



# Flood Control in South Palo Alto

IN THIS JANUARY ISSUE OF *TALL TREE*, IT SEEMS RELEVANT TO CONSIDER rain and floods. Periodically, South Palo Alto faces serious flooding challenges. From South to North, Palo Alto has four creeks, Adobe, Barron, Matadero, and San Francisquito. Adobe, Barron and Matadero merge at Bayshore Freeway and feed into the Palo Alto (tidal) Flood Basin. Prior to 1998, these three creeks flooded regularly, especially in Barron Park and wherever else they were bridged by north-south roads such as El Camino, Alma, Middlefield, Ross and Louis. Having small watersheds, they were subject to sudden flash flooding during torrential downpours. Barron



**DOUG GRAHAM**  
President, PAHA

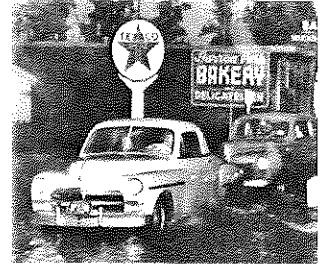
Park recorded floods in 1940, 1941, 1945, 1951, 1952, 1955 (December 22–26, “The Flood of the Century”), 1956, 1957 (twice), 1962, 1968, 1973 and 1983—14 floods in 44 years, about one every third year.

Santa Clara County’s response was to channelize the creeks in straight lines to maximize flow and minimize bank erosion and to line them with concrete. However, this proposal threatened the many gracious homes along the oak-lined natural or semi-natural channels, especially on Matadero Creek.

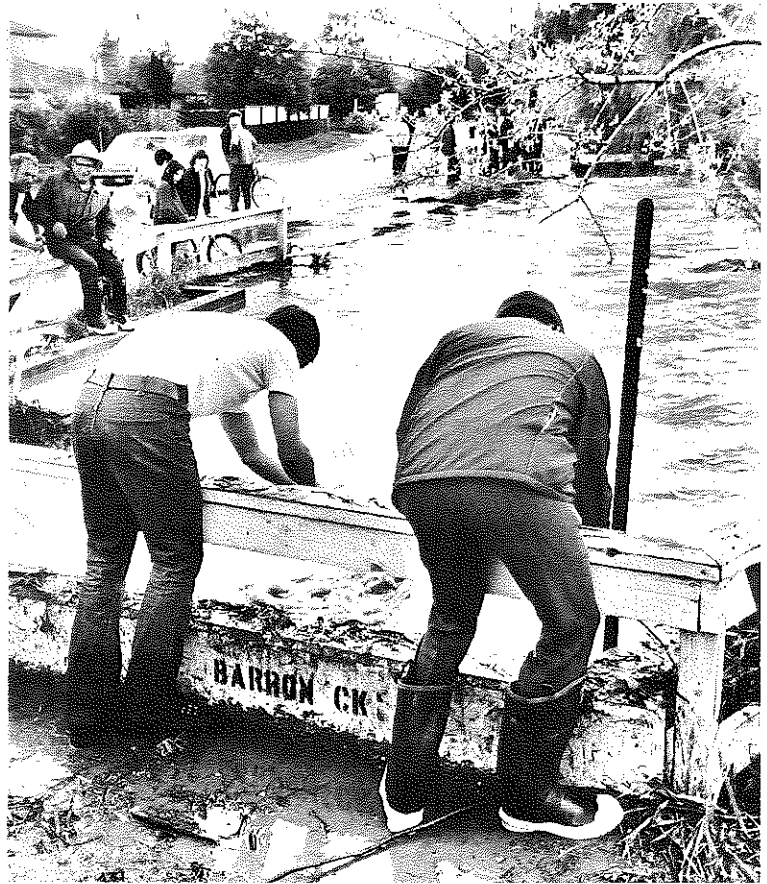
Homeowners strongly objected to channelizing Matadero Creek. Barron Creek had already been channelized for agriculture when the area was Mayfield Farm, but after the 1962 flood, two long stretches of Barron Creek were diverted into underground culverts. The County proposed that a high flood control dam be built across Matadero Creek at Old Page Mill Road, just South of Radio-telescope Hill, but no agreement was reached, and nothing was done.

