

# UC Santa Cruz

## Santa Cruz History

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Howell Rommel: The 1955 Santa Cruz Flood

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HOWELL ROMMEL

THE 1955 SANTA CRUZ FLOOD

Interviewed and Edited by  
Elizabeth Spedding Calciano

Santa Cruz  
1973

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## INTRODUCTION

Last fall Howell Rommel, a retired Santa Cruz cabinetmaker and excellent amateur photographer, called the Regional History Project Office to tell us that he had a series of approximately 60 slides that he had taken of the 1955 Santa Cruz flood. He had heard that our office collected materials pertaining to Santa Cruz County history and thought we might want to copy a few of his slides. We told him that indeed we might and arranged for him to come by and show them to us.

On the thirteenth of November, Mr. Rommel arrived at our office with his slides and projector, having walked through a rainstorm of such intensity that comments were heard right and left that we might be about to experience the successor to the 1955 flood. (Indeed, 7.2 inches of rain fell that day in Cave Gulch, and quite a few Santa Cruz streets were awash.) Coincidentally a UCSC student, Kip Bergstrom, had been in the office earlier that day asking about floods in Santa Cruz and the 1955 flood in particular as part of a research project he was doing for a course. We suggested he return that afternoon to see Mr. Rommel's slides.

As we started down to the viewing room on the ground floor of the Library, Mr. Rommel mentioned that he had shown his slides for various service groups and that he had a little talk that went along with them. Thinking that we might want to write some of his comments on the backs of the pictures we would select for

copying, the editor grabbed her dictating machine and took it along. Down in the viewing room with a dictating mike thrust six inches in front of him and end-of belt buzzers ringing every twenty minutes, Mr. Rommel gave his speech. An oral historian, however, does not always make the quietest audience, and it was almost inevitable that before very long Mr. Rommel's speech was being interrupted with questions. Mr. Bergstrom also asked several questions. What eventually emerged on the transcript was half speech half interview. After reviewing the transcript, the Special Collections Head and the Regional History Project Editor decided to reproduce all of Mr. Rommel's slides and paste them directly on the pages of the narrative. The manuscript would then be put on deposit in the Special Collections Room at the University Library at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

The manuscript was edited slightly for clarity, and as is the policy with our more traditional oral history interviews, it was shown to Mr. Rommel for his corrections and approval. He read through the text carefully and made several small but pertinent changes. When I asked if he would draw on a map the approximate boundaries of the 1955 flood, he commented that the Santa Cruz City Library currently had a display on the flood which included a map showing the exact area covered by it. He very kindly went to the trouble of obtaining a copy of that map from the City Library and the boundaries shown on that map have

been drawn onto the map included in this volume.

This manuscript is a part of a collection of interviews on the history of Santa Cruz County which have been conducted by the Regional History Project. The project is under the administrative supervision of Donald T. Clark, University Librarian.

Elizabeth Spedding Calciano

May 31, 1973  
Regional History Project  
University Library  
University of California, Santa Cruz

Rommel: December of 1955 was one of those nice open Decembers that we like to think is the normal thing in Santa Cruz. (1) This is the site of the present Yacht Harbor and Woods Lagoon. (2) It was nice enough so that the fishermen were able to catch steelhead right at the East Cliff Drive Bridge. The river itself at that time I thought was very beautiful, very placid.

Rommel: (3) But, oh, maybe along about the 18th or 19th of December, things started to cloud up, and the fishermen, the more forewarned of them, put their boats up on davits, out of harm's way, I guess you'd say. Those davits, of course, are not there at the present time. (4) The afternoon of December 22nd was a real rainy day, and it was blowing.

Rommel: (5) At more or less the mouth of the river, a lot of driftwood was already coming down, and you can see that the river is practically out of its banks.

Rommel: (6) Water was over the banks at this place down about Riverside Avenue. (7) Notice the next picture, now, and this fence will be gone.

Calciano: Is this on Riverside Avenue?

Rommel: Just off Riverside Avenue. The picture was taken after the flood. The car is not in the same condition it was in; the fence is gone.

