

**ON A FLOOD OF WORDS:  
RACE AND ETHNICITY IN THE LANGUAGE OF DISASTER  
IN EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY TEXAS**

A Thesis

by

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## ABSTRACT

My thesis will show that newspaper reports on weather-related natural disasters in Texas and the Southwest borderlands between 1899 and 1921 reflect the change in racial and ethnic identities during the rise of the Jim Crow system, but also how reporting helped shape those changes. I will examine the language used in this reporting and compare differences in treatment and presentation based on race and ethnicity and how this changed throughout the period, including the absence of information about certain victims and how class, gender, and age played a role in reporting. I will analyze graphic art and photography used in newspaper reports on the disasters for ways in which perceptions of race, ethnicity, and class influenced their selection. I will include diversity in the disaster types, geographical areas, and the victims' race, ethnicity, gender, and class. As weather-related natural disasters, particularly hurricanes, often extend over large geographic areas, I track the reporting of such storms outside my primary area where appropriate. In contrast, I will examine highly localized events such as diffused smaller flooding events that primarily impacted specific ethnic populations or geographic areas.

My sources include both Texas newspapers and major newspapers outside the region, including a broad sample of reporting—between six and twelve different newspapers for each disaster. Because many of the newspapers began or ended publication between 1899 and 1921, the choice of newspapers varies from disaster to disaster, but the *Dallas Morning News*, the *New York Times*, and the *Atlanta Constitution* will provide continuity for most of the disasters. I will analyze over 2600

newspaper articles on these weather-related natural disasters for their depictions of the victims, rescuers, responders, and other related persons. First, I analyze how race, ethnicity, class, and gender are used to manipulate or redefine these identities and to reinforce systems of control. Second, I examine how elite male control of labor and labor migration is reinforced through racialization and stereotyping of poorer victims in reporting in which class is as vital as racial or ethnic classification. Finally, I visually analyze a number of related images from the newspaper reporting, both drawings and photographs, for the ways in which they reinforce racial and class hierarchies. Throughout the thesis, I will closely follow the evolution from a multi-racial and multi-ethnic system to the uniquely Texan tri-racial system during this twenty-two year period.

## **DEDICATION**

To my father, Eugene L. Roe, Sr.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

While climate change and environmental issues have received considerable and increasing attention over the last forty years, natural disasters went largely unexplored. That is, they did so as a field of historical interest until recently. Environmental history began to receive rigorous attention in the 1970s, and William Cronon firmly confirmed the longevity of the field with his 1983 classic *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*. Donald Worster's earlier 1979 *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains In the 1930s* had already established environmental disaster as an influential subfield, especially his assertion that this particular environmental disaster was largely manmade. His central idea of manmade environmental disasters can still be seen in recent books such as Christopher Morris's 2012 *The Big Muddy: An Environmental History of the Mississippi and Its Peoples from Hernando de Soto to Hurricane Katrina*. However even before Worster and Cronon's works, Pete Daniel's 1977 *Deep'n as It Come: The 1927 Mississippi River Flood* quietly foreshadowed the separate but related field of natural disaster history and was republished in an expanded edition in 1996.

The next year, John Barry's *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America* signaled an emerging interest in the field of natural disaster history, as his work demonstrated some of the questions that historians can ask

within the temporal and geographical framework of a natural disaster. A natural disaster is not just a geological or meteorological event. The mid-Atlantic oceanic ridge may erupt under the ocean at a divergent plate boundary and go completely unnoticed by humans. Yet the September 2014 phreatic eruption of Mount Ontake in Japan which resulted in the deaths of a number of hikers was assuredly noticed, and most of Europe was forced to take notice of the eruption of the relatively remote Eyjafjallajökull Icelandic volcano in 2010 whose ash shut down air travel across Europe for almost a week.<sup>1</sup> As long they do not enter human experience and memory, geological and meteorological events are simply normal processes that continually reshape our planet. The more interesting phenomena are human reactions to natural disasters.

For the purpose of this thesis, a *natural disaster* is defined as a catastrophic event resulting from natural forces with consequences for a human population.<sup>2</sup> An *environmental disaster*, by contrast, is a catastrophic event entirely or mostly caused by human action and causing harm primarily to the natural environment itself, though it may also affect humans, directly or indirectly. As with many fields, of course, there is not always a clear line between the two, and some historians cross freely between both.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Ontakesan,” Global Volcanism Program Web Site, Smithsonian Institution, *National Museum of Natural History*, accessed December 25, 2014 <http://www.volcano.si.edu/volcano.cfm?vn=283040> and “Eyjafjallajökull eruption, Iceland: April/May 2010,” British Geological Survey Web Site, accessed December 25, 2014 [http://www.bgs.ac.uk/research/volcanoes/icelandic\\_ash.html](http://www.bgs.ac.uk/research/volcanoes/icelandic_ash.html).

<sup>2</sup> Robin Roe, “Man or Nature: The History of Natural Disaster,” (unpublished paper presented for Reading Seminar in United States History after 1876, May 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Both of these definitions exclude other types of disaster that do not significantly involve the natural environment, such as terrorist attacks. While it can be argued that separating the “natural” environment from the human-built environment is itself an artificial division, the logic of that argument is primarily based in disaster planning and response where the division makes little sense, not in broader historical frameworks of analysis. For a discussion of all hazards disaster planning, see Scott Gabriel

For Ted Steinberg, environmental history overlaps with social and cultural history, particularly where questions of power interact with disaster. His *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America* starts with the assertion that “blaming the latter—nature—for calamity has become a tool used to advance various political interests in society...those in power (politicians; federal, state, and city policymakers; and corporate leaders) have tended to view these events as purely natural in an effort to justify a set of responses that has proved both environmentally unsound, and socially, if not morally, bankrupt.”<sup>4</sup>

Starting from Steinberg’s proposition that natural disasters are manipulated by those in power, I examine and analyze both textual and visual newspaper reporting of six significant weather-related natural disasters in Texas and the Southwest borderlands between 1899 and 1921. The end of formal Reconstruction in the late 1870s and the “separate but equal” decision of *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 paved the way to a redefinition and hardening of racial and ethnic identities. This newspaper reporting not only reflected, but, in concurrence with Steinberg’s thesis, also helped further amend that emerging racial hierarchy and advance the interests of white supremacy.

First, I examine the ways in which race, ethnicity, class, and gender are presented and treated in newspaper reports to manipulate public perceptions of these identity categories and to produce support for evolving systems of control by race. Second, I examine how newspaper reporting racializes poor victims in order to control their labor

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Knowles, *The Disaster Experts: Mastering Risk in Modern America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011.)

<sup>4</sup> Ted Steinberg, *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), xii.

and labor migration, especially, but not exclusively, African Americans. Finally, I visually analyze graphic images in newspapers from several disasters for the same messages of race, ethnicity, class, and gender, especially for those that reinforce racial and class hierarchies. Throughout all of these, I analyze the manner in which these messages change over time to harden into the uniquely Texan tri-racial system of the early 1920s.

Disasters had to meet four specific criteria to be selected as one of the main foci for analysis in this thesis. The most obvious was that the disaster was connected to a weather-related event. The disaster must have occurred during this time frame and the primary focus of the disaster must have occurred within this geographic region. A disaster must have received significant newspaper coverage in Texas and preferably also in out-of-state newspapers. And finally, the reports had to include adequate description of victims rather than simply property damage to allow analyze for references to race or ethnicity in the newspaper coverage and, if possible, also to class or gender. A few other weather disasters are referenced briefly, but these were significant primarily for their ability to strengthen other evidence. I generally omit the one well-known and much examined disaster during this time frame, the 1900 Galveston hurricane, because a rigorous examination of the extensive newspaper reporting for that hurricane alone was simply not feasible. However, I do refer to secondary literature on the storm and include a few newspaper images in my visual analysis.

I selected six weather-related disasters and examined newspapers in detail for each of them. I did not necessarily choose the most severe weather-related natural

disasters in Texas and the Southwest borderlands during these years but ones which met the evidentiary criteria above. The April 1900 flood included a dam failure and exhibited a great diversity of ethnic and racial references as well as fairly clear references to class, while the summer 1899 flooding also had a wider variety of racial language that appeared to have additional class associations than later floods. The September and October 1904 flooding was the most diffused weather disaster and was actually a series of related flooding events over a period of about six weeks with most of its references to ethnicity only by implication. This was the single truly transnational weather-related disaster included in this thesis, involving people on both sides of the Rio Grande as well as regions of northern Mexico, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Colorado, with connections to a hurricane that passed through Honduras and Guatemala in mid-October, the remnants of which may have extended the flooding trend for an additional week.<sup>5</sup> The August 1915 hurricane affected the broadest geographical region and provides an opportunity to compare local coverage across a broader region, particularly flooding in St. Louis, Missouri.

The December 1913 flood was the most devastating flood in Texas history, involving almost every river in Texas and forcing as much as five percent of the population of the state of Texas from their homes. This was also the last weather-related disaster I examine with substantial direct references to ethnicity or race other than white, African American, or Mexican, apparently a turning point in the redrawing of race and

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<sup>5</sup> Spanish language newspapers may include far more extensive coverage of this flooding.

ethnicity that occurred during this period.<sup>6</sup> After this 1913 flood and by one of the two 1915 weather disasters (a major Galveston hurricane in August is examined, but there was also a major flood in April that is not analyzed here) almost all references to ethnicity or race other than African Americans or Mexicans vanished. Two international events may have contributed to this language shift at this precise moment: the outbreak of World War I in Europe, although the United States would not enter for several more years, and the revolution and unrest in Mexico that began around 1910.

White middle-class victims were the focus of reporting in the 1915 hurricane, making both race and class significant, especially for analyzing the creation of whiteness. The September 1921 flood victims were primarily Mexican but also present a very specific class division in this population—urban Mexicans and rural farm workers—while the 1904 flood victims were primarily Mexican and probably mostly Mexican nationals. In addition, the 1904 flood occurred during a particularly important transformation of the region along the United States–Mexican border that would lead to unrest and migration.<sup>7</sup> The earliest flood, the 1899 flood, was another diffused series of weather-related disasters with relatively limited geographic scope, which was reported

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<sup>6</sup> There is no way to identify victims' citizenship status in most newspaper reporting, and the word Mexican appears to have been used indiscriminately for Mexican-Americans and Mexican immigrants and migrants. Anyone with a Spanish surname or identified as Mexican will generally be referred to as Mexican due to this. African American will be the default term, except in instances when the exact language from the newspapers is appropriate. This racial identification is not only widely accepted, it also has the advantage that it does not appear in any of the newspaper reporting, thus avoiding confusion with the specific terms being analyzed.

<sup>7</sup> In fact the railroad that finally connected Brownsville to the interior of Texas was completed in July 1904, just months before this flood occurred, and was a factor in the rapid conversion of the border region from ranching to crop farming which had particular impact on the Mexican population. David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836–1986*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), 107–110.

similarly to the 1900 flood but with almost exclusively African-American rural victims. This flood was primarily representative for the early years of this transition from a multi-ethnic system of identification to a hardened tri-racial (white, African American, and Mexican) system in Texas and presented key early representations for this time frame of African Americans as something other than dependent farm laborers. The casualties of the 1913 flood were heavily African-American farm workers with little discernable class division.

The number of newspapers I consult varies from five to twelve for each disaster, with at least one non-Texas newspaper included for each disaster. The *Dallas Morning News* and the *New York Times* were published continuously between 1899 and 1921, though no coverage of the 1904 flooding was located in the *New York Times*. When possible, geographically diverse newspapers are selected, both within Texas and across the United States. The West Coast is the most difficult region to include, but coverage appears in *The Morning Astorian* (Oregon) for April 1900 and in the *San Francisco Chronicle* for August 1915 and September 1921.

I evaluate over 2600 newspaper articles, and locate over 500 articles which included implicit or explicit language related to identity. The disaster that received the most extensive coverage—I locate about 1150 articles on the 1915 hurricane—was also the disaster whose victims were most explicitly white and middle or upper-class. However, these numbers do not necessarily present a good representation of either the actual number of references to race and ethnicity or the extent of coverage. In 1899 there were single articles that continued for one or two columns and referred to multiple



markers of identity. By 1915 many articles were only a paragraph or two. A more detailed quantitative analysis is possible, but I deem it too time-consuming for this thesis.

Popular interest in weather-related natural disasters has recently been spurred by events such as the Mississippi river flooding in 1993 and Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The controversy of the public response and relief to Hurricane Katrina in particular was enmeshed with continuing perceptions of race and class that were shaped during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as part of the drive by those in power to use natural disasters to maintain and expand control. These perceptions persist and are revived with each natural disaster that largely victimizes racial minorities or the poor, obscuring the structural systems that shift the majority of risk to these relatively powerless populations.

At the same time, past experience has created suspicions among these same disaster victims that they are being victimized by those same structural systems and elites in order to protect others. Andy Horowitz found a widespread belief that the levee meant to protect the lower ninth ward during Hurricane Betsy in 1963 was intentionally destroyed in order to protect more affluent parts of New Orleans, based partly on prior event such as the dynamiting of a levee that flooded St. Bernard and Plaquemines parishes in 1927.<sup>8</sup> In the absence of the historiography of these events, the public is left ignorant of the source of these victims' anger at responses, reinforcing many of the

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<sup>8</sup> Andy Horowitz, "Hurricane Betsy and the Politics of Disaster in New Orleans's Lower Ninth Ward 1965–1967," *The Journal of Southern History* 80, no. 4 (Nov. 2014), 898–899 and John M. Barry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 246–247, 256–258.

stereotypes produced during previous disasters such as those which will be examined in this thesis. The manipulation of natural disaster in order to control and reinforce power structures is not new. We need to study the historical roots of modern racialization and politicization of natural disaster in order to understand the continuity of efforts to assert control and the source of racialized victims' reactions.

## CHAPTER II

### THE LANGUAGE OF IDENTITY

The evolution of the factory farm model in Texas and the influence of this on migration, risk, and labor control are central to understanding the reasons behind natural disaster reporting's racial and ethnic manipulation. Neil Foley's *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* examined these labor and economic transitions to an agricultural factory model, the conflicts they caused, and how they helped shape racial and class identities. Prior to the Civil War in Texas, the most productive cotton plantations developed along rivers in Texas and were primarily based on enslaved African Americans. After the Civil War, this eventually evolved into a system that relied upon African-American farm laborers, often concentrated on the same rich river bottom lands which were particularly at risk from flooding events. Poor whites, frequently ethnic, were concentrated in the Blackland Prairies, especially after the development of dryland cotton farming. This is where some of them initially owned land, though eventually many more poor whites there were forced into some form of farm tenancy.

At the turn of the century, Emilio Zamora found relatively few Mexican sharecroppers and direct farm laborers in Texas except "along the international border from Cameron County at the mouth of the Rio Grande River, to Valverde County" and "in the southwestern portion of the cotton belt region extending from East Texas to the

area south of Austin and San Antonio and to Nueces County.”<sup>9</sup> David Montejano identified the Mexican farm labor in these border areas primarily as ranch hands of some sort through the late 1800s.<sup>10</sup> Around 1900, the arrival of crop farmers into this border region began to accelerate, disturbing social and economic conditions in this region that led to unsettled conditions and eventually violence.<sup>11</sup> By in the 1910s, there was an increase in Mexican migration and immigration and growing employment of Mexican labor in areas traditionally worked by African Americans or poor whites.<sup>12</sup>

From 1900, the initial division in most of this region was between African Americans in the river bottoms that were particularly vulnerable to flooding and poor whites in the Blackland Prairies and was a vital factor in who was most affected by weather-related natural disasters. In addition, the African Americans in the river bottoms had little to no control over their housing, which was sometimes knowingly built well within the flood plain by the large land owners that once owned plantations. This was an economically devastating situation for these farm laborers and their families, even without the risk of drowning; the frequency of major floods in some areas suggests some families may have lost almost everything they owned every four or five years. A close reading of newspaper reports also suggests that workers were well aware that their

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<sup>9</sup> Emilio Zamora, *The World of the Mexican Worker in Texas* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M Press, 1993), 14.

<sup>10</sup> Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans*, 76–79, 105.

<sup>11</sup> Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans*, 109, 114–117.

<sup>12</sup> Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 11 and Zamora, *The World of the Mexican Worker*, 15.

employers knowingly risked their families' lives and property, using disaster to keep them dependent and working at the wages offered.<sup>13</sup>

### **Ethnic Identity and Erasure**

Perhaps the weakest point of Foley's book is homogenizing then dividing "white" almost exclusively by class, although he does admit that the tri-racial system of white, African American, and Mexican that he used glosses over differences within and between groups. "Anglo, for example, exists as a label principally in opposition to Mexican and denotes, rather crudely, all non-Mexican whites, thereby conflating widely diverse cultural groups in Texas, such as Germans, Czechs, Wends, Irish, English, Polish, and French—to say nothing of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews."<sup>14</sup> Yet while he admits to the flaws in homogenizing groups in this fashion, he includes counties in his study where large percentages of the population belonged to one of these ethnicities—particularly German—and if studied separately might demonstrate a very different dynamic. Prior to World War I at least, these other identities were often easily established through the newspaper reporting, and these ethnic identities helped shape reporting on victims who were neither fully white nor African American.

The strongest indication of the importance of racial and ethnic identity is literally revealed in how the victims of these disasters are identified or not identified. If a person

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<sup>13</sup> "No Appeal for Public Aid," *Dallas Morning News*, July 26, 1909, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Foley, *The White Scourge*, 7–8.

is fully named, even without any racial or ethnic identification, he was likely white and male.<sup>15</sup> During the period when ethnic identifications remained common, ethnic victims were generally identified by ethnicity, and sometimes by sex and status as child or adult, but these victims most often remained nameless. Typical of this, in 1900 the Dallas *Morning News* reported that “among the houses swept away was one occupied by an Italian family, a man, his wife, and three children. All are missing and several people report having seen the bodies of a woman and three children floating down the river.”<sup>16</sup> This story in which an Italian family remained nameless was not only typical, but of particular significance because they were not, in fact, unknown and nameless. While local newspaper reports omitted their surname, the New York *Times* reported that “an Italian family by the name of Tegoni, consisting of wife and husband and three children are missing. Their house was swept away. Several people have reported to the rescuing authorities that they saw the bodies of a woman and four children floating down the river.”<sup>17</sup> In addition, these reports strongly suggested that the Italian family was employed on the Bell Ranch east of Austin—both articles mention them in association with a report that an employee of that ranch named Ben Harvey drowned. Omission of any name when their surname was clearly known, in a report which named a presumably white man, must have been intentional.

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<sup>15</sup> White women victims were more likely to be named than women identified by ethnicity, but even then, their full names were rarely used, instead being referred to as “Miss C. Sanford” and “Miss Boss.” “Fifteen are Dead at Virginia Point,” Dallas *Morning News*, August 20, 1915, p. 1, and “Port Arthur,” Dallas *Morning News*, August 19, 1915, p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> “Death Sweeps the Valley,” Dallas *Morning News*, April 9, 1900, p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> “Additional Deaths,” New York *Times*, April 9, 1900, p. 1.

This failure to identify ethnic victims whose identities were available was echoed in reporting in 1913 when an Italian family drowned near Bryan, Texas. Local Texas newspapers, including the local Bryan, Texas, newspaper, the *Bryan Morning Eagle*, virtually failed to report their deaths, much less identify them.<sup>18</sup> However at least four geographically diverse newspapers outside the state—the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, the *Boston Daily Globe*, and the *Atlanta Constitution*—all reported their drowning and gave the family’s name. These newspapers reported similar details, such as the *New York Times* article, “Last night eight miles from Bryan, Lee Cortmelia, an Italian, was heard calling for help from his half-submerged cabin. This morning the cabin had disappeared. Cortmelia, his wife, and several children probably were drowned.”<sup>19</sup> Just as in the drowning of the Tegoni family in 1900, the identities of the drowning victims were clearly known and correspondents or editors made an intentional decision to minimize detail about their deaths in local reporting.

The 1899 flood, while more localized than most of the others and spread out over several weeks, included victims’ identities primarily by ethnicity as well, though also emphasizing the vagueness of these ethnic identifications for which “not white” was the key element in the word choice. The *Houston Daily Post* reported that near Winchester, Texas, “while a party was trying to hold a ferry boat that was going down the Colorado river yesterday between this place and La Grange, a young German was pulled into the

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<sup>18</sup> “Many Lives are Lost,” *Bryan Morning Eagle*, April 10, 1900, p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> “Provisions for Sufferers,” *Washington Post*, December 6, 1913, p. 9; “Life Savers Arrive,” *New York Times*, December 6, 1913, p. 1; “More than 50 Flood Victims,” *Boston Daily Globe*, December 6, 1913, p. 6; and “Railroad Losses Heavy,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, December 7, 1913, p. 1.

river and drowned. They failed to recover his body.”<sup>20</sup> However, the *Dallas Morning News* ran an article on the same failed attempt to capture the ferryboat and stated that a “Bohemian Perished in Attempting to Rescue a Passing Boat” then expands on that with “John Ernenky, a Bohemian 54 years of age, in an attempt with others to capture it seven miles up the river was drowned.”<sup>21</sup> Curiously Houston, which is far closer to La Grange than Dallas, not only failed to identify the victim by name even though the Dallas report ran a day earlier, but altered their report to change his ethnicity from a term for Czech ethnicity to a “German.”

Italians and “Bohemians” seem to have suffered particularly negatively slanted reporting. In 1900 there were further reports of “Bohemian” victims, with a definite disapproving tone: “A Bohemian and his wife, panic-stricken, jumped into the turbulent waters, ten feet deep and were drowned almost immediately, when they could have remained in safety.”<sup>22</sup> On the Farnsworth farm near Gonzales, Texas, “five Bohemian women were seen clinging to a barbed-wire fence, with their heads just above the water. They were rescued by Charles McGown and Claude Ollre, but they did not know what had become of the father and husband.”<sup>23</sup> From the amount of detail, at least their family name must have been known, but from the context, it appeared that the family was probably employed on the Farnsworth farm rather than owning or even renting. This suggests that class may also have influenced this omission.

