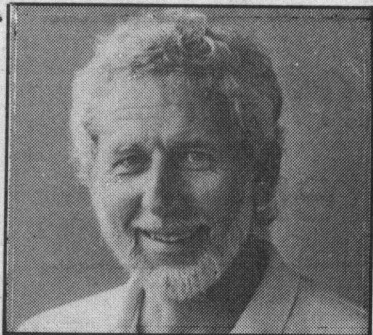


We've never been ready for a drought

Hindsight



Sandy Lydon

IT DOESN'T take much. Just a small northward shift in the storm track and we watch a parade of clear, mild days while Oregon and Washington measure their rain in feet rather than inches. That's why much of the Monterey Bay region's climate is termed "semi-arid." Arid some of the time.

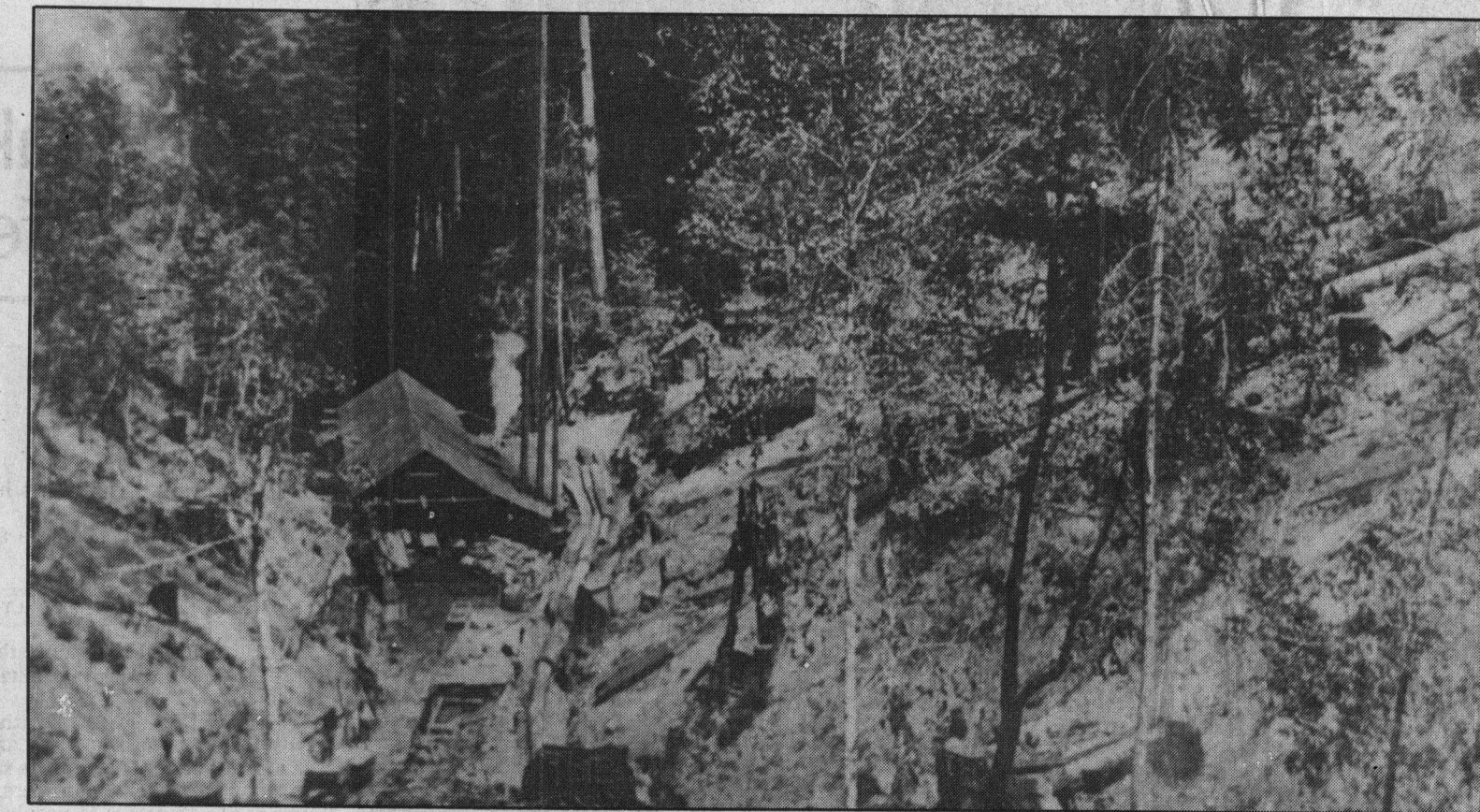
Pioneer immigrants to the region got their first glimpse of the arid side of the climate during the "volcanic, hot, windy, dusty" drought of 1855-56.

