



The Heritage Junction Dispatch

A Publication of the Santa Clarita Valley Historical Society

Volume 48, Issue 4

July - August 2022

Calendar

Due to ongoing construction, Heritage Junction is closed until further notice.

Monday, August 1

Deadline for the September-October *Dispatch*

Check www.scvhistory.org for other upcoming events when Heritage Junction reopens.



Articles and inquiries regarding *The Dispatch* may be made to 661 254-1275

To arrange for filming at Heritage Junction, contact Cathy Martin at 661 645-0107

President's Message

by Alan Pollack



The St. Francis Dam collapsed just before midnight on March 12, 1928. It killed over 400 people in what turned out to be the second-worst disaster in California history. The resultant flood, laden with debris, coursed through San Francisquito Canyon and emptied into the Santa Clara River Valley.

WILLIAM S. THOMAS

Forty-eight years later, William S. Thomas became a journalism professor at California State University Northridge. During his first week on the job, Thomas was assigned as an advisor to a first-year student and Vietnam veteran, Don Ray. The two men ended up

becoming best of friends. Don was a history buff. While taking a class on reporting taught by Thomas, Ray approached Thomas about doing a research project on the St. Francis Dam Disaster. After further discussions, Ray and Thomas hatched an idea to hold a reunion of survivors of the disaster on the event's 50th anniversary. That idea culminated in the enormously successful "St. Francis Dam Disaster Memorial Dinner," which took place at the Ranch House Inn in Valencia, California, on March 12, 1978. Over 200 survivors, many in their 80's and 90's, attended the dinner. Starting that night and over the ensuing months, Ray and Thomas dedicated themselves to interviewing the survivors about their experiences on that tragic night, and recording those interviews on tape and in writing.

Continued on Page 2

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President's Message

Continued from page 1

DON RAY

After leaving Cal State, Thomas turned over a vast collection of survivor interviews to Don Ray, encouraging him to continue doing historical presentations and writing about the disaster. Ray has never forgotten that sage advice. For many years, he has been thinking about putting the interviews he has in his possession into a book documenting the collective experiences of the St. Francis Dam disaster survivors.

Ray graduated from college and entered a successful career as an investigative journalist. His career and other life priorities delayed his dream of writing a book on the disaster, but the time has come to bring this to fruition. And now, Don is ready to get started on this noble endeavor. He has graciously agreed to allow the Historical Society to exclusively publish a fascinating letter he received from Charles Clarke Keely as a first step. Keely was an engineer at the DWP Power Plant 1, several miles above the dam site, on the night of the disaster. This account is just one of many survivor and rescuer stories in Ray's possession, which will be made public for the first time in Ray's new book.

THE TRAGEDY AT POWER PLANT 2

The St. Francis Dam tragically ruptured 2 ½ minutes before midnight on March 12, 1928. Five minutes later, a 120-foot wall of water and debris hit and decimated the DWP Power Plant 2 and its adjoining village of DWP employees and their families. Lyman and Lillian Curtis and their children Margie, Mazie, and Danny were one of those families. Lyman and Lillian woke up around midnight and noticed a strange mist in the air. They immediately concluded that the dam had broken. Lillian rushed out of the house with Danny and their family dog (who we now find out was a white bulldog) and headed for higher ground up a hillside. Lyman returned to rescue his daughters, but the flood swept them away. Ray Rising was swept away by the floodwaters in the house next to the Curtis house. He managed to swim and stay afloat until he could grab onto a rooftop of a floating house passing by. Rising rode the floating home to dry ground and joined Lillian, Danny, and the bulldog to await rescue at the top of the hill. He lost his entire family that night.

THE CHARLES CLARKE KEELY LETTER

And now, we present Charles Clarke Keely's account of what he saw and experienced that night. Keely wrote this

letter to Don Ray when he returned his reservation form for the memorial dinner in 1978. Keely was a registered civil engineer in California and an associate member of the American Society of Civil Engineers. He was born in Philadelphia in 1902 and moved to California three years later. He received a degree in Civil Engineering from Yale University in 1926. Keely served as a Commissioner for the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power and as a Director of the Los Angeles Department of Water Associates. He was also involved in farming and real estate.

