

The Day the Rains Came

January 18, 1973

San Luis Obispo, California

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The Day the Rains Came... January 18, 1973

The great flood of 1973 — along with the floods of 1969—ranks among the worst ever to hit San Luis Obispo. Some said it was the worst. Others said it wasn't, and cited greater and more widespread damage in 1969.

The flood of January 18, 1973, was a bizarre series of events for which both man and nature share credit. The rain that caused it began with an evening drizzle that developed into a hard and steady all-night rain. It climaxed the next mid-morning with a fierce deluge. The storm's fury was aimed directly at the San Luis Obispo area, and most of the county's flood damage was concentrated there. By mid-afternoon the sun was shining.

Creeks that at daybreak were running fuller than during any of that

winter's other storms rose rapidly during and after the mid-morning deluge. Independently, streets that couldn't handle their own runoff were flooded. Throughout the city a pattern seemed to develop—major flooding took place where the water's free flow was interrupted by manmade structures such as bridges, culverts, road crossings and building supports.

There were notes of irony. Debris caught on a building support pillar at the entrance to San Luis Creek's tunnel beneath downtown, and forced muddy waters out of the creek's banks and into downtown streets and buildings. The pillar, an acknowledged problem during the 1969 floods, was slated for removal in the spring of 1973, after a long series of negotiations between its owner and the city about who would pay for its removal.

Debris also caught on the Marsh Street freeway ramp bridge, as it had in 1969. This time it sent a devastating swoosh of water, mud and junk down lower Higuera. A third irony was the failure of recently cemented flood control channels in the Foothill-North Tassajara area. Designed to carry flood

waters faster than the previous grassy creek bottoms, they did—right into homes that had never before flooded, according to testimony of occupants and neighbors.

Stenner Creek turned into a raging torrent that covered parts of Foothill Boulevard and Santa Rosa Street, and caused extensive damage in the Lincoln-Broad area and near its confluence with San Luis Creek in the Brizolar-Dana area.

Prefumo Creek also surprised many with its unaccustomed fury. Water coming from Prefumo Canyon was a major contributor to the spectacular rise of Laguna Lake into developed areas supposedly above the once-in-100 years flood mark.

Statistics collected by the Army Corps of Engineers seemed to explain the flooding's erratic nature. Rainfall differed substantially within localized regions. In Prefumo Canyon, rainfall amounted to nearly nine inches. On the Cal Poly campus, near Stenner Creek's headwaters, rainfall was 6.4 inches. At two points within the city along South Higuera, rainfall was 4.25 and 4.7 inches.

As the clouds parted, the city's residents were shocked at what the flash-flood had done. Cleanup began imme-

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diately. Homes had been destroyed, yards and cars carried away, Personal possessions lost, merchants' goods damaged or ruined. Monetary damage, said the Small Business Administration, amounted to \$6.25 million within the city's boundaries. At first an unsympathetic and budget-minded federal government rejected the disaster designation that would have provided financial aid for residents and public agencies, but after a hard week's politicking the government reversed itself and made aid available.

In the water's wake came a flood of emotions. Anger was common. Fingers were pointed, and blame for the disaster placed on many. There was also fear — fear that such a bizarre flood might happen again tomorrow or the next day. It was the kind of fear that renewed itself with the sight of a clouded sky or the sound of rainfall, and it led to demands for instant solutions to flood problems men were reluctant to admit they may never be able to solve.

Richard Schmidt

Johnson Avenue Underpass.





San Luis Obispo Savings and Loan parking lot after the flood.



