

Palmdale Bulge was a mountain of mystery

Scientists and amateurs — even a healer — went to the Antelope Valley to study the baffling rise in the Earth's crust. Some said it was an illusion caused by faulty equipment.

Steve Harvey, Los Angeles Times, 12-11-10

The Palmdale Bulge — it sounded like some sort of waistline problem afflicting middle-aged men.

But it referred to something even more ominous in the mid-1970s — the reported uplift of the Earth's crust by as much as 18 inches along the San Andreas fault in the Antelope Valley.

Scientists wondered if it was the harbinger of a giant earthquake. Or perhaps a volcano.

Southern Californians were uneasy in the aftermath of the 1971 Sylmar quake that killed 64.

Stories of West Coast disaster were also trendy in the popular arts, whether it was author Curt Gentry's temblor tale "The Last Days of the Late, Great State of California"; the motion picture "Earthquake" (goodbye, Capitol Records tower); or the earthquake song by the group Shango, who warbled, "Where can we go when there's no San Diego?"

And now there was this real-life land mass said to be rising ominously in Palmdale, about 60 miles north of Los Angeles.

Riding to the rescue were "more than 300 scientists, engineers and technicians" who would arm themselves with instruments and "swarm all over the Palmdale Bulge for three months ... to determine the exact contours and extent of this mysterious swelling," The Times reported in December 1977. The U.S. Geological Survey funded the \$1.4-million project.

Meanwhile, on the home front, the state Office of Emergency Services sought to calm fears by recruiting Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck and Sylvester the Cat to deliver radio messages on earthquake safety.

The cartoons weren't indulging in any frivolity — Sylvester's trademark line "Sufferin' succotash!" was even cut from the script in order to squeeze in more survival tips.

A Glendale organization called Quake Watchers took out display ads in The Times warning that "the portent of the Palmdale Bulge" concerned every Californian.

And, in what The Times' John Dart termed one of the "more unusual forays of faith," a Lynwood healer drove to the Antelope Valley, where he performed "certain rites over the so-called Palmdale Bulge, predicting that it would miraculously go down."

The scientists' 1978 assault, plagued by "balky equipment" and "the worst weather in years," did not go well, The Times reported.

But a funny thing happened — or didn't happen. Time passed, and there wasn't any shaking going on.

By 1980 the Palmdale Bulge theory was developing "serious cracks," seismologist Susan Hough wrote in her book "Predicting the Unpredictable: The Tumultuous Science of Earthquake Prediction."

One verification problem was the fact that the suspected swelling was spread out across so many miles that it was invisible to the naked eye.

Some scientists, including UCLA geologist David Jackson, came forth to claim there was no bulge, saying it was an illusion created by antiquated equipment.

Looking back, Caltech seismologist Kate Hutton, a bulge doubter, said, "If we'd had GPS in those days we could have said yes or no" about the existence of the bulge.

Some USGS scientists clung to their faith in the bulge.

The ensuing debate, Hough wrote, became "as intense, as heated, as personal and as nasty as any Earth science debate in recent memory."

One USGS scientist who became a bulge naysayer "twice found paper bags full of dog excrement in his USGS mailbox," Hough wrote.

UCLA's Jackson later quipped: "Some people told me I was full of crap, but nobody sent me any."

In 1981, Science magazine carried a piece titled "Palmdale Bulge Doubts Now Taken Seriously," and the number of disbelievers grew.

Some local homeowners, angry over the publicity, filed a suit claiming that the false prediction of an earthquake "had damaged property values," David Ulin wrote in his book "The Myth of Solid Ground."

They were on shaky ground, legally, and the suit was dropped.

The controversy certainly didn't keep people from moving to the Antelope Valley. In the 1980s, Palmdale became one of the fastest-growing cities in the nation.

The members of the San Andreas Singers a capella group are content to live in the Palo Alto area hundreds of miles north, though.

The quintet recently admitted on one website: "Though we have yet to perform at seismology's famous Palmdale Bulge, animals do sometimes behave strangely just prior to and during our performances."

Today, the existence of the Palmdale Bulge seems a dead issue.

Some scientists think it never existed; a few believe there was a swelling that abated over the years because of natural causes.

Or perhaps that Lynwood healer made the bulge go away just as he said he would.