

Tachevah dry falls tamed by political debate

It took decades, bonds to construct \$1.7M dam

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“Not until you get almost directly under the falls do you really begin to realize their height and grandeur. You feel at once so very small, the gray, almost 200-foot stone wall seems so very high and impressive.” Edmund Jaeger thusly described the “great rocky spur that lies between the village and Chino Canyon. The name was also applied to the steep, picturesque little canyon that has its way choked with that giant block of barren gray rock known to many of Palm Springs residents as the dry falls.”

Jaeger was the premier desert naturalist of the early 20th century and wrote volumes about all aspects of the Coachella Valley. His writings are evocative and beautiful in their vivid descriptions. He also wrote for periodicals. In 1950 in a small article for the Villager Magazine, he mused about the spectacular formation and its surroundings.

“The name Tahchevah (sic), by the very oddity of its spelling, at once attracts our attention.” Indeed it still does! The mysterious name should certainly have some legend or god associated with it, like its neighbor Tahquitz to the south. Accordingly Jaeger asked “Albert Patencio, the 98-year-old Cahuilla Indian who tends the toll gate on Palm Canyon road, what meaning was attached to the word, he immediately replied that he knew of none.”

Patencio went on however to school Jaeger in the correct pronunciation, mainly that the emphasis is on the last syllable and not the middle one “as the white man says.” Jaeger searched the literature, questioning the older Indians for any clue to the meaning, trying to find an associated legend, some small tale. “Said 98-year-old Patencio, “There is no story.”

There is “generally a small bit of wa-



The dry falls are seen behind Democratic California Congressman John V. Tunney as he speaks at the Tachevah Dam dedication ceremony April 23, 1965.
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ter trickling down over the falls causing a dark stain down the center of the almost perpendicular rock surface.” That small trickle of Tachevah Creek made its way through the alluvial fan below to join the effluence from Tahquitz Canyon below on the flat of the valley floor.

That small, innocuous trickle marked the spot over which great quantities of water would on occasion, however, spill into the desert below. Dry falls was a misnomer. By the mid 1950s talk of how to control “flood waters which heretofore have inundated Palm Canyon Drive and Indian Avenue at their intersections with Granvia Valmonte and Alejo Road with water that sometimes get to three and four-foot depths, would be to build a low-level dam at the base of the steep slope where Tachevah creek normally enters a canal...” reported The Desert Sun.

A group of engineers had been studying the flood control issue, including Tachevah for several years. They traveled to Los Angeles to confer with the Army Corps of Engineers and county officials

on the plan. In 1938, just after the incorporation of the city itself, the council asked the federal government for help. The Army Corps began working on the problem about 1940 and in 1948 made definite recommendations. John Bryant, the chief engineer for the county flood control district, debated between a low dam and a much bigger dike. He changed his mind and his recommendation to the city council, advocating finally for a water retention basin at the foot of the Tachevah Wash.

Deluge from the Tachevah Wash threatened \$1.5 million worth of real estate in Las Palmas in 1950, raging down its streets to Palm Canyon Drive to Frances Stevens School.

“Each night, when the school is closed, flood-damage-control gates are placed on Palm Canyon Drive facing the school” to force the water past, washing across Section 14 until they meet the Baristo flood control channel and dissipate.

Erecting the flood control gates nightly in front of the school was labor

intensive, but the construction of a great dam at Tachevah was a massive project, and it quickly became embroiled in political considerations. The local congressman felt stymied by the Republican administration and complained openly about President Eisenhower. Bills including the appropriation for the project got stuck in Congress. Riverside County and the state of California were enlisted in the effort.

In the end, the \$1.7 million project had some tough conditions placed on the deal. Local interests had to assure the Secretary of the Army they would contribute \$102,000 of the construction cost. The locals had to provide “without cost to the United States all the lands, easements, and rights-of-way necessary for the construction of the project.”

The money was raised by a bond, but the condemnation or purchase of all the necessary land and easements was no small task, and fell to the city, and Bryant.

The Secretary of the Army also insisted the federal government was held harmless from water rights claims, and that local authorities had to maintain and operate all the works after completion. Despite the comprehensive terms, the fate of the bill in Congress was uncertain and described as “problematical.” The Kennedy administration’s inclusion of the long-discussed project in their budget “gave it the green light, Bryant said.” In February 1962 it went out to bid.

The contract was let, and by June 1964, Pascal and Ludwig Construction of Upland was moving dirt, stacking boulders and pouring concrete to construct the almost 50 foot dike and the many canals required. The project had expanded dramatically in scope and cost by the time it was built.

The story is hardly that of an Indian legend or a great god, but Edmund Jaeger’s dry falls, the usually small drip of water staining the ancient rock, was at last contained.