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Yuba City, California

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## The 1907 Flood

*(Photo collection Community Memorial Museum)  
[2005.003.360]*



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## President's Message

Continuity and our own sense of history benefited greatly with the presence of Randy Schnabel on the Historical Society Board of Directors. Randy recently resigned from the Board and every board member and member of the society owe him an incredible debt of gratitude for his service. Randy was a charter member of the society and has been on the board since 1957 and served several times as president. Thank you, Randy, for all you've done for us!

Great news - the Historical Society has hired Galvin and Associates, a firm of architectural historians, to conduct our survey of historical properties in the county. This survey is funded by the settlement from the lawsuit filed by Sutter County Heritage when the Onstott House was destroyed. However, the work to be done is great, so we'll be looking for volunteers to help with our efforts. The survey work will take approximately one year, and the kind of tasks range from photographing and describing historic buildings to doing research to entering information into a database. If any of you think you might like to participate in this important project, please call our Preservation Committee Chair, Phyllis Smith, at 671-3261.

This Christmas Eve will be the fiftieth anniversary of the last flood to inundate Yuba City. To commemorate this event we are printing introductory essays from the 1995 book *Coping with Disaster: Voices from the 1955 Flood*, which is for sale at the Museum bookstore. Obviously flooding is a topic of much interest these days, both the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina and the potential for future floods in our own area.

The Museum is embarking on two new construction efforts: desperately needed additional storage, and a new exhibit wing to house a multi-cultural exhibit. The storage facility will be an addition to the current building behind the museum, and the new wing will be north of the agriculture wing.

We're coming up on a busy season for everyone, and the Historical Society and Museum are no exceptions. Be sure and check the calendar on the back page of this Bulletin for the many events scheduled in the next few months.

I look forward to seeing all of you at our October luncheon at the Bonanza Inn Convention Center. Our speaker will be Jann Garvis of Nevada City, author of *Roar of the Monitors: Quest for Gold in the Northern Sierra*.

Audrey Breeding  
President

## Director's Report

Here's a gentle reminder to stop by the Museum if you haven't seen the traveling exhibit *State of Emergency: Disaster Response in California*. With disaster concerns so recently looming large on the national scene, this exhibit is timely and brings home the message of preparedness to our local area. The exhibit surveys California disasters - fires, floods, earthquakes - over the last century. Our Museum is augmenting the exhibit with a section on the 1955 Yuba City flood, as we approach the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that disaster this December. There are also photos of other local floods, such as the big one of 1907 that swept away the covered bridge between Yuba City and Marysville. The exhibit is here through November 27.

This continues to be a time of exciting opportunity at the Museum as we look forward to the imminent expansion of the west wing for a new multi-cultural history exhibit and also of the existing storage building to alleviate the present storage crunch.

In 2006 the museum is creating an important new series of presentations. Due to the incredibly rapid growth of our once small community, the stresses of new development impact our historic resources, the very buildings and structures that lend uniqueness, charm and character to our hometown. Even as we grow, we want to keep these historic resources to share them with newcomers to our community. The value of our own historic buildings increases as we grow. The distinct value of retaining these resources lies in defining our **sense of place** by keeping the things that make our community **home**, that make it like no other place.

However, as we have seen, without careful planning and the support of local officials, the pressures of development and the lure of economic gain can destroy these precious and irreplaceable resources in the blink of an eye. We have watched in disbelief as our historic buildings have fallen to the wrecking ball or fires of suspicious origin - Jacob Onstott house (1880s), George Harter home (1872), several other Harter houses (1920s), the turn of the century farmhouse on Live Oak Blvd., the flour mill, the Diamond Match building, and our 1890s Yuba City railroad depot that was actually sold by the city to be moved to another town!

It is now time to focus all of our attention on the historic buildings that remain and to garner community support for preserving them. If we don't pull together now, we are doomed to live in a nondescript place rife with strip malls, chain stores, fast food outlets and tract houses unrelieved by any semblance of character or history.

To wit, the Museum's new Preservation Series will present a series of programs through 2006 featuring a different home or business owner who has restored or is restoring an historic house or building. Here's our chance to hear the inspiring stories of our neighbors who triumphed over the travails of historic preservation and managed to give new life to an historic building while enhancing their own quality of life. The series will begin in January 2006 and will continue throughout the year. Watch for details in the next issues of the *Muse News* and the *SCHS Bulletin*.

Julie Stark  
Director

## Memorials

In Memory of **Helen Brierly**

Robert & Dorothy Coats  
Ida J. Philpott  
Randy & Shirley Schnabel

In Memory of **Robert "Bob" Carter Jr.**

Perry Mosburg & Daughters

In Memory of **Allen Dunbar**

Virginia Filter & Family

In Memory of **Will L. Essary**

Ruth & Howard Anthony

In Memory of **Janet Fowler**

Julie Stark

In Memory of **Dale Green**

Dewey & Barbara Gruening

In Memory of **Juan Guzman**

Dewey & Barbara Gruening

In Memory of **Cecil Hornbeck**

Joni Adams  
Christy Carlos  
Ida J. Philpott  
Sharyl Simmons

In Memory of **Kula Karnegas**

Jane & Walter Ullrey

In Memory of **Carol A. McNeill**

Meriel Davis & Joann Lundquist  
Bob & Sandra Fremd

In Memory of **Jean M. Middleton**

Bob & Katie Bryant  
Gene & Joan Erfle

In Memory of **Mary Willis Moore &  
Harold Whyler Moore**

Julia Moore Patton

In Memory of **Elizabeth Whyler Moore**

Charles E. Moore  
Julia Moore Patton

In Memory of **John Paine**

Perry Mosburg & Daughters

In Memory of **Ronald E. Rudge**

Anita, Sabrina & Robert Benton  
Buttes Pipe & Supply Co.  
Dean & Barbara Chellis  
Sally & George Herr  
George H. Inouye  
Japanese-American  
Citizen's League  
Jack & Linda Nelson  
Ida J. Philpott  
Dot & John Reische  
Allen & Dorothy Sutfin  
David & Gina Tarke  
Conrad G. Taylor

In Memory of **Etha Walker**

Arlene Chesnut

In Memory of **Hugh Whatley**

Bob & Katie Bryant

In Memory of **Leo Wyke**

Clint & Sue West

In Honor of **Cecil & Marilyn Hornbeck's**

61<sup>st</sup> Wedding Anniversary  
Marilyn Hornbeck



# Pre-Twentieth Century Floods

by  
David Rubiales

## *Maidu creation story*

*In the beginning there was no sun, no moon, no stars. All was dark, and everywhere there was only water.*

In its prehistorical form the Great Central Valley of California was often a giant flood plain for half of each year. Each winter vast amounts of water that originated in the storms of the Sierra Nevada and Cascade ranges descended into the Central Valley's river systems and created a water-filled bowl over fifty miles wide and more than three hundred miles long. No other river system in North America threatened its environment with such intense and recurring flood conditions.

