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# In the Wake of the Flood

**T**HE GREAT FLOOD OF '64 hit Northern California hard, and came as a cruel surprise. The farmers, ranchers, and townspeople who lived and worked alongside the creeks and rivers had barely recovered from the deluge of 1955, which at the time was the worst on record. Statistically, such a catastrophe was expected only once in a hundred years. The 1964 flood was not just shockingly ahead of schedule, it was devastating.

All the wild rivers of Northern California were swollen to bursting, but the most violent and unrestrained of them was the Eel. It tore a hundred million tons of rock and silt out of the coastal mountains and scoured the riverbanks all the way to the Pacific. It took away bridges, railroad tracks, houses, animals, and nineteen people. It rose to previously unrecorded heights, and marked the fury of its passing by leaving uprooted trees perched in unlikely places as evidence to confound future skeptics.

The worst damage to life and property occurred in the lower reaches of the river, in Humboldt County. Before arriving at its delta, the river ran through a broad gorge, where small lumber towns were situated on a narrow riparian strip. The river raked through them, and the immense stockpiles of logs, known as "decks," were swept away causing terrible damage and loss. A haunting photograph of the town

of Pepperwood shows it entirely destroyed by randomly flung timber dropped as though in a giant game of pick-up sticks.

In the delta area the existing levees were quite incapable of restraining the flood. People had built, as they do everywhere from Bangladesh to San Francisco, without troubling themselves too much about disasters that might never happen. Emerging from the gorge with its cargo of lethal battering rams, the river overflowed the entire area, drowning dairy herds and flooding the towns of Fortuna and Ferndale.

Far back inland, where the river gathered its strength, there was flooding too, but it caused less comment. The population was sparser, and the dollar value of the damage was less. The Eel inhabits rough, mountainous country inhospitable to man, and there was little room for development on the steep slopes alongside the riverbed—with one remarkable exception. Amid the jumble of peaks and canyons surrounding the Middle Fork of the Eel, there appeared, quite dramatically, a broad valley with a perfectly flat floor, some thirty square miles in extent, known as Round Valley.

The size and unexpectedness of this valley gave it a Shangri-la quality that has always fascinated newcomers gazing down from the surrounding ridges. It seemed to demand an explanation, and some outlandish theories developed to account for it, from Indian mythology to New Age mysticism. In fact the valley was formed during the intense squeezing, folding, and fracturing of the earth's crust, which created the Coast Range, a broad belt of mountainous territory that separates the Pacific Ocean from the Sacramento Valley.

Rivers and creeks twist and turn in this crumpled terrain, seeking some way out to lower ground, and those that do not drop down into the Sacramento River eventually have to find their way to the Pacific by the most tortuous of routes. All of those in the vicinity of Round Valley empty into the Eel River, which itself extends numerous forks into the mountains. A huge tract of this convoluted rock, 3,600 square miles of it all together, constitutes the watershed of the Eel. Round Valley is nearly at the center of it, and perhaps the most surprising geologic fact about the valley is that the river never ran through it but found a lower path around it.

When the cost of the 1964 flood was counted, the damage done at the delta and the lower reaches of the river amounted to about \$42 million, and the media flashed pictures of the devastation across the

country. By contrast, although Round Valley was flooded, the losses were estimated at less than a million dollars. Some small bridges went; the rest of the damage was agricultural.

No reporters thought it worth their while to tackle the long and arduous drive to Round Valley, with earth slides to bar the way and rock falls to crack an oil pan. The valley remained largely unknown and ignored, as it had been for decades. Not even the keenest observer could have anticipated that this quiet backwater of rural society would before long become the focus of a statewide feud involving the most powerful political forces in California.

There was one small town in the valley, named Covelo by its first postmaster to recall his native Switzerland. It housed a few hundred people and lay low among shade trees toward the northwest corner of the valley. The rest of the population of some two thousand all told was scattered around the valley and the nearby hills. On first entering the valley from the south, the town was scarcely visible. Great redwood barns, spreading their wings over a hundred feet or more, were the first structures that told of man's presence. Fields of hay or pasture stretched back to the foothills, sometimes bearing sheep or cattle, sometimes brilliant with wildflowers, depending on the season. The road ran straight and flat across the valley floor, between fences that were still built in the old style with split rails and crosses.

The southwest quarter of the valley was drier than the rest, and was the part that had been most favored by the early settlers. They had spread themselves over thousand-acre parcels in the nineteenth century and the holdings remained large, so that there were few houses to be seen there. About two miles into the valley, past a hundred acres or so of pear trees, stood a building with a second-story balcony supported on columns, reminiscent of the South.

