising floodwaters.

Former Socorro County Commissioner, Bennie Barreras, also remembers fleeing the floodwaters as they encroached the homes in nearby San Geronimo.



Photo by Paul Harden

Bennie Barreras showing the author the remains of Plaza Viejo – Old Town San Marcial – now buried deep in the tamarisk. Barreras grew up in San Geronimo and well remembers the flood of 1937. He watched his home, built by his father, disappear into the flood waters.

After the flood, the residents of Old Town and San Geronimo returned, only to find the two towns still under many feet of water and silt with no place to drain. In short, the San Marcial area was now part of Elephant Butte Lake.

Most of the area, now thickets of tamarisk from the 1929 flood, left little of the land farmable. What cleared land was left, was now covered with several feet of worthless silt, as was the town sites of Old Town and San Geronimo. Over the next couple of months, the soggy adobe walls collapsed under the weight of the roofs until virtually nothing was left standing. It was the final kiss of death for San Marcial.

The Barreras family moved to Socorro. The Guiterrez and Chaves families moved to Magdalena. Just about everyone moved



Courtesy Department of Agriculture, Herbert Yeo Collection
Flood waters in Old San Marcial – Plaza Viejo – remained waist deep for months. The gap in the center is El Camino Real entering town from Fort Craig.

somewhere. Only about 30 families remained after the flood, but by the 1940s, even most of them were gone.

Pat Gonzales and his family remained at the ranch house on top of the hill, safe from any further floods. However, the land after the final flood proved to be unworkable. Pat left the ranch in 1952 to serve in Korea. Shortly thereafter, the rest of his family had moved to Socorro. The Gonzales family gave the statue of San Marcial to the San Antonio church, where it remains to this day.

Bennie Barreras, Pat Gonzales, and scores of other former San Marcial residents, still live in Socorro or nearby towns. They had been flooded out several times and rebuilt, but as Pat Gonzales puts it, "the 1937 flood finally did us in."

The State Engineer and Bureau of Reclamation agreed. Citing each flood deposits one to two feet of silt, with 3/4-inch added every year to the river, and the nearby Elephant Butte Reservoir, the area could never again be restored to a flood-safe area, regardless of the effort or money expended. Thus, the San Marcial area was declared to be "intenable."

SAN MARCIAL TODAY

With the area declared intenable, bank loans and insurance could not be obtained by those wishing to rebuild. With the exception of one pioneer family operating a small ranch (on high ground), the area has been abandoned since the 1937 flood.

Visiting the site of San Marcial with Bennie Barreras for this article, much of the area was still underwater from the July 28, 2006 flood. Roads



Photo by Paul Harden

Only a few remnants of the 2,500 people once living in the area can be found – if you know where to look.

were washed out and impassible in places. Fresh undercutting in the arroyos are tell-tale signs of heavy local flooding. Even the massive stone walls of the old railroad roundhouse are no longer standing, once a landmark of the old town.

Today, virtually nothing is left of New Town, Old Town, San Geronimo, La Mesa or Valverde, once home to over 2,500 people. Only the Hunter Ranch remains. Only a few foundations and remnants of Plaza Viejo and San Geronimo remain - buried deep in the thickets of tamarisks. The rest of what was once San Marcial is now owned by Ted Turner's Armendaris Ranch, or by the Bureau of Reclamation.



Photo by Paul Harden

Site of the Civil War "Battle at Valverde," north of Black Mesa near San Marcial, is now buried under 12-15 feet of silt. The line of green trees in the distance, lining the old river bed, was the Texas line during much of the battle.

The San Marcial area is also historically significant in being the site of the Civil War "Battle at Valverde," fought between Union and Confederate forces on February 21, 1862. It was a major battle with casualties on each side numbering about 1,200. The battle was fought primarily on the north side of Black Mesa on the east side of the river.

It is noteworthy to mention that the Valverde battlefield is estimated to now be covered with 12–15 feet of silt, making recovery of artifacts a hopeless endeavor.

THE FLOOD OF 1941

May 1941 marked another period of flooding along the Rio Grande. This flood likewise submerged many areas from San Acacia through San Antonio, though not with the severity of the 1929 or 1937 floods.

The damaging aspect of this flood was the destruction of the San Antonio bridge across the



Courtesy Department of Agriculture, Herbert Yeo Collection
An aerial photo of Polvadera and Lemitar following the 1941 flood. The flood waters, two miles wide, destroyed many acres of vineyards and fields of cotton.



Courtesy Socorro County Historical Society
The 1941 flood destroyed the combination railroad and auto bridge at San Antonio – stranding hundreds on the east side of the river for months.

Rio Grande, as reported in the May 22 Socorro Chieftain: *"Following closely the demolition of the San Antonio highway bridge by flood waters along the Rio Grande, a break in the dike at Polvadera also flooded over 4,000 acres and force the evacuation of 48 families. Rising flood waters forced up to 100 families to be relocated between Socorro and Luis Lopez."*

A month later, the Socorro Chieftain reported the lingering problem from this flood: *"The Chamber of Commerce is leading the effort to get the bridge replaced at San Antonio on US 380. Since the Belen bridge is also out from flooding, there is virtually no access to the east part of the county. Requests to Ft. Bliss for emergency help for a temporary pontoon bridge have been denied. The only bridge is at Pueblito, but roads connecting to US60 and US 380 were also washed out by the recent floods."*

Though temporary roads were graded to gain access to the bridge at Escondida by residents of Pueblito, Bosquecito, and San Pedro, it was over a year before the San Antonio bridge was rebuilt. The railroad bridge to Carthage and Tokay, also destroyed in the 1941 flood, was never rebuilt.

EPITAPH

In the March 26, 1942 Socorro Chieftain, a simple obituary reads: *"Esmael Ortega, 76, dies at San Marcial, one of the last residences still there since the floods. He was a caretaker for a cattle company there."*

Ortega was the sheriff of San Marcial during the 1929 floods, working tirelessly to ensure everyone was properly evacuated and organizing the

attempts to shore up the levees and save the town. He also operated Ortega's Bar in Old Town, until it was destroyed in the flood of 1937. He was one of the few to remain, and one of the few lucky enough to have a job, working as a caretaker for the Victoria Land and Cattle Company.

In a way, Sheriff Ortega's obituary serves as the epitaph for the San Marcial villages that never received one. Let us never forget these towns, and the people, who fought with the Rio Grande for 100 years - and lost. And never forget, the now sleepy Rio Grande will no doubt roar again.

Some of the references used in this article:

"Destruction of Villages at San Marcial," U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, May 1937; "Report on Surveys made near San Marcial, N.M.," Herbert Yeo; Socorro Chieftain archives, Socorro Historical Society photographs; interviews with Bennie Barreras, Pat Gonzales, Henry Luera, Don Hunter; and field work by the author.