

# **THE GREAT FLOOD VENTURA COUNTY**

**January 1969 February**



**\$3.00**

Photography by  
**DAN POUSH**



Dan Poush, in his six years as chief photographer of the Star-Free Press, has brought the kind of photo-journalism that is exciting to readers and to newspapermen alike. He is an able craftsman, artistically talented, and has an unusual perception to the news. So when the product of his craftsmanship reaches the newsroom it customarily demands bold, oversize display. As a consequence, The Star-Free Press was adjudged by the California Press Photographers Association as the newspaper that did the best photo-journalism reporting in the state in 1967, one of the many awards that Dan Poush, who is only 27, has won for his newspaper and himself. His coverage of the twin Ventura County floods of 1969, reviewed in this book, was a typical exemplification of the Poush art with lens and light, and one that surely adds to his stature among the West's news photographers.

— JULIUS GIUS, editor, The Star-Free Press

#### **PILOT CREDITS**

Airplane — Bob Stapleton

Helicopter — Grady Ragsdale, Jr.

#### **PRODUCTION**

Writing — Russ Pyle

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## **THE GREAT FLOOD: VENTURA COUNTY**

**JANUARY - FEBRUARY 1969**

**A DAN Poush PUBLICATION**

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# JANUARY . . .

By RUSS PYLE

The story of Ventura County's great floods of 1969 began as simply as a gently falling rain on Saturday, January 18.

It began in Sespe Creek and ended many miles downstream where the Santa Clara River flows into the Pacific Ocean.

During the month and a week, between the Sespe and the Pacific, Ventura County was to know flood devastation as few Southern California counties have ever known it. Thirteen people would lose their lives. Home, boat, crop and equipment damage would total millions of dollars. The county would be declared a disaster area.

That gentle rain of Saturday, January 18, grew in magnitude. A steady downpour fell throughout the county on Sunday. By Tuesday 11 inches of rain had been recorded in the City of Ventura. More than 20 inches were measured at Lake Matilija, 13 inches at Lake Casitas and 14 inches at Oak View and the Upper Ojai Valley.

Another devastating storm would arrive the following Friday.

It was on Saturday, January 18, that Scott Eckersley, 28, a house parent at Live Oak School, swung his camper around at Sespe Hot Springs and started out. He had planned to camp the weekend but realized that if he waited too long, the rains would make the road impassable. He waited too long. Two-and-a-half-miles down the road, 15 miles above Lion's Camp, Eckersley's camper bogged down.

The next morning it was raining hard. Eckersley hiked down the road and found Robert Samples and

six youths from Canoga Park huddled in the back of their truck. They, too, had come to camp the weekend in the Sespe and become stranded by the storm.

The group broke into a cabin and spent the night. It was in this cabin that they were discovered Monday evening by a three-man rescue team. The team included Seabee Chief Petty Officer Robert Sears, driving a tractor; Deputy Sheriff Chester (Chico) Larson and Forest Ranger James Greenhill. Before daybreak Tuesday, all but Eckersley would be swept to their deaths in the raging Sespe after the tractor's motor stalled at midstream.

It was Wednesday before full details of the Sespe tragedy were known and another major storm was on the way.

On Saturday, January 25, residents throughout Ventura County awoke to complete devastation — and for many, complete isolation. Santa Paula, Ojai and Fillmore were cut off from the rest of the county.

Santa Ana Valley recorded 8 inches of rain in a 24-hour period. Ojai had 6.20 inches, Matilija 9.15, and Fillmore 5.75. Homes in the Ventura River basin and Santa Clara River basin were flooded. Homes along San Antonio Creek and Santa Paula Creek, threatened during the earlier rainstorm, were demolished by the second storm. Ventura's Marina was extensively damaged by floodwaters from the Santa Clara River.

Three more deaths were attributed to the storm, including Mrs. Jeannette LaBelle, who was swept to her death after the San Antonio Creek caved in her home.

And then it all ended, as simply as it began, with a gently falling rain.



# Death in Raging Sespe River



This is the bulldozer 6 boys and 4 adults rode to their death in the raging Sespe late the night of Jan. 20. Photo was taken two days after the Sespe flood waters crested.

One of the five bodies recovered two days after 10 people were swept off a bulldozer in the raging Sespe.



Pieces of clothing high in tree (arrows) indicate how high the Sespe flowed on night of tragedy.



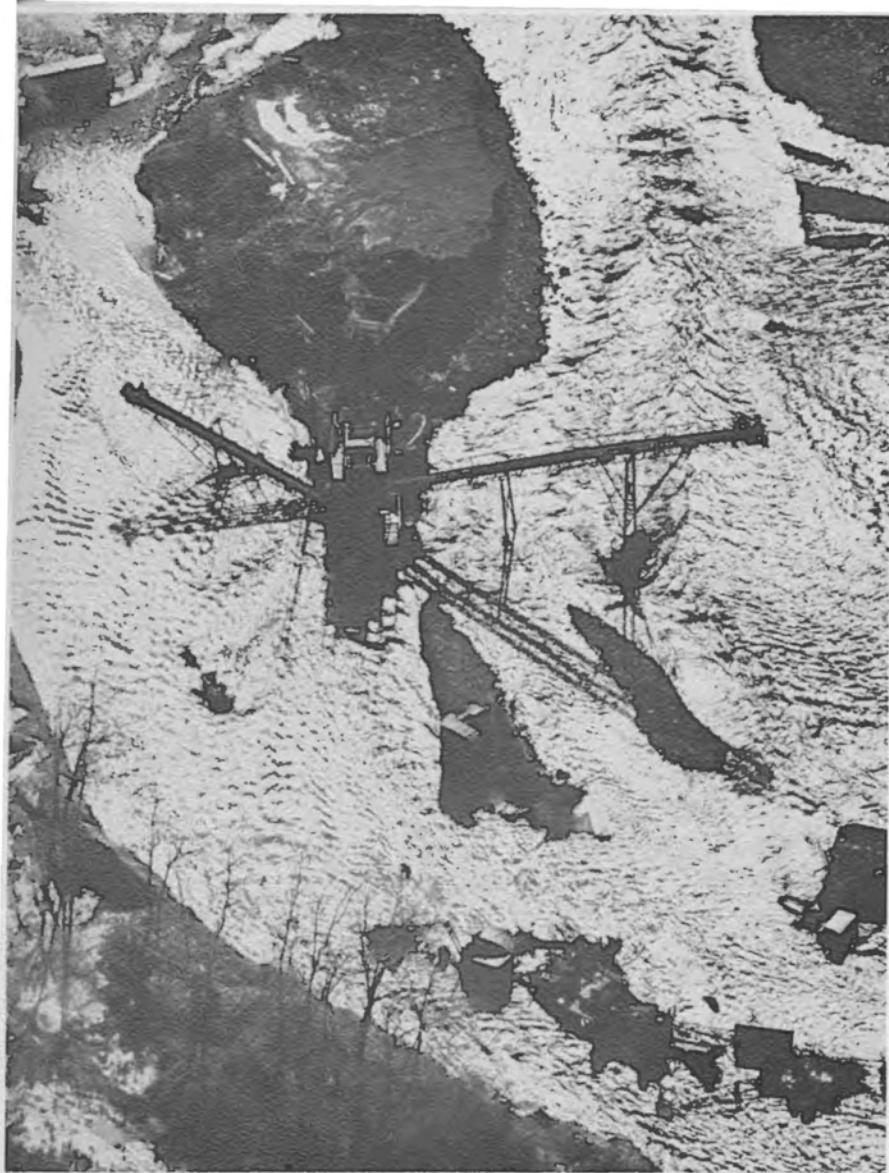




Clifford Larson, grief-stricken father of deputy sheriff Chester Larson, is consoled by Ventura County Sheriff William Hill, second from right, after hearing news that his son had perished in the Sespe,

At right members of the Ojai rescue unit wrap body prior to removing it from the Sespe waters. The victim was one of five bodies recovered a few days after 10 perished in flood waters. A sixth body has since been recovered, 50 miles downstream in the Santa Clara River bed, near Ventura.





The rampaging Ventura River also took a heavy toll during January's storm. A rock plant at Casitas Springs, above left; the Rancho Trailer Park at Casitas Spring, above right, and a home along Riverside Drive in Live Oak Acres, below, fell victim to the river.







County crews work late into the night to sandbag C. J. Salhus home in Live Oak Acres.

Clifford Hobb of the Maricopa Highway in Ojai found a virtual river at his door when a storm drain clogged.