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<sup>20</sup> “Man Drowned at Winchester,” *Houston Daily Post*, June 10, 1899, p.5.

<sup>21</sup> “Drowned in the Colorado,” *Dallas Morning News*, June 9, 1899, p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> “Dozen Persons are Drowned,” *Atlanta Constitution*, April 10, 1900, p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> “Loss in Guadalupe Valley,” *Dallas Morning News*, April 10, 1900, p. 2.



The 1913 flood, which due to its duration and devastating extent was one of the most extensively covered disasters (excepting perhaps the 1915 hurricane and the 1921 flood,) also had some of the most diverse ethnic references. The *Burleson County Ledger and News-Chronicle* reported that “While attempting to cross Davidson creek on the Tunis road Thursday morning while the creek was overflowed all over the country, a Hebrew banana peddler drove his team into the stream and missed the bridge and before the horses could be gotten out all three were drowned and the man was rescued with a boat after an alarm had been given and help from town went to his aid.”<sup>24</sup> A Navasota correspondent to the Fort Worth *Star-Telegram* asserted that “there are now fully 1000 refugees here, most of them being negroes, Mexicans, and Italians.”<sup>25</sup> A Polish woman was described in detail, including her full name and honorific, “Mrs. Anna Adamska,” but judging from her identification by her own first name as well as the tone of the article, this recognition was a matter of mixed sympathy and condescension at her predicament.<sup>26</sup> What these particular reports have in common is a generally negative portrayal of these ethnic individuals’ judgment and competence.

In a very rare mention of Native Americans affected by flooding, it was only as a geographical location, and not as a people: “it will take about forty-eight hours for the high water to reach the Missouri, Kansas and Texas line, in the Creek Nation, 124 miles

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<sup>24</sup> “One Man Rescued, Three Horses Drown,” *Burleson County Ledger and News-Chronicle*, December 5, 1913, p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> “Many Marooned at Millican,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, December 6, 1913, p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> “Woman with an Infant Born on Train Gets Help,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, December 5, 1913, p. 15.

north of Denison.”<sup>27</sup> Almost as rare was a mention of Chinese ethnicity in 1899; “Lulu Chops, the half breed Chinese girl reported drowned, was found safe and secure in a barn on the Tom Anderson plantation in the lower bottoms.”<sup>28</sup> In one of the last ethnic identifications identified in these reports, in 1915 a Swedish man was identified simply by ethnicity and employment; “a Swedish boatman left to cover the building,”<sup>29</sup> in a context giving enough detail to suggest that his name must have been available. In a less well-defined reference to ethnicity, the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, whose reporting was otherwise mostly sympathetic, stated that deputies in Missouri “had to place foreign-born householders under arrest to compel them to seek safety by abandoning their places,”<sup>30</sup> a direct criticism of the judgment of local immigrants.

However, even while direct blunt references to ethnicity began to vanish in 1915, indirect references remained constant. The story of J. F. Florian, sometimes spelled Florain, during the 1921 flood was clearly meant to be a light-hearted, comic story about a man with an apparently Italian surname. During the flood in San Antonio, he reportedly abandoned his car at the intersection of St. Mary’s and Romana streets to take refuge on the roof of a building where he encountered a “huge lion, which he says, had

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<sup>27</sup> “High Water in the Territory,” *Dallas Morning News*, April 10, 1900, p. 5.

<sup>28</sup> “Worse Than Was Reported,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 9, 1899, p. 4.

<sup>29</sup> The owner of the building in this story was named, as were several other men with either their town or property identified, but not the daughter of one of the men, suggesting the conclusion that the boatman’s name must have been available but omitted. One man was identified only by (Irish) last name, and three African Americans and a white man were unnamed, but appeared to be unknown. “Town of Anahuac Reported Destroyed,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, August 20, 1915, p. 5 and “Death List Increasing,” *San Antonio Express*, August 20, 1915, p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> The St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* was exceptional in 1915 in that their reporting identified local individual victims by name, age, race, and gender, although there was a second unflattering reference to both ethnicity and race. For more detail, see the description of their treatment of victims later in this chapter as well as the story in the next chapter on Edward Rauscher’s tavern. “Many Reluctant to Leave,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, August 23, 1915, p. 1.

escaped from the Breckenridge Park zoo.”<sup>31</sup> Fleeing the lion, he jumped off the roof into the flood waters, washed by the current a few hundred feet away to a tree which he climbed to find “a large black bear, the property of the Scottish Rite Cathedral.”<sup>32</sup> This report started with what was apparently a current joke based on a similar story, suggesting that the following story might not be entirely credible. In fact, details of the story were inconsistent with accounts of the disaster, especially accounts describing the storm as so severe by Friday night that people were unable to leave their homes before the flood waters struck. It seems very unlikely someone was out driving at that hour in that weather, at least not without an urgent explanation that should have been important enough to mention in the story. The geographic details fit well enough, but whether this was a story told to the paper by a real person named Florian, or one made up entirely to fit a stereotype and to connect with a crude slapstick premise, the descriptions of Florian never suggested courage or good judgment. They were worded to produce a laugh at his expense and make him look like a clown.

### **The Borderlands of Mexican Identity**

Mexicans have perhaps the most diverse representations in newspaper reports. In June 1899, the Dallas *Morning News* reported flooding on the San Saba River southeast of San Angelo, Texas, in the town of Menardville (now Menard). The names of property

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<sup>31</sup> “Flees from Flood Meets Lion Upon Roof of Building,” *The Brownwood Bulletin*, September 15, 1921, p. 1.

<sup>32</sup> “Flees from Flood Meets Lion Upon Roof of Building,” *The Brownwood Bulletin*, September 15, 1921, p. 1.

owners whose structures were badly damaged or destroyed were listed when available, and when not, “the others were rent houses, belonging to parties whose names are just now unobtainable.”<sup>33</sup> In fact, it is important to note that the renters who presumably lost all of their property and possibly livestock were not named. The only fatality in this portion of flooding also remained unnamed: “A Mexican was drowned and that, so far as is known, comprises the total of the lives lost by the flood.”<sup>34</sup> A second report two days later continued to leave renters and the Mexican drowning victim unnamed. From the same flood, a Louis T. Beerland was alerted to the rise of the Colorado River when he was “awakened about 11 o’clock last Tuesday night by a Mexican, who worked on my place and lived in one of the bottom fields with his family, rushing into my room with his wife and two children clinging to him. The frightened Mexican told me the river had risen so suddenly that he and his family had barely time to save their lives by running to higher ground.”<sup>35</sup> Clearly Beerland knew the name of this man and family, whose warning may have saved his own life, yet if the correspondent quoted him exactly as it appeared, he did not think it relevant to name him. More than that, he described them in a mildly derogatory manner, using words projecting an unheroic, even childish image: “clinging” and “frightened.”

The geographical area of the dispersed flooding in 1904 appeared to include the Rio Grande River and portions of New Mexico, Colorado, and at least two states in Mexico. The victims were primarily Mexican, though the reports rarely mentioned

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<sup>33</sup> “Colorado River Booming,” *Dallas Morning News*, June 9, 1899, p. 1.

<sup>34</sup> “Colorado River Booming,” *Dallas Morning News*, June 9, 1899, p. 1.

<sup>35</sup> “Rescued from Death,” *Dallas Morning News*, June 11, 1899, p. 1.

individual victims or referred to these individual victims as Mexican. Instead, the towns and districts that flooded were described as Mexican. In 119 collected newspaper reports related to this disaster, 33 of them referred to or implied Mexican nationality, over twenty-five percent of the reports. These report also often had class overtones which appeared more important in this instance than race or ethnicity.<sup>36</sup>

In one exception to the lack of Mexican individuality, named or unnamed, in this weather-related disaster, the Deming *Graphic* (New Mexico) ran a story about an unnamed Mexican fruit peddler's wagon which was struck by lightning near Roswell early in this weather event, killing the peddler's son.<sup>37</sup> More typical was an early, rather generalized report in the Palestine *Daily Herald*: "The flood is said to have swept away whole settlements of houses occupied by Mexicans between Presidio del Norte and Bosquillas."<sup>38</sup> Other reports used wording that was less neutral and critical based on class differences. A Monterey, Mexico report described "considerable damage to crops and to the badly constructed shacks of the poorer classes has been done."<sup>39</sup> An Eagle Pass correspondent found "much damage has been done by the washing away of innumerable shacks of the poorer classes,"<sup>40</sup> creating a very specific image of carelessly

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<sup>36</sup> This flood also appears to represent a transition from an uneasy but relatively stable social and economic system based on ranching to crop farming by immigrants from other areas of the United States who would destabilize the situation, leading to Mexican migration and immigration and outbreaks of violence. Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans*, 106–109, 114–133.

<sup>37</sup> This flooding appeared to be caused by prolonged heavy rain, and as Roswell, New Mexico, flooded on September 29, 1904, then again on October 9, 1904, this appears related. Untitled article, *Deming Graphic*, September 7, 1904, p. 3 and "Roswell Swept by Another Flood," *Brownsville Daily Herald*, October 13, 1904, p. 1.

<sup>38</sup> "Rio Grande Rages," *Palestine Daily Herald*, September 13, 1904, p. 2.

<sup>39</sup> The spelling of Monterey used here is that used in the dateline of the article. "Damaged by Rain," *Dallas Morning News*, September 16, 1904, p. 1.

<sup>40</sup> "Rain has Ceased," *Dallas Morning News*, September 17, 1904, p. 2.

constructed shelters and hordes of nameless people who lacked the qualities to be properly successful. The same correspondent described homes lost near Laredo as “huts,” then later in the same article stated that someone from Rio Grande City reported “many small huts along the edge of town had been washed away.”<sup>41</sup> Rio Grande City’s correspondent later claimed that “two or three adobe shacks were washed away.”<sup>42</sup> In one of the few similar word usages about class in 1899, the *New York Times* reported that a town that was swept away by the Rio Grande “had a population of several hundred Mexicans of the poorer class. Their houses were jackal adobe structures, which quickly melted away when the high water struck them.”<sup>43</sup>

The Brownsville *Daily Herald*, however, reported on losses in 1904 in far more neutral words. In Camargo, Mexico, “many families were compelled to leave their homes for high ground,” while the paper reported that in Garcias that “the whole place was flooded and all the inhabitants are camped on the foothills. The river carried away all the corn stacked in yards and many houses.”<sup>44</sup> In both of these references, the inhabitants were described with the same respect as might be expected for white non-poor victims. Reports from the interior of Mexico in English-language newspapers were sparse, but the Palestine *Daily Herald* reported that in central Chihuahua, a mining town

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<sup>41</sup> “Rain has Ceased,” *Dallas Morning News*, September 17, 1904, p. 2.

<sup>42</sup> “Recent Flood at Camargo,” *Brownsville Daily Herald*, October 3, 1904, p. 1.

<sup>43</sup> The *New York Times* report on this is a bit confused. The “old Town of Carrizo, the county seat of Zapak County” appears to refer to an old adobe section of Zapata in Zapata County. Jackal is a misspelling of “jacale.” “The Rio Grande is Rising,” *New York Times*, June 23, 1899, p. 1.

<sup>44</sup> Garcias appears to be the town now called Garciasville in Starr County. “Rio Grande Fifteen Miles Wide,” *Brownsville Daily Herald*, September 22, 1904, p.4.

called Cusihuriachco was destroyed; “every house was swept away, but no lives lost,”<sup>45</sup> again using the word “house” rather than a less flattering, class-based term to imply a deficient, substandard or childish domicile.

In 1900, there are relatively few references to Mexicans, primarily a single repeated report of those who appeared to have been unnamed farm laborers and mentioned in conjunction with equally nameless African Americans.<sup>46</sup> The identification of someone as Mexican did occur in conflation with the single use of the derogatory term “darkies” in 1899, in a context that implied that these particular victims may all have been suspect migrant workers.<sup>47</sup> A significant problem that Foley also addressed in *The White Scourge* was that records rarely indicate citizenship status. The word “Mexican” is used indiscriminately for both Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans.<sup>48</sup> By focusing solely on rural cotton farm laborers, however, Foley missed class divisions that may have implied assumed citizenship status.

The flooding in 1921 in which more than half of the drowning victims were Mexican produced a fascinating division between urban and rural Mexicans in their treatment in newspaper reports, a division that was not extended to African Americans. This appeared to have been related to class perceptions. The Mexican district of San

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<sup>45</sup> This town no longer appears on the map, but while it is referred to at least once as a camp in the article, the newspaper also mentions houses there. The article states that news took two weeks to reach Chihuahua itself by ore train which was held up by high water, suggesting many other communities without modern communication or transportation ties to the outside world may never have reported flood losses. Although the article was run on September 26, 1904, the flood was at least two weeks earlier, fitting in with the early, severe flooding on the Rio Grande River. “Mining Town in Mexico has been Utterly Destroyed,” *Palestine Daily Herald*, September 26, 1904, p. 5.

<sup>46</sup> “Many Lives are Lost,” *Bryan Morning Eagle*, April 10, 1900, p. 1, and “Dozen Persons are Drowned,” *Atlanta Constitution*, Apr 10, 1900, p. 3.

<sup>47</sup> “Timely Warning was Given,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 6, 1899, p. 2.

<sup>48</sup> Foley, *The White Scourge*, 8.

Antonio, along Olmos, Alazan, and San Pedro creeks, as well as the San Antonio River, was hit by flash flooding along those streams during the night when residents were sleeping.<sup>49</sup> The severe storm that caused the flood started after dark and was so heavy that residents were unable to leave their homes.<sup>50</sup> “While torrents of rain were still falling in the streets of San Antonio and the residents, unable to get out because of the downpour, went early to bed, a roar was heard, subdued but ominous as the flood waters broke upon the town.”<sup>51</sup>

Newspapers found it important to describe the urban victims as blameless in this disaster, as well as applying language that suggested bravery and resilience in the face of tragedy. In fact, heroism was a major theme of reporting, but mostly for the San Antonio rescuers: “Countless acts of heroism are current as civilians and soldiers, forgetful of personal safety, braved the current and floating debris to carry men, women and children to places of safety. Thousands of persons along the river were rescued before daybreak by men who worked the long hours often neck deep in water, risking their lives almost every minute at that time to save others.”<sup>52</sup> In this instance, the victims are referred to as “men, women and children” and as “persons,” rather than as “Mexicans.”<sup>53</sup> However, when speaking of the homeless, the language in the newspapers almost universally refers to them as “Mexicans.” The otherwise sympathetic reporting in the *Abilene Daily*

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<sup>49</sup> It is unclear exactly when the flash floods hit, but presumably around or before midnight: “Troops under Colonel Porter opened offices in the federal building shortly after (sic) midnight and are now patrolling the city,” *Breckenridge Daily American*, September 10, 1921, p. 1.

<sup>50</sup> “Mexicans Suffer Most,” *The Brownwood Bulletin*, September 10, 1921, p. 1; “Covered Wide Area,” *Abilene Daily Reporter*, September 11, 1921, p. 1; and “Scenes of Desolation,” *Abilene Daily Reporter*, September 11, 1921, p. 1.

<sup>51</sup> “Scenes of Desolation,” *Abilene Daily Reporter*, September 11, 1921, p. 1.

<sup>52</sup> “Covered Wide Area,” *Abilene Daily Reporter*, September 11, 1921, p. 1.

<sup>53</sup> “Covered Wide Area,” *Abilene Daily Reporter*, September 11, 1921, p. 1.



*Reporter* mentions “thousands of Mexicans are homeless,” language exactly repeated in the Dallas *Morning News* and the New York *Times*.<sup>54</sup>

Unquestionably the greatest difference in the reporting of this disaster from earlier disaster reporting is how the urban victims were identified. Not just the language used to describe victims as “men, women, and children” or as “persons”<sup>55</sup> was changed, but also whether and how a victim was named or not. In San Antonio, when individual victims including children were identifiable, they were named, such as “Estella Hernandez, five years old.”<sup>56</sup> Before this disaster, names were rarely included even for white children. Women were often granted honorifics such as “Mrs. Ramon De Sepeda,”<sup>57</sup> something previously almost exclusively reserved for non-ethnic white women. Notably, newspapers had a great deal of difficulty with the spelling of these names nor were they consistent about honorifics; another report identifies the same woman as Juanita Ramon de Zepeda.<sup>58</sup> Ages were provided for children and a few young or elderly adults, with a report in the Dallas *Morning News* extended that to almost all victims.<sup>59</sup> But the word Mexican was not directly applied to any of the urban victims, while race was specifically attached to the few African-Americans who were named in

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<sup>54</sup> “Covered Wide Area,” *Abilene Daily Reporter*, September 11, 1921, p. 1; “Thousands are Homeless, Dallas *Morning News*,” September 11, 1921, p. 2; and “Houses Piled on One Another,” *New York Times*, September 11, 1921, p. 1.

<sup>55</sup> “Covered Wide Area,” *Abilene Daily Reporter*, September 11, 1921, p. 1.

<sup>56</sup> “The Dead,” *Abilene Daily Reporter*, September 11, 1921, p. 1.

<sup>57</sup> “The Dead,” *Abilene Daily Reporter*, September 11, 1921, p. 1.

<sup>58</sup> “Dead and Missing in San Antonio Flood,” *Dallas Morning News*, September 12, 1921, p. 3.

<sup>59</sup> “The Dead,” *Abilene Daily Reporter*, September 11, 1921, p. 1; “Entire City Stunned,” *Dallas Morning News*, September 11, 1921, p. 2; and “Dead and Missing in San Antonio Flood,” *Dallas Morning News*, September 12, 1921, p. 3.

disaster reporting. Only when a victim was unidentified was Mexican race mentioned, such as “Unidentified Mexican woman (Dead at Reibe Undertaking Company)”<sup>60</sup>

Mexican victims in rural areas were given a distinctly negative treatment compared to the relative respect granted those in San Antonio. Mexican (and African-American) victims were presumably farm workers and identified generically, such as “reports from Taylor that forty Mexicans were drowned.”<sup>61</sup> The *Brownwood Bulletin* proclaimed in a headline that “Practically All of Victims of Flooded Streams are Mexicans.”<sup>62</sup> While early in the flood, this newspaper reported the names of San Antonio victims, two days later an article in the *Brownwood* newspaper provided the information that “a majority of the drowned and missing are Mexicans who were living in the lowlands of the San Gabriel, Brazos, Colorado and Little rivers and their tributaries”<sup>63</sup> then added a list of location and number of dead with no names provided. However rural white victims, sometimes differentiated as “Americans,” continue to be provided with at least a surname.<sup>64</sup> In a single mention of the flooding in South Texas which extended across the Rio Grande River, it was “bankful, due to heavy precipitation in the Monterrey section. The high waters broke through the city levee at Matamoros,

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<sup>60</sup> “Entire City Stunned,” *Dallas Morning News*, September 11, 1921, p. 2.

<sup>61</sup> “Flood Waters are Receding Near Houston,” *The Brownwood Bulletin*, September 12, 1921, p. 1 and “South Texas Hard Hit by Rainstorm,” *Abilene Daily Reporter*, September 12, 1921, p. 1.

<sup>62</sup> “Practically All of Victims of Flooded Streams are Mexicans,” *The Brownwood Bulletin*, September 13, 1921, p. 1.

<sup>63</sup> “Practically All of Victims of Flooded Streams are Mexicans,” *The Brownwood Bulletin*, September 13, 1921, p. 1.

<sup>64</sup> “Along San Gabriel,” *The Brownwood Bulletin*, September 13, 1921, p. 1.

Mexico, opposite Brownsville early today and flooded a large section of the town.”<sup>65</sup> No account was given of these flood victims beyond that statement.

Class also played an important role in the ways in which those with Spanish surnames were reported. The substantially different treatment of urban Mexicans from rural Mexicans during the 1921 disaster suggested that the nature of employment and the presumed permanence of their residency strongly implied a class distinction to the favor of urban Mexicans over rural Mexicans. One of the major losses during the 1915 hurricane was the United Fruit liner *Marowijne*, which was lost in the Gulf of Mexico on the way to New Orleans, Louisiana, from Belize in British Honduras. Approximately ninety people were on board. One of those passengers, Arturo Belgrano, an Argentinian diplomat, was named alongside the prominent white American passengers.<sup>66</sup> This same hurricane caused the delay of the *Sacramento*, whose prominent passengers included the Brazilian ambassador to Mexico, Jose M. Cardoso de Oliveira who was travelling to New Orleans, Louisiana, and Dr. Juan de Ortega, a Guatemalan minister to Mexico who had been expelled by Mexican revolutionary Venustiano Carranza, both given the courtesies of American diplomats.<sup>67</sup> The 1915 hurricane, which brushed the western Florida coast before striking Galveston, had one victim near Tampa, Florida, Galarmino

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<sup>65</sup> The lack of reporting on this Matamoros flooding, as well as the convenient levee break that spared Brownsville suggests the possibility that the levee break may not have been accidental. Levee sabotage (dynamiting) was a real possibility to protect one area over another, and an analysis of Mexican newspapers could be fruitful. “South Texas Hard Hit by Rainstorm,” *Abilene Daily Reporter*, September 12, 1921, p. 1 and Barry, *Rising Tide*, 192.

<sup>66</sup> “Steamer with 93 Aboard is Missing,” *Dallas Morning News*, August 21, 1915, p. 2 and “Gulf Being Scoured for Missing Steamer,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, August 23, 1915, p. 2.

<sup>67</sup> “Rough Sea Delays Cardoso’s Arrival,” *Dallas Morning News*, August 16, 1915, p. 2.

Garcia who was described as a Spanish cigar maker.<sup>68</sup> The single thing these Latin-American victims had in common was their presumed respectability as non-migrants and non-farm laborers.

