

“A Dam Fiasco”

To look at it now, solidly in place, you would never know its disturbed history. The broken course of the Sutherland project is one of those fantastic things that could only happen here.

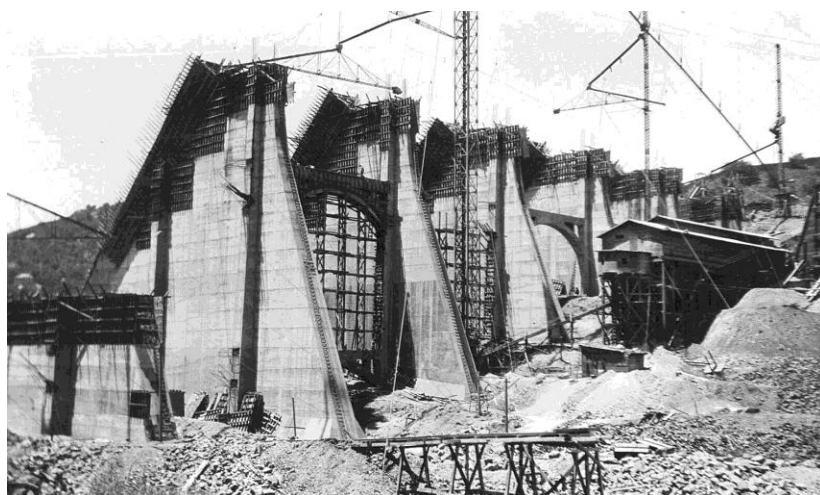
--Shelley Higgins, former City Attorney, in *This Fantastic City*.

In February 1927, on remote canyon land, ten miles northeast of Ramona, the City of San Diego began construction of the Sutherland Dam. Only eighteen months later, the ill-starred project would end--victimized by a series of problems including design errors, financial difficulties, and political squabbling. The site of the “dam fiasco” would remain untouched for the next 25 years.

The dam on San Ysabel creek--named for a local rancher, John P. Sutherland--was intended to capture rainfall from the San Dieguito watershed, which averages 30 inches a year. Billions of gallons of water that normally flowed to the ocean each year would be preserved in the new reservoir. Construction funds would come from a \$2 million bond measure passed by San Diego voters on October 19, 1926. Less than half of that amount was designated to build Sutherland Dam.

The construction firm of Edwards, Wildey & Dixon--low bid contractors from Los Angeles--began building a road to the isolated site as soon the ink dried on their \$885,000 contract. Heavy rains promptly washed out the roadwork—the winter of 1927 would be one of wettest on record. Undeterred, the contractors rebuilt the road and began work on the dam’s foundation.

But another problem emerged. Engineers reported that borings for the dam’s base indicated “a highly fissured condition of the foundation rock.” Deeper digging would be required to reach sound bedrock. Cost estimates began to rise. Supervising engineer J. W. Williams warned that total expenses might exceed \$1,700,000.



By summer, rumors were flying that the foundation site was unsuitable and the dam could not be built there at any cost. A panel of consulting engineers visited the site and suggested that a better foundation site could be found upstream.

And so the entire project was moved 700 yards up the creek and restarted. But the second site presented new difficulties.

Now the entire dam would need to be 300 feet longer to span a wider canyon area. Cost estimates soared to over two million.

By the summer of 1928, the slow moving Sutherland venture was nearly bankrupt. In desperation, the City Council turned to a water engineer they had once fired: Hiram N. Savage. The builder of several San Diego projects including the Lower Otay Dam in 1919 and Barrett

Dam in 1922, Savage had vast local experience. But he was also known for his stubbornness and inability to compromise—traits that cost him his job in 1923 when he quarreled with Council politicians.

Given a second opportunity in July 1928, Savage's first order of business was an inspection the Sutherland site. His immediate reaction was harsh criticism of the dam's multiple-arch design. Concrete arch dams had been built successfully before in California. Only ten years earlier the multiple-arched Hodges Dam in Escondido and Murray Dam in La Mesa were built with the designs of the respected hydraulic engineer John S. Eastwood.

But Savage hated the dams, believing that only his single-arch, monolithic concrete dams were sound. He even warned the City Council that Hodges was unsafe, and liable to fail at any time. The Council was sensitive to any hint of possible dam failure from poor design or construction. Only months earlier, the St. Francis Dam near Los Angeles had collapsed—killing hundreds of people downstream.

On August 13, Savage advised the Council that only \$100,000 in bond funds remained for a dam he believed would cost an additional \$700,000 to complete. With Sutherland only 25% complete, work was suspended at the end of the month. Only a caretaker remained at the site.

A year later, a wildfire swept through the Sutherland basin, destroying buildings and equipment and eliminating any hope of restarting the costly project. "All that remains of the city's Sutherland venture," reported the *Union*, "are some concrete buttresses uprearing at the damsite, a pile of reinforced steel shapes rusting on a hillside and an engineer's camp nestled on a hillside."