"Dear Don Ray:

Replying to your request for a description of my experience before, during, and after the St Francis Dam disaster, I am pleased to recount as follows:

I was an engineer in charge of the Survey Party at Power Plant No. 1, engaged in the enlargement of the powerhouse and penstocks. I was asleep in a small temporary house at the Construction Camp, located up on the hill back of the power plant, when the phone rang in our attached engineering drafting room. C.W. Ragan, our construction superintendent, was calling from his own house near Power Plant No. 1. He said, "Dress quickly and drive to Power Plant 2, its transformer room may be afire." He said the Power Plant Operator had just called him saying he had nobody available to send and would Ragan and some of his men rush down there. The operator had told Ragan that the L.A. Dispatcher had said the line had gone out after a big surge of electricity.

Accordingly, Myron Daugherty, Henry Mills, and I started in my 4-cylinder Dodge car, with the top down. When we reached the upper end of the reservoir, our headlights showed [sic] a mud flat, so we thought the westerly apron string part of the dam had failed and so lowered the water some 15 feet. Immediately after, we came to where the road had slid away, so turned around, went back to camp, and blew the fire siren. Ragan went to the truck drivers' dormitory, awoke them, and told them to start with their trucks over the transmission line road commencing from Bee Canyon. We then drove to Bee Canyon gate, about a mile from camp, and met the transmission line patrol, who was unlocking it. Our 2 cars then proceeded toward the surge chamber above Power Plant 2. When we got there, the watchman was in his yard, alone. Mills and I looked down into the Canyon, and we could see a bright red glow, which was from the exciter on top of the

Continued on Page 3

President's Message

Continued from page 2

south generator, and we realized it was still running. We then started down beside the penstock but soon came to where the brush had been striped [sic] away by flowing water, and the ground was too slippery to climb down on, as it was steep. We returned to the hilltop and joined some of the other men who were starting a different way. It was very dark, but we had a flashlight. We thought we heard someone call, so stopped and listened a bit, and our party split, and the others found Plant Operator Rising and a woman and child on a little hilltop. They were huddled against a bleeding white bulldog for warmth. There was also an injured white mule nearby.

By now, it was commencing to become light, more rescuers had arrived, and they brought these two persons up to the watchman's house at the surge chamber and put them in bed. Two of us then started for Saugus in my car, following the patrol road, which I had never driven before. We did not know where we were, so when we came to a ranch house, we shouted, but nobody appeared, so we took a chance, proceeded on the road, and eventually reached the DWP warehouse in Saugus.

There was great congestion in the warehouse yard, with many parked cars and several trains on a siding. When we said we had just come from the dam, we were rushed inside, and a man who was talking on the phone handed it to me and said tell this man all that you know. I think I was talking to an engineer named Panter in Los Angeles.

We were then asked to lead a string of cars back over the road we had come out on. The cars contained DWP personnel. When we got back, we joined a search party in the floor of the Canyon, looking for bodies. I had a large piece of red flagging in my coat pocket from which I tore strips from and, using sticks, flagged each body found. One was a small boy with his school-book bag strapped over his shoulder. Only the upper part of his body was exposed.

Later, a man came down and told us we would have to bring the bodys [sic] over to the base of the penstocks, that the corner [sic]

had said that there were too many dead down stream for his people to come.

Fortunately, the old railroad ties beside the penstock, left from its construction, were in place, so 2x6 were spiked on to them, and a wood sled had been quickly built, and a cable let down from a portable hoist on top. Hence the bodies were taken up that way, perhaps 20, I really can't remember.

Before we commenced removing the dead, I had gone back up the hill and reached the top when Mulholland's car pulled up. It was still early morning. He appeared shattered as he gazed down. It was misting at the time, and at the early hour, one could not see too clearly to the bottom.