One element of reporting about Mexicans during weather-related natural disasters was the odd combination of admiration for their daring, usually reserved for middle-class white masculinity, with others that depicted them as frightened children, such as Beerland's description of his Mexican employees, glossing over the fact that he would have had no warning without them. Other conflicting descriptions of Mexicans project an image of them as criminal but brave.<sup>69</sup> Travelers from Brownsville to Corpus Christi in 1904 reported that in order to cross the Arroyo Colorado during the flood, they "employed some Mexicans to take them across the arroyo in a skiff, the arroyo being a raging torrent sixty feet up, and narrowly escaped being carried away by the current."<sup>70</sup> In another, manual laborers on a branch of the National Railroad of Mexico "had thrilling experiences. The troughs which were used for feeding the horses out of were pressed into use for canoes and in this manner the men escaped from the flood."<sup>71</sup> Perhaps reflecting the international situation during World War I and the instability on the United States and Mexican border, there were bandit scares in 1915, including rumors of planned action against them, stating "no attack is anticipated now save those that may be made by Mexicans coming from their side of the river. Whenever that

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<sup>68</sup> "Tropic Storm Moves Toward Gulf Coast," *The Atlanta Constitution*, August 16, 1915, 5.

<sup>69</sup> "Rescued from Death," *Dallas Morning News*, June 11, 1899, p. 1.

<sup>70</sup> "Braves Arroyo Colorado Flood," *Brownsville Daily Herald*, September 30, 1904, p. 1.

<sup>71</sup> "Recent Flood at Camargo," *Brownsville Daily Herald*, October 3, 1904, p. 1.

becomes so serious, if it ever does, that actual war occurs, Mexican uprisings may be expected in all this part of Texas.”<sup>72</sup>

Lazaro Amador was an example of the brave but criminal Mexican in newspaper reporting and one of the rare examples before 1921 in which a Mexican was named. When a rescue boat capsized during that flood, “Policeman Joe Carlisle remembered the tales he had heard of Amador’s prowess as a swimmer and sent an automobile to the city jail, where the Mexican was locked up.”<sup>73</sup> Amador was described as a hero for rescuing five people by swimming out to them with lines, owing “their lives to his bravery and ability as a swimmer.”<sup>74</sup> He was then attributed the quality of selflessness when the correspondent continued to include the information that when “offered a purse, which had been collected for him last night, the Mexican shook his head and smiled.”<sup>75</sup> This last may have been a specific and not-so-subtle criticism of poorer laborers who tried to use the desperate need for labor during and after natural disasters to improve their own wages.

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<sup>72</sup> “‘Bandit Hunt’ Rumored,” *Dallas Morning News*, August 19, 1915, p. 3.

<sup>73</sup> “Flood on Brazos Sets New Record; Rescuers are Busy,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, December 4, 1913, p. 3.

<sup>74</sup> “Flood on Brazos Sets New Record; Rescuers are Busy,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, December 4, 1913, p. 3.

<sup>75</sup> “Flood on Brazos Sets New Record; Rescuers are Busy,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, December 4, 1913, p. 3.

## African-American Identity in Transition

The most obviously racialized identifications in newspaper reporting were those of African Americans. African-American flood victims were most often identified in newspaper reports by race only, with “negro” being the most common term, but with some references to “colored” or “black” in the earliest disasters, and a single reference to “darkies” in the earliest weather-related disaster in 1899. They were rarely identified in newspaper reports by name, and, when they were identified, the context often suggests that the correspondent intended either criticism or blame of the African American who is named, or in rare instances, giving tribute to an individual’s actions. When they were named, these descriptions often described victims in terms such as “it is thought a negro boy of Marcus Tate’s is also drowned and two Mexicans are missing”<sup>76</sup> although the context suggested the African American was an adult rather than a child. In other descriptions, African Americans were portrayed in very stereotypical terms that usually portray them as childlike and dependent.<sup>77</sup>

In 1900, out of the thirty-three articles identified as explicitly referencing race or ethnicity, African Americans were mentioned at least once in twenty-seven articles.<sup>78</sup>

“Negro” or “negroes” was the specific term used in at least eighteen of these articles.

“Colored” was the identification used at least ten times. “Black” was the racial indicator

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<sup>76</sup> “Dozen Persons are Drowned,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, April 10, 1900, p. 3.

<sup>77</sup> “Wharton Still Under Water,” *Houston Daily Post*, April 15, 1900, p. 6.

<sup>78</sup> The 1900 weather-related disaster was chosen over the 1899 flood for this statistic because it covered a broader geographic area and a more diverse population of victims; the 1899 flood offers a much higher percentage of racial references, but the victims were also almost entirely African Americans.

used once, in association with white, in a context which implied class and labor problems: “many tenants, white and black, have become dissatisfied and are preparing to leave that portion of the prairies.”<sup>79</sup> The full name of a victim was only rarely used; in a few cases, a surname or first name is used, such as “old Dan.”<sup>80</sup>

Victims identified as “colored” in 1900 were generally more likely to be named in some fashion—almost half of the time—and “colored” was the term used for one victim who may have owned his own farm.<sup>81</sup> Most of the other uses of “colored” referred to a non-farm laborer.<sup>82</sup> In 1899, a class division between African Americans was even more strongly defined by the use of the word “colored.” This flood presented an almost unique mention of an African-American victim described in language that indicated a community leader in the Brookshire area by a Texas newspaper; “the first victim of the flood was Smith Blackburn, a prominent and influential colored planter, who lost his life while attempting to get some of his more valuable live stock from his place in the Ross bottoms.”<sup>83</sup> This was the only disaster evaluated in which newspapers described an African American in any terms that suggested a community leader and property owner.

In these early floods, African Americans were relatively likely to be identified as active rescue workers. In an early stage of the 1899 flood, a town of about 800 located 30 miles from Del Rio, called Brackett, Texas, was under water and the population was

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<sup>79</sup> “Heavy Rainfall at Houston,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, April 11, 1900, p. 2.

<sup>80</sup> “Death Rides the Torrent,” *Dallas Morning News*, April 8, 1900, p. 1.

<sup>81</sup> “Waters Now are Falling,” *Houston Daily Post*, April 15, 1900, p. 6.

<sup>82</sup> “Waters Now are Falling,” *Houston Daily Post*, April 15, 1900, p. 6.

<sup>83</sup> Untitled article, *Houston Daily Post*, July 6, 1899, p. 1.

being evacuated to nearby Fort Clark which was on a hill. The population of the town was not identified, but much of the rescue work was performed “by the troops of negro cavalry at Fort Clark...one of the dead being a colored soldier.”<sup>84</sup> A rescue party organized in Houston a few weeks later to assist in the Brookshire area included eleven white men and nine African-American men, each named individually and identified as “colored,” accompanied by two unnamed Houston *Daily Post* artists and a correspondent.<sup>85</sup> During the two columns devoted to describing this party’s rescue efforts, in an unusual twist clearly meant to protect the reputation of one of the white men, an African-American man was named while the white man sharing his boat was not; “The oars of the small skiff were manned by Robert Thompson, colored, a native Brookshire boy who has been working in Houston, and by one of the white men, who demonstrated before the night was over that he was extremely willing to work, but that he was not well up in the art of handling a boat.”<sup>86</sup> Thompson was named despite the anonymity of the white man, but the word “boy” was still applied to Thompson while “man” was used for the white person.

However, the use of the term “colored” did not always indicate that the individuals or group of people discussed were more prosperous or respectable; in the same 1899 flood, Colonel D. C. Giddings in Brenham, Texas, was reported to have stated, “It would not be a good idea to inculcate among the colored people that they are to be supported in idleness. They should thoroughly understand that the supplies sent

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<sup>84</sup> “Cloudbursts in Texas,” *New York Times*, June 16, 1899, p. 1.

<sup>85</sup> Untitled article, *Houston Daily Post*, July 6, 1899, p. 2.

<sup>86</sup> Untitled article, *Houston Daily Post*, July 6, 1899, p. 2.



them are for temporary relief and until work can be furnished.”<sup>87</sup> The real significance was that the word “negro” appeared to have been used primarily for farm laborers and poor tenant farmers and was absent from descriptions of those who were clearly more respectable. A *New York Times* report in 1899 mentioned “30,000 or more destitute negroes,” and added that “many of them were prosperous planters before the flood came. Ever since the war they had been accumulating their modest fortunes, and to have all swept away in a few hours is such a shock that they are stunned.”<sup>88</sup> African-American planters reduced to destitution were transformed into “negroes.” The single use of the term “darkies” also occurred during the 1899 flood, which in the context of the other reporting appeared derogatory and suggested unknown migrants; “three darkies and a Mexican were taken from a pecan tree in the bottoms half-starved and shivering.”<sup>89</sup>

In 1899 and 1900, then, there were four basic depictions used in natural disaster newspaper reporting as markers for African Americans: “colored,” “negro,” “black,” and “darkie.” The term “black” only appeared in connection to “white,” and “darkies” in association with “Mexican” and possibly denoted migrants. The identification “black” reappeared one more time, in 1913, in an almost identical context, “white and black.”<sup>90</sup> The use of the racial description “colored” fell off dramatically after 1900. In 1915 during what was primarily a “white” weather disaster, at least thirty-six articles were located that use the term “negro” while none use the words “colored” or “black,” nor were those words used in any article examined for the 1921 disaster. Over these two

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<sup>87</sup> “Relief for the Sufferers,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 6, 1899, p. 2.

<sup>88</sup> “Help for Texas Victims,” *New York Times*, July 8, 1899, p. 2.

<sup>89</sup> “Timely Warning was Given,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 6, 1899, p. 2.

<sup>90</sup> “In Cotton Palace Park,” *Dallas Morning News*, December 5, 1913, p. 2.

decades, racial identification of African Americans transitioned from a language applying four different terms that inconsistently indicated class and social divisions to a homogenized use of the term, “negro,” the same two decades during which the development of Jim Crow laws largely disempowered even the most prosperous African Americans.

Murali Balaji pointed out in a study of the recent Haitian earthquake that the media’s coverage of disaster encouraged “the racialization of pity and the privileging of a white view of the dark world as dysfunctional, childlike and dependent.”<sup>91</sup> Direct and implied criticism of African Americans, often through the application of ideas of scientific racism, was quite common throughout this time period.<sup>92</sup> African-American victims in 1900 were described condescendingly; “the negro refugees housed in the cotton gins are happy and content and view the loss of their property with the proverbial philosophy of their race. The whole negro settlement beyond the depot is completely submerged and deserted.”<sup>93</sup> African Americans could apparently be named to support the idea that they lacked the proper moral sense. John Simpson’s name was recorded to criticize him for saving a hog ahead of his family, forgetting “for the time being that he had a wife and children,” who were “carried to places of safety,”<sup>94</sup> presumably by others. A report from “Hearne that seven negroes had drowned as they tried to make their way

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<sup>91</sup> Murali Balaji, “Racializing Pity: The Haiti Earthquake and the Plight of ‘Others,’” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 28, no. 1 (Mar., 2011): 51.

<sup>92</sup> Scientific racism is explored in depth in a number of works; for disaster purposes, Marian Moser Jones provides a useful contextual definition: “pervasive ideologies of difference that led to cruel inequalities in state and societal responses to disasters.” Marian Moser Jones, “Race, Class and Gender Disparities in Clara Barton’s Late Nineteenth-Century Disaster Relief,” *Environment and History* 17, no. 1 (Feb. 2011), 107.

<sup>93</sup> “Wharton Still Under Water,” *Houston Daily Post*, April 15, 1900, p. 6.

<sup>94</sup> “First Train out of Waco,” *Dallas Morning News*, December 5, 1913, 2.

from the bottoms,” was colored by criticism later in the same article that “if the people in the lowlands of the Brazos and Colorado rivers heed warnings sent out to them late yesterday, they will be in no danger,” hinting that these African-American farm laborers failed to act on warnings in time.<sup>95</sup>

The report from Brookshire, Texas, in mid-April 1900 suggested that African Americans were gullible and easily excited, childlike. “It is not thought that there is any danger of an overflow, but negroes are very much excited from fake reports, most of them having moved out of the bottoms, and it will take some time to get them back to work again.”<sup>96</sup> Yet consider the situation during severe flooding in the Brookshire area in early July 1899, less than nine months earlier; “It is estimated that in the bottoms in this vicinity there are at least two thousand people, mostly negroes, who must take their turn in being brought to the highlands. The sounds of the distant voices, guns and horns of these desperately unfortunate people ring in one's ears like death knells and unless conditions change for the better in the immediate future their ultimate fate is fearful to contemplate.”<sup>97</sup> This was the same group criticized in 1899 for supposedly failing to heed warnings of rising flood waters.<sup>98</sup>

In 1915 a report by Archie McDuffie of Waxahatchie, Texas, was repeated in newspapers across the country, describing African-American refugees on the lower floors of Galveston railroad terminal; “when the storm was at its height, hundreds of negroes on the lower floors of the building sang for hours the song, ‘Old-Time

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<sup>95</sup> “South Texas Hard Hit by Rainstorm,” *Abilene Daily Reporter*, September 12, 1921, p. 1.

<sup>96</sup> “Negroes are Fleeing,” *Dallas Morning News*, April 11, 1900, p. 2.

<sup>97</sup> Untitled article, *Houston Daily Post*, July 6, 1899, p. 1–2.

<sup>98</sup> “South Texas Hard Hit by Rainstorm,” *Abilene Daily Reporter*, September 12, 1921, p. 1.

Religion.”<sup>99</sup> In addition to the stereotypical description of African-Americans as somewhat simple, these articles subtly mentioned that “5,000 persons” were on the upper floors of the terminal, separating “persons” from “negroes” linguistically, as well as implying strongly that African Americans were segregated to the more dangerous lower floors.<sup>100</sup> This predictable description of singing was in direct contrast to admiration of the Hotel Galvez where “during the height of the storm the band played to keep up the spirits of the people marooned there.”<sup>101</sup> The stock image of African Americans singing and praying while in danger was also seen in the report that, “tonight at Horse Shoe Bend above the roaring of the river could be heard the singing and praying of fifty negroes facing death in a rocking gin house on an island a mile and a half out.”<sup>102</sup> The same article later painted an image of the African Americans as too unintelligent to appreciate the dangers they had survived; “many of the rescued negroes today appeared unconcerned over their adventures. They grouped around campfires, laughing and recounting anecdotes of the flood, how ‘Wash and Sam swum like a alligator,’ or ‘how Susan clung to a bit of finery when she had a chance for life.’”<sup>103</sup> Dr. W. H. Oliver in 1899 reported that at John Astin’s near Mudville, Texas, “the negroes

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<sup>99</sup> “Describe Events in Galveston,” *Dallas Morning News*, August 20, 1915, p. 2; “5,000 in Galveston Station,” *New York Times*, August 20, 1915, p. 5; and “Several Thousand in Hotel,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, August 20, 1915, p. 5.

<sup>100</sup> “Describe Events in Galveston,” *Dallas Morning News*, August 20, 1915, p. 2; “5,000 in Galveston Station,” *New York Times*, August 20, 1915, p. 5; and “Several Thousand in Hotel,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, August 20, 1915, p. 5.

<sup>101</sup> “Several Thousand in Hotel,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, August 20, 1915, p. 5.

<sup>102</sup> “Negroes Singing and Praying,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, December 8, 1913, p. 10.

<sup>103</sup> “Negroes Singing and Praying,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, December 8, 1913, p. 10.

were congregated at the gin and enjoying life to fullest extent the circumstances would admit.”<sup>104</sup>

Incidents when their deaths were included with losses of livestock were sobering indications of the status of African Americans. The town of Calvert reported that “several negroes and a number of horses, mules, and cows have been reported drowned.”<sup>105</sup> Repeatedly correspondents also stated a strong belief that victims, particularly African Americans, would not work in the aftermath of the disaster if given any sort of charity.<sup>106</sup> This was not an uncommon description of African-American victims and similar treatments could be seen in sensationalized reports from other natural disasters from this period such as the 1906 San Francisco earthquake.

In fact, Charles Morris’s book in the aftermath of that disaster, *The San Francisco Calamity by Earth and Fire*, applied very similar linguistic descriptions to the Chinese, setting the tone for this in his introduction by stating that San Francisco “may claim the unenviable honor of possessing the largest population of Chinese outside of China itself, the colony numbering of 20,000.”<sup>107</sup> Chinatown was described in distinctly criminal terms; “when the earthquake had passed this den of squalor and infamy was no more...as for the people of Chinatown, however, no one knows or will ever know the extent of the dread fate that overcame them, for no one knows the secrets of that dark abode of infamy and crime, whose inhabitants burrowed underground like so many ants;

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<sup>104</sup> “The Rivers,” Bryan *Morning Eagle*, July 4, 1899, p. 1.

<sup>105</sup> “Negroes Reported Dead,” Dallas *Morning News*, December 5, 1913, p. 1.

<sup>106</sup> “Waco Raises \$7,000 for Flood Victims,” Dallas *Morning News*, December 6, 1913, p. 6.

<sup>107</sup> Charles Morris, *The San Francisco Calamity by Earth and Fire* (Philadelphia: J.C. Winston Co., 1906; facsimile of the first edition, with an introduction. Secausus, N. J.: Citadel Press, 1986), 20.

and hid their secrets deep in the earth.”<sup>108</sup> Individual Chinese victims are described in negative language almost identical to that used about Mexicans and African Americans; “they were trembling, pitifully scared and willing to stop wherever the soldiers placed them.”<sup>109</sup> Here was Balaji’s “dark world as dysfunctional, childlike and dependent.”<sup>110</sup> Other descriptions continued that theme with Chinese dependents such as “Charlie” who were described as faithful family servants who somehow produced shelter, bedding, and food for his employers, with a nod to the possibility he had done so criminally because he was caring for an upper-class white family.<sup>111</sup>

African Americans acting heroically after 1899 were reluctantly mentioned, if at all, in most newspaper reporting. If they appeared in rescue and relief work, they were frequently described as laboring under the orders of white men to restore rail service or reinforce levees. This is consistent with Barry’s and Daniel’s evidence on the 1927 flood, as well David Welky’s work on a later flood in *The Thousand-Year Flood: The Ohio-Mississippi Disaster of 1937*.<sup>112</sup> Often, the victims were named if white while the rescuers, if African American, were not. The most extreme example of this is the unknown fate of several African Americans in 1913 whose boat overturned while trying to bring a body across Nolan Creek; yet, a dog who located the body was featured in a

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<sup>108</sup> Charles Morris, *The San Francisco Calamity by Earth and Fire* (Philadelphia: J.C. Winston Co., 1906), 70.

<sup>109</sup> Charles Morris, *The San Francisco Calamity by Earth and Fire* (Philadelphia: J.C. Winston Co., 1906), 75.

<sup>110</sup> Balaji, “Racializing Pity,” 51.

<sup>111</sup> Charles Morris, *The San Francisco Calamity by Earth and Fire* (Philadelphia: J.C. Winston Co., 1906), 131–132.

<sup>112</sup> David Welky, *The Thousand-Year Flood: The Ohio–Mississippi Disaster of 1937* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

newspaper photograph.<sup>113</sup> In other instances, African-American men who drowned while trying to rescue their families were sometimes named and given a certain amount of respect, such as Anthony Coleman.<sup>114</sup> Perhaps the most heroic but least known rescue work during any of these floods was that of two African Americans, Ed McQuinn and James Hickey, who worked with two different men over the course of several days in a homemade boat near Waco to rescue between seventy and one hundred people. They were mentioned in two newspaper articles for a total of about twenty-five lines of reporting on their rescue work. One of these paragraphs was prefaced by much more extended descriptions of looters who were implied to be African Americans, so that the report subtly associated African-American looters and rescuers in the same story.<sup>115</sup> By comparison, an unnamed (possibly apocryphal) young white boy who prevented other boys from shooting a rabbit stranded by the flood received fifty-nine lines and his own article in the Dallas newspaper on the same day that the first paragraph about McQuinn and Hickey—less than six lines—was included.<sup>116</sup>

The 1915 hurricane continued as a tropical storm, moving north through the Midwest, passing over St. Louis, Missouri, and on to Chicago, Illinois, creating fairly

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<sup>113</sup> “5 Drown in Belton; 6 Others Missing,” *Dallas Morning News*, December 3, 1913, 1–2; “Dog Which Assisted in Recovery of Woman’s Body from Belton Flood,” *Dallas Morning News*, December 14, 1913, 4; “All Died in Trees,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, December 9, 1913, p. 1.

<sup>114</sup> “Six More Drowned in Falls County,” *Dallas Morning News*, December 6, 1913, p. 6; “Brazos is Receding Now in Falls County,” *Dallas Morning News*, December 5, 1913, p. 3; and “Two Bodies Recovered,” *Dallas Morning News*, December 6, 1913, p. 9.

<sup>115</sup> It is possible that the other men, Harrison and Hudson, were the same person, due to the similarities of their last names and the fact they assisted on non-overlapping dates, but Harrison was mentioned in the first article in a way that implies that he was white, while Hudson was clearly stated to be African American. “First Train out of Waco,” *Dallas Morning News*, December 5, 1913, p. 2, and “Several Arrests are Made,” *Dallas Morning News*, December 6, 1913, p. 6.

<sup>116</sup> “Love of Fair Play Saves Rabbit’s Life,” *Dallas Morning News*, December 5, 1913, p. 7.

significant flooding near St. Louis. This provides a fascinating contrast in natural disaster reporting. Generally, newspapers outside of Texas and the southwest borderlands reported African-American victims in the same language during the 1915 hurricane as the Texas newspapers, but the reporting by the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* changed sharply when reporting on their own local victims. In most Texas newspapers, the only victims routinely named with additional information provided about them were middle to upper class white men, usually without an overtly ethnic name before 1915. Women were only named if they were particularly notable, such as someone who was very elderly or in special circumstances, and were most often described as someone's wife or daughter; children were also rarely identified by name, and ages were rarely given before the latest floods. An excellent example of this was Anderson Stewart/Stuart: "Anderson Stewart, a white farmer, his wife, and four children had drowned."<sup>117</sup>

The *Post-Dispatch* however, treated the eleven victims of the flooded River des Peres in Ellendale near St. Louis with a distinctly different attitude. Eleven people were drowned, one elderly white woman, and two African-American families. The woman was "Mrs. Annie Wagoner, 80 years old,"<sup>118</sup> which was reasonably consistent with reports on elderly white victims by other newspapers. Then the paper continued to state that "searchers found the bodies of James Copen, his wife, Emma, and their daughter, Elizabeth, 9 years old, negroes, in their home across the street from Mrs. Wagoner's

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<sup>117</sup> "Fifty Dead in Texas Floods," *El Paso Herald*, December 6, 1913, p. 1.

