

Story of Monticello Dam flows with water needs

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In a few weeks, Solano County will celebrate the 50th Anniversary of Monticello Dam. The dam made possible the creation of Lake Berryessa, which fulfilled a vision of earlier to secure a reliable water supply for local farmers and city residents.

In the early 1900s, a steady and secure water supply to irrigate crops during hot summer months and drought years was just a dream. At the time, farmers relied solely on the annual rainfall, creeks and wells to irrigate fields and orchards.

During those years, irrigation in the Central Valley allowed farmers there to grow bigger fruit, leaving dry-farming Solano farmers unable to compete and sell their crops.

In 1907, a group of cities south of San Francisco hired three famous engineers to study whether waters from the Putah and Cache creeks could be dammed. These men were well qualified for the project; George Washington Goethals had just finished building the Panama Canal, William Mulholland headed the scheme of draining Owens Valley water into Los Angeles County.

Unfortunately their ambitious idea of storing water on the South Fork of the Eel River, channeling it through tunnels from Clear Lake to Cache Creek and Putah Creek, transporting it from there through tunnels to Cordelia, Benicia and eventually under the Carquinez Strait to San Francisco was way beyond what the sponsors of the project could afford.

In 1916, William Pierce of Willota Ranch in Suisun Valley was the first to propose placing a dam at Devil's Gate to create a reservoir behind it in Berryessa Valley. While he realized that this meant the destruction of the small town of Monticello in the middle of the valley, the dam would create a reservoir that could hold up to 1.5 million acre feet of water.

Other ideas to address the water shortage surfaced over the following years, such as pumping water from the Sacramento River through a canal, but Williams Pierce's idea was looked at again and again.

Finally, in 1940, the Solano County Board of Supervisors formed the Solano County Water Council to study local water needs. They nominated Pierce as the Water Advisor and commissioned him to investigate all available water sources and to collect the

necessary water data.

At the same time, the Bureau of Reclamation and the Army Corps of Engineers developed plans for a project on Putah Creek, called the "Solano Project."

Using Putah and Cache creeks as well as parts of Berryessa Valley in this project meant that Napa and Yolo county residents also had to be involved in the decision making process. Yolo County supervisors preferred a dam at Indian Valley. Napa and Vallejo residents proposed a low-level dam at Coyote Valley, which would preserve the 12,000 acres of farmland in Berryessa Valley. Environmentalists wanted to see Putah Canyon converted into a state park.

Lengthy and often-heated meetings in Vacaville and Fairfield throughout 1945 resulted in statements for and against the dam construction.

The Water Council and the Solano County Board of Supervisors, among them farmers and businessmen such as Edwin Uhl, John Rico, Monte Gates, Max Brazelton, Frank Douglass, Henry Rogers, Bert Wykoff and George Akerly, persevered with their idea of a single high dam across Devil's Gate, to be constructed by the Bureau of Reclamation. The project would be paid for by user fees over a fifty-year period.

These men also were instrumental in the formation of the Solano Irrigation District, SID, which came into existence in 1948. With the approval of farmers in the five areas of the district - Dixon, Vacaville, Tolenas, Fairfield, and Elmira - SID became the legal authority governing upper Solano irrigation.

Finally, on Sept. 25, 1953, Governor Earl Warren was able to attend the groundbreaking ceremony at Monticello Dam. In his speech, he summed up the reason for this project: "Every month 30,000 people are coming to California, and not one of them brings a gallon of water."

Heavy rainfall during the winter of 1954/55 caused Putah Creek to flood, sending more than 95,000 cubic feet of water per second through Devil's Gate and across the unfinished dam. It caused heavy damage. Construction was delayed for five months.

With the construction of the dam finally on the way again, preparations to evacuate the valley began in earnest in 1956. In that summer, Professor Adam Treganza of the University of California, Berkeley and students from Sacramento Junior College excavated a number of Indian sites.

During an archaeological survey eight years earlier, nearly 150 Indian villages had been located in the valley.

The evacuation of the town of Monticello was attracting wide attention. Founded in 1867, the town had a population of about 250, with another 100 people farming throughout the valley. Cattle, grain and orchards were the main products.

Life magazine commissioned renowned photographers Dorothea Lange and Pirkle Jones to chronicle the last year of Berryessa Valley. For weeks, the two recorded how the citizens of Monticello prepared to move all their belongings out of town.

Houses and possessions had to be moved. Orchards, trees, bushes, fences - all were cut down. The last cattle roundup took place. Everything had to be removed, including family grave plots. State Highway 128 needed to be relocated around the dam site through rugged terrain.

On Nov. 7, 1957, the Monticello Dam, Putah South Canal and the Diversion Dam were completed. On May 15, 1959 the first water from Lake Berryessa was delivered into the Vaughn Canal near Dixon.

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