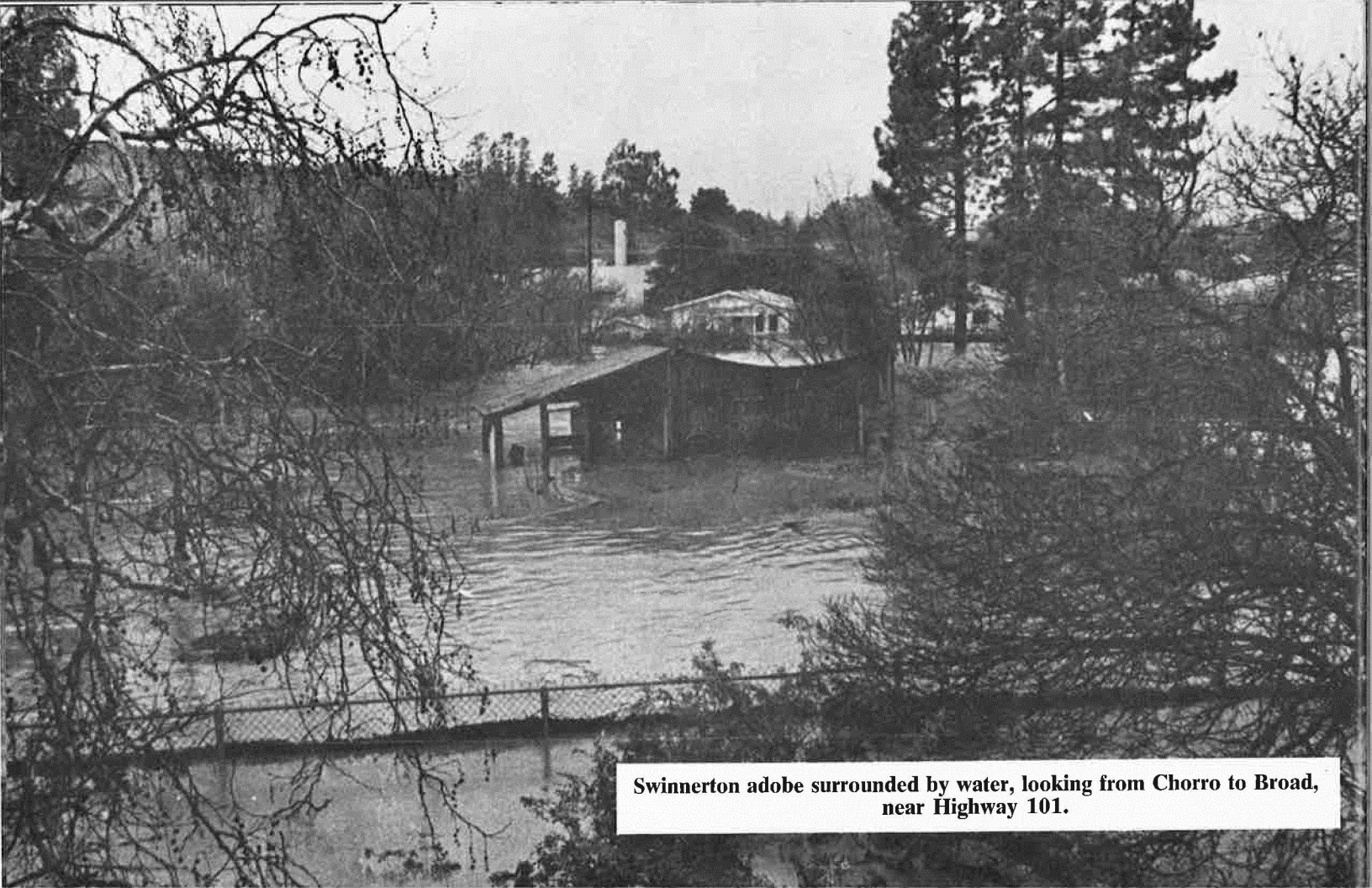
A flood-related fire did \$40,000 damage to the Tower Building, a well known landmark at Chorro and Higuera, about mid-day on the day of the flood.

Flood waters surging beneath the structure, which sits partially atop San Luis Creek's downtown tunnel, broke a gas pipe. The gas ignited a fire in a concealed stairway between Corcoran's Restaurant and a barber shop, and the fire spread to the second floor and attic of the building.

Dozens of volunteers joined firemen in fighting the fire. Fire Capt. Elton Hall said he had a shortage of men because of other flood-related emergencies. His crew was "hauling in bystanders," he reported, to help fight the fire.

"At one time," Hall said, "we had 40 men on it who were picked right off the street."

There were no injuries during the fire, which was reported shortly before noon the day of the flood.



**Swinnerton adobe surrounded by water, looking from Chorro to Broad,
near Highway 101.**



Flooding at Monterey at Toro

Cars parked in front of house at 522 Broad as water rises.

Right: Cars had been swept away by the time this picture was taken. Note high water mark on front of house.





Above: Soaked belongings removed from houses on Broad near Lincoln.