. . . And things were not any better inside. Hobb was confronted with nearly two feet of water throughout his house at peak of storm.

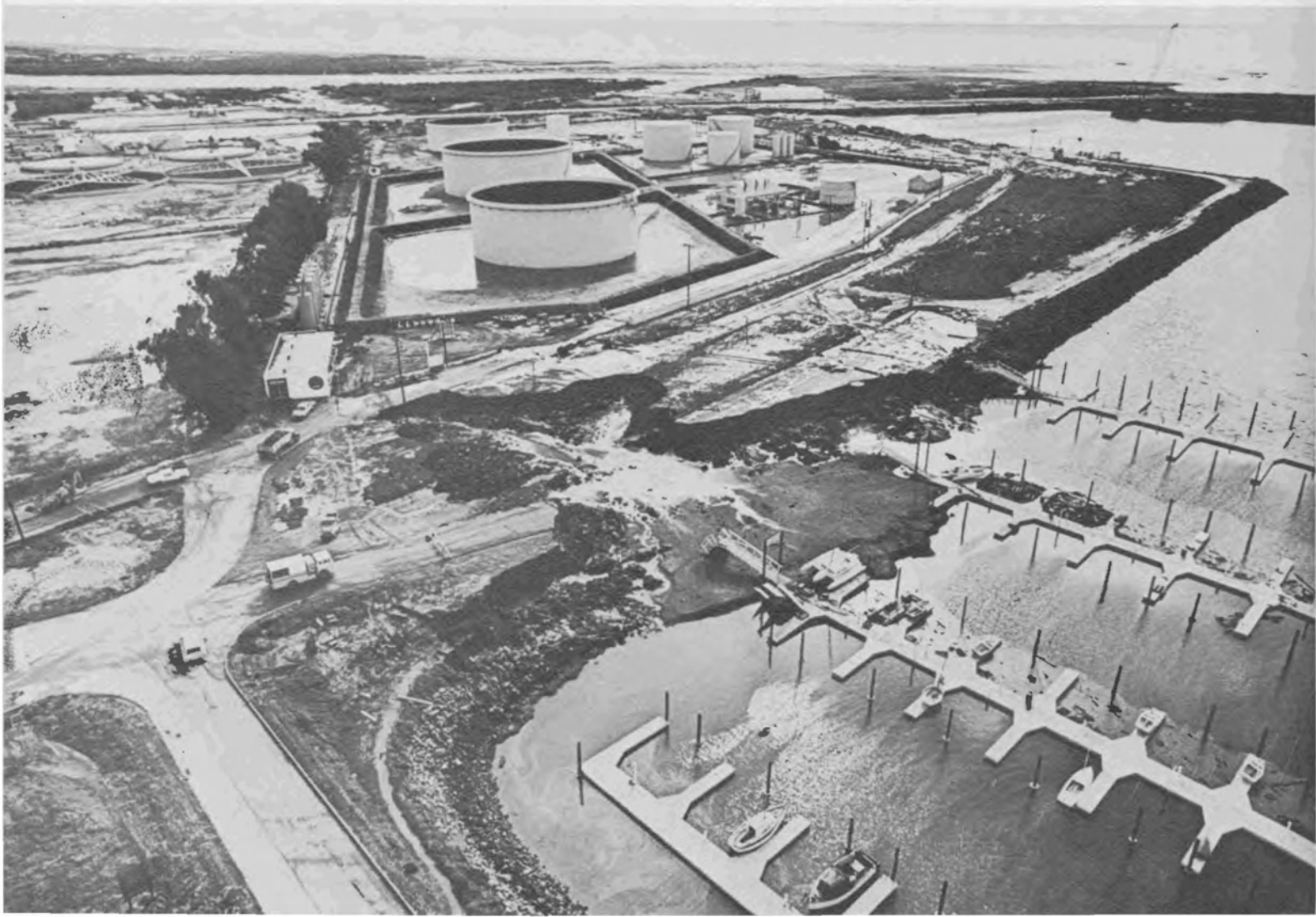






The curious and the heartbroken came to view damage at the Ventura Marina after the heavy January storms. Flood-

waters of the Santa Clara River severely damaged the dock areas. However, the worst was yet to come. A February storm demolished the area.





January's storm brought many traffic problems. A policeman, above, routes traffic around the flood-damaged intersection of Channel Islands Boulevard and Victoria Avenue in

Oxnard. Below, a Highway Patrolman and ambulance driver help an injured Michael B. Crane, Ventura, from his wrecked pickup truck on Highway 101 between San Jon Road and California Street in Ventura.







Helicopter pilot, Grady Ragsdale, Jr., watches torrents of water flow through the notch cut in the top of Matilija Dam.

It took weeks to pick up the pieces in Matilija Canyon after January's storm and it was all to do over again in late February. Mr. and Mrs. Paul Williams, right and second from

left, found their dresser far downstream after their home washed away. Joining in the search were Jim Stewart, left, who saved his home, and John Welch, second from right, whose home was also spared.







A giant earthslide buried Matilija Canyon Road and damaged several cabins in the area. Nearly two months later there was still no access to the canyon.



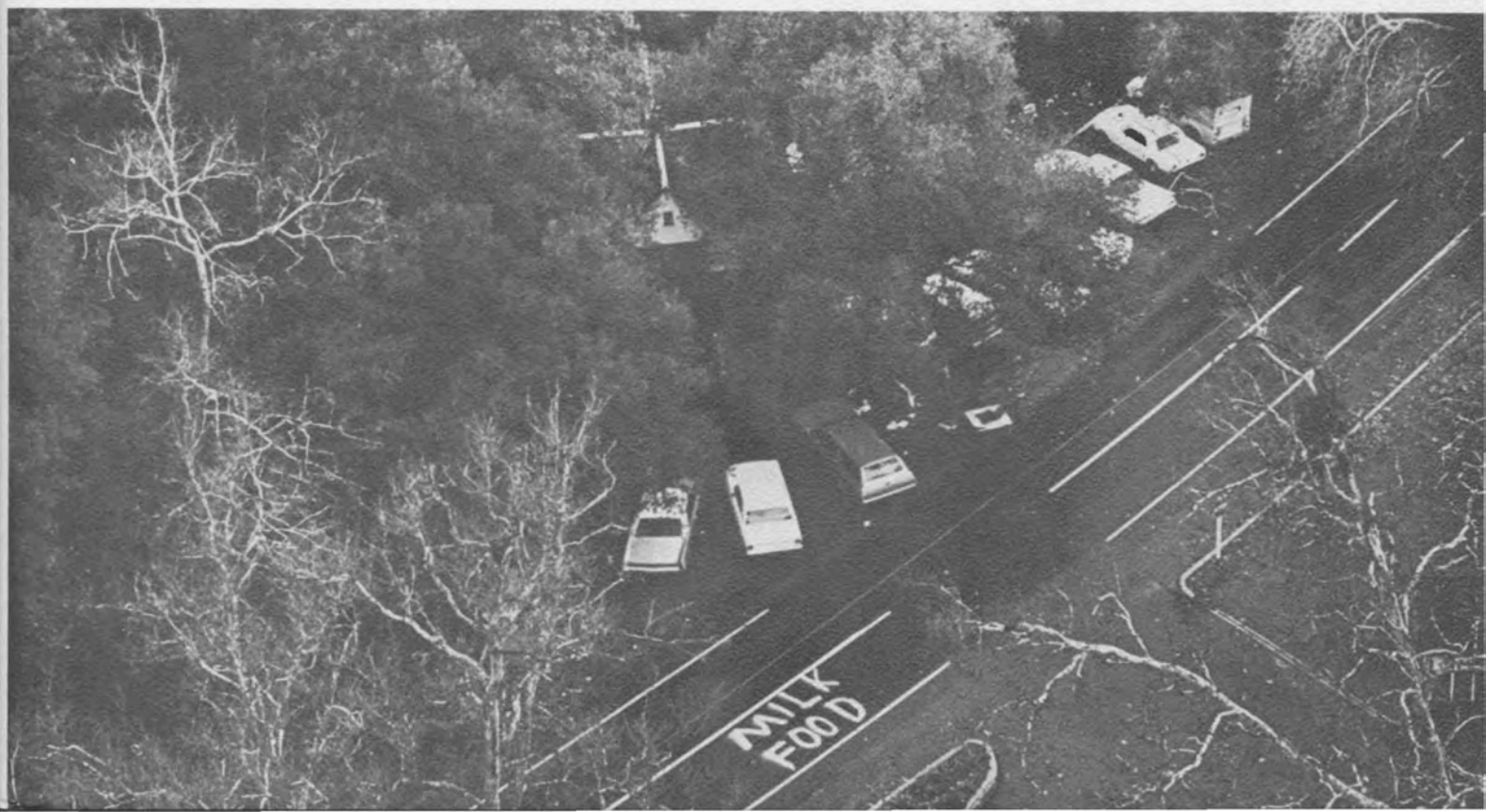
January's storm showed no mercy, be it canyon cabins or mountain home. The Al Smith residence on Maricopa Road, Ojai, was featured as the Ventura Star-Free Press Home of the Week in June, 1968. January, 1969, at left, it was in ruins.





