

Pete Amos/Sentinel

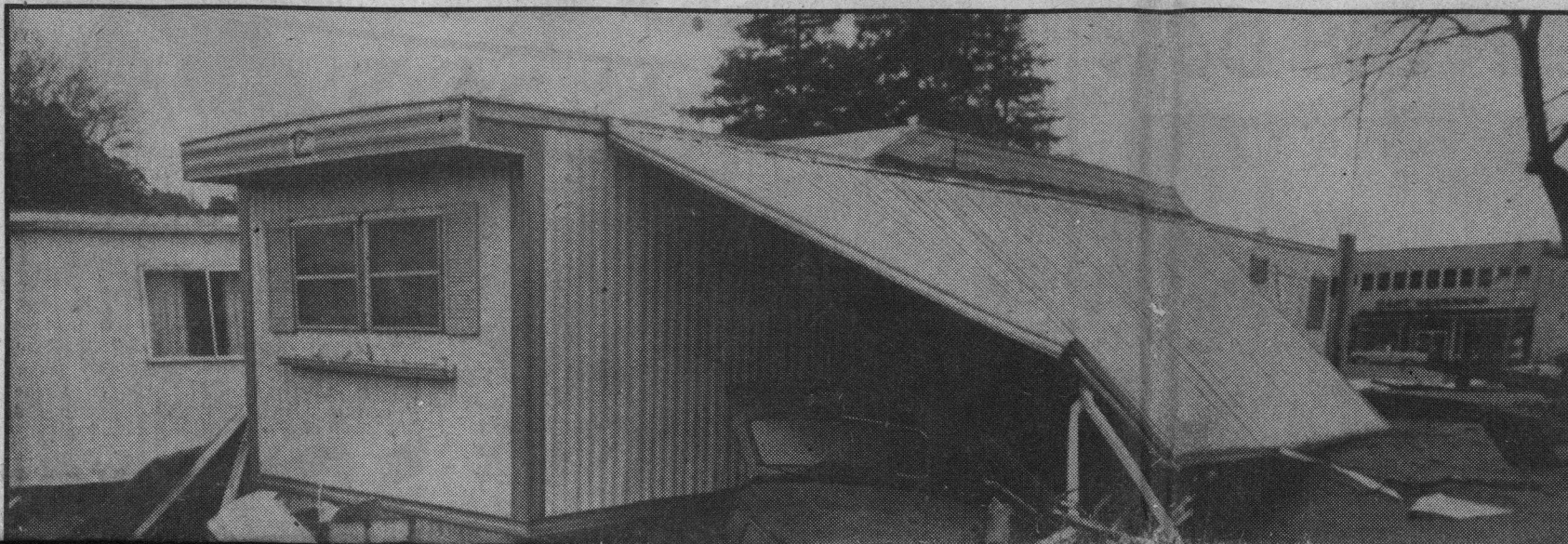
Felton Covered Bridge withstood the San Lorenzo's force.



Looking upstream from Soquel Bridge this morning.

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Water, Mud, Devastation





Mud swamped Old Mill Mobile Home Park in Soquel.

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel



Devastated coach at Old Mill park.

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

December 1955: Suddenly, Santa Cruz Area Was Flooded

By WALLY TRABING

Dec. 19, 1955, was a rainy day. Christmas shoppers dodged in and out of shops and department stores preparing for the holiday.

The Sentinel's weather story this day mentioned that the "Pacific storm was

diminishing."

But something very unusual had occurred that December day. It was noted well down in the story that 8.42 inches of rain had fallen over the past 24 hours in the Los Gatos-Santa Cruz mountain area. The banner that day focused on wind

damage.

Dec. 20, 1955.

More rain. That day the headline read: "Santa Cruz Gets Inch of rain." It gave the impression that it was a slow news day.

Again, almost buried in the weather

story was a line that said Howard Neilsen (now deceased) on Empire Grade had recorded 9.65 inches of rain over 24 hours.

It had been raining over a period of 20 days. The ground was saturated and ready for runoff.

This should have informed Santa Cruz and Soquel authorities that something was going to occur. Something damaging.

San Lorenzo River had risen, but there was no alarm.

In fact, the weather story mentioned that the river was down 10 feet. Down from what, was not explained.

Dec. 21, 1955.

Headlines: "17 Killed as Airliner Crashes."

The only weather story was a small rain chart which included the Santa Cruz rainfall over 24 hours: .53; 13.41 for the season; and 11.00 the year before on this date.

It was noted that rain was continuing to fall.

In the meantime, the deluge of water that had collected in the mountains was forming like some mysterious monster. The ground had been soaked. Nature was primed to let the rest of the water flow down into the river and creeks.

A small editorial that day mentioned an "unprecedented pre-Christmas rain has put a little damper on Christmas shopping."

"But to date, Santa Cruzans are fortunate that no great amount of damage has occurred."

Dec. 22, 1955.

It happened.

Almost suddenly, the river had filled its

banks with muddy, thrashing water which prompted the Sentinel banner: "Flood Waters Threaten Lowlands."

The heavy rain reported two days before in the backcountry, was materializing.