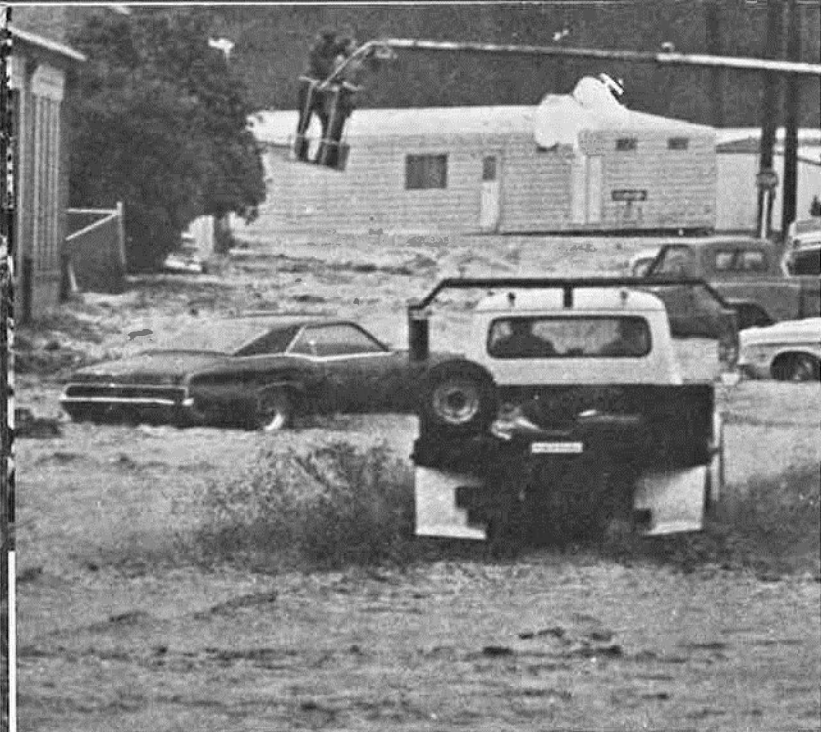
Above Right: Some of the cars swept from in front ended up in backyard of 533 Broad, across the street.

Right: 533 Broad, home of O. W. Koethen, was swept from its foundations. Note front steps next to sidewalk.

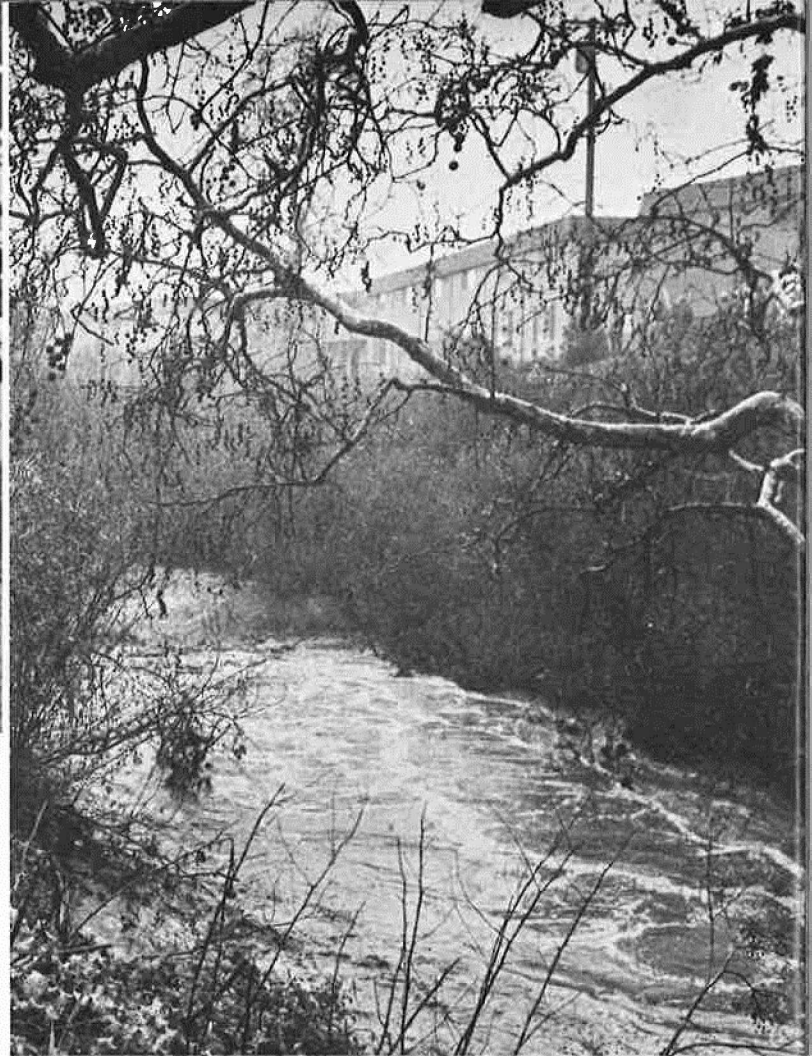




Cleanup at Marsh-Higuera intersection.



