

Guardisman recalls a soggy Christmas



In the photo above, taken by former Register-Pajaronian photographer Sam Vestal, work crews struggle to reinforce levees on the Pajaro River during the holiday season in 1955.

REFERENCE

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'55 flood dampened holiday spirit in Watsonville

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BY ALL accounts, it was a very soggy Christmas. But Norm Brownell still considered himself a lucky man on Christmas Eve of 1955.

The Watsonville man was returning from his delivery route as a Borden's milkman, despite several days of pounding rain that had resulted in a broken levee and flooded streets.

Then, as he crossed a bridge that used to stand at Majer Road, he felt it rattle. Brownell said the water was just about up to the top of the bridge.

A little while later, he found out the bridge had broken about 10 minutes after he crossed over it.

Brownell was a member of the local National Guard unit, which will celebrate its centennial next year. When he wasn't driving his milk run during the 1955 flood, he reported to the armory for orders.

He said the guardsmen who couldn't report to their jobs during the flood worked around the clock for the unit. "They had a rest area for us (at the armory)," he said. "And a lot of fellows had a change of clothes with them and didn't go home for three days."

Like many local guardsmen, Brownell said the 1955 flood was the most memorable event of his tour of duty.

Torrents of rain fell on Northern California the week leading up to Christmas, 1955. "It would let up a little bit, and then it would come again," Brownell said.

On Dec. 23, the Salsipuedes levee broke and flooded streets so badly that people were boating down Main Street.

Last minute Christmas shopping was nipped in the bud, as the Chamber of Commerce recommended that downtown shops close — and sandbag — their doors.

Soon rescue workers were going into homes and saving Christmas presents from under people's trees.

When the waters began to subside on Dec. 26, two homes had washed away and one man had died. Hundreds of others moved back into homes with extensive water damage.

Brownell and others are asking any former member of the National Guard's 1st Battalion 149th Armor who would like to reminisce about the 1955 flood, or anything else he remembers from his tour of duty, to contact the unit.

The battalion will celebrate its centennial on Aug. 5, 1995. It was first organized on Aug. 5, 1895, in Salinas as a cavalry unit. For more information, call John Honeywell at 1-800-736-7230.

The aerial photograph at right shows the flooding of downtown Watsonville at Riverside Drive and Main Street. The athletic field at Watsonville High School can be seen in the upper left. On Dec. 23, 1955, the Salsipuedes levee broke and streets were flooded so badly that people were getting about downtown streets by boat. Both of these photos were taken on Dec. 23, 1955.

