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THE GREAT FLOOD OF 1861-62

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Stockton and its environs, located at the lowest point of the great drainage basin comprising the Central Valley of California and its encircling mountains, has been perennially concerned with the frequency and the intensity of the winter storms that blow into the north half of the state from the Gulf of Alaska and the Pacific Ocean. Not only must the excess rainfall in the entire valley floor pass through the immediate area as it drains into San Francisco Bay, but there is the added danger of a sudden melting of the Sierra Nevada snowpack bringing torrents of water down the numerous rivers and creeks that eventually discharge into the same bay.

California's weather is usually described as the Mediterranean type: dry, warm summers and cool, wet winters. This has meant, for the residents of the Stockton area, that they can expect the rivers, creeks, and sloughs--the natural drainage courses of this part of the county--to run heavily in a normal winter, while (except for the rivers) drying up during the long summer months. As long as our winter seasons are "normal," all goes well. But California is famous for its unpredictable winter weather, and since the first European settlers came to this area, this has been a major concern of the inhabitants.

The 1972-73 winter season, thus far, has been unusually cold and wet when compared to the 123-year average for central California. While the dams on the major Sierra Nevada rivers and streams serve to lessen the possibility of flooding in this area, the citizens of Stockton are still concerned with the recent heavy rains and the prospect of more to come. A rainfall of almost 15½ inches as of January 20th (compared to the average of 6¼ inches for this same date) is bound to make the weather a common local topic of conversation, and to bring back, to our older residents, memories of other years when, without the benefit of the "New Hogan Dam" and other flood-control projects, heavy rainfalls such as this have brought wide-scale flooding to parts of San Joaquin County.

Many San Joaquin County residents remember quite vividly the major flooding that occurred in different parts of the county in 1896, 1907 (after which the Diverting Canal was built to direct Mormon Slough water back into the Calaveras River northeast of Stockton), 1909, Christmas of 1955, and again in April, 1958. In addition, there have been many occasions in which homes lying in the lower sections of Stockton had shallow flooding as a result of unusually high tides from the Bay preventing the normal drainage of local streams, which in turn caused water to back up over these residential areas. One has but to drive through the older parts of the city to be reminded that at one time its residents expected floods--and learned to live with them. The older homes, built high off the ground, are the vivid reminders of this past.

Early settlers in the county, unaware of the capriciousness of our California weather,

suffered often from the ravages of excessive rainfall. River lowlands were inundated in the winter of 1846-47, but caused no damage as the lands were still in their primitive state. Travelers through the valley at that time reported that both the San Joaquin and Stanislaus rivers had gone over their natural banks, flooding an area near the present Mossdale Y in the southern part of the county to a width of approximately three miles.

By the fall of 1849 the Gold Rush had brought thousands of new people to California, and Stockton was a thriving supply center for the Southern Mines. The winter of 1849-50 was unusually severe, with 12½ inches of rain falling in December alone. By the end of the winter season a total of 36 inches of rain had fallen in Stockton. This compares to our 123-year average annual seasonal (July 1 to June 30) rainfall of 11.64 inches. There were relatively few permanent buildings in Stockton at the time, but it was a city of approximately 2,000 people. Merchandise stored along the waterfront was lost, as well as many of the cloth and canvas structures which then served as homes for these pioneer Stocktonians.

In December, 1852, the weather staged a repeat performance, this time registering a rainfall of almost 13½ inches. On the 18th all the streets of the young city were completely under water, and low areas remained flooded for five weeks. According to Thompson and West (History of San Joaquin County, California) the pioneer John H. Tone, coming in to Stockton by boat with a friend, raised the ire of a small farmer living on the edge of the city as he rowed between the tops of the trees of the man's orchard! That season ended with Stockton recording a total rainfall of 27.40 inches.

Lesser flooding occurred also in 1872 and 1881. But by far the most disastrous flooding occurred during the winter season of 1861-62, when the total rainfall came within a half inch of equaling the all-time high set back in 1849-50. Like our present winter season, the rains were often accompanied by gale-force winds, alternating in temperature from freezing to warm. This alternated heavy snowfalls in the Sierra with warm, heavy rains that melted the snowpack.

The rains began on November 10, 1861, and increased in intensity through December and January. The result, for Stockton, was actually a series of floods, one right after the other. The editor of the San Joaquin Republican, on December 1st, prophetically wrote:

The rain commenced falling again yesterday afternoon, with the wind at the southeast. . . . we are strongly tempted to predict a '49 winter [1849-50], when it rained most of the time from November to April

By the 7th the sloughs in the area were running high, and on the next day a "tremendously heavy fall of rain" was reported, as well as heavy hail. This condition continued for the next several weeks, and by Christmas Eve reports were beginning to come in of imminent flooding in Sacramento and other valley communities. The Calaveras River spilled over its banks in the eastern part of the county, and Mormon Slough was expected to do likewise. Christmas Day was cold and clear, but heavy gale winds brought rain on the next day. Fences, signboards, outhouses, sheds, and trees soaked by the rains blew down throughout the area, and telegraph poles between Stockton, San Francisco, and Sacramento were down. The Sonora stage driver arrived in Stockton the day after Christmas and reported torrential rains throughout the Mother Lode. Mining at Copperopolis was stopped as the shafts were filling with water, and bridges along the Mariposa Road out of Stockton were expected to be carried away at any time.

One-fourth of the tin roof of the City Hall was blown off and repairs were impossible

during the storm. Footbridges across a number of sloughs within the city were washed away. The culvert under the Hunter Street causeway was too small to carry the water coming down the Oak Street Slough, and despite a cut three feet by three feet which was made in it by a city crew, the waters were backing up onto streets and lots.

