THE STRAWBERRY CREEK FLOOD OF 1962

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RELIABLE ACCESS to a year-round water supply was one of the principal reasons the private College of California, followed by the University of California, adopted rural Berkeley as a campus site. The College was able to secure land along the banks of Strawberry Creek, as well as rights to much of the Strawberry Canyon watershed in the hills above campus.

The first physical development on the campus site was not a building, but construction of a system of water pipes and check dams by the College of California. When this was largely completed, the College celebrated by opening the taps on the campus grounds and letting streams of the impounded water fountain into the air to the delight of picnickers and dignitaries who had come to see this marvel in the hinterlands.

Since those days, Strawberry Creek has changed to a largely aesthetic amenity. The University now draws its water from the Sierra Nevada, through the pipes of the East Bay Municipal Utility District. Strawberry Creek is valued mainly for its picturesque character on campus and opportunities for ecological research along its banks, particularly in the undeveloped canyon. The two-branched stream gently trickling through campus attracts dogs, wading children, picnickers and sunbathers to its banks and pools.

Sometimes, however, the University's cup runneth over.

As far back as the nineteenth century the creek would flood during heavy rainstorms. Just after the turn of this century there are press mentions of plans to reinforce critical points along the bank—particularly the sharp bend just upstream of Sather Gate—with rock and plantings. In more recent decades, the creek has been significantly reshaped, with concrete and stone retaining walls, artificial waterfalls, and even an environmentally friendly “crib wall” of logs at one point near Stephens Hall.

Most of these flood control measures came about because of the events of the second week of October, 1962.

Eleven inches of rain produced the most memorable creek flood in campus history. Saturday brought the worst flooding and damage. By midday, the south branch of the creek was a raging torrent from Strawberry Canyon to its entrance into the culvert at the western campus boundary under downtown Berkeley. At several points it poured over its banks, inundating roads, pathways, and campus construction sites. “Mud, water, and debris from the recent rain caused an estimated $100,000 damage to the University and hardest hit locations will not be restored until April.”

Three major buildings were under construction: Barrows Hall, Wurster Hall (then called simply the Environmental Design Building) and Etcheverry Hall. Building excavations had been pumped out to clear the accumulated runoff from the week, but the Saturday flooding filled them up again. Some of the worst damage occurred at the Etcheverry Hall site, where a temporary retaining wall and part of Le Roy Avenue collapsed into the excavation. The Wurster Hall excavation became an instant lake and “four rivers of mud flowed...down toward half-completed Barrows Hall.”

Mud was the main problem at the eastern end of the campus as well. The Poultry Husbandry area, then an active research facility, was flooded with up to three feet of mud in the occupied chicken coops, and part of one building collapsed.
Just downhill, the entrance of the Strawberry Creek culvert under the Strawberry Canyon Recreation Area and Haas Clubhouse was too small to take the flash of water barreling down the canyon. “The pool deck was buried under six inches of mud. Chairs and tables were upturned and covered with slime. The pool itself was filled with muddy water and debris...Tractors and bulldozers operated by a 40-man crew have been working steadily at Strawberry Canyon since Friday.”

Photographs two days later showed both pools still filled with mud. Mud slides further up the canyon and flooding had also closed roads.³

Below Memorial Stadium, the mud besieged low-lying Cowell Hospital (where the Haas School of Business complex now stands) and International House. “A river several inches deep flowed across the I House ground floor and out the front door.”⁴

Male students living at Bowles Hall and the student co-op at Oxford Hall turned out to pile sandbags around Cowell Hospital on Saturday “to prevent flooding of radioactive material in the new wing.”⁵ Gayley Road, adjacent to Cowell Hospital, was closed by mud. Further west on campus the floodwaters backed up at Sather Gate.

“By noon Saturday, the Sather Gate area was almost impassible, with muddy water pouring down from various construction projects and from an overflowing Strawberry Creek. The water pouring down past Sather Gate flowed back into Strawberry Creek or into the Student Union basement. In both places it created new havoc. Strawberry Creek overflowed its banks below Dwinelle Hall, with the flood reaching a width of twenty feet and a depth of three feet near the Eucalyptus Grove. It roared down to the western edge of the campus, covering Center Street with 10 inches of water.”⁶

Midway along this maelstrom at the Student Center complex, water poured into the underground garage, and besieged the Student Musical Activities offices in the basement of what is now the Chavez Center. Students from the Cal Band and singing groups piled sand-
baggis to prevent flooding.

The storm also toppled a number of trees on the campus, including a pine that fell across the Haviland Hall parking lot. In the aftermath of the flooding, the campus undertook a considerable amount of construction work to reshape the creek bed and to build retaining walls along the banks. Heavy rains in the early 1980s successfully tested the precautions, but the campus has not seen another flood of the same magnitude as that of 1962.

NOTES
1 “Storm Damages Near $100,000”, Daily Californian, October 16, 1962.
3 Daily Californian, October 16, 1962.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 Daily Californian, October 15, 1962.