

Raising Phoenix

based on Marin Municipal Water District Historical Files
2002

Concern and controversy over adequate sources of drinking water in the Ross Valley began well before talk of the proposed Russian River pipeline. About the turn of the last century when people came from San Francisco to Marin in growing numbers, there was impetus to find new water sources and ultimately develop Phoenix Lake, the only large dam in the Corte Madera Creek watershed.

Before the arrival of summer revelers, there were only a few families settled in the Ross Valley and consequently demand for water was not great. One of the relatively early settlers was James Stoddard Porteous, who, in 1883, purchased 1,128 acres of Rancho Punta de Quentin from Alexander and Mary A. Forbes for \$9,529. His land extended from the present day Phoenix Lake up the Fish Grade, to the site of today's Meadow Club, easterly through Deer Park to the backside of Bald Hill and down to the dam. Four years after purchasing the land, Porteous and his wife Janet built a fourteen-room home making use of available water. In addition, they constructed a large log cabin (the Phoenix Log Cabin), a small log cabin, a wine cellar and a barn with five acres of garden, vineyard and orchard, all surrounded by an eight-foot wire fence to keep out the deer. Porteous, a Scotsman, was a graduate of the University of Edinburgh and his friends considered him a scholar, well versed in many subjects and able to speak four languages. He died at 58 leaving the property to his wife Janet.



Greg Andrew of the Marin Municipal Water District leads a walk at Phoenix Lake

After Porteous's death, portions of the property were leased to the Marshall family who ran a dairy with about 100 cows. They built a house and barn in what today is known as "Hidden Meadow" below Shaver Grade.

By 1904 Marin County's population was increasing rapidly and the water company began planning for additional water sources for the Ross Valley. Hitherto, springs and wells supplemented by water from Lake Lagunitas had supplied the valley's residences and farms. Marin County Water Company had, in 1872, purchased Phoenix Gulch—the site that would ultimately become Phoenix Lake—from David Porter, as well as the Lagunitas and Bill Williams Gulch dam sites. Engineering studies for a dam at the proposed Phoenix site were carried out during 1904-05 by the firm of Hunt, Meridith and Cory, who, however, advised against building a dam at Phoenix Gulch.

In spite of their recommendation, construction began in 1905 to dam a catchment area of 1354 acres. County surveyor Richardson noted at the site that the day's work force was 43 men and 120 horses. The rock for the dam was very hard and dry and was blasted from a hillside above the Porteous house and placed in mule-drawn dump-carts and hauled downhill to the dam site. Hill slopes across from the Porteous property were also excavated, yielding a reddish clay, which was very tough and impermeable to water and would make a sturdy dam.

In June of 1906, a month before the dam was completed, the water company began diverting water from Lake Lagunitas, and in December the reservoir was filled for the first time to its capacity of 100 million gallons. From Phoenix Lake water had to be pumped by gasoline engines, uphill to the "hopper" located above the dam where it joined water coming down from Lake Lagunitas, on its way to supplying several towns of central Marin.

In 1908 the dam was raised 15 feet, doubling its capacity, partly because Sausalito needed more water. Sausalito had previously entered into an agreement with the North Coast Water Company in Mill Valley to supply water, but the company could not build their proposed dam in Redwood Canyon because

Mr. William Kent, congressman and conservationist, had purchased the property and given it to the Federal Government as a park--Muir Woods National Monument.

By 1918, with completion of Alpine dam, Phoenix Lake and Lagunitas were less important sources of our water supply. Phoenix was used the least because it was expensive to transport the lake's water by pumping. It was used intermittently, depending on the availability of water from other sources; but daily withdrawal seldom exceeded one million gallons per day. The lake was last used regularly for domestic water supply in 1962.

Following the failure of the Baldwin Hills dam in Los Angeles in the early 1960's the State made an inspection of all dams and found that Phoenix did not meet their standards. The dam was taken out of service and emptied in 1964, and the District entered into a 20- year agreement with the California Department of Fish and Game to rehabilitate the dam as a fishing and recreation area.

The district had agreed with the state not to take any water from the lake, but low rainfall in 1975-76 resulted in only 53% of total storage in all lakes and the need for more water was great. In 1976 and 1977 a submersible floating pump was installed in the lake below the Porteous cabin and it began operating to move water up to Lagunitas. With the increased costs of importing water, the district believed, at that time, that water would continue to be taken from the lake on a permanent basis. Pumping, however, has not occurred.

Today, Phoenix Lake and adjacent district lands provide trails for recreational use, and a place for fisherman to catch their limit of small-mouth bass and trout. The area is also habitat for a myriad of wildlife. Pileated woodpeckers, cormorants, and osprey are among the birds that may be found foraging there. Ospreys, likely visiting from neighboring Kent Lake, may well make up one of the largest populations on the west coast. Other animals are bobcats, skunks, and weasels-one-time targets, in 1936, of a trapping effort by the District, to rid district lands of varmints, which were taking a heavy toll on game birds and deer.

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