

The Christmas Flood of 1955: Gentle Rain Inundated Santa Cruz

By Ross Eric Gibson

We are fortunate so far that the 1995 storms are nowhere near the disastrous floods of 1982, or the flood of the century in 1955. That flood was not caused by a storm, but by a gentle rain, which continued for a week, until the downtown basin began filling up like a bathtub. Statewide flooding followed in the same places being hit today. For years it was called the Christmas flood.

In September 1955, the city already was pursuing a "non-intrusive plan" to build levees among the San Lorenzo River trees, with a deep flood-control lagoon between the Water and Soquel street bridges. This was to regulate flow and provide a setting to revive the once-annual Water Carnival festivities.

So Dec. 22 held no inkling of imminent disaster, as shoppers crowded downtown Santa Cruz. Scrolled tinsel arches with lighted red bells spanned Pacific Avenue from Mission Street to Beach Hill. Shop windows were decorated with Christmas scenes and merchandise, as part of a Chamber of Commerce contest. One hardly needed an umbrella, ducking from one canvas awning to the next. Children stood in line at Woolworth's to see Santa.

At El Rio trailer park, one couple heard a commotion at the river at 9:30 p.m. and investigated, but saw no danger. By 10:45, however, they looked out a window and saw three people holding hands and wading through chest-high water. A neighbor struggled to carry his wife and cat, but finally had to set his cat on a large shingle, and it floated into the night.

Floods rarely reached Pacific Avenue. But for the first time the Cooper Street courthouse was flooded, ruining volumes of documents, which later had to be dried page by page. Pacific Avenue merchants barricaded their doors. Santa Cruz Hardware drilled holes in their floor, to drain water into the basement and spare display merchandise. Some became trapped as water surged down Pacific Avenue too swiftly to wade across, reaching a height of 10 feet. A man on Water Street scrambled onto the roof of his car at 10 p.m. and climbed onto a telephone pole when his car submerged. He wasn't rescued until 5 a.m.

The screams and pleas of trapped people filled the night, overwhelming rescue teams. The call for boats went out, yet river currents didn't cooperate, and people had to walk the rescue boats into the flooded east-bank neighborhood. One woman refused to leave. "I'm trusting in the Lord to send help if I get in danger," she said.

They told her, "You are in danger; we are the help; and we're not coming back tonight." This persuaded her.

Eventually the current was so strong it swept three men in a rowboat out to sea. Some couldn't escape the swirling waters, and four people in an El Rio trailer and a woman in a house were swept away.

The water moved up Church Street to the steps of City Hall, which was headquarters for emergency services. Firefighters responded to smoke and fires caused by wet sump pump motors until midnight when the Blaine Street PG&E substation flooded, plunging the community into darkness. No phones worked, and all streets were blocked.

The morning of Christmas Eve found clusters of gaily decorated Christmas presents bobbing through the flooded streets. Shiny new cars lined west-side neighborhoods, where two car dealers had moved their inventory to higher ground. Fort Ord aided in the evacuation with amphibious trucks resembling armored Noah's arks on wheels. A man was rescued by helicopter from Opera Island near the river's mouth. The schools at Branciforte and Mission Hill became shelters. And there were still many who came to work, unaware of any disaster.

More than 400 acres were under water, and it was low tide. Water levels dropped as the river returned to its banks. Folks chased 10-pound trout through streets, or caught them in flooded basements. The town appeared redecorated in brown paint everywhere from the muddy waters. Above rain-swollen gutters the Rio Theatre II marquee advertised "The Rains of Ranchipur," a flood movie. People went shopping on the beaches, where amid the driftwood was store merchandise, canned food and family possessions. Happily, the cat set adrift on a shingle, was waiting at the trailer when the couple returned.

The Army Corps of Engineers replaced the riverbank forests with rock levees, but scrapped plans to cement the entire city-portion of the river. At its 1959 completion, it was criticized for turning the river into a drainage ditch. It not only destroyed the state's No. 1 fishing river, but it also was so narrow it could only prevent a flood one-third the size of 1955 (since proven by the 1982 flood).

Santa Cruz is no less prone to flooding today, as the proliferation of paved acreage in the watershed prevents water from percolating into the ground. This multiplies the volumes of runoff into overtaxed rivers.

Sources

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