

The flood of '55—when the people responded in the city's hour of need

If there was ever an indication that the people of Watsonville could band together in the face of an emergency, it came 25 years ago this week when floods hit the city and there was fear the Pajaro River would overflow.

Two days before Christmas, the city was hit with its heaviest rains in 15 years, inundating the south side of the city. When the call went out that help was needed, the response was tremendous.

More than 400 people turned out on a cold, damp night to sandbag the Salsipuedes Creek levee where it meets the Pajaro River, churches put up people who were left temporarily homeless by the flood, and businesses loaned or donated whatever goods they had that could help.

Frank Osmer, then police chief and now a member of the city council, remembers that he knew trouble was on the way on Thursday, Dec. 22.

By Friday morning, Dec. 23, Salsipuedes Creek levee had broken, flooding acres of land, and the city National Guard unit (101) had been called out to help with evacuations. About 35 families were evacuated from Bridge Street, Orchard Park, East Lake Avenue and Front Street.

Although the Pajaro River was still 10 feet below the levee, it was rising. Water was car fender high on Bridge Street, while residents of Rogge, Carolyn and Baron Streets were being evacuated. Downtown Watsonville was flooded.

On Friday night, Dec. 23, the call went out that men were needed to work on the levee. It didn't matter which side of town they lived on or whether they hadn't lifted a shovel in years — they came.

"The outstanding feature was the cooperation," Osmer recalled. The whole community was involved."

"Even the bars emptied," Osmer said. "Everybody was working on the levee. Osmer and his men kept working — some of them worked more than 48 hours straight. "You slept when you could (for a half hour or so). Nobody went home," he said.

First Christian, First Methodist and First Baptist churches helped put up the 400 people who had to leave their homes.

People weren't doing much traveling around the city — slides had closed Hecker and Chittenden Pass Roads. Santa Cruz had the worst flood in its recorded history, and trains were being held at Gilroy. (The flooding hit most of Northern California, with more than 50 flood-related deaths recorded.)

After getting 2.46 inches of rain on Friday, Dec. 23, Watsonville got another 1.89 inches for the 24 hours ending at 8 a.m. Saturday. The Pajaro River rose to 33 feet, a foot below the top, by 1:30 p.m. Saturday.

But by then it had stopped raining and Osmer said it was OK for people to return to their homes. Not everybody could return, however, because their houses were still flooded. Two homes were swept away by the flood waters. On Dec. 26, a man working on the railroad in Chittenden Pass fell into the River and was swept away.

As bad as the flood was in Watsonville, damage was minimal compared to Santa Cruz and the San Lorenzo Valley.

Damage was estimated at \$3 million to \$5 million in Santa Cruz, where the water level was five feet deep in the downtown area Dec. 23. (The river had risen five feet in three hours.) Five people were killed and more were reported missing.

Register-Pajaronian photographer Sam Vestal remembers going to Santa Cruz that night with his brother Jim, who was home from school for the holidays.

"We came over the Soquel Avenue Bridge and saw the water roaring down Front Street," Vestal said, "There were hundreds of people gawking.

"We had hoped to get to Pacific Avenue, but the force of the water was too much. We retreated to the sidewalk, where my brother was hit by a log. Luckily he grabbed a parking meter."

The area between Santa Cruz and Watsonville was also heavily damaged, especially in downtown Soquel.

In the week after Christmas, Watsonville began to return to normal. Governor Goodwin Knight visited the city and praised the community effort, while Army engineers started working on clearing the river.



The water on College Avenue was at hubcap level.

Photos by Sam Vestal

WATSONVILLE
REGISTER-PAJARONIAN
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REFERENCE



There was nothing but water on Main Street.



More than 400 people turned out to help sandbag the levee.



The Pajaro River came dangerously high.