

The Examiner

100 years after Raker Act was signed, the fight over Hetch Hetchy dam continues

By Jonah Owen Lamb



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The City won a big vote in the U.S. Senate, too much controversy.*

It is perhaps the mother of all California water wars, and it's been raging for more than a century.

The most decisive defeat in the fight over damming the Tuolumne River in Hetch Hetchy Valley occurred 100 years ago today when President Woodrow Wilson signed the Raker Act. That gave San Francisco the right to build the O'Shaughnessy Dam in a place described by environmentalist John Muir as "one of God's best gifts [that] ought to be faithfully guarded."

The struggle, pitting defenders of natural beauty against thirsty urbanites, has set the mold for environmental conflicts to this day. And while everyone who threw their weight into the first debate is long dead, the struggle continues.

Modern-day opponents of the dam say they plan to take their efforts to the courts and Congress.

The 1906 earthquake, and earlier fires, made it clear to many that San Francisco needed a more secure and plentiful supply of water than the monopoly held at the time by a private water company. The City looked to the Sierra Nevada. What it found was a high-walled valley perfect for damming the Tuolumne River. The only problem: The valley sat smack in the middle of the newly created Yosemite National Park.

Even before the earthquake, debates flourished as they do now. But they reached a fever pitch in the weeks before the Raker Act's passage.

The San Francisco Bulletin printed a Dec. 1, 1913, story calling the bill's opponents "a crowd of nature lovers and fakers, who are waging a sentimental campaign to preserve the Hetch Hetchy Valley as a public playground, a purpose for which it has never been used."

The San Francisco Examiner printed a 16-page special edition in Washington, D.C., that week to pressure lawmakers to pass the bill.

"The most insidious lobby ever assembled in Washington," was how a senator described the law's supporters.

The day after its passage, fruitless attempts were made to repeal the Raker Act.

"The Raker Act was deeply controversial, and was condemned in more than 200 newspaper editorials nationwide. That outcry is often cited as the birth of today's conservation movement. Three short years after the Act was signed, Congress atoned by passing the National Park Service Act, largely to protect our national parks from any further disfigurement," according to Restore Hetch Hetchy, a nonprofit trying to bring down the dam.

The dam, which wasn't completed until 1923, started delivering water to San Francisco taps in 1934.

The fight bubbled to the surface in 1955 when the Sierra Club released the film "Two Yosemitees." Narrated by environmentalist David Brower, it contrasted the "ugliness of the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir" with Yosemite Valley.

Fifteen years later, the group recommended taking down the dam. The Reagan administration in the 1980s picked a losing fight with California liberals in Congress by backing a plan to drain the reservoir.

Then-Mayor Dianne Feinstein, now a U.S. senator, said in 1987 of the plan, "All this for an expanded campground? Dumb. It's dumb, dumb, dumb."

Aside from small skirmishes in the past couple of decades, the most recent effort to bring down the dam was 2012's failed Proposition F in San Francisco.

Now Restore Hetch Hetchy is planning a new campaign in the courts and in Washington. In the courts, it will argue that San Francisco's current water system violates state and federal law. The

group hopes to get Congress to amend the Raker Act, which would take down the dam and restore the valley but allow San Francisco to still take water from the Tuolumne River and use its conveyance systems currently in place.

The Bay Area Council, which led the charge in opposition to Restore Hetch Hetchy's Prop. F effort, will continue to oppose such measures, said spokesman Adrian Covert.

"We are dedicated to maintaining the Hetch Hetchy water and power system and bringing a reliable, clean, fresh water supply to the Bay Area," Covert said. "And if that involves defending the Hetch Hetchy system in Congress or the ballot box, we'll be there."

Hetch Hetchy Reservoir

The water supply for San Francisco is housed in the Yosemite Valley, and also provides electricity locally.

1.7B Kilowatt hours of electrical generation from hydroelectric plant per year

167 miles of aqueduct from Hetch Hetchy to San Francisco

2.4M customers using Hetch Hetchy water in the Bay Area

300M gallons of water provided daily by water system

1913 Raker Act passed

1923 O'Shaughnessy Dam was completed

1934 water was first delivered to San Francisco

This article was corrected Thursday, Dec. 19. The name of Bay Area Council spokesman Adrian Covert was misspelled.