Two persons were plucked from flood waters on Pismo Street near Higuera.



Stenner Creek, with Stenner Glen in background.



Debris, including an automobile, caught on pier under Marsh Street freeway ramp was blamed for Marsh-Higuera flooding.



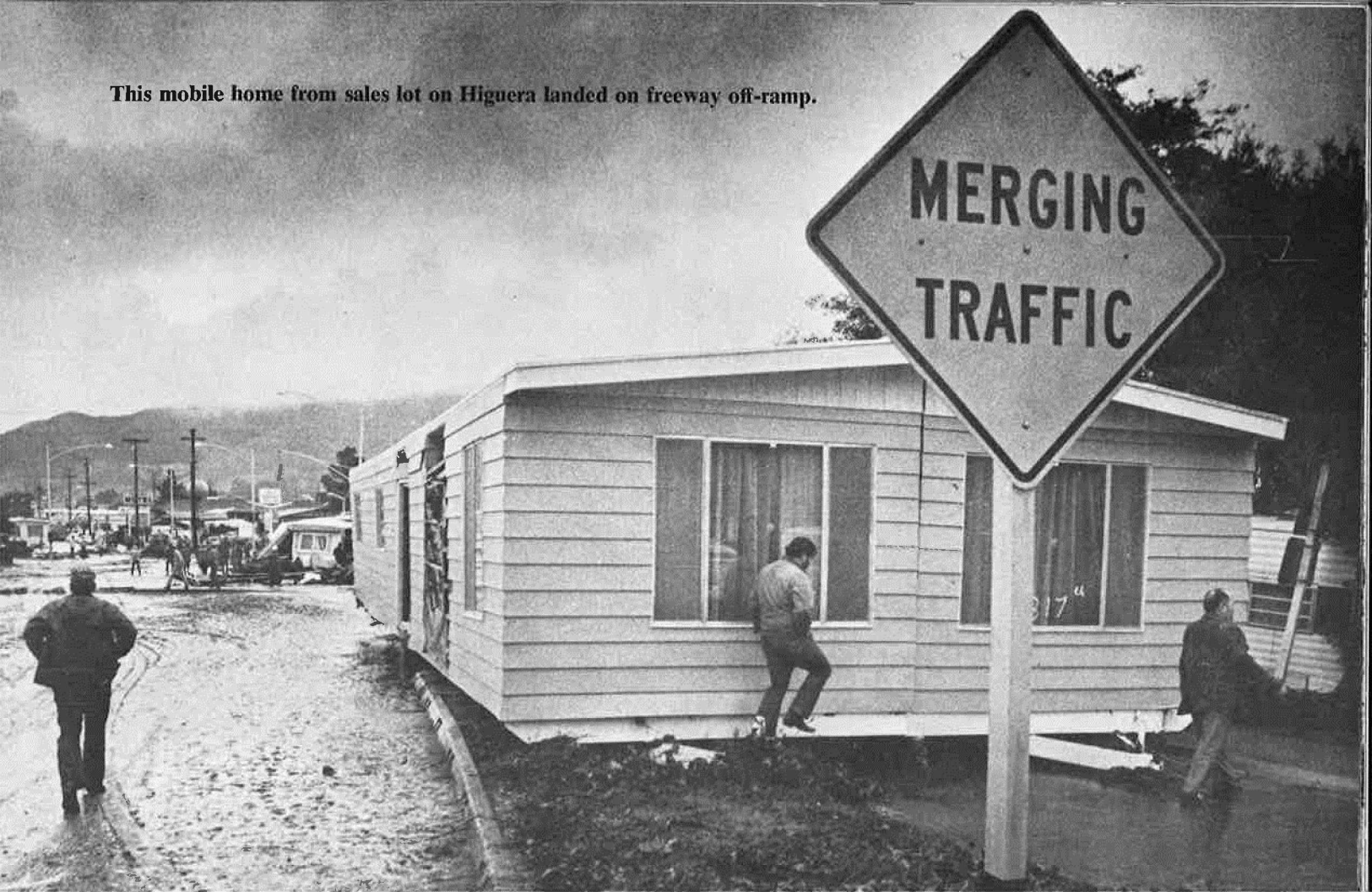
Surge of water in lower Higuera area left automobiles strewn about.