The ecology and wildlife of the Valley reflected the dominance of water. During the winter, millions of wildfowl inhabited the sloughs and marshes of the Valley floor, and dense riparian forests, consisting of tall oak, maple, alder, sycamore, ash, and button willow, sometimes miles in width, paralleled the major rivers of the Valley. Natural levees, some as high as twenty feet and as wide as ten miles, although the average width was 3 miles, separated the flood basin from the major rivers and provided a habitat for oak forests (*quercus lobata*), grasslands, and deer, antelope, and elk.

The earliest human inhabitants of the Valley understood the ebb and flow of the local rivers, and, instead of trying to control them, they adapted their daily life to accommodate them. One of the most

abundant plants available to these riverine inhabitants, one which demonstrated the constant presence of water, was the tule (bulrush), which grew in large low-lying swamps or ponds that dotted the landscape next to the rivers. The people of the village of Yubu (Yuba), across from the mouth of the Yuba River on the Feather, were particularly known for their skill in constructing tule rafts, which enabled them to get around on the rivers and sloughs, even in high water. Villages were built on the high ground of the natural levees, and dwellings were constructed of poles, tule thatch, and mud, so they could easily be reconstructed if flooding did occur. Even sleeping mats were constructed of tule reeds.

The specific characteristics of the Sacramento Valley, including its great floods, remained unknown to outsiders until the early nineteenth century when Spaniards, Mexicans, Americans, and Canadians began to explore the Sacramento Valley and exploit its resources. Gabriel Moraga, leader of the first expedition into the Valley in 1808, understood that the Sacramento River and its tributaries frequently overflowed its banks. A written account, however, of a great flood did not exist until 1832.

On Sunday, December 9, 1832, Hudson's Bay trapper John Work led his men onto the Sutter Buttes in

search of game. Work noted in his journal that there was "overcast weather, a very heavy rain in the evening", but he did not realize that he was witnessing the beginning of a great storm that would leave the Sacramento Valley underwater and the Buttes an island in a shallow sea.

The storm lashed the fur trappers' camp for the next two days, preventing them from moving camp. By the night of December 12, Work noted that the water was "rising fast." By the next morning, the water had indeed risen dramatically. "On our arrival here," he wrote, "there was only a small pond and now the whole lower plain is a lake." But the storm was not finished, and for three more days the water continued to rise and had begun to lap at the base of the trappers' lodges. Work relocated the camp to dryer ground, and, for the next two weeks, he and his companions were trapped by heavy fog and rain and saw the sun shining only once, while the Buttes became almost completely surrounded by water. Finally, on the last day of December, 1832, the storm subsided, and the Hudson's Bay Company trappers were able to escape the Buttes, almost three weeks since their arrival.

The discovery of gold in California in 1848 brought vast changes to the Sacramento Valley, particularly to its rivers. The riparian forests that paralleled the Sacramento and Feather rivers were cut down, their wood burned in house stoves and steam boat boilers, and crops were planted in place of the forests. Towns such as Yuba City and Marysville were built on low ground, virtually on the banks of the Feather

and Yuba Rivers, their founders completely ignorant of the ability of the rivers to create an inland sea. The new settlers soon learned, however, the power of the rivers that coursed through their Valley. For each of the successive winters of 1851, 1852, and 1853, the Feather and Sacramento Rivers flooded communities along their banks. In the next decade, the rivers would be no kinder. In January 1862, a torrential rainstorm swept over the Valley and Sierra Nevada range with catastrophic results for the state. Geologist William Brewer reported to his brother that

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... Thousands of farms are entirely under water... America has never before seen such desolation by flood as this has been, and seldom has the Old World seen the like.

The great flood of 1862 was compounded in its severity by new mining techniques in the mountains. By 1853, placer mining - the process of extracting gold from the river gravel (or placer) through panning or "sluicing" - was yielding less and less of the precious metal. Consequently, miners turned to a new method of mining which relied on breaking down banks and hillsides with pressurized water. This new system was known as hydraulic mining and revolutionized gold mining in the Northern mining regions. New towns sprang up and other mining settlements were revitalized. The Yuba watershed, with the largest gravel deposits,

became the heart of the industry. While the new method of mining proved a blessing for the mining industry and its workers, it was at the same time a curse for the residents of the Sacramento Valley, in particular those of Marysville and Yuba City and the farms that surrounded the two communities. Hydraulic mining produced huge amounts of debris and "slickens," which choked the creeks and rivers and added a new dimension to flooding in the Valley. In 1862 the Sacramento Valley was not only flooded, but much of it was inundated with hydraulic mining debris as well. For the next twenty five years, until it was outlawed, hydraulic mining ravaged the Yuba River and exaggerated the floods that plagued Valley residents.

Eventually, the citizens of Marysville and Yuba City, along with those of Sacramento, constructed levees and attempted to effectively wall their communities against the rivers and mining debris. The levees, however, could never be high enough. On New Year's Day, 1868, the Feather washed away a new levee and flooded Yuba City. In 1875 the levees around Marysville were breached, and water, mud, and sand from the Yuba River filled the city "like a bowl." The city was almost destroyed and did not recover for months. In the decades that followed the 1875 flood, more levees were built along the Yuba and Feather Rivers, and sloughs, such as the Gilsizer Slough in Yuba City, were plugged at their junctions with the rivers and drained. The great tule ponds between the Feather and Sacramento were "reclaimed" and turned into extraordinarily fertile farm land.

