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# South Bay Historical Society Bulletin

February 2016

Issue No. 11

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Chula Vista Mayor Mary Salas helped Steve Schoenherr and Betty Waznis cut the ribbon on the new exhibit in the Chula Vista Library's Heritage Museum at 5:05 pm on January 27, 2016, exactly 100 years after the Otay Dam burst in 1916. The exhibit marked the grand opening of the new museum that has been built into the northwest corner of the Civic Library. The original Heritage Museum was located in the little building in the corner of

Memorial Park since 1993. That building was constructed in 1946 for the Chamber of Commerce, and has served over the years as a real estate office and Bill's Drive-in, but it will soon be demolished to expand the park. The Friends of the Library maintained this building for the last 20 years, but last year it had to be closed. Library Director Betty Waznis offered space inside the Civic Library, and the Friends joined with the city to construct the new Heritage Museum. The South Bay Historical Society has joined with the Friends of the Library to produce exhibits that will be rotated at least once a year. The curved wall on the outside of the exhibit space will remain in place, featuring photographs that illustrate a timeline of Chula Vista history.

In the photo above, courtesy of Steve Wood, some of the crowd attending the grand opening are shown looking at the curved wall and the alcoves and artifact cases. Inside the museum, the display cases and walls will feature artifacts and photos for the rotating exhibits. For the Great Flood exhibit, each

of the eight alcoves recessed into the west wall illustrate an aspect of the flood, from Charles Hatfield to road closures, damage to the Sweetwater and Otay dams, the flooding of the Tijuana racetrack and the Bonita valley, and the people affected by the flood such as Hazel Goes Cook and Robert McCan.



The eight display cases show the causes, damage and aftermath of the Great Flood. The Exposition of 1915 brought a growing population to San Diego that needed water, and civic leaders such as John D. Spreckels wanted rain to full the reservoirs and stimulate the growth of more lemon orchards in the South Bay.



Books and postcards promoted the Expo and the new dams built in the South Bay. But the flood destroyed the new communities such as Little Landers and the town of Otay.



The Japanese farmers who were living below the Otay Dam suffered at least eleven dead and lost everything in the flood. On display are artifacts (on loan from the Japanese American Historical Society of San Diego) that would have been found in a typical Japanese home in 1916.



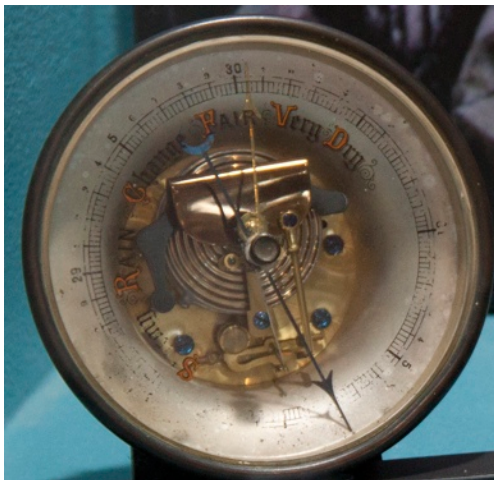
Hanako and Shogi were games brought by Japanese immigrants to the United States. The dictionary, published in 1916, may have been helpful for interpreters like Hachisaku Asakawa who helped immigrants process their paperwork. The Asakawa family lived in and operated the Japanese Tea House in Balboa Park during and after the Exposition of 1915-1916, and later opened a nursery in the Sweetwater Valley.



## Sponsors and Contributors

The Great Flood exhibit was made possible by the following sponsors and contributors. Financial assistance was provided by the Carol and Henry F. Hunte Fund and by Barbara and Howard Kruegel. Betty Waznis, Director of the Chula Vista Library, and Shauna Stokes, President of the Friends of the Library, guided the creation of the museum from the beginning. The members of the Heritage Museum Exhibit Committee put in countless hours of work over the last three months assembling the exhibit: Shelley Rudd, Harry Orgovan, Barbara and Howard Kruegel, Mitch Beauchamp, Patti Huffman, Mark Kochackis, Barbara Zaragoza and Tanya Carr. Eva Salas of Aplomb Media was the museum and exhibit designer. Curtis Wylie of MEACOR Signs did photo mounting and the stunning wall graphics.

