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Saint Francis Dam Disaster National Memorial-Written Testimony

History

Sitting in a remote canyon in North Los Angeles County are the remains of a structure responsible for one of the twenty worst disasters in American history. Starting at 2 ½ minutes before midnight on the dark foggy moonless night of March 12, 1928, the areas now known as the Santa Clarita Valley, San Francisquito Canyon, Castaic Junction, Santa Clara River Valley, Piru, Fillmore, Bardsdale, Saticoy, and Santa Paula were devastated by the worst flood that the state of California has ever seen. Up to 600 people lost their lives that night in a disaster whose magnitude in California history was surpassed only by the San Francisco Earthquake of 1906. The History Channel has called it “America's worst civil engineering failure of the 20th Century.”

The story of the St. Francis Dam is a story of the quest for water in the parched semi-arid region of Southern California which allowed Los Angeles to grow from a sleepy pueblo into the second largest city in the United States. It is the sad, almost Shakespearean, story of the rise and fall of William Mulholland, Chief Engineer of the Los Angeles Bureau of Water Works and Supply, and one of the most prominent figures in California history. It is a story filled with intrigue, mass devastation, and loss of lives, including entire families, and as with many tragedies in history, an event which witnessed people who displayed tremendous heroism in the face of almost certain death.

The origins of the St. Francis Dam disaster can actually be traced back to the very beginnings of Los Angeles in 1781 when Los Pobladores, a group of 44 people, set out with four soldier escorts to become the first settlers of El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora La Reina de los Ángeles sobre el Río Porciúncula. In the early days of the pueblo of Los Angeles, the city water supply was obtained from the Los Angeles River. Water was brought to the pueblo from the river by way of a series of ditches called zanjas. The main ditch was called the Zanja Madre (mother ditch). By 1868, the population of the pueblo had grown to between 5,000 and 6,000 citizens. At that time, the city entered into a contract with a private water company, the Los Angeles City Water Company, to lease the city's waterworks for a 30 year period to provide water to the city.

In 1875, Fred Eaton, a future mayor of Los Angeles, became superintendent of the Water Company at age 19. He hired Irish immigrant William Mulholland in 1878 as a zanjero (ditch tender). Although he had

no formal schooling, Mulholland proved to be a brilliant employee, who taught himself engineering and geology. Mulholland quickly moved up the ranks of the Water Company, becoming Superintendent in 1886.

By the turn of the century, the population of Los Angeles had grown to over 100,000 people. It was becoming obvious that the Los Angeles River would not have enough water to supply this growing city in the future. Eaton had traveled to the Owens Valley, east of the Sierra Nevada Range, in 1893 and came up with a grandiose idea of diverting water from the Owens River to the increasingly thirsty city of Los Angeles 233 miles away. In 1902, the City of Los Angeles took over the city's water supply and the Bureau of Water Works and Supply was formed with Mulholland continuing as Superintendent. Eaton convinced Mulholland to travel with him to see the Owens Valley, which they did by buckboard in 1904.

Mulholland was convinced by Eaton during this trip in 1904, and hatched an idea to build an aqueduct between the Owens Valley and Los Angeles. But to accomplish this would first require buying up land and water rights in the Owens Valley. The residents of the Owens Valley, however, had other ideas. They were looking forward to a reclamation project sponsored by the federal Bureau of Reclamation. Eaton, with the help of his friend and local chief of the Reclamation Service J.B. Lippincott, began buying up land in the Owens Valley under the pretense that the land would be used for the reclamation project. By July 1905, Eaton had bought up enough land to secure the land and water rights to build the aqueduct. The Los Angeles Daily Times headline of July 29, 1905 would proclaim "TITANIC PROJECT TO GIVE CITY A RIVER. Thirty Thousand Inches of Water to be Brought to Los Angeles. Options Secured on Forty Miles of River Frontage in Inyo County ... Stupendous Deal Closed."

Bond issues were passed by the voters in Los Angeles in 1905 to finance the purchases made by Eaton and in 1907 to finance the construction of the aqueduct. Mulholland began construction of the aqueduct in 1908. It would prove to be an engineering marvel extending 233 miles from the Owens Valley to Los Angeles with the water traveling the distance purely by gravity without the need for pumping systems. Mulholland miraculously completed the project on time and in budget by 1913. He became a hero to the City of Los Angeles (but reviled by the people of the Owens Valley for decades to come).

