



John Muir Correspondence (PDFs)

1907-12-16

**Letter from [William] Colby to Editor "Daily Commercial News",
1907 Dec 16.**

William Colby

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[16th]

December 1st, 1907.

Editor of the "Daily Commercial News",
San Francisco, Cal.

Dear Sir:-

Your issue of the 10th inst. contained a criticism of my position on "The Hetch Hetchy Water Supply" and I assume that you will be fair enough to give me a "square deal" in the matter and hence send you this reply. The writer of that criticism is evidently one of those whom I referred to as being "wedded" to the Hetch Hetchy system, though he does not disclose his identity.

He brushes aside my reference to Professor Marx' statements made before the Common Wealth Club, saying that the Professor had not had an opportunity to make the necessary studies involved, but he fails to explain the following language used by the Professor on that occasion.

"It can readily be shown that the drainage area needed for a water supply capable of furnishing 200,000,000 gallons per day can be had on a number of the Sierra streams. That the drainage areas of streams north of the Tuolumne give better promise of meeting these requirements, can not be denied. It can not be said that the physical data now available are such as to admit of a reliable comparison of the relative values of the various sources of water supply for San Francisco from the Sierras."

These statements can not be brushed aside so lightly and they would lead one to believe that Prof. Marx had given considerable thought to the subject.

However, I have not based my convictions that there are other Sierra supplies available on the authority of Prof. Marx alone, but have for many years discussed this subject with other eminent engineers in order to enlighten myself. It would seem incredible that the run off from the great roof of the Sierra should be confined to the Tuolumne system, especially in view of the fact that Mr. Marsden Manson's isohyetal lines established beyond the peradventure of a doubt that the amount of rainfall increases materially as we go North on the Sierra watershed.

Therefore, the undisclosed critic's statement that I would be better equipped for a full and just consideration of the questions if I had secured my information from engineers who already have their knowledge, was based upon a false promise. What the critic had in mind, doubtless, was that I should have secured my information solely

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from those who are "wedded" to the Hetch Hetchy project.

In his argument in reply to my suggested list of other sources, he says, first - that none is comparable in purity to the Hetch Hetchy, except the Stanislaus. The proponents of the Hetch Hetchy scheme at one time admitted that the Lake Eleanor and Cherry River supply was also. All the other supplies mentioned, except one, head in National Forest reserves and analysis has shown some of them at least to equal the Tuolumne in purity.

In his second premise he admits that the storage capacity of some of the systems is adequate, which is quite a concession coming from the source it does.

His third premise is more subtle, in that he asserts that the other systems are all complicated with existing "rights" to a greater extent than Hetch Hetchy. Surely this prophet is possessed of more than ordinary insight and can foretell the verdicts of juries and the judgments of courts years in advance of their pronouncement. I fear me that the owners and counsel of the alternative systems will have serious ground for difference from my learned friend. He overlooks the fact that one of the strongest organizations of irrigation anywhere within the area affected by water systems mentioned, is ready to maintain its rights by "fighting to the last ditch."

However, be that as it may, I am willing to meet my adversary on the ground he has selected as the only tenable one for maintaining his position, and, for argument's sake merely, I will assume the opposition of existing rights might be less serious in the case of a Hetch Hetchy supply. My proposition is as follows, and this is what I am advocating with all the force I possess: The reserving of the Yosemite National Park was no fortuitous circumstance done without object or reason. It was created because of the wonderful aggregation of natural scenic features existing within its borders "which the Congress of the United States sought by law to preserve for all coming time as nearly as practicable in the condition fashioned by the hand of the Creator - a worthy object of national pride and a source of healthful pleasure and rest for the thousands of people who yearly sojourn there during the heated months." John Muir and some of his interested friends started the movement which resulted in this dedication by Congress to the people of the nation. What right then, has any local community to step in and say "This water supply and system have carefully been preserved all these years for the benefit of the public, while other available systems have passed into private hands - it will be cheaper to enter this public park and appropriate that which is not privately owned - only because it has been devoted

to other uses?" I answer without equivocation, it has no such right where there are other sources of supply available, even if to obtain them will mean increased cost. But my learned critic has failed to convince me that upon due investigation San Francisco will not be able to secure an adequate water supply at less expense elsewhere. He knows as well as I do that such questions can not be settled in newspaper discussions. He asserts that the ground has already been covered by competent engineers and the decision made in favor of Hetch Hetchy. This is a very bold assertion, as unsupported by the evidence as have, of necessity, been my statements. It is made by one very closely "wedded" to the system he is advocating and such testimony would have very little weight before an impartial tribunal. It is like asserting that "I think so and so and therefore it must be so." San Francisco can well afford, especially in view of her present financial condition and her urgent necessities, to approach this subject with deliberation and acquire the data which Professor Marx, and many other engineers, think necessary before committing itself to any one system. The Hetch Hetchy system is amply protected and is not liable to be granted to other applicants meanwhile.

One point remains and I am done. My critic refers to a circular on the subject and brands a certain portion of it not only as a "misrepresentation" but as an "absolute misstatement". I regret that his zeal has carried him thus far, I had hoped that this discussion should be entirely free of such personalities. John Muir wrote that circular. His name is signed to it. His straight forward Scotch character permits of no dissembling and he never resorts to subterfuge. Everyone who has ever had the fortune to look into his clear gray eyes knows that he would not make a misstatement as charged by my critic, even though it would bring him a principality. He needs no vindication at my hands. If my critic had not been blinded by his excess of zeal, he would have saved himself from falling into the error of wrongfully charging a man of Muir's standing and character with writing misstatements and "absolute nonsense". He would have seen that Muir only intended to convey the idea that the sublime way up the Tuolumne Canon from Hetch Hetchy would be hopelessly blocked if the latter were ~~dammed~~. It has been my pleasure to visit the Hetch Hetchy and the Tuolumne Canyon many times and I know this statement of Muir's to be absolute fact. Mr. Muir never intended to convey the idea that access to the heart of the Sierra would be hopelessly blocked and it took an excess of imagination to inject this idea into his language.

Some people contend that the destruction of the beautiful meadows and groves of Hetch Hetchy Valley and the alteration of this natural setting by the creation of a reservoir with its unsightly margin and exposed flats as will occur in late Summer at time of low water, will enhance the beauty of the Valley. Muir and I do not agree with these zealous enthusiasts but, be that as it may, it does not answer the fact that Hetch Hetchy Valley will be rendered less accessible - that camping and living on the floor of the Valley will be rendered impossible - and how else can one enjoy to the full its wonderful beauties, which our artist Keith says are, in some respects, even superior to Yosemite? We might as well dam Yosemite to enhance its scenic attractions! Such arguments, as these are mere sophistry. I maintain that when other water supplies exist that can be procured at greater or less expense than the Hetch Hetchy supply, we should not

inside a National Park and alter its scenic wonders reserved for the people of the entire United States.

The Yosemite National Park means much for the future of California and the precedent of entering its borders for local gain is a principle which I most strenuously oppose.

Very sincerely,

Colby.

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