Across the road from it was an avenue of surprising pretension, lined with tall redwood trees planted seventy-five years earlier. The avenue led to a grand white-stucco mansion, the only building of its kind in the valley, with broad bay windows and balconies, decked out with decorative ironwork and elaborate Victorian ornamentation. It harked back to the reign of one of the most successful and despotic kings of the Wild West, George White. At the time of the flood, both houses were occupied by the Rohrbough family, which had inherited White's estate after his death.

Another mile or so farther along, over two narrow wooden bridges,

the road entered town and became Commercial Street, but unlike most towns Covelo had none of the familiar hamburger and ice cream franchises, no sprawl of busy lighted signs, nothing to even pretend at urban excitement. For most people arriving in the valley, this was the final destination. There was no passing trade of tourists or truck drivers to cater to. Only local people took the Mina road to the north, and very few crossed the Coast Range to Interstate 5 by the Mendocino Pass road, which was mostly dirt. When night fell, Covelo went to sleep.

Covelo was built, like all frontier towns, to straddle a "main drag" made broad enough to drive cattle or hogs, to park the half-ton Ford and Chevy pickups of the sixties, and to hitch horses, for many people still rode in on horseback. However, there was another visible element of the population that generally rode neither horses nor pickups, but walked. As well as being virtually the end of the road, Covelo had one other significant distinction. A mile north of town was the boundary of the Round Valley Indian Reservation, one of the most important reservations in California.

Another street, named Howard, crossed Commercial Street from east to west at the other end of town and ended up after half a mile at the school. In the area quartered off by these two streets most of the better houses had been built. They were, for the most part, tidy wood-framed structures with painted siding and porches and neatly fenced front yards. The roofs curved far out against sun and rain, and dripped wisteria. Imposing black walnut trees shaded the roads.

The valley was big enough to contain its own climate, and more than most rural communities, Covelo was dominated by its weather, which ran to extremes. Wet winters and dry winters usually came in cycles. In dry winters, at night, the air was crisp and clear and the thermometer might plunge to fifteen degrees or less. In the morning the valley's bowl filled with a heavy freezing mist, until the sun became high enough to burn it off. That winter sun, shining from a brilliant blue sky, could take the temperature up to seventy or even eighty degrees, before fading behind the trees, and whatever grew in the valley had to survive these dramatic swings.

Different crops flourished there at different times. Wheat was once profitable, and an imposing nineteenth-century flour mill stood abandoned in the town. Hops, too, were a moneymaker for a while, and a big ranch in the southern part of the valley, renamed the Diamond

H, was still known to some as the Hop Ranch. There used to be much diversity of livestock raised on the ranches, including turkeys, hogs, sheep, and dairy herds, but by the sixties the land was devoted almost entirely to raising beef cattle, and was put either in permanent pasture or used to grow other kinds of feed such as corn or alfalfa.

Round Valley was a natural home for the valley oak, a grand, patriarchal tree often 150 feet high, whose massive and contorted boughs shade an area almost as broad as the tree is tall. The oaks were a glorious feature of the valley and, in the northern areas where they were still numerous, gave the pastures the appearance of parkland. They drew prodigious amounts of water from the underground streambeds and their transpiration in the searing heat of summer helped to cool the surrounding air. On chill winter mornings, draped in their veils of Spanish moss, they loomed through the heavy mists with the grandeur of galleons under sail. Their brittle wood was of small value for construction, but they produced immense harvests of acorns, which settlers used to feed their hogs and which the native population once cooked into an edible mush. An alternative name for the tree was "mush oak."

In the wet winter cycles the valley was full of rain. The trees, houses, animals, and people lost their outlines and seemed to dissolve in the downpour. From ridge to opposing ridge, without ceasing sometimes for weeks on end, rain obsessed the valley. It fell at a steady, relentless pace, advancing slowly from the southwest, from the Pacific Ocean, soaking the hillsides to the limit of their capacity and laying heavy blankets of snow on the high surrounding peaks, which couldn't be seen, however, until the rain was interrupted.

The rain usually would start in September with a few tentative storms, catching people with their roofs unfinished or a cut of alfalfa ungathered. People would meet each other in the street and wonder aloud: "Is this it?" Would this be the beginning of the one that never stopped? You could never tell. It might come in October. It might not come until February.

