

# Damming Mission Gorge

*One of the biggest hassles we had was trying to keep some of these idiots from building a dam in Mission Gorge . . . A lot of land would have been flooded—Santee, Lakeside, and about a third of El Cajon Valley would have been a shallow lake.*

—Fred A. Heilbron, San Diego city councilman (1919–27)

The city fathers of San Diego were concerned about the water supply. After several years of quiet growth, the population began growing rapidly in the early 1920s—up to 10 percent annually. Would there be enough water to support a growing region? Heavy rainfall in 1921 and 1922 had filled local lakes, but city water engineer Hiram N. Savage sounded an alarm when he announced that the reservoirs had sufficient supply for no more than five years. “It is imperative,” he argued, “that the city of San Diego provide promptly, and accomplish not later than 1926, greatly increased reservoir storage.”

In August 1921, the city council directed Savage to study the water resources of the San Diego River and report back with recommendations. The engineer returned to the council six months later with a study that identified two “outstanding reservoir basins” on the river: El Capitan, twenty-five miles upstream, and—his strong first choice—Mission Gorge, only seven miles from the city limits.

Savage proposed a concrete dam located about a half mile below the historic Mission Dam. The dam would flood the gorge and the valley beyond, creating a reservoir of ten square miles. The reservoir water could be pumped to the University Heights filtration plant for distribution to the city.

Mission Gorge was perfect as a dam site. A narrow canyon and solid bedrock offered ideal building conditions—the same conditions Savage had used to build successful masonry dams at Lower Otay in 1919 and Barrett in 1922. The El Capitan site, on the other hand, lacked the hard granite foundations necessary for a conventional masonry dam. Only an expensive rock fill dam would do. El Capitan, judged Savage, would be “economically impossible.”

The city council was less certain. Mission Gorge may have been an ideal site for a dam, but the reservoir would be shallow and prone to severe evaporation losses. It would also drown a productive agricultural valley. The basin of El Capitan—its supporters argued—drained a massive watershed and would provide a much deeper and larger reservoir.



The chief advocate of the Mission Gorge dam had become a problematic figure, as well. Arrogant and opinionated, Hiram Savage was a difficult man to work with. Land baron Ed



HIRAM N. SAVAGE

Fletcher described him as “old school,” a man “positive in his convictions, who would never yield an inch, under any conditions.” His refusal to consider alternatives to Mission Gorge infuriated the city council. On June 15, 1923, City Manager Fred Rhodes fired Savage and eliminated his position of hydraulic engineer. When given the news of his discharge in a council meeting, Savage simply replied, “Very well.”

With Savage out of the way, the council decided to put the Mission Gorge proposition before the voters. A \$3.6 million bond issue was set for an election on September 10, 1924. Councilman Heilbron, City Manager Rhodes and the city attorney, Shelley Higgins, went to work to defeat the measure. “We called mass meetings and we made speeches,” recalled Higgins. “We let every San Diegan who would listen, know the disadvantages of the Mission Gorge location.”

On election day, the bonds for Mission Gorge were voted down 7,485 to 4,750. A second election held only a month later approved \$4.5 million in bonds to build a dam at El Capitan. But even with the endorsement of voters, the project bogged down. For the remainder of the decade, the city fought a costly legal action in the courts to defend the municipality’s “paramount rights” to the headwaters of the San Diego River. The case was finally won in 1930.

Remarkably, in June 1929, the city council decided to rehire Hiram Savage. The engineer had always been respected for his expertise and was popular with the public. Deciding it needed Savage to spur progress on urgently needed projects, a new council awarded him a five-year contract.

The return of Savage reignited the old controversy of where to site a dam and reservoir on the San Diego River. Savage strongly reiterated that Mission Gorge provided the quickest and most cost-efficient route to a new reservoir. But other water experts opposed him. Thomas H. King, a civil engineer for the Cuyamaca Water Company, decried the potential flooding of Santee and Lakeside, and M.M. O’Shaughnessy, builder of the dam at Hetch Hetchy in the Yosemite valley, emphasized that El Capitan was the one reservoir on the San Diego River that could store the greatest amount of water with the fewest impacts upon developed lands.

San Diego’s newspapers endorsed the Mission Gorge dam. Editorials from the *Union* urged the city to “bank on the engineering advice of Mr. Savage.” The *Sun*, claiming it had “never expressed any opinion whatever as to the relative merits” of either site, said the decision should be left to the engineers—namely, Hiram Savage.

The voters had the final word on August 12, 1931. By the narrow margin of 11,152 to 10,281, the people decided for the second time not to fund the Mission Gorge dam. Wiley V. Ambrose, head of a citizens’ committee that supported the project, was resigned: “Well, that’s that. Evidently the people thought we were wrong. But maybe events will show we were right after all.”

Construction of the El Capitan Dam began in December 1931. Hiram Savage would swallow his pride and design his first rock fill dam. He actively supervised the construction but would die of heart failure six months before the dam's completion.

Little noticed in the last weeks of controversy was the fate of 150 Kumeyaay Indians who lived at Capitan Grande—property that would soon be submerged under the new reservoir. The evicted Indians received about \$2,400 each for their parcels and moved to new reservation lands at Barona and Viejas.

Completed in 1935, El Capitan was 217 feet high and created a deep reservoir with a water surface up to 1,600 acres. Ironically, most credit for the achievement would go to Hiram Savage, the man who had fought the dam for a decade.

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