Photographs and artifacts were contributed by Julie Gay and the Bonita Museum & Cultural Center; Linda Canada and the Japanese American Historical Society of San Diego; Bruce Semelsberger and the Southwest Railway Library Archive of the Pacific Southwest Railway Museum, Campo; James Smythe and Jim Smith of the Sweetwater Authority; Lauren Raduc and Aleta Gee of the Otay Lakes County Park; and Rick Crawford, Special Collections, San Diego Public Library.



Charles Hatfield's barometer was loaned by Rick Crawford from the Hatfield Collection at the San Diego Public Library.



Jim McVeigh and Tom Watson loaned photos from the collection at the Otay Water Treatment Plant.

Several families who had relatives involved in the flood 100 years ago contributed to the exhibit. These included Patty Henos, granddaughter of Theresa McCan, and Ralph La Porte, grandson of Johnnie La Porte.



Special thanks to Chief Jim Geering and Captain Tim Mehrer of the Chula Vista Fire Department, who assisted in the efforts of the South Bay Historical Society to recover pieces of the old Otay Dam.



## The Great Flood

The flood of 1916 was the worst natural disaster in the history of the South Bay. The Lower Otay Dam broke and flooded the entire valley, destroying homes and farms. The official federal report on the flood concluded that 22 people died in San Diego County as a result of the flood, and most of these were in the Otay Valley. "Aside from the loss of life, the most serious loss was that resulting from the destruction of the results of the work of generations on well-developed farm lands and their improvements. Dams that are broken down, bridges that are washed out, water mains, pipe lines, irrigation ditches, wells and pumps, and power plants" would require, according to the report, "a long time to efface completely the track of a flood in a fertile, intensively cultivated river valley." (1)



It has been blamed on Charles Hatfield, the infamous rainmaker who erected a platform near the Morena

Reservoir, sending chemicals into the air that produced the rain that ended an alleged drought. Hatfield was not the only cause. The Weather Bureau said the rain came from several Pacific storms that converged at the same time on San Diego, an early version of today's El Niño. (2)



Hatfield was hired by the San Diego City Council to fill the Morena Reservoir for \$10,000. This was the desire of many promoters and developers who wanted to build up the water supply to attract more population and business to San Diego. These developers had sponsored the 1915 Panama-California Exposition in Balboa Park, not only to celebrate the building of the Panama Canal, but also to boost population and economic progress. One of the main purposes of the Exposition, according to its president, G. Aubrey Davidson, was to "call the attention of the world to the possibility of millions of acres of land that have been peculiarly blessed by nature and that have awaited through the centuries the touch that will transform them into the paradises of the Western hemisphere." (3)



John D. Spreckels was vice-president of the Exposition and a water supply developer. He had purchased from Elisha Babcock the Southern California Mountain Water Company that included the Otay Dam, and had finished the construction of the Morena Dam. He also built a pipeline from Otay Reservoir to San Diego and then in 1914 he sold his water system to the city of San Diego. Spreckels owned the city's streetcar system, its newspapers, its wharfs, and was building his San Diego and Arizona

railroad to bring growth to the region. There was no immediate drought in 1915, but the threat of drought was very real. If Hatfield could fill the reservoirs, it would alleviate this fear and contribute to the economic growth of Spreckels and his city.

Chula Vista lemon growers were in complete agreement with Spreckels. The water from the Sweetwater Dam had made the lemons prosper and land values increase. The dam was built in 1888, the first big dam in the county, and at that time the highest arched masonry dam in the United States. The Sweetwater drew its water from the backcountry watershed extending to the Cuyamacas. If Hatfield could cause rain at Morena, it would benefit everyone. (4)

Charles Hatfield at the Morena Reservoir reported rain beginning January 5, 1916. The rain became heavy from January 10 through January 18. "Rain of a genuinely remarkable quantity began January 10. For 24 hours in San Diego itself it rained off and on, but reports from the back country said it rained hard and almost continuously. From then until the 18th it was rainy weather. On the 14th it rained torrents and continued to rain heavily for several days. Roofs leaked. Storm drains that had not been taxed for years overflowed. The San Diego River went over its







banks and spread across Mission Valley in the early hours of the 17th." (5)

