

San Diego, Calif.  
December 30, 1918

Mr. J. M. Howells,  
San Francisco, California.

Dear Sir:-

I have heard of you many times in connection with the early development of the San Diego Flume Company, and through our mutual friend, W. L. Huber, through whose kindness I am sending this letter.

I am writing a history of the water development of San Diego County and feel sure you could give me some interesting information in connection with the early construction work. I would be very glad to pay any expense if you will dictate to a stenographer your recollections of the construction of the San Diego Flume, also any incidents, humorous or otherwise, which might be of interest. Who were the people you were associated with? Who financed the work? What were their general plans, etc. Have you any photographs of this early work which you would allow me to use for reproduction purposes? Were you connected with any other water development in San Diego County?

Through my efforts the Santa Fe Railroad Company and several prominent individuals have become interested in the water development of this County, and we have built three concrete, multiple-arch dams, and about 25 miles of conduit in the last three years. One dam consists of 27 arches, is 130 feet high and 600 feet in length; another is 117 feet high, 900 feet in length and has 33 arches. I will be glad to have you come to San Diego and see several new types of construction of both dams and concrete trestles, including a 42 inch reinforced concrete siphon, 1800 feet in length, under 90 foot head.

I hope I am not asking too much of you. If you can give me any information I shall consider it a personal favor and will be glad to pay any expense attached thereto.

Yours very truly,

EF/bm

J. M. HOWELLS  
HYDRAULIC ENGINEER  
14 BANSOME STREET  
SAN FRANCISCO

January 9th, 1919.

Colonel Ed. Fletcher,  
920 8th Street,  
San Diego, California.

Dear Sir:-

Your kind letter of December 30th was handed me by our friend Mr. W.L. Huber.

I am not able to give you much of value historically in connection with the water development of San Diego County. Such records as I have are so old that they are buried deep in old files, probably stored in Los Angeles. As to the popular side of historical events, most anyone in San Diego knows them as well as I do.

I had nothing to do with the original building of the San Diego Flume or the San Diego Water Works, having come to San Diego in 1894 representing the English owners of the properties. The English groups became owners by virtue of the purchase of the bonds of the two companies, the San Diego Water Company and the San Diego Flume Company.

The Water Works had been built by E.S. Babcock, I believe, who succeeded in leasing the property to the City of San Diego. By means of this lease he made a showing of earnings which enabled him to sell \$1,000,000 of bonds to my English friends long before I had any knowledge of the property.

Babcock later operated the water works for the English people and in a short time after the bonds were sold to them the city threw over the lease, after which the Water Works was operated as a public utility, the rates being fixed annually by the City Council.

Under these rates sufficient earnings were not returned to pay interest on the bonds and operating expenses.

As Mr. Babcock was deposed from the management and I came on to take his place, a vindictive warfare was



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waged against my employers and myself by Babcock. This was in 1894 to 1901.

Covering the same period was a drought of unusual severity which caused all old sources of water supply to fail, and we had an entirely new water supply to develop.

While all of this was going on the San Diego Flume was built by W.E. Robinson and others and the bonds sold to another group of Englishmen through entirely different commercial channels. This other group of Englishmen also employed me, so that soon after I arrived in San Diego I found myself President of both the San Diego Water Company and the San Diego Flume Company, and later President of a consolidated company owning both.

storage  
Cuyamacca Lake was the main/reservoir of the San Diego Flume Company at the time of my arrival in San Diego, and during the drought above mentioned it was entirely dry for about three years. In fact, for two years I raised barley in the bottom of the lake as no crop of water was in sight.

Hard times in San Diego as a result of the collapsed boom of 1886-87, together with the shortage of water supply, enabled Mr. Babcock to successfully inaugurate a new company as the savior of the country, and conduct quite a campaign with the aid of John D. Spreckels' money. Such newspapers as were not owned by Spreckels were subsidized, and I was obliged to start the San Diego Tribune in order to get facts before the public.

The new Water Company organized by Mr. Babcock was known as the Southern California Mountain Water Company. It undertook several schemes for an entirely new water supply for the city before ultimately settling down to the Marino Site.

Construction of the Marino Dam was commenced and also the Lower Otai Dam. The original plans for the latter were drawn up by an Engineer, but Mr. Babcock always prided himself on having looked these plans over and having thrown

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them aside and "built a dam". He was fond of telling this for the 18 years of its existence until its failure and the great disaster which followed it.

While this Lower Otai Dam was being built, I was building La Mesa Dam. This was the second hydraulic fill dam constructed, the first having been built by me in Tyler, Texas, the year prior. Material for a hydraulic fill dam was very scarce at La Mesa and this reason alone fully justified building the Murray Dam as a multiple arch structure. Although La Mesa Dam was not enlarged, it, nevertheless, marks the first dam of any considerable size built by the hydraulic method, a method which later became standard throughout the world: Gatun Dam of Panama being one, several were built in connection with the Los Angeles Aqueduct; one great one is now building near San Francisco and many others have been built in other parts of the United States, as well as in Canada, Mexico, South America and Europe.