Above: Higuera Street.

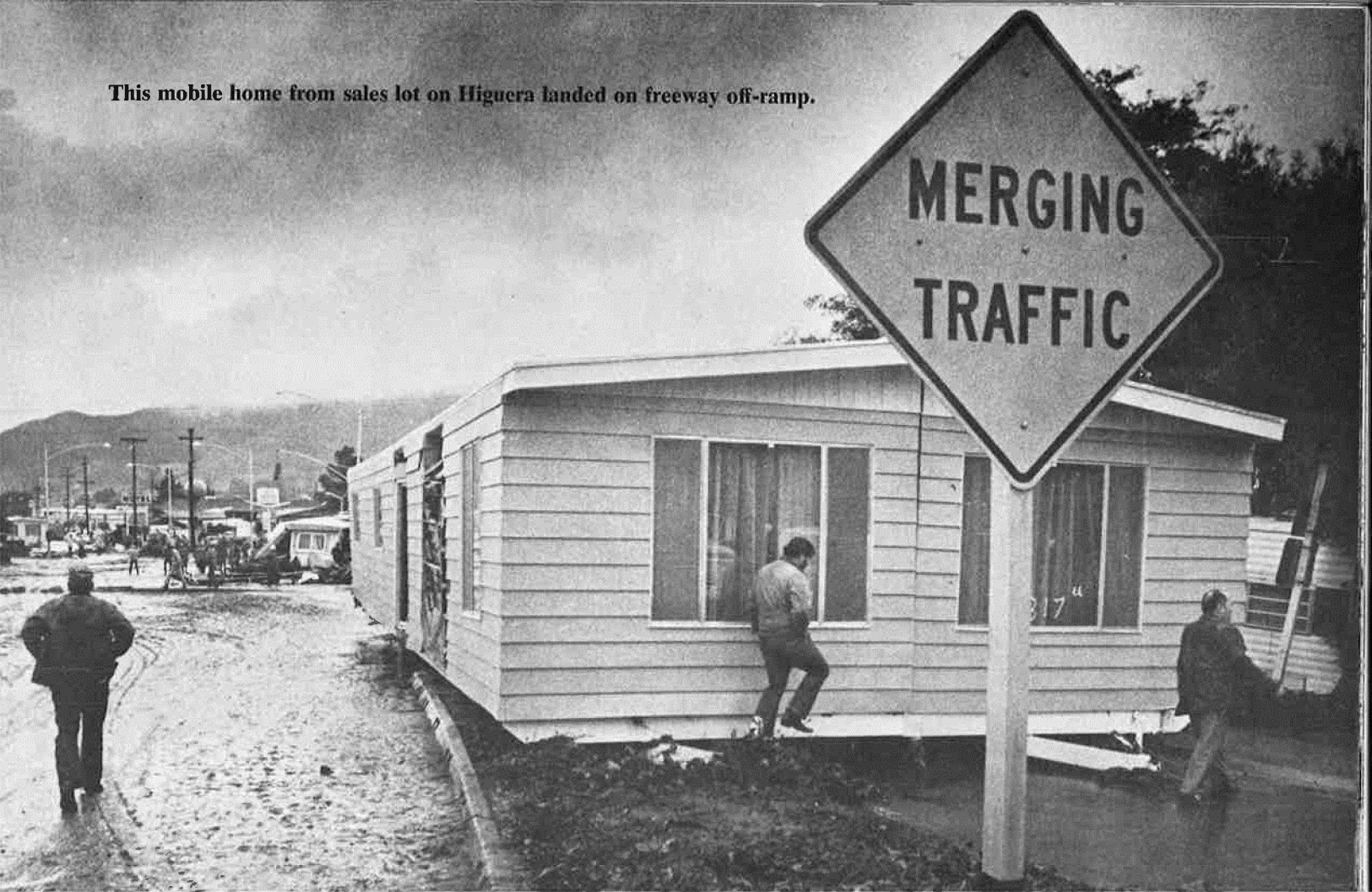
Left; Top: Archer at Pacific.

Left: Pismo at Walker.