When it came, the valley turned gray, and the fainthearted fled or were weighed down in misery. Often, in those times, the valley might be cut off for days by rock falls on the Covelo road. Power and phone lines would come down. Grist Creek and Town Creek, which crossed the road just before town, became unruly and rose up to threaten their bridges. Mill Creek and Short Creek, bigger streams, which ran a

couple of miles east of town, ripped and roared across their floodplains, tossing great banks of gravel hither and thither as they tried to heave out of their beds. Branches and trees came down from the mountains, and cross fences that hadn't been removed in time were quickly reduced to tangled skeins of barbed wire.

East Lane, where it crossed Mill Creek, would be under a foot or two of water for a while, and sheets of water lay over the fields on either side of the rising torrent. Then, as it subsided, in all but the worst years, the flooded areas would slowly drain, and the fish would come surging up the creeks searching for a place to spawn. The salmon were three feet long or more, each female bursting with crimson eggs. Visibly battered by rocks, their skins patchy and bruised, their flesh bled white by exhaustion, they followed their memories from the Pacific Ocean to the valley and the climax of their last desperate voyage up 120 miles of turbulent water.

A few days later, if the rain had not returned to bring the creeks into flood again, their carcasses lay on the banks and gravel spits, waiting for the vultures to feed on them. But in some years, the rain would not stop, and it would blow in warmer than usual from some tropical storm and melt the snowpack on the mountains, and the water would flow over the sodden sides of the northern ridges and simply swamp the valley. That's how it was in 1955, and again in 1964.

Then water flowed over the land slowly, maybe two feet deep, removing loose earth and seed, and floating the dead salmon and everything else that was loose away.

Among those who suffered losses in 1964 was a young rancher named Richard Wilson. He had established himself in the valley only a few years before, when he bought some two thousand acres of land there and on adjacent Dingman Ridge. He calculated that by adding this property to the three thousand acres of rangeland he had inherited from his father, he would have the basis for a thriving cattle operation.

Building up his ranch and raising his family on this land that he had known and loved most of his life seemed to Wilson enough of a challenge to satisfy any man's ambition. If he had been forewarned of the extraordinary role he was destined to play in California's affairs, he might have taken extreme measures to avoid it, but blissfully unaware of his fate, he pursued the life he had chosen from among so many opportunities, convinced that it would be the most rewarding for himself and his children.

Yet it was clear then, as later, that he was no ordinary rancher. In 1964 Richard Alexander Wilson was only thirty-one years old, a tall, athletic man with an imposing manner and an erect bearing that made the most of his six feet, two inches. He had dark hair brushed back flat from a high forehead, a strong aquiline nose, a determined chin, and deep, penetrating eyes, all set in a square, handsome frame. The combination of boyish enthusiasm and natural authority made a pleasing impression on some. Undoubtedly he offended others, who resented his wealth. They took his gravity for self-importance and thought him arrogant. He probably added fuel to their discontent, for he was not politic with his attentions, gave no half measures, and disguised his personal judgments poorly.

He and his wife, Susan, also tall and strikingly attractive, with a mass of wavy black hair and an open, affectionate manner, both loved the mountains. They came from Southern California, and had given up a prosperous way of life to live high above the valley. They had a modest house without electricity that Wilson's father had built twenty years earlier on Buck Mountain, and for several years they moved back and forth between the mountain and the valley. The eighteen miles of rough logging road to their home could take up to an hour to negotiate, and eventually, with three small children to care for, it took its toll.

Reluctantly they conceded that it made more sense to live on the valley floor, close to town, schools, and the ranch office. In 1963 they moved to a house tucked into the northeast corner of the valley, where most of Richard's ranch activities now took place, but they still yearned for their mountain home. Whenever possible, at Thanksgiving or at Christmas, they took the children up the hill to Buck Mountain, and in 1964 when the storm came in from the Pacific, just before Christmas, Richard was there with his family.

A short distance below the house the road crossed a wooden bridge over Hull's Creek. Rainfall during those few days varied between five and six inches a day. The creek literally jumped out of its bed, took the bridge away, and obliterated the road. For several days they were cut off entirely by an impassable torrent. With woodstoves, gas light, and provisions, they were well equipped to wait out the storm, but Richard waited anxiously day after day, wondering who might be down there to rescue his cows and feed them, and Susan prayed that none of the children would suddenly develop appendicitis or break an arm.

On the fourth day Richard was able to bridge the swollen creek and get to his ranch. Most of his fields were still under water. The pasture would not be seriously affected, but other fields that had been tilled in preparation for spring sowings would need a lot of work. His buildings were largely intact. On the whole, he felt that he had got off lightly, especially compared with those on the delta who had lost everything, even their lives.

