

The “Rainmaker”

The city council signed a contract yesterday with Hatfield, the Moisture Accelerator. He has promised to fill Morena reservoir to overflowing by December 20, 1916, for \$10,000. All the councilmen are in favor of the contract except Fay, who says it's rank foolishness.

—San Diego Union, December 14, 1915.

Councilman Fay had it right. But by the end of 1915, San Diego was in its fifth year of drought. The city reservoirs of Morena and Otay were nearly empty. With water supplies threatened, the nervous City Councilmen gave verbal acceptance to the offer of a “Rainmaker,” Charles M. Hatfield, who boldly pledged to “fill the Morena reservoir to overflowing . . .”



Charles M. Hatfield

Hatfield, who once earned a living selling sewing machines door to door, had found rainmaking a lucrative occupation. Throughout Southern California, and dry locales ranging from Texas to Montana, farmers clamored for Hatfield's services. Hatfield usually timed his jobs to coincide with the rainy season. When the rains came, Hatfield took the credit.

On New Year's Day, 1916, Charles and his younger brother Paul went to work. From a wooden tower they built near Lake Morena, the brothers brewed a blend of chemicals designed to “enhance moisture.” One observer recalled his visit to the scene:

I was startled by a sudden view of what looked like an oil tower on the heights above Morena basin. In the sky appeared puffs of smoke, and I heard explosions...It was Hatfield, shooting bombs, exploding them in an incantation aimed at wringing moisture from the air.

Fumes wafted skyward. And on January 10, it started to rain.

In the next two weeks, more than seventeen inches of rain fell in the mountains. The reservoirs filled and streams overran their banks. The San Diego River rose and Mission Valley flooded. The Tijuana River carried away the farming settlement of Little Landers, north of the Mexican border. Roads and bridges disappeared.

A second storm arrived on January 25, bringing another foot of rain. Two days later, water flowed over the top Sweetwater Dam, and then broke through the abutments on the sides of the dam.



Sweetwater Dam

But the most dramatic story was occurring further south at the Lower Otay Dam. Just after 6:00 p.m. on the 27th, floodwaters topped the dam. “The tension was so great,” an engineer would later report, “that the steel [core] tore from the top at the center, and the dam opened outward like a pair of gates.” A wall of water raced downstream through the Otay Valley, sweeping away houses, bridges, railroad tracks, livestock, and killing at least fourteen people.

Oblivious to the scale of the havoc and with their mission complete at Morena, Charles and Paul Hatfield walked the sixty miles back to San Diego and presented City Hall with their bill for \$10,000. City Attorney Terence Cosgrove showed the brothers the door, explaining there was no written contract for their “rainmaking” and the deluge was “an act of God.”

The brothers seethed for nearly a year and then filed suit on December 2. Cosgrove offered to settle with Hatfield if he accepted responsibility for \$3,500,000 in damages caused by the flooding. The rainmaker declined the offer. His suit would linger for over twenty years before dismissal by the San Diego Superior Court in 1938.

Charles M. Hatfield eventually returned to selling sewing machines. He would go to his grave, in 1958, insisting that his efforts had brought beneficial rain, not destruction. “The rain of 1916 was an act of Hatfield,” he declared, “not an act of God.”



Flooded Mission Valley.

Photographs courtesy of the *San Diego Public Library*

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