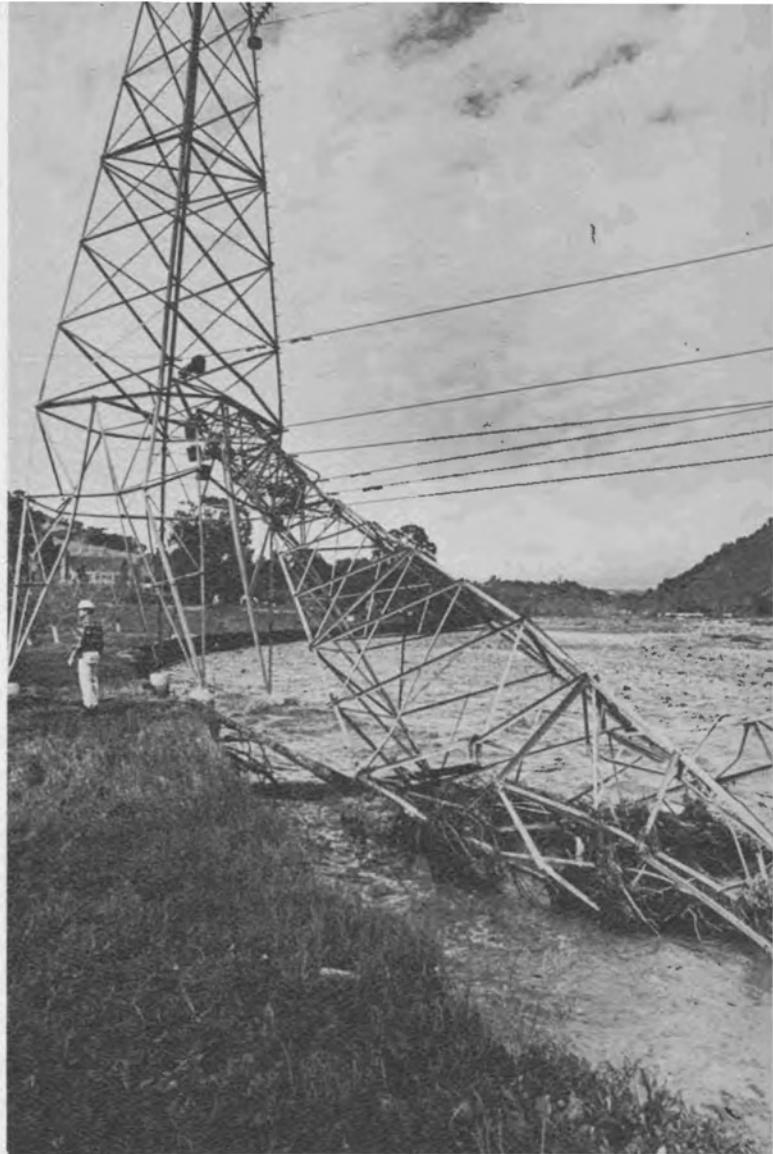
Portions of Highway 33, at left, were all but obliterated by January's storm. Parts of the highway which escaped raging river waters were severely damaged by rock slides.

A call for help went out from stranded residents of Wheelers Hot Springs, below. After January storms, all areas north of Matilija Road were cut off. Food was delivered by helicopter.

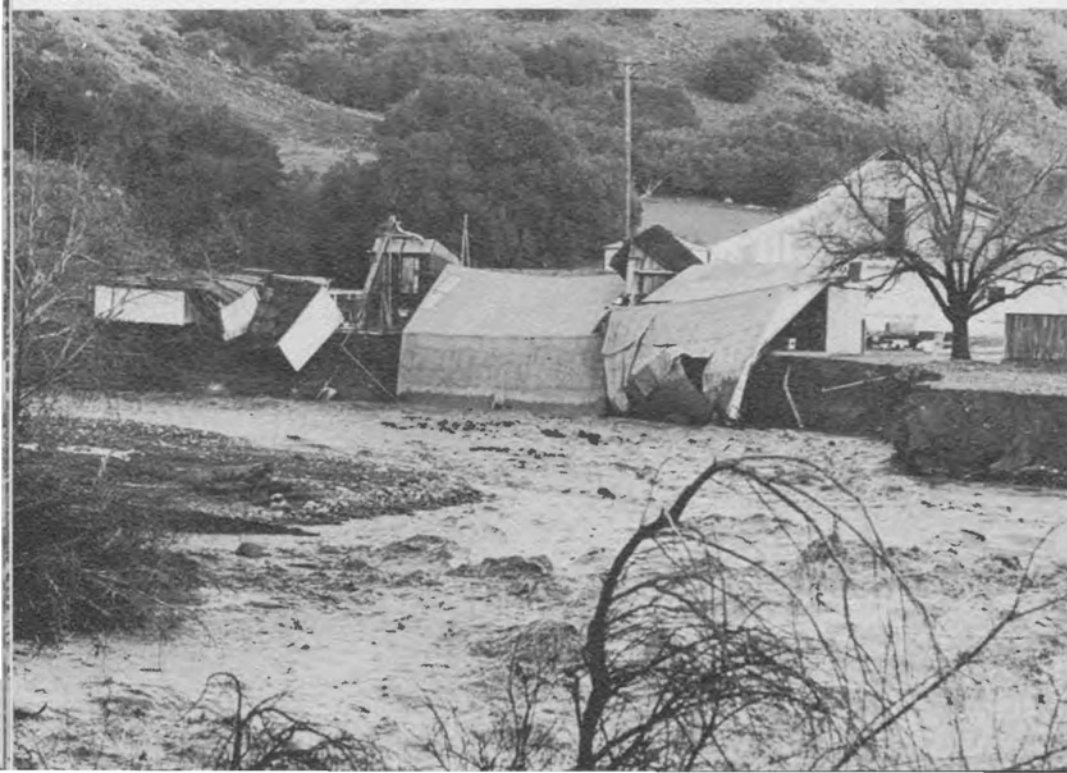




# FOSTER PARK



Southern California Edison Company power lines across the Ventura River at Santa Ana Road fell victim to January's storm. At left, a smashed car rests against a Foster Park telephone pole where it was hurled by flood waters.



Rancho Dos Rios on Creek Road, at left, suffered severe damage as San Antonio Creek waters ran wild. A storage shed was cut in two and toppled into the creek as storm waters ate away at the banks.



Three homes in Creek Road area were left in shambles when river waters roared out of control.




San Antonio Creek waters buried the Charles LaBelle home in the Creek Road area and swept Mrs. Jeannette LaBelle, 39, to her death.


Jack Hagans rides across San Antonio Creek in a cable chair at right. The demolished home of Dan Demaree is in the background. Three homes in this area were destroyed during January's storm.







An aerial photo shows home of Glen Anlauf along Santa Paula Creek virtually buried by mud. Note the high water of Santa Paula Creek in the background.



The ground view, below, shows full extent of the damage. Glen Anlauf uses a bulldozer in an effort to free his home from the storm's ravages. Mud six feet deep covered the yard.





