



Hetch Hetchy, the Earthquake and the Boodle

Greetings!

The story of how Hetch Hetchy Valley came to be dammed, a century after the fact, is often simply told:

"San Francisco's early efforts to build a dam in Yosemite National Park's Hetch Hetchy Valley were denied. But after an earthquake and fire devastated the city in 1906, a sympathetic Congress passed the Raker Act, allowing the city to build the water project it had long sought."

But the story is not that simple. It had as much to do with the graft and corruption that permeated city politics at the time as it did with the earthquake and ensuing fire.



After the earthquake, fire destroyed some 25,000 buildings. Local reservoirs were full, but water mains were severed so there was little firefighters could do.

Whether warranted or not, much of the blame for the fire was placed on the private

Spring Valley Water Company which served San Francisco at the time. Spring Valley had already been unpopular, so the occasion renewed desires to create a public water system. A public water system would also include the recognized need to bring in additional supply from afar.

Former Mayor James Phelan had long supported the Hetch Hetchy proposal, to build a dam within Yosemite National Park and harness Tuolumne River supplies. Phelan had used his considerable personal wealth to file for water rights on the river. Engineers were said to be completely hypnotized by the narrow granite dam site at Hetch Hetchy. **But the proposal had problems.**



After his 1903 camping trip with John Muir in Yosemite President Theodore Roosevelt agreed that Hetch Hetchy should not be dammed. But after the earthquake, he may have changed his mind.

Principally, Hetch Hetchy lay within Yosemite National Park. San Francisco hoped it could obtain permission to build a dam administratively. Ethan Allen Hitchcock, Theodore Roosevelt's Secretary of the Interior, however, had denied the application. Also, the Turlock and Modesto Irrigation Districts had senior rights to the river's flow, so San Francisco would only be able to divert surplus supplies. Finally, the proposal involved drilling a 25-mile tunnel through the Coast Range - the longest in the world at the time. (The Coast Range Tunnel was finally completed in 1934, 11 years after Hetch Hetchy Reservoir, and after a gas explosion had claimed 12 lives and depression era cost overruns had outraged the citizenry.)

In 1906, San Francisco was actively considering other alternatives for additional supply. Mayor Eugene Schmitz and the Supervisors preferred a proposal from the Bay Cities Water Company to bring water from the South Fork of the American River and North

water company to bring water from the South Fork of the American River and North Fork of the Cosumnes River. Those watersheds were wetter than the Tuolumne and did not include the competition of Turlock and Modesto for access to supply. They were also further away, but a pipeline would not require drilling through the coast range - it could simply be routed around the north side of Mt. Diablo as the East Bay Municipal Utility District would soon do.



After electing not to participate in San Francisco's Hetch Hetchy project, Oakland and other East Bay communities built Pardee Reservoir on the Mokelumne River. The Mokelumne Aqueduct was completed in only four years, allowing the East Bay to provide emergency supplies to San Francisco in the early 1930's while the Coast Range Tunnel was still under construction.

The Bay Cities proposal had a different problem. It had offered a \$1,000,000 bribe (about \$26,000,000 in today's dollars) to Abe Ruef, the Mayor's attorney, for "favorable consideration".

Boss Ruef was the most powerful figure in the City. He had foreseen the rising power of the working class and he then helped create the Union Labor Party in 1901. In 1903, he maneuvered to elect Schmitz, one of his clients, as Mayor. Doing business with the City meant doing business with Ruef, who typically demanded bribes before approving a contract. He would keep some of this "Boodle" for himself and disburse the rest to the Mayor and Board of Supervisors.

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By 1900, Ruef's scheme was under investigation at the behest of Phelan, newspaper editor Fremont Older and Rudolph Spreckels (my great grandfather's brother). President Theodore Roosevelt personally appointed U.S. Attorney Francis Heney as prosecutor.

The lengthy trial was delayed twice, first by the earthquake and later after a rejected juror shot Heney in the face. Heney recovered, and convicted Ruef and Schmitz. Ruef went to prison, but Schmitz appealed and his conviction was nullified. Several Supervisors resigned in disgrace.



"Boss" Abe Ruef served 4 1/2 years of a 14 year sentence. He refused to testify against Mayor Schmitz.



Mayor Eugene Schmitz' conviction was overturned. He ran again for mayor, unsuccessfully, but was elected to the Board of Supervisors.



U.S. Attorney Francis Heney was hand-picked for the San Francisco Graft Trials after successfully prosecuting the Oregon Land Fraud.



Mayor Phelan was later elected Senator. The University of San Francisco renamed its Phelan Hall in 2017 after reviewing his [anti-Asian campaign literature](#).

Even without regard to the destruction of Yosemite, the Bay Cities proposal may have been superior to the Hetch Hetchy proposal. Bay Cities was, however, tarnished by its association with the corruption of Ruef, Schmitz and their cronies, and was removed from consideration. Phelan emerged a hero, and San Francisco enthusiastically renewed its quest for the Hetch Hetchy project.

Some might say the story ends there, and that the rest is history. We disagree. Restore Hetch Hetchy intends to write the next chapter!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive that reads "Spreck Rosekrans".

Spreck Rosekrans

Executive Director

P.S. Sources for the information provided above include:

- [The Battle over Hetch Hetchy: America's Most Controversial Dam and the Birth of Modern Environmentalism](#), Robert Righter, 2005
- [Boss Ruef's San Francisco](#), Walton Bean, 1952
- [A History of the Municipal Water Department and San Francisco System](#), SFPUC Communications, 2005

Please Contribute Today

It's time to return Hetch Hetchy Valley to Yosemite National Park.