Then, after the massive flood in early 1862 (that's the other side of "semi-arid") which turned the Pajaro and Salinas valleys into lakes, the storm track shifted north again and for the next 30 months, virtually no rain fell.

It was difficult enough for pioneers to get used to the idea that the summers here are rainless (compared with the monsoon-like wet summers on the east coast of North America), but they were not prepared for what would happen when it also forgot to rain in the winter.

The south to north shriveling began in the summer of 1863 and the cattle that could still walk were driven north in search of pasture. Monterey County suffered the drought earliest and the carcasses of Mexican cattle littered the brown hills of the upper Salinas Valley. Grizzly bears roamed happily through the carnage and the buzzards so gorged themselves that they could not fly.

In 1863 Monterey and Santa Cruz counties were still called "cow counties" as the pastoral Californio cattle industry was still dominant. This was still the land of the vaquero, but neither



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Drought of 1862-64 closed logging mills, such as this one in Eureka Canyon outside Watsonville.

he nor his cattle would survive this drought. Cattle were worthless. There were no buyers. The price of sheep also dropped until you could buy one for twenty five cents. One wag said that the local hay crop had to be lathered before it could be cut.

STRAPPED for cash, the Californios went to the moneylenders and put the only thing they owned — their land — up for collateral. It had never stayed dry for longer than one season, they reasoned. Surely it would rain in December. Or January. But the storms stayed north and the next spring and summer the sound of the auctioneer's hammer echoed above the bawling of dying livestock. Some ranchos fell for 10 cents an acre. David Jacks bought the 8,794 acre Los Coches Rancho for \$3,535. The names Garcia, Soberanes and Castro were removed from deeds and Spence, Jacks, Iverson and Hihn put in their place.

The abundant streams of the Santa Cruz Mountains insulated Santa Cruz County from the

drought's first year, but by the winter of 1863-64 the lumber mills stood idle as the streams dried up. During the spring of 1864, lumber was imported into Santa Cruz County for the first time.

Several enterprising local farmers, including John T. Porter, bought Monterey County cattle on the cheap and turned them loose in the Santa Cruz Mountains hoping the desperate animals might find enough grass in the canyons to make it through. Enough did to make it profitable. Over the mountains, Henry Miller bought cattle for \$1 a head in 1864 which he would sell in 1865 for \$70 each.

Then, as easily and capriciously as it had shifted north, the storm track shifted south, and in December 1864 the rivers roared, roads turned to mud and the hills turned an emerald green.

Only a few who lived through the drought of 1862-64 were prescient enough to see the importance of the event. One was the editor of the "Pajaro Times" newspaper published in Watsonville. "The halcyon days of the

vaquero are of the things that were," he wrote. "No more rodeos. No more horses." The Monterey Bay region emerged forever changed in 1865.

Who will be the vaqueros of the current drought? The well-drillers? The subdividers? The building contractors? The rose gardeners? The farmers? It is too early to know. But if there is a major difference between those who lived here in 1863 and we who live here now, it is that the former were exposed to the realities of the climate. We cannot hear the natural heartbeat of this semi-arid place over the whine of the air conditioner and the hum of the well pump. It takes 7.1 earthquakes or droughts to remind us that we live in a lovely, precariously balanced marginally-habitable place.

IT RAINED this week, and there is some perverse gyroscope in us which hopes that we are now back to normal. If by normal we mean the insulated, arrogant, shove-all-the-dirt-around, dam-up-every-river, pump-until-it-sucks-air normal,

then normal is another way to say foolish.

The residents of the Monterey Bay region who lived through the drought of 1862-64 drought changed because they had to. They had no protections, no government guarantees, no insurance, no price supports, no safety nets to insulate them from the harsh reality of living on the edge of a desert.

Deep down inside, we know that much of what we do around here is inappropriate. We know we ought to change. But we don't. Instead we take comfort in the sound of rain, hoping that it means the storm track has twitched south once again and we can resume business as usual.

We look at the skies and wonder when it will rain again. Better we should look in the mirror and wonder if we will ever wise up.

Sandy Lydon is an author and lecturer on matters historical. He can be seen regularly on KCBA TV 35's evening news discussing history and the weather.