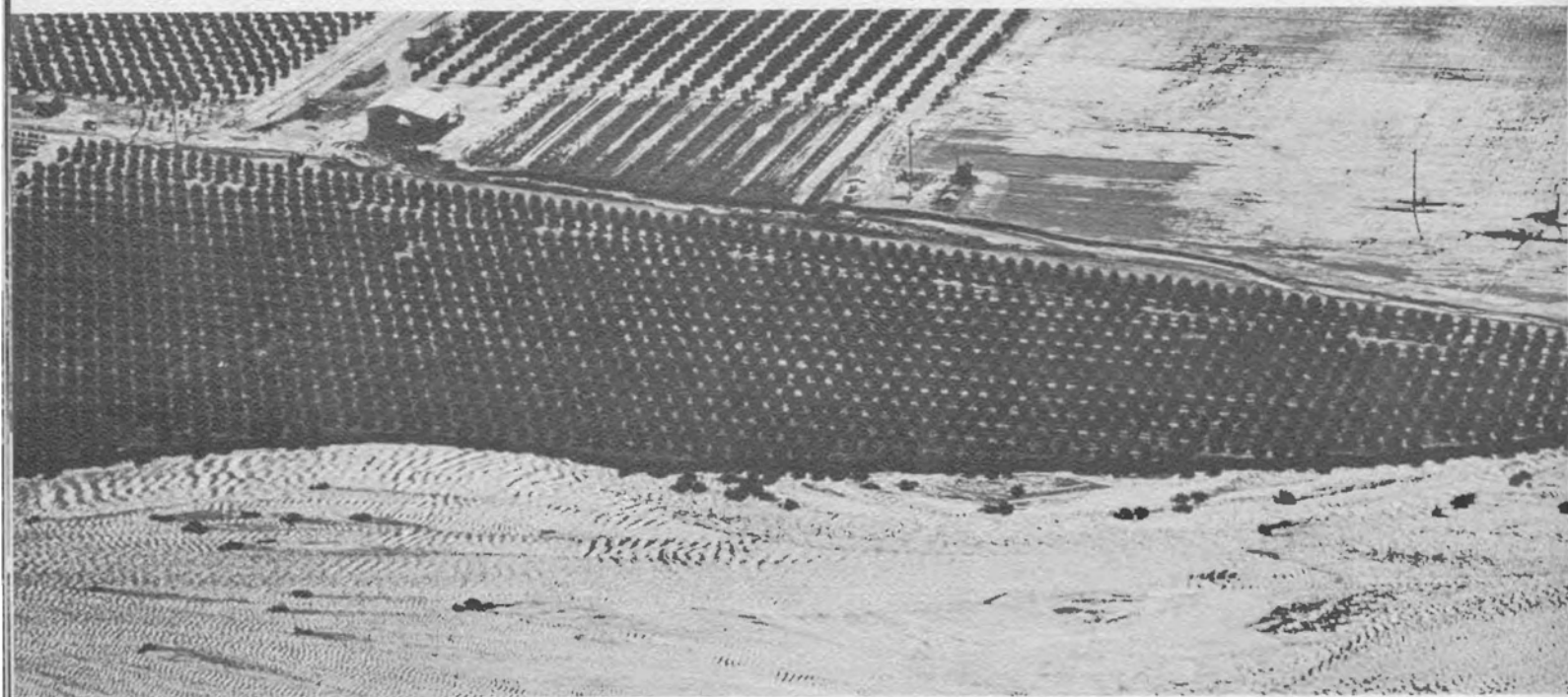
The Willard Bridge over the Santa Clara River in Santa Paula was left in ruins by January's storm. When the bridge went out on Jan. 25, it helped to isolate the city of Santa Paula. Residents were marooned for about five hours.



The Highway 150 bridge that spanned Santa Paula Creek near the entry to the Ferndale Ranch at Sulphur Mountain Springs did not quite make connections after January's raging storm. It will take months to repair damaged roads.



The Creek Road home of Ralph Copus was cut in two and ripped from its foundation by overflowing San Antonio Creek. The dark area of house shows where once the fireplace and chimney were attached.



Bridge at junction of Old Telegraph Road and Grand Avenue in Fillmore, left, was washed out during January storm, cutting off the bridge approaches and Southern Pacific Railroad route to Newhall. Below, flood waters cut a wide swath through a county citrus grove. Crop damage from floods ran into millions of dollars.



Ventura Keys residents stared in disbelief at the debris from up river which washed into their channels during the January storms. A new threat was just around the corner. A giant oil slick created by a leaking offshore Union Oil well.



Industry also suffered. Chem-O-lene's plant under construction on the Ventura Avenue below was demolished by the overflowing Ventura River.







These homes in Foster Park which escaped the rerouting of the Ojai Freeway were severely damaged in January's storm. The homes, above, were located between the railroad and the Ventura River channel. Below, water is pumped

from West Foods mushroom plant property near the Santa Clara River. At least five cars were swept from the parking lot into deep water by January's storm. Property damage was estimated at \$300,000.



# THEN CAME FEBRUARY . . .

By RUSS PYLE

There was almost a hint of spring in the air as January turned to February and Ventura County slowly dried out from what many oldtimers termed "one of its five worst storms."

Only the splintered canyon cabins and flood-damaged river basin homes served as reminders of January's flood. Occasionally conversation would drift to that "terrible tragedy in the Sespe."

It was only natural that the storm should be quickly forgotten by most. A new danger approached. A Union Oil Company offshore well had begun leaking. As the giant oil slick drifted toward Ventura's coastline, January's flood damages were pushed aside in a battle to save the beaches and wildlife.

And then came February's flood.

On the night of Monday, February 24, 4,000 residents of Santa Paula were evacuated as the Santa Paula Creek jumped its banks. In Fillmore, 400 fled their homes. The Ojai Valley evacuated 500.

And in a final burst of fury, the great flood of 1969 claimed the Ventura Marina.

The ending was as ironic as the beginning. While most Venturans slept the morning of Tuesday, February 25, the high-running Santa Clara River shifted its course not far from where it empties into the ocean and virtually wiped out the Marina. The multi-million dollar pleasure craft basin was turned into a scene of complete chaos with tons of water, debris and mud tearing loose boats, slips and buildings, hurtling them oceanward.

Crews worked around-the-clock to repair levees along the Santa Clara River. It was feared that most of the City of Oxnard would have to be evacuated if the rains continued. Fortunately, a predicted heavy storm did not materialize.

It was not until early March that the final damage from the January and February storms was recorded. A giant earthslide at the Getty Oil Co. lease off Ventura Avenue caused an estimated \$1 million damages.

