

San Lorenzo River, Boulder Creek - Felton: Past Floods

Summary of Historical Floods

Few records exist of past floods in the San Lorenzo Basin. However, damaging floods are known to have occurred in 1940, 1955 and 1958.

Flood Records

Information on historical floods in the San Lorenzo Valley was obtained from streamflow records published by the U.S. Geological Survey for locations within the San Lorenzo Basin. The stream gage at Big Trees has been in existence since 1937. High watermark of past floods were obtained, residents along the stream were interviewed and newspaper files as well as historical documents were searched for information concerning past floods.

1955 Flood

Storm Rainfall and Stages

During the storm period 15-28 December 1955, a total of 20.11 and 12.80 inches of rainfall were recorded by the Boulder Creek Locatelli Ranch and Santa Cruz precipitation stations, respectively. The most intensive rainfall occurred during a four day period, 21-24 December 1955.

The greatest rainfall in any 24-hour period occurred from 11:00 p.m., 21 December 1955 to 11:00 p.m. 22 December 1955, when the station at Boulder Creek Locatelli Ranch recorded 9.11 inches.

In the central part of the basin, known as the Ben Lomond area, the San Lorenzo River exceeded bank full stage during the early morning of 22 December and crested about 1:00 a.m. on 23 December 1955. U.S.G.S. stream gage on the San Lorenzo River at Big Trees recorded a 22.55 foot stage with a discharge of 30,400 c.f.s.

The 23 December 1955 flood on the San Lorenzo exceeded the previous maximum flood of 1940 by about 1.5 feet in the lower basin and approximately 3 to 3 1/2 feet in the vicinity of Boulder Creek. Local reports indicate previous maximum stages of record were exceeded along Kings, Boulder, Two Bar, Bear, and Zayante Creeks in the upper basin. Overflow occurred from the headwater to the mouth, resulting in the maximum flood of

record. The heavy rains and overflows loosened and scoured out large trees, and floated them downstream where they became lodged at channel points of constriction, impounding flow causing extremely severe local flooding. The numerous log jams and other channel obstructions diverted the high velocity flows, causing the streams to change from their normal alignment, undercut and scour out numerous bridges, road fills, channel dams and private developments.

The estimated gross acreage in the study reach of the San Lorenzo River Basin inundated during the December 1955 flood is summarized [in Table 3].

Table 3 – Areas Flooded

Stream	Acres Flooded
San Lorenzo River, Main Stem	
1. Mt. Hermon Highway at Felton to Highway no. 9 at Ben Lomond	94
2. Highway No. 9 at Ben Lomond to Highway No. 9 at Boulder Creek	16
3. Highway No. 9 at Boulder Creek to Riverside Grove	79
Subtotal	189
San Lorenzo River Tributaries	
1. Boulder Creek - Mouth to Wallace Johnson Ranch	90
2. Bear Creek - Mouth to mile 3.0	109
Subtotal	199
Total Acres Flooded in Study Area	388

Loss of Life, Rescue and Evacuation Operations

Despite storm and flood warning issued by local radio, a large part of the population was unaware of the danger of the impending flood. In addition, people in the area subject to flooding were reluctant to believe the floodwaters could reach such proportions. These and other factors contributed to the fact that seven persons lost their lives during 22-23 December 1955 flood in the San Lorenzo River Basin. Five were in the city of Santa Cruz and two were near Mt. Hermon in the Zayante Creek Basin. Based on data compiled from reliable sources, it is estimated that 2,830 persons were displaced by the floods. About 2,440 in the city of Santa Cruz, 30 at Felton, 52 at Ben Lomond, and 300 in settlements such as Gold Gulch, Paradise Park, Wildwood and Riverside Grove. The total assisted evacuations by boats, high-wheeled vehicles, helicopters, etc., numbered approximately 775, of which about 600 were in the city of Santa Cruz. The largest proportion of the rescues were accomplished by amphibious trucks manned by Army troops from Fort Ord. Salvation Army teams rescued about 100 persons in Santa Cruz and the U.S. Forestry Service rescued 10 persons at Felton. Many more were rescued by their friends and neighbors in local areas. In the Town of Felton, rescue teams of local people and the U.S. Forest Service evacuated 22 persons. In the Town of Ben Lomond, approximately 20 people were evacuated by the Ben Lomond Fire Department, and 30 displaced persons were cared for by the Red Cross.

