

## **Napa County Fights Against Building the Monticello Dam**

Excerpt from: Roots of the Present: Napa Valley 1900 to 1950, by Lin Weber

"In September of 1945, two Napers' attended a meeting of the Central Valley Water Project, the huge irrigation and riparian management program that sought to control the state's liquid wealth. They raced back to the County Board of Supervisors with word that 26 California counties had passed a resolution favoring the construction of a dam at Devil's Gate. Official bodies in Solano County, they said, would make a "concerted effort" to have work proceed. The Napers vigorously opposed it, and the resolution was sent to the Project's executive committee without action.

Surveys of the area continued nevertheless. An idea for the proposed dam that stirred up additional controversy was to drill a tunnel from Clear Lake to Putah Creek so that floodwaters from Clear Lake could be collected in the dam, thus removing a winter weather problem that had troubled owners of Lake County resorts. Already unhappy that Lake County had sucked tourist dollars from the Napa Valley, local leaders were disgusted that beautiful Berryessa might be utilized as a holding tank for someone else's floodwater. The Clear Lake water proved to be too full of boron and other chemicals unfriendly to plant-life, however, and the idea went away.

While the forces in favor of the dam were formidable, there were a few agencies outside of Napa County that withdrew their support once they understood the Berryessa residents' position. The California State Chamber of Commerce, for example, recanted an earlier stance and came out against to the project. Every piece of good news was music to the ears of Monticello's worried grain farmers and cattle ranchers, whose labors produced a sixth of the county's agricultural wealth.

The Bureau of Reclamation presented a bill to Congress in the summer of 1946 urging early approval of the Devil's Gate dam. Nathan S. Coombs drew up a resolution seeking a delay while other places further up Putah Creek could be investigated as alternative sites. Berryessans donated \$4,000 for the problem to be professionally studied and sought matching funds.

The Board of Supervisors hired hydraulic engineer, August Kempkey, to concoct the stratagem that could save Berryessa, and by March of 1947 he was ready to report. His proposal required the active cooperation of Napa's "sister city." It had three key components:

- Vallejo should relinquish its reservoir in Gordon Valley to other Solano County users, namely Suisun, Fairfield and the Benicia Arsenal;
- Conn dam should be heightened and its capacity increased so that the City of Vallejo could receive all its water from Conn;
- Putah creek should be dammed in uninhabited Coyote Valley, and the water impounded there should be added to the Conn supply. Other small dams should also be built in remote locations.

Some in Vallejo liked Kempkey's plan, but there had been friction between the two cities recently, and the political atmosphere did not favor cooperation. Just prior to the Kempkey proposal, for example, there had been an unfortunate contretemps involving Napa's invitation to Vallejo to use its existing Conn Valley supply. For months Napa had been asking Vallejo to commit one way or another to buying Conn water, but Vallejo had refused to answer. Delay meant postponing the installation of water pipes. Finally, after Vallejo ignored Napa's final ultimatum for an answer, the Napa City Council voted not to

sell any water outside the county. The next week, Vallejo said it might like to buy some water. Napa refused. Vallejo then asked Napa County to help fund a full-time lobbyist in Washington who could represent the area's needs. Napa politicians questioned why they should pay someone "to slit our throats." The "sister cities" now loathed each other.

The Kempkey plan had some flaws. Karl Kadie, district manager of the US Bureau of Reclamation, put it bluntly. The value of the water in the dam, he said, was greater than the value of the land beneath it. The Devil's Gate plan was relatively cheap; building a series of smaller dams would be too costly. Saving Berryessa was not consistent with newly emerging thought regarding resource management. The state of California now viewed itself as a huge thirsty organism, a gigantic system of mutually interdependent needs and resources. Water from the proposed Monticello Dam, for example, would not only irrigate Yolo and Solano farmland, but some of it would be sent to the San Joaquin Valley to supplement their water supply, which came from the dam at Shasta. This would leave more water at Shasta for use in generating power. Capturing and taming Putah Creek would, moreover, abate some of the winter flood problems experienced by the Sacramento River. Seen from this perspective, little valleys like Berryessa, and even large ones, like Owens in the south, could be sacrificed if necessary for the good of the whole.

Governor Earl Warren was mainly interested in the big picture. He assured a delegation of Vallejo businessmen and Mare Island representatives that he would do everything in his power to insure them a water supply as expeditiously as possible, as soon as the Bureau of Reclamation and the State Division of Water ironed out the details. When Vallejo selected vociferously pro-Dam publisher Luther Gibson as "Man of the Year," Warren spoke at the dinner given in his honor, while Al Streblov, Whit Griffiths, George Provine and other anti-Dam Napans listened quietly, sadly sipping their soup.

Napa and Solano drew up competing plans to form "irrigation districts" that would use Putah Creek water, a formality that preceded any final decision regarding a dam site. In the Napa plan, a "Berryessa Irrigation District" would use water from Coyote Valley and other uninhabited locations. In contrast, 757 Solano County residents petitioned for a "Solano County Irrigation District" that would drown Berryessa. Chief among the dam's promoters was the Chairman of the Solano County Board of Supervisors, Frank O. Bell, a nephew of the late Napa County politician.

Twisting and omitting key facts regarding the Conn Valley pipeline controversy, Bell accused Napa County at a public forum of hypocritically withdrawing its offer to share Conn water with its sister city and selfishly voting to retain all its water for its own uses. Solanan W.E. Andrews then bitterly assailed Napa for "misrepresenting the facts" regarding the dam. The meeting erupted in a furor of outraged Napans.

County Supervisor Lowell Edington flew to Washington to garner whatever help he could in fighting off the dam. He also tried to find money to improve the Napa River, a perennial problem that never seemed to get resolved. What he found was that, despite the big muscles behind the Monticello Dam movement, Congress itself was preoccupied with something having nothing to do with water management. Both houses were crammed with bills to fight Communism. The House Committee on Un-American Activities was identifying certain members of the entertainment industry as disloyal, and a Congressional sub-committee was reading through junior high school textbooks seeking pro-Red propaganda. A Southern California politician named Richard M. Nixon was riding to power on the crest of anti-Communist paranoia, together with a frightening hate-monger named Joseph McCarthy.

The fear was not limited to Communists within. The Soviet Union had been rattling swords of war in eastern Europe. China, too, had fallen under Communist rule, and when Japan withdrew from Korea in 1945, Chinese soldiers took over the northern part with support from the Russians. Due to the

urgency of these matters, Congress sidelined the issue of building a dam at Devil's Gate. Thanks to the federal obsession with Red and Pink, ranchers could watch a few more seasons play out in the green and gold little valley of Berryessa.”