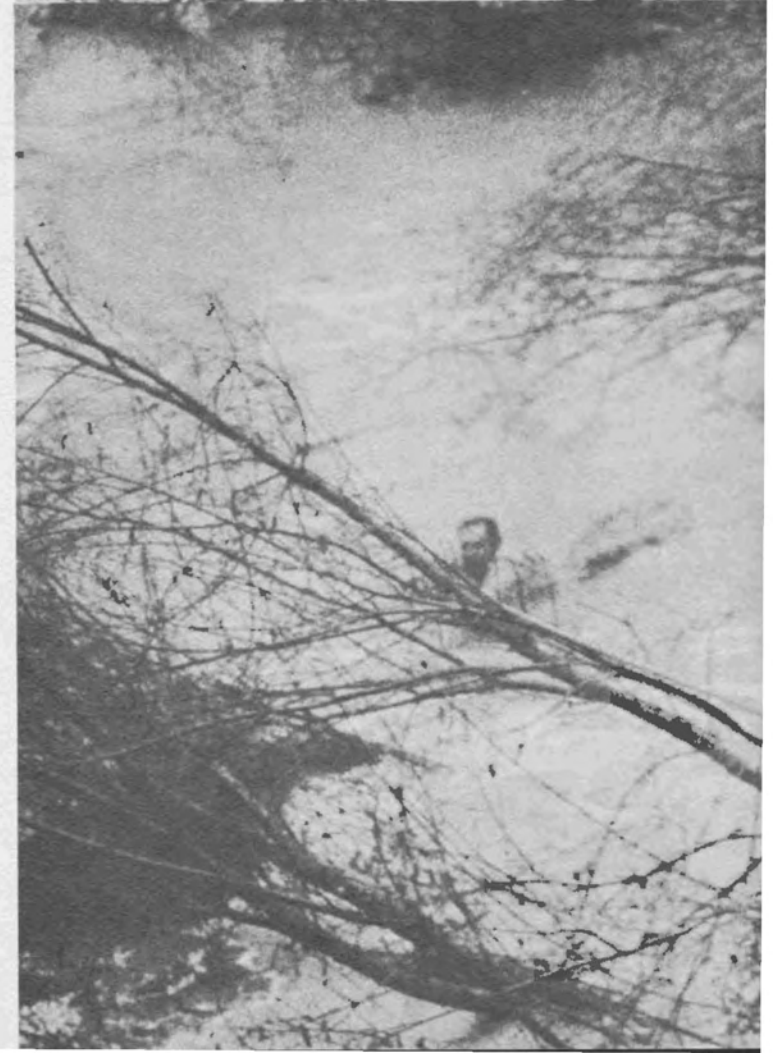
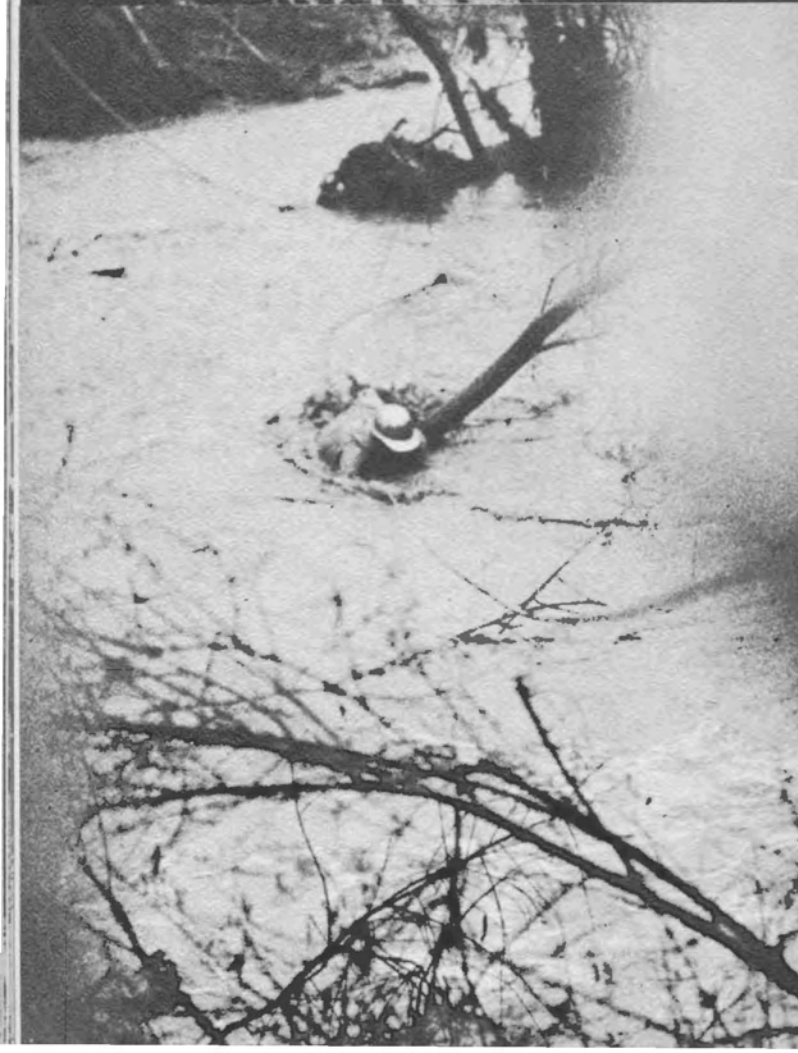
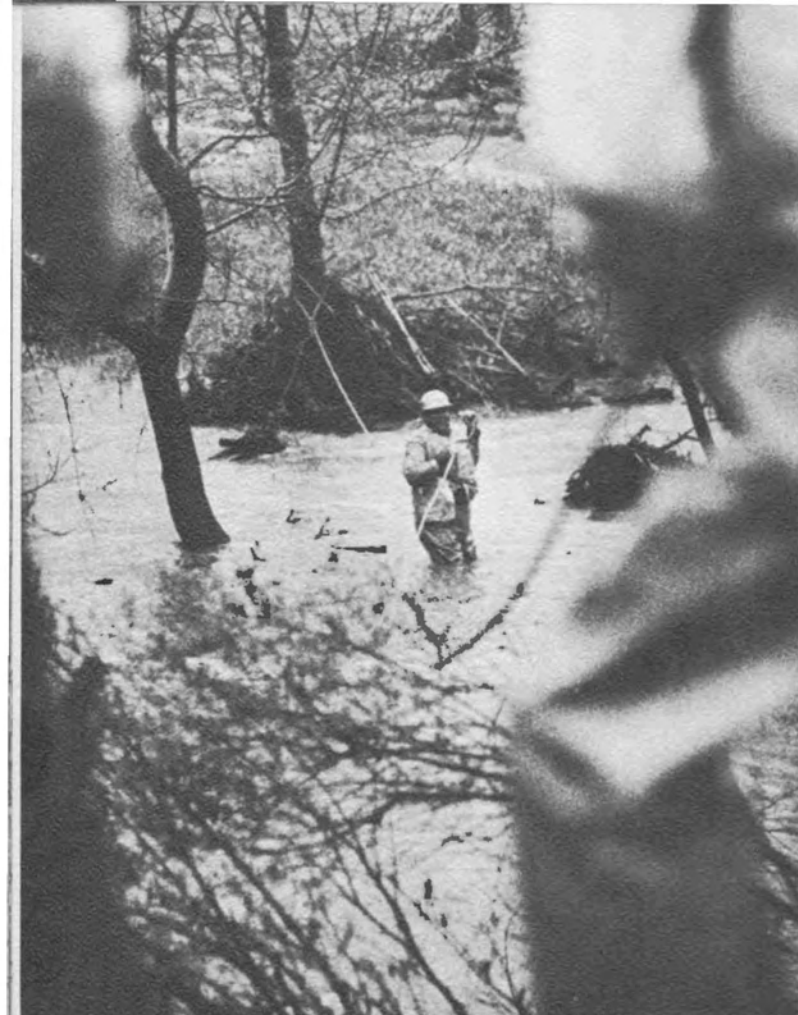
And a hint of spring was once more in the air.













## RESCUE

Bill Jones, a Ventura heavy equipment operator, was working in the Casitas Springs area of the Ventura River to clear January's flood damage when February's storm arrived. Jones was operating a skip loader on a dike when the river rose rapidly and trapped him on a small island. Fellow workmen and sheriff's deputies flipped him a line and dragged him from the raging river. Bill Jones' eyes tell the story as he walks safely on dry ground at last.

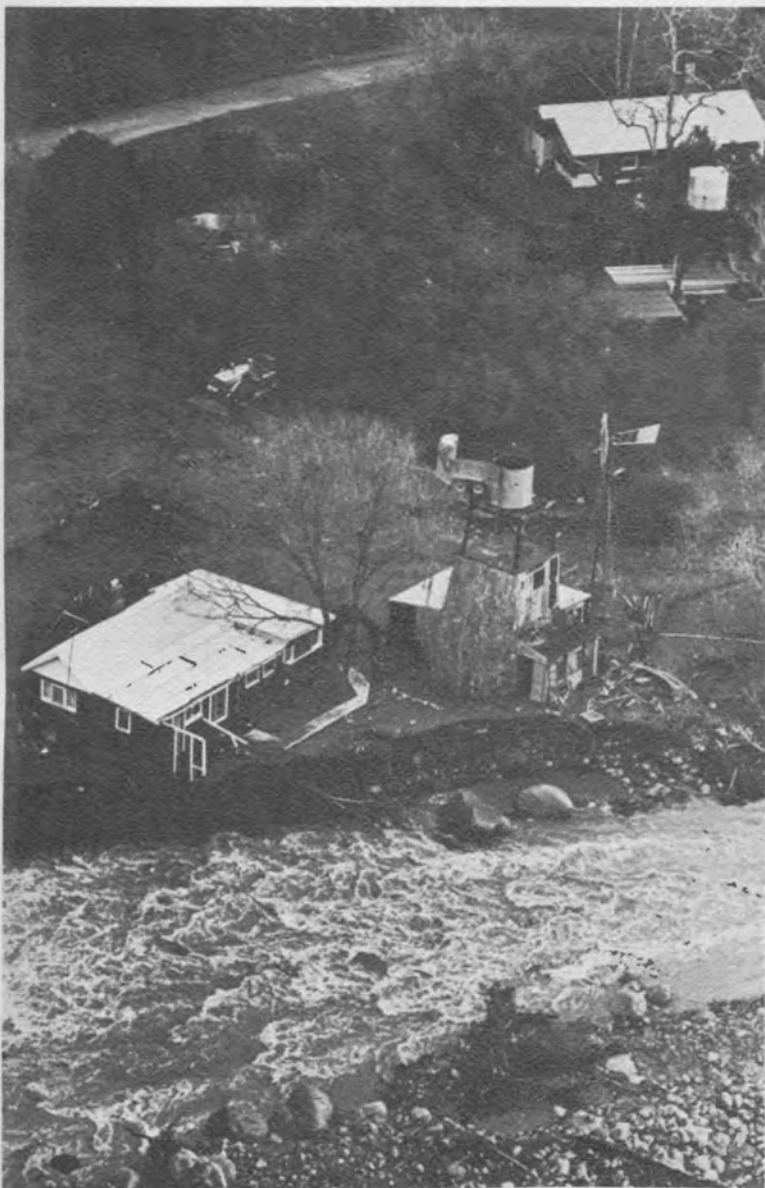






Crews with heavy equipment work far into the night, above, to save Casitas Springs from the rising Ventura River during February's storm. The river had already washed out the Ojai Railroad line. The Art Barn in Live Oak Acres, at left, is undermined by the Ventura River. Below, Ventura County Sheriff's Deputy Jack Hughes, left, and Deputy Dennis Lindermann, right, assist Harvey Richards, 83, to a waiting patrol car. Richards, a resident of Live Oak Acres, had just undergone a series of three cancer operations





**AFTER FEBRUARY . . .** January's storm left the Matilija Canyon cabin of Ventura auto dealer Dick Hughes dangerously on the edge of Matilija Creek. After the February storm, Hughes looks at where his cabin once stood. Below, a six-room, year-around home in Matilija Canyon is left in ruins by February's rains.







