

“The 1890 Census in San Diego”

“I am incensed,” Mayor Douglas Gunn responded on Saturday when the census figure of 15,700 for San Diego was mentioned. “I shall write to the census authorities and the Secretary of Interior demanding a recount.”

--San Diego Union, July 7, 1890

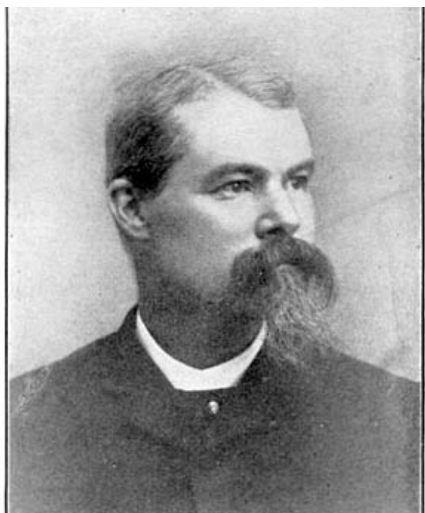
The Eleventh U.S. Census officially began on June 2, 1890. In the next few weeks 47,000 census enumerators spread out across America to pore over town maps, knock on doors, and personally visit every house and family, in order to tally perhaps the most significant and controversial census the nation had ever seen.

Like most U.S. cities, San Diego looked forward to the decennial counting with optimism, knowing it would show a major population rise and lead to significantly better legislative representation. Mayor Douglas Gunn estimated the 1890 count would show a city population of at least 27,000, up from 2,637 in 1880.

A local clothing store, A. Dorsey & Co., displayed its census spirit by announcing prizes “to the best guesser” of the final count. First prize was the choice of any \$25 men’s suit in the store. Second prize was an \$8 Dunlap silk hat, “the very best in the market.”

The questionnaire in the hands of San Diego’s sixteen enumerators contained 25 questions to be asked of every citizen. There was a separate sheet for every family. New entries in 1890 included questions about home ownership and indebtedness, and a query about race asked “whether white, black, mulatto, quadroon, octoroon, Chinese, Japanese, or Indian.”

There was little controversy over the questionnaire but as the numbering got underway in San Diego city officials quickly became concerned over the pace of the census taking and the completeness of the count. The Census Bureau required that cities of San Diego’s size be canvassed within two weeks. The count was particularly sluggish in the red light district south of H Street, where shy residents tended to ignore the knock on the door.



Mayor Douglas Gunn *Wikipedia Commons*

Mayor Gunn moaned, “This enumeration is of too great importance to have it rushed. . . I have heard it asserted that the enumerators were going to make out a population something like 6,000 or more short of what it really is. If this is so, irreparable damage will be done to San Diego.”

As the enumeration neared its scheduled conclusion in mid-June, San Diegans began coming forward to announce they were uncounted. George B. Hensley, a businessman active in the Chamber of Commerce, declared “none of his family had been seen by the census takers and he knew of many families who had been missed.” The proprietor of a local hotel complained “her house was full of guests, none of whom had been counted.”

The Chamber of Commerce voiced its concerns by telegraphing a resolution to the Superintendent of the Census in Washington, D.C., conveying “earnest protest against the unsystematic, careless and inaccurate manner in which the enumeration of the population of this city is being made.”

But some people refused to be counted. “The enumerators complain that they are rudely treated,” reported the *Union*. “One says he was ordered out of three places. As many doors were shut in his face, and eighteen persons positively declined to answer the questions.”

On June 19, the *Union* reported that people were being arrested for refusing to answer the census enumerator’s questions, per order of Census Supervisor L. E. Mosher from Los Angeles. A deputy U.S. Marshall escorted three San Diegans on the train to Los Angeles who seemed “afflicted with much lassitude over the census.”

With surprising speed San Diego’s census total arrived on July 7. San Diegans were stunned. According to the U.S. Census, the city’s population totaled only 15,700. Mayor Gunn was furious. Charging that two out of three people had been missed, the mayor demanded a recount. He took a train to Los Angeles and complained personally to Supervisor Mosher, who promised to take the matter under advisement.

A few days later Mosher telegraphed Gunn to say he would come to San Diego and thoroughly investigate “your claim of errors and omissions in the enumeration.” The *Los Angeles Times* headlined the story: “CENSUS SQUABBING: San Diego Thinks She Is in the Soup.”

On July 15 the Supervisor arrived and settled in at the Hotel del Coronado. Two days of audits followed in a room at City Hall. Mosher’s enumerators rechecked their schedules and interviewed over two hundred people who claimed to be uncounted. When their work was over, Mosher’s team added 336 names to the tally. San Diego’s official population was now 16,037.

With the count official San Diegans swallowed their pride and looked at the bright side. The percentage increase since 1880 was 512% versus “only” 350% for Los Angeles. The *Union* noted, “The per cent of increase in population for the last ten years is wonderful to hear, and wonderful to tell.” (Unfortunately, the winner of the A. Dorsey & Co. “best guesser” contest went unreported.)



San Diegans may have accepted their results but nationally, the 1890 U.S. Census would be controversial. People were shocked (and suspicious) of the speed of the census count. The eleventh census was the first to be counted by machine; the returns were tabulated from data entered on punch cards. The rough population estimate for the entire country (62 million) was announced after six weeks of processing. The complete 1880 count had taken eight years.

The 1890 census is mostly remembered as “the lost census.” In 1921, about 25% of the warehoused census schedules were destroyed in a fire in Washington, D.C. But 75% of the forms survived the blaze either damaged or untouched. These

irreplaceable returns were stored and ignored before a government order authorized their destruction in 1933.

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