<sup>118</sup> "11 Bodies Found in Flood District," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, August 21, 1915, p. 1.



cottage. A few minutes later, bodies of Copen's other two children, Ethel, 7, and Mamie, 13, were found near the house."<sup>119</sup> Here were the names of every member of the family, as well as the ages of the children, while the article casually implied that this was a multi-racial neighborhood. The other family was described in the same detail, "David Bowman, a negro, his wife, Adeline, their children, Ruth, 8 years old, and John, 3, and their granddaughter Bessie Westmoreland, 4 years old," including the different last name of the third child.<sup>120</sup> Other than the reference to race, the only potentially biased language used in relation to any of the African-American victims was a reference to the Bowman family home as a "little one-room cabin."<sup>121</sup>

### **Class and White Individuality**

David R. Roediger argues in *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* that industrial workers in the North created a working class identity that defined differences between themselves and African Americans by adopting language that claimed whiteness.<sup>122</sup> Foley's work on poor tenant farmers and farm laborers in Texas similarly argued that class in the United States is intertwined with race, though he advocated for a more complex system. However, any system that creates fears

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<sup>119</sup> "11 Bodies Found in Flood District," St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, August 21, 1915, p. 1.

<sup>120</sup> Copen's entire family were described as negroes while only Bowman was, but this appeared to be an anomaly as earlier in the article, it is stated very clearly that ten of the victims are negroes. "11 Bodies Found in Flood District," St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, August 21, 1915, p. 1.

<sup>121</sup> "11 Bodies Found in Flood District," St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, August 21, 1915, p. 1.

<sup>122</sup> David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1999).

of loss of social status functions to prevent people with similar economic interests from uniting.<sup>123</sup>

This intertwined system of race and class, with the addition of citizenship status, continued to keep groups from unifying, at least through the struggle for integration in the 1960s and 1970s, as Brian D. Behnken explores in *Fighting their Own Battles: Mexican Americans, African Americans, and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Texas*.<sup>124</sup> Ernest Obadele-Starks draws similar conclusions about white and African-American labor organization, and employers often intentionally pitted them against each other.<sup>125</sup> Even identifying white victims of these natural disasters often requires examining context. Newspaper reporting generally treated “white,” or in the earliest of these disasters, white, non-ethnic, and non-immigrant, as the default. The race of white victims was usually directly identified in three circumstances: when the victim’s name was stated to be unknown, when white victims were mentioned in the same report with non-white victims, and when the white victim was poor.

Throughout these disasters, poor whites who did not obviously belong to an ethnic group were often treated similarly to Mexicans and African Americans, as Foley pointed out, consistent with ideas of scientific racism that were creating a separate class of undesirable whites. When the Austin dam broke in 1900, an encampment of poor white families was swept away by the wall of water, and there was no suggestion that

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<sup>123</sup> Foley, *The White Scourge*, 9–11.

<sup>124</sup> Brian D. Behnken, *Fighting their Own Battles: Mexican Americans, African Americans, and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Texas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

<sup>125</sup> Ernest Obadele-Starks, *Black Unionism in the Industrial South* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2000), 40–41, 43.

there was an attempt to identify them or search for them. In the mildest articles, two non-Texan newspapers reported “a crowd of white people, numbering about thirty, living just below the dam in tents were seen just before the dam broke and have not been accounted for since. It is generally believed that all were swept away.”<sup>126</sup> Another newspaper used almost identical language, but qualified them as “poor white people,” ensuring that readers would not confuse them with recreational campers.<sup>127</sup> In a sharper criticism of these victims, a Texas newspaper stated “About thirty people had camped in tents almost under the crest of the dam, and although the terrific rise in the river should have been sufficient to warn almost any reasonable person of the terrible danger impending they paid no heed. Just before the crash a number of them were seen around there. It is certain that none who were there escaped.”<sup>128</sup> Ironically, presumably white sightseers who had gathered on the banks of the Colorado below the dam and had to be rescued from the flood waters did not receive any criticism when described on the same page of the newspaper.<sup>129</sup> The El Paso *Herald* was the only Texas newspaper of those examined which even mentioned the loss of the campers.

The term “persons” was sometimes used only for those presumably white, as previously noted. The description of “persons” on the upper floors of the Galveston Terminal in 1915 contrasted with the term “negroes” used for those on the lower

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<sup>126</sup> The identical wording is used in at least two out of state newspapers, suggesting they received the same initial report, possibly through a wire service. “Great Flood at Austin, Texas,” *The Morning Astorian*, April 8, 1900, p. 1, and “Thirty People Swept Away,” *New York Times*, April 8, 1900, p. 1.

<sup>127</sup> “Houses Float Like Ships,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, April 8, 1900, p. 3.

<sup>128</sup> “The Disaster of Saturday,” *El Paso Daily Herald*, April 9, 1900, p. 1.

<sup>129</sup> “Flee for their Lives,” *El Paso Daily Herald*, April 9, 1900, p. 1.

floors.<sup>130</sup> Whites were also referred to as “men” in the same sentences with African Americans to establish that African Americans could not be fully “men,” such as “a white man and a negro” in an article subtitled “Jake Woods, White, and Unknown Negro Lose Lives in Raging Torrent,”<sup>131</sup> although the context of the story makes it clear that enough was known about the African American that he could have been identified. Woods jumped into the river with a friend to prove his swimming skill, a daredevil act which received no criticism and did not prevent his name from being included, while the unknown African American rescued a child before being pulled under. People in boats began searching for the daredevil Woods immediately while “no attempt was made to find the negro’s body until several hours afterward, when the effort proved futile.”<sup>132</sup> Similarly, “two white men are reported drowned at Cameron and at Elgin three negroes are reported dead.”<sup>133</sup> Whites continued to be identified in more detail later in the same article; “an unidentified white woman, 85 years old; a white youth named Jones; two negro boys, and a white boy, son of Ed Kast, merchant, were drowned.”<sup>134</sup> Based on other uses of the word “boy” in relation to African Americans, it was impossible to tell whether these were adults or children. In 1921, drowned unidentified Mexican farm laborers were mentioned in the same article with “Ed Green, the farmer on whose land

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<sup>130</sup> “Describe Events in Galveston,” *Dallas Morning News*, August 20, 1915, p. 2

<sup>131</sup> “Trinity River Flood Claims Two Victims,” *Dallas Morning News*, December 5, 1913, p. 1.

<sup>132</sup> “Trinity River Flood Claims Two Victims,” *Dallas Morning News*, December 5, 1913, p. 1.

<sup>133</sup> “Ten Lives Lost Outside of San Antonio and Taylor,” *Dallas Morning News*, September 13, 1921, p. 5.

<sup>134</sup> “Ten Lives Lost Outside of San Antonio and Taylor,” *Dallas Morning News*, September 13, 1921, p. 5.

several were drowned...two white boys and a girl were rescued at the same time.”<sup>135</sup> Thorndale reported “Elijah Cass, a white man, and a negro are reported to have lost their lives on the San Gabriel River near here in trying to save live stock from the flood waters of the river.”<sup>136</sup> Wellborn described the rescue of some flood refugees with “Mrs. E. L. Meyers, who, with a small party of white persons and a number of negroes, spent 48 hours in a gin house at Horse Shoe Bend,” later expanding on this group in more detail as “four white women, three little children, half a dozen white men, and about 100 negroes.”<sup>137</sup> Mrs. Meyers and the white refugees were rescued, but “the water has been too rough to get the negroes.”<sup>138</sup>

A man either named Anderson Stewart or Anderson Stuart who, with his family, drowned in 1913 near Bryan, Texas, provided a particularly acute example of the differences in treatment by race. Several newspapers reported that “Anderson Stewart, a white farmer, his wife, and four children had drowned.”<sup>139</sup> Other reports indicated that “Anderson Stuart, a negro, his wife, and four children drowned.”<sup>140</sup> Anderson Stewart was consistently referred to as a farmer, and the description of their loss was respectful, appearing on the first or second page of the newspaper, and in one instance they were given fourteen lines of coverage. Anderson Stuart had no profession other than “negro,”

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<sup>135</sup> “Damage to Property Will Amount to Over \$10,000,000 in Entire Section Swept by River Overflows, Estimate,” *Amarillo Daily News*, September 13, 1921, part 1, p. 1.

<sup>136</sup> “Flood Damages are Very Heavy,” *Dallas Morning News*, September 14, 1921, p. 3.

<sup>137</sup> “Child Born on House Top,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, December 8, 1913, p. 10.

<sup>138</sup> “Child Born on House Top,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, December 8, 1913, p. 10.

<sup>139</sup> “Fifty Dead in Texas Floods,” *El Paso Herald*, December 6, 1913, p. 1; “Eight Known Dead in Marlin Section,” *Fort Worth Star Telegram*, December 6, 1913, p. 1; and “Entire Family Drowned,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, December 7, 1913, p. 2.

<sup>140</sup> “Six More Drowned in Falls County,” *Dallas Morning News*, December 6, 1913, p. 6.

and received about half as many lines much further back in the newspaper. However from the details provided, this was clearly the exact same family.

The extensive and sympathetic reporting extended to middle and upper class white victims contrasted sharply to the ways in which poor, ethnic, and non-white victims were often hinted or directly stated to have been responsible for their misfortune. A different set of characteristics and vocabulary were applied to those considered fully white. In the use of technology to define class, the El Paso *Daily Herald* reported in 1900 that “many people were on the opposite side of the dam taking Kodak pictures when the break occurred. They are all drowned.”<sup>141</sup> In a more detailed description of this group, the Bryan *Morning Eagle* described the scene as:

“A few hundred yards below the dam a point of land extended about 200 feet into the river. There were on this point at the time the break occurred a number of people, including a woman and two children, several photographers and a party of university students. Before these people could gain a position of safety the water struck the projection, covering it instantly. The woman and two children and an unknown man are known to have been swept into the torrent and drowned. Some of the others were caught in the stream, but managed to escape the main current and gained the shore after a desperate struggle.”<sup>142</sup>

Contrast this neutral, even somewhat admiring description of the “desperate struggle,” of a group of sightseers who were there precisely because there was a rumor that the dam

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<sup>141</sup> “The Dam Bursts,” El Paso *Daily Herald*, April 7, 1900, p. 1.

<sup>142</sup> “Many Lives are Lost,” Bryan *Morning Eagle*, April 10, 1900, p. 1.

was in danger of failing with the criticism of the campers' judgment by the El Paso *Daily Herald* who, if they were not from the area and had not had much contact with local residents, may have been completely unaware that there had been concerns about the safety of the dam for several years.

Another contrast to the treatment of these poor whites in a similar context was the treatment of middle-class recreationists. The Surfside station of the United States Life-Saving service was hosting a recreational party when the hurricane hit the coast in 1915, and of all the guests only Minnie Florea, 16, of Richmond, survived as well as two crew members, Carl Olson and a man named Larsen. They were swept out to sea from the mainland station and came to shore on the west end of Galveston Island, forty-five miles away.<sup>143</sup> The ordeal of Miss Florea, often given that honorific in articles, was described in detail in several articles, including a quote from Miss Florea that ““Carl Olson jumped when I did and offered to tie a rope around me and strap me to him, but I told him I would rather be drowned than cause his death. I shall never forget the calm bravery of my father or the serenity of my poor mother in the face of certain death.””<sup>144</sup> The article later identifies her uncle as a company manager, firmly establishing her credentials through class, in spite of the ethnic name, as fully white. Here, the bravery of both her father and Carl Olson is established, while she and her mother are given the more feminine characteristics of self-sacrifice and serenity. An article in the San Antonio

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<sup>143</sup> At least one article had her name as Flores, but Florea appeared most often. “Boat Loads of Milk,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, August, 22, 1915, p. 3.

<sup>144</sup> “Girl Drifted Sixty Miles,” *Dallas Morning News*, August 22, 1915, part 1, p. 4.

*Express* reported that campers on Marsh Island southwest of New Orleans were safe; no criticism of these campers was suggested by the language used.<sup>145</sup>

Character qualities usually ascribed solely to whites in these reports did become more blurred along the border. In Laredo, the Milmo Rifles company was “met at the depot by Mayor Sanchez and a large crowd of admiring friends. Despite the flooded condition of our streets...marched through the water ankle deep to their armory.”<sup>146</sup> A representative of the joint American-Mexican Boundary Commission station near Laredo named Clemente Romano was described as having a “thrilling experience.”<sup>147</sup> A large breeches buoy fastened to a cable and used to take measurements of the Rio Grande river current speed, and the article described the buoy and Romano, who was in it, as “precipitated into the waters and floated down stream,” until someone was able to throw a rope to him.<sup>148</sup> The language used in this incident, similar to that of the Florea story, make this event into an adventure the young man survived because of his quick, cool thinking and bravery, implying that class elevated him to the status of fully white.

Class and race also played a significant role in how behavior was perceived and reported. During the April 1900 flood, Wharton reported “the last few days have been a rare source of enjoyment, about a dozen barges are afloat on Caney, filled with a joyous freight of merry lads and lassies. The energies of young America have also turned many a dime by rowing passengers across the water.”<sup>149</sup> This light, positive description stands

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<sup>145</sup> “Campers Escape Storm,” San Antonio *Express*, August 20, 1915, p. 2.

<sup>146</sup> “March Through Water,” Dallas *Morning News*, September 15, 1904, p. 5.

<sup>147</sup> “Rain has Ceased,” Dallas *Morning News*, September 17, 1904, p. 2.

<sup>148</sup> “Rain has Ceased,” Dallas *Morning News*, September 17, 1904, p. 2.

<sup>149</sup> “Wharton Still Under Water,” Houston *Daily Post*, April 15, 1900, p. 6.



in opposition, of course, to frequently expressed fears about the bad effects of idleness on farm laborers. Daniel found a similar contrast in which white middle class flood victims in areas with less severe flooding who were able to remain in their homes also took advantage of the floodwaters to indulge in recreational boating during the 1927 flood.<sup>150</sup>

Perhaps the starkest indicator of the importance of names in newspaper reporting as indicators of race and class occurred during the 1915 hurricane which struck in mid-August while many middle and upper class Texans were vacationing at Galveston. Dozens of short and not-so-short reports were published in the *Dallas Morning News* from people who had relatives in Galveston or who had themselves been in Galveston during the hurricane, not as classifieds, but as news stories. Typically, these stories had a title and subtitle such as “Pass Safely Through Storm: Frank T. Payne Receives Message From His Children,” followed by identifying details of the persons involved: “Miss Anna B. Payne and Raymond H. Payne of 4611 Harry street; Mrs. Bertha Burney of 510 West Twelfth street and Miss Clare Cochran of 3603 Word street, who were in Galveston during the hurricane, passed safely through the storm, according to a telegram received yesterday by Frank T. Payne, father of two members of the party.”<sup>151</sup> The individuals were identified, women were given honorifics, and street addresses, a particular indicator of class in these articles, were listed. During the same disaster, the *Morning News* simply reported the deaths of “THREE NEGROES, who worked at

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<sup>150</sup> Pete Daniel, *Deep 'n as It Come: The 1927 Mississippi River Flood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977; reprinted Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 1996), 59, 64–65. Citations refer to the University of Arkansas Press edition.

<sup>151</sup> “Pass Safely Through Storm,” *Dallas Morning News*, August 21, 1915, p. 14.

Causeway Inn,”<sup>152</sup> although the context suggested that these three individuals were known but left unnamed.

In some instances, the person making the report to the *Morning News* included language to justify their presence on Galveston Island during the hurricane. Mrs. J. K. Foster’s safe return to Dallas began with “Not being residents of Galveston, we did not recognize or understand the various warnings about the impending storm, or we would have left the island before the storm broke.”<sup>153</sup> In other instances, the people involved had actually been trying to reach Galveston Island after the hurricane was known to be approaching: John Hunter with two friends “arrived at Virginia Point just as the West Indian hurricane gained a dangerous velocity. They attempted to cross the causeway but the water splashing over it caused them to desert the automobile and turn back to the mainland.”<sup>154</sup> While the article at least did not use language admiring the young men for their daring, it also did not criticize their daredevil attempt.

## **Conclusion**

Race and class identity clearly permeated newspaper reporting of disasters, indicated not just in word choices, but in what was reported and the emotional content of how the stories were reported. White middle and upper class victims were reported individually, accorded respect, and were rarely criticized and even shielded from implied

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<sup>152</sup> “List of Dead,” Dallas *Morning News*, August 20, 1915, p. 1.

<sup>153</sup> “Women Arrive Safely,” Dallas *Morning News*, August 21, 1915, p. 5.

<sup>154</sup> “John Hunter Heard From,” Dallas *Morning News*, August 21, 1915, p. 5.

criticism. African Americans were generally treated as a nameless mass of dependent, childlike laborers, and were frequently criticized for their choices, either as a unit or as individuals.

The language of identity was particularly distinct and fluid between 1899 and 1921. The language of maturity—man or boy—was used to create an image of dependency. Gender and class were almost as important in determining the presence or absence of names as race and ethnicity. Perceived immigration and citizenship status played a role in the racialized treatment of those with ethnic names before the beginning of World War I.

One factor that may also have played a role but was generally invisible in newspaper reporting was religion, particularly Catholic as opposed to Protestant. Certainly many of the ethnic identities and the Mexicans may have been presumed to be Catholics. Another weakness in this analysis of identity through the language in newspaper reporting may be that the 1921 weather-related disaster does not appear to have involved areas with a large population of non-Mexican ethnicities. However, there were a few victims in San Antonio during that flood who were identified by name with non-Mexican ethnic surnames and no negative language applied.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Examples included “Mrs. Emma Gorin, 414 Furnish avenue,” and “Mrs. Vasbinder, initials and residence unknown.” “The Identified Dead,” *Brownwood Bulletin*, September 10, 1921, p. 1.

## CHAPTER III

### RACIALIZING LABOR

First published in 1977 and blending cultural and environmental histories, Pete Daniel's *Deep 'n as It Come: The 1927 Mississippi River Flood* was a forerunner of natural disaster histories, and indeed, an expanded edition was republished just a year before Barry's 1997 *Rising Tide*. Drawing largely on popular culture and direct interviews, Daniel was not only one of the first historians to tackle a weather-related disaster, but he also was one of the first to directly draw a connection to the manipulation of natural disaster for political and policy purposes. He went further and analyzed the use of that power to maintain racial hierarchies, specifically the accusations that Red Cross refugee camps for African-American plantation workers were in fact functioning as pseudo-prisons to enforce peonage. Refugees, once registered, were not allowed to leave without proof of a job, and only local planters were allowed access to the camps in order to make such offers, a system generally enforced by the National Guard who controlled access both directions.<sup>156</sup>

While the complicity of the federal government with enforcing local control of labor was not that surprising during this time period, especially in light of Herbert Hoover's use of the 1927 Mississippi river flood to help leverage his 1928 presidential victory, the Red Cross's role was perhaps less comprehensible. The Red Cross's acceptance of local racial hierarchies has been analyzed more completely by Marian

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<sup>156</sup> Daniel, *Deep 'n as It Come*, 153–156.

Moser Jones in her essay, “Race, Class and Gender Disparities in Clara Barton’s Late Nineteenth-Century Disaster Relief.” She compared the stark differences between relief responses to the urban white victims of the Johnstown, Pennsylvania, flood in 1889 and to the rural African-American victims of the 1893 Sea Islands Hurricane in South Carolina. In her analysis, in order to gain access to the victims in South Carolina, the Red Cross was forced to accept and work within local racial hierarchies and roles, which may have been aggravated by the organization’s structure since they often relied on local volunteers for at least part of their relief efforts. The paucity of relief distributed to Sea Islanders was intensified by both the 1893 economic depression during which philanthropists were more interested in keeping urban poor fed and by the influence of scientific racism. The Red Cross’s relief distribution was also oriented on forcing Sea Island refugees to work, a requirement not demanded of the Johnstown flood victims who were shielded by both race and class from what Jones described as “scientific charity.”<sup>157</sup> Race and class were deeply entwined in fears that Sea Islanders’ work ethics and morals were too weak to survive direct charity.<sup>158</sup>

Although Barry’s *Rising Tide* was the first of the recent works that can be called a natural disaster history, he focused heavily on the politics and production of disaster, and the relation of power structures to rescue and relief responses during the 1927 Mississippi river flood, possibly the worst flood-related natural disaster in United States history. While he did extensively discuss race and class relations before the flood, both

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<sup>157</sup> Jones, “Race, Class and Gender Disparities,” 124.

<sup>158</sup> Jones, “Race, Class and Gender Disparities,” 120–128.

in Greenville, Mississippi, and in the region around New Orleans, Louisiana, he gave relatively little attention to the treatment of African-American farm workers during the flood, including their conscription to work on levees. Barry also devoted relatively little attention to how those same farm workers, forced into segregated Red Cross camps, were controlled by the disaster, or how they were portrayed, or not, in media at the time.

