San Francisco Water Power Sewer
Services of the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission

LAKE MERCED'S HUMAN AND NATURAL HISTORY

Human History

Lake Merced has been home to many different people and important events throughout history.

Ohlone Native Americans

The Ramaytush Ohlone were the first noted inhabitants of San Francisco. Archaeologists have found evidence of their habitation at the lake; a pestle was found on the San Francisco State University Campus for crushing acorns and an obsidian tool was found near the SFPUC's Southwest Treatment Plant. The Ohlone used Lake Merced for its abundant tule reeds, used to build homes and boats, and would have fished and hunted the abundant wildlife at the lake.

Spanish Explorers

The first Spanish explorers to arrive at Lake Merced were Don Fernando Rivera and Father Francisco Palou, though the De Anza expedition is often credited as the first group to discover San Francisco. Due to the Mexican Land Grant, the land was in Mexican possession throughout the early to mid-1800's. After the passage of the Homestead Act in 1862, the land was gained by squatters.

Spring Valley Water Company

In 1868, the Spring Valley Water Company (SVWC) purchased the water rights to Lake Merced, and began delivering Lake Merced water to the city of San Francisco in 1895. After the 1906 earthquake and the resulting inability to deliver water to the city of San Francisco, public support swelled in favor of the city of San Francisco purchasing the SVWC and make water a public utility.

City of San Francisco

in 1930, the city of San Francisco eventually purchased the SVWC for $40 million dollars, and used it as an emergency water supply from 1932 onward.

The post-World War II period saw rapid development of the area around Lake Merced into mostly single-family homes with a few notable exceptions such as Parkmerced. This changed the nature of Lake Merced from a rural landscape on the outskirts of town to a suburban area, and it meant that Lake Merced became utilized as a recreation destination. The SFPUC gave recreation duties to the Recreation and Parks Department in 1950, solidifying recreation as a major use of Lake Merced.

Today, Lake Merced is a vibrant ecosystem, cherished by generations of Bay Area residents. It is utilized by humans for various purposes, some of which are the same as the original Ohlone inhabitants – fishing, boating – and some are entirely new, such as birding, golfing, picnicking, jogging, and as an emergency non-potable water supply.



Bridle trail along the shore of Lake Merced taken in 1924



Bicyclists enjoying the shore of Lake Merced for recreation



Dragon Boat crew members practicing at Lake Merced

Natural History

Prior to the 1870's Lake Merced was a coastal estuary; during large rain events, the lake would fill up with water and overflow, creating a stream which connected the lake to the ocean. The lake drained an area of 6,320 acres in size, approximately 10 square miles which included Daly City, Westlake, and the Stonestown area of San Francisco.

In 1895, the Spring Valley Water Company built a dam at Lake Merced, disconnecting the lake from the ocean. This allowed the company to use the lake as a source of drinking water. As the city grew in the late 1800's, so did its need to protect water sources for drinking. The sewer system was built to divert the creeks that drained into Lake Merced, protecting the lake from debris and after the SVWC was purchased by San Francisco, Hetch Hetchy water replaced Lake Merced water in 1934.



SVWC Purchase, Dedication Ceremony in 1930

During the 1940's, the character of Lake Merced changed as new homes and roads were built. Lake Merced was officially designated as a park to be operated and maintained by SF Rec & Park in 1950.

During the 20th century, droughts and groundwater pumping lowered the lake level. The lake is hydraulically connected to the underlying Westside groundwater basin and is a surface expression of the shallow aquifer. Extensive pumping of the Westside Basin by golf courses, municipalities, and cemeteries developed in the post-War years, lowered groundwater levels within the basin and surface water levels in the lake. The lake hit its lowest levels during the drought between 1989-1993.

Since that time, the lake level has rebounded, due to the dedication of the SFPUC, CalTrout, the Committee to Save Lake Merced, and many other devoted stakeholders and groups.



Young angler practicing her fishing technique at Lake Merced

Today, Lake Merced is still the city's emergency non-drinking water supply. The lake also provides incredible habitat for birds and other wildlife and is also home to a vibrant boating community, both of which rely on a healthy watershed. The SFPUC and SF Rec & Park are committed to maintaining and enhancing the many beneficial values of Lake Merced. For the latest information please visit **sfpuc.gov/LakeMerced**.

San Francisco
Water Power Sewer
Services of the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission