



SAN JOAQUIN HISTORIAN

PUBLISHED QUARTERLY BY THE SAN JOAQUIN COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Volume V, New Series

Winter 1991

Number 4

The Great California Flood of 1861-1862

by *John D. Newbold*

Introduction

In 1861-1862 the California Gold Rush was twelve years old. Hard rock and hydraulic mining were rapidly displacing the romanticized placer miners who roamed the foothills in search of gold. Civilization had arrived and with it came a susceptibility to natural disaster by floods as communities sprung up along rivers and in the valley. Due to hydraulic mining the river beds were becoming filled with sediment, increasing the likelihood of flooding in a high water incident.

While the rest of the country was engaged in an epic cataclysm of Civil War, California suffered through an unprecedented natural calamity, which was the most devastating recorded flood in California's history — the Flood of 1861-1862.

In presenting this history, I tried to restrict myself to the use of primary source material, specifically, newspapers of the day, or the most contemporary secondary material available in an attempt to portray an accurate image of what it was like in the central valley, foothill and mountain regions of Northern California during the Flood.

The Great Flood

California has been subject to devastating floods throughout its history. The Indian mounds of past generations of native Americans, appearing on the lowlands along rivers, bear testimony of their efforts to achieve safety from rising water. Floods produced the rich alluvial deposits in the valleys and Delta, but in their severity can cause immense damage. There were floods before and after, but none with the magnitude and consequences of this one.

The flood reached its greatest height during the latter half of January 1862. A reporter for the "Stockton Daily Independent" took a cruise over the flooded area on the steamer *Bragden* and remarked, "...the river banks are invisible, Just as far as the eye can see, a vast inland sea spreads...."³ On January 19, Captain William H. Brewer, a member of a survey party in California, recorded in his journal: "The great central valley of the state is under water — the Sacramento and San Joaquin Valleys — a region 250 to 300 miles long and an average of at least twenty miles wide, a district of five thousand or six

thousand square miles, or probably three to three and a half million of acres [is inundated]!"⁴

The floods were actually a series of inundations creating a "... disaster ... by far the most dreadful that ever occurred in California."⁵ There were four distinct flood periods: The first occurred on December 9, 1861, the second on December 23-28, the third on January 9-12, and the fourth on January 15-17. Marysville and Sacramento suffered the worst effects from these floods in the valley. "In Sacramento the flood was the deepest and most destructive ever witnessed by the American residents and destroyed an immense amount of property and not a few lives."⁶ Water covered portions of the valley from December 1861, through the spring, and into the summer of 1862. Captain Brewer, on 13 August 1862, remarked regarding Sacramento: "Everywhere one sees the effects of the flood on that unfortunate city, and, indeed, the water was still over a part of it."⁷

Prior to 1861-1862, the highest recorded water level achieved on the Sacramento River was 22'6", the flood of 1852-53.⁸ On 27 December 1861: "The water ... at sunset ... stood at 22'7" above low water mark, having risen 10 feet during the past 24 hours."¹⁰ On the night of 23 December: "Soon after 8 o'clock, the American commenced to swell and at 11 o'clock information arrived from Rabel's Tannery [East Sacramento] to the effect that it had risen seven feet in three hours."¹¹

The amount of rain that fell in late 1861 and early 1862, "... is unprecedented in the history of the state."¹² The Stockton "Daily Argus" of 31 December, reflected on the "heavy wet": "The rain poured down in torrents. Instead of drops it came down in lines, almost sufficient to drown a man standing in it with his hat off."¹³ The winter rains set in early, on 9 November 1862, and continued with little interruption for the next four months. Prior to the first flood, of 9 December, large quantities of snow fell in the mountains in late November and the first few days of December. From December seventh to

the ninth, the temperatures were unusually high, causing the snow to melt. Some data will help illustrate the high temperatures:

The average temperature of the month of December for eight years, at Sacramento, is ..., (46.31°) ...; while the average of December, eighteen hundred and sixty-one, reached the high figure of ..., (50.98°) and the few days preceding the flood still higher, as follows: December seventh, ... (56°); December eighth, ... (57.66°); December ninth, ... (51.66°).¹⁴

Mr. William A. Begole, of Red Dog, Nevada County, reports that from 23 December to 11 January, the rains achieved "... a total of twenty-five and forty-seven one-hundredths inches in nineteen days, or eleven and thirty-two one-hundredths inches in forty-eight hours, ending with January eleventh."¹⁵ He reports that for the entire rainfall season there fell "... upwards of nine (9) feet of rain"¹⁶ Dr. Logan, of Sacramento, recorded that "... a total for the month, of fifteen and thirty-six one-thousandths inches"¹⁷ had fallen in Sacramento during January. The total for the season, at Sacramento, was 36.10 inches as compared to a normal

© 1991

San Joaquin County
Historical Society, Inc.
P.O. Box 21, Lodi, California 95241
Robert W. Clottu, Editor
Julia Gillespie, Associate Editor

The San Joaquin County Historical Society, a non-profit corporation, meets the fourth Monday monthly except July, August and December. Membership includes subscriptions to *The San Joaquin Historian* and the newsletter, *News and Notes*. Non-members may purchase individual copies from the Society. The Society directs the operation of the San Joaquin County Historical Museum.

San Joaquin County
Historical Museum
Michael W. Bennett, Director

Micke Grove Park
11793 N. Micke Grove Road, Lodi
P.O. Box 21, Lodi, California 95241
Phone (209) 368-9154 or 463-4119

seasonal average of 19.48 inches.¹⁸ Dr. Snell, of Sonora, reports that "... from November 10, 1861 to January 23, 1862, ... there were 69 rainy days."¹⁹

The calamity in the valley would not have been as severe if better precautions had been taken. As time progressed, settlements in the valley were improved and expanded, which created a greater liability for imminent natural disaster. After the flood of 1850, projects, such as protective embankments and levees, were proposed and undertaken to prevent subsequent disaster,²⁰ but the efforts were minimized by the magnitude of the flood of 1861-62. The necessity of levees was accentuated by hydraulic mining, which was filling up the riverbeds with mining debris, making the rivers susceptible to overflow.

The destructive characteristics of the flood are exemplified in the Sonora "Union Democrat" article of 18 January, titled: *The Storm of 1862*:

From all portions of the state came the sad tidings of cities and towns flooded or swept away: stores, goods, merchandise of every description, ranches, stock, grain, flour, lumber, and quartz mills, either totally destroyed or greatly injured. Bridges innumerable and ferries without number have been carried off, roads broken up and washed away, and all communication stopped between one town and another, of only a few miles distant. The mining interest has suffered heavily. On the rivers, the miners have been drawn out, and wheels, sluices, etc. have suddenly disappeared. In the various creeks, gulches and ravines, deep claims, which had cost years of labor to open, are filled up, flumes and derricks blown down and washed off, and general destruction marks the tracks of the storm. Large numbers of miners and others have been thrown out of employment, nearly all business has ceased, and very many have been left in a destitute condition in consequence. There is scarcely any chance to make money, and yet everything in the fuel and provision line has gone up to a high price. Much suffering must result, and it behoves everybody to husband their resources.²¹

The storm and subsequent floods caused damage in the mountains as

well as the valley. The Stockton "Republican" of 11 December reports that the flood in Sacramento is "... destroying property to an enormous extent,"²² In Shasta County, the "Courier" states: "Not a house was left standing at Union City, Lincoln or Latona, which were flourishing small towns."²³ The Marysville "Appeal," reporting on the flood in that locale, expressed: "The frequent sight of houses floating, air-like, along the swift current was novel indeed, some of them being upright, some bottom up, and some floating along log-sided."²⁴ Captain Brewer, at the end of January, surmised: "It is supposed that over one-fourth of all the taxable property of the state has been destroyed."²⁵

As a consequence of the flood, many lives were lost or impaired to destitution. The "Republican" of 14 December, reflects on the conditions in Sacramento: "The number drowned is stated at from ten to forty persons. The distress, dismay, and misery there is beyond all expression."²⁶ The Chinese, in their shanties, seem to have suffered disproportional worse than others during the flood. "The Marysville "Appeal" publishes a report of the drowning of fifty Chinese at Long Bar and one hundred at Ousley's Bar, by the late flood in the Yuba River."²⁷ A Chinese spokesman informed a Tuolumne County paper that "... fourteen hundred of his countrymen have been drowned in different parts of the state by the flood."²⁸ The Placerville "Mountain Democrat" proclaims: "Remember the Poor — This has been a severe winter and the late floods destroyed much property, impoverished many families, and threw out of employment many needy, worthy persons ... They need assistance, but may not have the courage to make known their destitute condition."²⁹

Suffering was not limited to humans. In the mountains and valley, animals went hungry and died. Livestock was lost throughout the state. The Wool Growers Association in March 1862 stated that, "... 100,000 sheep and 500,000 lambs have perished this winter."³⁰ In Joseph A. McGowan's *History of the Sacramento Valley*, he



Sacramento during the flood — 5th Street south from L Street.

Courtesy of California State Library, California Room

estimates that, "... ten thousand cattle were destroyed in Yolo County alone."³¹ "The amount of stock which perished ... is immense. No man can realize it unless he rides around and witnesses the number lying dead on our plains and open lands. Great numbers have been skinned, and some have done a thriving business in this line."³² The Sacramento "Union" tells about a boarder at one of the Sacramento hotels who, when ordering food, "... called for mackerel, saying, 'I'm darned sure they were not drowned in the late flood, but I'm not so certain about the beef and pork.' He has seen a good many drowned hogs and cattle lying around loose in the streets and in his eating wished to be on the safe side."³² The Stockton "Daily Independent" reports, "... the ground squirrels and gophers are ... floating about in all directions, drowned, or swarming thickly on old stumps, logs and trees, ravenous with hunger."³⁴ Persons taking trips over the tule lands noticed that, "... large numbers of coons are seen floating on driftwood ... The beavers, too, have been drawn from their houses ... They seek the edges of the floating islands, ... The coons and beavers are in bad luck as well as 'the rest of mankind'.³⁵ Even non-terrestrial life was affected by the flood. "The

oysters in the beds at Oakland are said to be dying from the effects of the freshwater ... coming down into the bay in such quantities. It is filled with sediment which appears to be injurious to oysters."³⁶

The flood also interrupted mails and the telegraph. Captain Brewer, reflecting on his inability to correspond, wrote: "All the roads in the middle of the state are impassable, so all mails are cut off. The telegraph also does not work clear through ... In the Sacramento Valley for some distance the tops of the poles are under water."³⁷

"The long interruption of travel and the impossibility of transporting supplies had created a famine in the mines. Gold was plentiful, but food was scarce."³⁸ The roads were "... impassable ..."³⁹ and in "... such a wretched condition,"⁴⁰ owing to mud, rocks and high water. With the mining camps "... almost destitute of flour and other staple goods,"⁴¹ the prices rose. In Mokelumne Hill: "Flour was selling at \$20 to \$24 per barrel, and but little in store; potatoes, 8 cents per pound, and very scarce at that; rice, none to be had; and Chinamen starving."⁴² The San Francisco "Alta California" summed up the predicament by saying: "Flour has

taken a rise without yeast, although plenty of water is the main reason.”⁴³

“Fortunes were awaiting the men who could pass the Rubicon of mud with supplies, and bring away the dollars that represented the pounds they might be able to carry. It was a powerful stimulant to men possessed of enterprise, endurance and nerve.”⁴⁴ These flood conditions “... stirred the business imagination ...”⁴⁵ of Dr. Dean Jewett Locke, who founded the town of Lockeford (east of Lodi eight miles), in 1862. Locke responded by establishing the Mokelumne River Steam Navigation Company, which would transport goods from San Francisco up the Mokelumne River to Lockeford, where they would be transferred by wagon teams to the central Motherlode mining towns in the foothills and Sierras. His wife, Delia Marcella Hammond, commented that the Navigation Company came into existence out of his desire “... to engage [in enterprises] ... that might promote not so much his own welfare as that of the community.”⁴⁶ The Company and its double-engined sternwheeler, the *Pert*,⁴⁷ did not produce the profits and benefits for the community that Locke had envisioned. The company operated sporadically till 1866 when Locke was forced to lay up the *Pert* for lack of business, due to declining revenues from a fading Gold Rush.

The prospect that “fortunes were awaiting,” also appealed to unscrupulous speculators, who engaged in various forms of extortion. The Stockton “Republican” reports that in Sacramento “... a captain of a schooner demanded \$125 per day for the use of his boat to rescue the women and children, but the indignant citizens took the boat from him.”⁴⁸ In February the “Republican” also remarks on the high prices:

We regret to see a disposition to take advantage of the flood by raising upon the prices of goods. Immense cargoes are continually arriving at San Francisco from the East, and there are more in the country than can be consumed for years. There is no excuse for this. If they want to crush the interior, let them pile on the prices. We hope to Heaven

that every speculator will lose ten dollars for every one he makes by the ruin of his country debtors, ... Gentlemen, we warn you to stop this, if you do not want your characters blackened from one end of the state to the other.⁴⁹

For several years preceding 1861-1862, the issue of whether to place the capitol in Sacramento or San Francisco had been contested. Construction in Sacramento was in progress when the floods descended. The “Daily Argus” of Stockton remarks: “The capitol building will hardly be built as its site was ten feet under water, and prudence would dictate a removal from such a locality. As ashes were to Pompeii, so it is feared water will be to Sacramento.”⁵⁰ The capitol question⁵¹ was again raised. The Stockton “Daily Independent” suggested: “Since the State Capitol is once more afloat, we suggest that Stockton be its next resting place.”⁵² It humorously commented that the capitol be floated over, since Stockton was “high and dry.”⁵³ As the floods continued into January, the necessity of moving the Legislature became obvious.

Upon January 11th the Senate by a vote of twenty to thirteen, adopted a resolution for the adjournment of the Legislature to San Francisco for the remainder of the session. In the assembly this measure was discussed at great length, and defeated by a vote of forty to thirty-six. Subsequently, however, in consequence of a further flood, they agreed upon the expediency of the measure, and, upon January 23rd, the entire Legislature, with all the attaches and furniture thereunto belonging, embarked for San Francisco.⁵⁴

If was feared by the residents of Sacramento that “... if it ever goes to San Francisco the chances are it will stay there permanently.”⁵⁵

Benevolent societies, towns, organizations and individuals were instrumental in their efforts to relieve distress from the floods. The flood of 9 December was responded to by San Francisco and Stockton. “San Francisco ... raised an amount of \$40,000 in goods and money for the flood in Sacramento

city. It has been duly forwarded and will be yet increased by the liberality of the metropolitan merchants. Stockton has also sent forward substantial aid to the sufferers."⁶⁰ The Howard Benevolent Society of Sacramento was frequently noted for its generosity and efforts in relief. It made its headquarters in the Pavillion, which was on the corner of Sixth and M Streets.⁶¹ In response to its efforts during the flood, on 9 December in Sacramento, a relief meeting met in San Francisco on 17 December.

The colored people of San Francisco held a meeting on Tuesday night for the purpose of raising funds to aid the sufferers by the Sacramento flood. It having been shown there that the Howard Association, in its benevolence, made no distinction on account of color, but assisted all in distress, whether white, black, red, or yellow, it was resolved to send the funds collected to that association.

The flood caused immense destruction, but produced positive benefits as well. "The streams that had been choked by tailings for years were suddenly cleared of their obstructions and extensive cover beds were again opened to the enterprise of the miner."⁷⁰ Those unemployed and forced out of work by the flood were engaged in: "The work of rebuilding bridges and mills, and of

repairing other damages, ..."⁷¹ The "California Farmer" of December 1861 urged its readers to "... cheer up":

"Look on the bright side," Brother Farmers! Though your farms may be flooded, and you have lost some of your stock — your horses, cattle, sheep or swine — your hay and grain: Yet, "look on the bright side." Your lands that have been flooded, will be enriched by rich alluvial deposits, and the next year's crops will be greatly increased. Another good; the gophers that have done you so much harm are all destroyed, old and young; you will now be freed of gophers. The loss of cattle and stock will serve to increase the value of those that remain, ...; for there is no doubt but the beef cattle, dairy stock, sheep and swine, will soon advance in price. So, Brother Farmers, "look on the bright side," and murmur not at the storm, for it was beyond your control.⁷²

The inundation may have been a "blessing in disguise," but the benefits did not outweigh the damages.

The "Farmer's" prediction of next year's crops increasing was premature, for one of California's worst droughts set in. "It began in the fall of 1862 and lasted to the winter of 1864-1865."⁷³ Crops failed and cattle now died of starvation instead of drowning. The amount of rainfall in the valley for 1862 to 1864



Looking out K Street from Sacramento River levee during flood of winter of 1861-1862.

Courtesy of California State Library, California Room

was as follows: For the season of 1862-1863, the rainfall was 11.6 inches, and in 1863-1864, it was 7.8 inches.⁷⁴ The seriousness of the drought is demonstrated by comparing the average seasonal rainfall of approximately twenty inches to these figures.⁷⁵

From December 1861 to the winter season of 1864-65, California experienced successive catastrophes of flood and drought unparalleled in its recorded history. A Reverend S. C. Thrall, of Trinity Church in San Francisco, found inspiration in 1862 by observing that the Civil War and the flood were occurring simultaneously. On 19 January 1862, he delivered the sermon: *The flood of January, 1862: Its meaning and lessons*. He relates the flood in California to the Civil War in the East by stating, "... we have not escaped the penalty of national sin, only it has come in diverse form. He who visited the nation with war has smitten us with flood."⁷⁶ He rebukes Californians for ungratefulness to God; who had provided them with great material wealth.⁷⁷ He remarks: "The rest of the nation hath forgotten God in national pride; we in thirst for

Gold."⁷⁸ If as Reverend Thrall stated, "... great calamities are God's punishment for sin..."⁷⁹ "Who, then, can fail to see in this, our portion of the national calamity - so exactly has it reached just that part which escaped the sorrows of Civil War."⁸⁰

John Newbold grew up in Lodi and Woodbridge. His father, Milton, was a surgeon for forty years, serving the Lodi community. Due to his father's progressed case of Parkinson's disease, John moved back to Woodbridge from Napa Valley, where he had lived since graduating from California State University at Sacramento in 1978 with a bachelors degree in history. John's historical specialization was in the 19th Century American West, the Progressive Era and World War I. While completing his undergraduate study, he wrote a paper on the Mokelumne River Steam Navigation Company, 1862-1865, which was established by Dr. Dean Jewett Locke, the founder of Lockeford, in response to the Great California Flood of 1861-1862.

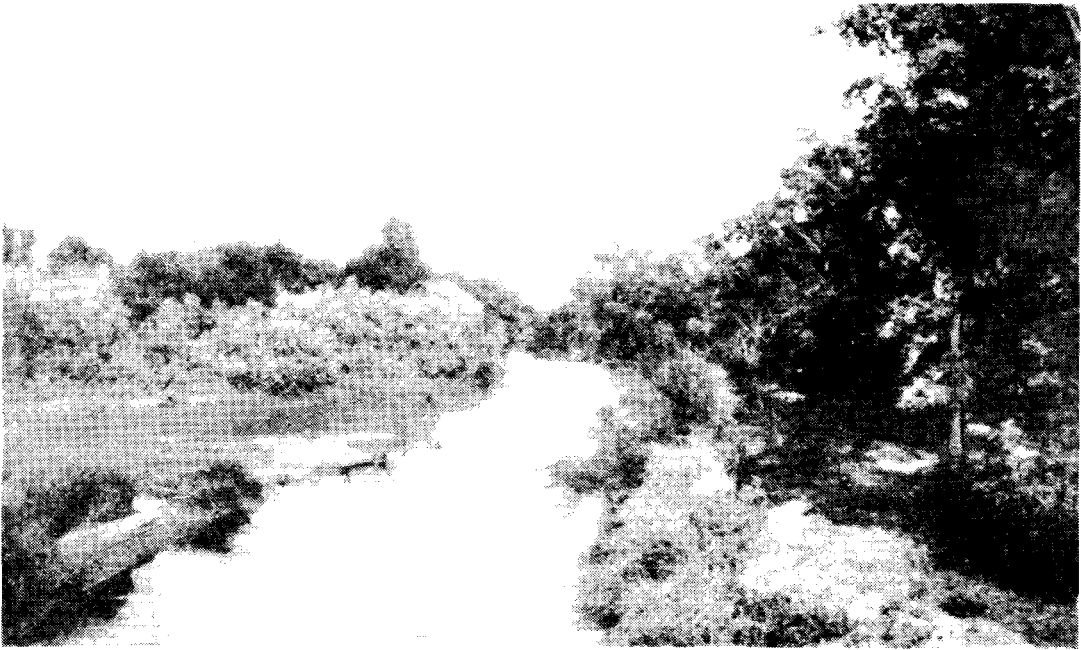
John is chairman of Mokelumne River Alliance and a director of the Committee to Save the Mokelumne River. Both groups are working to preserve and restore the Mokelumne River by improving its water quality and instream flows.

Endnotes

- 1 George F. Wright, **History of Sacramento County, California** (Oakland: Thompson and West, Publishers, 1880), p. 66.
- 2 As quoted in the Stockton **Daily Independent**, 19 December 1861
- 3 As quoted in Charles M. Weber Memorial Foundation, **Newspaper History of the Great California Floods of 1861-1862** (Stockton: Weber Foundation Series, Publishers, 1958), Section III, p. 5.
- 4 William Henry Brewer, **Up and down California in 1860-1864**; the journal of William H. Brewer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1930), p. 242.
- 5 As quoted in the Sonora **Union Democrat**, 14 December 1861.
- 6 As quoted in the weekly Placerville **Mountain Democrat**, 14 December 1861.
- 7 Brewer, p. 295.
- 8 As quoted in Weber, Section IV, p. 7.
- 9 Id.
- 10 **Union Democrat**, 18 January 1862.
- 11 As quoted in Weber, Section IV, p. 6.
- 12 Brewer, p. 241.
- 13 As quoted in Weber, Section II, p. 1.
- 14 As quoted in Weber, Section V, p. 6.
- 15 Id., p. 8.
- 16 Id., p. 6.
- 17 Id., p. 8.
- 18 Walter G. Reed, **History of Sacramento County, California** (Los Angeles: Historic Record Company, 1923), p. 41.
- 19 As quoted in Weber, Section IV, p. 21.
- 20 Wright, p. 68.
- 21 **Union Democrat**, January 1862.
- 22 Id., 14 December 1861.
- 23 As quoted in the **Daily Independent**, 28 December 1861.

- 24 As quoted in the **Union Democrat**, 14 December 1861.
- 25 Brewer, p. 243.
- 26 As quoted in the **Union Democrat**, 14 December 1861.
- 27 As quoted in the **Daily Independent**, 13 December 1861.
- 28 **Mountain Democrat**, 1 February 1862.
- 29 *Id.*
- 30 *Id.*, 8 March 1862.
- 31 Joseph A. McGowan, **History of the Sacramento Valley**, Volume I (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, Inc., 1961), p. 186.
- 32 As quoted in McGowan, p. 186.
- 33 **Daily Independent**, 19 December 1861.
- 34 As quoted in the **Mountain Democrat**, 11 January 1862.
- 35 *Id.*, 1 February 1862.
- 36 **Mountain Democrat**, 1 February 1862.
- 37 Brewer, p. 243.
- 38 Frank T. Gilbert, **History of San Joaquin County**, (Oakland: Thompson and West, Publishers, 1879), p. 37.
- 39 **Mountain Democrat**, 25 January 1862.
- 40 *Id.*, as quoted in 11 January 1862.
- 41 San Francisco **Alta California**, 19 January 1862.
- 42 *Id.*, as quoted in 25 January 1862.
- 43 **Alta California**, 21 January 1862.
- 44 Gilbert, p. 37.
- 45 Robert H. Bahnson, **A Half-Century of Lockeford, California**, Masters thesis, University of the Pacific, June 1953, p. 63.
- 46 As quoted in Bahnson, p. 3.
- 47 Fred S. Cook, **Steamboats in the Valley**, (Volcano, California: California Traveler, 1971), p. 12.
- 48 As quoted in the **Union Democrat**, 14 December 1861.
- 49 *Id.*, 8 February 1862.
- 50 As quoted in Weber, Section II, p. 1.
- 51 As quoted in the **Mountain Democrat**, 11 January 1862.
- 52 **Daily Independent**, 12 December 1861.
- 53 *Id.*
- 54 Wright, p. 72.
- 55 **Union Democrat**, 18 January 1862.
- 56 Wright, p. 71. (Text omitted)
- 57 As quoted in the **Union Democrat**, 14 December 1861. (Text omitted)
- 58 As quoted in the **Mountain Democrat**, 1 February 1862. (Text omitted)
- 59 **Union Democrat**, 18 January 1862. (Text omitted)
- 60 **Daily Independent**, 16 December 1861.
- 61 Reed, p. 138.
- 62 **Daily Independent**, 21 December 1861. (Text omitted)
- 63 *Id.*, 28 December 1861. (Text omitted)
- 64 Brewer, p. 242. (Text omitted)
- 65 *Id.*, p. 246. (Text omitted)
- 66 McGowan, p. 191. (Text omitted)
- 67 Wright, p. 75. (Text omitted)
- 68 McGowan, p. 188. (Text omitted)
- 69 *Id.*, p. 190. (Text omitted)
- 70 As quoted in Weber, Section VIII, p. 4.
- 71 *Id.*
- 72 As quoted in the **Daily Independent**, 31 December 1861.
- 73 James Miller Guinn, **Exceptional years (In pamphlet binder, California State Library), 1889, p. 36.**
- 74 **Reed, p. 41.**
- 75 *Id.*
- 76 **S. C. Thrall, The Flood of January, 1862: Its Meaning and Lessons**, a sermon preached in Trinity Church, San Francisco, Sunday, 19 January 1862 (San Francisco: Towne & Bacon Printers, 1862), p. 12.
- 77 *Id.*, p. 14.
- 78 *Id.*, p. 15.
- 79 *Id.*, p. 8.
- 80 *Id.*, p. 13.