Now there was a possibility that the river could leave its banks in the lower lying areas.

But before press time it was noted that the river had gone down, and unless the rain continued, the danger was lessening. A high tide was due that day at 4:36.

Emergency crews were on call. Soquel Creek had overrun its banks and sent water into buildings long its path. Two inches of water had wandered into the Capitola City Hall.

But that night, those 9 inches of rain, incidentally reported from the mountains, would pay off in Santa Cruz.

A reporter had written for the Dec. 23 edition that "the San Lorenzo River, a comic trickle" usually "went berserk."

By 9:30 p.m. that night, water jumped the banks as it entered the city. It has caused terrible damage to houses along its reach along its path to the city.

In Santa Cruz, it sent its muddy wash down Pacific Avenue, River and Ocean streets, down Church and into The Sentinel offices and then on to the steps of City Hall. It ran down Center.

It rose to half the height of the parking meters on Pacific.

Cars were rolled down the street. There was looting and several deaths and millions in damage to homes and businesses.

That night this writer roamed the flood area and noted:

"The man on the street turned here last night during a disastrous flood which few believed could happen. 'He fought a muddy encroaching monster that engulfed hundreds of homes and most of the downtown business district.'

It came slowly and easy at first, like an oozing tide.

Few realized a flood was under way that would take several lives and cause millions in damage.

"Some 1,000 persons left their homes along the river's length.

"The flood worked slowly and silently in places, spreading like bubbling lava, demonstrating its unbelievable power by plunging the town into darkness by snuffing out the Blain Street PG&E substation.

"It silenced phones and blocked roads.

"Many made decisions too late to leave their homes and had to be rescued.

"Christmas presents floated out of homes and were found miles away. A late-model car found in the bay had washed down from Soquel Creek."

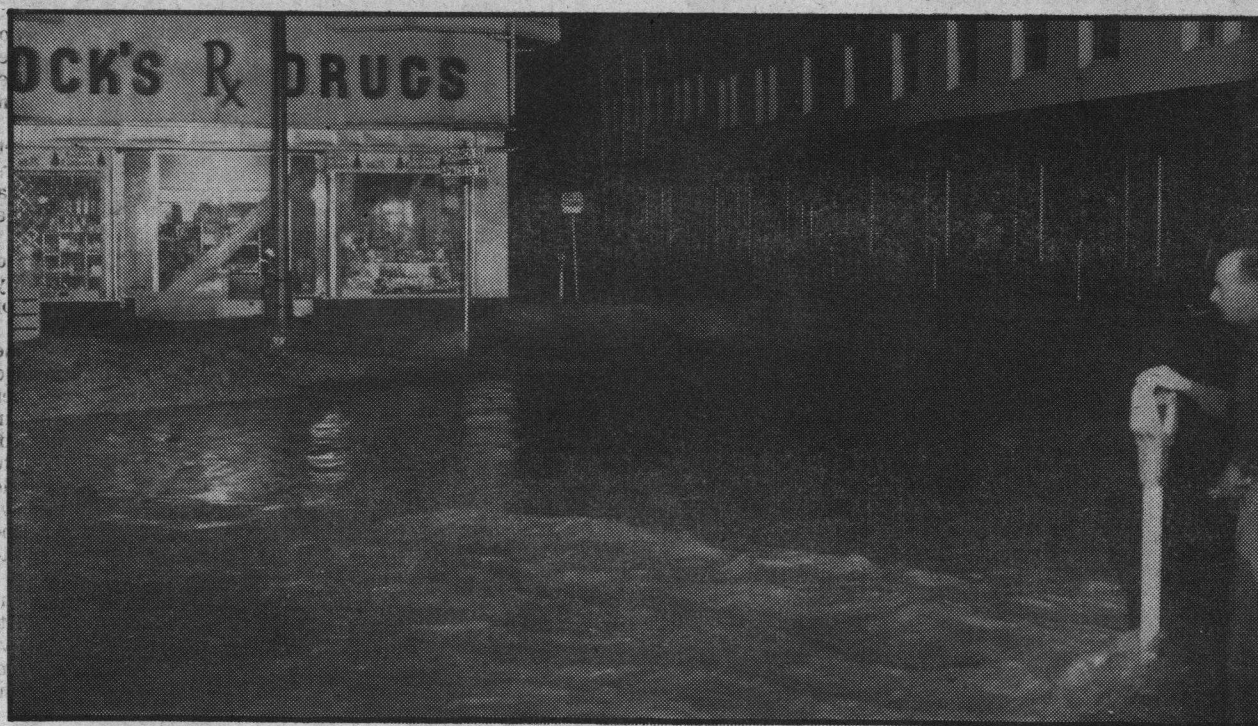
Mud covered streets and store interiors.

It was a night to remember, but many have forgotten.

It was upon the people before they were prepared.

In some ways, the area was better prepared. The river held. Soquel took the brunt of the heavy rains.

Like some oldtimer said: "No matter how well you prepare, a river or creek will do what it wants to do if it has enough water."



Corner of Church and Pacific Avenue in December 1955.