

Hannah Hudak

Title: Cerca Del Rio, Near The River

<<jazz music begins>><sup>1</sup>

**[Hannah Hudak]:** Have you ever heard the stereotype about small towns? You know, how everyone in a small town knows each other and that people are always willing to lend a helping hand? Well, I want to tell you a story about my small hometown. Because even through a devastation event, the citizens of my town will always help their neighbors.

Hi, my name is Hannah Hudak, and in this episode of South Texas Stories, I'm going to tell you a story that takes place in a city called Del Rio, and how even through the thick of devastation during and after an event of an intense flood, the people of Del Rio are resilient. In this episode, I also want to discuss Del Rio's close-knit comradery which makes that make this Texas town unique. Anyways let's dive right in!

While living in Del Rio, I always heard stories about the flood of '98. The stories would usually begin with an account on how no one suspected the rainfall to be as heavy as it was. Then, these stories would always highlight that the unsuspecting rainfall happened at night. So many families woke up seeing water sitting at the foot of their beds. Then, these stories would involve the topic of mass destruction, as well as the horrors experienced during the night.

The stories I grew up hearing always traced back to one common discussion though. These stories would somehow always discuss the comradery experienced by locals during and after the events of the flood.

Before we start, I want to retell the events of the flood to you. I want you to really understand how horrific and terrifying these might have been for the citizens. Anyways, let's begin.

On August 22, 1998, Tropical Storm Charlie came from the Gulf of Mexico and already hit the Texas coastline. Remnants of the storm would begin to head farther west into west Texas, towards Del Río. The storm would arrive to the city at night. And unleashing about 12 inches of rain before sunrise dawn.

And by 4AM, 2/3rds of Del Río would be underwater.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Vincent Sermonne, "brush-loop.wav," last modified November 3, 2010,

<sup>2</sup> Rick Lyman, "Storm Floods South Texas, Leaving 14 Dead," *The New York Times*, 25 August 1998.

It is important to note that there are various bodies of water that surround the city. Del Rio resides on the United States and Mexico border, which covers near the well-known Rio Grande River. Del Río also has a creek that goes through the city called the San Felipe Creek, and this creek also which is connected to the Rio Grande River.

So, during the heavy rainfall, these bodies of water would overflow, and move straight into the heart of the city, and quickly flooding homes, schools, and businesses.

The powerful stream of water and the intense winds of the storm would pull buildings from their foundations, which would completely destroy the homes of many families. Families who were fortunate not to have their residence homes destroyed would be entrapped into their homes were trapped inside them by the flood waters. In some situations, families had to climb from their windows onto the roof of their homes to seek safety and await rescue.

To tell me more about the intensities of the storm, I spoke to Michael Diaz, a Del Rio native, as well as the museum director of the Whitehead Memorial Museum located in Del Rio, Texas. Michael experienced the flood and devastation firsthand and provided me with some much-needed vital insight about the events of the flood that I did have the liberty of witnessing myself.

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**[Hudak]:** Do you have family or friends that might have a crazy or unique story about their own experiences with the flood?

**[Michael Diaz]:** “I remember my uncle lived in the San Felipe neighborhood. So the San Felipe neighborhood was the one that was hit the hardest, because that where the creek runs through. And, this happened—it was over night so you have to think it's dark, you know the power went out. He remembers hearing people screaming as the water was rising. So that's one thing that he never forgot was sounds of the people screaming. So that kind of when you think about its kind of hard to hear and think about.”

**[Hudak]:** Not only would homes be destroyed, but the cities vital infrastructure would be as well. Debris from the flood would infect the cities, water supply, making water in the city unsafe for human consumption.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> jppi\_Stu, "sw\_phone\_hangup.wav" last modified May 29, 2013,

<sup>4</sup> Rick Lyman, "Storm Floods South Texas, Leaving 14 Dead," *The New York Times*, 25 August 1998.

Once again, I asked Michael to provide me with some much-needed insight.

And did you lose power? Did you lose water during the event?

**[Diaz]:** “Yes. The flood waters did contaminate the pumping station where the city gets its water from. So they did have to shut water off to the whole city for quite a while. The majority of all the city was left without any kind of drinking water.”

**[Hudak]:** So what did you guys do to deal with this?

**[Diaz]:** “So the, the city actually had to bring in, bottled water. I know, I think H-E-B brought in tankers full of water, the national guard came in and they were just delivering tons of gallons of bottled water to everybody because—I mean, you have your whole city and you can’t drink any of the water. So, that’s what the government did to help out.”

