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"You Must Remember This:" Nothing Lasts a Hundred Years

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In the second half of the 19th Century, John Muir walked through much of California. Muir looked upon two similar granite valleys which had existed for thousands of years in the Sierra Nevada, Spanish for Snowy Mountains.

One of the two valleys Muir saw was named Yosemite, probably Miwok for Grizzly Bear. Yosemite became one of our first national parks. The second valley was named Hetch-Hetchy, probably Miwok for a wild grass with edible seeds. Hetch-Hetchy was dammed. The snow melt from the Sierras filled Hetch-Hetchy.

By the time I lived in San Francisco in the 1960’s and 1970’s, the water had filled and overflowed Hetch-Hetchy for many years. First, the falling water drove electric turbines in and below the dam which were owned by the Pacific Gas & Electric Company. Even in the 1970’s, there were still a handful of old output and
requirements contracts for electric power. In these pre-Franklin Roosevelt contracts, the price of kilowatt hours was set in gold dollar amounts.

With almost free electric power, San Francisco kept its trolleys, streetcars, and cable cars when other American cities tore up their tracks and wires and bought gasoline buses. I lived in a lovely flat on Dolores at Liberty Street where I paid a monthly electric bill of less than $15.00. After lighting my flat, the water from Hetch-Hetchy crossed California’s Central Valley through giant culverts. Then the water flowed into a man-made reservoir in San Mateo County named Crystal Springs Lake. Finally, San Francisco drank the water from Crystal Springs Lake.

Crystal Springs Lake is not an accurate or an imaginative name. The lake water is piped through hundreds of miles of culverts instead of bubbling up from pure, local springs. Crystal Springs Lake is both (1.) a cliché and (2.) inaccurate within the space of its two initial words. In California real estate, the words “redwood grove” usually means there never were any redwood trees. The name “orchard estates” always means the apricot trees have all been cut down. All cradle Californians are born knowing that the Pacific is not peaceful.

Richard Rodriguez, like me, a cradle Californian, says about names on the California land: “[L]iving Californians – such was the genius of Spain – must yet compose a litany of sorts to get from one end of town to another: ‘Take the San Bernardino to the San Gabriel turnoff.’” Only in San Francisco would John
Locke’s 18th Century ideal, Liberty, intersect with the Popes and Holy Roman Emperors’ 17th Century ideal, Dolores, Spanish for Our Lady of Sorrows.

Add the needs of 19th Century American people to the genius of 19th Century American inventors: Californians became, at least in engineering, Raskolnikovs in a New World Dostoyevsky novel to whom, “Everything is permitted.” Workers dammed Crystal Springs Lake to receive the waters from Hetch-Hetchy. This seems odd. If you look at a satellite map, you will see that the long lake runs southeast just along and on top of the San Andreas Fault.

Odd or not, 10 billion gallons of water now sit on a tectonic plate, a part of the world, moving slowly, but inexorably, north. Ten additional billion gallons of water now sit on a separate tectonic plate, a part of the world moving slowly, but inexorably, south. When they Christened California’s geography, the old Spanish explorers put St. Andrew on the map. The 17th Century knew St. Andrew’s faults: Today some would call them dysfunctions.

The dam which separates the south from the north half of Crystal Springs Lake was built in 1888 by anonymous workmen out of earth. Richard Rodriguez titled the last chapter of one of his books “Nothing Lasts a Hundred Years.” Nevertheless, the earth dam survived the 1906 earthquake. The old dam survived the 1989 earthquake which took down a part of the Bay Bridge. But, remember, nothing lasts forever.
Odd or not, when we meet Apollo or Artemis, he dancing on the edge of the world in Northern California, or she in the Uffizi beside the Florentine river Arno, we are enchanted. For a moment our human capacity for wonder is filled, even sated. Ezra Pound wrote, “Let the Sea and the Wind speak: This is Paradise.”

Crystal Springs Lake is beautiful, like an aging Botoxed California girl. When you are in Northern California, walk or run the paths around Crystal Lake. As you run or walk, you will see always the enamel blue lake, the sky will be filled with blue sun and with the scents of bay laurel, wild oats, live oak, manzanita and madrone trees. Flocks of gulls and ducks will rise from and land on the lake.

At Crystal Springs, you will believe that you are in Paradise. But you must remember this: “Let the Culvert, the Dams, and the Engineers speak. This is Artifice.”

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