

Book spotlights ‘best dam man’

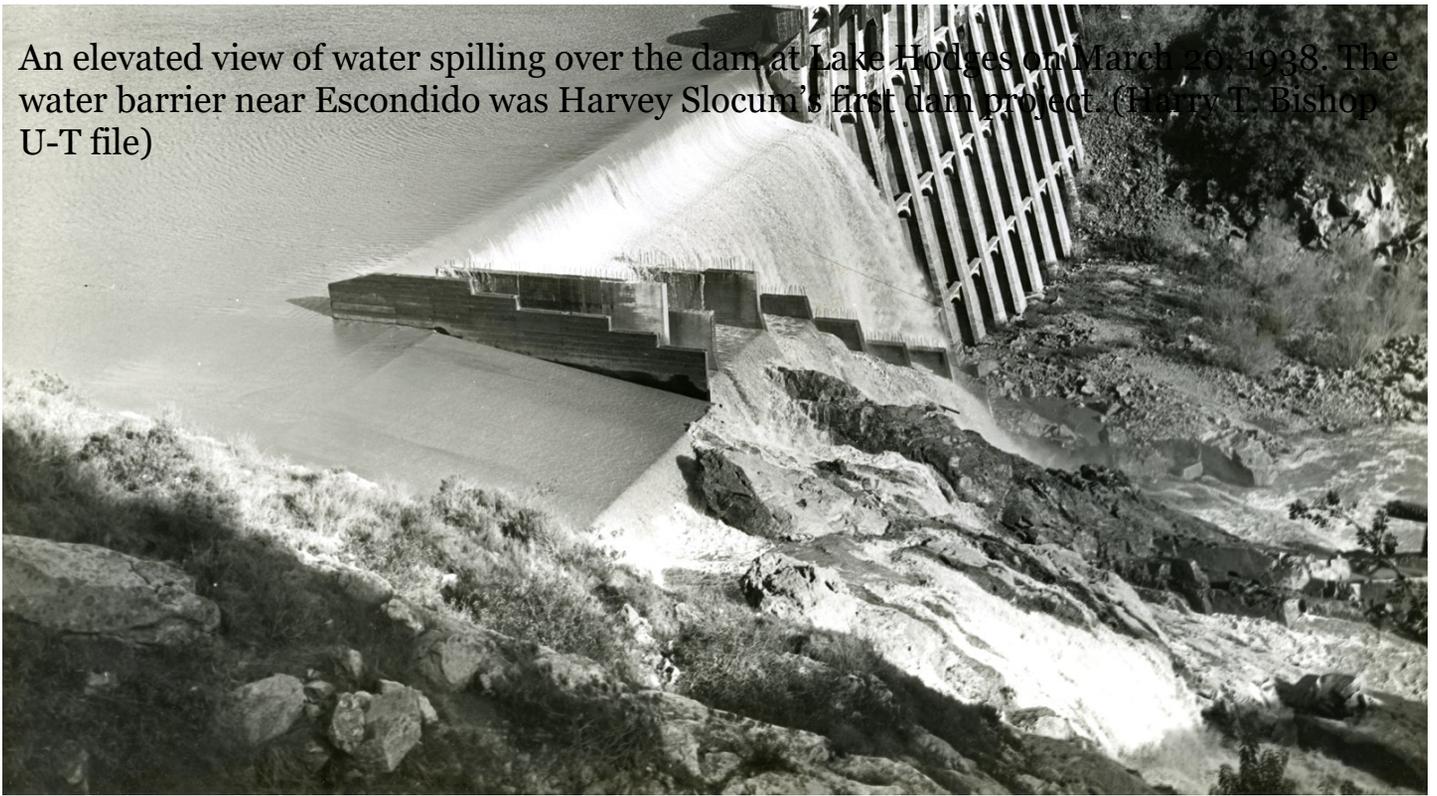
In biography, Solana Beach author tells story of construction giant who got start in San Diego



Solana Beach author Casey Gauntt sits with information and materials he uncovered in his research about San Diego native and dam builder Harvey Slocum for his book “Best Dam Man in the World.” (Eduardo Contreras U-T)



An elevated view of water spilling over the dam at Lake Hodges on March 20, 1938. The water barrier near Escondido was Harvey Slocum's first dam project. (Harry T. Bishop U-T file)



Now he's mostly forgotten, even in his hometown: San Diego.

Gauntt, a writer in Solana Beach, hopes to change that. Using magazine features, newspaper interviews, private letters and other research material, he's written the first-ever biography of the construction giant. It was [self-published](#) two months ago.

The book's title — “Best Dam Man in the World” — echoes the descriptor often attached to Slocum as he went about the controversial business of corralling rivers into reservoirs so the water could be used for drinking, farm irrigation, recreation and electric energy.

“Journalists across the country described him as self-made, rude, arrogant, profane and contemptuous,” Gauntt writes in the introduction, “chauvinistic, cantankerous, leathery, outspoken, wryly humorous, and an irascible blowhard with a colossal conceit who was just as good as he said he was, with an ego matched only by the size of the dams he built.”