### **Labor and Identity in Relief**

These weather-related natural disasters between 1899 and 1921 in Texas and the Southwest borderlands were reported in racialized language that reduced poor victims, particularly non-whites, to anonymous units of labor and often a major concern in that reporting was maintaining or even strengthening control over that labor. African Americans were the major focus of both labor control efforts and fears.<sup>159</sup> While Mexicans were mentioned from 1899 through 1921, there were far fewer Mexican victims mentioned in reporting before 1921 than African Americans, with the exception of the 1904 flooding on the Rio Grande, in the New Mexico territory, and within Mexico. There are several push and pull factors that contributed to this. Before 1910 there were still relatively few Mexicans in Texas outside of the Rio Grande Valley and South Texas compared to African Americans. Between 1910 and 1921, unrest in Mexico pushed Mexican farm workers to come to Texas and the United States Southwest to look

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<sup>159</sup> While poor whites were also the focus of some concern, other specific ethnicities were apparently not present in sufficient enough numbers as farm laborers outside their own communities or as urban laborers to merit the same focused attention.

for work.<sup>160</sup> At the same time, the movement of African Americans to northern cities to work in industrial jobs accelerated during World War I, creating a demand for labor to replace them that helped attract displaced Mexican workers to this agricultural work.<sup>161</sup>

It was this perceived need to control labor and labor migration that largely shaped both the identification of African-American victims and the streamlining of racial and ethnic identification during this period. While there were some signs of a trend away from a multiethnic and racial system of identification by around 1913, the labor demands of World War I appeared to be the catalyst of this shift. Mexican farm labor migration might have been far more unwelcome (as in fact it was in the eyes of many poorer white and African-American farm laborers) if industrial needs had not attracted a certain proportion of African American and poor white emigration away from farm work.<sup>162</sup>

Some of the clearest indicators that these events were used to control labor were relief efforts and charity after the disasters. In 1899 the flooding on the Brazos, though reported by the *Dallas Morning News* and the *Bryan Morning Eagle*, was ignored on the front pages of the *Houston Daily Post*, even though some of the worst of the flooding in early July was less than thirty miles from Houston. The *New York Times* began printing substantial front page stories on the flooding by July 2, 1899, and by July 5, 1899, ran a headline proclaiming “Hunger Follows Floods,” stating that residents of Brookshire, Texas, had appealed to the Texas governor to help feed starving refugees from the flood,

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<sup>160</sup> George J. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) and Foley, *The White Scourge*.

<sup>161</sup> James M. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

<sup>162</sup> Foley, *The White Scourge*, and Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora*.

and the next day the *Times* was asserting a probably exaggerated accusation in a headline that “Three Hundred Negroes Drowned.”<sup>163</sup>

On July 6, 1899, the first front page stories on the Brazos river flood finally appeared in the Houston *Daily Post*, but many of the stories may have been a form of public image damage control.<sup>164</sup> Especially significant was a statement run on July 8, 1899, in which it was declared that, “a meeting of prominent negroes held in Dallas this afternoon, and presided over by Rev. A. R. Griggs, passed resolutions declaring the Southern whites to be the best friends of the negro race and advising the people of the North to let the race question alone.”<sup>165</sup> The Houston newspaper projected an image of the white planters as generous and benevolent while actually themselves the greatest victims of the flood, especially near Brookshire; “the crops are simply ruined; the people can do nothing and are utterly dependent; most of them are negroes and they look to the whites for succor; they won't be permitted to starve, but the whites are also heavy losers and the rations will be short.”<sup>166</sup> In Hempstead, the correspondent similarly asserted, “The Large planters, who have lost in some cases over \$50,000, are magnanimously feeding the starved and half-naked negroes and their children, whether they are their own employees or not.”<sup>167</sup> While visiting Austin, H. B. Eaton stated that “all the planters of his section who are so fortunate as to have a bank account are showing a generous

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<sup>163</sup> “Hunger Follows Floods,” New York *Times*, July 5, 1899, p. 1 and “Three Hundred Negroes Drowned,” New York *Times*, July 6, 1899, p. 1.

<sup>164</sup> I have been unable to locate references to any other Houston newspapers being published during June and July 1899.

<sup>165</sup> “Relief for the Sufferers,” Houston *Daily Post*, July 8, 1899, p. 3.

<sup>166</sup> “Situation at Brookshire,” Houston *Daily Post*, July 6, 1899, p. 1.

<sup>167</sup> “Timely Warning was Given,” Houston *Daily Post*, July 6, 1899, p. 2.



disposition toward the destitute men, women, and children who were in their employ when the flood came.”<sup>168</sup>

When considered with Col. Giddings’s statement from Brenham, Texas, about requiring work for food, this assistance was unlikely to have been provided as charity, despite the benevolent tone of the articles, and may have been charged to the farm workers’ accounts.<sup>169</sup> While the food supplied was called “relief,” the context suggests that it was only distributed to families in which the adults were working. A week’s rations per person was “1 ½ pounds of bacon, 7 pounds of meal or 5 of flour and 1 pint of syrup per capita,”<sup>170</sup> an amount that was acknowledged as insufficient but justified on the grounds that children would not need as much as adults and it would balance out so “that the working men and women will have sufficient for their actual needs.”<sup>171</sup> This of course ignored statements such as H. B. Eaton’s that acknowledged that children were also working employees.<sup>172</sup>

During the 1899 flood, victims were repeatedly criticized for failing to heed warnings. “County Judge Hannay wired to Brookshire early enough that this overflow was ... above the 1885 mark and that only the earliest movements would save them from destruction, but his advice seems to have been unheeded.”<sup>173</sup> Victim blaming, despite the structural systems of sharecropping in which the victims often lived in housing provided

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<sup>168</sup> “Texas Flood Loss Heavy,” *New York Times*, July 10, 1899, p. 2.

<sup>169</sup> As quoted earlier in the discussion about the use of the racial marker “colored,” Giddings stated, “It would not be a good idea to inculcate among the colored people that they are to be supported in idleness. They should thoroughly understand that the supplies sent them are for temporary relief and until work can be furnished.” “Relief for the Sufferers,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 6, 1899, p. 2.

<sup>170</sup> “Situation at Brookshire,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 7, 1899, p. 2.

<sup>171</sup> “Situation at Brookshire,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 7, 1899, p. 2.

<sup>172</sup> “Texas Flood Loss Heavy,” *New York Times*, July 10, 1899, p. 2.

<sup>173</sup> “Timely Warning was Given,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 6, 1899, p. 2.

by the landowners, was very common. Despite this lack of control over housing, Henry Worberg claimed that “it was the first big rise in the Brazos River since 1861, and of late years the negroes had become careless and built their homes closer and closer to the channel of the river.”<sup>174</sup>

African Americans were additionally criticized for supposedly failing to donate to assist the flood victims; “there are many well-to-do negroes in Texas, but they have not responded to the call for aid for the unfortunate members of their race. The only contribution received from negroes by Gov. Sayers is \$10, which was raised by a local lodge.”<sup>175</sup> This did not take into account how many of those prosperous African Americans were themselves victims or the likely probability that African-American communities independently provided assistance, unwilling to trust the government to distribute their contributions fairly. They may have had good grounds for such suspicions; Governor Sayers withheld some of the money raised for the 1899 flood from the victims it was supposed to help and later spent it in April 1900 for relief for flood victims who were more likely to be white.<sup>176</sup> Their unequal treatment in the aftermath of the 1900 Galveston hurricane also supported African-American distrust.<sup>177</sup>

A few correspondents in 1899 admitted that families had little or no warning in some locations. During the sudden rise of the Brazos and Little Brazos rivers near Calvert, Texas, “the floods of the two rivers came up so suddenly that the negroes living

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<sup>174</sup> “Hunger Follows Flood in Texas,” *New York Times*, July 7, 1899, p. 3.

<sup>175</sup> “Texas Flood Loss Heavy,” *New York Times*, July 10, 1899, p. 2.

<sup>176</sup> “Homes Inundated; Many Lives Lost,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, April 10, 1900, p. 3.

<sup>177</sup> Patricia Bellis Bixel and Elizabeth Hayes Turner, *Galveston and the 1900 Storm: Catastrophe and Catalyst* (Austin: University of Texas, 2000), 80–82.

between the water courses had no opportunity of escaping. They were caught in a trap and drowned.”<sup>178</sup> There was in fact no evidence that when warnings were telegraphed that this information was shared with African-American farm workers. Newspaper descriptions such as that from Brookshire a few months later in April 1900 implied the opposite mindset; African Americans distrusted reassurances of safety from employers, believing that employers preferred to risk their lives rather than lose their work, especially in light of the recent disaster.<sup>179</sup> The language in some reporting supported this possibility, as well as the high death rate among African-American farm laborers. The language in some statements suggested compulsion; “many negro inhabitants have been compelled to remain with their cabins.”<sup>180</sup> These suspicions of African-American farm laborers were consistent with Horowitz’s conclusion that victims perceived those in power as creating their disaster and that “Vulnerable people do not tend to gather in risky places because of cosmic bad luck, even if the structures of power that push them there often are so insidious that such arrangements can come to seem like the natural order of things.”<sup>181</sup>

Patricia Bellis Bixel and Elizabeth Hayes Turner, in their research on the 1900 Galveston hurricane, also found that the disaster was a turning point for the disempowerment of African-American community leaders. “No black leaders, not even

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<sup>178</sup> “Death in Texas Floods,” *New York Times*, July 3, 1899, p. 1.

<sup>179</sup> This refers to the contradictions explored earlier between the 1899 and 1900 flood reporting in Brookshire when discussing negative portrayals of African Americans. In 1900, a correspondent complained, “it is not thought that there is any danger of an overflow, but negroes are very much excited from fake reports, most of them having moved out of the bottoms, and it will take some time to get them back to work again.” “Negroes are Fleeing,” *Dallas Morning News*, April 11, 1900, p. 2.

<sup>180</sup> “Rescue Problem Hard,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, December 5, 1913, p. 1.

<sup>181</sup> See introduction. Horowitz, “Hurricane Betsy,” pp. 895, 897.

former aldermen, were invited to share in the decision making or to become ward representatives, although black leaders labored under white leadership or blacks led other blacks.”<sup>182</sup> Prior to this hurricane, African Americans had been able to carve out a place within the community of Galveston that received a certain amount of respect and cooperation; that largely vanished during the recovery. Newspapers ran sensationalized stories about rampant looting and desecration of bodies, and other stories claiming African Americans refused to work helped to prevent their community from publicizing inequality in treatment.<sup>183</sup> African-American community leaders virtually disappeared in newspaper reporting of weather-related natural disasters after this hurricane, limited almost exclusively to African Americans as usually nameless laborers.

### **Disaster and the Control of Labor**

During the 1927 flood on the Mississippi River, African Americans were compelled to do repair work while they were interned in refugee camps at very low wages.<sup>184</sup> Barry found that the governor of Mississippi in 1927 issued orders to ensure that African Americans were not allowed to leave camps except to return to their old plantations to work, and some plantation owners went so far as to establish their own refugee camps and have evacuated workers moved from public camps to their private

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<sup>182</sup> Bixel and Turner, *Galveston and the 1900 Storm*, 79.

<sup>183</sup> Bixel and Turner, *Galveston and the 1900 Storm*, 78–80.

<sup>184</sup> Paul Martin Lester, *On Floods and Photos: How Herbert Hoover and George W. Bush Exploited Catastrophes* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2010), 175.

ones.<sup>185</sup> While this overt form of movement control was not openly described in Texas newspapers during these earlier disasters, some may have occurred without being explicitly stated. During the 1915 hurricane and clean up, correspondents reported on the control of travel between Galveston Island and the mainland which suggested this may have been a bottleneck that helped keep laborers on the island, forced to work at the low offered wages or even unpaid and under guard.

Work was compelled for African Americans and sometimes for working class poor, including women; women applying for emergency relief who claimed to have no male relatives were threatened with being detained in camps until they accepted employment.<sup>186</sup> The same D. C. Giddings who was concerned about the effect of charity on African American laborers later proposed that counties should “see if some method can not be adopted which will provide work to the needy and at the same time lessen the usual expense of road work.”<sup>187</sup> While he presented this as a means to avoid dependence (though a major, but contradictory, theme of these reports was that the African-American farm laborers were, by nature, dependent,) his primary interest was clearly saving on the cost of road work. The next part of his statement reinforced the use of this disaster as a means to obtain cheaper labor than normal: “every county in the district is sadly in need of work on its roads and by a cooperation of the relief committees and

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<sup>185</sup> Barry, *Rising Tide*, 313–314.

<sup>186</sup> Bixel and Turner, *Galveston and the 1900 Storm*, 80.

<sup>187</sup> “Work Should Be Provided,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 9, 1899, p. 4.

officials a great deal of this can be done at less expense and provide work to those who desire it.”<sup>188</sup>

Barry interviewed African-Americans who were forced to work on levees to try to prevent crevasses during the 1927 Mississippi river flood, and found stories of African-Americans working under armed guard who slipped from the levees into the waters and were never searched for.<sup>189</sup> Others were never reported dead, and Barry found credible estimates of hundreds of African-American levee workers who were swept away and unreported at the Mounds Landing Crevasse near Greenville, Mississippi.<sup>190</sup> One person stopped an attempt to cut loose and sacrifice an entire barge crowded with African-American levee workers towed by a tug boat which was caught in the pull from the Mounds Landing Crevasse.<sup>191</sup>

There are no living witnesses to the early twentieth-century Texas floods, but it was clear that African American farm laborers were also forced into dangerous work. The *New York Times* ran a statement from Galveston in 1899 that “the destitute will be fed and men will have work on the railways until the subsidence of the flood permits them to return to their homes.”<sup>192</sup> It was fairly rare that the exact nature of forced labor was described, but work restoring rail service by inexperienced workers was known to be dangerous, especially while flooding was still in progress. At least three African-American laborers drowned at Hempstead doing exactly this work in 1899; “Three

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<sup>188</sup> “Work Should Be Provided,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 9, 1899, p. 4.

<sup>189</sup> Barry, *Rising Tide*, 193 and 202.

<sup>190</sup> Barry, *Rising Tide*, 193 and 202.

<sup>191</sup> Barry, *Rising Tide*, 193.

<sup>192</sup> “Hopeful View at Galveston,” *New York Times*, July 7, 1899, p. 3.

negroes were drowned at 4 p. m. in the Courtney bottoms while working on the railroad track. Will Inge and Will Norris were brought in, while Gus Clay has not been found yet.”<sup>193</sup> A later report in the same edition may have referred to two of the same men as it also placed the incident in the Courtney bottoms and claimed that “two colored men named Morris and Eans were drowned. Contrary to warnings given them, they were sitting on the end of some ties used in rebuilding the road, and, by a sudden lurch of the track, they fell into the swift rolling current behind them.”<sup>194</sup> Not only does this second article place the blame on the two men for a warning they may or may not have received or, as unskilled railroad laborers, may have failed to understand, but the article was placed directly above a story in the newspaper reporting an accusation of an assault by an African-American man. Other statements made it clear that excess laborers from the flooded areas were available to other parts of the state: “even the work of putting in new crops will not give employment to all of the working men here and there will be plenty ready to respond to requests for hands from other portions of the State.”<sup>195</sup>

By the time of the 1900 Galveston hurricane, authorities and employers commonly began to threaten laborers with arrest if they refused work during or after a natural disaster at the wages offered. Poor white laborers were regarded with at least as much suspicion as African Americans during several of these disasters. In planning relief efforts in Galveston in 1915, the city stated that, “it was brought out in the meeting that

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<sup>193</sup> “Three Men Drowned,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 8, 1899, p. 3.

<sup>194</sup> “Two Negroes Drowned,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 8, 1899, p. 4 and “Young Lady Assaulted by a Negro,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 8, 1899, p. 4.

<sup>195</sup> “Situation at Brookshire,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 7, 1899, p. 2.

nearly every case of destitution is in the outlying districts and among poor people.”<sup>196</sup>

The mayor “announced this morning that anyone asking more than regular wages for his services would be arrested and put to work on the streets, under guard,” and went on to add a prohibition against begging and instating conscription of “anyone able to work and refusing to do so, and without means of support.”<sup>197</sup> The absence of racial language was important in both these instances because poor whites were clearly one of their major concerns. A later article announced, “Mayor Fisher and other city officials have been incensed by reports that white men have been circulating among the negro laborers asking them not to work for less than \$4 a day,”<sup>198</sup> followed by the repeated threat of labor conscription without pay.

Clearly laborers here were attempting unity by class rather than race in order to improve wages, and those in power responded quickly. In 1909 laborers tried a very similar strategy after a less severe hurricane in Bay City, Texas, with the result that a report from the city requested that no aid be sent because “over 100 able-bodied negroes had refused to work, and that they and some Mexicans, and also some whites, were anxiously waiting for free rations to be shipped in, when work at good wages is plentiful.”<sup>199</sup> The report continued to add that these workers, this time led by African Americans, were trying to get four dollars a day in wages for cleanup work. The city used vagrancy laws to force them to work. In 1913 Waco officials also used vagrancy

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<sup>196</sup> “Relief for Destitute,” *Dallas Morning News*, August 21, 1915, p. 3.

<sup>197</sup> “Loss \$4,000,000 to \$8,000,000,” *Dallas Morning News*, August 20, 1915, p. 2.

<sup>198</sup> “Must Clean Up Stores,” *Dallas Morning News*, August 22, 1915, part 1, p. 6.

<sup>199</sup> “No Appeal for Public Aid,” *Dallas Morning News*, July 26, 1909, p. 1.



laws to conscript or chase out “idle, shiftless whites, negroes, and Mexicans.”<sup>200</sup>

However the attempt in Bay City was the only actual instance of such labor unity across racial lines reported during these disasters. Ernest Obadele-Starks found that white and African-American labor organized separately and were very often in direct competition and used by employers to undermine each other.<sup>201</sup> Foley asserted that “the legacy of antiblack racism in central Texas and of white Southerners’ abhorrence of social equality with blacks led many white farmers to seek political alliances, however reluctantly at first, with Mexican sharecroppers and tenant farmers between 1910 and 1920.”<sup>202</sup>

One of the strongest messages was that laborers, particularly African-American laborers, were dependents, childlike and incompetent to take care of themselves. Black dependency was particularly emphasized through descriptions of white paternalism. In 1899 many correspondents expressed a great deal of concern about what work would be found for African-American farm laborers who were displaced by the flood; it was clear that these correspondents had no expectation that they would find work for themselves. African-American men were often linguistically reduced to the status of minor children; the term “boys,” was a particularly clear marker; “a negro boy of Marcus Tate’s”<sup>203</sup> and “some negro boys diving in the street.”<sup>204</sup> African-American victims frequently were unnamed, which is the same treatment given to most white women and to children, other groups who were “dependents.” The town of Sealy reported African Americans begging

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<sup>200</sup> “Waco Raises \$7,000 for Flood Victims,” *Dallas Morning News*, December 6, 1913, p. 6.

<sup>201</sup> Obadele-Starks, *Black Unionism in the Industrial South*, xviii, 40–41, 43.

<sup>202</sup> Foley, *The White Scourge*, 11.

<sup>203</sup> “Dozen Persons are Drowned,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, April 10, 1900, p. 3.

<sup>204</sup> “No Whiskey Allowed,” *Dallas Morning News*, August 20, 1915, p. 2.

during the 1899 flood; “Quite a number of negroes have been in Sealy today begging for food.”<sup>205</sup> From Hempstead, a report started with the assertion that “the distress in the Brazos bottoms now is beyond description; the negroes are naked, hungry and crying for bread.”<sup>206</sup>

Most of the dependency language was targeted at African Americans. However these descriptions of dependent and helpless farm laborers were not limited to them, particularly in the earliest disasters surveyed. Beerland’s description of his employee who alerted him to the rising flood waters was “the frightened Mexican.”<sup>207</sup> Frightened was an adjective almost never applied to a white man in newspaper reporting. The description of some “Bohemian” victims in 1899 and 1900 also implied helplessness associated with farm laborers.<sup>208</sup>

### **Drunk and Disorderly: Identifying Laborers in Disaster**

Rumors of looting and use of martial law, officially or unofficially declared, helped to enforce demands for labor and to shape public perceptions of class and race to favor those in power. In fact, looting could be defined in these newspaper reports—and often still can be defined that way—as the appropriation of goods, even those for survival and those without identifiable owner, by someone who was perceived as non-

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<sup>205</sup> “Work of Rescue at Sealy,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 6, 1899, p. 1.

<sup>206</sup> “Timely Warning was Given,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 6, 1899, p. 2.

<sup>207</sup> “Rescued from Death,” *Dallas Morning News*, June 11, 1899, p. 1.

<sup>208</sup> “Drowned in the Colorado,” *Dallas Morning News*, June 9, 1899, p. 1; “Dozen Persons are Drowned,” *Atlanta Constitution*, April 10, 1900, p. 3.

white or poor or both. Paul Martin Lester saw a comparison of two photographs from Hurricane Katrina in which a white couple was captioned as “finding” the food and drinks they scavenged from a store while a black man was captioned as “looting” food and drinks he scavenged from a store, inspiring Lester to explore the manipulation of publicity in catastrophes.<sup>209</sup>

In an eerily similar incident in Galveston in 1915, a correspondent admiringly reported that Blake Rose of Waxahachie swam “across the street to some fruit which had not been demolished during the night. He dragged two crates of cantaloupes to the station where they furnished the only breakfast for many women.”<sup>210</sup> The same article quoted Archie McDuffie’s claim that “he saw some negro boys diving in the street near where the refugees had hurried into the hotel, many of them through the water, searching for trinkets or jewelry.”<sup>211</sup> This was the same McDuffie whose report of African Americans singing on the lower levels of the station terminal during the hurricane was carried in so many newspapers.<sup>212</sup> Since he was clearly at the terminal in order to have described the singing, he must have watched these African Americans dive (“looting” in this context) in almost the same location as Rose swam to find the cantaloupes, and he provided no evidence that they were not also trying to locate food from the same source for the African Americans on the lower level of the terminal. Near St. Louis, recreational canoeists enjoying “the novel experience of being able to paddle through a second story

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<sup>209</sup> Lester, *On Floods and Photo Ops*, ix–x.

<sup>210</sup> “No Whiskey Allowed,” *Dallas Morning News*, August 20, 1915, p. 2.

<sup>211</sup> “No Whiskey Allowed,” *Dallas Morning News*, August 20, 1915, p. 2.

