

## William Mulholland

Some may find it ironic that a man from a country of soft rains and green fields was the engineer most responsible for creating in a desert one of the most powerful cities of the world. The country of soft rains is, of course, Ireland; the city is the movie capital of the world, Los Angeles; and the man is William Mulholland, native of Ireland.

William Mulholland, as the superintendent of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, was both the brains and the muscle behind a 233 mile aqueduct which brought water from the Sierra Nevada Mountains to a city whose natural water supply could sustain a city of 250,000. How could a man who left home at age fifteen, a self-educated man, build the most ambitious engineering project of its time and do it below budget and ahead of schedule?



Mulholland was born in Belfast and reared in Dublin. Like so many Irish before him, he signed as an apprentice seaman at age fifteen. He left the sea for land work in America. By the mid-1870's Mulholland was lumberjacking in Michigan and clerking in his uncle's dry goods store in Pittsburgh. By 1877 he was lured to the West for gold, prospecting in Arizona, fighting Apaches, and landing a job with a drilling crew in Los Angeles. The drilling fascinated him and turned his life in the direction of engineering: "Right there I decided to become an engineer." Years later when asked what his qualifications were to be running the biggest water system in the world, Mulholland said, "Well, I went to school in Ireland when I was a boy, learned the three R's and the Ten Commandments-- most of them-- made a pilgrimage to the Blarney Stone, received my father's blessing, and here I am."

The future superintendent of the water system started in 1878 as a zanjero (irrigation ditch tender). After work, Mulholland would study textbooks on mathematics, hydraulics, geology and other subjects he could put to practical use. Typically Irish, he would read the classics for recreation and be able to quote passages of great writers from memory. Mulholland's intelligence, gruffness, his repertoire of songs and ribald stories caught the attention of the company's president. In 1886 he was appointed the chief engineer of the Los Angeles City Water Company, a private firm, which was taken over in 1904 by the city. Mulholland was retained by the city and his remarkable career as the architect of the phenomenal growth of Los Angeles

was to begin. He quickly came to the conclusion that Los Angeles had to supplement its supply of water if it were to continue its growth. Influenced by the former mayor of Los Angeles, Fred Eaton, Mulholland found the water he desired for his adopted city almost 250 miles away at the Owens River which was fed by snow melt from the Sierra Nevada Mountains. The water available in the Owens River seemed limitless and, although the distance from Los Angeles was considerable, the water would always be running down hill to the low lying city.

It is the Owens River project that was fictionalized in the Jack Nicholson movie *Chinatown*. The movie is set in a different period of history but there are parallels. One character in the film, Hollis Mulwray, can be viewed as parallel to William Mulholland. The rich man played by Walter Houston can represent the wealthy Angelenos who used insider information to buy up land in the San Fernando Valley before land owners knew that water was coming to the valley. The secret dumping of water from reservoirs in the film has a parallel in the aqueduct project. In the film, water was being dumped to create an artificial drought prior to a bond issue vote. Charges of water dumping to create a drought to influence the real bond vote in 1905 were leveled against Mulholland and the city administration. *Chinatown* is a movie worth seeing independent of its tangential connection to the Los Angeles Aqueduct because a universal truth is portrayed: The rich and powerful take advantage of their access to information to become more rich and powerful. Many people did benefit from the aqueduct, including the owner and the publisher of the *Los Angeles Times*, Harrison Gray Otis and Harry Chandler, but Mulholland did not profit from his position: he lived in the same house with his wife and five children until he died and he never learned to drive, like Robert Moses to whom he is often compared.

Mulholland personally supervised the construction of the Los Angeles Aqueduct. The \$24.5 million bond issue approved in 1905 gave Mulholland the capital he needed to launch the project. Before the work started in 1908, land rights and other logistical matters had to be attended to, Land acquisition in the Owens River Valley was sometimes cutthroat and underhanded, a fact that would in time haunt the aqueduct. When work began, Mulholland seemed to be everywhere. He helped to solve problems; he supervised the bigger blasts; he prayed for workers trapped by underground rivers and he wept when workers died. The miracle of what an optimistic Los Angeles thought would be the end of its water problems was celebrated on November 5, 1913 when William Mulholland, an immigrant from Ireland and self-taught engineer, told the throng in the San Fernando Valley attending the opening of the aqueduct, "There it is; take it."

Take it they did and to this day Los Angeles is still thirsty. Mulholland saw

that the growth of Los Angeles would require another source of water, one that would after Mulholland's death lead to the construction of the Hoover Dam to bring water from the Colorado River to the city. Unanticipated by Mulholland was the devastating effect on the Owens River Valley and the Owens Lake of the amount of water taken from its water table by the needs of the growing city for water. The once fertile valley is today nearly deserted. The lake is an environmental hazard, for when it is dry its dust is the worse polluter of particulate matter in the United States. The residents of the Owens Valley were so angry at Los Angeles' seemingly endless thirst and the effect it was having on their valley that they began a guerilla war against the aqueduct. Starting in 1924, the "Owens River War" pitted Mulholland and Los Angeles against militants from the valley who set dynamite charges to damage the aqueduct and who occupied an aqueduct gate to completely shut off the flow of water to the city. Mulholland sent police officers and rifle toting private guards in a futile effort to try to protect a 233 mile structure, but it was the bankruptcy of the Owens River Bank, bankroller of the insurgency, which ended the Owens River War... or so it seemed.

William Mulholland was a hero in Los Angeles. He was asked to run for mayor, an offer he declined by saying, "I would rather give birth to a porcupine backwards than be the mayor of Los Angeles." He was invited to speak at professional and community occasions and had a gift of language, an Irish trait: "I don't know why I ever went into this job. I guess it was the Irish in me. Nature is the squarest fighter there is and I wanted the fight. When I saw it staring me in the face I couldn't back away from it.... I didn't want to have to buckle down and admit I was afraid because I never have been-- not for a second."

Sadly, William Mulholland's career and last years were overcast by the cloud of tragedy. On March 12, 1928, one of the dams built by Mulholland as part of the aqueduct system, the St. Francis Dam, burst sending a wall of water seventy-five high racing to the Pacific Ocean. Its collapse scoured a path two miles wide and 70 miles long through Ventura County. Five hundred and eleven people were dead or missing and property valued at \$20 million was destroyed. Because the mud and debris were as deep as 70 feet, bodies from this tragedy were being found 50 years after the collapse. Mulholland wanted to believe that the dam had been dynamited, a continuation of the Owens River War, but an inquest laid the blame on Mulholland without lodging criminal charges. At the inquest, Mulholland, broken by the monumental loss of life, said, "I envy the dead."

William Mulholland retired in disgrace from the water system in 1928. The "grateful" city of Los Angeles which owed its claim as a world class city to

Mulholland, removed his name from the Mulholland Dam, but the famous Mulholland Drive still attracts visitors. Most motorists do not know that this beautiful thoroughfare is named after an Irishman who, like so many of his countrymen, dedicated his life to making America a better place than he had found it.

(Written by John Walsh, September 2003)

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