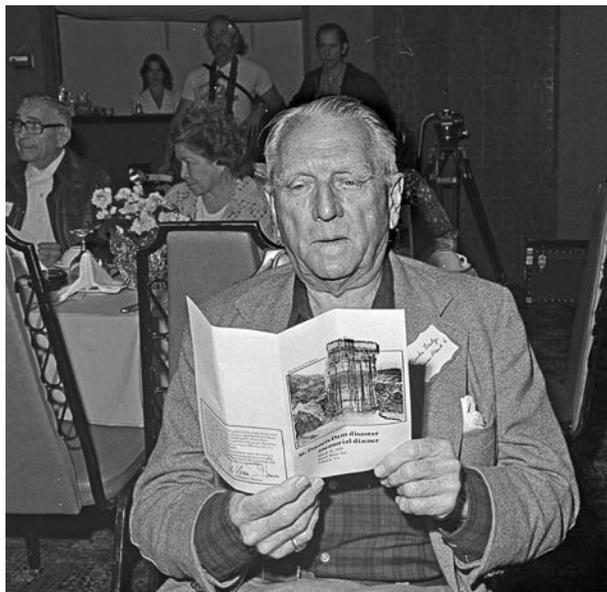
We hunted bodies all day, and that night some of us slept under a truck, out of the mist, and broke open a huge cheese that was in a case on the truck, along with many other supplies, including a case of eggs, some of which we ate raw before going to sleep quite late.

None of my group had any fear that the dam would fail, otherwise some of us would not have been sitting on it at sunset the evening before. The evenings were becoming mild, and we had formed the habit of driving down to the dam after supper and reading the gage. The reservoir was being filled, so we made bets on how many tenths the water would have risen since we were last there. We knew of a leak in the apron string wall that was being piped down to the stream bed, but it seemed to us to be of no concern."

This letter is a most fascinating first-hand account of the night of the disaster by eyewitness Charles Clarke Keely. Keely passed away from a heart attack on August 14, 1990. He is buried at the Forest Lawn Memorial Park in Glendale, California.

Don Ray promises much more to come in his upcoming book on the survivors of the St. Francis Dam disaster.

Of note, the above letter and its contents remain Don Ray's property and should not be republished without his permission.



Charles Clarke Keely at the 1978 Survivors' Reunion
photo by Kathryn Douglas

Discover the Hidden Treasures of Rancho Camulos Inside the Museum's Research Library

by Susan Falck

It's easy to miss. Most motorists routinely zipping past the small white adobe structure with the red tile roof on the south side of Highway 126, just minutes away from Piru, have little idea of the history of the building or the historic treasures stored inside. Known as the 1920 Adobe, the building once served as the ranch foreman's home and office for bustling Camulos Ranch for most of the 20th century. Today, it is the home of the Rancho Camulos Museum Research Library and offers valuable clues to how life was experienced at this busy California rancho more than a century ago.

Opened five years ago, the library has been a work in progress for the past decade. After furnishing the building with shelving to organize and store the collection and creating a small but comfortable reading room, museum staff and volunteers have catalogued a collection of more than 200 books on Southern California history donated by RCM docents. More challenging was rescuing the many letters, maps, photographs, business and labor records, textiles and furnishings found hidden away in the nooks and crannies of Rancho Camulos' Main Adobe house, winery, bunkhouse and elsewhere on the property. The museum's diverse collection of artifacts and archival materials--some dating back to the mid-19th century--were carefully cleaned and stored in archival boxes that will help to preserve them for decades to come. Several collections now have finding aids, making the collections more accessible to researchers.