Ironically, levee construction and slough drainage actually exaggerated the problem of flooding in the Central Valley. When great storms did occur, the levees trapped water and created high speed channels. The river's water, as it progressed downstream, could only increase in height, since the sloughs were blocked and unable to act as drains to the tule ponds. Inevitably, the fast moving water would escape its artificial banks and flood the settled countryside. All of this was proven in 1907 when the Feather and Sacramento Rivers overran their levees in several places and once again created an inland sea. The Marysville Appeal reported that the "Feather River surpassed all previous records so enormously that the ordinary precautions against... high water were as nothing..." The great flood of 1907 stimulated the federal government of the United States to join forces with state and local agencies in an effort to finally tame the Sacramento Valley's rivers. Over the next four decades integrated levee systems with weirs and pumping stations were designed and built, canals and bypasses were created to take pressure off the Sacramento and Feather Rivers, and dams were erected to hold back flood waters in reservoirs.

Indeed, by the middle of the Twentieth Century, the Sacramento Valley had been transformed, its rivers leveed, its wetlands drained and leveled, its riparian forests cleared away. All of this had been done in order to control the rivers and stop their flooding. It was not enough.

# Twentieth Century Floods

by

Julie Stark, Assistant Curator Community Memorial Museum

In this century, nothing like the huge inundations of the 1800s has taken place. December of 1955 was the first time that a storm of sufficient magnitude to produce such floods had occurred, but comparison to the floods of the last century is difficult due to man's alteration of the natural watershed with dams, levees, and reclamation districts with artificial bypasses.

The floods occurring in this century did progressively more damage as increased population built on the flood plain. The flood of 1907 followed 3 weeks of heavy rain in March and a snowfall that blanketed the entire valley. The rivers rose rapidly, and debris clogging the riverbeds contributed to breaks in the levees. On March 18, the District 10 levee broke, followed the next day by breaks at Shanghai Bend, Star Bend, Berg Ranch, McGuire Bend and Hock Farm, as well as breaks on the Yuba County side. Although the storm itself did not compare to those of the winter of 1861-62, this flood caused great damage to the levees because of a very prolonged flood wave on the Feather River, with a sustained length of over 200 miles. Damage to Yuba City was minimal, in part due to the small population of only 1,000 people, located mostly along Second Street. Water from the break above Yuba City spread toward town, and about two feet of water was reported on Shasta Street near the lumber yard. There was some flooding in the Chinese settlement in the area of the present

day armory when water from the Shanghai Bend break backed up into Gilsizer Slough at depths of 6 to 7 feet. The Cooper tract on Reeves Avenue was under two feet of water. The business district at Second and Bridge Streets remained dry, standing on higher ground than the supposed "hill" west of Gilsizer Slough, which was navigable by boat. The Sutter Basin was one vast sheet of water, and Oroville, District 10 and the Linda area were flooded.

Following the 1907 flood, engineers advised that the rivers should not be restrained, but allowed to flow into their natural overflow areas, protecting only the towns with levees. Mining debris laws were enforced to prevent further clogging of rivers. A state flood control project was initiated in 1911 to strengthen levees, followed by a federal project which added bypasses and dams. During this period, many reclamation projects were undertaken to put flood basins into agricultural use, including the Sutter Basin project which drained the Robbins area in 1925. When the Sutter By-pass was constructed, an opening was left for Gilsizer Slough. This opening was later closed, because water backed up as far as Tudor during high water.

The flood of 1937 followed a two-day cloudburst in December, which caused about only half the total flow of the 1907 flood. However, there were many breaks over the course of the Feather River system, and the flood wave was a short high

one. A levee break at East Biggs caused water to pour down on both sides of Gridley. Highway 20 was flooded at Seven Mile House east of Marysville, as were District 10 and District 784. There was water between the town of Sutter and the By-Pass, and the Nicolaus Bridge was wrecked. At Yuba City, the river was two feet higher than it had ever been, which, according to W.T. Ellis, was caused by the constriction of the rivers by levees, denying them their normal overflow basins. At Shanghai Bend, the new levee followed the deep water channel of the river, depriving it of overflow space at the confluence of the Feather

and Yuba Rivers.

In 1940, many agricultural areas of the valley were flooded, Meridian being especially hard hit with water from the Sutter By-Pass. Then Shasta Dam was built, which brought the headwaters of the Sacramento River under control. A break in the Bear River in 1944 brought flooding to Sutter County again.

November of 1950 brought a cloudburst-type storm that caused flooding in low areas. A break at the Hammonton gold fields on the Yuba River caused water to flow into the Linda-Olivehurst area. Rio Oso flooded following a break on Yankee Slough.

## **The 1955 Flood in Nicolaus and Rio Oso**

by

Julie Stark, Assistant Curator Community Memorial Museum

While several thousand men fought desperately to save the levees surrounding Marysville, levees all the way downstream on the Feather River were endangered. The first break in the levee system occurred about noon on December 23 on the east side of the Feather River near Nicolaus. The break took place in a new section of levee as a crew was at work trying to reinforce it. Over 24,000 acres, comprising 80% of Reclamation District #1001, were flooded. Nicolaus and East Nicolaus were inundated, along with much agricultural and dairy land, stretching from the Bear River on the north to the Natomas cross canal on the south, and eastward from the Feather River to the Western Pacific tracks. Although there was no initial

loss of life, two Nicolaus area residents lost their lives on January 6 when their small motorboat was swamped near Verona. Thousands of cattle and other livestock drowned.

At 3:00 p.m. on December 23, the Nicolaus Bridge crumbled, and 350 feet of the span fell into the Feather River. Over 200 homes were affected by the flooding, and the Nicolaus area was cut off from the outside world. "For a week, we were a nation unto ourselves," said resident Don Beilby. It was not until December 31 that it was possible to make contact with Nicolaus again. Many farms in the area were accessible only by boat for almost 2-1/2 months. The water reached depths of approximately 18 feet.

Two breaches in the north levee

of Yankee Slough on the Bear River poured water onto several hundred acres of orchard land. The Bear River Bridge was washed out at Four Corners. On December 24, the levee on the left bank of the Feather River near Verona was breached by the State Highway Department to relieve pressure caused by the Nicolaus break, followed by the breaching of the right bank opposite Nicolaus on Christmas day to drain water from below Yuba City.

