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## CHILDHOOD MEMORIES OF THE RIO GRANDE IN FLOOD

*By* MAUDE MCFIE BLOOM

**D**O FOUR-YEAR-OLDS remember? My mother said it was exactly a week since we had left Springfield, Illinois, for Las Cruces in New Mexico Territory, and for five days of this time the A. T. and S. F. mainline west had been in flood area. But the worst, of course, had been these last three days since leaving Albuquerque. In April of 1884 the Rio Grande was on its annual, spring rampage.

My mother's hands would flutter, and she said she simply couldn't stand all this horrible, rolling brown water much longer. But it was my birthday, and my brother Ralph (of seven) and I wanted to be happy anyway. So we rolled oranges and tossed walnuts in the isle of the wonderful "sleeping salon" while our mother talked to other passengers.

Our real suffering was for drinking water. The supply taken on long before at Albuquerque had soon been exhausted. There had been none since, except settled river water, taken on at little marooned towns where our train had been halted hours on end. Mama was afraid to let us drink it, nor did we mind until the fruit was exhausted. She said that when we arrived at the junction where the mainline turned due west—Rincon Junction which was only forty miles from Las Cruces—we should find a nice American eating house and pure, pumped water in plenty.

The trainmen told us of the "branch accommodation train" between Rincon and El Paso that we would get on. Pretty new yellow passenger cars, they said; an engine, as many freight cars as were needed, and our chair car made up that train. "Round trip" to and from El Paso in a day.

They told us this as the train took a spurt across the high, dry Jornada del Muerto. We were to reach Rincon at six o'clock sharp. Oh, it was very cheerful all that day.

Mama rested finally. Ralph and I could hardly wait to see the fine, new, painted-yellow chaircar. Most all the cars were new; this was only the second year since the railroad had begun through service.

We all petted my mother. She was only twenty-four, the youngest of a brood of seven sisters, so she expected it. My father, who had been in the Civil War, was very serious, and very much older, Mama said; ten whole years, she said. Mama was coming down to this god-forsaken New Mexico to uproot my father from this appointment as legal expert of the new U. S. Land Office. He was getting far too interested. . . .

Mama said he had no right to throw up his association with General John G. Logan and the speakership of the Illinois House of Representatives to come away off to this dry desert, even if the river *had* washed away the county seat at Mesilla and made a mess when the offices had to be moved across in boats to Las Cruces, getting papers wet, and lost, and all muddled up. Surely Papa had them fixed up, now after a year and a half bothering with the old things! Oh, she said, for the oaks, the snowballs in blossom, the never-ending lawns of her old home in St. Louis . . . the trellises, "Pride of the Prairie" roses, and the second story verandas overlooking the river of *clear, clean* water. Mama said *she* wasn't a hen to *moult* all her nice past life—like Papa!

Mama got vexed and slapped Ralph when he told her Papa couldn't be a hen anyway, that he'd be a rooster. I remembered it because it had never happened before—and it began to spoil my birthday just then.

At Rincon Junction everybody got scared all over again. The great steel bridge leading west to California was half under the flow but still passable, they said. The "branch" wasn't to make any more trips to El Paso; they told mama she would have to send a messenger by horse to Fort Selden for an army ambulance to take us three down to Las Cruces

because it was under water too—all except on the hill and the new station which was built up on high ground.

The trouble was that the Rio Grande was running full in both the old and the new beds. Oh, they predicted, wasn't the malaria going to be bad in "the valley" when the water went down finally. Mama began to shake all over again. Everybody was sorry for her now.

The big train heading west did cross the bridge, but the men shook their heads; that roadway led along the sandy soil for ten miles, and the very last building at Fort Thorn had been washed away. Of course Thorn wasn't occupied by troops now, but with the Apaches on the move and getting worse, there was talk of troops . . . Selden, being on the east side of the Rio Grande and twenty miles south, was too far. This in April of 1884 . . .

Ralph and I were very proud of our Papa. He "wrote for the papers" in the east, long wonderful letters about those Indians . . .

All of a sudden here came *our* train into position in front of the station where all we had to do was to step on. Just the one yellow car and the funny little engine. My, weren't we to ride in state!

Orders had been received just now, they said: the engine must get back to El Paso. There were not many engines—and in last year's flood the mate to this one had been lost down the Mesilla Valley. It was to start back immediately, not a minute lost. Every rod of track was to be felt out in advance of the locomotive, and *none* of the rails were gone yet.

The nice elderly conductor "jumped" Ralph and me up the steps and the train moved off. The brakeman had almost to lift Mama on. We didn't know it at the time, but they were scared about Mama already and had telegraphed for Dr. Lyons at Selden to meet the train—if it got to the Fort, and also if Doc. Lyons would be sober enough to serve.