The total estimated flood damages in the San Lorenzo River Basin were \$8,700,900 of which \$7,629,600 were within the city limits of Santa Cruz.

In the reach from Felton to Riverside Grove, some 13 acres of non-contiguous cropland, all idle, were flooded. These small units, principally garden tracts, suffered topsoil erosion and loss of land by channel changes.

Principal residential damage occurred in the Town of Ben Lomond and the rural settlement of Riverside Grove where 16 homes were flooded and 12 additional residential properties sustained damage to yards and bank protection works along the channel. Water supply lines were severed at several river crossings and power and telephone lines sustained minor damage. Downstream from the State Highway 9 Bridge, 39 commercial establishments were flooded, with overflows ranging in depth from a few inches to 9 feet. Further downstream a boys' camp was almost totally destroyed. Highway 9, in the vicinity of Wildwood Grove had minor undercutting of the road fill. The small county road bridge at Riverside Grove was washed out. Replacement was estimated at \$5,000. Total damages in this reach were estimated at \$133,300.

Boulder Creek Basin

This reach sustained scour and erosion damage to channel banks and timber-pasture areas. Minor damages were experienced by private farm roads and bridges. Three cabin camps in the vicinity of Highway 44 crossing suffered damages by inundation and roads, bridges and small channel dams were also damaged. In this vicinity there was minor undercutting of both State and County bridge approach fills. Total damages in the Boulder Creek Basin were estimated at \$13,000.

Bear Creek Basin

In this reach about 10 acres of timber-pastureland were damaged by inundation. Several ranch roads were severely eroded. In the lower 2 miles of the basin, three summer homes had damage amounting to \$2,000. Power poles in the area were pushed over by heavy debris. Undercutting of the road fill caused slides and slip-outs on the county road. Total Bear Creek Basin damages were estimated to be \$25,200.

Santa Cruz Sentinel-News. Santa Cruz, California, Friday, December 23, 1955

"City Braces for New Flood"

... Reports from Boulder Creek at press time had the San Lorenzo River at two feet below its high point of last night, and the river was reportedly rising fast within the city limits.

... Storm caused floods played havoc along the entire stretch of river between Boulder Creek and Santa Cruz."

Watsonville Register-Pajaronian. Watsonville, California, Friday, December 23, 1955

"Night of Terror"

Santa Cruz Downtown Area Inundated

... Damage in the San Lorenzo Valley reached into the millions. Two Ben Lomond motels were destroyed; the flood reached a 40-foot crest at Felton."

Santa Cruz Sentinel-News -- Santa Cruz, California, Sunday, December 25, 1955

"VALLEY SUFFERS SEVERE DAMAGE AS FLOOD RAGES"

The torrenting San Lorenzo River which spread death and destruction through Santa Cruz dealt severe damage along its path in the San Lorenzo Valley.

"Nearly 100 homes along the usually placid river were destroyed--some were swept down the roaring flood.

"Along the tributaries of the San Lorenzo more homes were torn and splintered. Many families are still isolated with dwindling food supplies.

"In the dark, murky night of Thursday, the waters rose over the bank and charged with unbelievable force through the thick forest resort parks. It crammed five-room houses against trees, twisted other off their foundations.

"For nearly a day the valley was cut at both ends. Highway 9 from Santa Cruz to Felton is still blocked by trees and great slides of rocks and earth. Graham Hill Road is clear, however.

"I drove up Highway 9 this morning to Paradise Park and Sycamore Grove before a giant madrone barred the way across the highway. The once beautiful resort area of Sycamore Grove just as you enter the valley from Santa Cruz was a sea of oozing mud and scrambled cabins. The small units were scattered like building blocks.

"The lower part of Paradise Park, the Masonic tract, was hit and ripped as if the river edge had the teeth of a saw. Three houses disappeared completely. Ethan Clark's new \$10,000 home was swept away. Ten houses had their interiors ruined. Another 10 will have to be rebuilt, according to A.C. Shurtz, resident manager.

"Felton Grove, near Felton Road, was nearly wiped out. Twelve persons were taken out of the flooded area in boats. Five cabins were carried away, some 20 were destroyed, crushed by the rushing current.