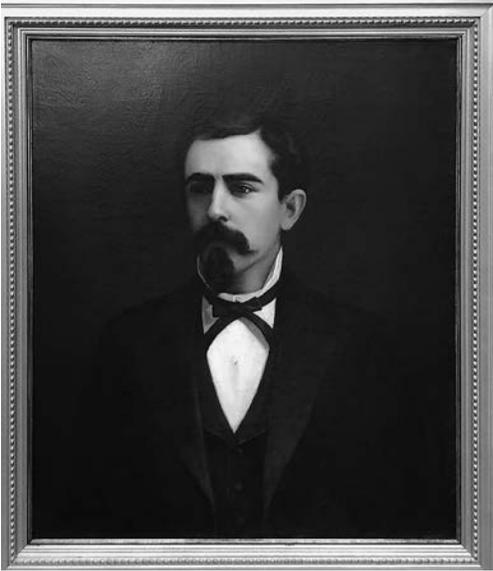
Rounding up the various pieces of the collection scattered throughout the large property has been an adventure in itself. In one instance several years ago, a group of graduate students from Cal State Fullerton who were assisting volunteers and staff in the winery building found a small, dark, battered trunk that was removed for further examination along with other historic items. When the trunk was opened, an astonishing array of historical documents and ephemera was discovered. Mortgage notes signed by the women of Camulos, del Valle family letters, several pieces of popular sheet music written about Camulos or Ramona, as well as 19th-century handwritten sacred hymns that were likely used in the Camulos chapel were found, most in excellent condition. The trunk probably belonged to August Rubel, who bought the property from the del Valle family in 1924 and stored the historic treasures in the trunk for safekeeping. Mr. Rubel created a community

museum in the winery containing many of the farm implements and other historic curiosities he found upon purchasing the property, and the items within the trunk collection may have been displayed at some time as well.

Other highlights of the RCM collection have been made possible by the donations of modern-day history enthusiasts, several by del Valle and Rubel family members. Two portraits, one of a young Reginaldo del Valle (about the time he became a state assemblyman), the other a large striking portrait of Josefa del Valle Forster in her wedding gown, both painted by acclaimed artist Alexander Harmer, are now in the collection thanks to the generosity of del Valle descendants. An RCM board member recently donated a very early (1884) and rare edition of *Ramona* by Helen Hunt Jackson; a 1915 souvenir program from Clune Studio's production of "Ramona," directed by Donald Crisp; and a second edition copy of *The Home of Ramona*, produced by amateur photographer and journalist Charles Lummis in 1888. Lummis' small booklet contains a series of cyanotype blue photos he took at Camulos that document scenes from Jackson's *Ramona* novel. And this is only a small sampling of the collection.

RCM volunteers and staff continue to process and catalogue archival records and artifacts found onsite and donated to the museum. Plans are also in the works to make the collection more accessible to the public through platforms like Online Archives of California (OAC). Scholars, including curators at the Smithsonian's Museum of American History, where several Camulos artifacts are currently on display, have had ongoing access to the collection. The hope now is to expand the use of the collection to members of the public who are interested in both Rancho Camulos and Southern California history, or perhaps have a family connection to the site. Researchers interested in reviewing the collection can digitally access some of these documents and images now by visiting the museum's website at www.ranchocamulos.org and going to the Research tab, selecting Associated Links and then the SCVHistory.com link. Appointment requests to visit the library can be made by e-mailing the museum at info@ranchocamulos.org. The museum also has plans to host a library open house for the public this Fall, where highlights of the collection will be on display. Look for details soon. For more information about Rancho Camulos, visit www.ranchocamulos.org.

Some Items From the Rancho Camulos Research Library



Acclaimed plein air painter Alexander Harmer painted this portrait of Reginaldo del Valle about the time he was entering California's State Assembly in 1878. Reginaldo was instrumental in the founding of UCLA. The painting was donated by Reginaldo's great granddaughter.



A copy of Charles Lummis' "Home of Ramona," a small booklet containing images of Camulos and text to support the claim that Camulos was used as the inspiration for Helen Hunt Jackson's best selling novel, was recently donated to the museum's research library.



RCM's Research Library contains many wonderful historic photos like this one taken in the late 1800s at Camulos during a family gathering

Monkey Business in SCV

by John Boston

Here's a smidge from Volume II of "Bigfoot, Witches, Vampires & Monsters, The Most Haunted Town in America." It's four anecdotes from Chapter 13 on SCV Monkeys vs. SCV Humans. Bright side? Our side won. Happy reading...