Man's Use of the Mokelumne River



Mokelumne River, circa 1910

Courtesy of San Joaquin County Historical Society

The following article is a reprint of a portion of "San Joaquin County Historical Society Bulletin" No. 3, Volume 2, dated April 25, 1966. The material was collected and edited by Miss Gladys Boynton.

"Outstanding scenery and colorful history are the qualities that make the Mokelumne River one of California's most exciting streams. Rising at the crest of the Sierra in a relatively narrow headwater area in Alpine County, the Mokelumne is 130 miles long. It drains an area of 700 square miles and has an annual average runoff of 722,000 acre feet of water at Pardee.

Its three headwater branches, the North, Middle and South Forks, occupy impressive canyons 1,000 to 4,000 feet deep and drain a rugged area about 47 miles long and 16 miles wide.... The North Fork is the largest branch and begins in the barren snow fields of the Sierra at altitudes up to 10,000 feet. "(Quotes from "Rivers of California.")"

The Mokelumne River crosses San Joaquin County and forms the county's northwest boundary before it drains in-

to the San Joaquin River near Suisun Bay.

The river takes its name from the tribe of Indians who found the area hospitable to their needs long ago. Muk-kel was their principal village and "umne" means "people of".

The earliest water systems from the Mokelumne were made by gold miners back in 1855, when the Butte Ditch was built bringing water by flume and canal for placer mines south of Jackson. In 1873-74 the Amador Canal and Mining Co. completed a new canal to a point above Sutter Creek.

Strangely, it was a French prince who was largely responsible for building the first hydroelectric plant on the Mokelumne. Prince Andre Poniatowski came to the United States in 1892. While in San Francisco, he met and married Miss Elizabeth Sperry, sister of Mrs. W. H. Crocker. Mr. W. H. Crocker was the president of the Crocker-Woolworth Bank in San Francisco, and it was he and the prince who, a few years later, built Electra Powerhouse,

the first to send its electric output to San Francisco.

Prince Poniatowski became interested in mines of the Mother lode in Calaveras and Amador Counties which seemed to offer promise of further development. He, with others, founded the California Exploration Co., and the prince went out seeking low cost electric power to be used in the mines. His explorations on the Mokelumne resulted in building the Blue Lakes Powerhouse five miles from Jackson in 1897.

But the prince was convinced the Mokelumne had the potential for much greater electric power. He dreamed of serving San Francisco, 143 miles away.

Prince Andre and W. H. Crocker promoted and organized the Standard Electric Co. of California. They then proceeded to build the Electra Powerhouse near Jackson, putting in the finest equipment possible at that time. In 1902, Electra was finished and went into operation. Blue Lakes was then discontinued. Electra supplied much of the electric power for the San Francisco Peninsula, and it continued to operate for 46 years. A new and greater Electra was built in 1948 and is still in operation.

Pacific Gas & Electric Co. now has the following reservoirs on the Mokelumne River. Lower Blue Lake completed in 1874, Upper Blue Lake in 1881, Meadow Lake in 1885, Twin Lakes in 1898, Bear River in 1900, Salt Springs in 1931, and Lower Bear River in 1952.

Five powerhouses are in operation on the river, four by P.G.&E. at Salt Springs, Tiger Creek, new Electra, and West Point. One at Pardee is operated by East Bay Utility District for Oakland and its neighboring communities.

The first company organized for the purpose of obtaining irrigation water from the Mokelumne was the Mokelumne Ditch and Irrigation Co. in 1875. Sylvester Treadway was president and David Kettelman was treasurer. They planned to build a rock masonry dam near the old Westmoreland Bridge in Calaveras County. Canals were to carry water to Bear Creek, and from there

water was to be distributed by lateral ditches to ranches.

The dam was built, but it was washed out in a spring flood the first year. Due to difficulties in obtaining rights of way for canals, it was never rebuilt.

