

The Great Flood of 1861

Alice Madeley Matthews

GOLDEN NOTES

SACRAMENTO COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Summer, 1982

Vol. 28, No. 2

On the Cover

Forced from their homes by rising floodwaters, a family of Sacramentans pause atop a weakening levee before rowing to the security of higher ground. Working from a rare stereograph photo in the Meier/Shaw collection of the Sacramento History Center, artist Kevin Bunker has recaptured a moment of great worry and concern on the minds of a few evacuees.

artprint press^{sd} sacramento

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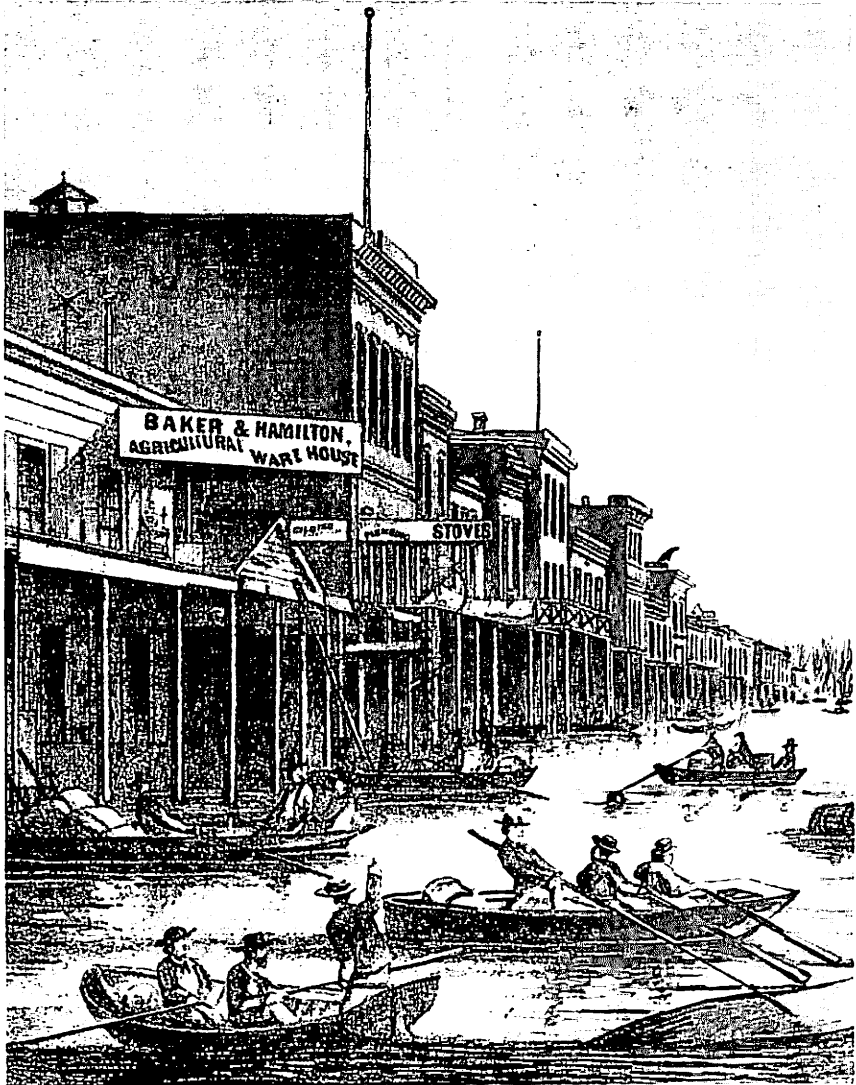
Preface

The Human Side

Historical events are frequently described in cold blooded objective terms, and they thereby lose human interest. The great floods of 1861-62 have usually been treated in this manner because there are few personal documents available. This issue of Golden Notes is one chapter in the family history of Alice Matthews, one of our members. She has based her story on conversations with her aunt, Mrs. Hattie Hunt, who lived until 1927. She also used letters of her grandmother, Sarah Dunlap, who described events to her family remaining in Marblehead, Mass.

