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# SUTTER COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## NEWS BULLETIN

Vol. VIII. No. 1

Yuba City, California, 95991

April 1969



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COVER PICTURE

Parks Bar Bridge over Yuba River before 1913

Published quarterly by the Society at Yuba City, California, 95991. Annual membership dues of \$2.00 includes receiving the NEWS BULLETIN. Life membership is \$25.00. Send your remittance to Lola Case, Treasurer, P. O. Box 1266, Yuba City, 95991.

THE BIG EVENT OF THE YEAR!

The ANNUAL DINNER will be held at the United Methodist Church, 627 B Street, Yuba City, Thursday, April 17, at 6:30 p.m. Make your reservations with Mary Poole, Phone 743-4413 before April 14. \$2.50

THE NEWS BULLETIN

THE PURPOSE OF THE NEWS BULLETIN:

to discover, present and disseminate knowledge about the history of Sutter County and the adjacent areas  
to arouse interest in the past by publishing historical material

to make historical data available to the general public  
to aid in bringing together the people of Sutter County interested in local history

to encourage contributions of personal history from long-time residents and relatives and friends of "old timers"

CONTRIBUTORS WANTED!

Articles about old times or old timers are needed for publication. Don't worry about the commas and periods--we'll edit the items for you. Send your items to 114 Carriage Square, Yuba City, California, 95991,

OR

Send the name of the person with a story that others will want to read about to 114 Carriage Square, Yuba City, and the Editorial Staff will make the contact,

OR

Send in a picture of people or places that would be of interest and can be used as a cover picture.

SUTTER COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

114 Carriage Square, Yuba City

Phone 673-7465

YOUR OFFICERS for 1969 - 1970

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Hours of the Museum: 10 a.m. - 5 p.m. Monday through Friday

THE BREAK OF THE ENGLISH DAM

An Address at a Meeting  
of  
The Parent-Teacher Association  
In Yuba City March 11, 1969

By Earl Ramey

What would happen if a flood came down the Yuba when the Feather was low? No one knows because the combination of conditions has never existed. But the residents of Yuba City and Marysville came very near finding out eighty-five years ago.

In the afternoon of June 18, 1883 there came over the wires this telegram:

North San Juan

June 18th

C. E. Sexey or the Mayor

English Reservoir supposed to be broken. River very high. Water now opposite Moore's Flat. Look out for big flood.

H. C. Perkins

Those who knew distances on the Yuba River and also something of the velocity of high water could calculate they had about 24 hours to prepare for the arrival of the flood at the mouth of the Yuba. Furthermore, those persons acquainted with the river knew that there was a great quantity of debris--cobble, slickings, sand, logs, timbers, etc.--to be washed down.

There would be a greater concentrated mass than that which came every winter with normal high water.

To appreciate the potential damage to Yuba City, one must be reminded that in 1883 the Yuba River bore northwest from a point on a line with H Street in Marysville and emptied into the Feather just across from B Street in Yuba City. When both rivers were high, the Feather served as a sort of dam to the Yuba, slowing the force of the current, which in spite of this slowing ate away at the levee and warehouse piling on the Sutter side. If the Yuba should have come down in full force laden with floating debris when the Feather offered no cushion, the levee at the foot of B Street could have been damaged severely and possibly overtopped.

The 24 hours' warning was academic because there was nothing to be done other than to keep boys out of the river bottom and to advise spectators not to use the levee as a grandstand.

The Levee Commission of Marysville had arranged to be notified by telegram when the flood reached Smartsville. From that time the arrival at Marysville could be estimated. But in order to have a more accurate schedule of the crest, Mayor Bingham and Levee Commissioner Sexey drove up the river to a point below Deguerre Point where they could see up stream some distance. At about the calculated time they saw the wave coming. And what they saw was even more frightening than what they had expected. They drove as rapidly as their team could travel back to Marysville to warn the residents. There would be nothing to do, as in the case of Yuba City, other than to keep spectators off the D Street bridge. They

felt sure that the bridge could not withstand the mass they had seen at Deguerre Point.

