



7-15-1987

The Raging Washita

Tena Garrison

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview>

Recommended Citation

Garrison, Tena (1987) "The Raging Washita," *Westview*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 4 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol6/iss4/3>

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Westview by an authorized administrator of SWOSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.





The Raging Washita

By Tena Garrison

The clouds were unusually low and ominous, with scooped dark circlets, like lavender puffs of cotton, bubbling angrily in the sky, and the wind was whipping the horizon. This was the tornado season in Western Oklahoma, and Mark Hobbs stood in the door of his prairie shack, licking the blowing dust from his suncracked lips and observing the sky. A funnel cloud had been seen near Cheyenne, and the young, muscular farmer was scanning the sky for a storm.

He jumped when the telephone rang, anticipating an alarm. If a tornado was sighted in the valley, Mr. Flood at the telephone office in town issued a warning with numerous short jingles.

He glanced at his blonde wife, sleeping peacefully, breathing a bit hard, burdened by the weight of her overdue baby. Her curls sprawled across the feather pillow, damp with perspiration. "Gee! She looks young," he thought. She hadn't heard the telephone.

It wasn't the alarm. The bells sounded twice, and Mark, recognizing his signal on the party line, moved quickly to the phone that was fastened to the living room wall. He yanked the receiver from its cradle before the phone could sound again.

"Hello," he answered.

"Mark," Mr. Flood's bass voice sounded over the wire. "We just got a call from Elk City. Arnett had a heck of a cloudburst and got ten inches of rain. You better get them Angus away from the river, cause she'll be outta her banks by mornin'."

Murmuring his thanks, Mark replaced the receiver. He heard Anita's regular breathing and peeked at Little Jean asleep in her reserved corner of



the living room. Opening the door quietly, he stared into the thundering night, his six-foot frame filling the gap.

He looked toward the Washita River that formed a U around his farm, and he remembered the flood stories of 1934. It had not rained in the valley, yet rolling water had engulfed the lowlands, and neighbors had awaked too late to save their lives. Mother Jeanie had lost her grip on the back porch and disappeared in the sucking water, while Daddy Ed handed his infant son to Uncle Jim Bob on the housetop.

Daddy Ed wouldn't talk about it, but one time when some coots in town were reminiscing, young Mark saw his daddy cry, and time hadn't completely erased the fear that had filled his heart. His wide farmer's hand wiped a tear from his lean cheek, and he roughly smoothed down his raven-colored hair. Daddy wouldn't sell the farm at any price. It was full of beautiful memories, and he hung on stubbornly--regardless of drought, depression, and low prices. Father and son worked hard, paying off loans and remodeling the old homestead. Someday they hoped to build a modern brick home for Anita with the cattle herd that grazed the river bottom.

Any extra profit was used to increase the herd of Aberdeen Angus, with registered cattle lines: "Katinkas," "Maid of Bauner," "Witch of Indors," famous Angus names with dams that produced magnificent stock. Mark felt his thick chest expand as he thought about them. There were sixty head with short, compact bodies and soft, brilliant black hair. Excellence in breeding had developed heads that were wide and short, with bonny eyes, and ears that reminded him of giant, fanned-out leaves.

"Twenty-five years of sweat is in that herd!" he said aloud.

Mark had made these midnight roundups before, but this was the first time that his father wasn't around to help. It took teamwork to find cattle in the dark under a spreading of trees and work them out of the river bottom and toward higher pasture. He dreaded riding alone, and he wondered what kind of mood Champion, his cow pony, was in.

He wondered whether he should wake Anita, knowing how she worried about him. She would be frightened if she awoke and missed him. He couldn't leave a note because the electricity was

off.

"Goes off ever time there's lightning," he growled.

His disposition was as rumbled as the shirt he pulled tight across his shoulders as he fumbled for grippers on the front. A small, wiggling form crowded against his back and instantly an intense blade of fire stabbed his shoulder. He bounced about trying to rid himself of the shirt and the scorpion that he knew was nestled inside.

"Lord Amighty!" he howled.

Anita had leaped to her feet, and she was searching the shirt with the beam of a flashlight. She shuddered as she observed the three-inch insect with its long, venomous tail.

She sighed. "There was one in Jean's crib when I tucked her in tonight. Thank God, I found it! I don't suppose we'll ever get rid of them. They seem to move into the walls of the house whenever the weather's dry."

When Mark rode past on the palomino, a lightning flash brightened the yard and revealed Anita at the gate. He felt comforted and spurred the pony down the driveway and toward the river. The cool breeze tickled his ears, and his eyes searched ahead for new gopher holes or other obstacles in his path. The moon was hidden by clouds, and the trail was obscured by darkness. Approaching, he slowed Champion and let him pick his own way.

He spoke softly to the compliant pony. "I believe we've got time, Boy. She ain't singin yet."

He slapped the horse's rump and hung on while he bounded, almost straight down, into the Washita bed--still bone dry, and the sand felt firm. The wind had filled it some, and when that water came it wouldn't soak up. It would keep on rolling downstream and then spill over into the valley.