Sarah Turner Madeley Dunlap was born in Marblehead in 1826. After her brothers moved westward via the Erie Canal, she followed them to St. Louis. There she met and married Richard Madeley, Jr. from England, and bore him two sons, Tom and Fred. After her husband died of Yellow Fever in New Orleans in 1853, she and her children joined the rest of her family on the overland trip to Sacramento. There she met and married Presley Dunlap, a well known lawyer, in 1860. Her son, Tom, grew up in Sacramento and married Frances Foster, the daughter of one of the city's early printers who owned a bookstore on J Street between Second and Third. They had three children, a boy and two girls, one of whom is the author of this article.

Dr. Joseph A. McGowan
Editor



J STREET FROM FRONT STREET
A. Rosenfeld Lithograph, 1862

BURNETT MILLER COLLECTION
Sacramento Museum & History Division

The Great Flood of 1861

by

Alice Madeley Matthews

The house in Washington, across the river from Sacramento, to which Presley Dunlap took his bride, was a typical gentleman's dwelling, and Presley's friends had seen to it that it was stocked well with provisions when the bridal couple arrived.

It held the essentials for comfortable living, some of them quite handsome, especially the big walnut desk, with hand-carved cupboards below, and rows of books behind tall glass doors above. Sarah was happy to see her mahogany washstand which had travelled all the way from Marblehead, and the old sea chest, with thousands more miles to its credit, fitted in perfectly.

The house was a one-story structure, built close to the levee, with a high basement and a steep-pitched roof, which allowed the attic space to serve as a bedroom for Tom and Fred. The window at one end of the room opened into a tall cottonwood tree, and the boys soon learned to swing themselves out the window and into the branches with an agility learned from a life of tree climbing on the ranch.

Sarah long ago had resigned herself to the thought that if broken bones were going to come, they would come, but the river so close at hand was another matter. She had seen the friendly little Bear on a rampage, and she knew the force of the mighty Mississippi. While the muddy Sacramento swirled along deep within its channel during the summer months, she feared what it could do when fed by the rains and snows of winter.

Presley pooh-poohed the idea there was any danger of harm coming to the boys. "They both are good swimmers and can take care of themselves," he said.

In spite of her concern about the river, Sarah found all the happiness for which she had hoped in her new home. Washington was connected to Sacramento by a bridge which had replaced the ferry services of an earlier day and gave easy access to Presley's law office with Judge English in the Read Building just a few moments walk from his home.

Hattie and Hannah had their families already established in the capital city, and Sarah's marriage enabled the sisters to see each other frequently.

Presley's business and political connections introduced her to a large circle of acquaintances, from which new friendships rapidly developed, and she rejoiced in his obvious pride and happiness in the new life which allowed him to nurture these friendships under his own roof for the first time in his busy life. Their home became a center for the group of friends who met to discuss the problems of the day and sample the Boston Baked beans, cod fish cakes and pumpkin pies for which Sarah soon became famous.

With her husband settled in his chosen profession, the boys in school, her sisters close at hand, her father and brothers only a few hours drive away, Sarah felt as established and secure as she had in her girlhood home in Beverly.

But in the winter of 1861 she found she had reckoned on that security without taking into account the uncertainties of the California weather.

The great flood caught her completely off guard! There had been no really high water for the past six years, and the levee along the Sacramento had been raised and strengthened until the city was lulled into a false sense of security. To all appearances a great inundation was impossible.

But the rains through the autumn had been steady and heavy, and the snows of winter had packed in ever increasing masses in the mountains. Then, contrary to the usual pattern of the California season, the weather changed and warm rains came.

For days, the weather reports from all parts of Northern California were the same---rain, heavy, torrential rain.

Instead of snow in the mountains, there was warm rain in the mountains, and the deep snow pack began to melt. When the earth could no longer absorb the run off, the streams and tributaries which fed the rivers became wild rushes of water, and the rivers quickly rose to the danger level.

Without warning, about mid morning on December 9, 1861, the levee on the eastern boundary of the city gave way and the American River swept in with uncontrolled fury. Trapped by the levees surrounding the city, the flood waters rose with incredible speed, and within an hour the only parts of the city visible above the raging flood were the levees along the Sacramento and the high ground along Poverty Ridge and I Street.

Presley Dunlap's first thought was of his family across the river, and to his great relief he found all



PRESLEY DUNLAP

AUTHOR'S COLLECTION

reports of the situation in Yolo County were good. The break through into Sacramento had relieved the pressure of water at the confluence of the Sacramento and American Rivers and all levees to the west were holding strong.

