

Yankee Hill Dispatch

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The Yankee Hill Dispatch is published three times per year. In each issue we include an article about the area's history. In this issue we cover the period in history from 1900 to 1930. Our next issue will be a special edition devoted to the town of Yankee Hill to commemorate a marker being placed at the site by Florence Smith Wilson, who, along with her husband, Skeet Smith, purchased the site in 1949. Check our web site for details

Turn of the Century Concow Valley and Yankee Hill

The early 1900s saw the continued decline of mining in the foothills North of Oroville. The population for Cherokee and Oregon City, which had been 1911 people in the 1880 census, was reported as 841 in 1903. On the other side of the West Branch of the Feather River, the population of the Concow Township, including Flea Valley, Concow Valley, Yankee Hill and Big Bend with a population of 492 in 1870 was reported as 377 in 1903. The worst was still to come.

The End of the Old Spring Valley Mining Company

The Spring Valley Mine, which had been the source of prosperity for Cherokee, had been leased out and reopened several times after its initial closing in 1887. Each time, the mine closed within a year or two. In 1896, after 10 years of litigation, the mine was sold in foreclosure for \$275,000 to several of the stockholders. In February 1903, all the assets were sold again. The mine, along with 4500 acres of land, was sold to W.P. Lynch of Cherokee and the Concow Reservoir and the ditches were sold to Bay Counties Power. Mr. Lynch made arrangements to lease water from the reservoir for mining.

Electricity Comes of Age

The late 1890s saw a surge in the creation of small electric companies. In Jan 1903, an article ran in the local paper telling how electricity was certain to replace water as a source of power for mining. It is not certain what the plan was for the Concow Reservoir by Bay Counties Power because one month later in March 1903, they were swallowed up in a consolidation of six power companies into the California Gas and Electric Corporation. By March 1904, the California Gas and Electric Company had acquired enough smaller electric companies that they were the major supplier of electricity in

20 California Counties. In 1908, another roll up of power companies would result in today's PG&E. \$45,000,000 in bonds were issued at 5% annually to finance the deal, the bonds matured in 1937.

Concow Dam Fails

On March 30, 1903, one week after the California Gas and Electric Corporation acquired the Concow Reservoir in the power company consolidations, the dam failed. Heavy rains and melting snow had filled the reservoir beyond the capacity of the dam. T.J. Kelley reported in the local paper that the reservoir was one mile wide and three miles long when the dam failed. (This would mean the area known today as Camelot was under water). The force of the flooding washed out the wooden covered Nelson Bar Bridge. The bridge was replaced with a steel bridge. (That bridge was torn down when Lake Oroville was filled in 1967).

The wet 1903 was followed by an exceptionally dry 1904. Part of the problem was that the Concow dam had not been rebuilt. The new owner, California Gas and Electric Corporation, was not particularly interested in the reservoir. In 1904 the mine at Cherokee employed 25 men, but the water was expected to run out in June. In September of 1904, Concow, Yankee Hill, Big Bend and Cherokee were all reporting that orchards, vineyards and gardens were dying. What made it worse was that what water there was in the Cherokee Ditch had been sold to Magalia. There was some talk about building a cement dam, 1000 feet behind the old dam at Concow, but that wasn't going to happen anytime soon. Local residents were talking about trying to rebuild the old Concow earthen dam. It would be 1924 before a cement dam was built. (Author's note: To date, research has not shown what repairs were made to the old earthen dam before 1924)



The site of the 1871 to 1924 earthen dam on Concow Reservoir, located across from the present caretaker's home. Authors note: The 1910 "Practical Treatise on Hydraulic Mining" by Bowie describes two 55 foot dams at the reservoir. It is possible the original 1871, 80 foot tall dam was repaired after 1904 with two smaller 55 foot tall dams, one on each side of the hill in the picture (part of the old dam?) located in the middle of the reservoir as shown here. An 80 foot high dam reaching the top of the hill, at this location, would also explain how the reservoir could have been 1 mile wide by 3 miles long in 1903 as described by T.J. Kelley.

1904 Was a Newsworthy Year

The lure of gold was still a hot topic in the Oroville newspapers. In March 1904, a gold nugget worth \$110.50 was reported found in Oregon Gulch. An article in April of that year talked about the dredgers operating on the river. A single dredger could process 40,000 to 45,000 cubic yards per month at a cost of \$.065 cents per yard. There were 26 dredgers operating on the river working an estimated 5,000 to 6,000 acres. Their gold production was estimated at \$4,500,000.

Meanwhile in May, it was reported that land was being acquired in Pentz at an alarming rate by Albert Smith. It was speculated that it was for mining purposes as gold had been discovered on several ranches in the area. The following July, a fire broke out on the Kroeger Ranch and spread to the Mortenson Ranch at Pentz, burning 500 acres. It was reported as coming within 1 1/2 miles of the town of Pentz.

In June 1904, a disastrous fire broke out in Oroville. It was the largest fire the city had seen in over 30 years. The fire started out in the back of the Palace Restaurant, destroying much of the business district. The losses were estimated at \$130,000.

In July of 1904, a new bridge was also constructed over the West Branch of the Feather River eight miles above the Nelson Bar Bridge. This bridge was 12' 10" wide, wide enough for a wagon. It replaced the old narrow foot bridge and allowed the transportation of goods from Magalia to Flea Valley and Concow. The only problem was there still was no road on the Flea Valley side of the bridge.