This mobile home from sales lot on Higuera landed on freeway off-ramp.



This mobile home from sales lot on Higuera landed on freeway off-ramp.



**A PANORAMIC
view of the
flooding taken at
approximately
noon from the
Breakers
Restaurant at
the south end of
San Luis Obispo.
Highway 101 is
impassable, the
settling ponds
and sewer farm
are covered as
is the area
between the
shopping center
and the
auto park.
Photo by
Marvin Dee.**







Wrecked mobile homes and debris along Higuera Street.



The Portola Fountain at Marsh and Higuera was demolished by floating mobile homes.



The Water-Pro on Pacific Street near Higuera was devastated.



Cal Poly campus looking east from Mustang Stadium.



Motorboats aided in evacuation efforts along the Laguna Lake district's Oceanaire Drive.



**Laguna Lake expanded over its flood plain.
This spot is along Los Osos Valley Road north of Foothill.**

National Guard trucks and rowboats provided Laguna area transport.



The day after, rowboats were beached in C. L. Smith School yard.



Editorial

Tax relief for victims of flood

An announcement made by County Assessor Joe Wamgriener Monday in the Telegram-Tribune and again Monday night at the San Luis Obispo City Council meeting bears repeating.

because of the flood. Once the board acts, property owners should file applications for

Emergency declared by Reagan

Gov. Ronald Reagan today proclaimed a state of emergency in San Luis Obispo County as a result of flooding which last week destroyed or damaged public and private property.

Announcements of the preliminary action of

Nixon labels county flood disaster area

Since 1869

County residents offer aid to victims of flood

The Telegram-Tribune continues to receive offers of aid to flood victims. Lord Washington of the Grande Malibu Girls says his group is looking for some kind of cleanup work — something to do with the ecology which "We are hoping that will feed some work that needs to be done around San Luis Obispo. We don't want to do any damage," she says. "The girls are from ages 12 to 18. We couldn't do any heavy work, of course, but we'd like to do anything else — for the city or if you know of other places where we need clean-up work."

Other offers include: The Rev. ...

The weather year 1972-73 will go down in history as one of the wettest ever recorded in San Luis Obispo County. Since 1869, when local weather records began, there have been only eight years in which total rainfall equaled what has fallen here this season. The records also show that "normal" annual rainfall between February and the June 30 winter-year end amounts to less than eight inches. The 1972-73 will turn out to be one of the top four rainfall years since 1869.

A huge amount of rain, however, for the year to date. The 1968-69 year holds the grand record of 54.50 inches of rain, which was about 34 inches more than "normal." To date, 31.00 inches of rain have fallen this season. In May and June, the weather records show no wet and dry years. Some of the wet years followed dry years. Last year's rainfall was 12.46 inches. Heavy rain years followed dry years. In 1968-69, rainfall to mid-February was 31.25 inches. The annual average rainfall for an entire weather year is 29.61 inches. The records are incomplete, but they show that several of the years have had more than 50 inches of rain.

Vista Grande flooded; students save two lives

Two students saved the lives of a woman and her young daughter, damage to the university was termed "minimal," and classes went on as usual Thursday, as an extensive flooding sent San Luis Obispo into a lurch. Rainfall totaled 3.72 inches between 7 a.m. Wednesday and 10 a.m. Thursday, according to the campus security office, flooding many major roads, closing schools and leaving sections of the city powerless. Roger Vincent, Mustang Daily layout editor, and his roommate Jim Fulton saved a woman and child at 10:30 a.m. Thursday.

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Disaster decision today

This year one of county's wettest

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Flood disaster loan office to open in SLO Thursday

Small Business Administration (SBA) representatives have found a permanent San Luis Obispo office at 305 E. Figueroa St., and beginning Thursday will dispense loan information at that location. The office will be open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily. The office will be open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily.

San Luis Hardest Hit As Flooding Sweeps Region

The City of San Luis Obispo was one of the hardest hit areas of the state as the result of the storm that tore through the region. Mud and debris added to the damage from area parking lots, making operations difficult even where water damage was not heavy. Along upper Figueroa Street, most stores were closed. Some had already sandbagged their front windows and doors, while at others, employees were trying to move merchandise.

Laguna Scout troop helped flood victims

It's almost two weeks after "probably" the worst flood in the history of San Luis Obispo. Thank you letters to various organizations, groups and individuals who have helped flood victims are still being sent. The Laguna Scout troop has helped flood victims.

