

8—Watsonville (Calif.) Register-Pajaronian, Monday, January 16, 1978



Saloonkeepers found their floors covered with mud.



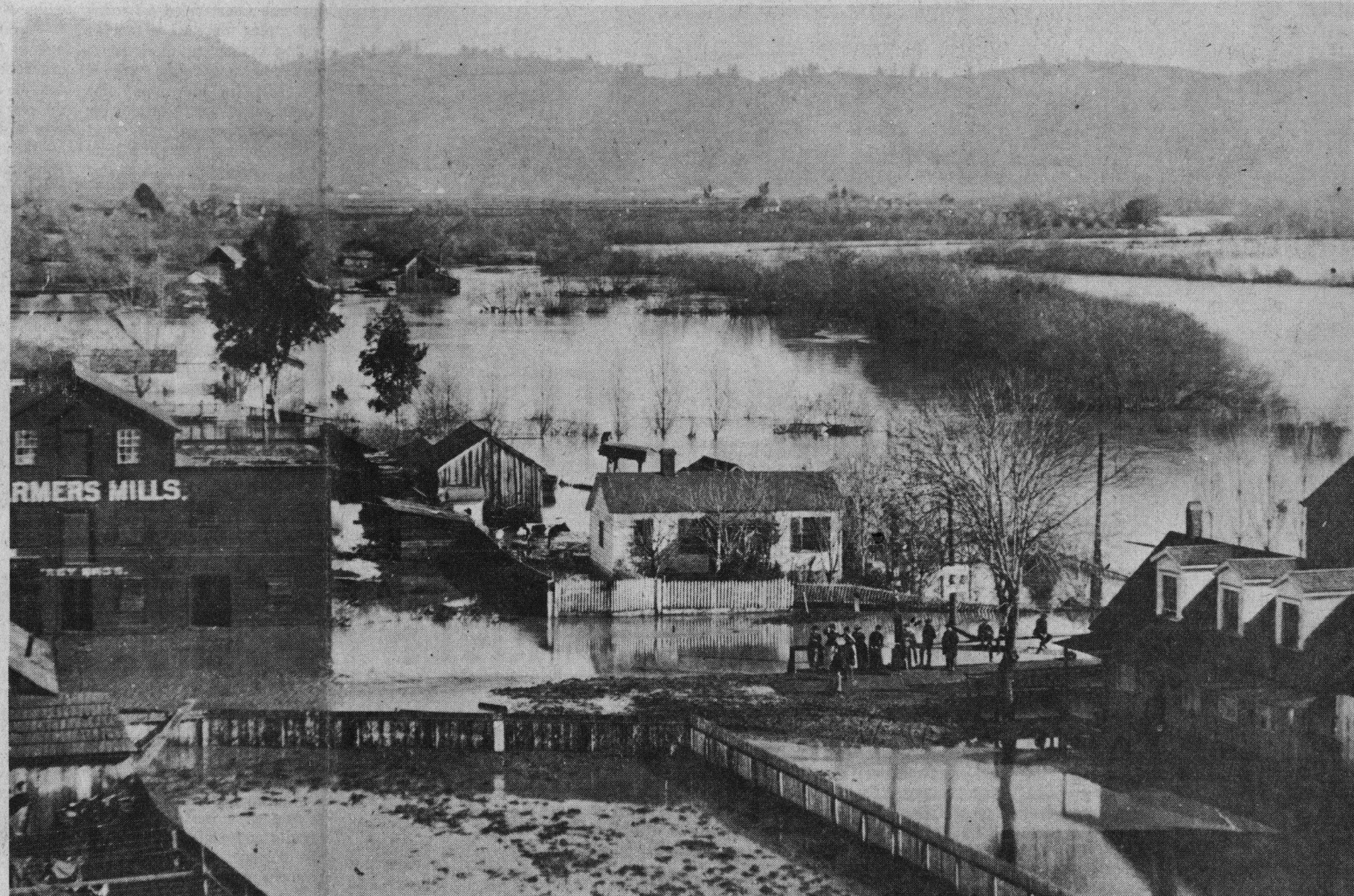
Buggies washed away on Main St. during 1911 flood.



# And the rains came...

APTOS BRANCH  
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REFERENCE



This picture, taken circa 1890, shows how flood waters covered virtually the entire Pajaro Valley.

By BETTY LEWIS

"Special Notice — To the People of the City of Watsonville — Owing to the Water Co.'s flumes being washed away and requiring from two to three days to repair same, you are strictly prohibited from using any water for washing buggies, watering horses, washing sidewalks, or baths, or anything else until further notice; other than cooking and drinking purposes. Anyone caught taking advantage of this, with our shortage of water, will be immediately arrested. Policemen have orders to patrol the streets and arrest anybody violating same. Wash your sidewalks and places of business with the water, as it recedes in the streets.

away by the flood. The Pajaronian was to note:

"The old settlers may dispute as to the comparative size of the flood of 1852, 1862 and 1890 but the latter was certainly far too large for any good use and we believe all our readers are perfectly willing never to experience another siege like that of Saturday night."

