

# Operation Chico was only a test

**By Jerry Bowen**

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The 1950s were disturbing times in the United States after World War II. It was the "Atomic Age" with fears of nuclear disaster strengthened as the first hydrogen bomb was tested in 1951.

Elvis Presley was the king of music and to his credit didn't protest when he was drafted into the Army. In 1953 "Ike" Eisenhower took the oath as president of the United States and the Korean War ended in a truce. Communism reared its ugly head once again and spies Ethel and Julius Rosenberg were executed.

In 1954 Sen. McCarthy conducted his controversial hearings on communism; our first nuclear submarine, the Nautilus, was launched and crewcuts were "cool."

Eisenhower began his second term in office in 1956; bus segregation was declared unconstitutional and in 1957 troops were sent into Little Rock, Ark., to aid integration.

Hoola-hoops were the latest "craze" in 1958, Marines were sent to Lebanon to preserve the government and the Iraq regime was ousted in a coup. Inter-continental nuclear missiles were being tested further increasing fears of nuclear disaster.

These trying times of the nuclear age resulted in an evacuation of Solano County in 1958 on Dec. 6 and 7 ... well, sort of; it was called "Operation Chico."

The purpose of Operation Chico was to test protection measures against atomic bomb fallout and other major disasters.

The plan was designed to test:

- The feasibility of an evacuation route designated in 1955 for Solano County exclusive of the city of Vallejo;
- Plans for the control of a sizable group of evacuees;
- Registration and assignment to billets of such a group;
- Mass feeding facilities and operations;

- Plans and procedures for continuity of governments of evacuated jurisdictions.

Operation Chico was to consist of the strategic evacuation of approximately 500 families from Solano County to the city of Chico and overnight care for the evacuees.

At the time, Civil Defense planning had designated evacuation routes from cities to what were considered safe zones. For the purpose of the operation, participating Solano County families were to drive individually from their homes to Esparto in Yolo County arriving there between 8 and 9 a.m.

At a designated "holding area" in Esparto, groups of 50 vehicles with a lead vehicle equipped with two-way radios were arranged for the next phase; to follow a designated route to Chico, which was determined to be a safe area.

At an "emergency" reception base set up at the Butte County Fairgrounds, the evacuees were registered and assigned billets with private families for one night. The test marked the first mass evacuation in the country in which residents were quartered away from their homes overnight. The evacuation was scheduled to occur on the anniversary of Pearl Harbor.

The convoys started from Esparto at 8:14 a.m. and began arriving in Chico a little before 3 p.m. They made a stop for lunch at Williams where they were served refreshments by townspeople and entertained by the high school band.

The operation was observed by top national and state civil defense officials and was declared a complete success.

Of course, there was no panic that might have completely altered the "successful" evacuation of Solano County. The parade-like atmosphere became a subject of controversy when Carl E. Hem, assistant professor of history at Chico State College paid for an ad titled "A Test of What" that disputed the operation's credibility.

In his ad he pointed out that the evacuation of our cities following a nuclear bombing is impossible because within half an hour after an atomic alarm had been sounded, not only would bottlenecks completely choke up the highways, but there would almost surely be devastating panic.

He went on to say that indulging in fantasy operations such as Operation Chico would only obscure the real dangers that threaten mankind when we assumed that "tests" of this nature would provide protection against wartime disaster.

He was critical of the "holiday" atmosphere that was stressed as an "enjoyable outing"

with Solano County citizens being serenaded by a high school band. In Chico, entertainment hosts offered church lunches, and the admission that "participation would be more whole-hearted if there were clear skies over the weekend." He reasoned that it would be far more sensible to make things thoroughly miserable for all participants.

He charged that civil defense was not the sole purpose of Operation Chico. Apparently instructions distributed to the hosts of the "evacuees" from Solano County were to promote the industrial and commercial potentialities of the Chico area.

In the ad's fourth point he said, "We cannot afford to play games." He questioned if Operation Chico was the type of program we should be devoting efforts to in a nuclear age and that it created stumbling blocks in the way of an international agreement to control nuclear testing.

Stanley Pierson, director of the state disaster office replied to the ad saying the sponsors of the advertisement in the Chico newspaper that criticized the evacuation exercise "apparently did not understand the purpose of the test. The test was not intended primarily for evacuation in the event of an impending bomb attack, but an overall evacuation program to be used in case of any threatened disaster, natural or military.

"It would be useful in moving out of cities, unessential workers, the aged, the ill and children. It would be as valuable in the face of a threatened natural disaster as it would be under a threat of military attack."

Pierson concluded that "He was not impressed by the advertisement and the less said about it the better."

Well, in spite of all the fears of the "Atomic Age," the United States never suffered a nuclear attack. All the civil defense planning and drills were never needed for that purpose. Perhaps some of the planning was of use during tornadoes, earthquakes, hurricanes and flooding and may have saved lives.

Today, threats of terrorist attacks are foremost in the minds in most officials and many of the country's citizens. Hopefully our leadership will make good decisions and the courage to do whatever is necessary. After 9/11 anything seems possible and we can only hope the world learns from its mistakes and successes. Future history will eventually record what happens; at least from the winners' or survivor's viewpoint.

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The California Maritime Academy will be celebrating 60 years at Morrow Cove this summer ( next year will be their 75th anniversary - founded in San Francisco and located in Tiburon in 1929). They have a reasonably good archive of historical documents and artifacts that help us understand and display their history. However, they have not come across anything definitive about Morrow Cove got its name.

I couldn't find how the cove got its name, but surely there must be someone out there that knows the information or location of records that reveal the information. If you know please e-mail me at the address below, or e-mail Carl Phillips at CPhillips@csum.edu.

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