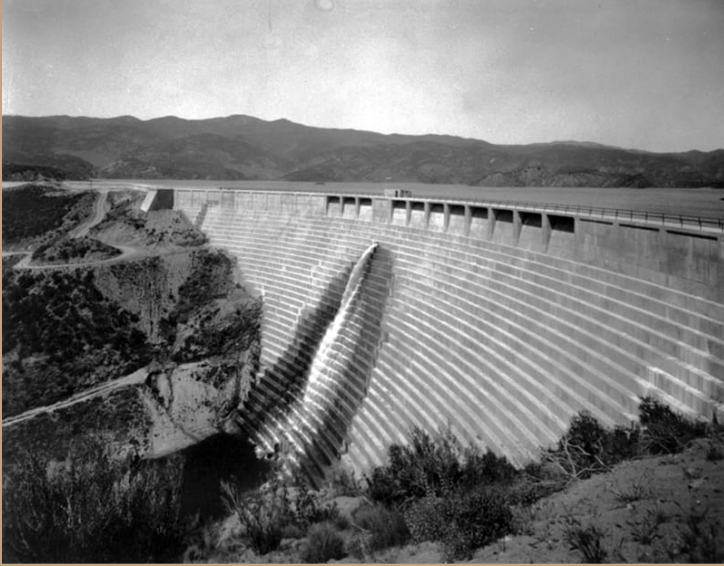


St Francis Dam – Los Angeles County

Between 1924 and 1926, San Francisquito Canyon was the site of the construction of the St. Francis Dam. It was a concrete gravity dam with William Mulholland its chief engineer. The Los Angeles Department of Water and Power began filling a reservoir in the San Francisquito Canyon in 1926.



On March 12, 1928, the dam catastrophically failed, and the resulting flood took the lives of at least 431 people. The collapse of the St. Francis Dam is considered to be one of the worst American civil engineering disasters of the 20th century and remains the second-greatest loss of life in California's history, after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire. The ruins of this disaster can still be seen today near the Cascades at the north end of the San Fernando Valley.



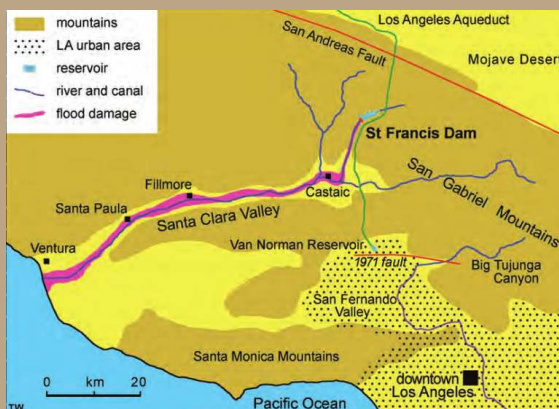
Louise Gipe, the telephone switchboard operator on duty in Santa Paula, didn't receive a warning call until almost 1:30 a.m. on March 13. When the dam collapsed, it took an hour for two years' worth of Los Angeles drinking water to empty from the reservoir into the canyon below. The initial wave traveled at 18 miles per hour, then subsided a bit as it rushed through Castaic Junction and westward through the Santa Clara River Valley in Ventura County. It cut a swath of destruction as it rushed toward the sleeping villages downstream. Gipe immediately began notifying local officials. One of them was motorcycle patrol officer Thornton Edwards.



Born in Deering, Maine, Edwards moved to Southern California to become an actor. By 1916, he'd picked up a handful of roles, mostly as a villain in silent Westerns. By the early '20s, Edwards had added motorcycle stunt riding to his repertoire, performing staged falls for the crowd and a minor paycheck. He then became a policeman.

When the dam broke, Edwards was living in Santa Paula with his young family. After he got the call, he gathered them up in the dark and moved them to high ground, warned his neighbors to do the same, then straddled his bike, ran the siren, and rode toward the flood. At the time, 7,000 people lived in Santa Paula. More lived outside town, on farms and ranches spread throughout the valley. There was no way to warn everyone in time. Instead, Edwards woke the occupants of every third house, instructing them to warn the neighbors on each side. It was a decision that would save hundreds of lives.

He found a crowd gathered on a truss bridge that spanned the river, the onlookers eager to see the approaching flood, unable to understand the destruction that was coming their way. Edwards shooed them off shortly before flood-borne trees and boulders knocked the bridge from its footing and swept it downstream, exploding a gas line in the process. Edwards didn't stop. He kept going, riding through the darkness until a 3-foot wall of water swamped his bike and forced him to fight his way to safety.

