

The Christmas of a Century 1955

The 50s was a time of multiple floods for San Joaquin County. Floods occurred at both the beginning of the decade (1950) and the end (1958). However, the most devastating flood occurred in the winter of 1955 and was concentrated at the lower end of the San Joaquin River during the week of Christmas. It was caused when a tropical rainstorm was pushed north by southern winds. The rain poured so fast that the Stockton storm drains could not channel the water fast enough. In addition, the warm rain melted much of the snowpack in the High Sierra, forcing the water down the mountain into the swelling rivers and vulnerable levees. When the water hit Don Pedro, the reservoir rose 20,000 acre-feet overnight and spilled into the rivers, causing extreme pressure on the levees. Preventive measures in place failed, and the water spilled into downtown Stockton. Officials gave an evacuation order, and three thousand people complied, carrying food and Christmas presents. On East Jackson Street, they waded through 3 ½ feet; elsewhere the water was waist deep, even rising to 6 feet at Howard Street. The evacuees needed somewhere to go, so the Red Cross put them in hotels, utilizing every room in the city. The city even opened the Civic Auditorium to house 700 people along with their children and pets in 500 cots. However, this was not enough, and the prisons were included to house overflow. All in all, 125 blocks were affected, including what is now Brookside, which was completely underwater. The devastation was so extensive, President Eisenhower declared the county a disaster area. The 1955 flood remained the largest San Joaquin County flood on record until the 1997 levee break and flooding.