His next thought was of Sarah's sisters. He knew the Bausmans were at French Corral, but what of Hattie...her home (near 16th and E Streets) would be under water.

As he raced down the stairs from his office and along the boardwalk on I Street toward the Hunt home, he ran into John Hunt, frantic with anxiety, searching for a boat.



SARAH DUNLAP

AUTHOR'S COLLECTION

"Help me, Pres," he cried. "They say the water is six feet deep around the house and Hattie and the baby are there alone."

"Let's see if we can make China Slough," (located north of I Street, Front to Sixth) said Presley. "Maybe we can find a boat there."

The two men, oblivious of passing friends and fellow sufferers, ran to the slough to the west of the Capitol building at the northwest corner of Seventh and I Streets. Miraculously, they found many of the fishing boats still tied to their accustomed moorings, and with thankful hearts, they unfastened a row boat and carried it across the narrow strip of high ground

separating the slough from the flood waters within the city.

"Row for your life, John," said Pres. "Bring Hattie and the baby to my office. They'll be safer in the Read Building (J Street between Second and Third) than anywhere else in town. I must go to Sarah and the boys."

While Sacramento was suffering almost complete inundation, there was only a slight overflow on the Yolo side of the river.

Sarah Dunlap went from window to window of her home in Washington, watching the river and keeping her eyes on Tom and Fred. She knew if ever they became launched on that swollen stream, she would surely never see them again.

She was nearly distraught as neighbors reported on the flood in Sacramento. What had happened to Presley and Hattie and baby Alice? Their house was surely under water. How was the Bear River behaving? Were her father and Tom safe? She was glad Hannah and Will were at French Corral. At least that was high ground. And John was in Nevada, but where was Presley? Why didn't he come and allay her fears? This was the moment she had dreaded since the day her marriage brought her to Sacramento. This was the counterpart of the devastation she had seen on the Mississippi.

"Oh, what I'll tell that man when he comes," she half sobbed through clenched teeth.

But when Presley finally did appear, almost in a state of shock from the destruction he had seen,

haggard and exhausted from his labors, and wanting only the solace of her presence, Sarah's heart melted and she knew she could not impose upon him the added burden of her useless worries.

She took his wet shawl from his shoulders, and laid it over the back of a chair near the fire, and brought his slippers and a cup of hot coffee as he sat in his favorite rocker, with his long legs stretched out to the soothing warmth of the little Franklin stove.

She hung on every word with hardly an interruption as he told of the losses and rescues, and the haven at Read's Building, where most of the nearby residents had climbed the stairs to Presley's office.

"Is Read's Building the only place open to the homeless?" she asked.

"No, there are hundreds housed in the State Pavillion at 6th and M Streets, and all the big houses are filled with neighbors and friends."

"Is there no way to get the water out of the city now that it's in there?"