On November 5, 1913, over 40,000 Los Angeles residents came to the San Fernando Valley to see the first water from the Owens Valley complete the journey to Los Angeles. Mulholland presided over the ceremony and instructed the water gate to be opened with the famous words "there it is, take it". The November 6, 1913 issue of the Los Angeles Times proclaimed "GLORIOUS MOUNTAIN RIVER NOW FLOWS TO LOS ANGELES' GATES".

With the opening of the aqueduct in 1913, Mulholland became a huge hero to the people of Los Angeles. He was asked to run for mayor, and neighborhoods and a public highway were named for him. But the people of the Owens Valley did not share in the city's love of their water Chief. They felt duped by land purchases stealthily accomplished by Eaton to secure water rights to the Owens Valley and complained that Los Angeles had stolen their water without adequate compensation.

Beginning in 1924, Owens Valley locals began attacking the aqueduct, dynamiting some sections and letting water loose into the valley, in what would become known as the Owens Valley Water Wars. This and other factors — such as the aqueduct crossing the San Andreas Fault — led Mulholland to build a series of reservoirs to provide Los Angeles with a reserve of water close-by in the event of a disruption of the aqueduct's operation.

The last of these reservoirs would provide the "fall" part of the William Mulholland saga. The St. Francis Dam was completed in 1926. Mulholland was greatly responsible for building the dam, which turned out to be flawed both in design and in geologic location. It was built with the intent to hold a year's water supply from the Eastern Sierra water provided by the Los Angeles Aqueduct in the event of an emergency. In 1923 preliminary studies and surveys for the St. Francis Dam were completed. Construction began in 1924 and the dam was completed in 1926. Just five days after being filled to capacity for the first time, on March 12, 1928 at 11:57:30 PM, the dam collapsed due to an unforeseen ancient Paleolithic landslide on the eastern abutment, hydraulic uplift phenomenon of the inadequately constructed foundation of the dam, and failure of the water saturated sedimentary rock on the western abutment. The 140 foot wall of water that was released from the dam ravaged San Francisquito Canyon, Saugus, Castaic Junction, Piru, Fillmore, Bardsdale, Saticoy, and Santa Paula killing virtually everyone in the flood path. The closest count of victims we have is approximately 469. However, it is believed that up to 600 may have perished. There are still bodies buried in the area of Blue Cut, and many others that are unaccounted for. Bodies were found floating in the sea as far away as San Diego.

The stories of victims and heroes of the dam disaster are many. At the base of the dam that fateful night may have been dam keeper Tony Harnischfeger and his girlfriend, Leona Johnson. Earlier that day, Harnischfeger had placed a frantic call to Mulholland when he noticed muddy water leaking from the Western abutment of the dam. While it was normal for dams to leak to some extent, the mud indicated to Harnischfeger that the base of the dam might be eroding and subject to catastrophe.

Mulholland arrived around 10:30 a.m. with his assistant Chief Harvey Van Norman and inspected the dam. He concluded that the leakage appeared normal and went back to Los Angeles — a decision he would regret for the rest of his life.

Later that night, Harnischfeger may have noticed more frightening problems with the dam. He might have been inspecting the dam base just before it collapsed. We will never know for sure. After the dam rupture, his girlfriend's lifeless body was found at the base of the dam; Harnischfeger's body was never found.

A mile and a half downstream from the dam was a group of homes for workers at Powerhouse No. 2. Lillian Curtis and her family were awakened by a mysterious mist in the air which she correctly concluded meant that the dam had failed. As a gargantuan wall of water approached the Powerhouse

site, Lillian and her son scrambled up a hillside while her husband went to retrieve their two daughters. The mother and son were the family's only survivors.

Ray Rising, a utility man from the Powerhouse, also was awakened and faced a 10-story-high wall of water. He was swept into the flood but managed to climb on to a floating rooftop which took him to safety. He was the only other survivor at this Powerhouse. The building itself was swept away by the flood, leaving only the floor slab and two turbines.

In San Francisquito Canyon, six members of the Ruiz family were swept away by the flood and perished. Their graves can be seen today lined up next to each other in the Ruiz Cemetery in the canyon.

