

December, 1955, Flood To Be Landmark In County History

By Gordon Sinclair
Managing Editor of The Sentinel
(Second of a series)

On the afternoon of December 22, 1955, the banner story in The Sentinel read:

"Definite flood threats to the lowland areas of Santa Cruz were a startling reality today as California's worst storm of the season nearly drowned the coastal areas."

Going to press shortly after 2 p.m., the lead paragraph turned out to be an understatement of the facts to come.

The weather report was an all too true forecast as the U.S. weather bureau reported that rainy December day—"Rain tonight and Friday, heavy at times. Southerly winds 20-35 mph with small craft warnings until 8 p.m. and probably continuing Friday."

Seven hours later, the flood came.

It was not like any flood experienced in Santa Cruz.

River watchers reported the San Lorenzo river was beginning to seep over its banks around 8 o'clock. By 9, it was apparent that the lowland areas would be affected by the flood.

By 10 o'clock, the lowland area of River street, Garfield street, lower Laurel street, Barson and Riverside and the sectors behind Ocean street were flooded.

A storm drain and a culvert on the by-pass project clogged and water cascaded down Ocean street.

But the worst was yet to come. By midnight all the lowlands were inundated and flood waters were pouring down Front street and slopping onto Pacific avenue. An hour later Pacific avenue, the heart of the downtown business district, was flooded by a fierce five-foot current, sweeping back onto side streets with power so strong that men were unable to cross.

And with each onrushing wave of mad, muddy water, thousands of dollars worth of damage was being inflicted.

The waters didn't start to recede until about 4 o'clock the morning of December 23.

For those who kept an all night vigil through the flood, it was a warming sight to note the falloff from the peak of the flood, but as the dawn came to Santa Cruz, the horrors of the destruction became evident. They were so awesome, even the sun didn't seem bright.

The final death toll was placed at eight persons!

Mrs. Gladys Shaw, 40, killed when flood waters swept a room from her home at Little creek; Philip Fridley, 73, who died of a heart attack while being evacuated from his home at Sycamore Grove; Mrs. Aurelie Bernard, 80, and her daughter, Kathleen,

found dead in their home on Garfield street; Fred Miller, 67, and Leo Prodinski, 66, both killed when the flood waters swept away their homes on Burnett street; and Joe Bayford, 49, and Shannon Esplund, 12, killed when flood waters swept away a bridge at Mount Hermon.

Hundreds were evacuated from their homes.

Damage in the Santa Cruz area was estimated at \$10,500,000 by a careful survey of the corps of army engineers. Damage in the city of Santa Cruz was set at \$7.5 million, \$1.5 million in the San Lorenzo Valley and more than \$500,000 in the community of Soquel with about \$1 million worth of damage in scattered areas.

Some business places were completely wrecked, others suffered severe losses, but within a month clean-up crews had done a magnificent job in rehabilitating the community.

It was probably the greatest single collective effort in the community.

The army engineers had a plan for the control of floods in the San Lorenzo river two years before the Christmas flood of 1955.

It hadn't been put in action for federal public works take a long

time, and until that tragic day in December, there hadn't been a great deal of interest shown in flood control in the past few years.

The city, however, had taken the formal steps necessary to activate the flood control program. Only three weeks before the flood hit, the city had finally received authorization for state participation in the multi-million dollar project.

After the flood, the emergency status of the San Lorenzo river project got it out of the doldrums of federal red tape and by the summer of 1956 the congress of the United States authorized the expenditure of \$307,000 during the fiscal year 1956-57 for the design of final plans for the San Lorenzo river flood control project.

Those plans are now completed.

They were finished a few weeks ago and specifications for the job written. It is now under advertisement by the corps of engineers with the expectation that congress will allocate \$1,200,000 this session for the first phase of construction.

Already the state has spent more than \$628,000 for the purchase of rights-of-way, easements and other changes necessary for the flood control project. City

Manager Robert Klein estimates that the final state expenditures for the project will total \$2 million.

The rush is on today to get the rights-of-way completed for the first stage of construction, scheduled to begin sometime in September. The initial work will be located between the business district by-pass bridge and the Soquel avenue bridge.

Since their research on the factors involved in the Christmas flood, the engineers have changed some of their designs for the flood control project.

The two main changes are complete levee protection along both sides of the river instead of a combination levee and flood wall, plus enlarging the flood control protection from 35,000 second feet to 45,000 second feet between the by-pass bridge and the mouth of the river.

Probably the biggest change is the estimated cost of construction. Back in 1951, when it was originally designed, the project was estimated to cost \$2,413,000 for construction. Today, it is estimated that the construction costs will be in excess of \$4,000,000.

Engineers plan a concrete channel for Branciforte creek for a distance of one mile and plan to change the course of the creek between Ocean street and the river.

The levees will have a 12-foot path across their top as a planned pedestrian walkway along both sides of the San Lorenzo. It is hoped that the landward side will be landscaped with ice plant for erosion control and City Manager Klein has urged that select types of trees be planted along the levees' outside banks.

Klein has conferred with H. Dana Bowers, supervising landscape architect for the state division of highways for aid in planning the landscape appearance of the levees in an effort for river beautification.

The time plan has been announced for the flood control project as 570 days from the start of construction September, 1957, or April or May in 1959.

The final "take lines" have been settled and today appraisers and negotiators are working against a deadline in an effort to get all the land acquisition ready in time for the contractors to start work as soon as the army engineers announce the contract award.

It's a race against the clock, but all concerned are anxious for the construction program to get started as soon as possible.

(Tomorrow, right-of-way acquisition and the inter-locking connections between flood control and urban redevelopment in the San Lorenzo park.)

Effect Of State Legislation On Health Program Explained

The impact of state legislation on the county health program was outlined this morning by Health Director Dr. Russell Ferguson.

On October 1 the county will probably be designated a rabies hazard area since it is contiguous with Monterey county which has a high incidence of rabies.

An enlarged mental health services committee has been established to study the new mental health act establishing in principle state support for community mental health care — both clinic type and hospital bed type.

The public health committee was expanded to make an intensive study this summer of the new medical care program.

Dr. Ferguson met this morning with Branciforte Supervisor Walter G. Merrill and Mrs. Hulda McLean, supervisor of the Seaside district, and Dr. Alan Nittler, chairman of the public services committee of the Santa Cruz County Medical society. Actions taken by the group are subject to approval by the county board of supervisors.

The county health director described the effect of the rabies bill, the mental health act and the medical care bill.

The new mental health committee will be under the direction Dr. Ferguson with Supervisor Francis Silliman, chairman of the board of supervisors, as the chairman. Physicians named to the committee were Dr. Nittler, Dr. Ruth Ferrari, and Dr. James Culver. Lay members are Mrs. Fred Weaver of Santa Cruz and Mrs. Helen Phelan of Watsonville.

Dr. Luther Newhall, representing the welfare committee of the medical society; Dr. Charles Jerstrom, geriatrics, and County Social Welfare Director Mrs. Helen Clemensen have been added to the enlarged public health committee.

The first meeting will be August 1.

In a rabies area, every owner of a dog four months old must obtain a city or county license and must have it vaccinated once a year by a veterinarian. Under four months, dogs must be kept under restraint or in the owner's yard.

The new measure ordering compulsory rabies vaccinations will be incorporated in the new county code with the new zoning ordinance.