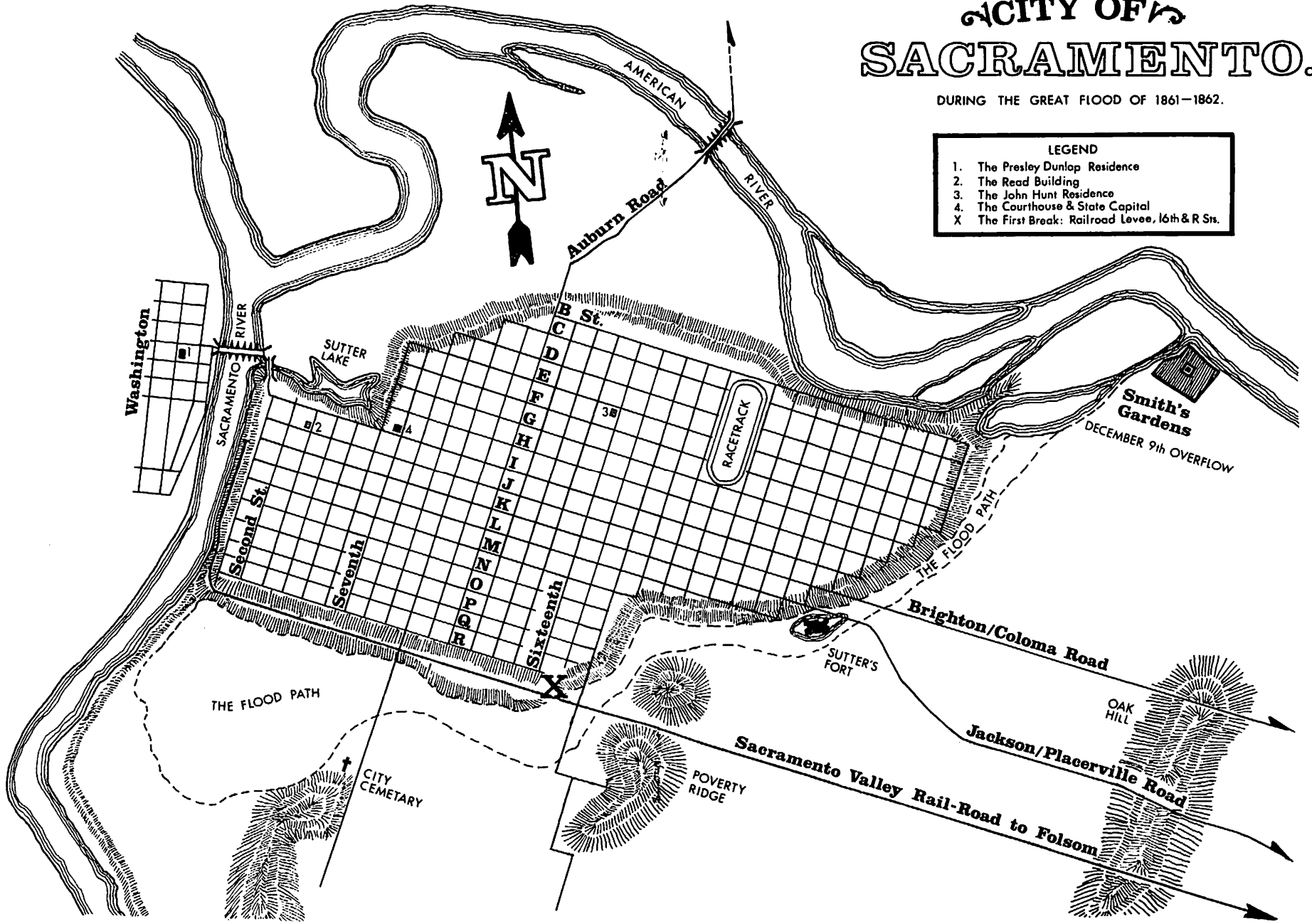
"Oh, haven't you heard?" asked Presley. "The chain gang blasted out a section of the levee at 5th and R and the water poured into the Sacramento below the city in a torrent. It took half a dozen homes right along through the opening with it, but it had to be done."

Presley's words came slower and slower as the warmth of the fire and the comfort of home provided

CITY OF SACRAMENTO.

DURING THE GREAT FLOOD OF 1861-1862.

- LEGEND
- 1. The Presley Dunlop Residence
 - 2. The Read Building
 - 3. The John Hunt Residence
 - 4. The Courthouse & State Capital
 - X The First Break: Railroad Levee, 16th & R Sts.



their healing balm.

"I think I'll take you and the boys over to my office for the night. We may be safer there, and I'm sure the Hunts will come. I told John to bring Hattie and the baby."

"Presley, you think of everything. I knew I could trust you. I'm so glad I didn't scold you when you came in as I thought I would."

His shoulders drooped lower and lower and, as his chin finally rested on his chest, Sarah knew it would take more than a blast in a levee to rouse him from his deep sleep.

She moved his head into a more comfortable position against the high back of his chair and gently covered him with a quilt.

"How thankful I am you are here by our fire instead of housed in the State Pavillion," she murmured as she dropped a light kiss on his tousled hair. "Now I must gather up a few things we'll need tonight and prepare the boys for a campout, and we'll want an early supper to fortify us for whatever may come."

When they arrived at Read's Building a few hours later and climbed the stairs, they found the upper floor filled with women and children of all ages, all types and many nationalities. They were overwhelmed by the calamity which had overtaken the city, and the combined wailing of the babies and the chattering of the women was deafening.

Presley left almost at once to engage in the work

of rescue, and Sarah, with the boys at her heels, made her way through the crowd to see what sort of refuse they had found. She was glad to find the big wood-burning cook stove in the back room giving off a welcome heat.