<sup>212</sup> “No Whiskey Allowed,” *Dallas Morning News*, August 20, 1915, p. 2.

window,”<sup>213</sup> and one canoeist was admiringly reported as wishing “a supply of groceries, paddled into a store. Nobody was there, so he waited on himself, taking bacon and canned goods back to his club house where they furnished a breakfast for 40 or 50 refugees.”<sup>214</sup>

Rumors of looting were easier to find than actual evidence of looting. The 1915 hurricane was not entirely over when the Dallas *Morning News* ran “that on account of reports of considerable looting in the city, the provost guard has been increased.”<sup>215</sup> These reports quickly became racialized two pages later in the same day’s newspaper when a declaration of martial law by the mayor was reported, claiming “looting had started, mostly by negroes. Four regiments of the United States Army, the Fourth, Seventh, Nineteenth and Twenty-Eighth, are patrolling the city, which has been divided into four districts.”<sup>216</sup> That same correspondent added that, “passengers on the Gertrude said it was reported that twenty negroes, caught while looting stores, were shot and killed by soldiers Monday night, but this could not be confirmed.”<sup>217</sup> The San Francisco *Chronicle* simply reported that the Galveston mayor had declared martial law, and in Port Arthur, “the city is under martial law, following the reported looting of a number of homes whose owners had been forced to vacate on account of the high water.”<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> “Many Reluctant to Leave,” St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, August 23, 1915, p. 1.

<sup>214</sup> “Many Reluctant to Leave,” St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, August 23, 1915, p. 1.

<sup>215</sup> “Galveston Provost Guard is Increased,” Dallas *Morning News*, August 19, 1915, p. 1.

<sup>216</sup> “Places Galveston Damage at \$3,000,000,” Dallas *Morning News*, August 19, 1915, p. 3.

<sup>217</sup> This report was repeated in *The Atlanta Constitution* and the *San Antonio Express*. “Places Galveston Damage at \$3,000,000,” Dallas *Morning News*, August 19, 1915, p. 3; “The Buildings Burned,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, August 19, 1915, p. 3; and “Troops Patrolling Galveston Streets to Check Looting,” *San Antonio Express*, August 19, 1915, p. 2.

<sup>218</sup> “Declares Martial Law,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 19, 1915, p. 3 and “Port Arthur is Guarded,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 19, 1915, p. 3.

However, this reported looting, or the shooting of African-American looters, was not ever verified.

Looting was not a particular concern during the earliest weather-related disasters; correspondents and editors made little or no mention of the possibility of looting during the 1899 and April 1900 flooding. During the 1904 flooding, correspondents made no particular mention of possible looting either, but this was a dispersed series of flood events mostly effecting border communities. However Bixel and Turner found looting was widely and sensationally reported during the 1900 Galveston hurricane and its aftermath. Most of these reports attributed looting to African Americans, including reports that “twenty-four negroes were shot while pillaging wrecked homes,”<sup>219</sup> although Bixel and Turner only found evidence in police records that six people were summarily shot and eight arrested for looting. Significantly, the race of these looters was unidentified however, which weighs heavily against African Americans as the looters since the race of African Americans was virtually always included, particularly when it could be used negatively.<sup>220</sup> Newspaper reporting of weather-related natural disasters after 1900, with the exception of the 1904 flooding, placed a heavy focus on fears of looting and unsubstantiated reports of looting, with martial law imposed at least informally in certain places.

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<sup>219</sup> Bixel and Turner, *Galveston and the 1900 Storm*, 78.

<sup>220</sup> Bixel and Turner, *Galveston and the 1900 Storm*, 78.

The 1921 flash flood hit the Mexican district and the business district of San Antonio probably before midnight on Friday, September 9,<sup>221</sup> and the first newspaper reports on Saturday, September 10, included the information that the military was assisting San Antonio, not just in rescue work, but “patrolling the city.”<sup>222</sup> Whether or not martial law was ever officially imposed in San Antonio is unclear due to contradictory reports; “Police Commissioner Wright estimated the dead at 1,000. He has asked Col. T. H. Slaven, Chief of Staff of the Eighth Army Corps area, for martial law for the city. His request will be granted, Wright said,”<sup>223</sup> as opposed to, “although martial law has not been declared, it was decided to accept the offer of federal troops to assist the police in giving property protection.”<sup>224</sup> Camp Travis apparently provided three full regiments, “co-operating with civil authorities in bringing order out of chaos.”<sup>225</sup> Even the reports that denied martial law described the military acting as if it were officially declared. Some of these actions were justified, with some reasonable basis, as related to concerns about sanitary conditions; “city health officers are engaged in a rigid clean up of the city to prevent any possibility of an epidemic.”<sup>226</sup> Most of the reporting made it clear that the soldiers were patrolling to prevent looting, however.

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<sup>221</sup> “Troops under Colonel Porter opened offices in the federal building shortly after (sic) midnight and are now patrolling the city,” Breckenridge *Daily American*, September 10, 1921, p. 1.

<sup>222</sup> “Main Business District of San Antonio Flooded and Thousands Made Homeless,” Brownwood *Bulletin*, September 10, 1921, p. 1.

<sup>223</sup> “Police Chief Says 1,000 Dead,” Breckenridge *Daily American*, September 10, 1921, p. 1.

<sup>224</sup> “Two Morgues Opened,” Abilene *Daily Reporter*, September 11, 1921, p. 1.

<sup>225</sup> “38 Bodies Have Been Recovered,” Dallas *Morning News*, September 11, 1921, p. 1.

<sup>226</sup> There may have been an unspoken but coded aspect to these particular concerns about epidemics that was communicated through the emphasis on deaths and damage in the Mexican district—the perception of a connection between epidemic diseases and recent immigrants from Mexico. The emphasis on the *Mexican* district may be connected to John Mckiernan-González’s analysis of “fear and stigma associated with filth, labor mobility, and outsider status,” particularly in relation to contemporary

Concerns about a lack of available labor, especially for work in cotton fields, also developed in reporting over these two decades. Emilio Zamorra cites a Department of Labor report from 1920 that asserted that there had been a shortage of agricultural labor during the war due both to a loss of agricultural labor to urbanization and to a lack of European immigration that led to increasing reliance on Mexican farm labor.<sup>227</sup> This supported an assertion in a 1915 a report from Sinton, Texas, on storm damage to cotton crops which included the complaint that “pickers have been very scarce and only a small per cent of the first crop has been picked.”<sup>228</sup> This is a contrast with the proprietary, confident way that articles in 1899 and 1900 spoke about farm laborers. Similarly, a report from Kingsville, Texas, on damages included a report on injuries to cotton pickers.<sup>229</sup> Although race was not mentioned specifically in either of these articles, the class of migrant farm laborers was a racialized one, and one that was already becoming dependent on Mexican labor.<sup>230</sup>

Ironically, the series of three closely timed major catastrophes at the turn of the century, the June and July 1899 floods, the April 1900 flood, and the September 1900 Galveston Hurricane, probably resulted in a number of moderately prosperous African-American farmers and tenant farmers descending into poverty and share-cropping. This in itself may have introduced a more independent, less compliant, element to the share-

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research and theory on the transmission of typhus. For more information, see John Mckiernan-González, *Fevered Measures: Public Health and Race at the Texas-Mexico Border, 1848–1942* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 166, 170–174. “City of San Antonio Victim of Disastrous Flood with Big Loss,” Abilene *Daily Reporter*, September 11, 1921, p. 1.

<sup>227</sup> Zamora, *The World of the Mexican Worker*, 46–47.

<sup>228</sup> “Damage in Cotton Fields,” San Antonio *Express*, August 17, 1915, p. 4.

<sup>229</sup> “Crop Damage Reported Heavy,” Dallas *Morning News*, August 18, 1915, p. 2.

<sup>230</sup> Foley, *The White Scourge*, 11 and Zamora, *The World of the Mexican Worker*, 46–47.

cropping and wage farm laborers that unsettled employers, as well as causing more migrations of the work force which, in the case of non-white or poor white laborers, could be seen as threatening.<sup>231</sup> Some large farm owners began to turn to Mexican laborers, especially as the Mexican Revolution pushed more people into migration seeking better opportunities and more stability. But these migrants included revolutionaries and radicals such as socialists and anarchists who were just as threatening to employers and other white residents.<sup>232</sup> It was in 1915 and 1916, with white Texans also unsettled by the threat of the war in Europe, that some of the worst violence in Texas against Mexicans occurred, which is echoed by the article about a “bandit hunt” that ran during the 1915 hurricane.<sup>233</sup> It may have been partly the memory of this violence that led newspapers to treat urban Mexicans in San Antonio, presumably not migrants or farm workers, with some degree of consideration in 1921. Those in rural areas continued to be treated as anonymous and relatively unimportant except for the loss of their labor. The 1915 hurricane may also have been partly responsible for the concentration of United States Army forces near San Antonio who were used to impose martial law in 1921.<sup>234</sup> One of the main army posts in Texas in 1915 was at Texas City, which suffered severe damages and the deaths of at least ten, possibly twelve or more soldiers, primarily enlisted men, though the acting commander reported; “four officers

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<sup>231</sup> Foley, *The White Scourge*, 10.

<sup>232</sup> Foley, *The White Scourge*, 56.

<sup>233</sup> “‘Bandit Hunt’ Rumored,” *Dallas Morning News*, August 19, 1915, p. 3.

<sup>234</sup> “Would Add 8,000 to Army Post Garrison,” *San Antonio Express*, August 19, 1915, p. 1.



and 215 enlisted men,<sup>235</sup> missing immediately after the storm, most of whom were presumed to be on passes.

Alcohol was often linked to labor control, class, race, and looting fears in articles. This imagery of drunkenness was at its height in 1915, which coincides with prohibition campaigns and clearly was intended to appeal to popular views of laboring classes as immoral and in need of reform and paternalistic control, possibly to discourage charity. In 1915 a special deputy collector of customs, A. J. Rosenthal, reported to the *Dallas Morning News* that “custom-house afforded shelter to more than 800 refugees, of whom I took care, with the assistance of three clerks, and three of janitor’s force policed building and kept order. I confiscated and destroyed large quantities of liquor brought into building by unruly negroes and ejected them from building.”<sup>236</sup> At the Terminal where thousands took shelter during the hurricane, men were asked “whether they carried whisky. None found with whisky in their possession were permitted to bring it into the building. Mr. McDuffie said that many men threw away flasks, but that one man refused to enter without his flask and waded away to seek other shelter.”<sup>237</sup>

In another story from 1915 Galveston, a direction connection was drawn between alcohol and looting; “Early Tuesday a few stores were broken into, but the mayor ordered all saloons closed and the soldiers and police soon had the city orderly.”<sup>238</sup> Further, martial law was used to search “suspicious-looking” persons and “if liquor was

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<sup>235</sup> “Colonel Waltz’s Report,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, August 19, 1915, p. 3.

<sup>236</sup> “Judge Rosenthal Reports,” *Dallas Morning News*, August 20, 1915, p. 9.

<sup>237</sup> “No Whisky Allowed,” *Dallas Morning News*, August 20, 1915, p. 2.

<sup>238</sup> “Seawall Swept Clean,” *San Antonio Express*, August 20, 1915, p. 3.

found on any it was taken away, and several hundred bottles of whiskey were appropriated during the day.”<sup>239</sup> Clearly, alcohol was only considered a problem in the hands of those who were suspicious—working class individuals and “unruly” African Americans.

St. Louis reported similar problems when the storm passed over that region, this time a complaint about the need to close a saloon that reopened in Valley Park in a rather novel fashion. “Boatmen operated boats from the edge of the water to the saloon, a distance of four blocks. A negro at the door permitted only a few boats to enter through the door at a time. The boats lined up at the bar and their occupants were served. When a boatload finished drinking the negro pushed the boat out and admitted another.”<sup>240</sup> To discourage readers from finding this story merely amusing, however, the saloon was referred to as “the Devil’s church,” and the customers were described in unflattering terms; “persons in the saloon were noisy and occupants of two boats engaged in a quarrel in the saloon and threw bottles at each other. Several persons fell from the boats into the water in the saloon.”<sup>241</sup> Here was class and race as well as ethnicity—the owner, Edward Rauscher, had a German surname—with no hint of admiration for the business innovation that was accorded to the young white men who were charging for boat rides across flooded streams near Wharton, Texas.<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>239</sup> “Seawall Swept Clean,” *San Antonio Express*, August 20, 1915, p. 3.

<sup>240</sup> “Boats Lines Up at Saloon Bar,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, August 24, 1915, p. 3.

<sup>241</sup> “Boats Lines Up at Saloon Bar,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, August 24, 1915, p. 3.

<sup>242</sup> “Boats Lines Up at Saloon Bar,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, August 24, 1915, p. 3, and “Wharton Still Under Water,” *Houston Daily Post*, April 15, 1900, p. 6.

## **Conclusion**

From 1899 to 1921, there were movements of poor laborers that created anxiety about maintaining control over a supply of labor as well as fears of the behavior of new migrant labor. These anxieties helped shape the identification and representation of poor and non-white laborers during natural disaster reporting in order to shape public perceptions. Negative themes of dependency and charity were intimately tied to an attempt to protect employers from the loss of labor, labor unity between races, and laborers leveraging disaster to temporarily improve their wages. These were entwined with compulsory labor, criminality, and immoral drunkenness which all reinforced the claims of white employers that they needed to control poor, socially inferior laborers, particularly those who were non-white.

## CHAPTER IV

### SEEN AND UNSEEN: THE IMAGES OF RACE

Historians and other academic disciplines have increasingly turned to visual analyses of the historical record. These analyses occupy a spectrum: at one end very limited uses of a few images as a research supplement to primary methods of analysis, and at the other research based primarily on images such as fine art, popular media, or photography. While many early works on visual rhetoric emerged from the English and communications disciplines, David D. Perlmutter's 1994 "Visual Historical Methods: Problems, Prospects, Applications," examined the application of these methods specifically to the discipline of history.<sup>243</sup> In a limited use of visual rhetoric within a natural disaster framework, Daniel's *Deep 'n as It Come* relied heavily on photographs and popular images to support his narrative analysis. However he rarely analyzed the photographs themselves as sources, although his use of photographs was effective at reinserting African-American and poor white tenant farmers back into the history of natural disaster. Berkley Hudson's article, "O. N. Pruitt's Possum Town: The 'Modest Aspiration and Small Renown' of a Mississippi Photographer, 1915–1960" at the other end of the spectrum relied almost exclusively on photographs to analyze race relations in a single town and region of Mississippi.<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> David D. Perlmutter, "Visual Historical Methods: Problems, Prospects, Applications," *Historical Methods* 27, no. 4 (Fall 1994), 167–184.

<sup>244</sup> Berkley Hudson, "O. N. Pruitt's Possum Town: The 'Modest Aspiration and Small Renown' of a Mississippi Photographer, 1915–1960," *Southern Cultures* 13, no. 2 (Summer 2007), 52–77.

In recent years, historians have become more aware of gaps in archival records and the significance of these gaps, referred to as silences by one of the leading advocates of the concept, Michel-Rolph Trouillot. In *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, he proposed that “the production of historical narratives involves the uneven contribution of competing groups and individuals who have unequal access to the means for such production.”<sup>245</sup> Two of the four moments that Trouillot identified as moments in which silences enter the historical record, production and archives, were particularly relevant in the creation of racial and ethnic identity through newspaper and other visual sources.<sup>246</sup> Newspaper reporting of weather-related natural disasters was not limited to text: visual images presented clear messages about construction of identity and the social order. As with the absence of names in many articles about African Americans, Mexican Americans, and ethnic groups, who and what was not represented was often more important than what was recorded in newspaper photographs and graphics.

### **Seen: Drawings in Newspapers**

In the early twentieth century, newspapers generally reserved any sort of photograph or sketch for major events, and only a few of these disasters were well represented visually in the public record, if they were represented at all. For that reason, although the 1900 Galveston Hurricane was not generally evaluated for this thesis, some

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<sup>245</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), xix.

<sup>246</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 26.

visual images from that disaster are included in this chapter. The 1899 summer flood and the April 1900 flood both were graphically depicted through drawings in newspapers, while *Harper's Weekly* published a few photographic images of the 1900 Austin dam failure. Newspaper photographs were published during the December 1913 flood, the August 1915 hurricane, and the September 1921 flood. Only one photograph from 1913 and none from 1921 are suitable for in-depth analysis, however, and the 1904 flooding was not recorded in newspaper graphics in the material examined.

The quality of these early newspaper photographs are often rather poor, and the quality deteriorates to some extent with electronic archiving. Some of the images used have needed corrective formatting to make them clear enough to analyze with any degree of confidence. Many of the early hand-drawn illustrations included in newspapers are actually much clearer, simpler, and easier to analyze than photographs. In analyzing intent in messages, the drawings have certain advantages over photographs; every detail included in a drawing reflected conscious or unconscious intent on the part of the artist to convey his messages. Even the most carefully staged photographs could only be manipulated so far; unintended details may have conveyed messages that the photographer did not intend.

Visual records of the victims themselves were, in fact, far less common than those of structures. Non-white race and ethnicity was often absent from images of relief and recovery efforts even when the majority of victims were non-white. However in 1899, the *Houston Daily Post* sent two artists with their correspondent to the Brookshire region near Houston, Texas, to record the flood. The newspaper published a series of

drawings by these artists illustrating rescue efforts that included African Americans. These illustrations, credited to “Sketches by The Post’s Special Artist” or “Sketched by The Post’s artist,”<sup>247</sup> present a rare opportunity to analyze how race was presented visually in the earliest of these disasters.

In eight drawings analyzed from 1899, six illustrate men in row boats in conditions which project the catastrophic nature of the flooding.<sup>248</sup> The artists commonly used telegraph poles with water almost up to the wires and the tops of trees projecting just above the flood waters to convey the depth of the flooding to the viewer. Artists also illustrated buildings with water up to the eaves of the roofs or with only the peak of the roof projecting above the flood waters to convey the scope of the flood. In the earliest of these drawings, Figure 1 (p. 79,) even the second part of the title conveyed the artist’s intent: “Showing Depth of Water Over What is Usually Dry Land.”<sup>249</sup> The rescuers in the rowboat were centered near the foreground of the drawing with a row of telegraph poles and lines on either side flanked by a row of treetops on either side. These rows funneled the vision of the viewer into a classic artist’s perspective drawing which used

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<sup>247</sup> “Near M., K. and T. Bridge Over the Brazos, Showing Depth of Water Over What is Usually Dry Land,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 6, 1899, p. 1; “Scene at Joe Brantley’s Cotton Gin, Near Brookshire,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 6, 1899, p. 2; “A Rescue Near Brookshire,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 7, 1899, p. 2; “The Overflow at Sartartia,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 8, 1899, p. 1; “The Refugees at Brookshire,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 8, 1899, p. 2; “Frank Spaight, Who is 106 Years Old,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 8, 1899, p. 2; “A Scene at Sartartia,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 9, 1899, p. 4; and “Starting for Little Prairie,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 9, 1899, p. 5.

<sup>248</sup> “Near M., K. and T. Bridge Over the Brazos, Showing Depth of Water Over What is Usually Dry Land,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 6, 1899, p. 1; “Scene at Joe Brantley’s Cotton Gin, Near Brookshire,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 6, 1899, p. 2; “A Rescue Near Brookshire,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 7, 1899, p. 2; “The Overflow at Sartartia,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 8, 1899, p. 1; and “A Scene at Sartartia,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 9, 1899, p. 4.

<sup>249</sup> “Near M., K. and T. Bridge Over the Brazos, Showing Depth of Water Over What is Usually Dry Land,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 6, 1899, p. 1.

parallel lines converging toward the horizon line to convey distance and channel the vision of the viewer.<sup>250</sup>

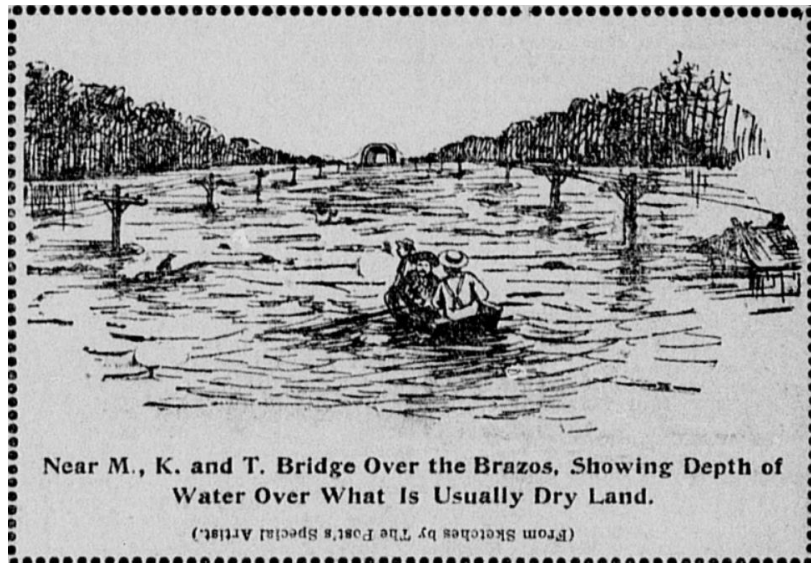


Fig. 1 “Near M., K. and T. Bridge Over the Brazos, Showing Depth of Water Over What is Usually Dry Land,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 6, 1899, p. 1.

Source: Chronicling America archive, Library of Congress Web site, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>, accessed January 14, 2015.

A roof was drawn just above the floodwaters on the right, possibly being carried downstream. Near the row boat and off to the left, the artist included a log floating with a dog, and in the direction the rescuers were rowing was a vague outline which appeared to be an African-American victim in the water.<sup>251</sup> The artist used the most conventional artistic techniques in this drawing, particularly the use of perspective to direct the viewer’s gaze. However, this was not the only one in which a row of poles or fence posts

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<sup>250</sup> Marguerite Helmers, *The Elements of Visual Analysis* (New York: Longman, 2005), 37.

<sup>251</sup> “Near M., K. and T. Bridge Over the Brazos, Showing Depth of Water Over What is Usually Dry Land,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 6, 1899, p. 1.



channels the viewer's gaze; rows of telegraph poles, fence posts, and trees appear as artistic devices in directing the eyes, as do the angles of roof lines and wires.<sup>252</sup>



Fig. 2 “A Rescue Near Brookshire,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 7, 1899, p. 2.  
Source: Chronicling America archive, Library of Congress Web site,  
<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>, accessed January 14, 2015.