MINI KONG #1

Anyone who calls himself a film buff is familiar with the 1933 "King Kong". (Released on my birthday on April 7th!!) Not to be a spoiler, but the giant monkey climbs atop the Empire State Building in New York City and is shot to death by machine guns in biplanes.

Minus the aerial support, we had our own version back in early October of 1971.

Pico, a 20-pound monkey, had severely bitten several Canyon Country citizens, then scampered onto a roof. Had he attempted his reign of terror in Valencia, where people are not as frontier, Pico might have lived to go "Ooooh-ooooh" another day. The ape was shot by one man, then clubbed to death by another after he hit the ground.

MINI KONG #2

STRANGETHING? On exactly the same date in October of 1953, a monkey escaped from its cage and was running through the old Tip's Café, back when it was at Castaic Junction.

Mind you, this was before the days of emotional support animals.

The simian was chased outside and treed. From there, it threw twigs and — other material at the earth-bound humans. The humans responded by throwing rocks at the monkey. It scampered down and returned to its cage. BAD monkey...

Side note? What is a caged monkey doing outside a restaurant? I'm hoping it wasn't the Tuesday businessman's lunch special...

MINI KONG #3

In the dead of winter, 1974, SCV animal control officers had a full-blown, well — monkeyhunt — underfoot.

Where else? North Oaks.

A couple of young Canyon Country boys reported seeing a spider monkey in their back yard. Word spread and dozens of kids gave chase. When one lad tried to pet the creature, it bit him on the finger. The sub-ape then bit two other kids in his rampage.

This was eons before any defund the police movement, and the Sheriff's switchboard was lit up like a Christmas tree with monkey sighting calls, which, today, in some neighborhoods would go to the crackerjack SCV How Does Seeing A Monkey Make You Feel? Department.

I love this King Kong-esque and intense play-by-play from the ACO (Animal Control Officer): "It seems to be heading down Whites Canyon toward the shopping center, going from backyard to backyard. It's no use driving around the streets trying to find it. It's probably up a tree somewhere."

The offending simian, Jojo (how come monkeys never have names like, "Bob?") disappeared into the hills overnight but was eventually captured peacefully the next day when he was found in a neighborhood gas station.

And please, no "grease monkey" jokes.

MINI KONG #4

IT'S SURPRISING how many of these stories I've come across over the years. Back on April 11, 1954, we enjoyed yet another exciting L.M.I. (Loose Monkey Incident)

Well. Technically, it was a L.B.E. (Loose Baboon Incident)

Either: i) Some fabulously lost safari abandoned the creature; ii) It escaped from a zoo; iii) It escaped from Santa Paula High School (home of The Fighting Baboons, which, as of press time, we're checking the accuracy of that being the mascot); or iv) It made the long hike from to get to — yes, you guessed it: Canyon Country.

The young simian started showing up in the ranches and back yards of Canyon Country, raiding orchards and vegetable gardens. The creature grew bolder and broke into a few homes, helping himself to everything from unsupervised pies to boxes of sugar. There's a picture: A baboon high on a sugar rush.

A couple of farm boys, Tom Davie and Perry Hendon, laid a stealthy trap for their distant-distant-distant cousin and snared him when he was caught in the act of munching an apple.

Continued on Page 7

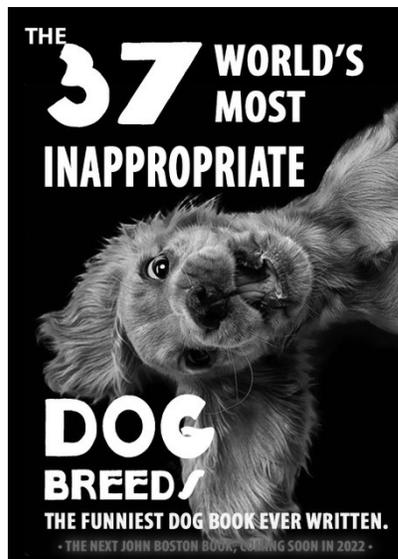
John Boston Article

Continued from page 6

“Bozo,” as he had been called, went from wild ape to Saugus pet.

