

Calendar

Inside the Seasonal Bat Motel

Boat Tour of Lake Hodges Reservoir

After a dam is built, you might think, it's hand-washing time: the job is done. Its builders certainly hope so. But the ribbon-cutting signals only the start of things for a dam's keepers. "We work from sunrise to sunset, so we're here 18 hours a day during the summer," says Dan Hughes, who has been the reservoir keeper at Lake Hodges for 13 years. "I have a crew of seven, when I'm lucky."

The dam is made of concrete, 157 feet high, 27 feet of it below the streambed. "You've got steel bars reinforcing it. And it's multiarched, because it's more stable during our quakes and things."

Catching graffiti artists lies within

LOCAL EVENTS

the range of Hughes's responsibility. He's proud to say he caught two last year.

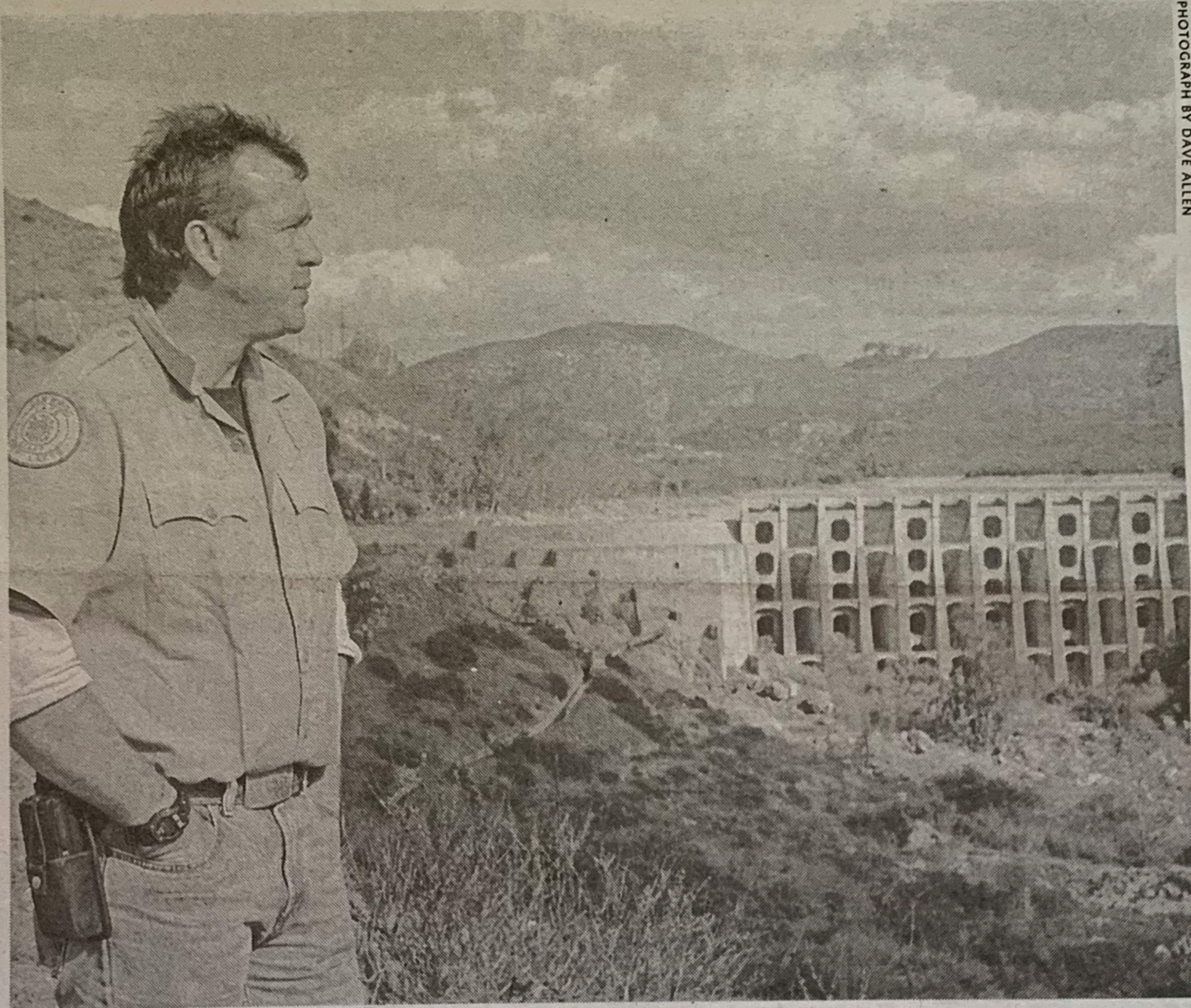
He also measures cracks in the dam.