In five of the six drawings illustrating rescue work, an African American was in the row boat, which supported the report that nine of the twenty volunteers from Houston were African Americans. Two white men were alone in the sixth drawing, Figure 2 (p. 80.)<sup>253</sup> In four of the five drawings with African Americans, however, there was only one African American in any single boat, and he or they were always manning

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<sup>252</sup> One particularly clear example of this use of line to direct the vision is “The Refugees at Brookshire,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 8, 1899, p. 2.

<sup>253</sup> The article described two local white men, D. C. Parker and B. F. Pennington, in a homemade boat who joined the rescue party from Houston. This was probably the artist's drawing of these two men. Untitled article, *Houston Daily Post*, July 6, 1899, p. 2.

the oars of that boat.<sup>254</sup> In Figure 3 (below,) two, possibly three of the boats have African-American rowers.



Fig. 3. "Starting For Little Prairie," *Houston Daily Post*, July 9, 1899, p. 5.  
Source: Chronicling America archive, Library of Congress Web site,  
<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>, accessed January 14, 2015.

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<sup>254</sup> "Near M., K. and T. Bridge Over the Brazos, Showing Depth of Water Over What is Usually Dry Land," *Houston Daily Post*, July 6, 1899, p. 1; "Scene at Joe Brantley's Cotton Gin, Near Brookshire," *Houston Daily Post*, July 6, 1899, p. 2; "The Overflow at Sartartia," *Houston Daily Post*, July 8, 1899, p. 1; and "A Scene at Sartartia," *Houston Daily Post*, July 9, 1899, p. 4.



Fig. 4. “The Overflow at Sartartia,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 8, 1899, p. 1.  
 Source: Chronicling America archive, Library of Congress Web site,  
<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>, accessed January 14, 2015.

The clothing of these African-American rowers was typically more working class than the white rescuers. In all four drawings which included African Americans but only one boat, Figures 1 (p. 79,) 4 (above,) 5 (p. 83,) and 6 (p. 84,) eight or nine of the ten white men in the boats were wearing a fashionable hat sometimes called a boater while only one African American, in Figure 1, was drawn wearing a boater.<sup>255</sup> One of the other white men and two African Americans in the same drawing, Figure 6, were wearing what appeared to be a somewhat generic western or rural broad brimmed hat with either

<sup>255</sup> A boater was a hat with a round flat short crown and a straight brim, usually white or straw colored with a band trimming the brim, now commonly seen in barbershop quartets, for instance. This was a very middle-class and fashionable hat at the turn of the century. “Near M., K. and T. Bridge Over the Brazos, Showing Depth of Water Over What is Usually Dry Land,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 6, 1899, p. 1; “Scene at Joe Brantley’s Cotton Gin, Near Brookshire,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 6, 1899, p. 2; “The Overflow at Sartartia,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 8, 1899, p. 1; and “A Scene at Sartartia,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 9, 1899, p. 4.

a rounded or shaped crown.<sup>256</sup> One of the ten white men in these four drawings, Figure 1 (p. 79,) was wearing a hat seen only from the underside of the brim.<sup>257</sup>



Fig. 5. "A Scene at Sartartia," *Houston Daily Post*, July 9, 1899, p. 4.  
Source: Chronicling America archive, Library of Congress Web site,  
<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>, accessed January 14, 2015.

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<sup>256</sup> The face of one of the two men I identify as African American is not visible, but one of his hands, holding an oar, was clearly much darker than the hand of the white man seated directly behind him. "Scene at Joe Brantley's Cotton Gin, Near Brookshire," *Houston Daily Post*, July 6, 1899, p. 2.

<sup>257</sup> "Near M., K. and T. Bridge Over the Brazos, Showing Depth of Water Over What is Usually Dry Land," *Houston Daily Post*, July 6, 1899, p. 1.

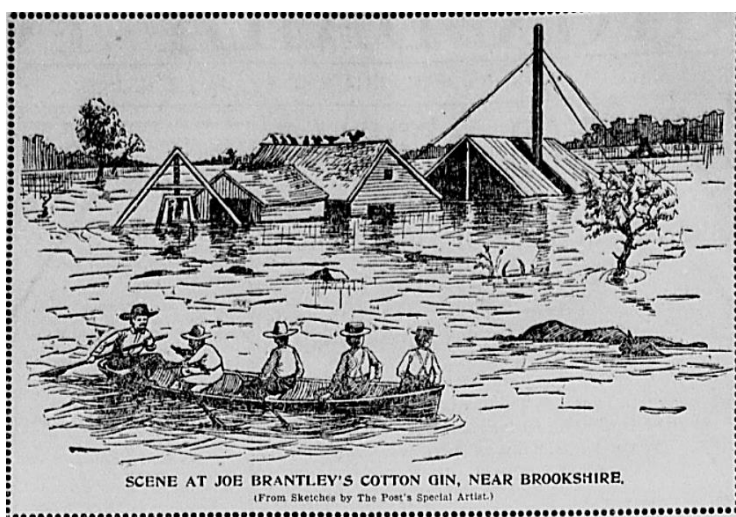


Fig. 6. "Scene at Joe Brantley's Cotton Gin, Near Brookshire," *Houston Daily Post*, July 6, 1899, p. 2.

Source: Chronicling America archive, Library of Congress Web site, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>, accessed January 14, 2015.

In Figure 2 (p. 80) with no African Americans, one of the two white men in the boat as well as the third man being rescued were wearing the generic broad brimmed rural hat with a shaped crown while the other white man in the boat was wearing an indistinct hat with lines that suggest a trilby or fedora, fashionable middle-class hats primarily appearing in advertisements in an urban context.<sup>258</sup>

In Figure 1 (p. 79,) the two white men were wearing jackets of some sort while the African-American rower was in shirt sleeves with suspenders.<sup>259</sup> In the other four drawings with only one boat, the African Americans were in shirt sleeves without suspenders. The only white man who appeared in shirt sleeves without suspenders in these four drawings was one who was steering the largest boat illustrated in Figure 6 (p.

<sup>258</sup> "A Rescue Near Brookshire," *Houston Daily Post*, July 7, 1899, p. 2.

<sup>259</sup> "Near M., K. and T. Bridge Over the Brazos, Showing Depth of Water Over What is Usually Dry Land," *Houston Daily Post*, July 6, 1899, p. 1.

84) while two African Americans rowed.<sup>260</sup> Five white men were in shirt sleeves with suspenders in these four drawings; one was wearing a jacket, and the body of one white man was obscured by the rower's body. Lack of suspenders suggested poverty, which was supported by a non-rescue related drawing from that flood.<sup>261</sup> Although the names of the artists were not recorded, at least one artist inserted what may be a self-portrait: one of the passengers in Figure 4 (p. 82) held a sketch pad and pencil, perhaps a message that either the reporter or the artists took risks with the rescuers.

The artist projects his intentions fairly clearly in Figure 2 (p. 80,) the rescue boat manned only by two white men.<sup>262</sup> The correspondent stated clearly that the small skiff brought from Houston was manned by two men, an African American, Robert Thompson, and a white man who was left unnamed to protect the fact he was unskilled with a boat.<sup>263</sup> The other boat was four oared, and based on Figure 6 (p. 84,) required two men to row and a third to steer.<sup>264</sup> Although not identified in the drawing itself, the men in Figure 2 were probably meant to be the only other rescuers mentioned in the report, the two local men identified as, "Messrs. D. C. Parker and B. F. Pennington."<sup>265</sup> They were supposedly in a boat they built themselves in a few hours, but the boat in the drawing was almost identical to the two man skiff brought from Houston. While the occupants and victim were almost the only white men shown in shirt sleeves without

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<sup>260</sup> "Scene at Joe Brantley's Cotton Gin, Near Brookshire," *Houston Daily Post*, July 6, 1899, p. 2.

<sup>261</sup> "The Refugees at Brookshire," *Houston Daily Post*, July 8, 1899, p. 2.

<sup>262</sup> "A Rescue Near Brookshire," *Houston Daily Post*, July 7, 1899, p. 2.

<sup>263</sup> Untitled article, *Houston Daily Post*, July 6, 1899, p. 2.

<sup>264</sup> Untitled article, *Houston Daily Post*, July 6, 1899, p. 2 and "Scene at Joe Brantley's Cotton Gin, Near Brookshire," *Houston Daily Post*, July 6, 1899, p. 2.

<sup>265</sup> Untitled article, *Houston Daily Post*, July 6, 1899, p. 2.

suspenders, one man did appear to be wearing what may have been a rather fashionable hat.<sup>266</sup> Key to this drawing, though, was that this is the only actual rescue of someone in a clearly precarious position (in a tree top) illustrated by an artist. While the Houston rescuers did join forces briefly with Parker and Pennington, however, no rescue of anyone from a tree was described.<sup>267</sup>

Figure 3 (p. 81,) the sixth drawing of rescue boat crews from late in the flood, is worth treating separately. Five two-man row boats were shown at Little Prairie Texas, rescuing African Americans from either the loft of a barn or the upper story of a cotton gin which appeared to hold dozens of people of whom only their dark complexions are identifiable. Three of the five boats again had African American oarsmen in shirt sleeves without suspenders and wearing the broad brimmed rural hats. One white man in a boat with an African American was wearing a jacket and a boater, while at least one other white man appeared to be wearing a jacket.<sup>268</sup> At least one of the men may have been wearing a uniform, but only a few of the men in the foreground were distinctly visible. The clothing of the men in one boat suggests the locals, Parker and Pennington, including a distinctive pipe in the mouth of one of the men, but the man with a pipe in

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<sup>266</sup> "A Rescue Near Brookshire," *Houston Daily Post*, July 7, 1899, p. 2.

<sup>267</sup> By July 9, 1899, these original rescuers had clearly been joined by other boats because the drawing in Figure 3 (p. 7) included five two-man boats. Untitled article, *Houston Daily Post*, July 6, 1899, p. 2; and "Starting For Little Prairie," *Houston Daily Post*, July 9, 1899, p. 5.

<sup>268</sup> "Starting for Little Prairie," *Houston Daily Post*, July 9, 1899, p. 5.

Figure 2 (p. 80) had dark hair, a moustache, a long neck, and a distinctive jawline which did not match the man in this drawing.<sup>269</sup>

While this appears to be a rescue, it was clear the boat nearest the building was unloading supplies. However none of the other boats appeared to be carrying supplies even though their bows were still pointed toward the building. If the artist rendered these boats correctly, none of them could have carried more than two adult passengers, and there were certainly more than ten people visible in the doors and on the stairs from the loft.<sup>270</sup> Either the artist confused a rescue operation with the delivery of relief supplies, which does not fit most of the narratives about work in the Brookshire area, or only some people were being removed, and supplies were being delivered for those who would have to wait for a later rescue trip.

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<sup>269</sup> It was possible, of course, that the artists were unconcerned with accuracy in appearance. “A Rescue Near Brookshire,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 7, 1899, p. 2, and “Starting for Little Prairie,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 9, 1899, p. 5.

<sup>270</sup> “Starting for Little Prairie,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 9, 1899, p. 5.





Fig. 7. “The Refugees at Brookshire,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 8, 1899, p. 2.  
 Source: Chronicling America archive, Library of Congress Web site,  
<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>, accessed January 14, 2015.

Figure 7 (above) was unique: the artist recorded African-American refugees on a railroad track, apparently being guided to safety with floodwaters on either side.<sup>271</sup> A white man clearly was supervising their evacuation. He was wearing a broad-brimmed rural style hat, a perfectly-fitted collared shirt and suspenders, and, despite the water and mud visible in the drawing, clean, well-cut pants with crisply turned cuffs, and nicely fitted shoes or boots. The trousers of two African-American men were completely visible; both had ragged, unhemmed bottom edges rather than turned cuffs; one man’s pants were visibly patched. Both men were in shirt sleeves and carried bundles; neither wore suspenders. A man standing at the front right of the drawing, only visible to the

<sup>271</sup> “The Refugees at Brookshire,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 8, 1899, p. 2.

knees, appeared to be an older African-American man with neatly cuffed sleeves on his shirt, though without suspenders. He was not carrying bundles, suggesting he was also there to help supervise the refugees.

There were two ragged, visibly dirty children at the front of the drawing. The boy was wearing an un-collared shirt and knee-length, ragged pants and a broad-brimmed adult's hat which appeared too large. The girl was wearing a collared knee-length dress that had a distinct resemblance to the men's shirts and her head was uncovered. Both children were barefoot, although the men wore shoes. The final figure at the front of this drawing was a stout African American woman dressed in what appeared to be a plain gingham cotton dress with a head scarf. She was carrying a pail and bundles and may have been barefoot. The hem of her dress and the cuffs of her long sleeves were not clearly visible. The animals at the front of the drawing are also worth analyzing. A bone-thin hound, almost starved in appearance, stood just in front of the little girl while a chicken was shadowed to the right of the dog. Two young pigs appeared on the left of the drawing.



Fig. 8. “Frank Spaight, Who is 106 Years Old,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 8, 1899, p. 2.  
 Source: Chronicling America archive, Library of Congress Web site,  
<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>, accessed January 14, 2015.

Perhaps what was most significant, though, was what did not appear in the drawings. Six brief lines in the *Houston Daily Post* summarized the work of John Williams, described as an “old, quiet colored man,” who “by himself brought fifty-two people, men, women and children, out of danger.”<sup>272</sup> This can be compared to the eight lines of the paragraph devoted to the white man who was incompetent with a handling a boat.<sup>273</sup> But no drawing of John Williams was apparently published while a rescued African-American man, Figure 8 (above,) was included solely as a curiosity of age, as

<sup>272</sup> “At and Near Sugarland,” *Houston Daily Post*, July 8, 1899, pg. 2.

<sup>273</sup> Untitled article, *Houston Daily Post*, July 6, 1899, p. 2.

were drawings of animals floating down the river.<sup>274</sup> John Williams' tribute was limited to "This old man is certainly entitled to great credit for his brave deeds."<sup>275</sup>

The 1900 Galveston hurricane was also primarily visually reported in drawings. Interestingly, most of the images for this disaster appeared in the Houston *Daily Post*, with few if any images in other newspapers, with the exception of a few drawings and some poor quality photographs in the Dallas *Morning News*. The drawings often portrayed people at the site of the disaster far more clearly than the photographs, and as with the 1899 flood drawings, anything included in a drawing was done intentionally and reflected the artist's messages.

One of the earliest drawings of the storm damages, Figure 9 (p. 92,) shows several people looking at a damaged church. There are three men, all white and all well-dressed in clean, well-tailored clothing. Each man wears a suit jacket, placing him outside the laboring classes, and each wears a stylish hat. One man is holding the hand of a small girl who is wearing a neat dress or possibly a coat over a dress, with some sort of edging at the bottom. While she is white, her legs are dark, suggesting stockings. She also wears a nice, rather stylish hat, though her height suggests the girl is supposed to be less than ten years old. Standing behind this pair is a white woman in a neat, light-colored fashionable blouse tucked into the waistband of a dark, tailored skirt. Her hair is pinned up very neatly and is topped with an elaborate hat with plumes or flowers of

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<sup>274</sup> "Frank Spaight, Who is 106 Years Old," Houston *Daily Post*, July 8, 1899, p. 2.

<sup>275</sup> "At and Near Sugarland," Houston *Daily Post*, July 8, 1899, pg. 2.

some sort. In all, her appearance is very stylish, while her position behind the others suggests properly modest behavior.<sup>276</sup>



Fig. 9. “Ruins of the First Baptist Church on the Corner of Fannin Street and Rusk Avenue,” *Houston Daily Post*, September 10, 1900, p. 3.

Source: Chronicling America archive, Library of Congress Web site, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>, accessed November 9, 2014.

Clearly none of these onlookers were intended to suggest people assisting with the disaster. In fact, gender and age were used to symbolically convey Galveston’s plight in the aftermath. One less-than-subtle cartoon, Figure 10 (p. 93,) illustrated a woman floating at sea clinging to debris with a sash that said “Galveston.” This white woman is waving a piece of cloth desperately, possibly part of one of her sleeves which appear to have been torn from her dress. Her hair is loose and whipping around in the gale while

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<sup>276</sup> “Ruins of the First Baptist Church on the Corner of Fannin Street and Rusk Avenue,” *Houston Daily Post*, September 10, 1900, p. 3.

ships are shown sinking in the background of the cartoon. Supported on the debris and protected by the woman is a small unconscious child, possibly a girl, wearing a thin dress and possibly shoes.<sup>277</sup> Another image illustrated several bodies sprawled on debris in Galveston, all white, with a woman's body in the foreground.<sup>278</sup>



Fig. 10. "Help!," *Houston Daily Post*, September 16, 1900, p 1.  
Source: Chronicling America archive, Library of Congress Web site,  
<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>, accessed November 9, 2014.

Cleanup and restoration work was the most common subject in photographs and drawings after structural damages, but some images included the *white* human costs. In a very simple sketch in the *Dallas Morning News*, Figure 11 (p. 94,) two white men drive a donkey cart with bodies stacked in two layers and covered with blankets. White feet are shown protruding out the ends of the blankets, and in one case, the leg from mid-thigh is

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<sup>277</sup> "Help!," *Houston Daily Post*, September 16, 1900, p 1.

<sup>278</sup> "The Ruin Wrought, Showing Bodies Among the Wreckage," *Houston Daily Post*, September 13, 1900, p 1.

visible of one body. According to the caption, these bodies were taken out to sea on barges for sea burial, leaving the impression that most or all victims were white.<sup>279</sup>

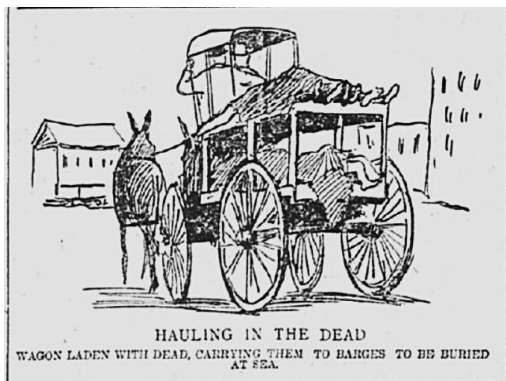


Fig. 11. “Hauling in the Dead,” *Dallas Morning News*, September 14, 1900, p 5.  
Source: America’s Historical Newspapers, Archive of Americana Web site,  
<http://infoweb.newsbank.com.lib-ezproxy.tamu.edu:2048/iw-search/we/HistArchive>, accessed February 17, 2015.

African Americans did appear in the drawings, but in very distinct roles that reflect the racialized newspaper stories of this disaster. In Figure 12 (p. 95,) five men appeared in the foreground of the drawing. In the very center, a well-dressed white man in a suit jacket and boater hat is surveying the damages with his foot resting on a block or box. Another white man, dressed in what appeared to be a uniform, stands to this man’s right. His pants were rolled up almost to his knees and he may have been barefoot. However, he was holding a rifle with a fixed bayonet against his shoulder, and he was pointing to an African-American workman at the far left foreground, apparently giving him directions. The African American was barefoot with his pants rolled up, and wore suspenders and a relatively plain hat. He was holding a board, the only figure in the

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<sup>279</sup> “Hauling in the Dead,” *Dallas Morning News*, September 14, 1900, p 5.

front of this image who was actually engaged in cleanup work, and the image clearly suggested that only the guard's presence was forcing him to work. Two other white men in the photograph are dressed somewhat more casually than the well-dressed white man, but somewhat better than the African American, and both of them appeared to be observing the work rather than participating. There was possibly a sixth indistinct figure in the far distance moving some debris, but if so, he was also African American.<sup>280</sup>



Fig. 12. "Postoffice Street, Looking West From Twentieth Street," *Houston Daily Post*, September 14, 1900, p 1.

Source: Chronicling America archive, Library of Congress Web site, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>, accessed November 9, 2014.

A second drawing, Figure 13 (p. 95,) published in that same newspaper echoed the same message. Three men, all African American were clearing away a huge pile of debris from what appeared to be devastated buildings. Two of these men were

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<sup>280</sup> "Postoffice Street, Looking West From Twentieth Street," *Houston Daily Post*, September 14, 1900, p 1.



workmen's caps, the third wore an indistinct dark broad brimmed hat. All three of these men were in shirt sleeves, with the sleeves rolled up past their elbows. Two were shown primarily in profile, but the third wore a pair of pants with a poorly fitted waist and rather coarsely made suspenders. The other two figures in the drawing were white men in military uniforms—with particularly clear details of the uniform of the man in the foreground—each holding a rifle and clearly supervising the African-American workmen. While one leans on his rifle in a relaxed posture, the other holds his rifle in a semi-ready position, as if expecting to need it at any moment.<sup>281</sup>

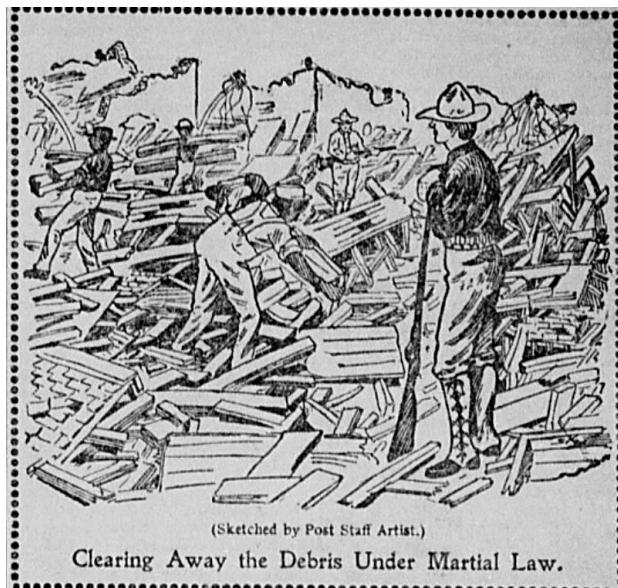


Fig. 13. “Clearing Away the Debris Under Martial Law,” *Houston Daily Post*, September 14, 1900, p 7.

Source: Chronicling America archive, Library of Congress Web site, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>, accessed November 9, 2014.