The yearly rainfall for 1889-1890 (June to July) was 43.75; the year before it had been 18.42 and the year after, 18.75 — the normal seasonal rain was considered 21.93.

March 8, 1911 — "California's people face misfortune with a grin brave enough to face a grizzly bear." By 10 o'clock on the morning of March 7, the plaza was covered with flood waters, telephone and telegraph lines

young berry plants and trees were washed away and Nils Dethlefsen reported a loss to his entire berry crop to the tune of \$10,000.

"Watsonville gets bathing which shatters all traditions in History of the city. Boats land passengers at Third and Main streets. Water clear to Lake Avenue. The Salsipuedes Creek broke its banks a short distance above the city. There was water, water everywhere and it is also true that there was not a drop to drink, not even in the saloons." — Watsonville Register, March 8, 1911.

In 1914, merchants on lower Main Street barricaded their stores with the help of fellow citizens but the water surged up from the river and on into the backs of the stores and flooded the town from Beach Street to

The F. A. Wilson home on College road was carried off by the flood waters — the river having reached a height of 33.2 feet. Up in Eureka Canyon the raging Corralitos river cut a swath 20 feet into its west bank toppling redwood trees and flooding homes — "like Paul Bunyan bowling in the redwoods." Two walls were washed away from the Len Fuller house when a log jam further up the creek had diverted the water, sending it through the Fuller property.

Drowned in the Pajaro river out Chitenden pass was J. C. Garcia, section worker for the Southern Pacific railroad. Another fatality laid to the flood was the death of Amato Rodriguez who had been evacuated from his home on Lakeview Road and subsequently died of pneumonia at the





**Water spilled into stores along Main St.**



**Main St. became a river in February, 1938.**

—P. K. Watters, Mayor of the City of Watsonville”

—Evening Pajaronian, March 8, 1911

The flood of 1911 was by no means the first in Watsonville; there had been a number of them over the years starting in 1852 when Watsonville was first laid out. In January of 1890 a storm had been gathering for days and, on Jan. 24, the clouds burst open and a torrent of water fell in a monotonous downpour for two days. Salsipuedes creek overflowed its banks at several points and the water flowed down to Main Street and to the Pajaro river flooding much of the east side of town. Then the Pajaro river broke over its banks and swept down Main Street flooding the plaza; sweeping through yards and spilling into houses and stores. Mud and slimy sediment oozed and settled over dry goods, furniture and carpets.

In the Union, Rodriguez and Marchant street areas, many residences were flooded and picket fences toppled by the wayside. The damage was estimated at over \$15,000 including the loss of the rich topsoil washed

were down and Constables Johnny Corr and Lawrence Sandberg were in their boat “Search Me” transporting stranded residents. Central Avenue was renamed “Central Rapids” and wading boots were sold out in a few hours with an estimated \$2,500 to \$3,000 changing hands during the rush.

Mayor P. K. Watters had a narrow escape while making a professional call on a family on First Street. Two men were rowing him down to the house when an oar got lost in the swirling water and the current upset the craft. The three men climbed up a telephone pole and hung on for an hour before they were finally rescued. Two buggies floated out from Bridge Street (now Riverside) into the middle of Main and snarled up the traffic as they mired in the mud. The newly built Tri-County bridge near Aromas was washed out creating a loss of over \$10,000. At the Morning Star Saloon the water rose to a height of 28 inches and water washed over the stage of the Lyric Theatre to a depth of three or four inches. Out on San Juan road,

the river. The sudden rise of water had been caused by the heavy rains in San Benito County and, having forewarned, the people in Watsonville managed to lessen some of the damage. The waters did not reach the plaza; some portions of Maple Street receiving a wetting. The rainfall for the year of 1910-1911 was 28.33 and for 1913-1914 it was 35.90.

But December of 1955 is the one that many local residents remember.

“Gov. Goodwin Knight arrived at Watsonville airport at 10 a.m. Wednesday and immediately set off on a tour of the flood-ravaged area. He was accompanied by state civil defense director Stanley Pierson and his own secretary, Verne Tobia. Led by police chief Frank Osmer who welcomed Knight at the airport, the party toured the Riverside road area along Salsipuedes creek at the point where the levee broke during the height of the flood.”

—Register Pajaronian, Dec. 28, 1955

arrived on the scene from Ft. Ord and were instrumental in saving the Thurwachter bridge out on Beach Road. They also were used on the Salsipuedes creek where a new break developed and they helped shore it up.

“The measure of a community like the measure of a man, is often the quality of its response to an emergency. Watsonville did herself proud, let it be recorded, during the harrowing hours of last week-end’s flood emergency. For enthusiastic response to calls for help, for unselfish effort, you just can’t beat the spirit shown by this city’s men and women as the Salsipuedes and the Pajaro went on a rampage ..... It certainly wasn’t a normal Christmas weekend. Yet, in view of the response our fellow-citizens showed to the needs of others, wasn’t it perhaps one of the most Christian Christmases of all?”

—Editorial, Register-Pajaronian, Dec. 27, 1955

**Photos courtesy Pajaro Valley Historical Assn.**



**Men wore waders as they tried to navigate Main St. in the 1911 flood.**



**No matter what the weather, the Register-Pajaronian got delivered.**