"The covered bridge, an ancient landmark, near Felton, was badly damaged. Its bottom was torn away and much of the side.

"The sight of Gold Gulch Park, a subdivision of private homes in Tanglewood, was startling. Looking down toward the river from the highway, I could see a tumbled muddy mess of expensive mountain homes, shoved here and there like a puzzle maze. Thirty homes were pushed off their foundations. Three were reported gone down the river. Some were crushed as though a 12-ton boulder had fallen on the roofs. One house was rammed by a large tree trunk which had rushed down the river and lodged inside the house."

"In Ben Lomond the damage was sporadic. The boiling waters crashed the concrete retaining wall bordering the Ben Lomond Park and swept away the dance pavilion, crushing barbecue pits and leaving behind a mucky mess. Ray Emerick, local fireman, said that many homes were lost near the community. Jack Miller lost two cabins; Bill Eddy's five room home of Riverside Drive was torn apart. The Wesley Barling Home went into the river. Jack Fisher, fire chief, had his home flooded.

"The park damaged to an estimated \$6,000 but the controversial dam abutments which were completely under the raging river, held their ground.

"Rescue workers found a moment's respite for humor during the flood when several 8- to 10-pound steelhead were observed slithering up Ben Lomond's main street. They were chased and caught and no doubt fried.

"Some 25 families in Glen Lomond and Brackney have been without water for the last three days.

"Glen Sliter, owner of the Glen Lomond grocery store, said that a Citizen's Utility pipe crossing the river was snapped and their drinking water was added to the general flood supply. The water supply gave out Wednesday night at 8 o'clock.

"Clear Creek, that picturesque, tinkling addition to the decor of the Brookdale Lodge as it flows through the dining room and chapel below, added its angry voice to the general uproar and swept away some 300 chairs and tables which have yet to be found, according to Barney Morrow, owner. The coffee urns were found down the creek some distance away."

"Elsewhere in the Santa Cruz mountain areas surrounding Santa Cruz, nine families were still isolated in the Glen Canyon district and it was reported that their food supply was giving out.

"Mrs. Jack Roman, 1463 Redwood Drive, off Glen Canyon Road phoned the Sentinel-News yesterday afternoon to ask for aid. She said two bridges on the drive were out and that the families were running out of food.

"It was also reported that residents of Ben Lomond have been without water for the last two days. The service was restored last night.

"Most county roads leading into the Valley were choked by slides and fallen trees. The Big Basin Road is still closed. Bear Creek Road is closed with a bridge out near Bonnie Brier. The King's Creek Road is closed with several bridges reported washed out. Jamison Creek Road is blocked. Clogged by rain are the Pine Flat Road from Empire Grade, Alba Grade and the Felton Grade roads. A bridge was reported out down Rio Del Mar way over Aptos and Valencia Creeks.

"The flood storm even gave Santa Claus a bad time.

"This stout gentleman with a long white beard thrilling the children at Santa's Rancho on Glen Canyon Road gave them a bigger thrill when he fell into the rain clogged creek near the road."

1958 Flood

The April 1958 flooding in the San Lorenzo River Basin was minor on the tributaries and in Santa Cruz compared to the floods of December-January 1955-1956. Approximately 250 people in the northern part of the county were evacuated from their homes. Damages in the basin were estimated at \$170,000 due to erosion, bank sloughing and erosion of houses.

Santa Cruz Sentinel, Santa Cruz, California, Wednesday, April 2, 1958

"More to Come -- Storms Cause Minor Damage.

"More rain, and wind, seemingly unending, plagued Santa Cruz County last night and this morning ... prompting uneasy speculations concerning the San Lorenzo River. County Civil Defense Director Colonel Donald Gates expressed no alarm. However, it rained hard and steadily in the San Lorenzo Valley region up to press time at 1:00 p.m. George "Hoot" Cress of Boulder Creek said just before noon that water was pouring

over Boulder Creek Dam at a height of two and one-half feet. He said that it was six feet over during the 1955 flood. The rain, however, was really coming down, he added.

"... Santa Cruz Weatherman Robert Burton said that the wettest season to date in the history of his records was 54.68 (inches) in 1889-90. The present reading to this morning is 45.55 inches."

Source

Flood Plain Information, Santa Cruz County, California. San Francisco: U.S. Army. Corps of Engineers, July 1973, pp. 9-14.

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