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<sup>281</sup> “Clearing Away the Debris Under Martial Law,” *Houston Daily Post*, September 14, 1900, p 7.

In case the message of white men firmly supervising reluctant African-American laborers escaped the reader, the title of the drawing specified that the work was being performed under martial law.<sup>282</sup> However, Bixel and Turner found many references of African Americans volunteering free labor early in the disaster, such as the black Cotton Jammers' Association, or producing the majority of those accepting paid work; "in the first call for crews hired to clear debris from Tremont Street, fourteen of the twenty-five recruits were black."<sup>283</sup> The artists clearly intended to convey the message through illustrations that African Americans were only willing to assist with recovery under threat of force. While one of those messages was clearly a reassurance that order was being maintained, just as clearly two of the other messages were that African Americans were the disorder that had to be controlled and that white control was what they required.

### **Unseen: Newspaper Photographs**

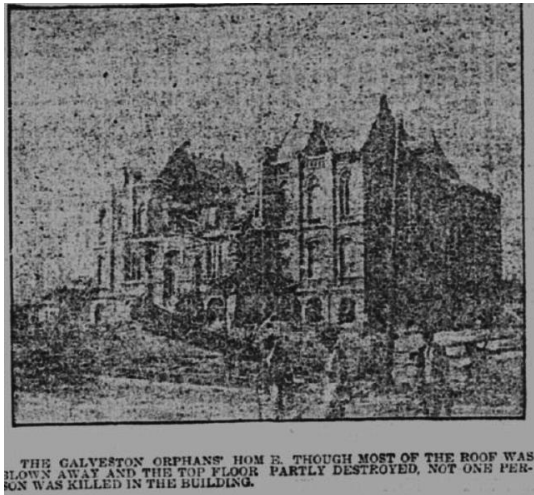
These drawings seem to have been published during a transitional period between the use of drawings and photographs in newspapers; portrait photographs appeared in the *Houston Daily Post* during the hurricane, primarily as part of political and society stories and in an occasional advertisement. The *Dallas Morning News* published few images outside of advertisements during the hurricane and recovery, and

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<sup>282</sup> "Clearing Away the Debris Under Martial Law," *Houston Daily Post*, September 14, 1900, p 7.

<sup>283</sup> Bixel and Turner, *Galveston and the 1900 Storm*, 78.

few illustrations on any subject appeared during the 1900 Galveston hurricane, though one or two images which appeared to be photographs rendered into drawings were published.<sup>284</sup> However while a few drawings appeared on September 14, 1900, in the *Dallas Morning News*, only Figure 11 (p. 19) showed anything other than structural damage. Eight photographs did appear on page three in the Sunday edition on September 16, 1900 and two more on page two on September 17, 1900, also focused on property damages.



THE GALVESTON ORPHANS' HOME. THOUGH MOST OF THE ROOF WAS BLOWN AWAY AND THE TOP FLOOR PARTLY DESTROYED, NOT ONE PERSON WAS KILLED IN THE BUILDING.

Fig. 14. "The Galveston Orphans' Home," *Dallas Morning News*, September 16, 1900, p 3.

Source: America's Historical Newspapers, Archive of Americana Web site,

<http://infoweb.newsbank.com.lib-ezproxy.tamu.edu:2048/iw-search/we/HistArchive>, accessed February 17, 2015.

Unfortunately these photographs are such poor quality that little except the outline of buildings can be determined. Using photographic corrections for contrast and brightness, several vague figures can be made out standing in the foreground of one

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<sup>284</sup> "Horseless Fire Engine," *Dallas Morning News*, September 12, 1900, p. 8.

photograph, Figure 14 (p. 98,) a method that has had to be applied to all newspaper photographs used here. One man on the right side of the group in this photograph appeared to be wearing a dark suit jacket.<sup>285</sup> A photograph that was generally better quality was supposed to show men searching for bodies, but even with correction, no figures can be made out.<sup>286</sup>

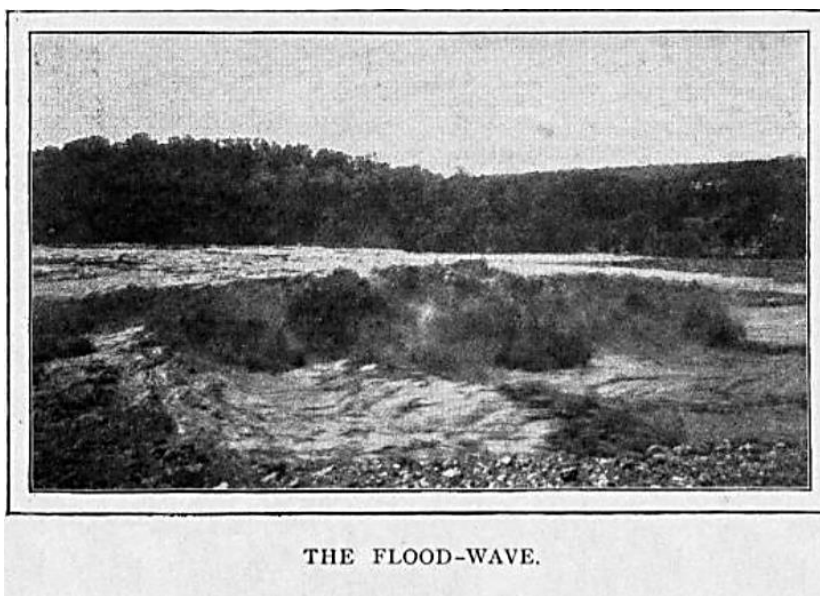


Fig. 15. "The Flood-Wave," *Harper's Weekly*, April 28, 1900, p. 392.  
Source: HarpWeek Web site, <http://app.harpweek.com.lib-ezproxy.tamu.edu:2048/>, accessed January 13, 2015.

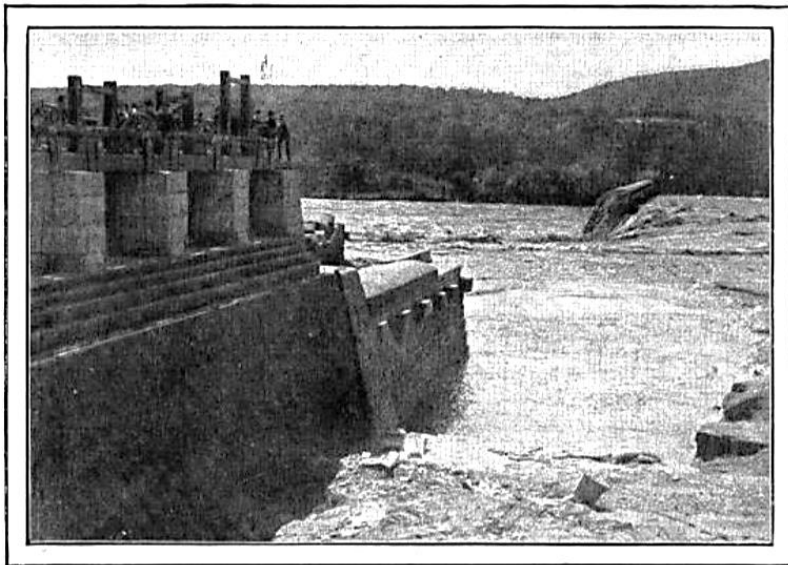
During the April 1900 flood, the images in newspapers, almost all drawings, were limited, not to victims and rescuers, but to the Austin dam itself and the wave of water. The *Harper's Weekly* story included rare photographs which were surprisingly

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<sup>285</sup> "The Galveston Orphans' Home," *Dallas Morning News*, September 16, 1900, p. 3.

<sup>286</sup> This photograph is omitted as no significant details are visible. "View of the Wreckage and Debris at the Foot of Thirty-Ninth Street Showing Men Searching for Bodies among the Ruins," *Dallas Morning News*, September 17, 1900, p. 2.

good quality compared to any other newspaper photographs examined through the 1921 flood, but these photographs were focused on the dam. Figure 15 (p. 99) was supposed to be a photograph of the wave let loose by the dam failure, unfortunately without enough context to judge the height of the wave and without the identity of the photographer.<sup>287</sup> Figure 16 (below) showed the gap in the dam left by the section which gave way. No drawing or photograph examined included victims or rescue efforts.<sup>288</sup>



VIEW FROM THE SHORE, LOOKING WEST.

Fig. 16. "View From the Shore, Looking West," *Harper's Weekly*, April 28, 1900, p. 392.  
Source: HarpWeek Web site, <http://app.harpweek.com.lib-ezproxy.tamu.edu:2048/>, accessed January 13, 2015.

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<sup>287</sup> "The Flood-Wave," *Harper's Weekly*, April 28, 1900, p. 392.

<sup>288</sup> "View From the Shore, Looking West," *Harper's Weekly*, April 28, 1900, p. 392.



Fig. 17. “Wreckage of Surf Bath House on Galveston Beach,” photograph by Gildersleeve, Waco, *Dallas Morning News*, August 22, 1915, p 6.

Source: America’s Historical Newspapers, Archive of Americana Web site, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com.lib-ezproxy.tamu.edu:2048/iw-search/we/HistArchive>, accessed November 11, 2014.

During the hurricane in August 1915, almost every photograph represented property damage. Figure 17 (above) was representative of these photographs, capturing the debris from beach structures after the hurricane, with no human figures in the photograph.<sup>289</sup> When figures were included, such as Figure 18 (p. 102) in which what may have been white men were surveying the damages, the photographs were either poor quality originally or have deteriorated.<sup>290</sup> While studio photographs were relatively common in the newspapers, landscape photographs that included human figures appeared to be relatively rare, a trend that was repeated in 1921.

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<sup>289</sup> “Wreckage of Surf Bath House on Galveston Beach,” photograph by Gildersleeve, Waco, *Dallas Morning News*, August 22, 1915, p 6.

<sup>290</sup> “Wharf Wreckage Scene at Galveston,” *Dallas Morning News*, August 22, 1915, p 6.



Fig. 18. “Wharf Wreckage Scene at Galveston,” *Dallas Morning News*, August 22, 1915, p 6.  
Source: America’s Historical Newspapers, Archive of Americana Web site,  
<http://infoweb.newsbank.com.lib-ezproxy.tamu.edu:2048/iw-search/we/HistArchive>, accessed February 22, 2015.

While technical difficulties in producing landscape photographs that included human figures may have played a role in the focus of these photographs, these cannot have been the sole reason; landscape photographs including humans appeared for other stories during the 1915 hurricane.<sup>291</sup> But clearly institutional structures spoke loudly through this visual focus on major property losses—almost exclusively those of white, middle or upper-class men, rather than human loss, rescue, relief, or recovery.

Institutional silences like this supported the construction of identities of race, ethnicity, class, and gender in early-twentieth-century newspaper reports of weather-related natural disasters in Texas and the southwest borderlands. The language in newspaper reports on disasters reflected the rise of Jim Crow laws through the shift from a multiracial and

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<sup>291</sup> One example was “Cotton Warehouse at Wolfe City,” *Dallas Morning News*, September 18, 1915, p. 6.

multiethnic identification of victims to a hardened tri-racial system by 1921, largely reflected through silence in naming victims who were considered non-white. But it is perhaps the graphical silences which were most significant.

### **Conclusion: The Forgotten**

One of the most profound examples of graphical silences revolved around a photograph from the worst flood in Texas history, the disastrous December 1913 flooding that involved almost every river in Texas and Oklahoma, and extended into areas of Louisiana, Arkansas, and Missouri. On Sunday, December 14, 1913, almost two weeks into the flooding, the Dallas *Morning News* ran a photograph of the Stone family's dog, Figure 19 (p. 104,) as part of a continuing story about the first victims of the flooding, the Polk family of Belton, Texas. During the search for the body of Mrs. W. C. (Yettie) Polk, this dog on the south bank of the still-flooded Nolan Creek attracted the attention of searchers on the north bank to her body by barking and whining. These men were unable to cross the swollen creek, but the barking also attracted the attention of African-American searchers on the south bank. These searchers put Mrs. Polk's body in a rowboat and tried to cross to the (white) searchers, but midway, their boat overturned, washing body and boat downstream. The African-American searchers, who were never named in any newspaper article in this analysis, instantly vanished from



newspaper reports the moment the boat overturned. Their role, even their survival, only mattered as long as they were in contact with her body.<sup>292</sup>



Fig. 19. "Dog Which Assisted in Recovery of Woman's Body from Belton Flood," Dallas *Morning News*, December 14, 1913, p. 4.

Source: America's Historical Newspapers, Archive of Americana Web site, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com.lib-ezproxy.tamu.edu:2048/iw-search/we/HistArchive>, accessed October 13, 2014.

Images used in reporting of weather-related natural disasters in newspapers emphasized and echoed the text in newspaper reports. When African Americans appeared in drawings, they were consistently portrayed as laborers at best, and

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<sup>292</sup> "Dog Which Assisted in Recovery of Woman's Body from Belton Flood," Dallas *Morning News*, December 14, 1913, p. 4 and "Spend Night in Terror," Dallas *Morning News*, December 4, 1913, p. 2.

sometimes in ambivalent settings that suggested they were lazy or even criminal, especially when associated with racialized stories on looting. Other images reinforced stereotypes of African-American farm laborers. African Americans were consistently shown engaged in heavy physical labor, though sometimes under threat of force, while working class whites who appeared were never under threat of force and were never engaged in heavy physical labor. Middle class whites and authority figures were illustrated supervising and directing this labor, set apart by their clothing and stance. Later photographs, on the other hand, were notable for what did not appear—the victims—as well as for what did, which were property damages.

Natural disasters grip the public imagination for a brief time, and the public follows these disasters avidly through media. These moments provide opportunities to manipulate public perceptions of identity, both through what is said and what is not, what is seen and what is unseen. While the disasters themselves are often quickly forgotten, the words and images remain in the public memory. Visual media, particularly drawings, were a powerful means of manipulating race during disaster, creating a distorted image of African Americans as childlike, incompetent, lazy, poor, and possibly dangerous, only kept in order by the supervision and control of whites. Analyzing these images provide us with the context in which to evaluate modern disaster reporting.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

The silences in the visual images were parallel to the historical silences that have existed on these weather-related natural disasters themselves. The standard histories of flood control development on these rivers almost entirely ignore the floods themselves between 1899 and 1921. James H. Banks and John E. Babcock's *Corralling the Colorado: The First Fifty Years of the Colorado River Authority* spent several pages discussing the planning and construction of the first Austin dam, but only briefly discussed the failure of the dam itself in 1900, and essentially ignore the flood it created for those living downstream and the victims themselves.<sup>293</sup> They expended two sentences to the history of flooding on the Colorado generally, asserting that there were twenty-two major floods on the river between 1843 and 1938, then a single line about the April 1915 flood—in relation to an attempt to rebuild the Austin Dam.<sup>294</sup>

John A. Adams, Jr., in *Damming the Colorado: The Rise of the Lower Colorado River Authority, 1933–1939*, addressed flood victims at least briefly, but was vague in defining how he arrived at the number of major floods on the Colorado River between 1900 and 1923.<sup>295</sup> He also focused the bulk of his attention on the 1900 Austin dam failure and the April 1915 flood, completely omitting any mention of the 1913 flood

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<sup>293</sup> James H. Banks and John E. Babcock, *Corralling the Colorado* (Austin: Eakin, 1988), 19–24.

<sup>294</sup> Banks and Babcock, *Corralling the Colorado*, 3 and 26.

<sup>295</sup> John A. Adams, Jr., *Damming the Colorado: The Rise of the Lower Colorado River Authority, 1933–1939* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1990), 9.

which was the most disastrous and was also the one most associated with losses to African-American farm laborers.<sup>296</sup>

A dissertation by Comer Clay on the Lower Colorado River Authority included one of the few mentions of the 1913 flood, and it is limited to two paragraphs.<sup>297</sup> This brief description began on the same page in which he categorically, but incorrectly, states that “major floods are caused by downpours of rain from tropical hurricanes blown in from the Gulf of Mexico,” which was an ironic juxtaposition because the December 1913 flood had its source in prolonged heavy rainfall that actually dated back to September and culminated in several days of unusually heavy rains that had absolutely no relationship to any tropical storm.<sup>298</sup> Like Banks, Babcock, and Adams, he also was also vague on defining what constituted a major flood, concluding there were fourteen between 1843 and 1933.<sup>299</sup> Clay did include more detail about individual floods, but again, remarkably little about the damages and victims.

Works on the Brazos River and the Brazos River Authority demonstrated the same silences. Kenneth E. Hendrickson, Jr., in *The Waters of the Brazos: A History of the Brazos River Authority 1929–1979*, mentioned the 1913 flood briefly once, then included a single paragraph focused on property and agricultural damages.<sup>300</sup> The only other flood from 1899–1922 that he specifically included was the 1921 flood, mentioned

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<sup>296</sup> Adams, *Damming the Colorado*, 10–12.

<sup>297</sup> Comer Clay, *The Lower Colorado River Authority: A Study in Politics and Public Administration* (Austin: University of Texas, 1948), 13–14.

<sup>298</sup> Clay, *The Lower Colorado River Authority*, 13.

<sup>299</sup> Clay, *The Lower Colorado River Authority*, 16.

<sup>300</sup> Kenneth E. Hendrickson, Jr., *The Waters of the Brazos: A History of the Brazos River Authority* (Waco, TX: Texian Press, 1981), 12–13.

twice in single sentences.<sup>301</sup> He did include a photograph from each of these floods, both of the San Gabriel tributary to the Brazos and focused on bridges, not victims, and certainly not on poor farm laborers or racial or ethnic victims.<sup>302</sup>

Yet clearly the sources and the archives for these disasters exist. Hundreds of newspaper articles can be found by examining no more than a handful of newspapers for most of these disasters. These historians clearly were aware of some of these specific events and chose to remain silent about them despite the significance of a series of major floods to the momentum that flood control efforts gained afterwards. In large part this seems to be the result of historians focusing on property damage and influential figures rather than the overwhelming majority of flooding victims.

Newspaper reporting of weather-related natural disasters, whether textual or visual, was heavily racialized. The language used was often specific and intended to convey ideas about race, ethnicity, class, and gender. What was intentionally omitted, particularly names, was often as important as what was said; stripping non-white victims of identity also stripped them of individuality, allowing the easier manipulation of perceptions of a faceless, homogeneous group. White victims who were named without overt racial language created an individuality that was in direct contrast to those who were racialized, particularly nameless African-American farm laborers.

Racial identifications constricted over time, from the multiple class-related identifications of African Americans in 1899 and 1900 and the multiethnic

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<sup>301</sup> Hendrickson, *The Waters of the Brazos*, 12 and 14.

<sup>302</sup> Hendrickson, *The Waters of the Brazos*, photographs between chapters three and four.

identifications that persisted through 1913 to the more rigid, triracial system of identification by 1921. Also by 1921 Mexican migrants and Mexican Americans occupied a middle ground between whites and African Americans which was further divided by class and geography. Rural, presumably immigrant farm laborers were treated similarly to African Americans while urban, presumably more permanent residents were given the individuality of white victims.

By embracing ethnic victims and some Mexicans as white or near white, elites' control over labor was reinforced. Labor itself, through class perceptions, was also racialized, particularly during disasters when cleanup and reconstruction labor was coerced. This extended to visual messages in which obvious physical labor was performed almost exclusively by African Americans. This message was sometimes reinforced visually by the demonstration of force through weapons in white military hands overseeing this labor. These visualizations conveyed a dual message: to those in the laboring class, that resistance was dangerous, while to middle and upper class whites, that order was being restored and "dangerous" elements were under control.

I began with Steinberg's proposition that disasters have been a tool for various political interests,<sup>303</sup> and while the evidence is convincing that these natural disasters were used as a tool to build a more clearly defined racial and social hierarchy, we should also be cautious not to make conclusions that are too sweeping. The victims may have used these disasters to push back at those in power, but the record of that resistance can only be found in occasional hints in the newspaper reporting. Some of this reporting may

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<sup>303</sup> Steinberg, *Acts of God*, xii.

have been proactive and deliberate in redefining and reinforcing racial categories, but some of the writers and editors in moments of crises may have been more unconsciously reflecting the dominant white society, its beliefs in innate racial superiority, and perhaps their fears about maintaining control. It can be dangerous to homogenize the motives of these correspondents, reporters, and editors and forget that they had the same complex individuality as the disaster victims whose individuality they denied.

Because correspondents were rarely named, the number of individuals actually responsible for these reports is probably irrecoverable, especially in later disasters when virtually identical articles ran in newspapers in several states.<sup>304</sup> However whatever their intentions, this reporting clearly reflected and influenced perceptions and construction of race, ethnicity, class, and gender as it was transformed and reified during the first two decades of the 1900s. Textual and visual reporting were racialized both in describing individual and corporate victims, including the absence of language or images in order to remove individual identity from the most racialized victims. Issues of control of labor and of “unruly” and potentially dangerous non-white or working class victims during this period influenced the reporting as well. This was an historical era in which large scale movements of rural laborers to cities and from South to North and West began to take place. Newspaper reporting was also influenced by international crises, including the volatile Mexican Revolution after 1910 which drove migration across the border and by the events of World War I. The newspaper reporting of these weather-related natural

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<sup>304</sup> This was most likely due to the use of wire services of some sort. Newspapers and wire services were expanding from telegraphed reports to telephone and shared photographs. Jonathan Coopersmith, “From Lemons to Lemonade,” *American Journalism* 17, no. 4 (Fall 2000), 56–57.

disasters in this borderlands region gains its larger significance in this context: those in power tried to manipulate these events to create a new hierarchy of control in order to protect their power and to resist a rapidly changing economic, ideological, and political global climate.



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<sup>305</sup> Archives and URLs do not appear with each individual newspaper article in order to simplify the individual citations. Because each newspaper was accessed through a single archive, this summary should be adequate to identify the source of all articles. Some of these newspapers were surveyed for racialized language relating to these weather-related natural disasters, but were not specifically quoted.

<sup>306</sup> While this newspaper was accessed from Proquest's database in December 2014, it appears to no longer be available through Proquest.

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