In order to sell a water supply to the City of San Diego, it was necessary to eliminate my company from the field, hence a bitter campaign was waged against all connected with it, and bonds were voted for paralleling the system.

As the old Water Company was collecting a bill against everyone once a month, and therefore a chronic creditor, it was easy on the part of Mr. Babcock to do cheap politics to the injury of the business he had induced my English friends to undertake. At a later period, after my removal from San Diego, I understand he repeated the same program against the Spreckels' interests which were entrusting him with their affairs during the fight against the Englishmen and their American representatives.

However this may all be, the Englishmen tired of their investment and sold out to the City of San Diego for fifty cents on the dollar of the bond issue, receiving nothing for their stock, and the ground was thus prepared for the sale of Babcock properties (at this later time the Spreckels properties) to the City of San Diego, and thus the program inaugurated



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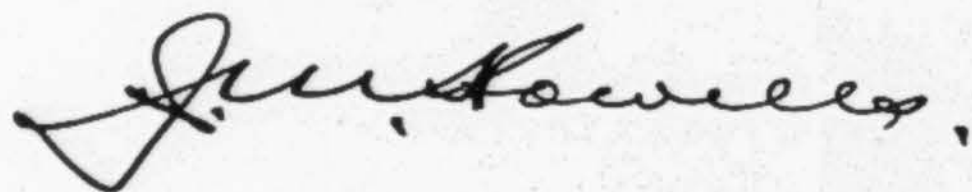
before I arrived in San Diego and finished after I left, was carried out.

Before the sale of the Water Company and the Flume Company, the latter to the interests you represent, my place was taken by Mr. M.C. Helion, a man of much ability who I believe is still in San Diego.

I have heard of your activity in affairs in San Diego with a great deal of interest and no little admiration, knowing full well the long, tiresome fight you must have had to conduct. When I finished I was almost ready for the hospital, but you seem to thrive on it and I trust you will be amply rewarded for your long years of sacrifice. San Diego was certainly fortunate in your being so much in her important affairs.

I realize that this letter is a mere rambling reminiscence and wish I could give you something of more definite value. Would be very glad to meet you the next time you visit San Francisco and hope you have the time and the inclination to see some of the things our Company has been doing here.

Yours very truly,



JMH: M

J. M. HOWELLS  
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SAN FRANCISCO

February 7th, 1919.

Mr. Ed. Fletcher,  
920 8th Street,  
San Diego, Cal.

My dear Mr. Fletcher:

Your kind favor of February 5th is just received.

The interview with Mr. Babcock covering the period I was in San Diego, must be like a summary of the old editorials of the San Diego Union which Mr. Sefton's clippings doubtless furnished you, or the San Diego Vidette when it was considered desirable to get that paper active.

I remember at one time Mr. Babcock gave the late James D. Schuyler notice that if he did not approve some matter in which Babcock was interested, he would ruin his reputation. Mr. Schuyler refused, and the old copies of the San Diego Union published after this interview, bear evidence of such an attempt. I may say also, that the same papers bear evidence of such an attempt to ruin my reputation, but neither Mr. Schuyler nor myself ever experienced any serious inconvenience from this cause.

I thank you very much for your generous offer to entertain me in San Diego, and will be greatly interested, and I am sure instructed, by visiting the engineering work you have been carrying out in that locality.

As for my photograph, it has been a great many years since I have had one taken, certainly some time before I was living in San Diego, so that if I complied with your request, it would be necessary to be photographed again. This I have promised my family for some time, and perhaps if you cannot find any better material with which to illustrate your book I may have one taken and sent you.

Miss Marshall



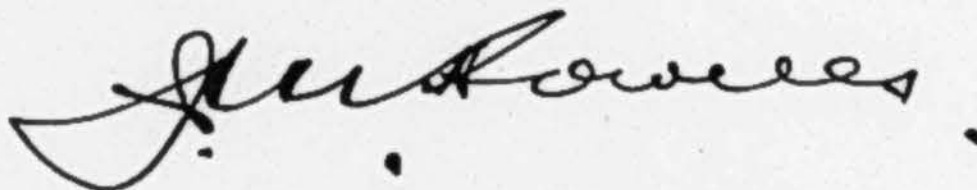
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Feb. 7th, 1919.

As to photographs of early construction work, I really have none, as such as I had were destroyed in the San Francisco fire. In Mr. Schuyler's book on reservoirs for irrigation and water supply, you will find some pictures of the work on La Mesa Hydraulic fill Dam. These I took myself. I also see in Edward Wegmann's "Design and Construction of dams" he also has a picture of La Mesa Hydraulic fill Dam during construction. I know of no other pictures available. In both of these books is described this type of dam building, which has since come into general use.

With kind regards, I remain,

Sincerely yours,



JMH:M

**Ed Fletcher Papers**

**1870-1955**

**MSS.81**

**Box: 12 Folder: 26**

**General Correspondence - Howells, J.M.**



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