

Thirsty Vallejo suffered dam dilemma

By Jerry Bowen

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Near the turn of the century, Vallejo was experiencing a serious shortage of this valuable resource. Concerns rose about health and fire danger in the town.

In 1892, Vallejo secretly purchased the Hastings Ranch in the Wildhorse Creek watershed above Green Valley.

In 1893-94 the city built Frey Dam, named after John Frey, and installed piping to the city. With continued growth of Vallejo, it wasn't long before they realized the supply was still inadequate.

In 1898, Vallejo decided to add Dug Road Creek above Green Valley to their inventory and began acquiring more land. But a Napa City winemaker, Constance Malandrino, had beaten them to the punch by purchasing about 850 acres of mountain land that included the riparian water rights along Wildhorse Creek just below Lake Frey on the headwaters of Dug Road Creek in 1897.

Malandrino built an earthen dam at the head of Dug Road Creek creating a 12,500,000-gallon reservoir in 1906. In 1908 he offered to sell his riparian rights of Wildhorse Creek to Vallejo, but city officials refused.

Vallejo's need for more water was partially satisfied by adding another dam in 1908 a little north of Frey Reservoir, creating the Lake Madigan reservoir.

Referring to Madigan and Frey Dams, Malandrino sued the city for obstructing his "free and unrestricted use of the water of Wildhorse Creek." According the Solano Republican, "Malandrino's dam was built for the purpose of diverting the water so it could not be used by the city of Vallejo."

Before the lawsuit was completed, Constance Malandrino died of appendicitis in 1908. Malandrino's widow won the lawsuit in 1909 and soon after, she filed a second suit against Vallejo to demolish the Madigan Dam. The city paid her \$5,000 for the Wildhorse Creek water rights.

Unusually heavy rains in early 1909 began filling the dams above Green Valley to such dangerous levels that officials realized that Lake Madigan Dam was in danger of failing. If the dam failed, its 400,000,000 gallons of water had the potential take out Lake Frey

Dam and to wipe out lower Green Valley all the way to Cordelia.

The waters of Lake Madigan continued rising as emergency sandbagging failed to keep up. In a desperate attempt to save the dam and valley, the decision was made to blast a small bypass through the dam's concrete . Even after opening up the dam, the waters continued to rise.

After blasting the bypass, the Solano Republican stated: "On Tuesday of this week, however, the water was so near the top of the dam and was beating against it with such force that the situation became critical."

Warnings were issued. Three orchards and homes belonging to the Oberti, Cravera and Jones families were located a little below the intersection of Wildhorse creek and Dug Road Creek.

Everyone began breathing a sigh of relief, as the emergency measures finally seemed to work. Then the unexpected happened. No one had been paying attention to the poorly constructed Malandrino Dam.

Suddenly it gave way. A monstrous wall of water rumbled down the canyon toward Green Valley.

The Solano Republican described the disaster as follows: "A poorly constructed dam on the Malandrino Ranch in Green Valley yielding to the pressure of water behind it gave away last Friday (Jan. 15, 1909) and released 50,000,000 gallons of water, which instantly formed itself into a roaring river sweeping everything in its pathway as it tore down the narrow canon to the valley several hundred feet below. Immediately at the base of the canyon are the beautiful and productive cherry orchards and homes of Louis Oberti and Crovera (Cravera). Fred S. Jones's land was also damaged somewhat but his large cherry orchard was protected by a stone fence, which diverted the course of the water.

"By the breaking of the dam, 150 feet of Vallejo's new water main, 100 feet of the old main and between 700 and 800 feet of 7-inch pipe was destroyed. Vallejo will therefore probably be the plaintiff in a suit against the Malandrino estate and interesting developments are anticipated. The matter concerning the damage to Oberti and Crovera has been placed in the hands of Attorney T.T.C. Gregory of Suisun ...

In the end, claims for Oberti, Cravera and Jones were settled and Vallejo received satisfaction and perhaps a little revenge through the courts. Lakes Madigan and Frey were improved and continue to serve as a source of water to Vallejo.

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