Like most people, Richard had seen, down in the valley, the television reports of rescue operations. News of the disasters on the coast flashed across the nation. The network TV crews flew in and politicians jostled for opportunities to contribute their sound bites. He heard Governor Pat Brown declare a state of emergency, and during the weeks and months that followed he listened to various officials and pundits promising action and offering solutions to curb future floods. All of them suggested building dams and levees somewhere or other.

In California, where water is such a precious commodity, water projects had been growing in size and complexity since the turn of the century, and many thousands of engineers, bureaucrats, and developers had come to depend on them for their livelihood and prospects. At the same time as they were creating one system, they were naturally searching out the next. It was an oft-spoken dictum that there was nothing like a flood or a drought to have water projects approved. Well-paid lobbyists were always eager to get them past the legislature in Sacramento, and they greeted major flood disasters with the same scarcely concealed enthusiasm felt by reporters, for whom the best news is usually bad.

The flood in 1955 had hastened the approval of a master plan to capture and control more of California's rivers and send them south. This project, known as the State Water Project, was already under way on the Feather River, narrowly voted into being in 1960, and underfunded at \$1.75 billion. Few voters realized that this was merely a first stage, which could not on its own fulfill the promises that had been made to justify its existence. Before very long, yet more water would have to be found to funnel into that plumbing system, and the planners had their maps and models all ready.

Tantalizing amounts of water spilled off the coastal ranges into the Pacific Ocean, and for many this was a state of affairs verging on criminal neglect. The terrain was notoriously difficult, making water projects expensive and hard to justify, but the wild rivers of the north



coast and, in particular, the Eel, presented an irresistible challenge. Among engineers and politicians it was understood that the Eel would be the source of their next big increment of water, and they had been planning for it for many years.

However, their ambitions went far beyond that. In the offices of the big construction companies and consulting firms were maps showing how all the rivers would be tamed. Where an atlas would show the Eel, the Klamath, and the Trinity as a tracery of thin black lines meandering from the mountains to the ocean, the engineers' maps showed them gorged and swollen like varicose veins by a multitude of dams and reservoirs, backed up to each other like steps in a staircase. The whole scheme, statewide, was to cost something in the order of \$12 billion.

The engineers and planners who had drawn up this extraordinary scenario were convinced that, ultimately, the state would have to buy it. Population increases would demand it. For California to go on growing, more water had to go south, and as long as there was water "wasting," as they said, to the ocean, it was unthinkable that the state would hesitate to turn it around and send it where it was needed.

These long-range ambitions of the water lobby were concealed, if only by omission, from the public. The voters, it was thought in 1960, had enough to think about with just one monster plumbing project costing less than \$2 billion. The next step would have to wait until the time was politically ripe. That time seemed to have arrived in the winter of 1964.

During the '64 flood more water poured out of the Eel River in eight days than it took to irrigate the entire cotton crop of California for a year.<sup>1</sup> For engineers eager to build bigger and better dams, for city managers of the rapidly growing suburbs of Los Angeles, for corporations with a few thousand acres of arid land somewhere south of Bakersfield, for politicians anxious to increase the state's gross product and rake in more tax dollars, for developers with dreams of lakeside condominiums on the shores of new reservoirs, the lights turned green. They lost no time in condemning this profligate outpouring as an intolerable threat to life and limb, and in the political climate of those days there were very few who disagreed. Liberated by this new sense of urgency, the engineers emerged from the closet as knights errant, flying the banner of flood control, and once again the area was beset by dam fever.

Throughout the century, long before the State Water Project, there

had been plans to build dams up and down the Eel River, though few people in Round Valley got to hear of them. Every few years, some agency or other drew a map showing these hypothetical dams, with names like Sequoia, Bell Springs, English Ridge, Willis Ridge, Spencer, Jarbow, Dos Rios, and Etsel. They were motivated by two quite distinct aims. In one form the engineers came in the guise of kindly godfathers, bearing water to nourish the valley. Their dams were generally smaller, local affairs, diverting water from the Eel into a ditch that might irrigate the foothills of the valley. The dam at Etsel Crossing would have been one of those, and had been talked about for decades.

In their other incarnation, the engineers were very different. Then they came as the mighty manipulators of nature improving on God's work, the men who drilled through mountains, who raised immense inverted pyramids of rock and concrete and sent great rivers uphill. In pursuit of their Herculean purposes, they could hardly be expected to concern themselves much with a scattering of farmers and natives eking out a living in a remote valley. To such men the proximity of a valley to a river suggested only the question: Should we fill it with water?