Cracks. "Our" quakes. These ideas are unsettling to most of us. Not for 39-year-old Hughes. "We're in there once a month, measuring," he says of the dam's interior. Visual inspections are weekly. "We do have some leak weirs. Every dam leaks. You'll never find a dry dam."

To hear him tell it, cracks in the two-and-a-half-foot thick dam wall are "a good thing." It's because the cracks could be harbingers, and reading them correctly could be a preventative. More likely, they're business-as-usual in the (hopefully) very long life of a dam. (The Lake Hodges dam will be 83 years old next year.) "In the winter, right now," he says, "all the cracks are expanding, because it's getting colder. When it warms up, they'll get smaller. So, like, it breathes."

Inside the dam, breathing for Hughes and his crew is sometimes a problem, unless they wear breathing apparatus. That's because of the bats. "They migrate from Mexico to us, in March. We'll get about 5000 bats in there. And they'll be all fluttering and squeaking, and there's a very strong ammonia scent, because of the urination."

Another measurement Hughes takes is the level of the lake. "At full capacity, we're 1234 square acres," he says. The peak depth is 115 feet. "Now we're in a drought, so we're down 25 feet. It's an uncontrolled dam, so when it hits 115, it goes over the spillways, down into the riverbed, into Del Mar Bay, and out into the ocean."



PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVE ALLEN

Dan Hughes

"Uncontrolled" doesn't mean "out-of-control." True, precious water is lost, but that's the plan. "That's what an uncontrolled dam is."

With the water low, the reservoir's wet tower is exposed. "There are wet towers and dry towers," Hughes explains. "A dry tower actually lets you go down a big tube to the bottom of the lake, and in there are valves. And when you open up those valves, that's how the water gets down to the San Diego community, into the filtration plant, where it's processed. With the wet tower, you open up the valves at the very top. Ours is connected right to the dam, and we have our valve room inside the dam."

Bryan Norris, assistant reservoir keeper, will be conducting a boat tour of the reservoir this weekend, in Hughes's stead, since he'll be back home, in Philadelphia, for the holidays. Throughout the new year, Hughes will conduct the same tour; but, unlike Norris, he hopes to take

people inside the dam. "We won't be ready for them going into the dam this month. We've got to get in there and clean it up. It's slippery, with guano." Upon the bats' return, he'll probably omit that part of the tour once again.

Home for Hughes, otherwise, is "on-station" — in the keeper's house. "The city gives me a house, so I'm only three miles — three minutes — away from anything that goes on," including accidents involving hikers, bikers, equestrians, as well as motorists. "We're lifeguards, first-aid people. The list goes on and on."

Still, he believes, "I've got the best job in the world. I'm outside all day. It's wonderful, even when it's raining." Especially when it's raining, he might say. "I love the rain."

Hughes sees as foolish those living "downrange" who, in drought years, build horse stables and plant flower beds. "Then they wonder, when the rains come, why they got washed out. Last time we spilled, it wasn't a big

one." That was in 1998. "The big one was El Niño, in 1992. We had four feet of water going over the spillways. It was a pretty sight."

The Lake Hodges reservoir itself is a harbinger of a kind. Of all nine reservoirs in the county, it's always the first to spill. That happens when the watershed gets saturated. "We have 303 square miles of watershed," says Hughes. "We get the run-off from that whole area, and it comes a hootin'. It fills up very, very fast."

— Jeanne Schinto

"Boat Tour of Lake Hodges Reservoir"
Saturday, December 30,
9:00-11:00 a.m.
San Dieguito River Park,
Escondido
Free
Tour is sold-out
Info and reservations for future
tours: 858-674-2275, x5
or www.sdrp.org

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