

Rain in Our Pipes, and in a Bottle of Bud

By John Rico

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A SUBJECT CLOSER TO HOME - Now that President Jimmy Carter has solved the Israel- Egypt controversy, at least for the time being, it may be enlightening to put into print a subject which should be of concern to every Vacaville resident. Let's review our rainfall situation.

Constantly, in the news media and on television, you hear reports of "average" or "normal" rainfall. Local residents from time to time want to know what the difference is between these two words. In computing an average it is fairly simple, by just taking the annual rainfall and dividing it by the number of years. In computing the normal, that's a different problem. It must be asked: "Normal of what?"

It is hard to believe, that if you added up the total Vacaville rainfall for the past 50 years (seasons) you would come up with 1217 inches. Divide that by 12 inches to a foot, and you come up with 102 feet. So, in simple terms, we have had 102 feet of rainfall here in 50 years, and in that total are the two lowest seasons in recorded history - 1975-76 when it rained only 7.72 inches and 1976-77 with 9.18.

A simple division problem, 50 into 1217, presents us with an annual average rainfall here of 24.35 inches.

Rainfall for the present season, which is below the 20-inch mark, could be classified as below normal. There is always a 50-50 chance of more rains in April and May. Last season 2.35 inches were recorded in April, to end the season with 38.01. In 1882-83, nearly six inches were recorded for the month of May, doing considerable damage to fruit crops.

It was an accepted practice a few years back to include a basement in any new home built here, and many were the years when it was necessary to install a sump pump because the ground water level had risen high enough to cause the grocery cans stored in those basements to do the disco.

Today, an attached garage, has replaced the basement.

Rainfall statistics available to The Reporter go back to the season of 1880-81. The lowest total rainfall recorded here in the 78 seasons was the one of 1975-76 when 7.72 inches were tabulated.

Rainfall totals for Vacaville and Sacramento are somewhat comparable, and using the Sacramento figures which go back to 1850-51, when only 4.71 inches were tabulated, it must be accepted that the rain total in Vacaville was somewhat similar.

It was a wet winter in the 1889-90 season when record rains of 50.05 inches were tabulated. December of 1889 provided 12.48 inches, followed by 11.74 in January for a total of 24.22 in the two month period.

Excessive rains had become a problem for local area fruit growers. Many bought and installed clay drain pipes to carry off the over-supply, which was damaging the tree roots. In the 10-year period, 1880-81 through 1889-90 it rained a total of 299 inches for an annual average of 29.90.

Many local fruit growers blamed diminishing rains on the decline of the fruit industry here, but that in itself was not the complete problem. The virgin soils had just petered out, and the fruit lands of the San Joaquin Valley produced far in excess of what could be done here.

Area farmers knew that the waters of Putah Creek were continually on a flooding rampage, and for more than half a century proponents of diverting these waters sought ways and means of accomplishing the job.

Today Putah Creek has been harnessed, and the waters impounded in Lake Berryessa are used not only for growing of more and better crops; not only for human consumption, but you can get it in Anheuser-Busch beer.

There were skeptics who predicted there was not sufficient water in Putah Creek to fill a lake of feasible size. But they have been proven wrong. The 1,600,000-acre feet capacity of the lake has been reached several times, and today, following those disastrous dry years of '76-'77, storage stands at over 1,200,000.

Back around the turn of the century when the Vacaville Water and Light Company was formed, the water supply furnished to residents of the small community came from shallow wells drilled not far north of Buck Avenue.

As the population here increased, it was necessary to look elsewhere to drill for greater quantities of water. This was accomplished by drilling deep into the earth between Vacaville and Elmira, the present site of the city-owned wells.

Several hundred Vacaville residents have been able to bolster their water needs by drilling shallow back-yard wells.

Historically the lack of water in the local area has not been a major problem. Statistics reflect just the opposite - too much water. Flood control projects, a multi-million dollar expenditure, have cured most of the flooding problems in the lowlands east and south of Vacaville and Elmira. The excess rain water finds its way through the many creeks here, empties into the Sacramento River, and then into the Pacific Ocean.

Although rain in sufficient quantities has soaked the earth here, past reports will indicate there has been a lessening of quantity in the last half century. Quoting from an 1888 pamphlet which reviewed the climatic conditions is the following paragraph: "In the hills are found many springs of mineral water in which exist all those medicinal qualities so highly beneficial to certain classes of diseases. They need only to be tried to convince one that they are as good as many more noted ones."

When Ulatis and Alamo Creeks carried water throughout the 12-month period, youngsters in Vacaville would select their private "swimmin holes" in either of these two streams during the hot summer months.

With Vacaville being 166 feet above sea level, prospects of flooding here are impossible. There has been minor damage throughout the years when local area creeks overflowed their banks.

California is the nation's leader in agricultural production. This is all made possible by the triple combination of soil, water and sunshine. In recent years total production has been on the increase primarily attributed to the availability of water stored in the many man-made lakes of Northern California. While much has been done in water conservation, there is much more to do.

But getting back to Vacaville when you are asked the question of "How much does it rain here in a season?" your simple answer is: "Oh, about two feet."

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