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Remembering When ...

Flood of 1938 was devastating to whole community

by David Mason

"The view of nature that Matilija Canyon presents has always been awe-inspiring, but never more so than now, when the evidence of what nature can do when in a wrathful mood is still manifest."

- The Ojai, May 5, 1938

The night of March 2, 1938, was a long wet one. The rains had been pounding the small valley for a week, and in the last 24 hours, the downpour had totaled up to 7.9 inches. The residents waited through the night, listening to the roar of the water as it rushed over the rocks that were being washed into town. They waited throughout the night for the first light of daybreak so that they could assess the damage that was done during the last few hours.

Morning brought with it the realization that the Ojai Valley was



PETE MASON (left), the author's father, was a member of a crew which constructed a temporary roadway across the San Antonio Creek on Grand Avenue - 1938.



THE BACK OF THE ARCADE AS STORE buildings began to flood. The picture was taken from the back door of what is today Bonnie Lu's Country Cafe - 1938.

completely cut off from the rest of the world. Telephone and telegraph lines were down on the ground and out of service. All roads leading in and out of the valley were either washed away or covered with tons of earth that had washed down from the hills, making them completely impassable.

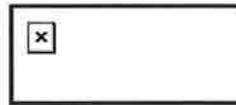
The small bridges in town withstood the torrents, which had the water beating against them at a rate of 500 cubic feet per second. The river banks were overflowing in many places and the water was being carried directly into houses.

Signal, Ventura and Lion streets were virtual spillways as the water raced down from Stewart Canyon too furiously for the runoff ditches to handle. On Lion Street, the water had changed its course from the original channel and was rushing down the middle of the street, causing the houses on the east side of the street to be stranded on an island and the overflowing water poured across Aliso Street, headed for the downtown block.

In the arcade, the Rockafellow's Pharmacy, now Bonnie Lu's Country Cafe, was completely flooded from the rushing water. Many of the other stores in the east end of the arcade were also in grave danger as the water level continued to rise. The Buckner house, now The Herb Garden, was inundated, the piano and other furnishings were being carried out as the water swirled up knee-high. With the quick thinking of Anton Sarzotti, the downtown stores were saved. Sarzotti brought bales



THE WEBB WILCOX CAFE, now The Wheel, on the Maricopa Highway, after floodwaters completely removed the first floor - 1938.



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of hay into town, at his own expense, and built a dam that diverted the water from doing any more damage to the business block.

All of the local schools were closed for the duration of the storm. The teachers and students were unable to reach the schools, for all of the roads were quickly disappearing as the water was rising.

Ranches in the East End were also hit hard. The H. Waite Gerry orchard, across Grand Avenue from San Antonio School, was cut by a deep ditch when the water rushed through the orchard, taking with it orange trees and smudge pots. The "dip" on Grand Avenue was piled with boulders in profusion, and the beautiful hillside mansion of the Sam Barrett family, at the end of Boardman Road, was surrounded with tons of mud as the earth gave way and slid down the mountain.

The bridges crossing San Antonio Creek on Grand Avenue and Ojai Avenue were completely washed out, effectively cutting off the East End residents from the city of Ojai, and stranding them due to the Dennison Grade being closed because of the mud and debris.

The floodwater went raging down the Ventura River, creating severe damage to the Maricopa Highway and in Matilija Canyon. At Pop Soper's training camp on the Maricopa, five cabins were lost to the stream and the two ends of a nearby bridge stood forlorn, reaching for each other across 50 feet of space, while the water flowed merrily along 20 feet below. The bridges above Soper's were all left standing firm,

although seriously undermined. Had they not been reinforced by new supports less than six months earlier, they would probably have not withstood the pressure.

In every spot where the river scoured against the bank of the roadway, the shoulder had been washed away, leaving nothing between the pavement and a 50-foot drop into the rocky stream. On one bridge, the underpinnings had been so badly weakened that the highway workers had to fence off one-third of the bridge, lest the weight of a car prove too much for it.

Everywhere trees leaned precariously with their trunks 5 feet deep in debris. Heavy displaced boulders filled the streams - only hours earlier they had been on a bank farther up the canyon.

At Wheeler Hot Springs, three cabins were lost, and across the highway at Webb Wilcox's Cafe, now The Wheel, the first floor was washed away, leaving the second floor on the ground in its place. Road graders plied their way steadily up and down the hard-hit stretch of highway. The 1,100 feet of road in the curve that led into the first tunnel was completely torn away, leaving nothing but hillside where the highway had been.

Farther up the Maricopa Highway, a new channel was cut through the Wheeler Gorge campground, and all of the concrete viaducts over the creek inside the camp were taken away, as well as a number of the picnic tables. Many fine old trees and hundreds of feet of highway were destroyed in a

very few hours by the force of the once-gentle stream as it roared its way toward more destruction in lands where the water had not flowed for many decades, lands where homes and farms had sprung up.

As the Ventura River continued to make its way to the ocean, the water crested on both sides, flooding the Rancho Matilija and cutting away the banks on the Meiners Oaks side. Reaching the small town of Oak View Gardens, it completely destroyed the houses that had been built along its banks, washing them out to sea. Many daring rescues took place as people found themselves stranded in the middle of rising water.

Evacuees found a dry room and a cot waiting for them in the Boyd Club in Ojai, where the Red Cross had set up their relief center.

Everywhere you looked, there was destruction. Along the beautiful winding Creek Road, many of the stately sycamore trees that had grown there since the Indians populated the area were uprooted and moved downstream.

Finally, when the rain was over, an emergency road was cut through to the Matilija for use by government vehicles. A detour of the Ojai Avenue bridge was built temporarily just north of the destroyed bridge to give the people living in the East End access to town. Damage to the roads was estimated at \$50,000, not including the Matilija Canyon road, which was the worst spot in the whole area.

One property owner in Matilija Canyon returned to his home to find the building and land gone,

and in its place, a pond filled with trout. When the water receded in Oak View, a 32-inch salmon was rescued from a back yard.

The local Bank of America was even short on currency - because of the interruption of the mail service, they had no fives, 10s or 20-dollar bills on hand, although they said that they had "plenty of ones."

Some of the people living in the lowlands that had been evacuated were unable to bring anything with them, and with the high water entering their houses, practically nothing could be salvaged. It was the first time in many years that the rivers had risen to this extent, and it plainly showed that some measure of flood control was needed - after all, the property that was removed to the Pacific Ocean was land that the county had been collecting taxes on.

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