The back door opened onto a wide porch which extended across the entire width of the building. Upon opening the door, she found all the livestock that could be hurried there at a moment's notice had been marooned on the porch.

She saw a calf, a couple of goats, a number of pigs and dogs and cats and several dozen chickens. Each was raising to high heaven the fear and terror with which this strange and uncomfortable surroundings filled him.

Sarah's first impression was that she had unwittingly boarded a second Noah's ark as she encountered the chorus of moos, bleats, grunts, barks and meows of the frightened animals.

Closing the door hastily against as much of the pandemonium as possible, she turned her attention to her fellow voyagers on the troubled waters, and she felt the noise inside was a pretty good second to the outside clamour. She knew something should be done about it, and, as there seemed to be no one else to start, she stepped into the breach.

She looked about to see what she could find to divert the women from their nervous fears, and was glad to discover the men already had brought in a good supply of groceries. Then she went with friendly helpfulness to her companions.

"Let's make coffee and biscuits," she invited. "A little hot food will help us all, especially the men who will be hard at work all night. They will be glad to come for a hot bite if they know where to find it."

The women galvanized into action.

Then when the next weary boatman tied his boat to the bannisters in the lower hall and came up to see how the women were making out, he was greeted by a busy and cheerful group, and the aroma of coffee and hot biscuits. It didn't take long for the first grateful recipients of this hospitality to pass the word along, and a steady stream of wet, hungry men climbed the stairs to Mr. Dunlap's law office to be cheered and fed by the timely service.

In the meantime, John Hunt, thinking of his precious wife and baby, pulled frantically for his home. The sight of people marooned on upper porches and roof tops, of household goods of all sorts floating in every direction and of drowning animals, increased his anxiety, and his panic grew with each pull on the oars.

As a bedraggled doll in a full yellow skirt drifted by, John's heart gave a flip flop, and he quickly feathered an oar to avoid striking the white China face with the wide staring blue eyes. What of his own precious daughter and her new doll with the big blue eyes?

He tried to picture his home, thinking of the high basement and long flight of front stairs which the architect had devised for just such an emergency as this, and he kept turning to look over his shoulder as

he neared his corner to reassure himself that the houses built high as was his own, were still safely above the flood.

A high wave momentarily hid the corner toward which he was pulling and he was forced to give his complete attention to the business in hand.

His anxiety gave way to relief as he saw at last his beloved Hattie standing in the doorway and he forced himself to sing out a wavering, but cheery "Ahoy there" to encourage her and himself as he tied the boat to the porch railing.

His relief was short lived, however, for he found Hattie, clinging to him helplessly and in tears, hysterical with fright.

"John," she sobbed. "The baby, she's gone!"

This was the final blow to a morning of devastating crises. Involuntarily, John's eyes sought the yellow water sucking around the foundations of the house, but he realized this was not the time for him to become unnerved. Hattie needed every ounce of strength he could muster. He half carried her into the house, and said, "Now, let's search. Where have you looked?"

"I've looked everywhere," sobbed Hattie.

"Then, we'll look again together."

They made a thorough search of the parlor, the dining room, the kitchen, the pantry, the little closet under the stairs, and then, although Baby Alice never had climbed the stairs, they went up to the two

bedrooms above.

There was no trace of Alice. John supported Hattie as they came down slowly and entered the dining room where she had last seen the baby as she put the linens into boxes to be taken to the upper story. Neither had the courage to make the last desperate search about the outside of the house.

As Hattie, half fainting, leaned against the sideboard, she felt it tremble, and she looked out the window, thinking the house was moving on its foundations.