Mark leaned forward over Champion's shoulders, helping bear his weight up the steep bank, where the lowland was dry and dusty, minus its normal johnson grass crop. He waited for the lightning to distinguish a path among the dead limbs that had fallen from thirsty elm trees. Intently, he listened for the lowing of cattle, but he heard only wind and the distant rumble of thunder. Apparently the herd had taken the trail leading to the back boundary of the property, and they had bedded down in scrub timber, a half mile upriver. The sky was clearing, and a few stars peeked down as the

clouded moon sent beams of golden auras through the dissolving clouds, and weird shadows flitted across the vale. Hearing the faint rumble of water, the determined man set a rapid pace.

The first wall of water splashed against the river bank as the young cowboy kicked several cows to their feet. Bedded down and sleepy, the animals moved groggily as Mark ran from one animal to another, gouging with the toe of his boot. In the saddle again, he started the herd down the narrow land that circled the acreage. He nudged the pony with his heels, causing him to bump into the rear of the lagging cow. The dam squealed and shoved the animals ahead of her, and the slow moving silhouettes picked up speed as he guided them into the lane where they couldn't turn back into the trees.

A dozen yearlings broke away and scattered like wild rabbits. The man let them go and pushed the cows farther down the trail. They knew where they were headed now: the old ones would move on to the river; the calves would follow.

Mark turned back to find the lowing bull. Quality Prince of Sunbeam had been purchased from Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College, and he was the farm's most valuable asset. Now he was belligerently answering the bellows of a Guernsey bull on pasture a mile away. As the rider approached, the two-ton bull eyed him suspiciously; then he chose to ignore him. This dark hulk wasn't mean, but he was stubborn and not about to lose an argument. He stomped and jerked as Mark tugged at the nose halter. The man pondered, hearing the voice of the thirsty river.

"Really, Prince! I don't have time to drag you in! I gotta get those cattle across!" He hit the bull, hard, across the rump with his quirt and reached for wire cutters in the saddle bags. He was running out of time as he cut four barbed wires that would allow Prince to climb a bit higher on a neighbor's land.

"I'll be back for you at dawn," the frustrated cowboy shouted. "Even now I gotta swim these cattle across."

At the first hint of daylight, Mark pulled on his boots. That bull had to be found and taken to higher ground--if he weren't drowned already. Anita was feeling bad, he knew, and he wished his

father would return from his cattle-buying trip.

"Okay, Baby," he spoke firmly to his wife. "Listen to me. I gotta go after that bull. You watch the water and get out in time. You have never seen an overflow, and it may scare you to death. If the water starts in from the east and circles around the house over the alfalfa, you head for higher ground. You won't make it out by car. Climb the hill, then cut over high above the road. I'll find you there."

As the sun arose, it cast brilliant rays into the valley. Champion set a smooth gait across the alfalfa field, kicking up dust as he moved across the stunted, dried plants. There had been too little rain for the deep green stalks to flourish and make hay after the last cutting. Splashes of red earth of Western Oklahoma were vivid around the shriveled stems of the alfalfa.

The river had filled and spilled over on the south side. The torrential water was tinted an orange red, dyed by the elements of the soil that it had swept over. The rushing water was swirling with logs and debris. The gaited gelding slowed, cautiously, as he approached the fierce current, and Mark slipped his feet from the stirrups to plant them high upon the horse's strong shoulders, across the cantle of the saddle. As the current struck the palomino's legs, he shuddered a moment, walked in deeper, and started swimming. Mark could feel the stress of the animal as the fingers of the river tugged to submerge him. Because the water was so deep and the valley so flooded, Mark wasn't sure when they cleared the channel, but finally Champion gained his footing, and they aimed for Prince's meadow.

Prince wasn't there. Mark guided the pony through the gap made by his wirecutters the previous evening, but there was no sign of the bull. He entered his own property again, noticing the ground had become damp with the swelling water. Mark pulled Champion to a stop, and he listened. The muted sound of the river was growing louder. He was reminded that the narrow, shallow channel had a vast watershed and many tributaries. Just a few miles upriver, White Shield and Quarter Master Creeks emptied their contents into the inadequate riverbed. The sounds of rolling water were reaching a crescendo accompanied by the cracking sounds of large logs bowling over huge

trees.

As the water rolled over the meadow and began swirling under Champion's feet, Mark spurred the mount. Champ jumped forward and galloped toward the crossing. Six young heifers broke out of the trees and moved along ahead of them, seeming to sense the danger. The angry river was covering the meadow, and debris was beginning to float among the trees. Guiding Champion to the highest spot in the riverbottom, Mark reached for the binoculars that were in the saddle bag. Focusing through the glasses, he could see the swollen, copious liquid etched across the wheat field that stretched a half mile east of the channel. The water level was rising rapidly, wiping out fences as it progressed. He would need to cut back south to an old crossing and get out immediately, or he would be caught in the Washita basin when the heavy drifts washed through. Something caught his attention as he started to swing the binoculars away from his face. With dismay, he focused in on a tiny, distant figure trudging up the hill, above his house. It was Anita, dragging little Jean. Something was dreadfully wrong with the way she moved! While the water was stretching its expanding fingers and filling the lowlands beneath their home, Anita was moving with a visible effort, entirely foreign to her. It had not occurred to Mark that Anita would not or could not get out in time, but she was moving so slowly. A horrid thought touched his brain as he screamed her name.