The Robinson cabin in Matilija Creek was severely damaged during February's storm and the car demolished. The owner of the cabin and car had been a canyon resident for only two months.

Broken boards and broken glass is all that remains of this canyon hideaway, below, which fell victim to water of Matilija Creek.





A man who risked his life in an attempt to save his boat almost lost both life and boat at the Ventura Marina. Above (arrow) he signals for help after he fails to save boat torn loose from its Marina slip. He and three other men were

eventually removed from the power boat which later was battered to pieces. Below, yachts are pounded into rubble at the mouth of the Marina after being washed out of slips by the overflowing Santa Clara River,







All hands turned to at the Ventura Marina when flood waters came in February. Friends of an absent yachtsman struggle to free his boat and sail it from the Marina before it became

trapped by mud. Aerial photo below shows how the Santa Clara River jumped its banks and cut a 100-yard-wide swath (arrow) into the Marina.

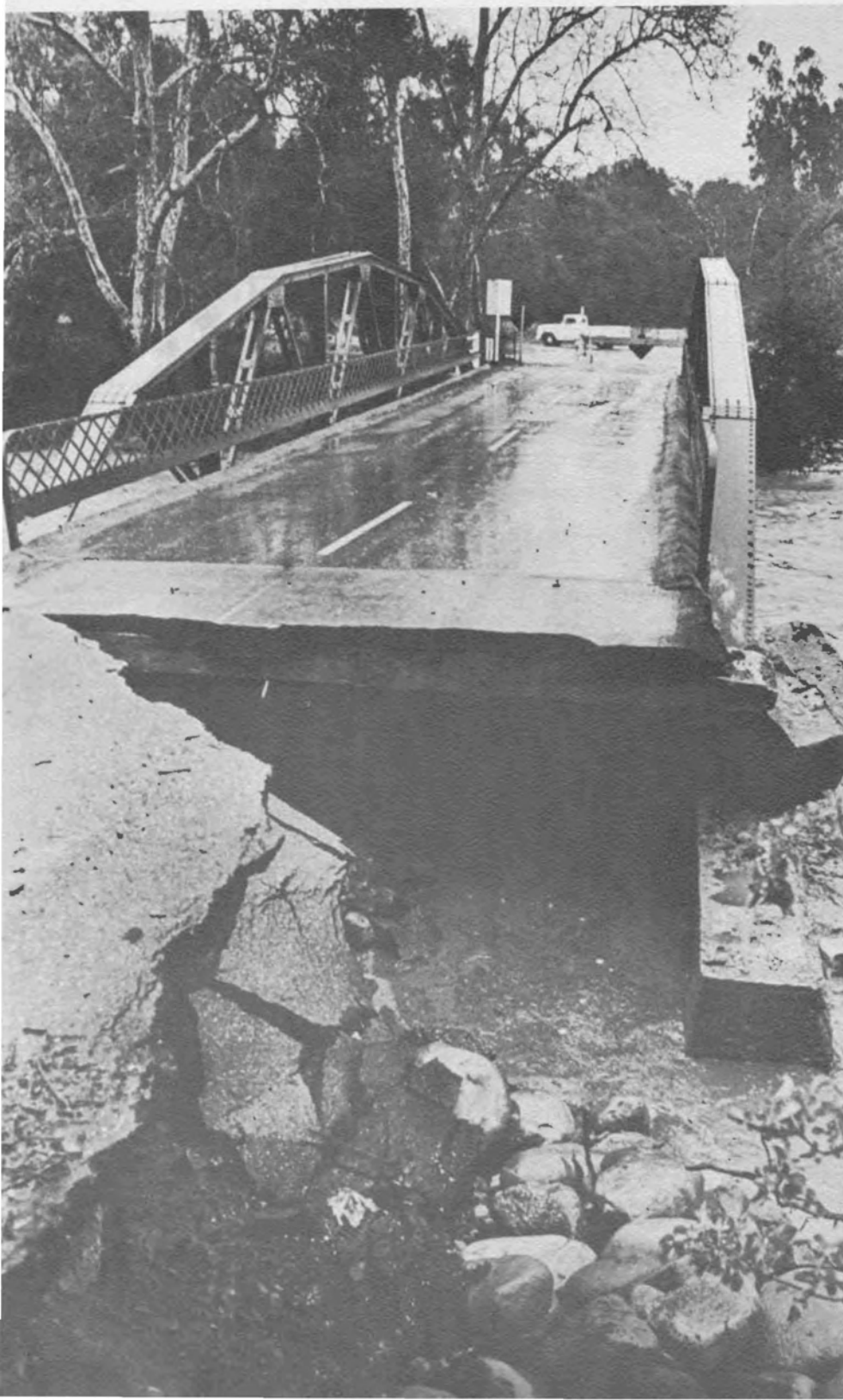




Ventura's new Olivas Park Golf Course, severely damaged by January storms, was wiped out in February. Santa Clara River water,  $4\frac{1}{2}$  feet deep, rampages through the pro shop and restaurant. Below, channels up to eight feet deep are cut through the golf course by waters which overflowed the Santa Clara River. In the foreground is the Olivas Park road and the driveway into the parking lot. The course will have to be completely rebuilt.







Red Cross workers make final check for the night on Ventura River basin evacuees at De Anza Junior High School on Ventura Avenue. Red Cross representatives worked around the clock during both January and February storms to make evacuees as comfortable as possible. At left, a bridge on Creek Road near the intersection of Country Club Drive, Ojai, stands as silent testimony to the fury of the record-breaking storms. Below, Sisar Creek jumps its banks and wiped out a wide section of Highway 150 north of Santa Paula.





An oil well up-river from Saticoy became the victim of the rising Santa Clara River. This aerial photo was made after the river had peaked and started to recede.

The Highway 118 bridge at Saticoy withstood the January storm, but failed to survive February's onslaught. Motorists, who suddenly discovered they could drive no further, examine the damage.