Rommel: (8) Up on the Riverbank Trailer Rest it used to be full of trailers, and of course there was near panic in there. This one shows a big trailer and a little truck. (9) The next picture shows the big trailer and the little truck and a bigger truck. Everybody was doing his best to get out of there. That Riverbank Trailer Rest was where the present parking lot is for the County employees right at the north side of Water Street Bridge.

Rommel: (10 & 11) So they'd pulled out as many as they could, and they were desperately pulling them out. This was about 3:00 in the afternoon I'd say.

Calciano: May I interrupt and ask why you had these pictures that were taken before the flood? What had tipped you off that there was going to be a flood?

Rommel: Well, it came over the radio that there was danger of flood. I was just concerned, that's all. (12) Good old police, God bless them, they were everywhere that afternoon, and I don't suppose they had any rest for the next three days and nights.

Rommel: (13) This is about Blaine Street close to Ocean. Notice the fence; the next picture (14) shows what happened to that fence in the next twelve hours.



Rommel: (15) Now these pictures from here on are taken after the flood. I wasn't able to take pictures of the flood, because I was stuck downtown that night, and my wife didn't know whether I was alive or dead, because I couldn't get home and couldn't phone. But a day or two after the pictures I've just shown you, and when the water had receded, I got this picture. There used to be a nice footbridge across the river right there.

Calciano: What location was that?

Rommel: That's just upstream from Soquel Avenue Bridge. It's about where the footbridge is now that leads over to the County Center.

Rommel: (16) This picture is no masterpiece, but it's irreplaceable. This is looking right down below Soquel Avenue Bridge. (17) Somebody's boat in more or less the same place ... right under the Soquel Avenue Bridge. There's another boat up to the left.

Calciano: Are those alder trees there?

Rommel: No. They were probably willows. They're all gone now. The Redevelopment Project has done away with them. But I think those were willows.

Rommel: (18) This house is at about where Dakota Street starts in from Soquel Avenue now. I think Branciforte Creek

is right behind it. (19) Two days later it was dried up to this extent. Look at the dirt on top of their porch.

Rommel: (20) There's the devastation in that same area.

Calciano: Who had been living in that area?

Rommel: I couldn't tell you. Do you mean what general group of people?

Calciano: Yes.

Rommel: It was not a slum by any means. It was an area of working people and others. Just common neighbors through Santa Cruz.

Calciano: There wasn't one predominant ethnic group in there then?

Rommel: No, no, no. No, that was just a common run of Santa Cruz citizens.

Rommel: (21) I've never been able to figure out how bricks and rocks can be slipped around in water that way, but they really were. See the timber on top of the Dodge truck?

Calciano: Where is this?

Rommel: Now that's still just about where Dakota Street comes in close to Soquel Avenue. You can look across at the Palomar Hotel there.

Rommel: (22) (Laughter) You can tell that this man was not damaged by the flood. He's just down there congratulating himself on living somewhere else.

Calciano: You don't know who he is?

Rommel: No. Never did know.

Rommel: (23) Now in one of these two houses or in a house one or two doors up the street, a mother and a daughter, both grown people, were lost. They just couldn't believe that the flood would catch up with them. They were swept out in the ocean.

Rommel: (24) Now this house belonged to a realtor in Santa Cruz; Soquel Avenue is just across the rooftop there.

(25) Merry Christmas, huh?

Calciano: Is that the same house?

Rommel: Same house, yes.

Calciano: Which realtor owned it? Do you remember?

Rommel: His name was Perry.

Rommel: (26) This is the Riverside Avenue Bridge. Some way the water got behind the bridge abutments and this fell in. Quite a thrill.

Calciano: It says, "Bridge Out." I can't see, is half the bridge there....

Rommel: Yes. One lane only, I think, was taken out. You could have gotten around on this side.

Calciano: Had there been warnings not to cross the bridges?

Rommel: No, no, that poor fellow just fell in. He happened along just as it fell in.

Rommel: (27) Riverside Avenue and San Lorenzo Boulevard ... now that's where the Torch-Lite Motel stands today, a beautiful big building.

Rommel: (28) Down San Lorenzo Boulevard from it, the people were days and days drying out rugs, blankets, and things like that.

Calciano: How high did the water rise in those houses, do you know?

Rommel: Well I would have to guess here at maybe a foot over the floor level. Notice the kind of a stain there by that ventilator in the wall?

Calciano: Yes.

Rommel: Well it had to get up higher than that to get these people in trouble with their rugs, didn't it?

Calciano: Yes.

Rommel: (29) On Christmas Day this helicopter was on its way up the river; there'd been some people lost their lives up the river, I think by going onto a bridge that went out under them.

Calciano: Whose helicopter was that?

Rommel: Just private; it was not a government helicopter as far as I know.

Rommel: (30) Here we are again at the Riverbank Trailer Rest. This is all that's left of one of their laundry rooms out in front. You're looking right down over the Water Street Bridge to the north.

Calciano: I'm curious now ... in the 1940 flood had that trailer park been there and had the water hit it at all?

Rommel: Apparently not. Do you know the 1940 flood was not big enough to have really stamped itself on my memory?

Calciano: I see.

Rommel: (31) These next few pictures are within that trailer court. Shows how the peoples' washing machines ... well I suppose that this was equipment that belonged to the court's laundry room.

Rommel: (32) Look closely right up the fence line there and you'll see the lady in blue looking over their trailer court lot ... trying to pick up things that they weren't able to take with them when they moved out.

(33) I went over and talked with her; she had salvaged some plants that she thought a lot of, and in her right hand you'll see her husband's carpenter's square.

Rommel: (34) Don't know who this belonged to right in the

trailer court there. (35) This is a valuable table saw turned upside down.

Rommel: (36) Now these oil drums have to be something like six feet in the air, so that'll give you an idea of how much water was running through at this particular place.

Rommel: (37) If you're three years old, and you've got a brand new pair of red boots and all the mud you can use....  
(Laughter)

Bergstrom: What type of soil was deposited?

Rommel: Well there's just very, very fine sediment, no sand in it at all ... just like a fine talcum.

Rommel: (38) Full of water. Everybody got in and helped everybody else ... the old spirit of neighborliness did come out there. (39) This one you will recognize, this location, by the sign. Pennell Jeweler.

Calciano: Down on Pacific Avenue?

Rommel: Down on Pacific Avenue, yes.

Rommel: (40) This was a variety store on Pacific Avenue, right next to Woolworth's, you see ... where Woolworth's is today.

Calciano: What's all the trash there?

Rommel: Just merchandise in boxes that was not worth salvaging or impossible to salvage. They just pushed it out by

the square yard.

Calciano: How many hours warning did the merchants have to start moving their stuff up, or did they even realize the flood would get over to Pacific Avenue?

Rommel: I would say that perhaps four hours of warning ... they were.... We knew by early afternoon that it was probable that there'd be a flood, and by night, I'd say by seven or eight o'clock, it was about the crest of the flood. From then on it dropped down a little.

Calciano: How long did the water stay at its high point, or near its high point?

Rommel: I would say four or five hours ... no more than that, because by the next morning at eight o'clock I was able to get from the west side of town back across the Soquel Avenue Bridge and out where I live on the east side of town.

Calciano: You mentioned earlier that your wife didn't know whether you were alive or dead because you couldn't phone her. Now were all phone's out of commission, or just the ones in the central area?

Rommel: As far as I know, they were all out. Anything that I wanted to use was out. My wife wasn't able to reach me. The radio station was able to keep on broadcasting. She knew that we were in trouble

downtown, but she didn't know if I'd been drowned or just simply couldn't reach her.

Calciano: And what were you doing downtown? Did you have a business there, or were you shopping?

Rommel: No, no. It happened that I have a brother who had a machine shop backed up right to the west bank of the river. So I hurriedly went down to help him salvage whatever I could of his machine tools; he had plenty of help, so I went on up Front Street and up Pacific Avenue Extension to where I had a neighbor, Mr. West, who's presently a Sentinel printer ... I wanted to help him get his stuff out. I wasn't even able to make it up Front Street there in the truck. I had to turn up Mission Street, and I thought well I'll help whoever I can. I went to the Police Department at the City Hall. They said, "Just sit still ... we've got work for you." May we talk a little on just odds and ends here?

Calciano: Sure.

Rommel: You have no idea how still a town becomes when the lights go out ... no automobiles are running. You'd think that the roar of the flood would be everywhere, but it's not. Everything is just deathly still. I remember seeing one car come down Laurel Street, start



into what we knew was deeper water, but we couldn't make him hear. He just drove out, out in the deeper water, and his lights just went dim. (Laughter) That was it.

Calciano: Was the flow of the waters very fast? In other words, that man who got trapped, could he get out of the car and safely walk to high ground?

Rommel: Yes, he could, because I suppose it was not more than 40 inches deep about there ... maybe less than that.

Calciano: And was it just sort of eddying around, or was there a real directional flow to it?

Rommel: There was a direction all right, but there were many, many eddies as the cross streets would come together, you see. You'd have an east-west and a north-south flow there which was dangerous. It happened that I knew the Mayor quite well -- well he was a City Councilman at the time -- his name was Carl White; he had recently had an injury to his ankle, a break, I think. He and I went around together quite a bit that night. We got a boat (we were working down along Washington Avenue somewhere) and Carl drifted away from me in the night, and I never had such an agonizing five minutes in my life. I thought he was gone forever (laughter) and pretty soon he came

walking up to me. He had to leave his boat a couple of blocks away.

Calciano: Oh my.

Rommel: Oh, there were thrilling things. What is the name of the doctor in town who's paralyzed? Dr. Holbert?

Calciano: Yes.

Rommel: Well Dr. Holbert was in a desperate situation that night because the electricity had gone off; they couldn't run his iron lung. They took him down to the Sisters Hospital -- it was called Hanly Hospital at that time. You know where that is?

Calciano: Yes. Opposite the Dream Inn.

Rommel: That's right. They had taken him down there because the hospital still had electricity. Well finally the electricity went off right there, but they asked me if I could take some policemen to Dr. Holbert's house and get his iron lung and take it down to him. Well Dr. Holbert's house stood about four feet above the lawn, and when we went in and got the iron lung with three policemen on each side, as they stepped into the lawn, they all went in almost to their knees right through the grass and everything. But we did get it down to the hospital, and eventually we got a generator that

was able to run that and keep the doctor alive that night.

Calciano: Good heavens.

Rommel: (41) (Laughter) I've taken quite a kidding about this picture. I'll say that the real reason I took it is to show the man's track down there on the floor of the display window.

Calciano: I see. (Laughter) How much silt was deposited in that store?

Rommel: Oh, I'd say about three-quarters of an inch on that end. You know all these display windows have their floor about 18 inches above the floor of the store itself.

Calciano: Yes.

Rommel: So it was much deeper on the floor.

Rommel: (42) I took this picture because I was interested in the expression people had on their faces as they walked along there and walked through that greasy slippery mud. My camera has a rather heavy shutter noise, and when it went "bang," she looked up at me, and she said, "Did you take my picture?" And I said, "Yes. Is there anything wrong with me doing it?" "Well," she said, "I'd rather look nicer than I do right now, because every stitch I have on came from

the Red Cross."

Calciano: Oh my.

Rommel: So when the Red Cross asks me for a donation, I always remember this.

Calciano: (43) I see the shadows there ... it was a sunny day.

Rommel: Yes, we had beautiful weather after that.

Calciano: What had precipitated the flood? A heavy rainstorm at one time, or a lot of rain for a long time?

Rommel: No, a combination. About three things. Heavy rain for many days, several days at any rate, so that the ground soil, the ground moisture was very high. Then a high tide that night, and what was the third thing....

Calciano: Well I've heard that there were log jams and so forth up the river and that this contributed....

Rommel: Oh yes. There was a lot of rain up Boulder Creek way, and it uprooted tree after tree after tree, and then on the Soquel Avenue Bridge it almost formed a dam there.

Calciano: I see. But the high water wasn't because a log jam had broken higher up on the river letting a lot of water come down at once?

Rommel: No. It was just a combination of many things. They all hit us at once.

Calciano: I see.

Rommel: (44) Bibbins - that's on North Pacific Avenue. This great big rock came down through the roof of their bicycle shop and (45) here is the way the hole looked in the roof. That's off the chalk cliffs on this side.

Calciano: Oh, yes.

Rommel: (46) Now this is my neighbor's print shop after I was able to get up there and see what had happened.

Calciano: Where is that?

Rommel: On North Pacific Avenue.

Rommel: (47) This is the El Rio Trailer Court. They really had it in there. Now they did go in and try to convince some of these people that they should leave. We'll say as many as could did leave, but it left many trailers in there.

Calciano: (48) That mud I-see there, was that deposited by the flood, or was that just because it was wet ground?

Rommel: Well ... no. I would say that the top, maybe three inches of it, had to have been brought in by the flood. What you see down here in front, I think, is on top of the pavement.

Calciano: Oh!

Rommel: So you see it's about three inches deep.

Rommel: (49) These people told me that they'd spent the whole

night of the flood on top of their trailer, because the water was up way above the floor; they thought it would float away at any minute, but the only safe thing that they could do was stay on top of the trailer and maybe float away with it. Some did go out to the sea, you know.

Calciano: I could look this up, but can you tell me offhand how many people were lost in the flood?

Rommel: I would have to guess at that ... it was not very many. A half dozen, something like that.

Calciano: Now when you said, "some did go out to sea," did you mean some people or some trailers or both?

Rommel: Both. Some trailers were washed out, but not with people in them as far as I know. But some of the people who drowned in other than trailers did wash out to sea.

(50) (Laughter) This is on the morning of Christmas ... I found this man washing an automatic pistol in this mud puddle, and I asked him, "Do you think you'll do the pistol any good?" He said, "Well, I'm doing a lot more good than I can do with that gallon jug of drinking water we've got in the trailer." (Laughter)

Calciano: (Laughter)

Rommel: (51) This man had a beautiful patch of chrysanthemums.

This is just up Ocean Street; he and his wife were raising chrysanthemums commercially, but it put so much sand and silt on top of the chrysanthemum plants that they got out of the business after that.

Calciano: Oh really? Do you happen to know who he is?

Rommel: Yes, his name was Lain Ayers and his wife is Dell Ayers.

Calciano: How long had they been growing flowers there? Do you have any idea?

Rommel: Oh I would say three or four years.

Rommel: (52) This is the mouth of Woods Lagoon; this is the channel of the present-day small craft harbor. They started in ... well I guess you'd just as well say that they built their groin right in this waterway.

Rommel: (53) And the wood hoarders were busy. A peculiar thing about so much of this wood that comes down out of the mountains ... I think it's the alder ... that when it gets bruised, the inner bark turns so red.

Rommel: (54) Now I think these children were brought along to help Mama bring home some wood, but you know kids, they'd rather play. (Laughter)

Calciano: Now this is wood that has come down the river, gone out to sea, and then been thrown back up on the beach.

Rommel: That's right.

Calciano: Was there also wood along the riverbanks through town?

Rommel: Not to this extent, no. It washed out pretty well. It came right out to sea and then turned down the coast toward Capitola. This is the Twin Lakes Beach. This is right where the small craft harbor entrance is.

Rommel: (55) People got so excited about picking up wood or burls and things like that, they'd let little children run around unattended. (56) Another little kid without mother or dad.

Rommel: (57) (Laughter) Have I got about the right pose, Mama?  
(Laughter)

Calciano: (Laughter) Now this is still....

Rommel: Still down there at Twin Lakes Beach.

Calciano: Umhmmm.

Calciano: Now I'm curious ... every winter driftwood comes up on the beach after a storm; was this a markedly great deal more, or about average?

Rommel: Oh yes. Yes, oh far more, I'd say; I'd almost say ten times as much as normal.

Calciano: Oh really?

Rommel: Umhmmm.



Calciano: Was it pushed higher up on the beach than normal, or was the ocean....

Rommel: About the same; about the same height.

Calciano: The ocean was just having a regular wave action then?

Rommel: Yes. (58) This fellow's lucky; he's found a piece that's already cut for his fireplace.

Calciano: Hmmm.

Rommel: No, a peculiar thing about this thing, when it finally gave us the crest of the flood, everything abated. We just had everything going for us from then on.

Calciano: (59) That's a whole tree, isn't it?

Rommel: Oh, it's everything. And some fellows had superhuman strength when they were confronted with that much good wood.

Calciano: (Laughter)

Rommel: (60) Now if I could just find a lamp pedestal about this long...." (Laughter)

Rommel: (61) Well this is more or less a sign that the flood is over. Everything in Santa Cruz has been changed by it, but we still have our beaches and our waves and our rocks. A lot of people look back nostalgically to the Santa Cruz that used to be, but they forget the flood. They do remember the beautiful river; they're

sorry about the big ditch we've got through town right now; but the trade-off has been the beautiful Redevelopment area, and the side effect has been the Pacific Avenue Mall. They forget that nowadays you can make a dollar in Santa Cruz, and it used to be really hard scratching. It reminds me of the little boy before the flood sometime ... it was on a Saturday evening in the wintertime on Soquel Avenue, and he was in front of one of the big stores in town selling the Saturday Evening Post -- I think they were 20¢ at that time. And he was working his little heart out; he was one of these ragged little guys that we think of as the typical little newsboy of that time. He finally got down to one last Saturday Evening Post, and it didn't look like he was going to sell it; finally a nice little woman at the streetside there said, "Little boy, little boy, I'll buy your Saturday Evening Post if you'll promise to go to church tomorrow." He marched right over to her, and he said, "Here's your Saturday Evening Post, lady. What church do you want me to go to?" (Laughter)

Calciano: (Laughter)

Rommel: That's all the slides.

Calciano: Did you have any questions, Kip?

Bergstrom: Before the levee was built, did the river meander more than it does now?

Rommel: Only slightly. The course of the river right now almost repeats the old course of the river.

Calciano: In the summertime the river is almost dry. Was it that way in earlier years, or has development up the river changed things?

Rommel: I think it's always been that way; I don't think there's any difference now.

Calciano: Umhmmm.

Rommel: Sad little things have happened. Where Highway 1 crosses the river now, that bridge, as I remember, had just been partially built, and they lost everything in that flood.

Calciano: Oh they did?

Rommel: Yes.

Bergstrom: In the area from the mouth of the river up through town, were there willows in the riverbed and banks?

Rommel: Let's just say it was comfortably wooded with willows 20 or 30 feet high ... things like that. Down on the north side or the upstream side from Riverside Avenue Bridge used to be some beautiful big eucalyptus trees.

It was beautiful and sad in some ways ... you know, the river that runs through a town never is allowed to go just as the Lord wants it. (Laughter)

Calciano: Yes.

Rommel: People will throw a tire into it once in a while.

Bergstrom: What was the total area covered by the flood? Did it go all the way up to the cliffs? Did it cover the whole flood plain, do you know?

Rommel: Let me go over there [to a map], and we'll take my pen as a marker, and I'll outline that for you. Realizing that it's always difficult to find your way on a map right away. Let's find ... here's Ocean Street, and so this is the part that is the Redevelopment area right now.

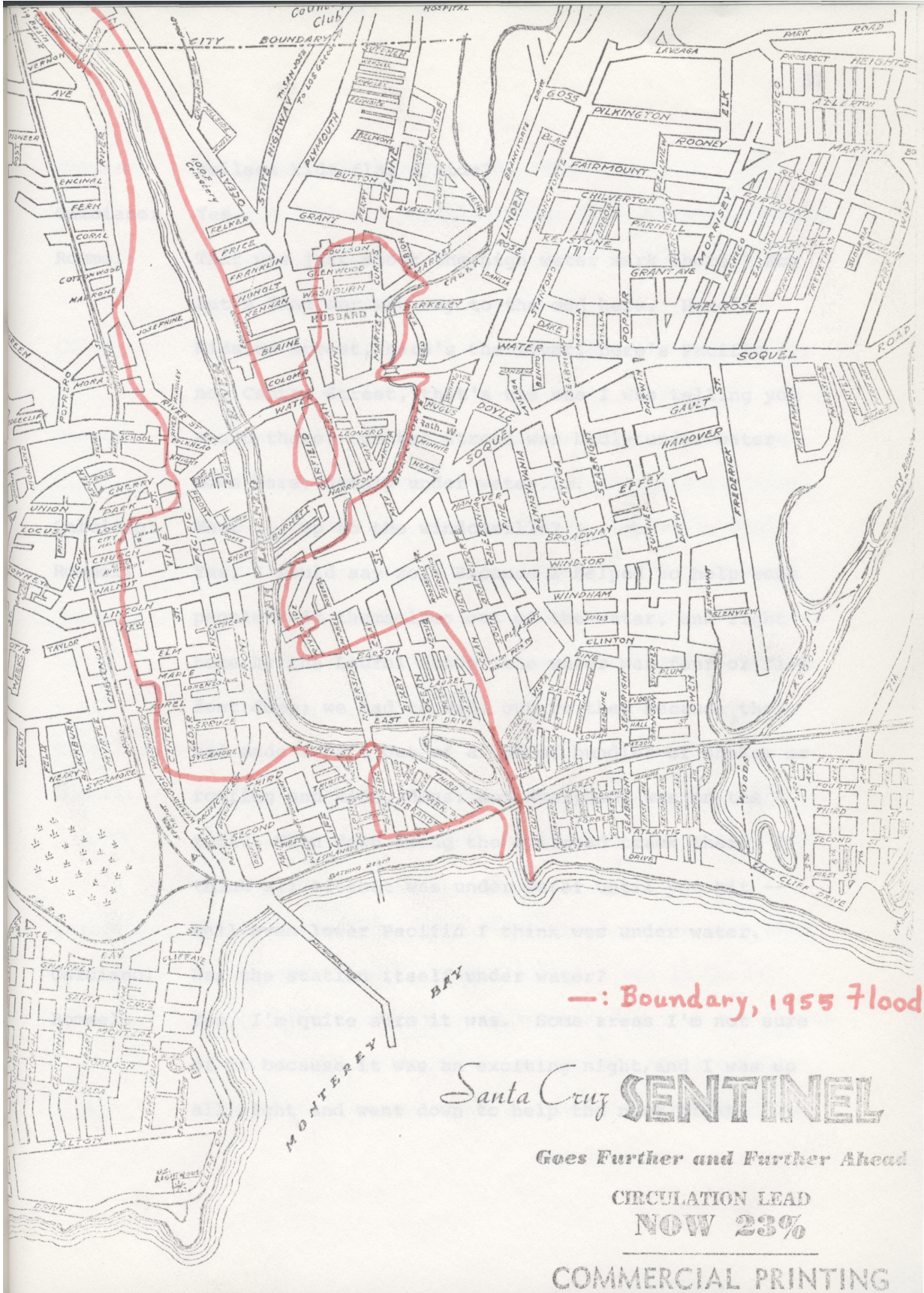
Bergstrom: Umhmmm.

Rommel: Now then this part right in here where Broadway comes along was above water, but all back in here, all of this....

Calciano: [reading from map] San Lorenzo Drive, Bixby Street....

Rommel: Yes, all of that, we'll call it the flat down there, was under water. Then you get over here ... Pacific Avenue was all under water and North Pacific. Up here the El Rio Auto Court, north of Pacific Avenue, was

under water, and the water came up Mission Street just  
a few feet beyond where Cedar Street turns to the  
south there ... you know, just about where the



—: Boundary, 1955 flood

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college kids flag a ride?

Calciano: Yes.

Rommel: That was just about the high water mark there. Now let's find our way to the end here. Here's Mission Street, here's the river, here's Pacific ... now Center. Street, that's the one I was telling you about there. Center Street was badly under water down here, deeply under water....

Calciano: What ... up to the windowsills?

Rommel: Yes, I would say so. Because I helped to help some people raft themselves out of the water, and right here by the Laurel School the water was four or five feet deep; we had to wade out to them because they had made a raft out of a lot of bundles of shakes or roofing and kids, dogs, and everybody was on the raft. Then down along the railroad track there, I think all of that was under water until you hit - well even lower Pacific I think was under water.

Calciano: Was the station itself under water?

Rommel: Yes, I'm quite sure it was. Some areas I'm not sure of it, because it was an exciting night, and I was up all night and went down to help the next night.