Civil Defense headquarters was set up by John Iribarren at his home in Nicolaus, where he acted as its temporary director. Eber Beilby, District 5 Supervisor, and Orlin Van Dyke, as Civil Defense deputy, coordinated local disaster activities. The Fairview Church served as a shelter for flood refugees until the Red Cross set up cots in the Odd Fellows hall in East Nicolaus. The church then became a distribution point for food, clothing and bedding. The women of the church made quilts and kitchen linens for those who had lost their belongings in the flood. The walnut drier at Four Corners was turned on to dry laundry and other wet items.

An emergency operation was launched to feed and rescue marooned cattle. A 100-foot barge was brought up the Sacramento River to Verona by U.S. Army personnel, and about 1400 head of dairy and beef cattle were moved downriver to ranches outside the flooded area. Other stranded cattle were fed by air drop or boat.

Cattle losses were estimated at between 6,000 and 10,000 head. The carcasses of these drowned animals presented a huge disposal problem. Civil Defense set up five carcass disposal centers. Some carcasses were towed by boat, dragged by half tracks, or handled by military weasels. Carcasses that could not be accommodated at rendering plants were burned or buried in great pits.

Many valuable orchard trees were ruined by the vast sheet of water which stood on the land for weeks and by the heavy deposit of silt left when the water finally receded. The value of orchards destroyed was placed at \$3,000,000.

Total losses in the south Sutter County area totaled \$30,000,000, with repairs to the Nicolaus Bridge alone costing \$200,000. The Sutter County Grand Jury praised the people in the vicinity of the Nicolaus break, including the Directors of Levee District #1001, for being well prepared to handle the situation, avoiding loss of life and minimizing property damage.

The Nicolaus area was threatened again when heavy rainstorms occurred in mid-January 1956. Repairs to the break in the levee had not been completed, and 200 feet of the embankment washed out. The final big storm of the cycle hit late in February, but the repairs had been completed, and the levee held.

# The 1955 Flood in Yuba City

by

Jacqueline L. Lowe, Director Community Memorial Museum

Torrential rains driven by gale force winds struck Northern California on December 15, 1955, and continued without stopping through December 23, sending at least eight rivers over their banks. The tropical storms brought warm rains that melted snow in the Sierra, adding further to the rising waters.

On December 22, the Feather and Yuba Rivers, which converge at Marysville and Yuba City, were rising at a rate of two feet per hour. At this time they were barely distinguishable as rivers, flattened out with no definite waterlines to separate them from the overflow into the adjacent lowlands. By that day, a record 19.42 inches of rain had fallen on the area in a six-day period. The storms of 1955 produced an all-time record flow at Marysville and Yuba City, greatly exceeding the design capacity of the levee system, making the levees particularly vulnerable.

On December 22, the California National Guard units of Marysville and Yuba City were alerted and put on stand by in case of emergency. The Commissioners of Sutter County Levee District No. 31 set up a 24 hour headquarters in the California Canning Peach Association office at 206 Bridge Street in Yuba City. They met with Yuba City Mayor Glenn Gauche to coordinate plans already under way for patrolling the levee along the west bank of the Feather River from Shanghai Bend to the 5th Street

Bridge.

When supplies were requested, store owners opened their storerooms and brought everything that could be used. If heavy machinery was requested, heavy machinery appeared; everyone was working toward a common goal.

Across the river, things were not going well. On Friday, December 23, approximately 9,000 residents of Linda and Olivehurst were evacuated to Beale Air Force Base in anticipation of flooding, and by 11:30 a.m. the Levee Commissioners stated that they could no longer guarantee the safety of the levees. One hour later the official order to evacuate Marysville was given. In just a little over two hours, almost 10,000 people in several thousand cars and 20 buses had poured over three lanes of the Tenth Street Bridge to Yuba City. Only those working on the levees (about 2,000 civilians and 600 military) and law enforcement personnel remained.

At 12:04 a.m. on Saturday, December 24, the west levee of the Feather River, just south of Yuba City, broke in the vicinity of the Gum Tree Station, a little north of Shanghai Bend. Directly to the west of the levee and some 25 feet below it lay open country. As water gushed through, the gap in the embankment quickly lengthened.

Water escaped through the widening gap in a wall eight to ten feet tall headed rapidly toward Yuba City.

In Yuba City buildings stood on elevation contours of 45 to 54 feet, while the nearby levees reached 83 to 85 feet. The water spread north and uphill for two miles, reaching a maximum contour elevation of 60.6 feet in the north part of Yuba City. Lands near the break were heavily damaged by scouring and sand deposition. The water from the break found Gilsizer Slough and rushed both north and south at depths of 10 feet or more with great force. Only a residential section in the extreme north part of the town was spared by the flood water and remained dry. As water spread to the south and west, it continued on until it encountered other levees. In all, 100,000 acres of Sutter County were covered with water. A month after the flood, the water still covered over 50,000 acres.

When the levee broke, the roar of the oncoming water acted as an evacuation notice for many. The city fire siren was sounded and both Sutler County Sheriff and Yuba City Police spread the alarm as best they could. Radio broadcasts went out over the air telling of the levee break, but the general impression left by those reports was that the danger extended only as far as Onstott Road. Confusion also existed because the Marysville evacuation had been on the air a great

deal, and many listeners, despite the radio station's efforts to make the distinction clear, confused the new order to evacuate Yuba City with the on-going Marysville evacuation order.

Once evacuation of Yuba City began, it was characterized by great haste and by 3 a.m. everyone who was able had evacuated. Due to the speed with which the water overtook Yuba City, many people were stranded on their housetops or overtaken in their cars and forced to scramble for high ground by climbing trees or taking refuge in and on the houses of strangers. Water over two feet deep caused automobiles to stall. The majority of those who drowned or were rescued from trees had been caught in their automobiles on the road as they attempted to evacuate Yuba City.

In Yuba City itself, water stood four to six feet deep over a wide area. There were low places in the city where depths of 20 to 30 feet were reported.

Of the approximately 3,000 dwellings in Yuba City, 100 were totally destroyed, 300 sustained major damage and 1,000 suffered minor structural damage. A total of 2,100 out of 3,000 homes were affected by the flood.

