

Never Before Was Drought a Vacaville Problem

By John Rico

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THE RAINS HAVE ARRIVED - After two exceptionally dry seasons, rains in substantial quantities have arrived in the Vacaville area. With storms reminiscent of those experienced here in our yesteryear, it is again gratifying to see water standing in open fields, creeks flowing with runoff from the hills and mountains around Vacaville, and storm drains in some sections of the city failing to take care of their chores.

Historically, and this is a statement which may be a surprise to many local residents today, the lack of rainfall here in past years has not been a problem. It has been an over-supply which caused some farmers to go to the additional expense of laying drain pipes to help carry off some of the water.

It has not been unusual in our past for owners of many Vacaville homes, when building a house over a basement, to install a sump pump.

Ulati and Alamo Creeks carried a supply of running water throughout the hot summer months, providing "old swimming holes" which were heavily patronized by the young men of the community.

At one long period, before the word "environment" was an important part of our vocabulary, local residents were permitted to dump their garbage and rubbish into Ulati Creek, just north of Main Street. The heavy winter rains carried the refuse into the open fields around Elmira, or further southeast into the sloughs of the Sacramento River.

In the early years of FDR's New Deal, Vacaville was picked as a site for a Citizens Conservation Corps camp because excessive rains had caused considerable erosion of soils in the hills north of Vacaville.

The late President Roosevelt proposed new federal agencies in such numbers that it was necessary to label them by using letters of the alphabet. His NRA was the key to formation of the WPA, which led to the spawning of the CCC.

It was in 1935 that the CCC invaded the Vacaville area. This was a "make work" federal agency, and it was necessary to go forward as rapidly as possible so that thousands of unemployed men could be put to work. What better task could there be, but to help stop erosion of the Vacaville hills?

An extensive camp was located. just off Peaceful Glen Road on the Robinson Ranch. Dormitories, mess halls, recreation centers, and a small hospital, were all part of the new CCC project here. The official name was Soil Conservation Service No.5. In a few months the camp was known as Camp Chester (but who was Chester?).

At the peak of operations between 200 and 300 men were housed at Camp Chester. An Army unit had control of activities within the confines of the camp.

Soil erosion projects throughout the entire area were solicited from landowners to keep the CCC crews busy. Much of the work consisted of building small dams, planting trees, clearing creeks, or laying drain pipe. The expense to the landowner was minimal. Today, nearly 40 years after abandonment of the camp, there are in the area visible results of some of the chores performed by these men. In all fairness to proponents of the plan at the time, it was just another means of taking unemployed men off the streets and urging them to do a minimum of work in return for their board, room and a small wage.

Downtown Vacaville merchants benefited from patronage by residents at the camp.

Long before the turn of the century men had talked about harnessing the wild waters of Putah Creek, but it was not until later years when the Bureau of Reclamation could become interested that the project we now know as Lake Berryessa was born. It took many long years of volunteer efforts by ambitious Solano County men to get the ball rolling.

Now behind a block of concrete in Putah Canyon is Lake Berryessa, with a capacity of 1.6 million acre feet of water. At this writing the two successive dry seasons have depleted the supply down to approximately half, or 875,000 acre feet. Even the most pessimistic opponents of the project, were a bit surprised in January 1965, when word went out that the lake was "full."

Every pound of cement and gravel used in the concrete structure 304 feet high and 1000 feet long, was carried into the canyon by fleets of trucks. In that one chunk of concrete are 325,000 yards of cement and gravel.

It will take a lot of rain to again fill Berryessa to capacity. No one will offer a guess as to the year when it can again be said the "lake is full."

California residents can be thankful for the foresight of proponents of water conservation through impounding of this precious gift from the skies in man-made lakes.

Had not it been for such lakes as Berryessa, Shasta, Oroville and Folsom, along with others in the north state area, the two successive years of drought which recently ended could have been a calamity of the first degree.

These four man-made lakes can impound a total of 10.6 million acre feet of water at capacity, and that's a lot of liquid in any man's language.

Many Northern Solano residents can well remember when Putah Creek had gone on a rampage, before being harnessed by a block of concrete.

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