In August 1904 Dirk Johnson of Yankee Hill, reported as an all around bad guy, threatened to shoot his wife. It seems Mr. Johnson had killed three Indians at Cherokee in a knife fight the year before. His wife ran to the Well's Hotel where Mrs. Wells offered her shelter. The next day Dirk showed up with a shotgun looking for his wife. The constable showed up at the same time and arrested Mr. Johnson in the Well's kitchen.

In November of 1904, Hulbert R. Wright of Concow was given a second trial for the murder of Henry Clay Farley, in May of 1903. It seems Farley who also was from Concow, felt Mr. Wright was paying too much attention to his wife. Mr. and Mrs. Farley had been separated for some time. Both men ran into each other at the Farley home. Farley went into his son's room and retrieved a gun, meeting Wright outside; two shots were fired, resulting in Farley's death. The Supreme Court overturned the first conviction because of evidence being withheld; the retrial lasted three weeks. The jury found Mr. Wright guilty a second time but asked the judge for leniency because of the circumstances. Mr. Wright was sentenced to eight years at San Quentin. Mr. Farley was 59 years old at the time of his death.

In December 1904, the Western Pacific Railroad reported they had a large team of surveyors in the area to survey the last leg of the railroad from Oroville to Beckwith.

1904 was a milestone year for the Yankee Hill/Concow area. In May an ad was run in the Oroville paper offering 80 acres with a five room house, post office and general store with a small stock of supplies, located 18 miles Northwest of Oroville, \$2500. Dora Wells was not able to sell the house, post office and store her husband had built in the place he named Yankee Hill in 1856. In Sept William H. Mullen left his ranch at Big Bend to join his brother Joseph Mullen, who had left this area 18 years earlier, in Arizona. William had been a resident of the Concow/Big Bend Area since 1855. Also in September of that same year there was an advertisement for a postmaster at the Concow post office, the job paid \$1.00 per week. The Concow post office had been established by Joseph Mullen in 1882 in the hotel at the Concow Reservoir. No one wanted the job. In 1908 the post office for the Yankee Hill area was moved from the Wells store to the Lunt home on Nelson Bar Road where it served as the only post office for the area until the 1950s.



**Above: The second Concow school 1907 to 1939
Below: The third Concow school built in 1939 and still standing today.**



The Local Schools

In 1904 the Concow School had 17 students. That same year the Reservoir School had 18 students, the Yankee Hill School had 15 students, the Cherokee School had 40 students, the Oregon City School had 34 students and the Messilla Valley School had 36 students. All the schools except Messilla Valley had a decline in student enrollment from 1903.

In 1907 the Concow School, built in 1875, burned to the ground. Vagrants were suspected of starting the fire. The school was soon rebuilt.

In 1922 the Reservoir School, located at Concow Reservoir was closed. In 1921 there were three students, the teacher was Leola Lunt. Mrs. Mary Simmons, F.C. Salmon and M.S. Taylor were the last Supervisors of the Reservoir School District. It is not known when the building was torn down.

In February 1939, the Concow School burned a second time. The school was insured for \$800 and the contents for \$400. The fire started at 9:30 am while school was in session. No one was hurt; a piano and some other furniture were salvaged before they burned. The community held a meeting to begin planning the building of a new school. The County Superintendent of Schools proposed merging the Yankee Hill School with the Concow School. Both communities later voted on the merger. Yankee Hill cast 10 votes, all in favor of a merger and Concow cast 3 votes in favor and 15 votes against the merger. In April 1939, an \$8,000 bond was passed to rebuild the Concow School.

Thermalito Buys the Concow Reservoir

In January of 1923 the Board of the Thermalito Water District approved selling \$270,000 in bonds to finance a new water project. Part of the plan was the building of a new cement dam at Concow. The old reservoir would be renamed Lake Wilenor. The water would flow through ditches to the Lime Saddle and Coal Canyon Power plants. PG&E would pay \$4,000 for the water flow to the power plants to the Thermalito Irrigation District. The community of Thermalito would also benefit from the additional water for the irrigation of crops. The project was plagued by several lawsuits because the proposed new ditch system supplying water to the PG&E power plants diverted water from the old ditch servicing Yankee Hill and Cherokee. The 90 foot tall by 350 foot wide dam, designed by Lars Jorgenson to hold 8200 acre feet of water, was completed in August of 1924. The dam was 1,000 feet down the canyon from the earthen dam. The dam and the cement ditches cost \$120,000 and were nearly three times the cost of the original proposal which called for a dam holding 3500 acre feet of water. In 1932 Thermalito defaulted on their bond payments because of a big freeze hurting crops that year. The bond deal was restructured.

1936 Sees an End to an Era

In March of 1936, Dora Spencer Wells, the wife of Michael Henry Wells died. It was a milestone, signaling the end of the town of Yankee Hill.

In the next newsletter, more about the history of the town of Yankee Hill and Florence Smith Wilson, who will soon be placing a marker at the site to commemorate its history.

YHHS Happenings

First Saturday each month, Bunko Party!! - The first Saturday of each month at 1:00pm we have a bunko party at the old school. Prizes and a raffle are held to raise funds for the school restoration. The restoration crew has been feverishly working on the school and we want to make sure we can provide the materials to keep them going! The money raised from the bunko party is a primary contributor to the restoration fund. It is fun and supports a great cause. SEE YOU THERE!

Yankee Hill Historical Society Web Page - You can visit our web page at www.yankeehillhistory.com. The web page has copies of some of the newspaper articles used as reference in this newsletter article, so you can read them for yourself!

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