Now to have a better appreciation of what was in store for the people in Marysville and Yuba City, we must go back and follow the flood from the time the dam broke. Also, it is of interest at this point to note the source of information regarding this event.

During the summer of 1883 the Sacramento Valley Anti-Debris Association was preparing for the famous injunction suit of Woodruff vs. North Bloomfield by which means the valley people hoped to stop the hydraulic miners dumping debris in the Yuba River. The hearings were to begin in July, and the Association, under the management of George Ohleyer of Yuba City, was lining up witnesses. Ohleyer must have seen the opportunity for some good testimony the moment he heard of the break of the dam. He probably went to Sacramento the same day that word of the break came. There was a telegraph line in operation, but there were not yet any telephones with which he could have made the necessary arrangements.

The Association had an agent named Robinson who worked out of Sacramento on various missions getting information about certain mines and arranging for witnesses. Ohleyer and the attorney for the Association sent Robinson the next day to the dam to find out what he could about the incident.

This time he was to be the witness himself.

The Sacramento Bee was a loyal defender of the valley interests in the contest with the miners. C. K. McClatchy, the editor, took advantage of the opportunity to get some good

copy and arranged for Robinson to write a series of letters describing what he found in the mountains. These letters were submitted in evidence at the hearing after they had been published in the Bee. Perhaps more than any other feature they dramatized the destruction of which debris and a flood are capable. Undoubtedly they were a strong factor in persuading Judge Sawyer to grant the injunction of 1884. The huge transcript of the testimony can be read in the Marysville City Library.

The dam in question was the property of the Milton Mining Company, which concern was composed of English capitalists. The dam was popularly called the English Dam. It was near the headwaters of the Middle Fork of the Yuba River. It was 500 feet long across the canyon and 100 feet high and had a capacity of 650 million cubic feet of water. It was full when it broke. The cause of the break was never known.

This supply of water served to lengthen the operating season of several mines along the San Juan Ridge which season would have been limited to winter and spring during the natural run-off period. Also, the elevation gave a good head for the monitors.

Robinson learned that the dam had gone out with a roar early in the morning. In less than two hours the reservoir was emptied. Never before had such a volume of water been concentrated in one fork of the river. The first wave dislodged boulders and uprooted trees, and the next wave pushed along the accumulation. Many Chinese miners were caught at work and carried along with the debris. In a small valley of

bottom land a few miles down there was a sheep ranch on one side of the river and a cattle ranch on the other side. Fortunately, the stock had already gone up the slopes to graze because houses, barns and all equipment of both ranches were picked up and added to the mass.

At narrow places in the canyon debris jams would develop and build up greater head behind. When the jam would give way the wave would move down stream with added force. These waves left marks indicating depths of as much as 90 feet in places. The very sturdy bridge at Freeman's Crossing on the Downieville road down near San Juan was carried down stream. Water ran through the large Freeman Hotel which stood at an elevation never reached before by the river. From the dam to the main Yuba, a distance along the river of 75 miles, all flumes, ditches, roads, cabins and equipment were either wrecked or carried away.

A group of miners were trapped in a drift tunnel when the debris sealed the mouth of the tunnel. They were able to escape through a prospecting shaft. Several miners were caught trying to save their effects from cabins after they could hear the mass coming. There was never an exact count of Chinese miners drowned.

When the wave got into the main channel marks indicated that it ran 20 feet high and by the time it arrived at Smartsville it was yet 15 feet. So we can guess that when Bingham and Sexey saw it at Deguerre Point it was at least 10 feet, although it probably appeared higher to them from the distance they were below.

At that time there was about 15 feet clearance between the water and the floor of the D Street bridge. There would not have been room for the wave and debris to pass under.

The levee on the Yuba City side of the Feather was not as high as it is today. The wave and debris might have had trouble turning at the right angle and getting on a downstream course. If it could not have negotiated the corner, it would have had to climb the levee.