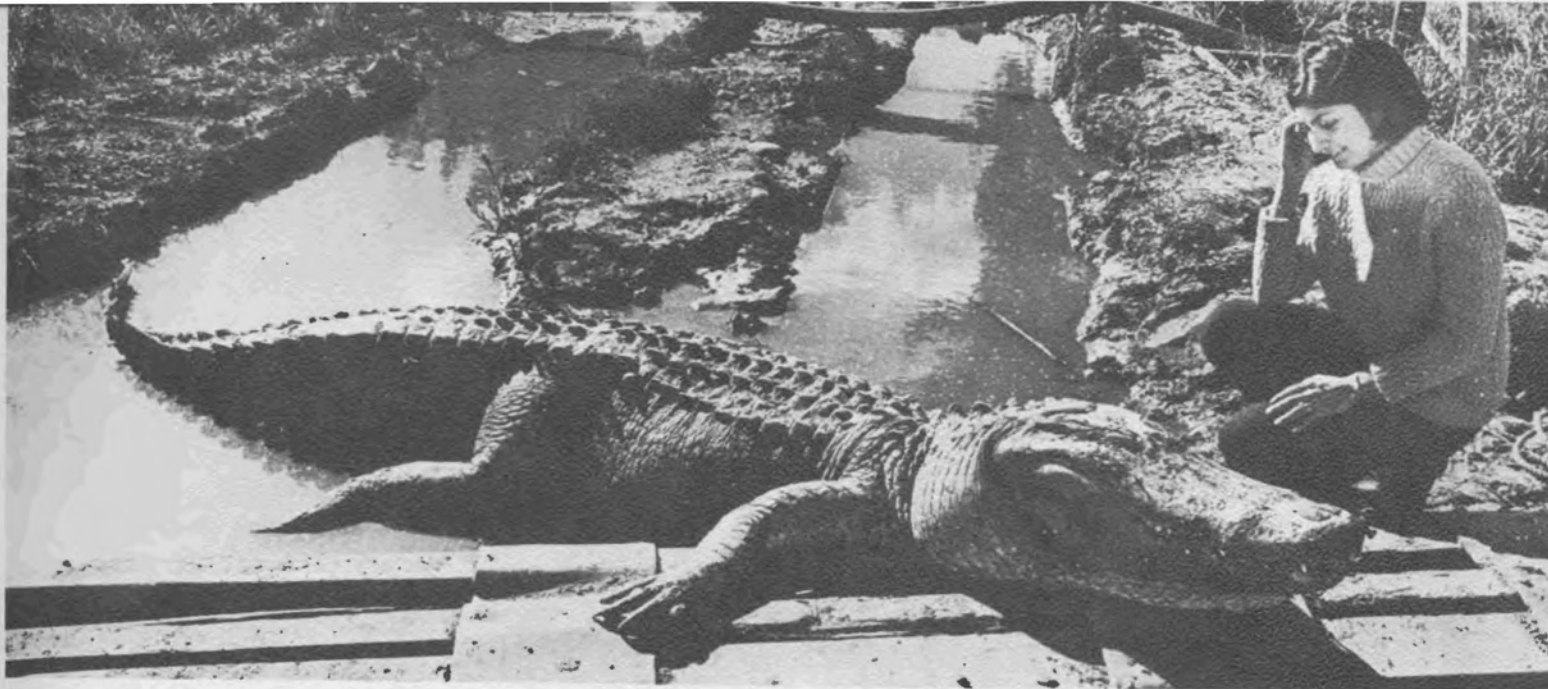




Two swimming pools were washed away from homes along San Antonio Creek near Ojai, above,

while flood waters of Santa Paula Creek threatened a mobile home park, below.





Donna Diaz, 19, examines a 10-foot-long crocodile found dead on the Olivas Park Golf Course after February's storm. He is believed to be one which washed away from Africa USA, some 50 miles away in Los Angeles County.

A rock plant at the intersection of Santa Paula Creek and the Santa Clara River was submerged when February's storm sent both streams overflowing their banks. Note crane, foreground, buried in Santa Clara River floodwaters.







William Price, Jr., manager of United Water Conservation District, prepares to photograph the first overflow of San Felicia Dam at Lake Piru. The heavy storms in January and February filled most of the county's water storage projects.

The battle to save Oxnard during February's storm took place on the levee near El Rio. Construction crews and equipment worked around the clock to bolster a levee. Fortunately, February's storm ended before the levee was needed. Oxnard officials had predicted that, without the levee, one more heavy rainfall would have flooded most of Oxnard.





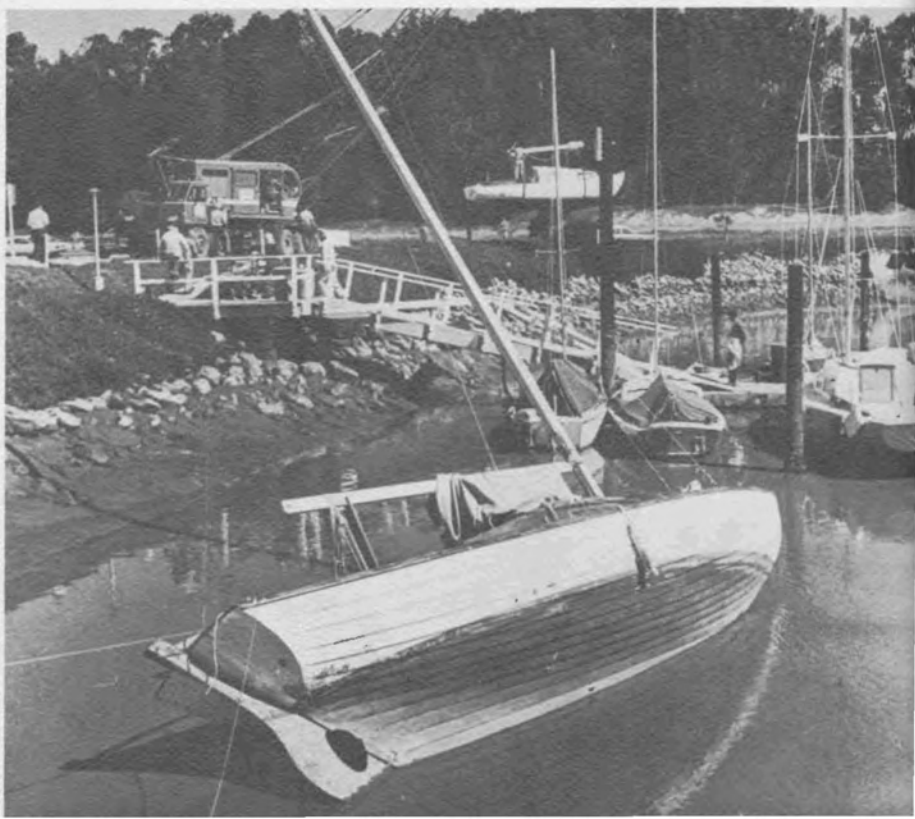
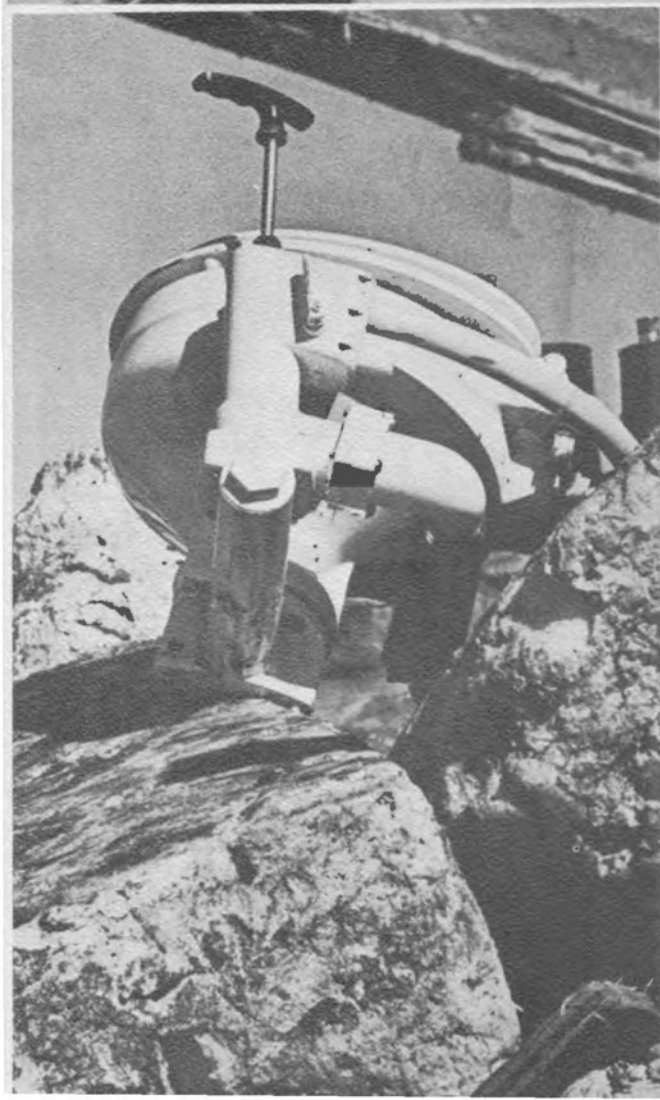
Complete devastation at Ventura's Marina was left in the wake of February's storm. While some fought a rough sea and rising river waters to save their crafts, others sifted through the wreckage on beaches to salvage what they could. The Marina can be repaired. But for some boat owners, the loss is more painful. They will not be able to replace their boats.







Picking up the pieces at the Ventura Marina was a job for only those strong of arm and strong of heart. Some were able to find only a few personal items. Others, below, were more fortunate. One of the lucky crafts to survive is hoisted from the Marina's mud by crane.