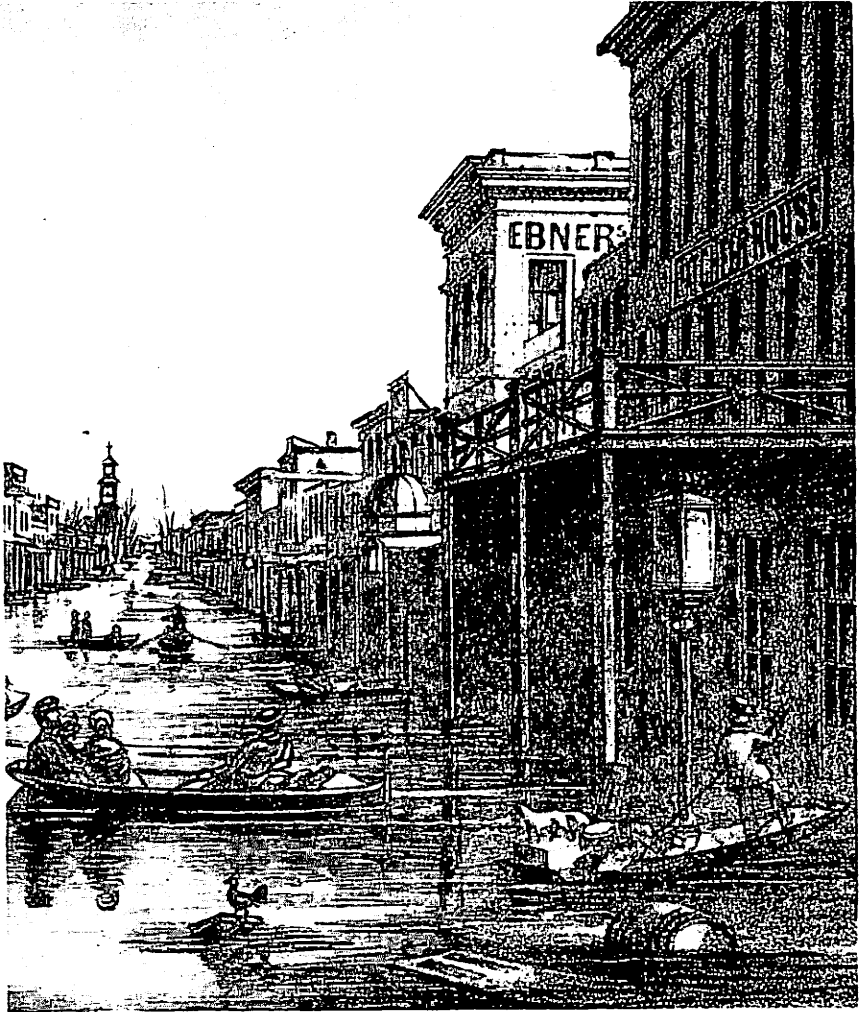
Again she felt the sideboard quiver under her hands.

"John, look!" she screamed. More from instinct than reason she stooped down and opened the door of the little cupboard from which she recently had removed the linens.

There, snuggled in her dark hiding place, was baby Alice.

She had climbed into her little cubby hole after Hattie had removed the last towels, and, finding the spot dark and snug, had taken a nap. Her cheeks were pink, her hair was rumped, but she was in fine spirits and ready for a game. With gasps of happiness, John and Hattie grasped their baby and hugged each other with Alice in their arms.

As they faced the windows into the backyard, they looked out on the little shed where the harvest of pumpkins from the garden had been stored. At that



K STREET FROM FRONT STREET
A. Rosenfeld Lithograph, 1862

BURNETT MILLER COLLECTION
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instant the door of the shed was forced open by the weight of the heavy fruit, and out came a procession of yellow and green globes, dancing and bobbing along in the muddy water. They looked so like a lot of gnomes that involuntarily Hattie and John burst into hysterical laughter, and Hattie continued to laugh and cry.

A moment before they had been so close to tragedy.

John knew action was the best method of helping his Hattie regain her accustomed poise, and action was needed at that moment.

"You gather up some blankets and whatever food the house affords, and I'll see if I can get help in moving some of the furniture," he said. "Pres said to come to the Read Building for the night, and we can probably catch a steamer for San Francisco in the morning."

He stepped to the door and hailed a neighbor on a shaky raft.

"If you'll come in and help me boost up some of this furniture out of reach of the water, we'll take you downtown in our rowboat."

Together the men carried the smaller things upstairs, and raised Hattie's precious piano onto four upturned wood washtubs, then they boarded the rowboat for the trip to higher ground.

In spite of the distress all around them, the meeting between Sarah and Hattie was one of the happiest and most thankful they could recall. Hattie refused to let baby Alice out of her arms, but she followed her sister from one end of the building to the

other, laughing at the animals on the back porch, sampling the biscuits and coffee by the big hot stove, and shedding the happiness that invariably surrounded her on all about her.