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## Reminder

Event: State of Emergency: Disaster Response exhibit opens

Program: Bill Hampton, manager of Levee District One

Date: Thursday, October 6

Time: 7:00 p.m.

## Marysville's Beginnings

*Theodore Cordua was the first European resident in what is now Marysville. Born in 1796 in Mecklenburg, he left Germany in 1816 and began working his way around the world. His journey led him to South Africa, Indonesia and South America. After arriving in the Sandwich Islands, Cordua heard of the success of another immigrant, John Sutter, in California. He arrived in California and came inland to settle in the Sacramento Valley. Like Sutter, he lost his fortune in the Gold Rush, returning to Hawaii where he lived until 1856. Finally he returned to Germany where, as restless as ever, he began making plans to try his luck on Vancouver Island. Before he could begin that journey, he died in Gustrow on October 8, 1857.*

*The following is excerpted from a series that ran in the Appeal-Democrat from February 19 through March 5, 1934. Erwin G. Gudde, working for the California Historical Society, translated and edited the memoirs of Theodore Cordua.*

**From the Alta California, December 1, 1855**

The early settlement of Marysville is a matter of much importance to its correct history, and it is due those whose enterprise opened the way to what is now a flourishing city, that their names at least appear as the true Pioneers. In 1841, Theodore Cordua settled in the forks of the Yuba and Feather Rivers, where the city now stands, under a lease from Gen. Sutter, running nine years with the privilege of nine more. He remained in person on the property until January, 1849. During this term of nearly eight years, he erected several adobe houses, including his residence, granaries and other out-houses necessary for a ranch. These were at the foot of D and High streets where a portion of the adobe walls are still standing. Cordua had from 3000 to 4000 head of cattle, and about 1000 head of horses - all of which might be termed wild stock, there being no market to justify the pains necessary to tame them. The cattle were only killed for the hide and the tallow, the meat

being given to the Indians as far as they could use it.

In October, 1848, Charles Covillaud purchased one-half of Cordua's entire interest being the lease of about two leagues from Sutter, and the Honcut Ranch of seven leagues, which was granted to Cordua by the Mexican Government, 1849 - the lease and grant joining each other, and also stock before named. In the spring of 1849, M. C. Nye and William Forster bought the remaining interest of Cordua in the land and stock. In the fall of the same year they sold the interest they had purchased of Cordua to Mr. Covillaud, who then became owner of this vast and valuable ranch. In the latter part of 1849, Mr. Covillaud sold three-fourths of his interest to John Sampson, J. M. Ramirez and Theodore Sicard; and in January, 1850, the town of Marysville was laid off by the four parties in connection under the name of C. Covillaud & Co.

Cordua corrected the newspaper article in his diary - he arrived in 1842 - and recounted that he landed first in Monterey, then the capitol of Alta

California, and checked in with the Governor and customs house. "All ships which wanted to trade in California had to anchor first at Monterey in order to pay the high duty according to the Mexican tariff. Monterey had a Catholic church and but few streets which were built up entirely. Many streets had only a few houses here and there. There was not yet any pavement nor were there any gates. The whole place looked as if it were yet to become a town. From a distance, however, its two hundred white adobe houses on a gentle slope, surrounded on all sides by proud coniferous forests, made a very interesting and even surprising impression upon me, a northern European who came from the tropics."

"In September I made a boat trip via Yerba Buena (later San Francisco) to visit Captain Sutter and his Fort on Nova Helvetia in the Sacramento Valley. I conceived the plan of settling there too as a farmer. Before settling, however, I decided to visit the southern part of Upper California... All harbors from San Diego to the Bay of San Francisco were visited going and returning. The supercargo usually traveled on horse and announced the arrival of the ship to customers and friends. In the stern of the ship, in front of the cabin staircase, the steerage was like a regular store provided with all kinds of goods. Here one could make purchases, retail and wholesale, according to one's wishes. As soon as the anchor had been cast in the harbor, the prospective customers came aboard so that at times a regular little fair was improvised. Captain Paty had his wife and son with him. The supercargo, in whose veins flowed Hawaiian blood, was Mr. William Davis

of Honolulu, a good business man and a pleasant companion. During the trip, however, he was too busy to be much in our company."

### **Bull and Bear Fight**

"From the Bay of San Francisco we first visited Monterey. Here we had an opportunity to witness the cruel entertainment which is rather popular in California, of a fight between a large grizzly bear of about six hundred pounds and a spirited steer of about twice the size. In a circular enclosure a fore-leg of one animal was tied to that of the other by a rope 20 yards long. As soon as the steer saw the bear and felt the latter was hindering it from moving about freely, it rushed toward the poor grizzly and ran his horns into the bear's ribs. After many such violent thrusts, the bear finally clutched its great paws around the neck of the steer and embraced it so tightly that the bull could not move and showed its fear by frantic bellows. Frequently the bull is strangled in this manner while the bear clings to its neck with its entrails dangling. The two animals participating in the fight we observed were still alive after a struggle of two hours, although they were mortally wounded. The butcher gave them the death-blow with his knife."

"From Monterey we traveled to Santa Barbara, a city of about two thousand inhabitants, and at that time the most beautiful in California. It is the residence of the bishop, situated not far from the sea, in a valley whose background is formed by high mountains. At the foot of these mountains bubble several hot springs. Even at that time it was the residence of several English and American

families who did everything in their power to make the stay of a stranger in Santa Barbara as pleasant as possible."

### A Wedding

"Here I had the pleasure of attending a wedding in one of the most prominent families in California. The marriage was solemnized in the beautiful church. On the way home all the guests, who had been at the nuptials, accompanied the bridal couple. The young husband, escorting his wife, threw handfuls of dollars from time to time among the children following the procession, as the custom demanded. In this manner, more than one hundred dollars were given away. Every one who married, whether rich or poor, had to make a similar sacrifices according to his means. I have not been able to learn how this custom originated. The procession went back to the home of the parents-in-law of the husband where the wedding feast was served, followed by a fandango. Fandango here is not a single dance, but music and dancing in general. Every once in a while the ladies would throw an egg filled with eau de cologne at the young gentlemen they favored. Every throw which hit the mark increased the joy and laughter. Besides that all kinds of jokes were played, especially such as would embarrass the young couple. A celebration like this lasted sometimes for a week or a fortnight.

