

It Rained In '55 Too...

You don't have to be a real old timer in Santa Cruz to recall the Flood of 1955 when the San Lorenzo River raged down Pacific Avenue and Branciforte and Soquel Creeks made like wild rivers too.

By December 22 of that fateful year, enough rain had fallen to swell every stream of water in Santa Cruz County to the bursting point.

That night — labeled the "worst night in Santa Cruz history" — all the normally tame streams burst their banks and went on a rampage unequalled in the county's history. As a result, low-lying areas of the city and county were flooded with swift currents that swept away houses, autos, chickencoops and even some persons.

The desperate screams of trapped citizens — many of them oldsters, went unanswered for hours as the policemen and firemen battled to save lives. There were just too many lives endangered — the police and firemen were swamped. "Police and firemen waded, fought, swam, strained and gave their utmost to bring to safety hundreds of citizens..." according to a Sentinel article.

The call went out for boats — needed at

the intersection of Dakota and Garfield Street and many other low-lying areas. The San Lorenzo broke its banks about 10 p.m., December 22, and the work of saving went on all night.

Evacuees were rescued by boat, then put into cars and trucks to be taken to friends' homes on higher ground, or up to Mission Hill Junior High.

The next morning lower Front Street area was "an ocean of mud." Soquel and the San Lorenzo Valley were hard hit. Paradise Park and the Salz Tannery areas were lakes of destruction.

There was fear of contamination of the city's water supply. A partial estimate of downtown damage placed it at 1.8 million dollars — and that was before inflation.

By December 27, federal aid was on the way; there were eight dead and 23 still missing.

Santa Cruzans won't forget the big disaster of '55 in a hurry. One old timer puts it well: "Every now and then, Mother Nature flexes her muscles and lets you know what she can do," he says.

—MARGARET KOCH



The corner of Pacific and Church — just a few steps away from the former Sentinel Building -- was awash with river currents on that fateful night of flood.



Sandbags didn't do much good when the San Lorenzo raged



Soquel's main street looked like this. Below, Center Street with Calvary Episcopal Church in the background

Photos from



Basement of Veterans Building