On January 18 tragedy struck Tijuana and Little Landers on the Tijuana River at the border. The Little Landers colony was founded by William Smythe, author and reformer who claimed everyone deserved "A Little Land and a Living." Smythe bought 500 acres that had been part of the old town of Tia Juana on the north side of the border that was wiped out by the flood of 1891. He gave it the formal name, Little Landers Colony No. 1 at San Ysidro, on January 11, 1909. By 1916 his colony had 100 people living on one-acre farms. Unfortunately, many Little Landers built their farms on the bottom land of the river, unaware of the tremendous damage caused by the 1891 and 1895 floods. (6)

The newspaper reported houses washed away. "Miss Betty Prince lost her two-acre farm completely. The rushing river washed it away. The house owned by James McIntyre was last seen floating rapidly towards the ocean. Mrs. N. Hollister's house which was in the direct path of the river was the first to leave its moorings. It tipped over on its side and passed rapidly downstream. The King home was turned over on its side, but it clung to its supports as the river went down last night. It is probable it will remain. The Gunn home was carried away during the

night. It had vanished when daylight appeared. The home of Peter Monaghan was moved some distance but is stuck against one side of the river. Jonas Franklin's home, located on the edge of the river bed, was one of the first to go. Every house on the bottom lands has been severely damaged. The house and barns at Christofferson's dairy were washed away and several valuable dairy cows were lost. The restaurant of Andrew Knots on the Tijuana road just east of San Ysidro, was washed to a shallow pond on the bottom lands, where it is sticking in the mud. Charles Frederick's one-acre farm with its buildings was completely washed away." (7)



San Ysidro Hotel pictured here in 1909 when it was converted from the Belcher Ranch bunk house



A Little Landers Relief Fund was started by civic leaders in San Diego. Madame Katherine Tingley was one the benefactors who contributed to the Fund. She was the founder of the Theosophical Society in Point Loma in 1900 and a leading patron of the arts. The Navy sent a relief expedition to Little Landers,

comprised of sailors from the torpedo boat destroyers Hull and Hopkins. Supplies were sent to the homeless in Little Landers from the Jorge Ibs store in Tijuana owned by Miguel Gonzales. The First Cavalry stationed in Balboa Park for the Exposition sent tents to San Ysidro(8)

The Tijuana River flood overwhelmed the Tijuana racetrack on January 18. It had just opened only 150 yards from the border and drew thousands of visitors, most brought to the border by the San Diego and Arizona railroad of John D. Spreckels. The track was built by "Sunny Jim" Coffroth, a former boxing promoter who wanted to take advantage of the Exposition drawing people to San Diego. One of his partners was John D. Spreckels who owned the newspaper that promoted the track and the railroad that carried customers to the border. (9)

Although the rain storm ended in San Diego January 19, another storm came from the southeast and hit the backcountry very hard east of the Cuyamacas. The Colorado River flooded Yuma on January 22, destroying 100 buildings. The First Cavalry sent a mule pack train to Potrero with supplies, crossing dangerous flood waters on the Cottonwood and Sweetwater rivers. (10)

During the afternoon of January 26, heavy rains began again in San Diego, causing a second great

RAINFALL BY DAYS								
January 14 to 20 in San Diego city and county:								
	Fri.	Sat. and Sun.	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Storm.	Season.	Last Season To Date
Barrett Dam	2.30	...	3.20	1.04	.88	12.51	18.85	5.86
Cuyamaca Dam	1.81	9.96	...	2.23	1.00	15.00	28.89	12.67
El Cajon	.68	3.89	4.30	.67	.54	10.08	15.76	6.09
Escondido	.82	3.78	...	...	...	...	...	6.12
Otay	.48	2.32	1.82	.53	.45	5.60	9.68	...
Morena Dam	3.01	6.11	4.55	1.52	1.33	16.52	23.29	6.60
San Diego	.57	1.15	1.58	.57	.36	4.23	8.04	4.19
Sweetwater	.54	2.22	1.94	.46	...	...	...	4.55
Warners'	1.13	7.17	7.10	2.34	.76	18.50	28.07	10.00

Rain totals in the San Diego Union, Jan. 20, 1916

flood that was more devastating than the first flood of January 15-19. 24 hours of rain caused all the river valleys of the county to flood on January 27, knocking out bridges and roads and all communications. (11)