"Pueblo de los Angeles, at that time the largest city in California, with about twenty-five hundred inhabitants, appeared to be a garden. Nearly every house was surrounded by vineyards and fruit trees. These gardens were open to every known foreigner. We were in Los Angeles at the time when all fruits

were ripe. The trees, especially the peach, were almost breaking under their burden. In the garden of an old Frenchman I saw ripe oranges. I enjoyed the delicious grapes, the delicate pears, figs and peaches.

"Although I daily ate many fruits I always remained in good health. Dysentery, which is so common in my home country in the fall, is not known here at all. In southern Upper California only a few valleys are suited for the cultivation of wheat, corn and vegetables...

"Since this part of Upper California was the first to be settled one could find here, at my time, numerous and beautiful ranchos. There is in general little timber. In the summer the usual temperature ranges from seventy to one hundred degrees, and in the winter from fifty to sixty degrees Fahrenheit. In general the climate is mild and very healthful...

"The Indians who lived near or far were compelled to accept the Catholic religion and forced to work at the missions. Not acquainted with the Spanish language, they understood little of the Christian religion and could be governed at first only with force. At the first missions, cattle raising and agriculture were undertaken in large measure. Of land there was no scarcity. The real estate of every mission was the size of a municipality. In its most flourishing period, the Mission San Gabriel owned over 5000 Indians, 120,000 heads of cattle, 100,000 horses and 25,000 sheep. Under the cloak of religion, the priests and monks ruled like magnates and were the kings of California, while the poor Indians had to do all the work."

### **Beginning of New Mecklenburg**

"The beginning of November we returned to the Bay of San Francisco and anchored at the small town of Yerba Buena which at that time could be called neither village nor city. Here I met my German compatriot, Mr. Flugge from Hanover, who was in the service of Sutter, and who induced me to return to Nova Helvetia with him. The idea of settling in Sutter's neighborhood in the Sacramento Valley I had almost given up in the meantime. I had heard many complaints about Sutter, especially that he had contracted many debts and did not think of repaying them; for this reason I naturally somewhat lost my confidence in him.

"Mr. Carl Flugge, whose uncle I had known since 1815, in Grossen Helle, Mecklenburg, as a very worthy and respectable man, had been in California for some time and was better acquainted with the conditions than I was. Therefore I followed his advice although he was a friend of Sutter and had been his pal from the time they had met in St. Louis. He advised me not to give up my plan and I returned to Sutter's Fort with him. Sutter, who owned a grant of thirty leagues (actually 11 leagues at this time) in the Sacramento Valley, wished to have settlers in his neighborhood. He also wanted to buy the goods which I had brought from the Sandwich Islands and which he needed very badly just then. His many promises finally led to a deal."

### **Stocked by Sutter**

"To Mr. Sutter I sold goods valued at about \$8,000 for which I was to receive in exchange heifers at \$4 a head, wild cows at \$6, domesticated

sows and oxen at \$15, wild mares at \$3, domesticated mares at \$15, and well-broken horses at \$20. Mr. Flugge guaranteed everything and became my partner for a few months. Sutter in accordance with his promises also gave me all the land north of the Yuba to which he held claim.

"This permission to live on a part of his holdings and to use it at my pleasure for nine years was given to me by contract. If I would move away at the end of nine years, Sutter would pay me for the newly constructed buildings but if I were to use the land another nine years, the buildings too, would become Sutter's property.

"In addition to the five leagues I received from Sutter, I applied to the Mexican Government a little later for a grant of seven more leagues, situated at the boundary of Sutter's grant. The size of this additional property was probably ten leagues, but I have never received a written document for it. I was loath to take the trip to Monterey or to the distant Pueblo de los Angeles, the residence of the last two Mexican Governors, Micheltorena and Pico. Neither was I willing to bribe the government officials at those places. Nevertheless, everybody considered me as the owner of the Honcut Ranch. This name I had given my ten-league grant because the Honcut River formed the northern boundary of my entire holdings of about 15 square miles. On the east my possessions were bounded by the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, on the south by the Yuba and on the west by the Feather River.

Cordua's Note: "Since the Indians had no special name for this river (Yuba) I called it after the Indian village of Yuba, situated on the opposite shore of the Feather River.

The Feather River received its name from the French Canadians who many years before my arrival hunted beavers and otters in this district for the Hudson's Bay Company and who took several millions dollars worth of furs out of the country. They found many Indian villages at the river whose inhabitants adorned their heads with diadems of woodpecker feathers and likewise wove goose feathers into their hemp blankets which they used as coats. For this reason the beautiful river was rightly called Rio de las Plumas or by the Americans, Feather River. The names of the rancheros or Indian villages I found rather pretty, for instance Boga, Deitchera, Honcut, Macalome, Yuba, Mimal, Hock, Sisum, Olash." (ed. Note: The villages of Boga and Deitchera are not mentioned in Kroeber's Handbook of the Indians of California.)

"According to the Mexican laws I could consider the six to seven thousand Indians inhabiting the land as my subjects. They were not allowed to work for any other settler, but received wages and board from me whenever I needed them."

"My ranch was in every respect one of the finest farms in California suitable for soil cultivation as well as for cattle raising. The whole estate was a valley with hardly any trees. There were only a few beautiful oaks. The banks of the river were lined with oaks, alders, willows and sycamores; here and there were arbors of wild grapes. By the rivers spread the finest meadows and the most beautiful grazing land, lowlands of five hundred to two thousand acres. On the whole plain of the Sacramento River not a single shrub is found, only here and there near the river are a few oaks.

But it is covered with fine grasses, and in the month of March many flowers blossom. At this time it resembles a carpet of all colors. The soil of this plan is a yellow loam, toward the mountains it becomes reddish-brown and is less fertile. In the lowlands by the rivers are alluvial lands, light soil mixed with much humus and hence very fertile. The luxurious growth of grass makes this sufficiently evident.

"I called my whole settlement Neu-Mecklenburg, hoping that I would be able to share it with many of my own countrymen. In the beginning I had to struggle with unspeakable difficulties. The virgin soil had to be broken with the plowshare, and it was extremely difficult to instruct the laborers on account of the language. The first good ox hide served as a mattress and the saddle as a pillow, the stumps of trees as a table and chairs.

