

River, Stay 'Way From My Door

A Look Back at Floods in Santa Cruz County, Part 1

by Sarah Weston

The Santa Cruz mission was established on the banks of the San Lorenzo River in 1791, but within a year and a half the river's capricious nature caused the Mission to be moved to higher ground. Nevertheless, during the remainder of that decade floods and rains repeatedly damaged the outpost, earning it the reputation of a "hard luck" mission.

The padres were not the only settlers to come to woe in this oft-flooded area. Beginning in 1822, major floods arrived every ten years like clockwork, until a true 100-year flood in 1862 swamped most of the state, driving it into bankruptcy and forcing Governor Leland Stanford to arrive at his inauguration in a rowboat.

In Santa Cruz, the 1862 flood was so forceful that entire buildings along the bank of the San Lorenzo River were washed out to sea, and



the course of the river was forever shifted several hundred feet away from Mission Hill towards downtown. In an effort to protect Mission Street, residents built a new bulkhead, a structure that gave Bulkhead Street its name.

Soquel residents that year came to the realization that their community sat directly in a low spot where Soquel Creek (then called "Soquel River") naturally overflowed during severe storms. Residents responded by hauling dirt fill in from surrounding hillsides, but it was largely washed away in subsequent floods.

Many commercial buildings were built onto stilts. Recurrences remained frequent enough that residents

were quick to adopt the popular 1931 Kate Smith song, "River, Stay 'Way From My Door."

One observation of that flood proved particularly prophetic.

A local newspaper account stated, "Old timers had seen Soquel Creek on a rampage before, but those coming here within the last 20 years had never believed it could be possible to have it move right inside their homes."

The same might also be said of merchants some two decades later.

The nearby San Lorenzo River flooded basements of buildings along Pacific

Avenue in Santa Cruz repeatedly in the late 19th century.

But in the 20th century prior to 1955, it had only happened once, in 1940.

In the subsequent 15 years the city's population had increased by a third, and memories had grown dimmer about the dangers a raging river. In 1955, eight residents drowned, while hundreds lost their homes.

The Big Storm of 1955

A 1982 Army Corps of Engineers report stated, "Historically, the San Lorenzo River has frequently flooded and caused substantial damages. Peak flows occur when a short-duration, intense storm follows a longer period of heavy rainfall which saturates the soil."

As Christmas approached in 1955, Santa Cruz residents were already sick of the rain.

The first week of December saw one storm that dropped 4.5 inches of rain, and that was only the beginning.

By the end of the next week a major storm was shaping up near the Hawaiian Islands, and began moving towards California with tremendous force.

At first it was the winds that had people looking to the skies.

On Dec. 18 television stations in San Francisco were knocked off the air, plate glass windows were smashed, and entire roofs ripped free by winds as high as 110 miles per hour. The next day the rains began, nearly nine inches in one day in Marin County.

In Santa Cruz, where television reception was spotty anyway, there was not yet reason for alarm.

A power blackout was noted, but on Monday, Dec. 19 an optimistic headline

reported, "Weatherman Says Storm Diminished." Tuesday saw an inch of rain in the city, but as much as nine inches in the mountains.

Wednesday's headline said, "More Rain." By Thursday, Dec. 22 it was noted that some areas were under water, and still more rain was forecast. Nevertheless, the San Lorenzo River level was down, lessening the total flood danger. Or so the reporter thought.

The next day, Friday, Dec. 23, ten and a half inches of rain fell in Ben Lomond. The city of Santa Cruz had seen nearly nine inches of rain in the three-day period, and the Weather Bureau was saying, "We cannot promise that the storm will be over by Christmas."

In all, more than 42 inches of rain would fall in the Santa Cruz Mountains between Dec. 19 and Dec. 27.

The Big Flood of '55

The San Lorenzo River began cresting its banks early in the morning of Dec. 22 in Ben Lomond, but the huge volume of debris clogged and slowed the passage of water downstream for a while. Out at sea a high tide was simultaneously building.

Some of the first Santa Cruz residents to suspect anything amiss were residents of El Rio Mobile Home Park, appropriately located near Water and River streets. One couple heard some commotion by the river around 9:30 p.m., but found no danger. A watchman at the park reassured the mostly middle-aged and elderly tenants.

"Nothing could possibly happen," he said. "I've lived here five years and I know." ■

[Next issue: The county and the state wake up to the worst flooding in modern history].

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