

Stories from our Members: The Saint Francis Dam Disaster at Storke Ranch –

Personal account written by Alex Summers, father of Jim Summers, a long time resident of Chatsworth and member of the Chatsworth Historical Society. The collapse of the St. Francis Dam is considered to be one of the worst American civil engineering disasters of the 20th century and remains the second-greatest loss of life in California's history, after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire. Jim Summers was the baby in the story below.

At about 12:30 A. M. on March 13, 1928, my wife Jessie and I were awakened by what we thought was rain. If it hadn't been for a few things (like our darling baby) we would surely all have been drowned by this disaster.

Jessie asked me to get up and close the window that was open just a little. When I pushed back the curtains to close the window, I saw floating in our yard her modern washing equipment - wash tub, wash board and boiler. I yelled to her to "get up quick and get the baby wrapped up". Many things went through my mind and the first and main one was not to go floating away with the house! I ran to the telephone to call my boss, Frank Dent, and just as I did the complete telephone line and pole went down. I ran and got the baby and told my wife to come with me to the porch on the South side of the house. There was a walnut tree in the southwest corner of our yard. With the water rising every second, I told Jessie to run for the tree should the house go. Just then another house came around and hit ours, raised up and floated away. I yelled for Jessie to "jump as far as you can". I ran for the tree and looked back for her as she came floating by. I reached out and caught her hand. This was just lucky! We were in a tight spot for a few minutes. We were standing on a big drift. My arm became very tired so I told Jessie to climb up in the tree and sit on the low branches and hold the baby. She tried but was so exhausted she couldn't do it. I then picked her up with my right arm and sat her up in the tree. When I attempted this some time later I couldn't do it. Jessie's muddy clothes left her brand on the limb of the tree for a long time. The roots of the walnut tree supporting us were popping and cracking. I thought this was it. Luckily, it held and we were there for about an hour.

I could see a man over at the next house. I thought this was my cousin, Doc Scurlock. However, it was my boss's oldest son, Floyd Dent. He risked his life, trying to get to us. I finally made him understand that we would need a rope to throw over to me. He left to get the rope but before he could return the water went down and though knee deep and swift we were able to wade out.

There were cars waiting when we got out. They had blankets for us and then took us to Mr. & Mrs. Dent's house. They had a fire in the fireplace and put our baby on a blanket in front of the fireplace. He kicked and played and didn't ever know how close to death he was.

We lost everything. Our new 1927 Model T. Ford, our home and all our belongings and clothing. I had the pair of Levi's I wore (which sure weren't very warm). The next day when we were looking for our house, I found the body of about a 5 month old baby. I also saved a man's life. His name was Mr. Serena. He was buried alive and I dug him out. George Dent and I also found a girl probably about 14 years old wandering dazed and without clothes. We gave her our shirts (mine borrowed) to cover her and walked her out and some one took her to town. I never knew who she was.



We lived to raise a beautiful family. We have our son, James and his wife Betty and our 3 grandchildren. We have a daughter, Janet and husband Hubert Loedter and two grandsons.

We are among the lucky ones who survived that terrible disaster. I could continue on and on and write a book about the experiences.

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Shown on the tractor in Chatsworth is Alex Summers (seated), son Jim (standing) and daughter Janet on his lap.