At the base of San Francisquito Canyon (today the Tesoro Del Valle development) was the ranch of movie star Harry Carey. The flood roared through and destroyed part of the ranch, including a Navajo Trading Post which had been a popular tourist attraction.

Carey was away on business in New York at the time. Legend has it that a group of Navajo Indians hired by Carey to run the trading post had called Carey asking to leave the ranch for Arizona the night before the dam break on the basis of a premonition by their medicine man of an impending dam rupture. But according to Carey's son, Harry Carey Jr., the Indians actually asked Carey one month prior if they could leave when they did — after the medicine man went deer hunting near the dam and noticed a big crack in its face.

As the flood approached Castaic Junction, Raymond Starbard, an assistant Edison patrolman at the Saugus Substation (which can still be seen on Magic Mountain Parkway), was almost washed away by the flood. He hitched a ride to Wood's Garage next to the Saugus Cafe. There, Starbard made a call to the Newhall Sheriff's Substation No. 6 and was credited with being the first person to sound the alarm about the flood.

Just past the Ventura County line along the Santa Clara River was a railroad siding called Kemp. There, a group of 150 workers for the Edison Company were fast asleep in a tent camp used while they were building a transmission line. Night watchman Ed Locke watched in horror as the huge flood of water approached the camp. He ran through the camp, waking up as many people as possible.

Locke, a true hero of the disaster, perished that night, along with 84 of the workers as the flood hit a geologic outcropping called Blue Cut, which created a whirlpool effect that uprooted the tents. Most of the survivors had their tents zipped up, which allowed them to float on the whirlpool.

There were other heroes to recognize at Santa Paula. Louise Gipe, a night telephone operator at Santa Paula, received a call from the Pacific Long Distance telephone operator at 1:30 a.m., warning of the flood headed her way. Ignoring the peril to her own life, she stayed at her post, notifying California Highway Patrolman Thornton Edwards and calling residents in the low-lying areas of Santa Paula to warn them about the impending flood.

Edwards would become known as the "Paul Revere of the St. Francis Flood" as he raced wildly from door to door warning residents of Santa Paula. While Edwards spread the alarm through Santa Paula, deputy sheriff Eddie Hearne raced up the Santa Clara River Valley toward the flood with his siren blaring to warn residents.

He made it as far as Fillmore, where he met the flood waters and had to stop his wild ride.

NEED

In the 88 years since the St Francis Dam disaster, this tragic event has mostly been forgotten. At the time of the disaster, it was a worldwide sensation, with banner headlines in newspapers reporting on the event all over America and the world. Yet today, few people are aware of one of the epic disasters in United States history. Never in the 86 years since the dam failed has an attempt been made to place a memorial at the site appropriate in scale to the magnitude of the disaster.

It is our belief that a site and event which resulted in the loss of hundreds of lives in a single evening in 1928, would be most appropriately remembered, and the victims honored, by designating the site of the St. Francis Dam as a National Memorial and Monument. We have the support of the constituency of the City of Santa Clarita, the Santa Clarita Valley Historical Society, The St. Francis Archeological Group, the Community Hiking Club, the Santa Clara River Watershed Conservancy and many other organizations and businesses. We know of no opponents to this legislation.

Congressman Knight's Legacy for the Santa Clarita Valley

We believe the St. Francis Dam site creates a tremendous opportunity to leave a lasting legacy to the people of the Santa Clarita Valley, and to most appropriately honor the memory of the many people who lost their lives on the night of March 12-13, 1928.

We appreciate the attention that Congressman Knight has paid to the constituency of the 25th District who have asked that these important ruins be turned into a Monument and Memorial, and that the people who perished 88 years ago be honored. We hope that with this memorial we can conserve both the natural and historic sites in and around the disaster area to provide unimpaired enjoyment and historical congruity for future generations.

We thank Congressman Steve Knight for his efforts to permanently protect the historical scene of the Saint Francis Dam, to encourage the building of a Visitor's Center and Memorial Wall, to secure the area in an effort to reduce unauthorized theft of historical artifacts, to reduce graffiti and other vandalism, to memorialize the area and pay homage to the citizens that perished in the flood, and to bring to light this huge historical event for educational purposes, and for future generations.

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