With Sutherland abandoned, the city took on other water projects. Hiram Savage supervised the construction of the earth-fill El Capitan Dam in 1932-35 (after voters refused to fund his preferred concrete dam in Mission Gorge), and San Vicente Dam was finished in 1943. In 1946 the first Colorado River came to San Diego via an aqueduct from San Jacinto.



Sutherland abandoned.

None of these projects were enough to satisfy the water needs of a region that doubled in population size during World War II. A second barrel was planned for the San Diego Aqueduct, and the city took a fresh look at the long forsaken ruins of the Sutherland project.

"We need that water," declared Ralph Phillips of the Greater San Diego Water Committee. San Diego voters agreed, passing a bond measure in February 1952 for \$6,500,000. The bonds restarted work on the old foundations of Sutherland Dam. A second proposition paid for construction of the second barrel for the San Diego Aqueduct.

Finally completed without any hint of the historic complications, Sutherland Dam was dedicated on June 5, 1954. With a crest length of 1,025 feet, Sutherland is the second longest San Diego dam, surpassed only by El Capitan Dam. When full, 5.25 miles of shoreline surround the reservoir of 556 surface acres of water.

300 See Sutherland Dam Dedicated

Fete Caps Task Begun Back in '27

RAMONA (Special) — The 30-year-old dream of spanning Santa Ysabel Creek with a dam to impound waters in the wide gorge 10 miles northeast of Ramona for residents of San Diego has been realized officially.

More than 300 persons shared in the realization Saturday afternoon when dedication ceremonies for the 161-foot high Sutherland dam were conducted.

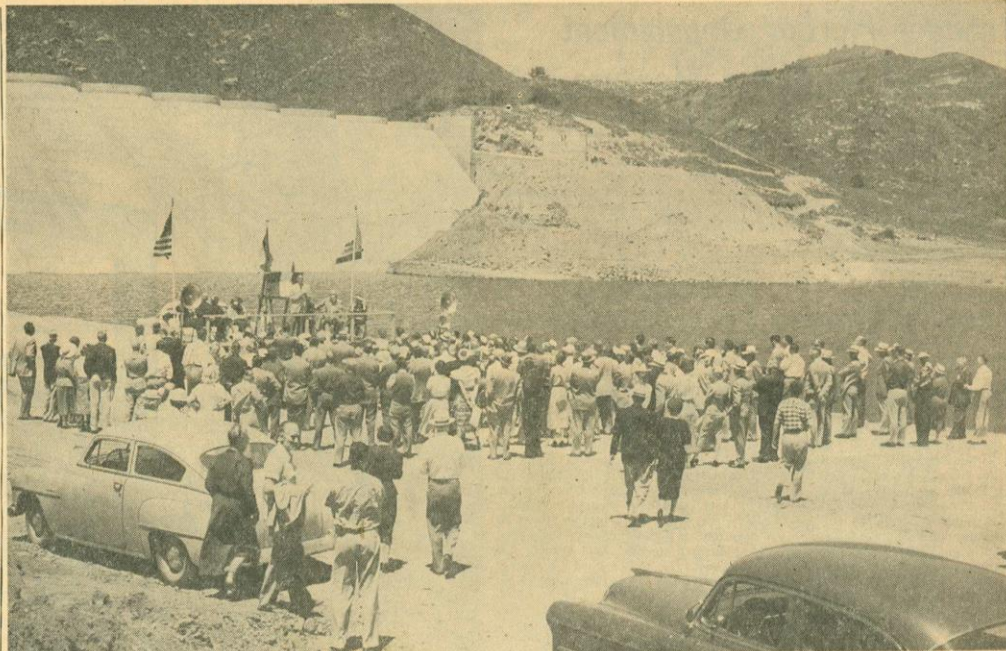
"It is a ceremony that should have been held 25 years ago," City Manager Campbell told the crowd which gathered near the base of the concrete structure on a spot that someday will be awash with trapped water.

Campbell referred to start of construction in 1927. It was halted a year later when the city ran out of money and after 25 per cent of the work had been completed.

Resumed in 1952

Work was renewed in 1952 after San Diego voters had approved a 6½-million-dollar bond issue for cost of the dam, a tunnel and pipe-line to San Vicente Reservoir, rights of way and other items.

Fred A. Heilbron, County Water Authority chairman, said, "We have laid in concrete a lot of ghosts, but the simple matter was, we didn't have the money. We had



DAM DEDICATION—Crowd of 300 gathers at Sutherland Dam for dedication of the 161-foot high, 1,240-foot wide structure 10

miles northeast of Ramona. Construction was started in 1927, abandoned a year later for lack of funds and renewed in 1952 after

San Diego voters approved 6½-million-dollar bond issue. Dam will yield about eight million gallons a day.—Tribune Staff Photo

From Richard W. Crawford, *The Way We Were in San Diego* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2011).