Ducks are victims of flood, too

In the editor: Among the many misadventures regarding the recent flood, there are two areas of concern — at least locally. As a late October duck season, the probability of floods is to be a fact of life in this community. Then surely the real estate values in the affected areas will be adversely affected. In the editor: Among the many misadventures regarding the recent flood, there are two areas of concern — at least locally. As a late October duck season, the probability of floods is to be a fact of life in this community. Then surely the real estate values in the affected areas will be adversely affected.

Damage estimate climbs

Damage in San Luis Obispo last week's flood was by city officials this

Storm chops away part of beach

The extremely high tide last Thursday has virtually eliminated some stretches of beach and sand dunes on the Pison Beach shoreline. The damage of the wave extended nearly a mile. Rainfall in San Luis Obispo has gone over the 30-inch mark for only the 10th time in this century. Once it went over 40 inches, once over 50 inches. SAM LUIS

Rainfall table

SAN LUIS OBISPO
Recorded 7 a.m. daily

Daily	Cumulative	Total	Total
July 20	0.04	0.04	0.04
Sept. 9	0.07	0.11	0.11
Oct. 2	0.11	0.22	0.22
Oct. 10	0.22	0.44	0.44
Oct. 11	0.49	0.93	0.93
Oct. 13	0.51	1.44	1.44
Oct. 14	0.57	2.01	2.01
Oct. 15	0.60	2.61	2.61
Oct. 16	0.60	3.21	3.21
Oct. 17	0.63	3.84	3.84
Oct. 18	0.63	4.47	4.47
Nov. 4	0.67	5.14	5.14
Nov. 6	0.67	5.81	5.81
Nov. 11	0.74	6.55	6.55
Nov. 14	0.79	7.34	7.34
Nov. 15	0.79	8.13	8.13
Nov. 16	0.79	8.92	8.92
Nov. 17	0.80	9.72	9.72
Nov. 18	0.80	10.52	10.52
Dec. 4	0.87	11.39	11.39
Dec. 5	0.89	12.28	12.28
Dec. 7	0.90	13.18	13.18
Dec. 8	0.90	14.08	14.08
Jan. 2	0.91	15.00	15.00
Jan. 8	0.91	15.91	15.91
Jan. 10	0.93	16.84	16.84
Jan. 16	0.94	17.78	17.78
Jan. 17	0.94	18.72	18.72
Jan. 18	0.94	19.66	19.66
Jan. 19	0.95	20.61	20.61
Jan. 26	0.96	21.57	21.57
Jan. 29	0.96	22.53	22.53
Jan. 31	0.96	23.49	23.49
Feb. 4	0.97	24.46	24.46
Feb. 6	0.97	25.43	25.43
Feb. 7	0.97	26.40	26.40
Feb. 8	0.97	27.37	27.37
Feb. 10	0.97	28.34	28.34
Feb. 11	0.97	29.31	29.31
Feb. 12	0.97	30.28	30.28
Feb. 13	0.97	31.25	31.25
Feb. 14	0.97	32.22	32.22
Normal this date	12.45		
Same date last year	11.12		
Annual average	29.61		



Ruined stock inside ADX Drugs.

Editorial

Friday, January 19, 1973

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Storm brings out the best in many

The unrelenting three-day storm this week brought out the worst in winter weather and the best in many people.

Thursday as the storm peaked and usually gentle Stenner and San Luis Creeks became swirling, muddy rivers, as storm drains overflowed and as water cascaded down hillsides, bringing rocks and debris with it, the city was virtually paralyzed for a time.


Cars were stuck or stalled, but there would be someone in most cases to help the stranded motorist.

By mid-day when it became evident that damage to some homes would force families to evacuate

temporarily, churches were announcing they could provide shelter and emergency relief installations were being established at the Laguna Village Shopping Center and at University Square. Many individual volunteers were offering to help in any way they could.

San Luis Obispo Junior High school was prepared to care for homeless families Thursday night, but found that many, instead, had been invited into homes of friends and neighbors.

The havoc created by the deluge is tragic. The prompt response of the community in assisting those in trouble is commendable.



Monterey near Toro.



CREDITS — PHOTOGRAPHS

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A copy of this booklet will be
mailed anywhere for \$1.25.

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Front Cover: Monterey Street at Toro.

Back cover: Car submerged beneath Johnson Avenue underpass was pulled out after water level dropped.