When Bingham and Sexey got back to Marysville, well ahead of the flood, they gave the alarm and joined the crowd on the levee, not on the bridge. We have no description of the scene on the Yuba City side; so we do not know where the audience waited. The wagon bridge would have been upstream enough to be safe, but it would not have been a good place from which to watch because it was housed in with only a few windows.

As the time approached when the mass was due to arrive at Marysville, the river began rising slowly. The audience interpreted the rise as an advance notice of the main show. The river rose to 9 feet on the gauge and held steady. Bingham and Sexey knew that something had happened which they had not expected. Some hours later they learned why the wave and debris did not reach the bridge.

As had happened in nearly all flood threats, the water found a weak spot in the levee on the Linda side about a mile east of the present golf club. The volume of water quickly washed a large gap which allowed such a rapid drainage that the current lost much of its velocity. Men were caught working in a field and had to run through water to higher ground.

The distance between the Linda levee and the Brown's Valley grade was quite wide. The water had left the main channel and had spread over a large area which was at the time more of a lake than a river. As the water escaped through the gap, the debris settled in the river bottom, very little of it reaching the bridge or the Feather.

However, Marysville had not seen the last of the product of the English Dam. The Levee Commission was quite concerned about the logs and timbers which had been left in the river bottom. They were too much scattered to be collected and burned. When in the following winter the first high water came, men were stationed on the D Street bridge with long poles with which they met and guided the logs around and between the piles. The logs were allowed to go down stream where they could find other bridges.

## REFERENCES

While there are many references to the break. of the English Dam in the transcript of the hearings of the Woodruff-Bloomfield case, the best account is given in the testimony of

T. G. Robinson v. 24, pp 9984-10004

v. 26, pp 10627-10689

William Davis v. 17, pp 6628-6667

The reaction and scene in Marysville and Yuba City are described in several issues of the Marysville Daily Appeal, especially in the issues of June 19, 1883, and November 28, 1883.

THE WEEKLY SUTTER BANNER

April 8, 1867

"The Banner is the only paper published in Sutter County."

Shipping Wheat--Mr. Edward Whyler shipped on Saturday, by the schooner Clara, to San Francisco, 1,100 sacks of wheat. Yuba City continues to improve as a shipping point.

Wheat--We learned that Mr. James Gray sold a large quantity of wheat during the present week, to A. D. Starr, at \$2.10, the purchaser paying for the sacks.

Bridge Toll--The receipts of toll at the Feather River Bridge for the week ending April 6th was \$232.

Travel--Every day from about 9 in the morning until 5 in the evening, an almost continual line of vehicles are passing through Yuba City, east and west, some going to Marysville, others to Colusa, Coast Range, and other points. The travel now is very large, and we should judge the "free bridge" is doing a land office business. The time is fast approaching, however, when the farmers will not pass through Yuba City, or go away from home to do their trading.

Shade Trees--We notice that several of our citizens have been planting shade trees, and fixing up and trimming those already planted. It is encouraging to know that some of our citizens take some pride in the ornamental. More attention ought to be paid to this item in every part of the city. Nothing adds more to the beauty and comfort of a city than shade

trees. Every block, where business would not actually prevent their growth, should be surrounded by them.

Road Open--The road is now open to travel from Oroville through Plumas and Lassen Counties, to Indian and Honey Lake Valleys. Thirty-five miles from Oroville is made on wheels, and the balance of the route is very good sleighing.

Advertisements

Broom Manufactory

Wilcox & Co.

Wholesale and retail dealers in brooms of every description.

The Original Telegraph Matches

Manufactured by

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Corner E and First Sts., Marysville

Cheaper than can be furnished by S. F. Manufacturers.

Warranted not to be affected by dampness. A fair trial is the best test of their merits.

W. T. Ellis

Forwarding and Commission Merchant

Nos. 101, 103, 105 and 107 and No. 20 D Street, Marysville. Dealer in all kinds of produce; grain; flour. Has constantly on hand a large and well selected stock of groceries! All of which will be sold for cash.