This second storm of Jan. 27 was worse in the Tijuana River valley than the first flood of Jan. 18. The Custom House and more homes in San Ysidro were washed away. Robert McCan was a young rancher living on a truck and hay farm in the valley. "We were about 1 and 1/2 miles south of the Nestor store," McCan said, "on the American side, of course, although I always said after 1916 our farm was in Mexico." McCan said of some 40 homes in the valley, 25 were washed away. "There had been a smaller flood two weeks before the big one," McCan said, "and that had washed things out pretty good." The water had come through Smugglers' Gulch and people had to be rescued, stock moved out all during that first flood. "Our two-story house was pretty high up on a bluff, so we put people up and brought out their horses and tied them to a bridge. The first flood had brought in some good soil (six inches to two feet of silt) and we were glad to get it, but the second flood took it all away," McCan said. McCan's father, who was road foreman from Otay south, lost a small river boat in the first flood, getting people out, McCan said. (12)



Rudolph Wueste was the supervisor of the Otay Dam in 1916 and took the photo on January 27 of a group of people who drove their cars on the spillway of the Otay Dam. It was the last photo of the dam before it broke.



On January 27, 1916, the lower Otay Dam split open "like an over-ripe melon." The steel plate in the center core of the dam peeled back and pieces of the core were torn loose and carried down the valley 12 miles to the bay. Andrew Ervast, chief engineer for the Spreckels Companies, inspected the damage one day after the break and said, "It seemed as if a monster knife had been drawn across the ground. Neither are there any trees or houses left. All one can see is bare gravel, and the entire valley is swept clean." (13)

Rudolph Wueste tried to call San Diego City Hall with his candlestick telephone at the upper Otay Dam, but the line went down just as he heard the operator answer "City ha -." The flood cut off all communication with the outside world. (14)

Robert McCan wrote about the "local Paul Reveres" who warned people about the flood. Henry George and Bob Gallagher started at the lower end of Otay



Valley, each on horse, and warned as many people as they could find. Gallagher died when the flood hit the Daneri winery. The story of another Paul Revere was published in the newspaper two days after the dam broke. "F. E. Baird, laborer at the Lower Otay, with four others, volunteered Thursday afternoon to go on foot down the Otay valley from the dam, notifying ranchers that the waters of the reservoir would run over within a few hours and that if the dam broke, their only chance of safety would be on higher land. Of the four, Baird alone reached San Diego. He was about six miles below the dam, he told the mayor, when a huge wall of water more than forty feet high loomed up behind him. Up to that point, he had succeeded in inducing all valley residents to desert their homes and take shelter on the hills, he said. Baird was caught by part of the flood, as he made for the higher ground, but managed to fight his way through. Clinging to small trees, and swimming at times, he reached the edge of the bluff.

From the viewpoint, he declared that the valley was a swirling mass of water and wreckage. Houses came rolling down like so many chips, with horses and cattle, some alive, some dead, hurled here and there by the torrent." (15)

Manuel Daneri was born in Italy and came to Old Town 1870, and came to own a 900-acre ranch in Otay Valley. Mrs. Manuel Daneri called to Manuel to come in to eat, but when Mr. Daneri came up the steps they looked down the valley and they saw 40 feet of water coming down on them. My father-in-law and mother-in-law ran up the side of the hill and did not enter the kitchen; but they shouted and shouted to the others inside to come out - that the water was coming. But they didn't hear them. When the water came down, the house and all the people inside were washed away down the valley and lost. There were about five or six hired men, the man who



In this photo, Johnnie La Porte is sitting in a piece of boiler plate from the old Otay Dam that washed down the valley and came to rest at Palm City near Johnnie's home that had been in Nestor. Johnnie had just been married six months before the flood and was working at the PM Dairy near Nestor that was founded by Henry Schnell in 1913. Johnny's new wife, Marie Patterson, had been born in Oneonta and grew up in the Tijuana River Valley. The homes of her father and grandfather near Nestor were flooded out. Johnnie and Marie moved to National City where he became the city's first motorcycle cop in 1920. (19)



San Diego History Center

Johnnie La Porte stands near the railroad tracks at Palm City looking northeast across the Otay river. In the distance is the town of Otay, including the white building with a tower that was the brick school house where the Army and Navy set up relief headquarters. The shadow of photographer Lee Passmore is at the bottom.

came to warn them about the dam, the housekeeper, (Rosa Mosto) and her brother, John Mosto, and they all were lost. Rosa Mosto had been working for the Daneris for 36 years. Her other brother, Joe Mosto, was not there that day and he lived for years afterward in town. The Daneris lost everything - all their wine, their ranch - everything they had. They would have been very rich people if everything had gone good. . . There were quite a few Japanese gardens in the valley. Three days after the flood a Japanese woman was found with her head above the water and she must have only died a few hours before, John said, because she was still warm. Many people were hit in the flood and many cows and horses and other animals were lost. (17)

The Sweetwater Dam, unlike the earthen dam at Otay, was solid stone and concrete and did not break.

