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Photo: JVV

Laguna de Santa Rosa performing its natural cycle as a flood retention basin, January 1995 (near Occidental Bridge, north of Sebastopol).

Flooding — A Natural Cycle

by Page Leonard

"Over the high coast mountains and over the valleys the gray clouds marched in, from the ocean. The wind blew fiercely and silently, high in the air, and it swished in the brush and it roared in the forests. The clouds came in brokenly, in puffs, in folds, in gray crags; and they piled in together and settled low over the west. And then the wind stopped and left the clouds deep and solid. The rain began with gusty showers, pauses and downpours; and then gradually it settled into a single tempo, small drops and a steady beat, rain that was gray to see through, rain that cut midday light to evening. And at first the dry earth sucked the moisture down and blackened... until the earth was full."

JOHN STEINBECK, *The Grapes of Wrath*

Those familiar with this remarkable novel will recall that the Joats, an itinerant farm working family displaced from their home during the Dust Bowl disaster of the Great Depression, had experienced unbearable suffering in their efforts to find work. At last they found steady but temporary work picking cotton in California's San Joaquin Valley. Here they took up residence in a boxcar, their best shelter in many weeks. It sat along side a creek and was surrounded by other boxcars and makeshift tents which housed other wandering families. The nearby creek was in many ways a lifeline that they took for granted. From it the women washed clothes and fetched drinking and cooking water. Children swam in the coolness of it and played among the willows and cottonwoods lining its banks. Of course it was no accident the camp was situated near the stream. The people required water, and it was here water was plentiful year round. Then came the flood. For two days heavy rains fell and the earth became saturated. The creek quickly metamorphosed from useful

neighbor to an angry foe. Those in the camp who had flimsy shelter quickly fled to higher ground. Those sustained by permanent housing eyed their possessions and each other, and decided to wait it out. Soon however, it was too late. The angry foe was now a raging monster. It lapped at the edge of its bank just long enough to give a thin veil of hope to those in the boxcars. Maybe if they threw all their energy to building a makeshift levee the water could be held back. Through the night they worked tirelessly shoveling mud which they reinforced with willow cuttings. The rain began to wane somewhat, their dike looked as if it might hold. Then a large cottonwood succumbed to the water's force. It toppled into the swollen stream, caught, swung around and punched through the barrier tearing the men feeling small and foolish. Now the waters rose unabated, as the rain and land would dictate.

The wrenching pathos of Steinbeck's story finds its roots in terms of human suffering: displacement from the land, loss of possessions and property damage. Similarly, recent flood events along the Russian River and elsewhere in California are largely viewed in this context. The images we embraced through the media or experienced firsthand, were compelling: a chaotic exodus of people who cling to what few possessions and pets they can carry, upper stories and roof-tops protruding through murky backwaters, and belongings of all kinds either floating about or dragged beneath the waters like so much garbage set free; the temporary shelters and food kitchens, the tired faces of displaced residents and emergency personnel working to make the best out of every new twist in the crisis.

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