We went plunk down into the raging, terrible flood waters of two big arroyos coming down from the Rincon

mountains off east. But the bridges held. They assured Mama that the whole way was built on rocky hillsides through The Narrows between Rincon and Robledo Pass; that all she had to do was shut her eyes and go to sleep. We all should, they said. Yes, siree, we were to be plumb down under water many a mile but hadn't they just come up that way—wasn't the car still wet?

Mama just looked at them with big, scared eyes, and said she'd try. We two thought we'd try too, and rushed down the car to get a good drink. If it would take us *all night* to arrive, we might as well sleep.

There was not a drop of water in that drinking water faucet! We looked at each other. We called to the two trainmen stationed on the rear platform keeping up a signaling with their lanterns to the handcar men following . . . if any track went out under our weight these were to hurry back to Rincon. Ralph asked them for "water, please."

Then they looked at each other in consternation,—the one thing they had overlooked in the hasty departure, having carefully drained it on arrival mid-afternoon! They grabbed our shoulders and whispered: Mama was not to know. Oh they'd do anything on earth for us if we'd just pretend we'd had a good drink and wanted to get off to sleep quick.

Just then Mama looked around from her staring out the car window where the night-black water was lap, lapping a few inches below the sill, and under foot more water was slosh, sloshing in the isles.

"Ralphie, Mama wants a drink, too. Be awfully careful, son. This engine is going to fall into the river too . . . we'll all be . . ."

The conductor hurried forward. Just a minute, he said soothingly, he was on his way to the engine to get her some nice distilled water, that the train was getting along fine, with no danger, and all that.

We got our arms around Mama, telling her what we'd promised to—Hadn't the conductor told us we'd have a *free*

*ride to El Paso at circus time* in the fall? And if, as the kind old man had pointed out to us, Mama was in for a god-awful lot of bad times down here in New Mexico, hadn't we just as well buck up—learn how to handle her at the start?

When he got back, all he had was half a greasy-looking tin cup full. In the other hand he carried a tin pail with more, but it wasn't free of engine grease, he admitted. Mother turned away. In another minute she was shaking and screaming, quite beside herself with hysterics.

We held on for dear life. The two men hurried back-car gesticulating. My brother was tall and thin; I was short and fat. Mama pushed away and ran splashing down the isle. They must go back to Rincon, she cried.

By now the two men had decided something. Certainly, said the conductor, if Mama would simply sip this water laced with a tip of fine Kentucky bullrun to cover the grease to quiet her nerves, why, he'd go out back and do some signalling about the situation . . . but she must quiet down—we all must settle so he could do it. It was good water, too he assured her; only trouble was the engine wasn't going fast enough to generate much steam so there'd be any amount to speak of tonight. See?

"It's plain whiskey," Mama said, wavering. He pressed it on her instead of her smelling salts, off which all the ammonia had spilled and we all began to cough. The *water* would stop our coughing, he said.

Mama was led back. She drank it down, gagging and crying that it hurt her throat. She kept on laughing and crying by spells, but pretty soon she was only laughing—and that in a very silly way. Nor did she watch out the window at the water. Then she leaned over to go asleep. Ralph and I curled our feet under us to warm and dry them. I'll never forget how nice and warm that red plush coach seat looked that cold night.

Ralph insisted he stayed awake and saw the tall, uniformed army doctor come in; the three men whispering and

grinning over us three. But I only remember waking at sunrise, to be hugged by our father very hard.

After the Las Cruces stop, the train went on for a few miles, when, with a hiss and a sigh, it toppled into the torrent. There it lay until, one day, my mother had a big idea. It was pure waste to allow that good sweet-toned engine bell to rust. It would be wonderful to have it for the new little Presbyterian church for which they were then trampling mud to make adobes.

As most of the young American boys were in Mama's Sunday School class, the Llewellyns, the Bryan boys, little Numa Frenger, an orphan and Ralph's bosom companion who was being raised by his namesake uncle Numa Raymond, Mama went right about it. All the fathers chipped in for the bell, and the railroad was very willing. It was quite an event, the bell.

Until the tower was finished they hung it from a pole between posts in the church yard. It was the first Protestant church bell in all the Mesilla Valley region. The men of town used it for a fire signal, too. And did we children have battles royal over who should ring it of a Sunday morning! We were an awful torment to old Mr. Matheson, the Scotch missionary to the Spanish Americans who was stationed there with a nice little Mexican congregation and a school where Mrs. Granger and her daughter, Miss Leva, taught all of us children those first years.

We lived neighbors to Dr. Lyons' family at 'Cruces but Mama did not forgive him for reminding her, on occasion, of her plight that night on the train. We didn't any of us—until that awful epidemic of scarlet fever. For, in those days, no *lady* wanted her dignity belittled.

With this earliest remembering of the Rio Grande on the rampage, that same little girl has been gathering data on the ancient towns that lie beneath the waters of the river. For the most part by floods, which seemed to be worst in cycles of ten years; but others drowned by dams.

The list now stands at twelve, charming, sleepy old colonial villages and towns that were, for the most part, begun as haciendas or fortalezas. Their names are found in traders' diaries, colonial family histories, the archives at Santa Fé, and land office registers.

Gregg's *Commerce of the Prairies* mentions the old crossing at Paraje, which was a little mercantile center when Numa Reymond got his start—and nearby Fort Craig, which was where the three Frenger children became orphaned when their officer father was killed by Indians. Paraje has been submerged under Elephant Butte dam for many a year. And it had a "twin" town just across the river as most of the towns did. The name of Paraje's twin was *Cantarecio*, meaning, "the place where the water sings loudly."

The Historical Society of New Mexico  
(INCORPORATED)

*Organized December 26, 1859*

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1859 — COL. JOHN B. GRAYSON, U. S. A.

1861 — MAJ. JAMES L. DONALDSON, U. S. A.

1863 — HON. KIRBY BENEDICT

*adjourned sine die, Sept. 23, 1863*

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*re-established Dec. 27, 1880*

1881 — HON. WILLIAM G. RITCH

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1923 — HON. FRANK W. CLANCY

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**CONSTITUTION**  
**OF THE**  
**HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF NEW MEXICO**  
(As amended Nov. 19, 1929)

**Article 1. *Name.*** This Society shall be called the Historical Society of New Mexico.

**Article 2. *Objects and Operation.*** The objects of the Society shall be, in general, the promotion of historical studies; and in particular, the discovery, collection, preservation, and publication of historical material, especially such as relates to New Mexico.

**Article 3. *Membership.*** The Society shall consist of Members, Fellows, Life Members and Honorary Life Members.

(a) *Members.* Persons recommended by the Executive Council and elected by the Society may become members.

(b) *Fellows.* Members who show, by published work, special aptitude for historical investigation may become Fellows. Immediately following the adoption of this Constitution, the Executive Council shall elect five Fellows, and the body thus created may thereafter elect additional Fellows on the nomination of the Executive Council. The number of Fellows shall never exceed twenty-five.

(c) *Life Members.* In addition to life members of the Historical Society of New Mexico at the date of the adoption hereof, such other benefactors of the Society as shall pay into its treasury at one time the sum of fifty dollars, or shall present to the Society an equivalent in books, manuscripts, portraits, or other acceptable material of an historic nature, may upon recommendation by the Executive Council and election by the Society, be classed as Life Members.

(d) *Honorary Life Members.* Persons who have rendered eminent service to New Mexico and others who have, by published work, contributed to the historical literature of New Mexico or the Southwest, may become Honorary Life Members upon being recommended by the Executive Council and elected by the Society.

**Article 4. *Officers.*** The elective officers of the Society shall be a president, two vice-presidents, a corresponding secretary and treasurer, and a recording secretary; and these five officers shall constitute the *Executive Council* with full administrative powers.

Officers shall qualify on January 1st following their election, and shall hold office for the term of two years and until their successors shall have been elected and qualified.

Article 5. *Elections.* At the October meeting of each odd-numbered year, a nominating committee shall be named by the president of the Society and such committee shall make its report to the Society at the November meeting. Nominations may be made from the floor and the Society shall, in open meeting, proceed to elect its officers by ballot, those nominees receiving a majority of the votes cast for the respective offices to be declared elected.

Article 6. *Dues.* Dues shall be \$3.00 for each calendar year, and shall entitle members to receive bulletins as published and also the *Historical Review*.

Article 7. *Publications.* All publications of the Society and the selection and editing of matter for publication shall be under the direction and control of the Executive Council.

Article 8. *Meetings.* Monthly meetings of the Society shall be held at the rooms of the Society on the third Tuesday of each month at eight P. M. The Executive Council shall meet at any time upon call of the President or of three of its members.

Article 9. *Quorums.* Seven members of the Society and three members of the Executive Council, shall constitute quorums.

Article 10. *Amendments.* Amendments to this constitution shall become operative after being recommended by the Executive Council and approved by two-thirds of the members present and voting at any regular monthly meeting; provided, that notice of the proposed amendment shall have been given at a regular meeting of the Society, at least four weeks prior to the meeting when such proposed amendment is passed upon by the Society.

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Students and friends of Southwestern History are cordially invited to become members. Applications should be addressed to the corresponding secretary, Lansing B. Bloom, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, New Mexico.