When the valley was flooded during the first downpour January 15 through 20, photographers from the San Diego Union newspaper struggled for two days to reach the dam through washed-out roads and collapsed bridges. Photos of the dam were published several times in following week. The dam overflowed January 19, and water began to wash away the abutment on the north end where it was attached to the hillsides. On January 27, the abutment finally gave way, releasing a torrent of water that destroyed the big pipeline that ran down the valley floor. Richard C. Allen inspected the backcountry tributaries of the river and warned the rapidly growing amount of runoff water would overrun the dam. He was right. On January 27 it also washed out the earthen dike that supported the south side of the reservoir. The resulting flood was not as sudden as Otay, and no lives were lost. But the



Chinese vegetable farms below the dam were destroyed. Allen's wife Ella was one of the founders of the Sweetwater Woman's Club that was washed away by the collapse of the dike. The building and its contents, including a piano and the county library, were swept down the river. (18)



Hazel Goes Cook was photographed in 1916 sitting on the mud-soaked ground down the hill from her lemon ranch. As the flood in the Sweetwater Valley receded, she rolled up balls of mud and made snowman figures. Hazel and her husband Joe Cook came to Chula Vista from Chicago in 1911 and started their 55-acre lemon ranch around Pepper Tree Drive and down the hill toward what is Interstate 805 today. Hazel became one of the leading lemon growers in the area and was president of the Mutual Orange Distributors (MOD) packing plant in Chula Vista. She served on the school board and in 1955 an elementary school on L Street was named for her. Some of the mud that Hazel piled up into what she called "adobe balls" may have come from the adobe walls of the packing shed of the Sweetwater Fruit Company on Bonita Road that washed away in the flood. The walls were rebuilt of redwood and the shed became known as the "old red barn." (19)

Before the flood, the Western Salt Company was a thriving and profitable business. The salt ponds had existed at the south end of the bay long before they were first noted on the Pantoja map of 1782. The La Punta Salt Works was first organized in 1871, became the Otay Salt Works in 1888 when purchased by Elisha Babcock, then changed to Western Salt in

1902. Henry Fenton bought the company in 1922. (20)



For several years before the flood, the Salt Works employed Japanese workers, shown in this 1912 photo. By 1916, many of these men moved to the Otay Valley to become farmers and some were killed in the Jan. 27 flood. A monument to the eleven Japanese who died in the Otay flood of Jan. 27, 1916, stands today in Mount Hope Cemetery.



Most of the town of Otay was destroyed by the flood. The only surviving buildings were the Otay Watch Factory brick building, the Clark brick building that was used as the post office, the Otay Baptist Church, and the Victorian house known today as the Lorenzo Anderson house.

