

Washed-out highway south of San Francisco

The Velez home, below, where three died



On Aptos Creek in devastated Santa Cruz County, a house bisected by the tide of muck

The Rains Came, the Mud Flowed

Death and destruction in Northern California

"It had all the appearances of a very normal storm as it came across the Pacific," said National Weather Service Meteorologist Richard Wagoner. But the storm was far from normal, and so was its nightmarish impact. The extraordinarily heavy rains that poured down on Northern California last week—in some areas, more than a foot in 32 hours—followed weeks of rain that had saturated the po-clay earth. On Monday, mountain-sides began turning to mud, flowing in thick torrents over towns and rural houses in their paths. In wealthy Marin County, just north of San Francisco, more than 80 houses were destroyed by mud slides. In Santa Cruz County, to the south, where thousands of people were trapped in their homes without power or water, authorities suspect that perhaps more than a dozen bodies remain buried.

At week's end the death toll approached 30, and property damage (500 houses and businesses destroyed) was expected to reach \$280 million. Five counties were declared federal disaster areas, and 2,000 state workers, as well as 200 National Guardsmen, were engaged in the daunting rescue and cleanup operations.

In Santa Cruz County, the greatest devastation occurred along Love Creek, near the town of Ben Lomond (pop.

2,793). Naomi Taylor says she heard a rumbling and looked outside. There, 20 ft. away, a 15-ft.-high tide of water and mud cascaded past, carrying her car with it. Her house was unscathed. Lester Grizzell, 54, slept through the mud slide. Says he: "It snuck in so smooth and slippery we didn't even hear it." But when he awoke, surrounding houses were gone. In another Santa Cruz town, Felton (pop. 2,062), John Haskins and his family fled from their home as it filled with muck. A salvage attempt proved fruitless. Says Haskins, 33: "Every time we get feeling bad about some of the things we lost, I just think that I have my three children."

Up the coast in Pacifica (pop. 36,866), a middle-class suburb just south of San Francisco, William and Barbara Velez had no such redemption. The mud sent a neighboring house crashing into theirs. The couple escaped, but all three Velez children, ages three to 14, died beneath 100 tons of mud.

The destruction was almost as severe north of the city. Highway 101 was made impassable by mud and floodwater along several stretches. The highway's link to San Francisco, the Golden Gate Bridge, was closed for only the third time since its opening in 1937, forcing thousands to take ferryboats. In Sausalito, a mud flow

Muddy but fortunate: in East San Rafael, a house still stands and cars are unburied



brought one hillside house slamming down onto two others, killing a woman. Two hundred yards away, Writer Brian Van der Horst watched. Says he: "It happened so fast that two rooms from the falling house were flashing with lights as they came down the hill. Mud was running like molten lava." Surgeon Robert Rabkin had planned to spend Monday night in his Sausalito condominium, but decided at the last moment to attend a hospital meeting miles away. Leaving home he had a foretaste of disaster: the stream running through the property was a dark, muddy brown. When Rabkin returned seven hours later, his house and car were buried. Says he: "I'd be dead if I'd been at home. There was nothing left, just emptiness and a wall of mud." Around seaside Point Reyes (pop. 700), farmers shot their cattle as the animals drifted helpless and flailing down flood-swollen creeks.

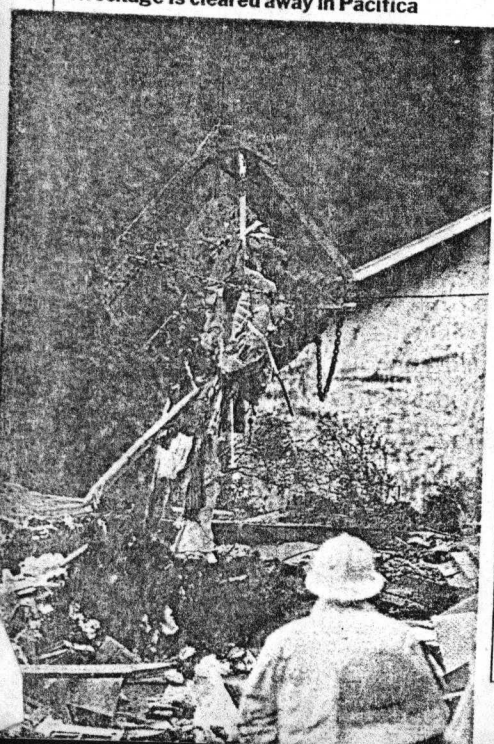
California's weather catastrophe was only the most extreme of the storms that struck the country last week. The winds from the Pacific blew eastward, covering parts of the Rocky Mountains and Sierra Nevada with as much as 10 ft. of snow, and triggering more than 100 avalanches in Colorado alone; one skier died there.

Farther east, Milwaukee suffered its worst blizzard in 35 years, with 33 m.p.h. winds driving 16 in. of fresh snow; 6 in. had fallen earlier. The city was paralyzed for a day. Georgia was beset by heavy rains and flooding, and a tornado whirled through Newton, Miss. (pop. 3,556), killing one man and injuring 17.

As the weather calmed and recovery went on, Westerners, at least, could look forward to some consolation in the spring. The rains and mountain snows are likely to end the region's two-year-old drought.

—By Kurt Andersen. Reported by Carol Foote/Santa Cruz and Michael Moritz/San Francisco

Wreckage is cleared away in Pacifica



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