

The Buhisan Dam

Cebuanos finally got their first glimpse of piped water when the Buhisan Dam, the only one outside Manila, was first tested at the reservoir in Tisa, Labangon, on December 27, 1911. While the availability of potable water was still about two months away, it was poignant that the trial, which drenched many a Cebuano, came on Holy Innocents Day. For hundreds of children and infants had succumbed to another round of the cholera epidemic the previous year.

The dam was the brainchild of the young Philippine Assembly Speaker Sergio Osmeña Sr. in response to the fires and cholera epidemics that regularly visited Cebu. An equally young engineer named E.J. Halsema (who would later build Kennon Road) was tapped by the Bureau of Public Works to do the daunting task of designing the dam and its accompanying waterworks. Constructed by the Atlantic, Gulf and Pacific (AG&P) had to build a small-gauge railway line from port to construction site to carry cement imported from Hong Kong and about 4,000 tons of steel from Glasgow, in Great Britain. A strike in the steelworks almost caused a delay in the project's completion. But construction was fatefully aided by a long drought that befell Cebu even as torrential rains poured down on the rest of the archipelago.

On hand to witness the groundbreaking ceremony on January 3, 1911 were Osmeña (for whom the accompanying waterworks was named) and Governor General William Cameron Forbes.

On February 17, 1912, the same party came to a fountain makeshift rotunda far from the city, to inaugurate Cebu's first waterworks.

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MCWD opens photo exhibit on Buhisan Dam's 100 years

By [Rebelander S. Basilan](#)

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ON THE top of a mountain in Cebu City stands a dam that, for a century, has supplied Cebuanos with potable water.

The Buhisan Dam, a structure 27 meters high, was inaugurated on Feb. 13, 1912 and continues to be a major source of water in Metro Cebu.

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To celebrate its 100 years of existence, Cebu City's Cultural and Historical Affairs Commission (Chac) and the Metropolitan Cebu Water District (MCWD) yesterday opened a photo exhibit.

Located at the Rizal Memorial Library and Museum on Osmeña Blvd., Cebu City, the exhibit shows the history of Buhisan Dam and the people who made it a reality.

"It's not often that we celebrate a hundred years of something," Cebu City Councilor Margarita "Margot" Osmeña said during the opening ceremony.

Osmeña, Chac vice chairperson, underscored the importance of Buhisan dam, and lamented that not many Cebuanos recognize the dam's significance.

"Not many people know that Buhisan Dam is part of Cebu City," she added.

MCWD general manager Armando Paredes shared Osmeña's sentiment. "Not everybody in Cebu knows the Buhisan Dam and its significance," he said.

"The significance of the dam cannot be understated, especially for us living in Metro Cebu," he said, adding that the exhibit will help the public learn more about the dam.

The construction of the Buhisan Dam started on Jan. 3, 1911. It was built to address recurring fires that had destroyed millions worth of property in the city, as well as the deaths due to the lack of safe drinking water.

A fire in 1906 destroyed most of Cebu's business district and a cholera outbreak in 1909 killed 559 people in Cebu City, which then had a population of 55,000.

The late president Sergio Osmeña Sr., who was then Speaker of the Philippine National Assembly, lobbied for infrastructure projects, including a waterworks system, in Cebu.

He worked closely with then governor Dionisio Jakosalem.

Then governor-general William Forbes helped secure P550,000 to fund a waterworks project in Cebu. He issued an executive order declaring 5,590,000 square meters of land in Labangon as the site for the proposed watershed and reservoir.

On Feb. 13, 1912, Forbes, Osmeña and other officials graced the opening ceremony of the waterworks system, then called Osmeña Waterworks, in what is now known as the Fuente Osmeña Circle.

As part of the ceremony, Forbes turned on the fountain that has remained a landmark in the Fuente Osmeña Circle.

The MCWD has been managing the Buhisan Dam since 1974.

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