

The Jekyll-and-Hyde history of the Santa Ana River

The Santa Ana River normally may be placid, but many times in its history it has turned into a monster.

Of the many floods that have leapt its banks, the most memorable occurred in March 1938. It left 119 people dead and 2,000 homeless, and flowed as fast as 100,000 cubic feet per second.

But however destructive it was, the 1938 flood was not the biggest in the region's history.

That dubious honor goes to the flood of 1862, which flowed 300,000 cubic feet per second, according to hydrological evidence.

The rain began Christmas Eve, 1861, and continued virtually nonstop for 30 days. The only sizable town in the path of the resulting flood was the fledgling Anaheim vintners' colony, founded only a few years before. James M. Guinn, writing about the flood later in his "Historical and Biographical Record of Southern California," said flood waters ran 4 feet deep in Anaheim — four miles from the river — and "spread in an unbroken sheet to the Coyote Hills, three miles beyond."

The flood drowned 200,000 cattle, and the drought that came afterward effectively ended the area's cattle industry.

The Santa Ana River's fickle nature long has frustrated area residents. The river carved Newport Bay about 300,000 years ago, but at other times wound through what is now Buena Park before bending south and emptying in Seal Beach.

Often, it just spread freely across the Santa Ana Valley, irritating farmers. They organized the Newbert River Protection District in 1900, acquired a long strip of land 300 feet wide, dredged a channel and built levees.

That wasn't enough to stop the 1916 flood, caused by a downpour of 19 inches in two days. The levees didn't hold, causing four deaths and much crop damage. A new, deeper channel was dredged by 1920, the river's emptying point placed at its present spot, the border between Huntington Beach and Newport Beach.

The 1938 flood proved that even more flood protection was needed, and Prado Dam, com-

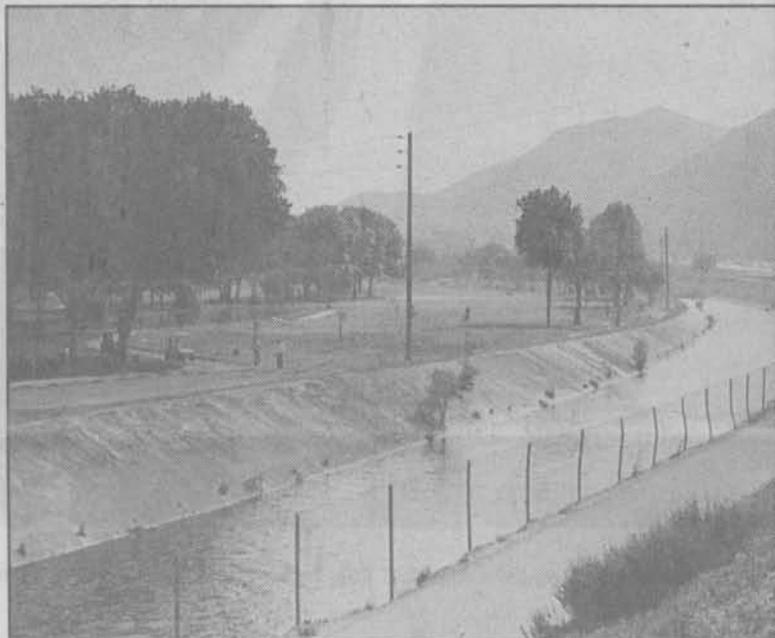


1910: Before the days of concrete channels, the Santa Ana River flowed relatively freely through Orange County through the county, with its beginnings in Riverside and San Bernardino counties. Here it is shown at a spot near the small resort built by a group of Santa Ana residents in 1910. The resort didn't last.

pleted in 1941 in Riverside County, was the response. But even that wasn't enough. In 1969, 20 inches of rain that fell from mid-January to late February caused mudslides and the overflowing of Villa Park Dam, killing 11 people and causing millions of dollars of damage.

The 1862 flood is now considered a one-in-200-year flood, a worst-case scenario.

The county hopes to be better prepared if it does occur again. The All-River Plan, first proposed by the Army Corps of Engineers in 1975 after an 11-year study, was signed by President Reagan in 1986 and will provide \$1.1 billion (1985 dollars) in flood-control improvements, including the raising of Prado Dam, the building of Mentone Dam in San Bernardino County and the shoring up of levees in Orange County.