"Mr. Flugge left me after a few months. He had invested nothing in the business, yet he was not satisfied with fifty percent of the profits which, to be sure, would amount to very little during the first few years. He wanted to make his fortune as soon as possible and went to the southern part of Upper California.

"Everything I saw and heard was "Greek" to me, although I had been born and reared in the country and was not entirely unacquainted with cattle raising and agriculture. But the cattle were treated here in a manner which not only would have surprised the Mecklenburg farmer, but would have intimidated him. Until 1844, I was the only settler of the Upper Sacramento Valley, in a distant part of the unknown California, almost without neighbors and surrounded by thousands of wild

Indians. I lived two hundred miles away from Yerba Buena, and all the necessities had to be carried up the Sacramento, Feather and Yuba rivers by boat or canoe. Captain Sutter was my only neighbor, yet he lived fifty miles as the crow flies, or seventy-five miles along the stream from me.

"Almost the whole year around I employed white people of all nationalities and twelve Indians, all of whom lived and boarded under my roof. For ordinary agricultural laborers I could always get as many Indians as I needed from the surrounding villages. I paid white people twenty to fifty dollars a month, the Indians received a dollar with board and goods for two weeks."

### Erects 'Clay' Houses

"In the spring of 1843, I was in the happy position to erect structures of clay, frame and straw, and to build several enclosures for the cattle and horses on my ranch. I could lay out gardens and fields and provide them with fences and ditches.

"Not until this time did I receive the horses and cattle I had bought from Sutter. I also provided my ranch with hogs and chickens now. The term 'wild stock' may give the impression that wild horses and cattle were running about in great numbers in the Sacramento Valley, of which I might get as many as I desired. In the San Joaquin Valley there were, indeed, wild horses, but no wild animals could be found in my district. Whoever wanted to own cattle had to buy them, or, as it was done frequently, steal them.

"While we had no wild stock in the Sacramento Valley, we let our animals run freely in the open. This

would be done all year around because there is no winter here. In order to be able to gather the cattle at the desired time, we trained them by driving them to the rodeo, which was usually one or two miles from the living quarters. At first we made this drive daily, then weekly and finally monthly. After some time the cattle ran at full speed to the rodeo as soon as a few men on horseback rode about calling 'Rodeo, Rodeo.' In this manner the cattle could be driven into large solid enclosures to brand them or for other purposes. At the rodeo we gave them salt to lick and thus kept them together for several hours. When the cattle had arrived at the rodeo, they acted like domesticated animals. They rested and stood around and one could ride through the herd without any trouble.

"The horses were divided into manadas (herds). A manada consisted of twenty-five mares and one stallion. In guarding them one gradually accustomed them to stay at certain places where water and food were not lacking. The stallion watched over the mares very carefully. If a strange horse approached he would run toward it and try to chase it away by kicking and biting. The manadas had to be driven every month to an enclosure by the house to keep them from becoming too wild. If one wanted to train a colt, of three years, one tied it with a jaquima (a halter made of horsehair) and left it without food and water for two or three days. The horse was then mounted by a man who was tied on. After many jumps the poor animal began to run and was spurred on until it sweat and trembled and could hardly stand on its feet any longer. The best of the colts were, of course, rendered 'broken' in this manner.

"The horses were of excellent stock. Since the animals ran about day and night, one tried to prevent stealing and exchanging by branding them. This was done by burning a brand (mine was TC) on the high thigh of each horse or cattle. Besides this, the cattle were marked on the ears. These signs had to be registered at the office of the alcalde in order to make a future claim legal. If an animal was sold, the seller receipted the value received by putting his mark on the front leg and the buyer burned his mark on the hind leg, below that of the seller. Thus one saw at times horses with many brandings, with which the animals surely did not gain in beauty."

#### **Many Cattle, No Butter**

"The manufacture of butter and cheese was very limited. One could find ranchos of twenty to thirty thousand head of cattle and yet no milk could be procured for coffee. Cattle-raising was undertaken chiefly for skins and tallow.

"Soil cultivation, too, was still very primitive. With a single plow, the upper crust of the soil was broken about four or five inches deep. Upon this ground, as in Germany, the seed was broadcast in the fall as well as in the spring. If one had to harrow a crooked young oak tree was used.

"The harvest began at the end of June, and was very productive, in spite of the poor preparation of the ground, because soil and climate were very well suited to wheat, barley, peas, and beans. In the interior of the country rust was still unknown, but it could be found along the coast as far north as Oregon. On Vancouver Island, which is situated on the coast, although farther north than Oregon, rust was entirely

unknown. There were hardly any failures of crops. Only when the wheat was very milky and when the temperature was too hot, it ripened too quickly and lost in weight.

"The grain was cut with sickles and knives, but not thrashed. The grain was separated by having the horses trample upon it on an open thrashing floor, as it was done by the Jews of old. Colza (should thrive excellently here, but it was not cultivated in my time." (Ed. - Culza is a plant cultivated for oil with the remaining cake used for cattle feed in Europe.)

#### **Campaign of 1845 and the Emigration from the United States**

"Until the end of the year 1844, we lived a tranquil life. Everything followed a general routine. Diseases and illness among the animals and men were known but little. In December of this year, however, a dark cloud arose on the horizon. The country resounded with revolution and civil war. In Europe this sounds terrible, but in the large and small Spanish republics such a thing was taken with great calmness because everyone knew that the unsettled situation would not last long.

"From Mexico several hundreds of freed convicts had been sent to California as soldiers. These offended the good California citizens because they did not shrink from robbery and murder. The officers, to be sure, were a noticeable exception, especially their general, Governor Micheltorena, who was a good man and a friend to everyone - only a little too lenient in dealing with these vagabonds.

"Now, the citizens who wanted to keep Micheltorena but send the soldiers home took up arms. Captain

Sutter, who wished to receive forgiveness for a former offense against Mexico, sided with the Governor. Through a number of intrigues he succeeded in gathering about 200 Europeans and Americans as well as 250 Indians. Some of those who did not wish to volunteer were forced to join. I was one of these. The foreigners were mostly settlers from the Sacramento Valley and Upper California.