The author's interest in the builder started last summer with a photo, passed down by his grandmother. It showed a group of men gathered behind two others who were seated.

Gauntt recognized one of the men in front as a young Dalai Lama. The other one, according to his grandmother's handwritten note on the back, was “Harvey Slocum — Biggest Dam Builder in World.”

His grandmother had also passed down a postcard that showed her with two women in Tijuana in 1944. One of the other women was identified as Helen Slocum — Harvey's wife.

Who were the Slocums? Gauntt wondered. He called an uncle, who told him Gauntt's grandparents and the Slocums were good friends.

“And down the rabbit hole I went,” he said.

Hard worker

Slocum was born Oct. 23, 1887, in National City. His father, Manly, was a former Confederate Army general and a building contractor who worked for San Diego tycoon John D. Spreckels. His mother, Cella, was a teacher who collected books about metaphysics and gave lectures.

After finishing eighth grade, Harvey decided he'd had enough formal education and began making a living as a messenger boy in San Diego's red-light district.

He moved to San Francisco's notorious Barbary Coast, helping prostitutes with errands and delivering heroin in hollowed-out fountain pens. He was making good money, but he recognized the dangers.

"Harvey always said that the smartest thing he ever did was leave San Francisco," Gauntt said.

Slocum came back to San Diego, to a house where his parents lived near Little Italy. He trained as a carpenter and an iron worker, and got his name in the papers for his prowess in rowing. He also nearly died here, burned severely when a gas heater exploded at a potash plant he was in charge of building.

He was hired for his first dam job in 1917 by Bent Brothers, the company building the [Lake Hodges](#) barrier to provide water for the development of Rancho Santa Fe and Solana Beach. Not yet 30, he'd heard the superintendent on the job was going to be fired and proposed himself as a replacement, promising that he could get the concrete poured faster.

Faster it was, and when Hodges was finished, it was the highest multiple-arch dam in the country. The reservoir, owned by the city of San Diego, holds water for several local communities and is a popular recreational site.

Bent Brothers put Slocum in charge of the Gibraltar Dam in Santa Barbara, and then Henshaw Dam near the base of Palomar Mountain in North County. He was on his way, using Alhambra as his home base and going all over to supervise work on a total of 18 dams in his lifetime.

"What's most impressive about Harvey is his tenacity," Gauntt said. "He just outworked everybody."

He sometimes tried to out-drink them, too, and that got him in trouble. He was fired from the [Grand Coulee](#) job in 1937 because of alcoholic binges.

For the next 18 months, he was in and out of rehab facilities. Companies hired him to prepare bids on construction projects, but not to oversee them.

Then he made sobriety stick. As he later explained in one of the magazine profiles about him, "I didn't care what they (other people) thought of me. When I had no more use for myself, that's when I quit."

An offer they couldn't refuse

Biography author Gauntt worked for more than 40 years as a corporate attorney, first in Los Angeles and then in San Diego. After he retired in 2018, he turned to writing and has authored [three other books](#).

“Best Dam Man in the World” ends where Slocum’s life did, with the massive [Bhakra Dam](#) in India.

His reputation rehabilitated by work on a string of projects around the world, Slocum was recruited to oversee what would be the biggest concrete dam in the world. He didn’t want the job and demanded a salary — \$1 million, paid over 10 years — he was sure would be rejected.

It was accepted, and when he started in 1954, he became one of the highest-paid people in all of India.

The project was so audacious it attracted a string of world leaders who wanted to see it, including the Dalai Lama, Prince Philip of Britain, Ho Chi Minh of Vietnam, Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, and Zhou Enlai of China. Slocum was their tour guide.

Newspaper reporters captured a memorable exchange he had with Nikita Khrushchev of the Soviet Union in November 1955. Khrushchev noted that American engineers had helped build dams in Russia after the communist revolution, but “now we are competing with you and will soon surpass you.”

Slocum responded, “Competition is fine by us.”

They traded jibes about which country was more welcoming to visitors from the other, and when Khrushchev made a crack that seemed to suggest Slocum didn’t have to work very hard, he said, “Okay, you take my job, and I’ll take your job.”

Khrushchev laughed. So did Slocum.

“Harvey was not someone who was going to back down,” Gauntt said. “He was tough, he was plain-spoken, and he didn’t sugar-coat anything.”

Slocum was at the Bhakra dam site on Oct. 24, 1961, when he had a stroke. Hospitalized, he had a heart attack and died a couple of weeks later.

He and his wife had no children. Gauntt said his research for the biography led him to one distant relative, a step-grand-nephew living in La Jolla, who has since passed away. The nephew told Gauntt that he knew about Slocum — and regularly wore a watch the builder had bought while in India.

Huge dams in Slocum’s day were seen as progress, monuments to man’s ability to harness Mother Nature, but the passage of time has complicated that picture. More is known now about the harm caused to people displaced by the projects and the wildlife killed. In some places, dams have been removed.

Still, Gauntt thinks there's something uniquely American about Slocum — his self-determination, his tenacity, his failures and his triumphs.

“This,” he said, “is somebody who needs to be remembered.”

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