

Almost Simultaneous Record Floods On Two Major California Rivers Approximately 500 Miles Apart

On January 22, 1862, an unusual weather pattern was causing record flooding on the Santa Ana River in the south and on the Sacramento River near Shasta in the north. By early the 23rd record flooding was in progress on the Sacramento River at Red Bluff.

This is incredible! Record flooding almost simultaneously on two main California Rivers ~ 500 miles apart during the month of January. Our preliminary research also indicates that in both floods* rain on relatively fresh snow was involved and was likely one of the reasons for the record peak flows. The estimated peak flow on the Santa Ana River on January 22, 1862 was 317,000 Cubic Feet Per Second (CFS). Over three times larger than the devastating flood of 1938 in the same area.

**Note: In addition the peak flow on the Santa Ana River may have also been affected by landslides.*

In the north we know of no estimates that may have been made of peak flows on the Sacramento River at Shasta or Red Bluff during any of the three major floods of December 1861 and January 1862. However, the following articles in local newspapers identified the last flood in the series (January 22-23, 1862) as being the largest:

1. Semi-Weekly Independent, Tuesday January 28, 1862:
“We learn by the Courier that the river at Shasta on the 22nd instant was 3 and ½ feet higher than the flood of December. No material damage was done, as all the bridges in the county but three were swept away by previous floods.”

NOTE: A geographical review may be in order. Examine PLATE 1 – NORTHERN CALIFORNIA in our book: “LAKE SACRAMENTO”. As you can see there is a great deal of watershed area in Northeastern California that drains (via the Pit and McCloud rivers) into the Sacramento River before it reaches Shasta. The significant snowfall that occurred in this area just prior to the January 20-22nd warm storm is very likely the reason for the record high flows on the Sacramento River near Shasta late on the 22nd.

2. The Red Bluff Beacon, Thursday January 30, 1862: “THE FRESHET IN TEHEMA COUNTY – Since our last publication the Sacramento River has swollen to an extent never before known to residents of this county. On the morning of the 23rd instant the water stood over eighteen inches higher than the first great flood of December.”

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