

## THE WAY WE WERE

# From drought to flood



Residents forded the San Luis Rey River during the flood of 1916. The river flooded farmland, forcing families out of their homes.

## 'Rainmaker' hired to fill reservoir was blamed for deadly 1916 storm

By Lillian Cox

**O**CEANSIDE — On Jan. 14, 1916, a major storm moved into Southern California from the Pacific. By the time the rain stopped, Oceanside had weathered the deadliest floods in its history.

The devastation was not so much the result of the rain as it was of warm temperatures that melted the snowpack of Palomar Mountain over a period of two days.

"Every stream in the entire backcountry was a boiling, rushing torrent," the *Oceanside Blade* reported. "In every direction, bridges, railroad tracks, highways and everything movable was torn loose and on the way to the sea."

Pine trees, thought to have been uprooted from the slopes of Palomar Mountain, floated down the San Luis Rey River.

Oceanside became isolated from the rest of the county. Telegraph and telephone communication was interrupted. Food and supplies had to be brought in by boats using Oceanside's pier.

Trains were stranded, and passengers filled local hotels and rooming houses.

Most of the chaos was centered on the San Luis Rey River, which overflowed into adjacent farmland. Families were driven from their homes, escaping only with their lives. Some weren't so lucky.

After their wagon became stuck

during the exodus, C.M. Hermens and his neighbor took two of Hermens' children and a third child to safety. When they returned, the men cut the horses loose and watched in horror as the wagon capsized in the darkness, throwing Hermens' wife, daughter and a third woman into the water, where they vanished.

Blame for the deadly storm was not placed on Mother Nature, but rather on a local rainmaker named Charles M. Hatfield.

A sewing machine salesman by trade, Hatfield began experimenting with chemicals and evaporating tanks on his father's ranch near Oceanside in 1902. Although he called himself the "Moisture Accelerator," city folk in Los Angeles and farmers in the Central and San Joaquin valleys knew him better as "The Rainmaker."

In December 1915, after a long drought, the San Diego City Council contracted Hatfield to fill the Morena Dam reservoir for \$10,000. The reservoir was scarcely one-third of capacity, and the city's growth depended on a plentiful water supply.

With the help of his younger brother, Hatfield built a 25-foot tower, then added an 8-foot extension for tanks and other equipment.

On Jan. 14, 1916, it began raining, and the rain persisted on and off for about two weeks.

When it was over, Hatfield rejected responsibility for the storm damage throughout the region.



This collapsed bridge contributed to Oceanside being cut off from the rest of the county during the flood. *Oceanside Historical Society photos*

"I entered into a contract with the city, and it was up to the city to take the necessary precautions," he said to reporters.

Although there have been subsequent floods, none have had the magnitude of the 1916 storm, and it is unlikely such an event could ever repeat itself.

"A number of improvements have been undertaken such as higher and stronger bridges and drainage improvements to reduce the possibility of this happening again," said David E. McBride, senior civil engineer with the city of

Oceanside.

"The single most notable improvement was the San Luis Rey River improvement project, which was a joint project with the United States Army Corps of Engineers," McBride said. "It essentially constructed embankments on both sides of the river throughout the city."

In 1956, Burt Lancaster played a character similar to Hatfield in the movie "The Rainmaker."

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