Today: Now firmly channelized, the river's setting is not nearly so rustic. Alongside the Riverside (91) Freeway flows alongside — with traffic often on the other side is the Green River Golf Course.

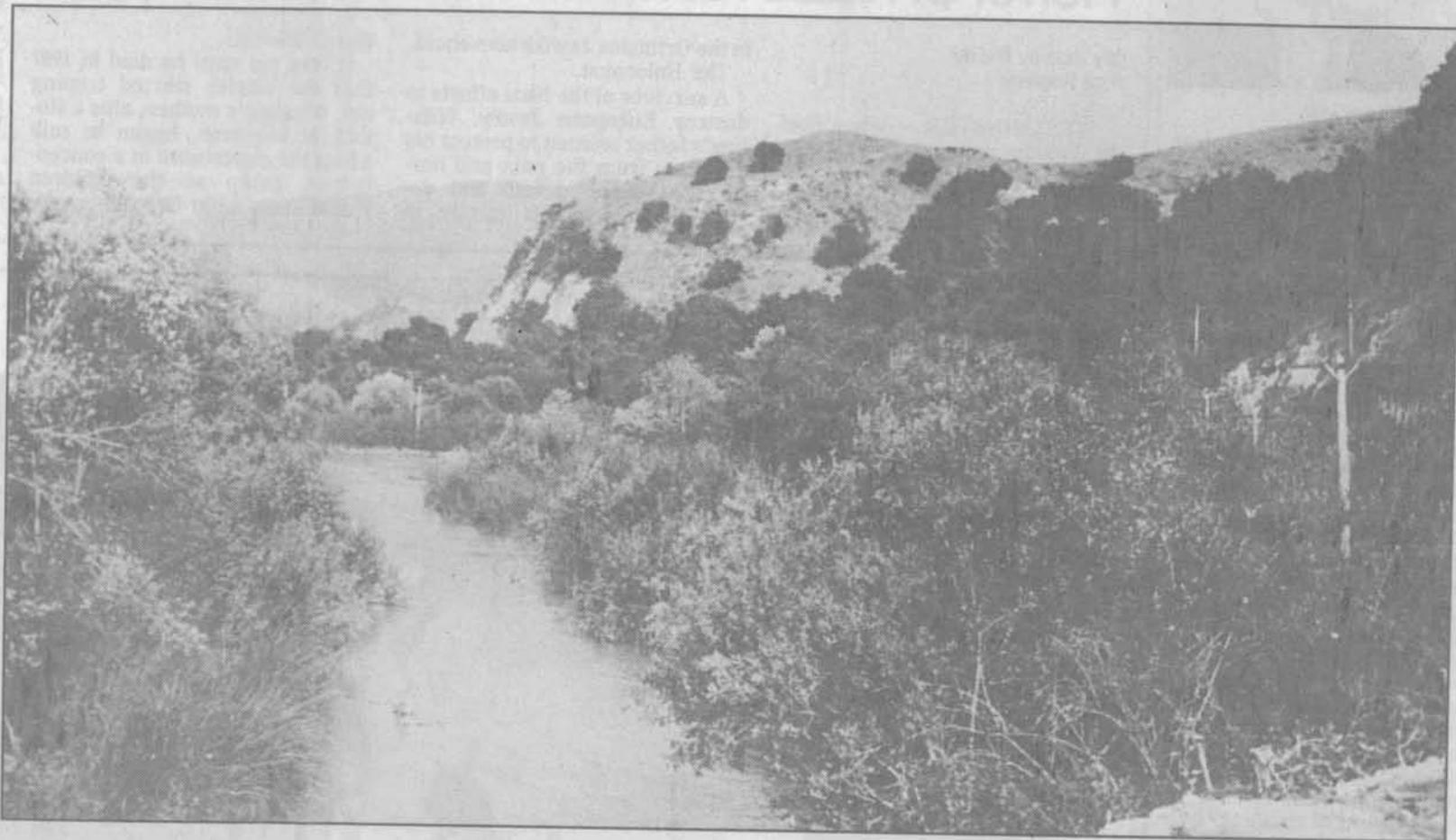
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1910: Before the days of concrete channels, the Santa Ana River flowed relatively freely through Orange County. Only 25 miles of its 90-mile length runs through the county, with its beginnings in Riverside and San Bernardino counties. Here it is shown at a spot near the Riverside County line, close to Alta Vista, a small resort built by a group of Santa Ana residents in 1910. The resort didn't last.

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