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**[Hudak]:** After the devastation of the flood, Former Texas Governor George W. Bush would send over 150 National Guardsmen, 25 trucks, and 9 Blackhawk helicopters to join and assist in the rescue effort in the area.

After the events of the flood, news outlets would flock to the city and ask locals to give a brief rundown of some of reported occurrences of destruction around the city. Some reported include the following, fields of local crops would be covered in a pool of water. And in one area, a chunk of asphalt measuring at about three feet would be found a block away from a parking lot that had been ripped up by raging flood waters. And at Laughlin Air Force Base located a few miles outside of the city, rows of aircrafts would stand in a lake of water, which

Even though the citizens of Del Rio only experienced the remnants of Tropical Storm Charlie, the storm would be so extremely intense a bring lot of destruction and lots of devastation to the city.

Every Del Rio citizen experienced the storm and flooding differently. In some cases, individuals were not as lucky as others.

Today, the flood of '98 is still very much remembered and spoken about in Del Rio by those who experienced it. The citizens of Del Rio remember the flood for bring the city together. Because in times of tragedy, people come together.

I asked Michael how the city would felt after the events of the flood, he had this to say.

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<sup>5</sup> jppi\_Stu, "sw\_phone\_hangup.wav" last modified May 29, 2013.

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**[Diaz]:** “Even though the community was devastated because there were people who passed away to the flood. Even though after it, a lot of people came together to help each other out. So I remember, school just had started or was about to start. And I was in the marching band, and some of our friends in the band, you know they had their houses flooded out. So we decide to get together and actually go over there and help a few of our friends. So when we went. You know, we saw all of the devastation. Houses full of mud, full of debris. Cars and vehicles turned over, cars in the creek that were pushed by the flood waters. But the people—the neighbors everyone came together to help each other out. So all you saw was, you know—people who may not even know those families, but they were out there helping them. Cleaning up the mess. I remember also me and my mom we went to help at the red-cross. So there was a vacant building where the red-cross had setup, and they were taking in clothing and food donations for those who lost—you know everything. Cause there were houses that were swept to the foundation. So, yeah the community came together to help each other out.”

**[Hudak]:** Growing up in Del Rio, stories like Michael’s are what I am accustomed to hearing. These stories would begin with a retelling of events. Then transition into a discussion of the destruction seen and experienced. Next, these stories would then highlight and acknowledge that the flood displaced many families throughout the city by destroying their homes.

But then, these stories would always somehow highlight that the community came together in such a desperate time. Helping each other out.

The Whitehead Memorial Museum located in Del Rio, Texas, houses an exhibit showcasing artifacts from the flood as well as retell the events. Like I previously stated, Michael is the Museum director at the institute. Michael explains that when he initially assumed the role as director, the museum had no exhibit about the flood. Michael explains the following.

**[Diaz]:** We didn't have any kind of exhibit on the flood. So I decided to—you know, something that we needed to share with our visitors and youth who didn't know anything about it. So that's another way of memorializing those people who passed away and the event.

**[Hudak]:** What kind of information is on this exhibit?

**[Diaz]:** So we have some pictures, we have some video that was taken after the flood, so all of the aftermath. We actually have some artifacts such as the canned water and glass bottled water that the beer companies were making. Instead of making beer they stooped and started bottling water and canning water. We also have the actual rain gauge that was used by the

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<sup>6</sup> jppi\_Stu, "sw\_phone\_hangup.wav" last modified May 29, 2013.

National Weather Service to measure the official rain amount that fell during the flood, and also the charts that were on that rain gauge.

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**[Hudak]:** Even 20 years after the flood, the citizens of Del Rio still remember events just like it was yesterday, mainly because the memories still remain with those who experienced it. However, those like myself who did not get to experience the flood have memorials and museum exhibits to analyze. These exhibits like Michael describes remembers and honors the lives that were lost, as well as what was lost. But what was not lost was the communities comradery and care for each other.

Located about 145 miles west of San Antonio, the citizens of the small remote desert town of Del Rio still remember the comradery experienced during the events of a disastrous flood.

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<sup>7</sup> jppi\_Stu, "sw\_phone\_hangup.wav" last modified May 29, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> TexasMusicForge, "Morenita.mp3," last modified July 13, 2005.

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