I’m confident there’s some Genesis/Tempted By An Apple parable buried here.

Several times, Santa Clarita’s John Boston has been named both Best Humor and Best Serious Columnist in America. He writes the SCV History column, The Time Ronger and his Mr. Santa Clarita Valley column in The Mighty Signal.



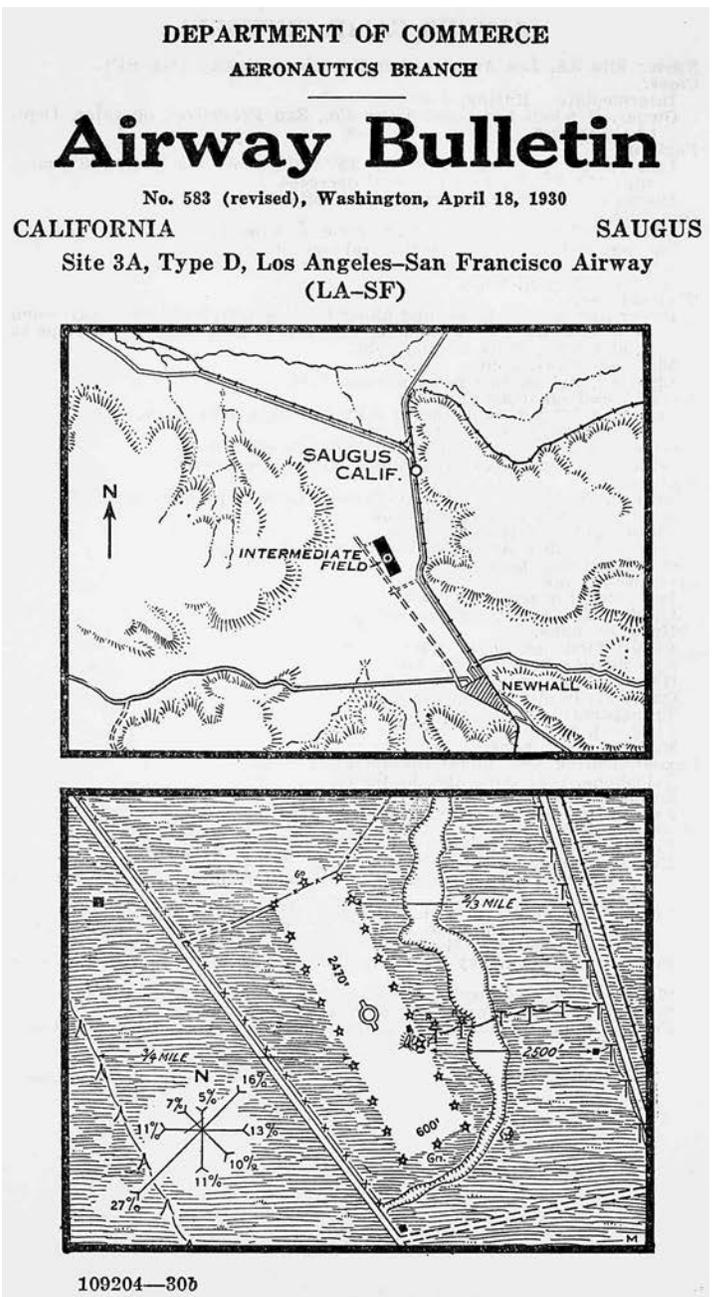
John Boston will be publishing the funniest dog book ever written: “The World’s 37 Most Inappropriate Dog Breeds.” Pick up your copy at johnbostonbooks.com today.

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We Used to Have an Airfield Here



There was also a short railroad tunnel next to the intersection of Bouquet Canyon and Soledad Canyon Roads



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Dated Material: Please Do Not Delay



Several days of heavy rain in December, 2010, barely covered the bed of San Francisquito Creek, quite a contrast with the 1928 flood. See page 1.