## NOTES:

- (1) McGlashan, 1918, p. 27.
- (2) In 1965, meteorologist Don Eldemiller published a study of the 1916 flood and concluded that four air masses came together to create four fronts. (San Diego Union, Jan. 2, 1961.) Three of these four fronts were stalled over California and northern Baja by an enormous high pressure area in the northwest. This "atmospheric logjam" produced several periods of heavy rainfall. (Jenkins, p. 167). The mayor of Ensenada, 80 miles south of San Diego, commented to a Union reporter; "It has only sprinkled in San Diego. It is but a mere mist. We have had the heaviest rains in Ensenada in the memory of the oldest settler. For seven days and seven nights it not only rained, but it poured. It must have been fully fifty inches!" (Brimmer, p. 65).
- (3) San Diego Union, Jan. 1, 1915. Also, David C. Collier, a director general of the Exposition and developer of the Ocean and Mission Beach city suburbs, said the Expo would "build up San Diego and adjoining territory." (quoted in Bokovoy, 1999).
- (4) Trook, 1988.
- (5) Patterson, 1970.
- (6) Hensley, 1994, and Lee, 1975; quote from San Diego Union Jan. 20, 1916.
- (7) San Diego Union, Jan. 20, 1916.
- (8) San Diego Union, Jan. 19-21, 1916.
- (9) San Diego Union, Jan. 1, 2, 20, 25, 1916.
- (10) San Diego Union, Jan. 21, 1916; Wueste, 1955.
- (11) San Diego Union, Jan. 28, 1916;
- (12) San Diego Union, Jan. 28, 1916; Chula Vista Star-News, Jan. 27, 1966.
- (13) San Diego Union, Jan. 29, 1916.
- (14) San Diego Union, Jan. 23, 1966.
- (15) San Diego Union, Jan. 29, 1916.
- (16) Chula Vista Star-News, June 3, 1965; Chula Vista Historical Society. Family, Friends, and Homes. San Diego CA: Tecolote Publications, 1991, p. 260.
- (17) Aurelia de Bincenzi Daneri, Oral History, Oct. 5, 1960, San Diego History Center.
- (18) Trook, 1988.
- (19) Chula Vista, the Early Years. Vol. 3, 1994; photo 16755, San Diego History Center.
- (20) Salt Works photos courtesy of the H. G. Fenton Company.

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## Windover Ranch

Emil Bruhlmeier was born in Switzerland in 1886, and immigrated to the U.S. in 1906. He enlisted in the Army in 1907 and served in Panama several years; was sent to France in World War I; was in the Second US Cavalry in 1917, led by General John Pershing; served at Fort Rosecrans, and was in the 89th Aero Squadron at March Field when discharged in 1920. He moved to the Tijuana River Valley and bought a ranch in Smuggler's Gulch. After the death of his first wife Lina Rychner, he met Clara Tvedt who was working across the border at Agua Caliente. They were married in 1933 and she joined him at his Windover Ranch in Smuggler's Gulch, raising avocados and selling drinking water from 7 wells Emil had dug by finding water using a divining rod. The water was pure and much sought-after by residents of the South Bay for 3 decades. He raised two daughters, Emilie and Leonora, who were long-time members with their mother Clara of the Nestor Methodist Church. Clara was also active in the Palm City Woman's Club. Emil was a vice-president of the

Palm City Chamber of Commerce and a clerk for the Monument School District. In 1939 he was appointed to the San Diego County Flood Control Committee to represent the Tijuana River Valley. Emil raised pedigreed White Leghorn chickens that were much admired by his brother Hans who visited from Switzerland in the early 1930s. Emil sent several shipments of the chickens to Switzerland to start a flock for his brother. When World War II began, the Army put a small outpost in Smuggler's Gulch near the home of Emil's neighbor, David Smallcomb. Its purpose was to guard the border, but there also was a widespread fear in California of foreign spies and saboteurs. Japanese farmers in the valley were taken from their homes and sent to relocation camps. Elizabeth Iguchi went to school with the Bruhlmeier sisters and recalls how her family lost everything when the war began. Her father, Kumataro "Mike" Iguchi, was a farmer near Palm City. His hobby was photography but the FBI confiscated all his equipment and all his family pictures. Emilie remembers when the FBI came to her house in Smuggler's Gulch. "The FBI searched our house too. Someone had turned Daddy, the Aeschlemanns, and another Swiss family in

