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They hope this levee holds

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New barrier will protect Olivehurst, Plumas Lake

May 28, 2008 11:15:00 PM

By Andrea Koskey/Appeal-Democrat

The night of Jan. 2, 1997, is one that longtime Yuba County residents will never forget.

Around 8:10 p.m., a swollen Feather River broke through the levee that protects south Yuba County, flooding more than 300 homes, causing roughly \$300 million in damages and killing three people.

Members of the Anderson family were victims. Their 35-acre English walnut farm off Feather River Boulevard and Anderson Avenue was one of the first hit by the flood waters.

According to Mary Anderson, water covered one home on the property completely and flooded the second level of another home. Marian Anderson, Mary's mother-in-law, drowned.

Eleven years after the flood, that levee — which was scheduled for an upgrade in the summer of 1997 — will be replaced. The project, known as the Feather River setback levee, will protect Olivehurst and Plumas Lake once it is completed at the end of the year.

Wednesday, a ground breaking ceremony was held to kick off construction of the project.

Anderson and her mother, Berdina, attended the ceremony across the street from their once-flooded homes.

The new levee will run through 18 acres of her family's farm.

Anderson was not enthusiastic about losing half of the family property, but said she understood the reason Yuba County's Three Rivers Levee Improvement Authority took the land.

"We're not willing to lose something that's been in the family for a number of years," she said. "What makes it a little easier is knowing it's for the greater good."

Anderson said she feels safe with the current levee.

"This is starting over. I have to trust that these guys are going to build it right," she said.

The new site, and the Anderson home, is only a few hundred yards from the existing levee.

In the dirt field where the ceremony took place, an electricity pole was marked with blue and red paint to indicate the height

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Chris Kaufman/Appeal-Democrat From left, Howard Lansdon, Duke Griego, Don Graham and Walt Whinton look over the shovels Wednesday during a levee groundbreaking ceremony on Anderson Avenue in Olivehurst. The six miles of levee will cost about \$200 million.

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[Levee Groundbreaking A groundbreaking ceremony is held for a 6-mile Yuba County setback levee near Star Bend on the Feather River.](#)

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the flood waters reached in 1997 and 11 years earlier, in the 1986 flood.

"We learned that lightning can strike twice," Supervisor and TRLIA Chair Mary Jane Griego told the crowd. "Buildings can be rebuilt, crops can be replanted, but what about those irreplaceable items like a wedding album, or a baby's blanket?"

Griego said the levee will help prevent the loss of such personal treasures. She has supported the project since improvements began four years ago.

The six miles of setback levee will cost nearly \$200 million. Officials hope to achieve 200-year flood protection status with the new levee under Federal Emergency Management Agency guidelines. The project is the last of four phases of levee improvements scheduled in Yuba County.

Don Graham, a Feather River Boulevard resident for 38 years and a member of the TRLIA board, supported the project because he's seen the effects of floods.

"I don't want to have to go through that again," Graham said.

Graham said water in the 1997 flood was up to the second story of his home, even though the original builder raised the foundation 4 feet to protect it from floods.

During that flood, Graham said he and his wife tried to leave, but couldn't make it off Feather River Boulevard because the water was too high.

Graham said the couple spent the night on the second story of their flooded home. They were rescued by a helicopter the next morning.

Graham said the construction of a new levee is important for the safety of residents.

"This exercise today brings back memories and hopes that this kind of thing won't happen again," he said. "We hope the likelihood of getting wet is greatly reduced."

Memories of the 1997 flood are still with the Andersons, too. They will continue to farm what is left of their walnut trees.

"You pick up the pieces and move forward," Anderson said.

Contact Appeal-Democrat reporter Andrea Koskey at 749-4709 or akoskey@appealdemocrat.com

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I hate to sound cold hearted, but a flooding of epic proportions is just what this area needs. I think we can all agree that we just need to "start over". I for one have flood insurance and can't wait to use it.

5/29/2008 10:36:46 AM

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