"Anita!" His cry echoed dreadfully across the travailing river, the haunting cry of an animal that was losing its mate.

"Anita!" The cry came again. Mark knew that his wife was in hard labor.

Champ leaped forward, shocked at the deep, unique rake of his master's spurs. Heifers scattered before him as the half-crazed man goaded the powerful animal forward.

Limbs bobbed about in the water at the crossing. They would float atop the rotating flood, then be sucked under in a gulp, only to resurface downstream.

A twenty-foot log, eighteen inches in diameter, came floating down the channel and caught upon a tight braid of limbs. The drift groaned, heaved, and was finally broken apart by the force of the water. Innocuously, the

limbs unraveled and moved along with the spinning trash, but the heavy, lumbering log was swept sidewise, and it blocked the channel. It was jammed tightly against the trunks of cottonwood trees on opposite sides of the Washita. The river formed a bend there, and the obstinate log was backing up loppings and changing the course of the stream. Rushing water, with its collection of limbs and farm crucibles, began surging by the palomino's legs, and a large corner post knocked him off balance. Mark knew that if he crossed and the barricading log broke free, he would be killed.

A vision of Anita flashed through his mind, and he forced the horse toward the river. Hearing the surrendering splintering of the roots of the cottonwoods, the horse reared and almost toppled backward. Desperately, Mark brought his quirt down, severely, upon Champion's head, and he spurred him forward. The animal moved ahead slowly, then with increasing momentum. Suddenly, his feet slipped on the muddy land, and Champion fell. Slipping his feet free from the stirrups as the pony rolled, Mark fell into the icy torrent. Cold saturated his body as the water closed over him, and he manipulated his limbs to keep from being trampled by the horse. He fought for footing on the soggy terrain and ultimately leaned against the trembling gelding.

Standing in waist-deep water, muddy and miserable, he put his head on the pony's shoulder and cursed loudly. Having spent his wrath, he spoke softly, "Partner, one of us better use our heads or Anita won't be the only one in trouble."

Refuse had stacked eight feet above the jammed log, and the top of one giant tree swayed and jerked downward. The tree creaked and splintered under the pressure of the drift as Mark turned away from the crossing. Suddenly the jammed log tore loose, and the drift untangled slowly as its varied contents were forced downstream. Mark watched as a half dozen fence posts, with some barbed wire intact, moved past him. An unpainted barn door drifted by, followed by loppings of trees. As the crossing cleared, the impatient husband urged his steed ahead, muttering encouragement. Inching ahead into the channel, the gelding started swimming. When they reached the road, Mark saw his

father's car ascending the north hills, and he turned the sweating animal toward Anita.

Later at the hospital, he tried to smooth Anita's tangled hair. He felt a combination of pride, relief, and guilt as he watched her. She was relaxed and smiling, still exhausted from the birth of his son.

"I don't know about ladies who go into labor during floods and then insist on giving birth in an automobile," he teased. "But you gotta admit he is one good-looking boy, just like his Daddy."

The events of the day overwhelmed him. There had been one crisis after another, then the glorious miracle of Marcus Andrew Hobbs. He envisioned the farm, sitting under a foot of smelly water, drinking up the needed liquid.

"Wow!" Mark drawled. "Today we hit the jackpot! We got our boy, and we got an overflow that will provide months of moisture. We'll have a great alfalfa crop. You know, we could afford our house now if I hadn't lost that bull."

He watched Anita's eyes widen. "You lost the bull?" she said.

Mark felt a wave of depression, thinking of the magnificent animal. "Yeah, I lost him. He wasn't in the back meadow, and I looked as long as I dared. Thunder! I wish I could have found that bull! I won't find another one that will mix as well with my herd and throw such good calves—even if I could afford another Quality Prince."

"Old Prince?" Anita laughed delightfully. "When your dad drove across the field to pick me up, Prince was crossing up to the north pasture. He got to safety before you did, and he had eight heifers with him." ❧

Tena Garrison is a real-estate agent and owner of a uniform and maternity-dress shop in Elk City. Free-lance writing is an avocation for her.



SERVICE

Come by our location, 301 W. Broadway. We have two teller lanes and a night depository to serve you. With our excellent staff and computerized, in-house processing, we can meet all your banking needs, simply and efficiently. We are members of FDIC and have been in operation since 1904.

Bill Haney, Executive Vice-President

301 W. Broadway.

Thomas, OK

661-3515

**FIRST
NATIONAL
BANK**