On Saturday, the 28th, the San Joaquin Republican reported that in addition to the problem with the Hunter Street causeway, water from the Calaveras River was now covering Miner Avenue between Hunter and California streets as well as low-lying lots all over the city. The French Camp Road was closed to all but boat traffic, and volunteers were working to keep the Mormon Slough within its banks.

The next day the Mormon Slough overflowed into the rural area east of the city, from which the water then moved westward into Stockton's residential section. At the same time, Lindsey Slough backed up onto the west end of Miner Avenue, adding more water to the downtown area. But the major flooding was due to the fact that during the course of the city's growth the previous decade, little attention had been given to the need for keeping Stockton's natural waterways (sloughs) open; many had been partially filled and built over as new residential and business blocks were laid out. (History repeats itself: solid fills had replaced a number of bridges over Mormon Slough in the early 1950's, and when the Christmas flood of 1955 occurred the city found it necessary to open them up again.) Also, in crowning and graveling the major streets, natural routes of surface drainage were cut off, and this caused some water to back up into downtown stores. The central part of the city from Center Street eastward, between Market Street and the Mormon Channel, was covered with shallow water. On the eve of the new year city prisoners were put to work cutting a channel through Weber Street at the San Joaquin Street intersection in order to carry off the water which threatened to inundate the county courthouse square.

By this time all connection (except by water!) with outlying communities had been cut off. Mokelumne City (located at Benson's Ferry where the Cosumnes River joined the Mokelumne River) reportedly rested under six to eight feet of water and most of its buildings had been swept away. A few miles to the east the wooden bridge across the river at Woodbridge had floated downstream and that community was also under water. The entire area between French Camp and the Coast Range was a solid sea of water.

The rains let up for about a week, and the weather turned bitterly cold, adding to the misery and inconvenience already being visited upon the county's residents, as well as upon the cattle, sheep, and other farm animals throughout the area. Heavy snow fell along the foothills of the Sierra Nevada. While the streets of Stockton drained off and normal business was resumed once more, access to other parts of the county and the state was very limited.

A new, warm storm hit Central California on January 8th (1862), melting the snow in the foothills and the water came back in over the city. A number of bridges across the city's sloughs broke up and floated away; the local newspaper noted that the Center Street bridge was "somewhere between this [city] and Benicia by this time." Business and social activities again came to a halt. The editor of the San Joaquin Republican was able to show a small bit of humor when he reported two days later that "The dedication of the new Catholic Church [the present St. Mary's Church on Washington Street in downtown Stockton], which was to have taken place on Sunday next, has been postponed until Sunday, February 2^d, when it will probably take place. If the dedication does not come off then, the time will be postponed until fair weather or the 4th of July."

On the 11th Captain Weber's gardens and vineyards were entirely under water at his

home out at the Point [west of the present Holiday Inn], and the adobe portion of the structure was in danger of soaking up the moisture and of disintegrating. Fremont Square [Park] was under six inches of water, and the wooden sidewalks downtown were floating out on the streets. The State Hospital grounds [on California Street] were also under water.

After a brief respite heavy rains returned once more on the 16th, and this time no part of the city was spared although the water was shallow enough to allow almost all residents to remain in their homes. The Steam Navigation Company of Stockton sent several whale boats, loaded with cooked provisions, out into the rural area, hoping to spot stranded farm families scattered through the county, particularly between Stockton and Sacramento. The water continued to rise, forcing merchants and hotel keepers who were still open to build wooden platforms over their street-level floors.

The peak of the flooding came between January 23 and 25. Boats were the only sensible means of travel on the streets of Stockton. Those who attempted to wade through the waters often experienced rather unhappy results--as humorously reported in this small news item dated January 21: "Father Joseph Gallagher went under, yesterday or Sunday, up to his waist. We are confident that he does not believe in that kind of baptism, whatever he may practice." Business perforce came to a standstill and people remained at home except in the most urgent situations. All church services were suspended for three weeks, except at St. Mary's on Washington Street. Many of the few who did show up there arrived literally by boat. Boys rowed through the streets, retrieving chicken coops and sections of picket fencing. The lumber from shattered out-buildings and other wood debris was picked up by these adventurous youths to provide firewood. Men rowed through the streets and unfenced yards, collecting the wooden planking that once served as sidewalks. Burial of the deceased was impossible at the height of the flooding, and several bodies were removed to San Francisco for burial.

The rural part of the county was hit very hard, and the isolated farm families had a very difficult time. Getting supplies was a serious problem for them, and a number of charitable groups were organized in Stockton to deliver food, etc., to those stranded by the high water. One farmer living near Colledgeville in the Dent Township, by the name of Samuel Merryman, sailed his own boat into Stockton a distance of over ten miles in order to get needed supplies. The county was literally one large sea, with only isolated high spots above water. Here thousands of cattle and sheep took refuge, but many more thousands perished in the rising waters, died of the bitter cold, or starved to death. Schooners were pressed into service to bring hay to these isolated groups.

The waters began receding, with the return of better weather, on the 26th, but this was followed by freezing temperatures and snow fell in Stockton on both the 27th and 29th. Although almost twice the normal amount of rainfall was received in February, there was no new flooding, and slowly the waters receded back within their normal channels. While farmers and businessmen particularly had taken a large loss, life once more slowly returned to normal throughout the affected area. But Stocktonians were not soon to forget their unique position at the "bottom of the bowl" in the great Central Valley of California.