

**Our Ocean Backyard — *Santa Cruz Sentinel* columns by Gary Griggs, Distinguished Professor of Earth and Planetary Sciences, UC Santa Cruz.**

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Love Creek—Mountains of Mud**



*1982 Love Creek slide. A house buried by mud and the remains of another house destroyed by the event*

Love Creek, nestled in the hills above Ben Lomond, was the site of the deadliest landslide and mud flow in California history during the very wet winter of 1982. The creek with the strange name memorializes Harry Love, also known as the “Black Knight of Zayante”. He was the leader of the California Rangers that were created to hunt down the fabled bandit, Joaquin Murrieta. Love is generally credited with killing Murrieta and then displaying his head and hand preserved in a brandy-filled jar, although there are still debates among historians about whose head was actually in the jar.

Harry Love, born in Vermont in 1818, went to sea as a cabin boy but was soon shipwrecked. Surviving that episode, and at the age of 13 he fought in the Blackhawk Indian War of 1831 with Abraham Lincoln. A few years later he served

as a Texas Ranger, and then in 1850 he arrived in San Francisco on a ship, where he left almost immediately for the mother lode to make his fortune.

He was unsuccessful as a gold miner, however, and after adventures elsewhere in the state, he arrived in Boulder Creek in 1854 where he bought a large tract of land. Harry met an unfortunate end, but Love Creek became better known than Captain Harry Love in early January 1982.

November and December of 1981 were monsoonal in the San Lorenzo Valley, with Lompico, Ben Lomond and Boulder Creek receiving 33 to 39 inches of rain in these two months. This contrasts sharply with this past December, which was the 2<sup>nd</sup> driest on record with Santa Cruz receiving one-sixth of an inch of rain.

The downpours of late 1981 continued into January 1982, when a catastrophic storm literally sat over the greater San Francisco Bay area from January 3-5. The clouds opened up and dropped as much as half of the average annual rainfall over much of the area in just 30 hours.

The 24-hour total for Santa Cruz was 8.23 inches. This exceeded any other 24-hour rainfall measurement since record keeping began in 1891. 8.23 inches is the same as what we have received in the entire first four months of this year's rainy season (October 1, 2017 to January 31, 2018).

Santa Cruz was on the low end of the January 1982 storm rainfall. Ben Lomond recorded 11.5 inches, Boulder Creek got 12.7 inches, and Lompico, topped them both with 15.5 inches, all in just 24 hours.

With 33-39 inches of rain in November and December, followed by 11.5 to 15.5 inches in 24 hours, hillsides in the San Lorenzo Valley, and throughout the San Francisco Bay area, began to turn to mush. Soils were now saturated, lost all their strength and turned to a muddy liquid. Slopes failed throughout the greater San Francisco Bay area with over 18,000 landslides triggered that were quickly transformed into debris or mud flows.

The mountainside above Harry Love's Creek was at ground zero for rainfall. It was also very steep. An impermeable layer of shale that sloped 25-30 degrees downhill towards Love Creek lay beneath about 30 feet of soil and weathered bedrock. In the very earlier hours of January 5, 1982, the rain in the valley had finally stopped and the stars had come out. Then it happened.

About 600,000 cubic yards of hillside, liquefied by the rain of the past 30 hours and the two months before that, turned to mud and started down the mountain. 600,000 cubic yards is a lot of mud and would fill about 60,000 dump trucks.

Nine houses and ten people were buried that early morning as a freight train of mud, rock and trees descended all the way to Love Creek, where it formed a dam and ultimately a small lake. There was no warning and no time to escape.

There was a single survivor, Karen Wallingford, who wanted to die as she lay beneath the wreckage of her Love Creek home. With her head and legs pinned by fallen debris, she thought about her family in Massachusetts. "It wasn't scary. You lie there and two things are going to happen: You're either going to live or you're going to die. That's it," said Wallingford in a Sentinel interview.

Karen and her roommates, Vonna Blount and Gene Rumrill, were like a family. They lived in their mountain home sharing a love of the outdoors and wildlife. "Our idea of a good time was to light a fire in the fireplace and watch an old movie," said Wallingford. Blount and Rumrill, both active in the UC Extension wilderness program, planned to be married in a month later. They both died in the mudflow.

The mud and debris flows in Santa Cruz County alone during that disastrous January storm led to the ten deaths in the Love Creek slide and 12 others. Twenty-two lives were lost in all. The same number of fatalities as in the Montecito mudflows, almost exactly 36 years later. And now the concerns of another drought are already surfacing.