In 1983, an unusually vigorous El Nino year, these three creeks flooded several times, the night of January 23–24 being the worst. 90 acres were flooded on 24 streets in Barron Park, flooding 220 structures and eroding 44 properties there. Starting in 1983, the neighborhood worked with the Santa Clara Valley Water District and the City of Palo Alto to protect against future flooding. The first phase was to improve the Flood Basin so that it could handle larger flows. By the late 1980s, work was begun first on Adobe Creek and proceeded to Barron and Matadero. Downstream from El Camino, where all three were already in concrete channels, the work focused on enlarging chokepoint bridges and, on some stretches, building flood walls on top of the channel banks to contain greater flows. Upstream, Adobe Creek needed a few small anti-erosion projects, but Barron Park faced major problems. The neighborhood was unwilling to give up the natural channel of Matadero Creek and the removal of many homes that would have been necessary for channelization.

The final solution was to build a \$15 million underground channel around the periphery of the neighborhood that would take only excess flood water, not the normal, continuous natural flow of the creek. It was built in the mid-1990s along the regional bike path, the old Santa Cruz Cut-Off railroad grade, protecting Barron Park from flooding up to the calculated 1% annual probability flood level—the so-called “Flood of the Century.”

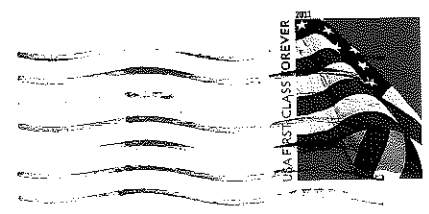


Overflow flooding on El Camino Real from Barron Creek, 1955. (Courtesy of the Santa Clara Water District.)



Volunteers clearing trash rack at Laguna Avenue culvert on Barron Creek during the 1973 flood. (PAHA Guy Miller Archives)

\* SByW  
(EXHIBIT LISTED  
ON CALENDAR PG.)



JAN 09 2012

Los Altos Historical Museum,  
51 S. San Antonio Rd  
Los Altos, CA 94024

PALO ALTO HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

www.pahistory.org

*Our mission is to collect, preserve and make available to the public information about the history of Palo Alto.*

# History Jaunts

**VICTORY: Tales of a Tuskegee Airman.** Local hero, Les Williams will talk about his new book. Tuskegee Airmen were the first African American pilots to fly during World War II, and for his efforts Williams received a Congressional Gold Medal. San Mateo County History Museum, Saturday, January 21, at 1 PM: Museum admission \$3-\$5; Free to Association members; 2200 Broadway, Redwood City. Info: [www.historysmc.org](http://www.historysmc.org) or call 650.299.010

**Antique Toys** will be displayed until the end of April. The Museum of American Heritage: 351 Homer Avenue, Palo Alto. Open Friday through Sunday, 11 AM to 4 PM. Free Admission.

★ **Shaped by Water; Past, Present, & Future**, a Los Altos History Museum exhibit. 51 South San Antonio Road, Los Altos. Open Thursday-Sunday, Noon to 4 PM. Free Admission.

**Discover and Learn about Great Chocolate** at the Chocolate Garage: 654 Gilman Street, Palo Alto. A "hidden treasure" in Palo Alto. Call 650-796-5287, or see [www.thechocolategarage.com/](http://www.thechocolategarage.com/) for information.

## PAHA's Public Meetings

Sundays at the  
Lucie Stern Community Center  
1305 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto

**JANUARY 15 AT 2:00:**  
"SEA SCOUT 100"  
**Speaker: Josh Gilliland**

**MARCH 4 AT 2:00:**  
"THE 3RD DOWN"  
**Speaker: Henry Ford**



Save these dates in 2012

APRIL 1

MAY 6

JUNE 6: ANNUAL DINNER

## Heritage Program on Channel 30

The TV cable program, Heritage, on Channel 30 in the first part of January will be the November 6 PAHA program on Clara Shortridge Foltz by Barbara Babcock, followed by the December 4 "Palo Alto Vignettes" hosted by Karen Holman. "Palo Alto Vignettes" will continue into early February. DVDs of previous programs may be borrowed at the history desk at the Palo Alto Main Library, Tuesday 4-8 pm and Thursday 1-4 PM.

## Become a Member of PAHA

We invite you to become a member of the Association and join those who care about Palo Alto and enjoy learning about its history. Your dues support the preservation of our archives, assistance to researchers and dissemination of Palo Alto historical information through our publications. Join today!

Individual \$25      Family \$40  
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Make check payable to PAHA and mail to: PAHA Box 193, Palo Alto, CA 94302. Or join online at [pahistory.org](http://pahistory.org). Let us know if you wish to volunteer for a PAHA committee. (Note: current members will receive a renewal notices in July.)



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