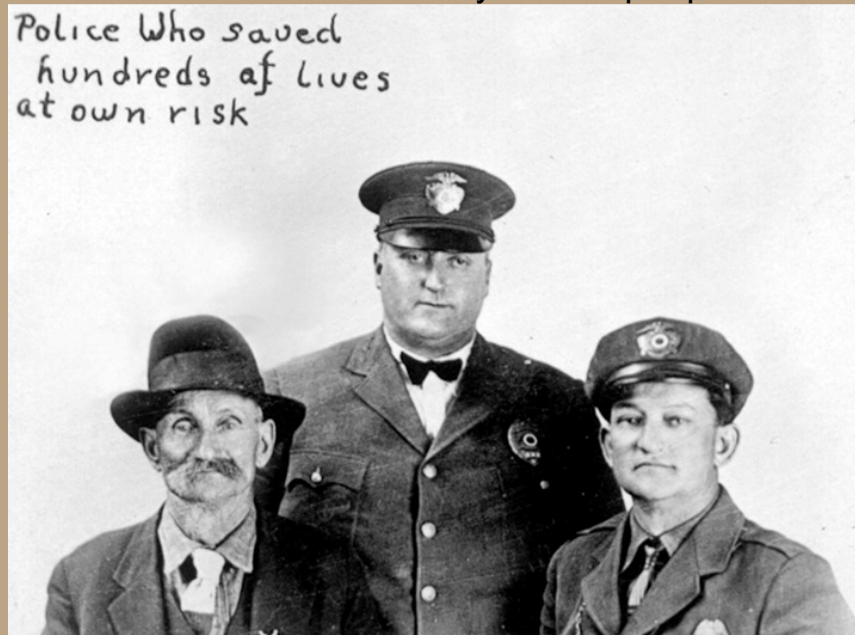


"The Warning" Santa Paula memorial

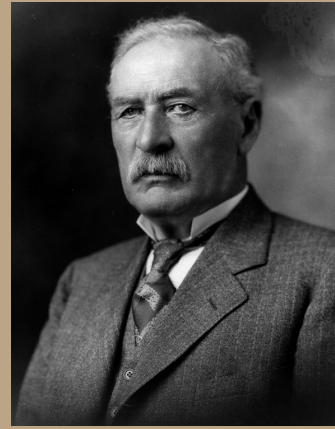
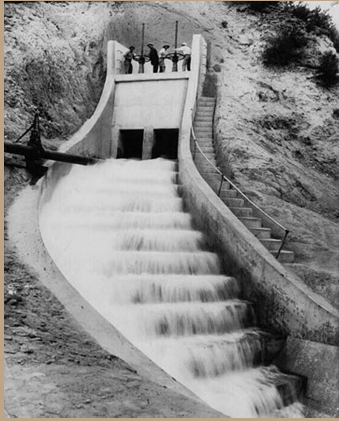
When the St. Francis Dam failed on March 12, 1928, it unleashed a 100-foot wall of water that killed hundreds of people and left a swath of destruction in its wake. More could have died were it not for the efforts of a pair of Santa Paula motorcycle cops who warned people sleeping in the wave's path to get to higher ground. When the flood waters subsided, more than 400 people were dead. Recent estimates including undocumented farm laborers put that number closer to 600. More than 10 bridges had been wiped out. All that remained of the St. Francis Dam was a 185-foot-tall concrete monolith—the center section had remained standing, turned slightly by the force of the reservoir emptying around it.



Edwards was one of 1,200 families that lost their homes in the flood. He received only \$2,089.22—about \$30,000 in today's money—in restitution from the City of Los Angeles. But his efforts and those of another motorcycle patrolman, Stanley Baker, saved hundreds of lives in Santa Paula. The city lost 16 people in the disaster.



John Messer, Lee Shepard, Stanley Baker



William Mulholland, the ambitious LA water superintendent and self-trained engineer is credited for the LA Aqueduct thru Owens Valley. Above is a photo of the 'Cascades' 1913 dedication. This was the end of the gravity-driven pipeline. It was Mulholland who had overseen the geologic exploration, design, and construction of the St Francis Dam a dozen years later. He took full responsibility for the calamity. A jury did not find him criminally responsible, but he retired in November 1928 all the same, resigning himself to a life of seclusion, though he did consult briefly on both the Hoover Dam and the Colorado Aqueduct before dying in 1935.