For many boat owners, the search for missing yachts ended on the rocks of the Marina's south jetty. Above, twin Chrysler engines are all that remain of a high-powered cruiser. Below a yachtsman struggles with parts of marine engine.

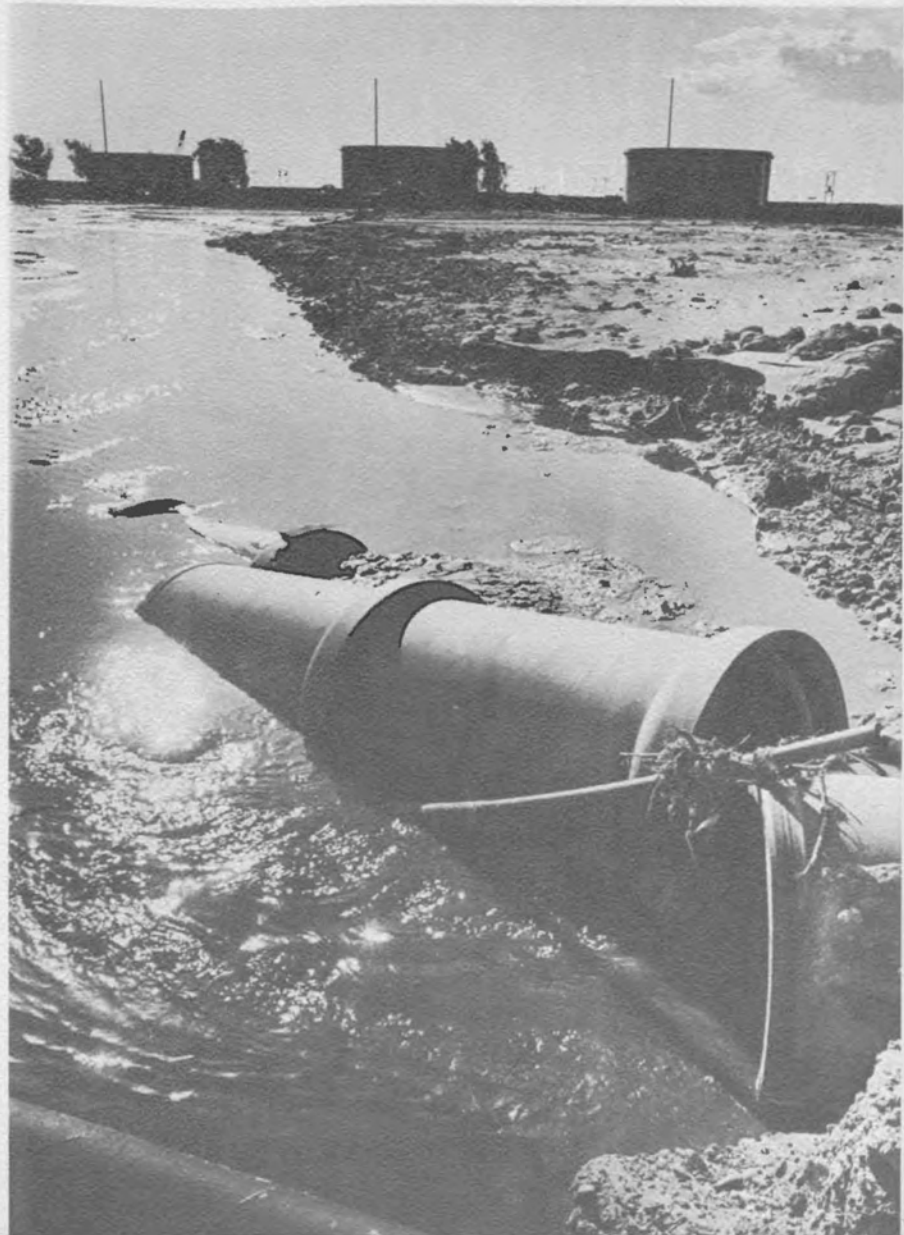








Sewer plants through Ventura County were hard hit by January and February storms. Above, Fillmore's sewage treatment plant is flooded by the rising Santa Clara River which collapsed buildings and toppled treatment tanks. Below, one of Ventura's main sewer lines was broken by February's storm, allowing the raw sewage to flow into the Marina. Pipe is located 500 yards from Santa Clara River, yet it was broken when river jumped its banks.



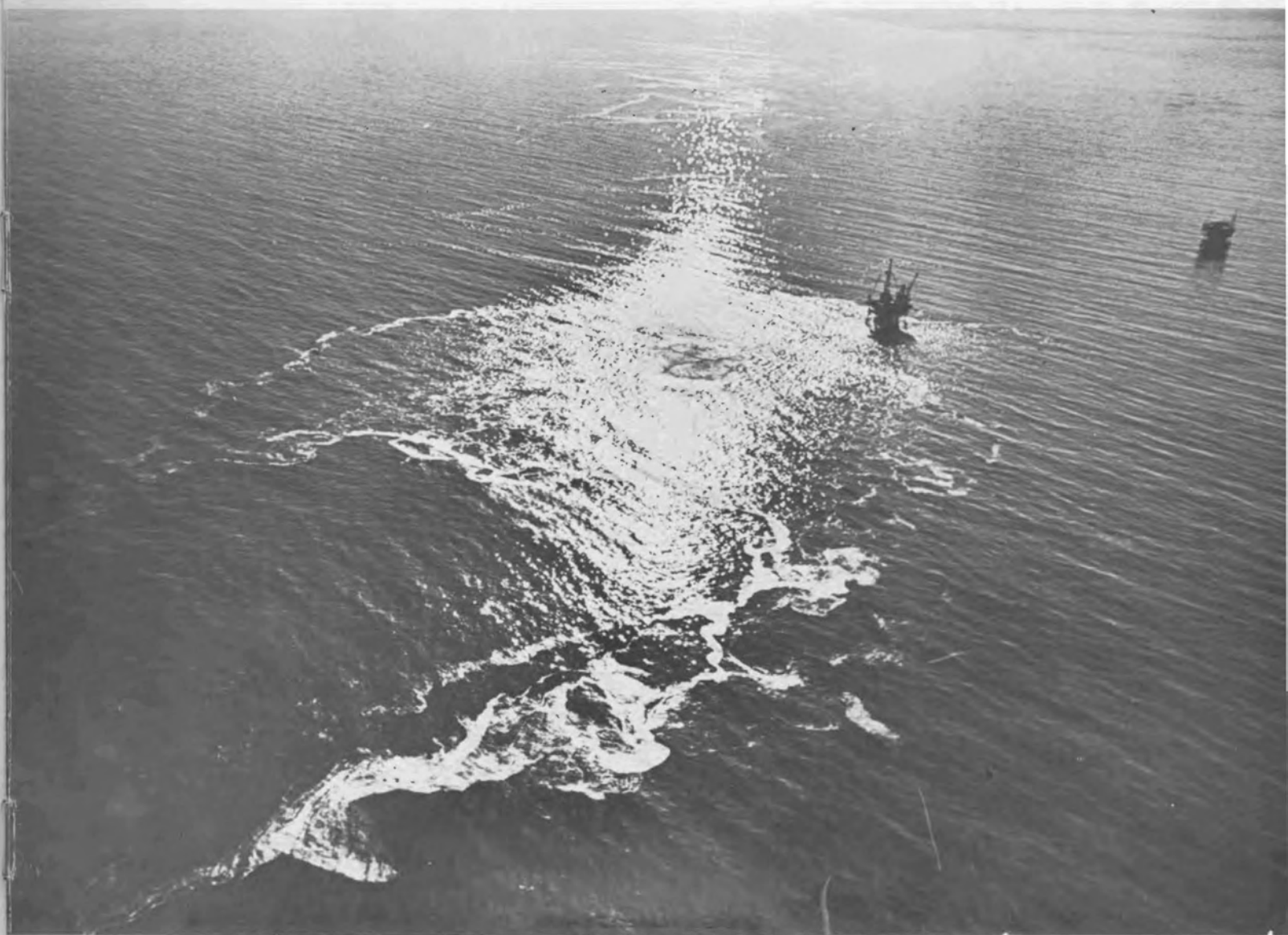




Last fallout from Ventura's severe winter storms was a million dollar landslide at the Getty Oil lease off North Ventura Avenue. Some 40 acres were

involved in a series of slides with about 12 wells buried and many more shut down. The Getty gasoline plant perches precariously on the edge of the slide area.

**. . . BETWEEN STORMS  
THE OFFSHORE OIL LEAK**



**UNION OIL'S PLATFORM 'A'**



