

# STORM ON THE SWEETWATER

by Vic Head

A mid-September visit by the kid's mother gave brief respite from the summer doldrums. Walking through the Denny live oak grove, they nearly jumped out of their shoes when a whirl, almost a roar, sounded. Dozens of quail had remained absolutely silent among the dried horehound and other weeds until almost stepped on, and then Z-RR-R-R-RRR! She told of her new employment as librarian at Alpine and of writing "Alpine Notes" for the San Diego Union. Her most recent story was "The Girl Who Sat on A Wildcat." Paralleling Deer Creek to the south another Sweetwater tributary, Taylor Creek, ran through the Taylor Ranch. Hazel Taylor, a brilliant girl, had finished high school at the age of sixteen. Home for the summer she had hiked into Sacraero Valley and was climbing South Ridge when she lost her footing and slid, mostly sitting, down a twenty-foot rock slope. Her fall had been broken by an amazingly soft cushion which reacted with a yowl, scrambled from beneath her and was gone. Both girl and cat had been more frightened than hurt.

More doldrums. Shot a horned toad with his "bone-arrer" "only because it moved." "Didn't really want to hurt it," he sobbed into Sister Mary's apron.

Way upstream, Deer Creek rounded a bend formed by an ancient mud slide. Brother Tate remembered the storm that formed the mud—'round 1880 or so. The conical hill, baked hard by decades of sun, was often covered with the open doors of trapdoor spiders. These were dried mud disks so coated with web that from a distance they looked like silver dollars standing on edge.

As the kid walked home from this discovery, he stopped to listen as a whisper far to the east grew and approached like a fast freight. Soon the ground shook under his feet and then the sound receded to the west and seemed to come from far across the Sweetwater before it died out. "Bloody earthquake," Raymond complained, "broke three dishes. But we've had worse."

There came a Saturday morning in mid October when the kid and Mary Denny, now friendly again and as lonely as he, sat on a live oak branch watching as Bell Bluff lost its usual mid-morning lavender and turned an angry gray-green with moving cloud shadows. Soon the whole sky was fast-moving clouds and a few drops fell. "Gotta get home. Mom will skin me if I get wet," and she dropped to the ground and was gone. But the kid's blood was racing now as the tree swayed and wind roared in the branches. When the first lightning bolt struck North Ridge with a long echoing crash, he laughed out loud—Sister Mary frowned as water from his coveralls puddle on the kitchen floor.

Have you heard a violent downpour on a corrugated steel roof with no ceiling? All afternoon he listened, thrilled. During a brief pause after supper, she got him to his seven-foot-square cabin under an umbrella she could barely control.

It was a night to remember, with the downpour drowning out the thunder, except for one crash to raise the dead. Then lanterns across the drive and a huge black something—and this was no cactus—silhouetted against the lightning-brightened ranch house. He dozed off to the irregular rhythm of his cabin door banging in the wind. Morning revealed the seventy-foot windmill blown down, its huge steel wind wheel half buried in the drive between the kid's cabin and Sister Mary's bedroom

Deer Creek had washed away all the sand and willows and was starting to cut a gullywash in

the weak "decomposed granite" bedrock. The downpour gave accompaniment to Sunday hymns, and Monday brought no relief. And so, day after day. On Friday, Brother Ed moaned as his vegetable garden washed away. The gullywash grew to a gorge whose wall approached the ranch house foundation and the water took out the bridge to the Denny Ranch.

Another Friday, the fourteenth day, gave a break in the clouds. A few splatterings and the rain was over. One cornerstone of the ranch house hung out over a twenty-foot cliff. Slowly the boiling waters of Deer Creek dropped, and Raymond and Mr. Denny improvised a foot bridge, but it took two more days for the Sweetwater to crest and then the main bridge over the Sweetwater gave way and vanished. Total isolation.

Old Brother Tate had that twinkle in his eye as he spoke to the kid: "Told ya we'd get a good 'un in October, didn't I? Bet they'll call this a fifty-year flood. But you needn't worry. We still have lots of canned goods, and when they're gone, lots of peanuts!" and he pointed to a half-dozen-five-gallon cans near his chair on the screen porch.

Mary Denny came over the foot bridge a few days later and hand in hand they approached the place where the Sweetwater Bridge had been. Strange men had started to string ropes across and so the rebuilding of the only bridge out of the area began. They wandered down river where new drifts of sand had covered old familiar rocks. Four or five feet from the near shore a sandbar perhaps 40 feet long and four wide stood a foot above the swift water. "A pirate island," they decided, but barefoot tests showed the near water too swift and deep. A plank would solve the problem.

Far downstream they spied a board standing at an odd angle and raced wildly down the sand-drifts and then—and then—well, "plunk" doesn't describe it. The perfectly dry sand turned under their weight into a sand soup and Mary was instantly up to her waist and the kid up to his armpits. To their left a rock was barely attainable by half falling, half "swimming" in the sand slurry, and they were out so fast they never had time to be frightened. That was QUICK quicksand! "Better hurry home, we're so wet," was the kid's first thought, but "Mom would skin me for getting wet," came the reply. So they sat on a rock in the afternoon sun, their feet dangling in the thrilling water, and talked about pirates and buried treasure and how captives "like us" would be made to walk the plank—"but we really did," the kid exclaimed. Thoughtless of worried grownups, they finally started home as the sun was setting behind them. As Mary Denny disappeared over the improvised foot bridge, the kid thrilled once again to watch Bell Bluff change from mirror silver to deep royal red---

Sacramento Valley is under water now. They've built a dam near where the Indian Burial Ground used to be. It took decades to silt the coarse sand to hold water, and dramatic changes in weather patterns have prevented the Sweetwater from going dry as it used to every summer, so, with several dams, a large bit of the Sweetwater Valley has become part of the San Diego water supply system. But in 1949 a young man showed his family the valley, still much as he remembered it, except that ranch houses, windmills and water towers had been hauled away. The only familiar man-made sights: the ancient metates where the ghosts of squaws still seemed to grind their corn, and the four standing timbers, each some 14 inches square which had once supported the Kosmon windmill.

Note: Sacramento Valley was at the northeast of what is now Loveland Reservoir. Bell Bluff Road or trail crosses the Sweetwater River and goes east just north of the reservoir; perhaps well up the slope of the north ridge bounding the valley.