In 1891, Byron C. Beckwith founded the Woodbridge Canal and Irrigation Company. In that same year, a timber dam was built on the Mokelumne just north of where the headgates are on the present Woodbridge Dam. This dam was washed out by high water in the spring of 1895. Later a new timber dam was built further downstream where the present dam is located. In 1910, the wood dam was replaced by a concrete one.

Unfortunately, there was no control over the headwaters of the river, other than the small Blue Lakes Dam. So there was much high water in the spring snow runoff and not nearly enough to irrigate ranches later in the summer. Farmers were reluctant to participate in the project because they could not get the water when needed.

In 1924, the Woodbridge Irrigation District was formed as a political subdivision, and was recognized by the State Security Commission in 1927 when sufficient landowners became included in the district.

In 1929, the large concrete dam at Pardee was completed on the river five miles north of Valley Springs. It was constructed by the East Bay Municipal Utility District to supply water from the Mokelumne by aqueduct to serve communities on the east side of San Francisco Bay.

An agreement covering the release of water from the Pardee Reservoir was executed between East Bay and Woodbridge Irrigation District. Now that farmers are assured of a sufficient irrigation water supply all summer, the Woodbridge Irrigation District has prospered. It is the Woodbridge Dam that keeps the water in popular Lodi Lake throughout the summer.

Camanche Dam, situated 15 miles east of Lodi, and 10 miles below Pardee, was completed in 1963. It was built by East Bay Municipal Utility District as a

supplemental reservoir to supply standby storage waters which can be released as needed downstream, thus preserving the bulk of the water in Pardee for domestic consumption in the East Bay.

An additional feature of Camanche is the flood control factor requested by the Federal Government to protect the rich crop lands in the lower Mokelumne River areas. For this reason there was federal assistance in paying for the dam. This flood control feature is much appreciated by the Mokelumne River Irrigation District, representing 12,000 acres of farm land near Lockeford. Neil Locke, president of this association, says of the river, "Finally we have it about where we want it."

Camanche Reservoir is expected to

provide one of California's finest recreation areas for boating, fishing, swimming, and water skiing. The fish hatchery below the dam is being successfully operated to raise steelhead trout and furnish spawning grounds for salmon.

Now over 400,000 acre feet of water storage has been constructed in eight reservoirs on the Mokelumne and its tributaries. Water is stored in these reservoirs during the spring runoff and flood periods and is later released to generate power and to supply farms and homes with water which would have otherwise wasted into the ocean.

Thus has man made wise use through the years of one of the great rivers flowing through San Joaquin County.

Chronological Index for Volume V — San Joaquin Historian

New Series

(The Index for each Volume year is presented each December.)

Volume V, New Series Spring 1991 Number 1

Water in San Joaquin County Part II
A Contemporary Perspective
God's Greatest Gift - A Poem
Robert Gilmour LeTourneau "Earth Mover"

by Warren D. Noteware
by Warren D. Noteware
by James A. Beardsley

Volume V, New Series Summer 1991 Number 2

D.J. Oullahan: Wagon Freighter
Bocce - A Game of Companionship
The Vanishing Ancient Abacus

by Parsons Holladay
by R. W. Clottu
by Bill Hathorn

Volume V, New Series Fall 1991 Number 3

Farmers & Merchants Bank of Central California
California Waste Removal Systems:
A Family Concern
Interest of the New Generation

by William Ferrero
by Steve Routt

Volume V, New Series Winter 1991 Number 4

The Great California Flood of 1861-1862
Man's Use of the Mokelumne River
From Bulletin No. 3, Vol. No. 2,
San Joaquin County Historical Society
April 25, 1966.

by John Newbold

You can perform an outstanding service by sponsoring an issue of The San Joaquin Historian for \$1000.00. Your donation helps us preserve our local history, it is tax deductible and it reaches nearly 1500 members and scores of schools and libraries.



Editorial Comment

Thanks to Howard Mason of Lodi for calling our attention to San Joaquin County Historical Society Bulletin No. 3 (April 23, 1966). We think that a reprint is appropriate since it is unlikely that the majority of our current members had the opportunity to read the mimeograph issue 25 years ago.

Howard Mason has collected a wealth of similar information which we hope he will share with us in the future.

**San Joaquin County
Historical Society**
P.O. Box 21
Lodi, CA 95241

Non-Profit
Organization
POSTAGE
PAID
Permit No. 48
Lodi, CA 95241