Calciano: What about the Neary Lagoon area?

Rommel: I can't tell you anything about that. I would assume it had to be under water. I just can't see how it would have avoided it.

Calciano: And also was there any flooding that you knew of on Soquel Creek, Aptos Creek....

Rommel: Oh yes. Soquel. Soquel Creek Bridge I think was out for a long time, the one that runs right through town. In fact, do you know where the County Bank used to be in Soquel? [on Soquel Drive] After it was all over with, my wife and I went down there with our hearts in our mouth to see how our safe deposit box fared.

Calciano: Oh!

Rommel: Our safe deposit box was about 30 inches above the floor, and as I remember, it was the bottom box that didn't get flooded.

Calciano: My goodness. You don't think about things like that.

Rommel: Interesting thing ... awhile back I was in Soquel Variety Store and happened to remember that the fellow who owns that is an old-timer there. And I said, "You know, I am making up a show about the flood in Santa Cruz in 1955. I'm not sure what night it was ... was it December 23rd or December 22nd?" "Wait a



minute," he says, "I'll tell you exactly." And he went over and pulled up a rug, a sort of a welcome mat in his store there, and it's recessed in the concrete. He lifted it up and it said, "December 22, 1955." He'd had the date put in concrete.

Bergstrom: What happened to the Harvey West Park area and the cemetery?

Rommel: The cemetery [Evergreen Cemetery] lies right in here. Now this man's chrysanthemum plants were up here exactly north of the Odd Fellows Cemetery. [Just below Crossing Street] So they were under we'll say a couple feet of water. I'm sure that most of the Odd Fellows Cemetery withstood it all right, but some of the old grave markers finally fell in and were found down the river here somewhere.

Calciano: Oh?

Rommel: And it's quite sure that they were just extra cull stones that had been thrown over there ... nobody's grave involved.

Calciano: Oh!

Rommel: But it was quite a furor among everybody for awhile thinking it had got in and disturbed some of the graves. You asked about Harvey West. Harvey West would

lie off in here.

Bergstrom: Yes.

Rommel: I just can't say if the flood reached there.

Bergstrom: It's interesting that they would build two cemeteries right on the flood plain.

Rommel: Well this cemetery right here [Odd Fellows] is higher than the flood plain.

Bergstrom: Yes, that's right.

Rommel: Have you ever been back in there?

Bergstrom: Yes.

Calciano: You're referring to the Evergreen?

Bergstrom: Evergreen.

Rommel: Do you know there's a very, very unique thing in that cemetery? Are you acquainted with the story of the Bennett-Arcan [also spelled Arcane] party? Of Death Valley fame?

Calciano: No.

Rommel: Well, the Bennetts and the Arcans are the people who were stuck on the other side of the Panamint Mountains during Christmas and all that time while William Lewis Manley went out almost to Los Angeles on foot and brought back aid to them. The Bennetts and the Arcans.

Now the little Arcan girl was born in Santa Cruz seven months later than that incident happened.

Calciano: Oh!

Rommel: Remember Mrs. Arcan made it out over the Panamint Mountains ... walked out almost to Los Angeles in that condition ... and that little girl's grave was the first grave in Evergreen Cemetery. She died 19 days after she was born.

Calciano: Oh dear.

Rommel: But the thing that's so sad about it is I wanted to write up a little story about it and illustrate it with a photograph; I went down there this past summer and here was that little gravestone broken in two. Vandalized. So it's been taken away. But we have something very unique in history there.

Calciano: Yes. I didn't know about that.

Trans: Doris Johnson

Typed: Doris Johnson

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Elizabeth Spedding Calciano was born in Iowa in 1939 and lived in Ames, Iowa, until her college years. She received an A.B. cum laude in history from Radcliffe College in 1961 and an M.A. from Stanford University in 1962. She is married to a physician and is the mother of three children. The Calcianos moved to the Santa Cruz area in 1962, and on July 1, 1963, Mrs. Calciano became the Head of the Regional History Project in a half-time capacity. Since 1967, she has taught a course on the history of Santa Cruz County for University Extension. She has also been a guest lecturer in other Extension courses and has been a speaker at several local and national oral history conferences.