"Sutter proposed to elect a leader, firmly expecting that he himself would be chosen. That choice, however, fell upon the brave Captain Gantt, an old doughty American who formerly had been in the service of the United States. For his adjutant, Captain Rufuss, a German was selected. Sutter and I remained unnecessary associates.

"In the Salinas Valley near Monterey, we united with the troops of Micheltorena. Our whole army consisted of 800 men, a copper field piece, and two old rusty cannon. Our batteries were placed upon an old ox-cart. All good California citizens as well as the foreigners below Monterey opposed us with an army of about the same strength."

### **Bloodless War**

"The incidents of this little campaign I can skip easily. I only wish to mention that in May of the following year, 1845, the campaign ended near Pueblo de los Angeles with a defeat of our party. With the exception of a horse which lost its tail, there were no casualties on either side. Many of my brave comrades had run away before the battle commenced. I received the honorable commission of an official messenger and was wise enough not to

return. General Micheltorena with his soldiers was sent back to Mexico. The good fellow had promised everyone on his side legal titles for their land after the completion of the campaign. He was, however, embarked on the Don Quijote, Captain John Paty, and expectations to receive legal titles came to naught."

### **Immigrants Arrive**

"The immigrant trains for Oregon and California usually collected in spring at Westport on the extreme western frontier of Missouri, and started on their trail over the Rocky Mountains at the beginning of April. The carriages in which most of the immigrants take this trip are ordinary covered wagons occupied by one family and packed with their complete household equipment.

"Every wagon is drawn by two or three oxen with as many oxen in reserve. Some travelers ride on mules or horses. To be sure of finding sufficient fodder and water, the large trains are separated into detachments of ten to sixty wagons. Each detachment elects a leader or captain charged with the enforcement of order. Such a caravan covers fifteen to twenty miles a day. At places where good grass and water are found, a rest of several days is made."

### **Buffalo Afford Meat**

"Near the Platte River on the wide plains and in the river valley, great numbers of buffalo are seen far and near. Usually they graze quietly on the nourishing buffalo grass. They easily can become dangerous to the caravan when they are chased because they unite in large herds and stampede, crushing everything in their way.

Occasionally a halt is called and a buffalo-hunt is undertaken until enough of the palatable meat of these animals is obtained and dried to last for some time. It is said that the tongue of the buffalo is very tasty and a hunter who is eager to get this delicacy will often kill a buffalo just for its tongue.

"The route to Oregon was established by Clark's and Lewis' first expedition, but the world-famous traveler Colonel Charles Fremont has opened more convenient routes. At Fort Hall the roads to Oregon and California separate. In general the road to California leads over wide treeless plains, over easily passable mountain ranges, through valleys and rivers."

### Scaling the Sierras

"Not far from the Bear River which empties into the Salt Lake, are the famous soda springs whose water is said to surpass in taste the Selterser. Of the springs some are boiling hot, some lukewarm and some are ice cold. There the immigrants usually stop to refresh themselves. In the basin of the Great Salt Lake, on the other hand, is a stretch where the caravans have to travel about seventy-five miles without finding grass or water. In this region many a poor animal must die on account of thirst or weakness.

"After that, one passes Utah, the great Mormon settlement in the Valley of the Bear River at the great Salt Lake, an example of what cooperative work is capable of achieving. After that, one has to pass the Truckee River. It is only two or three feet deep and about fifty feet wide and flows rapidly over a stony bed. This river has to be crossed some forty times before one can leave its banks. After this river has been left behind, the country begins to rise.

"The road leads now over small hills covered with good grass and winds from valley to valley up the California mountains. After about ten days the high point of the road is reached, about eight thousand feet above the sea level. Up to this point the difficulties are not insurmountable and a caravan still can cover eight miles in a single day. But from here down to the California Bear River, the trail leads over naked rocks and through dark canyons and valleys without the slightest sustenance for man or beast. There are places where the wagons must be taken apart and lowered down by ropes. The oxen must almost be rolled down or dragged over large layers of rock, so that they are half dead when the train arrives in the beautiful Bear Valley."

*To be continued*



# PUZZLER

P M L F F R I V E R S P W D N  
P R E S E R V A T I O N Q W I  
G V Z G D A Z N A N O B E T C  
M Y G W J F F S L K H Y A Z O  
A C R D H U U L H Y N L H S L  
R N U U O X D G O A L H Q I A  
Y E B A R Q Q D M O N Z Z E U  
S G N L S V I R W U D G R R S  
V R E L E L E H F M D E H R C  
I E L I S G Y L T D T I L A U  
L M K V R E V O E S Q A A S I  
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E F E C J M E S B K E M I I Q  
X T M F T S I L L E C E O R A  
B D D Q M D D S C H N A B E L



BONANZA  
COVILLAUD  
ELLIS  
FLOOD  
HORSES  
MAIDU  
MECKLENBURG  
PRESERVATION  
SCHNABEL  
SIERRAS

CORDUA  
DISASTER  
EMERGENCY  
GERMANY  
LEVEE  
MARYSVILLE  
NICOLAUS  
RIVERS  
SHANGHAI  
TALLOW



# Coming Events

## October

- 6 *State of Emergency* exhibit opens  
Opening program: Bill Hampton, manager of Levee District One,  
7:00 p.m. at the Museum
- 8 Historical Society October luncheon, 11:30 a.m. at the Bonanza Inn  
Convention Center  
Program: Jann Garvis, author of *The Roar of the Monitors*
- 24 Volunteer Appreciation Tea, 10:30 a.m. at the Museum
- 26 Christmas Ornament Workshop, 10:00 a.m. at the Museum
- 29 Book signing and program for *The Sutter Buttes, A Peaceful  
Sanctuary*, 2:00 – 4:00 p.m. at the Museum

## November

- 17 Christmas Ornament Workshop, 10:00 a.m. at the Museum
- 27 Last day to see *State of Emergency* exhibit at the Museum

## December

- 8 Decoration Day, 9:00 a.m. at the Museum
- 9 Hors d'oeuvres Workshop at the Museum
- 10 Trees and Traditions, 5:00 p.m. at the Museum
- 18 Children's Program at the Museum