

## “The Flood of 1927”

A “big rain is coming,” predicted Henry Cooper, Escondido’s celebrated, amateur weather prognosticator. The “Escondido Weather Prophet,” as he was known,” spoke in early February 1927, predicting a major storm for later in the month. “We shall have copious rains all along the coast,” Cooper declared, “with assured runoff from a heavy mantle of snow in the mountains.”

“Copious” indeed, were the rains that swept into the county beginning on Thursday, February 10. Two storms would last for seven days bringing the heaviest rainfall San Diego had seen since the famous “Rainmaker Flood” of January 1916. Dams would fill and overflow, Mission Valley would turn into a broad lake, and roads and bridges would disappear, isolating San Diego from the rest of world.



Mission Valley, February 1927. *San Diego Public Library*

The first storm drenched the county for three days, dropping nearly an inch of rain in the city of San Diego and bringing heavy snow to the mountains. Cooper’s prophecy seemed on the mark.

A bigger storm arrived on Sunday, pushed by southeasterly winds reported at 28 miles per hour. Light rain fell along the coast but there were heavy downpours in the mountains. Lake Cuyamaca led the county with 7.5 inches of rain.

By Monday, precipitation records were falling everywhere. In downtown San Diego, people were stunned by intense cloudbursts. At mid-day .80 of inch fell in forty-five minutes. One five-minute downpour measured .25 of an inch. Streets and buildings quickly flooded.

Unused to driving in rainy streets, San Diegans plowed into swamped intersections. A tow truck did a thriving business at the foot of Broadway where water rose three feet deep. At 17<sup>th</sup> and C streets city firemen were called to carry people out of inundated buildings. At Wabash and University Avenues, the *San Diego Union* reported “street cars and automobiles were stalled for hours,” and “men, women, and children had to wade knee deep torrents to reach transportation.”

East of Balboa Park, rushing water in Switzer Canyon threatened to overwhelm a dam at the foot of the canyon. One end of the dam was cut open as a makeshift spillway to prevent the dam’s collapse.

Remarkably, San Diegans accepted the violent weather with little complaint. Some found the rain entertaining. From pergolas at Mission Cliff Gardens, overlooking the south rim of Mission Valley, hundreds of sightseers watched the dramatic flooding that covered the valley below.

The *Union*, while admitting the rain did some damage by “ripping out a few bridges, flooding highways and railroad lines and making young rivers in city streets” chose to emphasize the “immense amount of good” from the water pouring into the county reservoirs. With no water available from the Colorado River or northern California, every drop of water used in the county in 1927 came from wells or local lakes.



The reservoirs filled quickly. Four billion gallons a day were flowing into county lakes, according to a newspaper estimate. At midnight on Tuesday, water at Lake Hodges reached the spillway and began rising against a wall of sand bags. At 3 a.m. the sand bags were topped and torrents began cascading down the spillway.

Lake Hodges, *SDPL*

Water levels at other reservoirs were rising, as well. But news from the dams stopped when the storm took out the telephone lines at Morena, Barrett, and Lower Otay.

The telephone silence hid a dramatic story taking place at Barrett Dam. Dam keeper E. J. Walker and his force of six men watched the dam begin spilling. But they also saw broken trees and logs from the flooded watershed piling up behind the dam. The men frantically sawed and chopped the debris to get it through the spillway gates. If the spillway jammed, the dam would overtop and possibly fail. Working night and day Walker’s men kept the water flowing and the dam was saved.

By Tuesday night, washed out roads and rail lines effectively cut off San Diego from the rest of California. The isolation officially began when the fast-moving San Diego River threatened the bridge at Old Town. The northern approach was dynamited to relieve pressure and save the bridge.

Only boats or airplanes were left to reach the outside world. Postal service continued without interruption but incoming mail was brought in by ship. Five special steamship sailings between San Diego and San Pedro were scheduled to aid transportation. The popular Catalina Island steamer, the S.S. *Avalon*, was taken off its normal run and used to carry up to 600 passengers between San Diego and Wilmington.

Also isolated by the storm was Tijuana. The impassable highways and crippled rail system forced the suspension of horse racing at the popular Tijuana Jockey Club. Flooding had caused minor damage to the grandstand and parking lot but the race track was unharmed. Workers scrambled to clear mud and debris. Racing would resume at week’s end with the resumption of rail service.

Heavy rain continued into mid-week but by Thursday, the backbone of the storm system appeared broken. The rains faded as the storm moved east. Repairs to roads and bridges were made quickly. San Diego's city manager made the optimistic, if dubious claim, that damages had been less severe than in storms of the past.

“Water, water, everywhere—and lots of it to drink!” the *Union* happily reported as the sunshine reappeared. Nearly seven inches of rain in one week had dumped 65 billion gallons of water in San Diego reservoirs. The newspaper concluded that the supply would last the city population—about 135,000 in 1927—up to seven years without any additional rain.



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