



MARK KOCHACKIS

**Border Patrol Agent Ben Hollinder (from left) and Jim McVeigh and Tom Watson of the S.D. Water Dept. look at debris Dec. 21 left by the flood.**

## REMEMBERING THE GREAT FLOOD OF 1916

Historical Society exhibit will look back on South Bay disaster

BY ALLISON SAMPITE-MONTECALVO

### CHULA VISTA

A flood is coming to the South Bay, again.

It's the centennial year of the great flood of 1916 that devastated the Otay, Sweetwater and Tijuana river valleys, and the anniversary is being commemorated with an exhibit in the Chula Vista

Civic Center Library.

The exhibit will go on display Jan. 27 at the city's Heritage Museum.

The exhibit is courtesy of the South Bay Historical Society and the Chula Vista Library. It is expected to stay up for at least the first half the year, said the society's president, Steven Schoenherr.

The exhibit will tell the 100-year-old  
SEE **FLOOD • 3**

# FLOOD

FROM 1

story of when the county and in particular the South Bay, experienced the worst natural disaster in its history when the Lower Otay Dam broke Jan. 27, 1916, destroying almost everything in its path.

A wall of water flooded the entire valley, wiping out the town of Otay, the Chula Vista Salt Works and hundreds of farms.

Many Japanese farmers, working in the valley at the time, ran to higher ground but 11 of them living below the dam were killed.

The flood carried debris and topsoil into San Diego Bay, forming shoals that filled the south end of the bay, blocking ship channels for years.

The South Bay Historical Society is currently working with the Chula Vista Fire Department to extract a large 300-pound piece of the Otay dam for the exhibit, expected to feature more than 100

## Centennial flood exhibition

**What:** Otay Valley, Sweetwater and Tijuana flood talk given by historian Steven Schoenherr at 3 p.m. in library auditorium. Exhibition viewing begins at 5 p.m. in main library.

**Where:** Chula Vista Civic Center Library, 365 F St.

**When:** Wednesday, Jan. 27

historical photographs related to the flood.

A map of the county will show all the areas affected by the flood, including National City, Chula Vista and Bonita.

The first section of the exhibit will feature the historical context of 1916, the long drought that began in 1911 and the work of Charles "Rainmaker" Hatfield.

The San Diego City Council hired Hatfield to produce rain in the hopes of ending the drought. He built

platforms near the Morena Reservoir to release his secret mixture of chemicals into the air around Jan. 1, 1916. On Jan. 5 rain began. It came down in torrents for the remainder of the month.

In fact, more rain fell than had ever been recorded for a two-week period in the history of the South Bay, according to the historical society.

The rain filled the Sweetwater Reservoir until the abutments above and below the dam gave way, unleashing a tsunami-type wall of water into the valley.

The second part of the exhibit will show the devastation caused by the flood in the Tijuana, Otay and Sweetwater River valleys.

River canyons were flooded and bridges destroyed, along with water pipelines and the local railroad. The Tijuana River tore into Tijuana and destroyed the village of Little Landers.

The earthen dike on the low side of the reservoir also broke, sending another flood of water down the canyon past Central Avenue (in

Bonita). The Friend's Church washed away and the Sunnyside school was damaged.

The Sweetwater Woman's Club house and the library inside were swept into the bay. The gardens and fields belonging to Chinese workers who helped build the dam in 1888 were also destroyed. There was no drinking water in the South Bay for three weeks.

The third part of the exhibit will show recovery efforts after the flood. The Navy sent a relief expedition under Lt. Willis W. Bradley Jr., commander of the USS Lawrence.

Tijuana moved to higher ground, and horse racing resumed at the Tijuana Race-track.

The Lower Otay Dam was rebuilt and more dams were added to the South Bay watersheds, including Barrett in 1922, Rodriguez in 1936, Judson in 1937 and Loveland in 1945.

---

allison.sampite-montecalvo@sduniontribune.com