

100 Years, Later:

San Antonio's 2021 Arctic Blast Reminiscent of the Great Flood of 1921

By Victoria Villaseñor & Lindsey Wieck

In the wake of the recent Texas arctic blast in February that shut down the city for a week and left residents scrambling for basic resources, we are reminded of a long history of environmental catastrophes in our city. Inequitable, shortsighted infrastructure has existed in San Antonio for centuries, and neighborhoods like the Westside have been disproportionately impacted by floods, and most recently by snow. Last year, we began to research water in San Antonio, with the goal of sharing histories of the big 1921 flood for its 100th anniversary this fall.

On September 9, 1921, a series of heavy rainstorms moved across a woefully unprepared central and south Texas. The torrential rain brought on a catastrophic surge of water, leading to the greatest flood in Bexar County's recorded history. Several news outlets captured images of the downtown area of San Antonio that looked like Venice, Italy, with water filling the city's streets. The flood of 1921 created at least \$3 million in damages, destroying the city's electricity, communication, and infrastructure, which left citizens scrambling for resources.

While the downtown business and northern districts received most of the news coverage in the aftermath of the flood, it was the west and south sides of San Antonio that experienced the greatest devastation. The Alazán and Martínez Creek tributaries burst, allowing the flood waters to ravage the Westside's structurally unsound neighborhoods. Mexicans and Mexican Americans on the Westside and Southside made up the vast majority of the 80 deaths accounted for, and many more people remained missing and never discovered after the flood. The city's long history of disinvestment in these communities left the west and south sides to deal with menial resources and unsanitary conditions that magnified the damage of the storm. Those who did not die from drowning died under collapsed buildings or were struck by loose material carried in the streams.

Despite the great devastation Mexican American communities



Downtown San Antonio at Travis & Broadway streets during the 2021 Arctic blast.



Downtown San Antonio at Travis St. looking west from Navarro St. during the great flood of 1921.

experienced during and after the flood, the Anglo-dominated City Council's main concern was the rehabilitation of the city's commercial and wealthy districts. The City Council initiated one of the most extensive public works projects in the city's history, the construction of the Olmos Dam, which diverted water away from San Antonio's north and central districts.

Out of the millions spent to protect an already elite area, city leaders allocated only \$6,000 for the beautification of the Alazan and San Pedro Creeks. Cutting brush along the creeks offered no rehabilitation or protection for Mexican communities; city leaders made clear which communities mattered in San Antonio. Decades passed before federal funding would be allocated to meaningfully address flooding concerns in the Westside, and even these came with ramifications, changing the creeks and other spaces people in the Westside used.

To research this history of flooding in the Westside, we delved into histories of water, inequitable development, and social and political justice in San Antonio

by authors like Lewis Fisher and Char Miller. We also relied on historical newspaper articles and photographs, and a 60+-page brochure, "La Tragedia de la Inundación de San Antonio," published in Spanish after the flood revealing the expansive damage to the Westside.

As we develop some materials helping us remember the flood of 1921 and continued flooding throughout the 20th century, we are seeking to preserve and share community memories about flooding or your experiences with Alazán, Apache, and Martínez creeks throughout your lifetimes.

NOTE: Lindsey Wieck, Asst. Prof. of History/Dir. of Public History at St. Mary's Univ. & Victoria Villaseñor, St.MU student, are researching the 1921 San Antonio flood & will be collecting stories to share for the 100th anniversary commemoration this fall.



Remembering the Great Flood of 1921 in San Antonio

Share your memories and stories: of the creeks of San Antonio, of floods you have experienced, of flood prevention efforts in the 70s & beyond or stories you've heard of the Great Flood of 1921!

A brochure of these stories will be available at the Esperanza Center as well as a digital site with the stories and our research.

Email stories to stmupublichistory@gmail.com or mail them the Esperanza Center, 922 San Pedro Ave., San Antonio, TX 78212.

Coming Fall 2021!