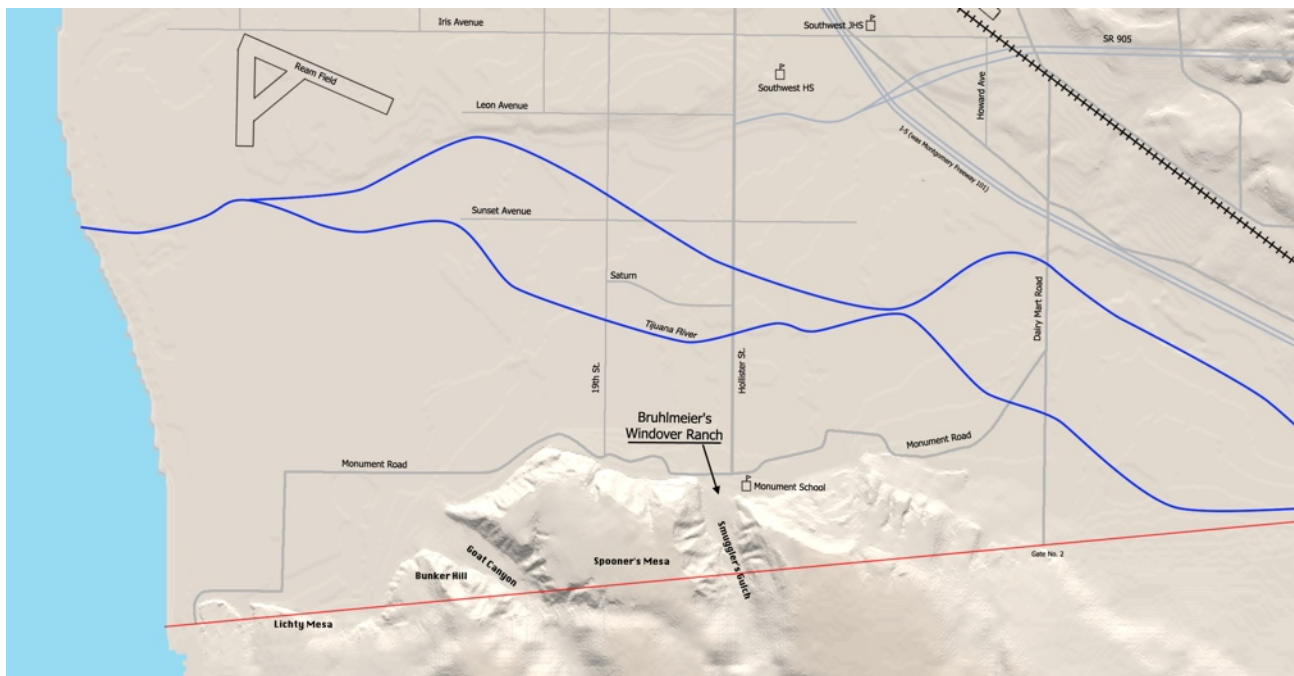


Emil Bruhlmeier



This view looking east shows Windover Ranch in Smuggler's Gulch about 1924. The Satterslee house is east on Monument Road.

