



Photos courtesy of Randall Brown

**NEW BRIDGE:** The big floods of the winter of 1890 washed out the bridge at Felton, prompting construction of a new Felton Covered Bridge, above left, which stands today.

# 1890, the year that 'The Boss Flood' ravaged SLV communities

By Randall Brown  
Press Banner

When the rain began to fall on Thursday night, Jan. 23, 1890, the annual rainfall total at Boulder Creek had already passed the two-yard mark. The storms had started on Oct. 7 and would continue, seemingly unabated, until the following May, leaving behind a staggering 125 inches of water.

The next time mountain rainfall totals would approach that would be late in the next century, in the killer rains of the winter of 1981-82, when 114 inches of rain would fall.

The *Santa Cruz Sentinel* observed that week in 1890 that: "The San Lorenzo is again booming with all the turbulence and current of a mighty river, swollen by its small mountain tributaries."

The downpour intensified Friday morning.

As the river rose, the products of that year's timber harvest were swept out of piles and mill ponds.

A correspondent phoned in this report to the newspaper in Santa Cruz:

"There is a jam of logs at the junction of the San Lorenzo River and Bear Creek. If it gives way, every bridge between Boulder and Monterey Bay will be carried away. Boulder Creek is higher than ever known."

What was the rainfall?

"Up to noon today, 90 inches. It is raining so hard in Boulder that the trees are falling down, and I am afraid to go out to look for news. Today 50 men and four span of horses held the bridge so that it couldn't be washed away."

Meanwhile, about a mile up Boulder Creek, one of its tributaries turned deadly.

Veteran newspaperman Winfield S. Rodgers later recalled that:

"The cottage of a lumberman up

Hesse creek, a small creek which usually was dry, was carried away by the rush of the waters, reached Boulder Creek, and was speeding on its way for the river before rescue parties could stop its flight."

A woman was found alive among the debris of the house - her husband was drowned.

At 4:30 on Friday afternoon the Bear Creek Bridge gave way.

According to Rodgers, "Not a wagon or railroad bridge was left standing between Boulder Creek and Santa Cruz."

"A train which had left Boulder Creek and proceeded about halfway to Ben Lomond was completely cut off by slides.

Nearly a half acre of land at the curve of the road at Brookdale was loosened by the rain and slid down the mountain side, carrying everything with it into the creek bed."

Water rushed down the main street of the new town of Ben Lomond (now Mill Street.) At Felton, the *Sentinel* reported "numerous head of cattle, mostly cows, have been seen going down past the town."

After the storm, the old bridge into town was declared unsafe and, two years later the still-standing covered bridge, five feet higher from the river bed, took its place.

The rain let up early Saturday morning.

That afternoon, the *Santa Cruz Surf* headlined "The Boss Flood in the History of Santa Cruz County," declaring that "the record is broken—all records are broken. 1889-90 outdoes them all."

Randall Brown is a former director of the San Lorenzo Valley Water District. He writes periodically about local history.

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— correspondent,  
The Santa Cruz Sentinel