History of the Santa Ana River

People have lived along the Santa Ana River for approximately 9,000 years. Four distinct tribal groups lived within the watershed; however, it was the Tongva/Gabrielino and Yuharetem/Serrano people who inhabited the banks of the River. The Serrano were mountain people that lived as high as 9,000 feet in the San Bernadinos. The Tongva inhabited most of the Los Angeles Basin, including what we know today as

1938 flood >>

The first European contact with the watershed occurred in 1542 when Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo sailed past the River's mouth on his way to setting anchor on the Channel Islands off the coast of Ventura. Juan Gaspar de Portola was the first European to set foot in the watershed in 1769. Portola's party named the River after the Santa Ana Mountains, which they had just named in honor of Saint Anne's Day. To this day, in many places along the Santa Ana River, signs along the River use the original spelling of "Santa Anna."

Father Serra, who traveled with Portola, established nine missions in California. While none were in the Santa Ana River Watershed, two missions claimed land within it. Mission San Gabriel, established in 1771, claimed much of the upper watershed, while lands of the lower watershed were under the control of the Mission San Juan Capistrano.

<< Santa Ana River Flooding
Each mission had outposts in their respective lands within the Santa Ana River Watershed, and forced the local tribes to leave their villages and traditional ways to live under Mission authority. The Spanish dominated the Santa Ana River Watershed for more than 50 years. By 1834 the missions had been stripped of their power and their lands. During the following period of Mexican rule, various ranches were deeded by Spain for Rancho Santiago de Santa Ana through a land grant to Juan Pablo Grijalva in 1811. Following the Bear Flag Revolt of 1846 and the end of the Mexican American War in 1848, the area became a free state. It was added to the United States in 1850 as part of the State of California.

Agriculture quickly spread and row crops replaced cattle grazing as the chief form of farming in the region, though several large cattle operations continued in the mountains and foothills of the area. The Santa Ana Watershed also played a role in the gold rush. Though it was never mined, it supported the 1860's mining boom with lumber and sustaining industries. By 1900, citrus was central in the lower watershed, so much so that the County's founding fathers chose the name "Orange County" to recognize this important industry.

Spurred by the success of the agricultural industry, the human population of the Santa Ana River Watershed continued to grow during the twentieth century. As settlement around the Santa Ana River increased, so did flood concerns. In 1938, a flash flood along the Santa Ana River resulted in 19 dead, 2,000 homeless, and 68,400 acres of flooded area. The magnitude of the event served as the impetus for the construction of the Prado Dam, thus paving the way for the post-World War II building boom which began the conversion from large agricultural operations to housing and commercial development projects.

In 1969, a significant flood along the Santa Ana River Watershed caused damage on tributaries including San Timoteo and Santiago Creeks. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers declared the Santa Ana River to be the greatest flood threat west of the Mississippi River, thus spurring the creation of the Santa Ana River Mainstem Project, which installed the concrete lining in the river channel. In the 1970's, property values jumped, spurring heavy residential, commercial, and industrial development along the Santa Ana River, with little thought given to the River itself other than as a flood control channel. However, the creation and work of the Santa Ana River Task Force, will lead Santa Ana's efforts to preserve and enhance the River's recreational, environmental and economic development features to increase community pride and quality of life.
Historical Timeline of
Santa Ana River

The Santa Ana River has gone through a series of transformational events. Identified here are some of the key dates in the history of the River.

1769 - The priests accompanying Captain Gaspar de Portola’s party as it passes through Orange County names the Santa Ana River “Nombre Dulce de Jesus De Los Temblores” or “Sweet Name of Jesus of the Earthquakes.” The name makes mention of the first recorded earthquake in Orange County. The military officers in the party subsequently change the name to Santa Anna in honor of Saint Anne, which they had recently celebrated.

1810 - First recorded flood of the Santa Ana River.

1825 - The Balboa peninsula is formed by a Santa Ana River flood.

1860 - The U.S. Coast Survey makes its first attempt to survey the Santa Ana River estuary.

1862 - The Santa Ana River floods after 30 days of rain.

1869 - William Spurgeon purchases 70 acres from the Yorba Family and establishes the city of Santa Ana. The Santa Ana River forms the western boundary of the new city.

1886 - The City of Santa Ana incorporates.

1896 - Southern California Power Company acquires the rights to the upper Santa Ana River and builds the power station known as Santa Ana No. 1.

1899 - The Santa Ana River line goes into service carrying power from Santa Ana No.1 to Los Angeles No.1. The line moves 33,000 volts a distance of 83 miles, making it the highest voltage, longest transmission line in the country.

1903 - James T. Talbert forms a drainage district that oversees the first man-made channeling of the wandering Santa Ana River.

1906 - Hiram Kellogg is appointed Engineer of Newport Protection District, making him responsible for flood control of the Santa Ana River, from Santa Ana to the Pacific Ocean. His family home is later donated and moved next to Centennial Park to house the Centennial Heritage Museum programs.

1915 - The first known mentions of the Santa Ana River Trail in historical documents and maps are made.

1916 - Two storms within one month overwhelm Orange County with floods. The Santa Ana River and Santiago Creek overflow their banks, causing damage and washing out bridges.

1920 - The Santa Ana River is re-channeled by the building of the Bitter Point Dam in Newport Beach. The River bypasses Newport Bay with a direct outlet to the sea.
1933 - The Orange County Water District is formed to protect the County’s water rights to the Santa Ana River. Later the District’s mission is expanded to manage the underground aquifer, making optimum use of local supplies and augmenting those with imported supplies provided through the County’s Metropolitan Water District member agencies.

1938 - A flash flood along the Santa Ana River results in 19 dead, 2,000 homeless, and 68,400 acres of flooded area.

1941 - The Prado Dam is constructed near the City of Corona.

1955 - Orange County adopts its first water pollution ordinance.

1964 - The Santa Ana River Mainstem Project is initiated. The Mainstem Project proposes flood control improvements along the Santa Ana River from the headwaters to the Pacific Ocean, covering some 75 miles.

1969 - A significant flood along the Santa Ana River Watershed caused damage on tributaries including San Timoteo and Santiago Creeks.

1975 - Orange County Flood Control District prepares the Santa Ana Survey Report on Santa Ana River flood hazards and proposed flood protection improvements.

1978 - The Santa Ana River Survey Report is submitted to Congress for consideration of funding.

1980 - The Army Corps of Engineers completes the Phase I General Design Memorandum for the Santa Ana River Mainstem Project.

1986 - Construction of the Santa Ana River is authorized by Congress by Section 401a of the Water Resources Development Act.

1989 - Construction of the Santa Ana River Mainstem Project begins.

1992 - The Santa Ana Watershed Project Authority is formed as a joint powers agency of five major water districts to focus ways to reduce salinization and promote water conservation.

1993 - Phase 1 of the Lower Santa Ana River Main Stem Project is completed, consisting of 3.2 miles of reinforced channel.

1999 - Construction of the Seven Oaks Dam is completed a few miles north of the City of Redlands.

2004 - On November 15, City Council approves the formation of the Santa Ana River Task Force.

2005 - On May 2, City Council approves the members to the Santa Ana River Task Force; the first meeting is convened on October 11.

2005 - Southern California experiences one of the wettest periods in recent history, placing unusual stress on the Santa Ana River system. Prado Dam, which is under construction for expansion, begins to crack, and residents of the local communities of Corona and Yorba Linda are evacuated as a precaution. The dam is damaged, but no major flooding results, and evacuees are allowed to return.

2006 - The Santa Ana River Vision Plan is finalized.