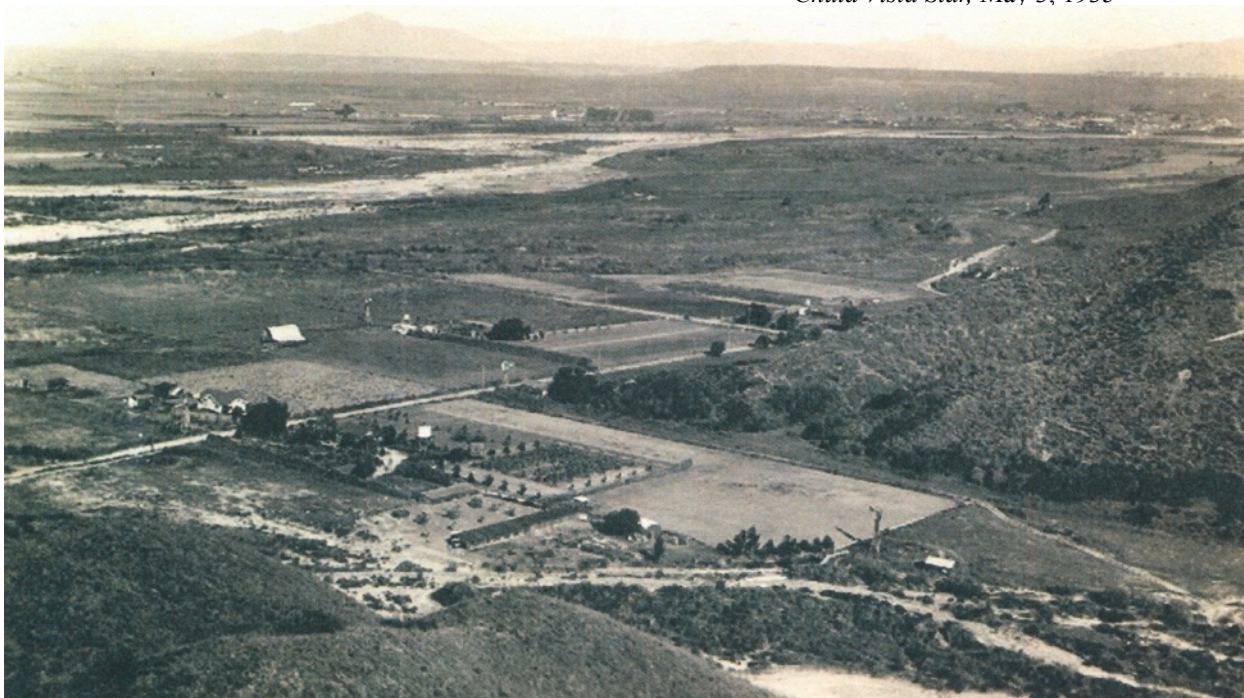




as Germans (not the Eggers, Hofers or Zumsteins). They were looking for German war bonds and were surprised to find U.S. war bonds instead. My father was very upset that anyone would suspect him. He took his citizenship seriously." Emil died in 1953. In 1961 Clara married Lester Chitwood and they managed the ranch until the threat of flooding caused them to sell in 1966.



*Chula Vista Star, May 3, 1935*



This view looking northeast shows Windover Ranch in Smuggler's Gulch about 1930. Avocado trees line the entrance to the ranch and a long row of chicken coops is in the center. The house across the street belonged to the Holcombs in the 1930s. These photos are courtesy of Emilie and Leonora.





Emil Bruhlmeier built a stone wall and pillars at the entrance to Windover Ranch. All traces of the ranch are gone, but parts of the stone wall are still visible today in Smuggler's Gulch.





## MEETING .....

"After the Flood Exhibit - What Next?" is the topic of our next meeting on Friday, Feb. 19, at 3 pm in the Chula Vista Library auditorium. This meeting will be a discussion of what the SBHS has been doing and what we would like to do this coming year. One idea is an exhibit on the Rohr Aviation Company. Several years ago the Heritage Museum produced an exhibit on Rohr and it was very popular, and we believe it might be worth another exhibit.



Fred Rohr was an aircraft engineer who helped build Charles Lindbergh's Spirit of St. Louis in 1927. He went on to develop a drop hammer to make engine parts for Solar Aircraft in 1928. After working for Boeing and Ryan, he decided to go into business for himself and founded Rohr Aircraft Corp. in 1940. From a rented warehouse in San Diego, he came to Chula Vista to build a factory on 10 acres along Chula Vista's bayfront where the Tyce brothers' airport had been located. His first building opened in Feb. 1941 and



A Rohr drop hammer is on display in Memorial Park

employed 422 workers making airplane engine power packages. In 20 years his 10 acres would become 156 acres with 41 buildings for 11,000 skilled workers. Chula Vista's population growth from 4,000 in 1940 to 30,000 in 1955 was due in large part to Rohr Aircraft's growth. Ada Dean has written that "seldom do companies rise to the top of their industry overnight. For Rohr the rise was sudden. Four years after its founding Rohr Aircraft was the world's largest producer of aircraft power plant assemblies, a distinction held by the company throughout its 57 year history." Over the years, Rohr diversified its product line, adding radio antennas, shipbuilding, mass transit trains and buses, modular homes, and rocket boosters. Rohr facilities expanded beyond the borders of Chula Vista. An engine test site was established at Brown Field in 1968. Additional factories were built in Riverside, Washington, Georgia, Arkansas, Maryland, Texas and France. Rohr had a major impact on the South Bay. He once paid his workers in silver

dollars to show how much his payroll meant to the community. It took 12 tons of silver coins. His company was purchased by Goodrich and continues today manufacturing aviation materials on the bayfront. Two federal wartime housing projects were built for Rohr workers, at Hilltop Village and Vista Square. Fred Rohr purchased the old Manor House in the Sweetwater Valley to provide rest and recreation for his workers. This property later became Rohr Park. He started the Rohr Federal Credit Union. An elementary school in the Princess Manor subdivision was named in his honor shortly before his death in 1965. The people of Chula Vista should know how much it owes to Fred Rohr, and an exhibit would honor his legacy.



Rohr Manor

### South Bay Historical Society

Bulletin No. 11, Feb., 2016

Editorial Board ..... Steve Schoenherr, Harry Orgovan

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For more information, see our web page at .....

<http://sunnycv.com/southbay/>