As darkness fell over the stricken city, the tumult in the Read Building began to quiet down. The animals on the porch accepted the inevitable until only an occasional throaty wail broke their silence. The crying babies, wrapped in warm blankets, finally went to sleep, and their tired mothers, comforted by the relaxed bodies of their children, slept fitfully, too.

The men who had struggled without stopping all day on their missions of mercy made a last weary trip up the stairs for a last cup of coffee before sinking to the floor in the deep sleep of complete exhaustion.

Within a few days the flood waters receded. Streets were cleared for traffic. Merchants cleaned out their stores and shovelled off the boardwalks and were ready to resume business.

But a month later the weather continued to hold its share of headlines in the newspapers, refusing to be crowded off the front pages even with the news of the arrival in town of the State Legislators.

The Alta Californian of January 10, 1862, printed in full the inaugural address of Governor Leland Stanford, but it also devoted a column on the front page to the fact that the rain had been renewed at an early hour, the waters pouring down with a volume and violence unprecedented.

The wires from Strawberry and Placerville, from

Chico and Oroville, from Marysville and Stockton all reported rain. There was no respite, and the rivers continued to rise.

The Daily Alta editorialized, "We know that a week's fine weather would put everything to rights.

But the week's fine weather didn't materialize, and the courage and energy of the people of Sacramento proved unequal to the force of waters in the rivers. The levees, weakened in the December flood, melted away under the continued downpour.

This time, the inhabitants were somewhat better prepared for the flood that inundated the city. There was something almost gay about the way they crowded balconies and porches and waved to the throngs passing in boats. Having once survived the deluge, they knew their strength.

Merchants raised their goods onto high platforms. Stock owners drove their cattle to the high ground along I Street and Poverty Ridge and Whiskey Hill. The large two story houses were opened to the neighborhood, and the women and children were moved to the upper stories while the men did the cooking, walking raised planks from the stairways to the kitchen ranges which had been set up on bricks to keep the water out of the fire boxes.

On January 22nd the levee of China Slough, near the Capitol at 7th and I, fell to the rising waters. With all streets navigable by boats, the Legislature, after heating debate, voted to adjourn to San Francisco for the remainder of the session.

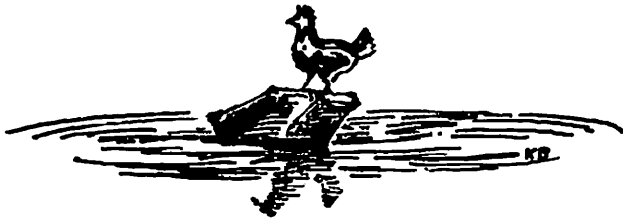
By ten o'clock the next morning, both chambers were bare, with the exception of General Sutter's portrait in the Assembly and General Washington's portrait in the Senate. All other furnishings had been removed to San Francisco.

Venice never presented a livelier scene than did the streets of the water-bound city, as the Legislators swarmed the Front Street levee with their personal effects and boarded the Chrysopolis for the Bay.

Craft of all descriptions traversed the liquid thoroughfares, here a raft freighted with shivering stock from a submerged ranch, there a jolly boat filled with ladies and young men, scudding along, grounding for a moment on the plank crosswalks or bumping another boat. An occasional sloop, rigged with mast and sail came inland to see, and to be seen.

Yolo County at last was getting its share of the overflow. Farm houses were covered and the plains were navigable for small steamers and all sorts of river craft.

When Presley and Sarah looked out of their window to see a full rigged schooner in their own front yard, and the Coast Range the only substantial piece of land visible, Presley decided he had better move his family to the Bay where there were no rivers.



About the Author

Alice Madeley Matthews is a true Sacramentan. She was born in her mother's birthplace...a two story brick house built in 1860 on 7th Street between F and G. It was directly across the street from the elegant Charles E. Crocker Victorian mansion.

She was graduated from Sacramento High School (as were her father and mother) and from Mills College. Her marriage to Herbert Matthews in 1921 took her to Mill Valley, California, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Glencoe, Illinois before she returned to Sacramento in 1940. Mr. and Mrs. Matthews, together with nine families, founded the Sacramento Country Day School. She enjoys writing her memories and has written numerous articles in the Sacramento Union as well as the introduction to Vanishing Victorians.

Acknowledgements

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Sacramento Museum & History Division, with special thanks to Stephen Helmich, Susan Searcy & James Henley

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