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## Meet Charles Hatfield, the rainmaker of San Diego

Posted By [william.yelles](#) On June 10, 2009 @ 4:15 pm In [Water](#) | [6 Comments](#)

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If we are looking for answers to our water shortage, maybe we should take a hint from our forefathers. Ninety-three years ago, San Diego decided to hire a sewing machine salesman and hope for a miracle.

The population in San Diego County was 61,000 and total of rainfall for the year was 9.9 inches. Los Angeles, only 90 miles to the north, received twice as much rain, and it also had a resident named Charles Hatfield.

Hatfield was born in Fort Scott, Kan., in 1875 of Quaker lineage and conducted himself with diligence and neatness as he sold sewing machines door to door in Los Angeles. But he understood business and when asked if he could read the sign "No Peddlers or Agents, replied, " Yes, but I don't believe in signs."

He was aware of the droughts at the end of the century and studied the ways of some of the "rainmakers" that were taking advantage of farmers and city folk throughout the Midwest. In 1902, his family had taken up residence on a ranch in Gopher Canyon, which is in northern San Diego County. It was there that his family said he produced his first rain from the top of a windmill tower, although there was no public knowledge of the event.

In 1904, word made its way to those in "La La land" and the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce offered Hatfield \$1,000 to produce rain. Hatfield never said he made rain, but that he just "found a way to release the moisture from the air." Years later he would be remembered in articles, books and even a song as the "rainmaker." Los Angeles received 18 inches of rain in four months and all were satisfied.

The San Diego City Council was approached several times from 1912 to 1914, by the "Wide Awake Improvement Club." It was headed by a real estate agent named F.A. Binney, who kept boasting about a sewing machine salesman, whom he said was known for his ability to produce rain.

During the dry months of 1915, the levels of the San Diego city reservoirs dropped significantly and Hatfield was invited to talk to the council. He presented three options, each differing in pay structure, but all resulting in the end that he would fill the Morena Reservoir for \$10,000. If he failed to fill it by Dec. 20, 1916, he would not take a dime. The council accepted Charley's offer, on

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a vote of 4 to 1.

Councilman Walter P. Moore is to have commented, "If he fills Morena, he will have put 10 billion gallons into it, which would cost the city one tenth of a cent per gallon; if he fails to fulfill his contract, the city isn't out anything. Its heads the city wins, tails Hatfield loses."

Hatfield headed for Lake Moreno with his youngest brother Joel, not waiting for a written agreement. By Jan. 1, he built a large tower where he sent chemicals into the air via evaporation from a large shallow pan.

**Years with most rainfall in San Diego (in inches)**

There had been only light rain in the city by the end of December, but January would be a different story.

1. 1883-84: 25.97

Between the 15th and the 19th, the mountains east of San Diego received more than 17 inches of rain. Near Old Town, the San Diego River wiped out the concrete bridge and the Santa Fe Railroad bridge, which was weighted down with freight cars.

2. 1940-41 24.74

3. 2004-05 22.49

Flooding in the Tijuana River Valley wiped out a small community known as "Little Landers" killing two and leaving 100 people without homes.

4. 1977-78 18.71

5. 1921-22 18.65

The Sweetwater Dam in southeast San Diego County, built in January 1888, had overflowed safely during storms in 1895. But this time the spillway was not large enough to contain the water, and two sections of the abutments were destroyed.

6. 1992-93 18.31

7. 1982-83 18.26

The Lower Otay Dam, where water level rose more than 27 feet in 10 days, gave way on Jan. 27th. Thirteen million gallons of water were released, sending a wall 20-40 feet high toward the Tijuana River Valley. Farms, citrus groves and homes were swept downstream.

8. 1951-52 18.16

9. 1997-98 17.78

10. 1994-95 17.12

The next morning, the city treasurer and Naval Reserve officer Don Stewart, surveyed the damage where the river met the ocean. He found a delta several hundred yards wide. Debris from the dam 12 miles inland lay on the beach. He saw many Japanese residents who lived in the valley looking for their dead from small boats. Estimates of deaths varied from 18-65 in the aftermath.

Lake Moreno received more than 35 inches of rain, enough to rise 18 inches above the crest of the dam. Hatfield had completed his part of the deal.

He and his brother spent two days walking the 60 miles to San Diego. Later in life he admitted he and his brother had denied their identity after meeting people on the trail who were angry about the flooding and deaths. During the Feb. 4th press conference, he realized that some people felt he couldn't prove he caused the rain, while others blamed him for the destruction and the deaths.

Charley showed up at a council conference two weeks later and when Mayor Capps asked what he wanted, he replied, "The essence of my contract was to fill Morena Reservoir. That has been done. I have fulfilled my contract and I desire that the city should fulfill its contract to pay me \$10, 000." The council voted to refer the matter to the City Attorney, meaning they were refusing payment.

Hatfield filed suit on Dec. 2, 1916. He offered to settle for \$1,800 saying that it was less than the amount of his expenses. The city said it would settle if he assumed the responsibility for settling the lawsuits that amounted to \$3.5 million. Hatfield left San Diego dejected.

He and his brothers continued to ply their trade of rainmaking in California and in 1929 they went to Honduras to try to stop a forest fire. He was forced to go back

to being a sewing machine salesman during the Depression. His wife divorced him.

His lawsuit against the city remained in the court system for 22 years, when it was finally dismissed. Most of the other suits against the city were settled out of court. The two that went forward resulted in a verdict that the flood and collapse of the dam were "acts."

Before he died in 1958, he told a reporter. "To this day, I've never felt right about that San Diego City Council." He never revealed his secrets to making rain.



[5]

The population of San Diego County last year was estimated at 3,001,072 and the rain total at Lindbergh Field from 2008-2009 with less than a month to go is 9.12 inches.

San Diego during the 1927 Flood. (Photo property of Don Kohlbauer at DKImage.com)

Does anyone know where the Hatfields live?

*Don Kohlbauer is SDNN's visuals editor. Reach him at [don.kohlbauer \(at\) sdnn.com](mailto:don.kohlbauer@sdnn.com) and view more historical images at [DKImage.com](http://DKImage.com) [6].*

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[4] *San Diego Water Crisis Coverage*: <http://www.sdnn.com/san-diego-water-crisis>

[5] Image: [http://www.sdnn.com/wp-content/gallery/hatfield/flood\\_6\\_hatfield.jpg](http://www.sdnn.com/wp-content/gallery/hatfield/flood_6_hatfield.jpg)

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