

Chapter 6

Alive Again!

The Modesto Irrigation District came alive again on February 2, 1901.

On that day the control of the district's board of directors was wrested from anti-irrigationists in an election brought on by the irrigationists' refusal to act. Modesto Irrigation District residents, comparing their disintegrating canals barren of water with the irrigation which had started the year before in the Turlock district, declared: "Enough!"

After a five-year hiatus, things began to happen.

The first problem, of course, was money. No tax assessments had been levied for four years and efforts had failed five years earlier to see bonds voted in 1895. The district indebtedness amounted to \$800,000 in outstanding bonds plus \$275,000 in interest due on these bonds. There were some \$50,000 in unredeemed warrants outstanding.

Voluntary subscriptions totaling \$1,433, amounts ranging from \$2.50 to a \$500 donation by Oramil McHenry, enabled the immediate hiring of Engineer R. H. Goodwin to determine what was needed to complete the system and bring water to the land.

By October of that year Engineer Goodwin had prepared a comprehensive plan for completing all the necessary works, including laterals to make the system fully operative.

One of the first things the new board had done was to set in motion procedures for reaching a compromise with holders of the 1887 bonds. As construction plans proceeded, negotiations went on between the bondholders and district officials, concluding on November 5, 1901, shortly after Goodwin had presented plans, specifications and cost estimates for the works.

The compromise included an assurance by the district that it would complete the construction expeditiously, with the district putting up \$71,000 toward its cost and the bondholders contributing the balance, approximately \$231,000. The district would exchange new bonds, voted under 1897 legislation which made irrigation bonds more secure, for the old 1887 bonds on a \$1-for-\$1 basis. The bondholders' contributions to construction were to come from interest coupons on the new bonds. Bondholders withdrew all suits against the district in which payment on the old bonds had been demanded.

As soon as the compromise was announced, a majority of the landowners in the district petitioned the MID board to call the election required for approval of a \$1,056,511 refinancing bond issue.

The back of the opposition was so badly broken that the bond election was approved 433 to 24. In the two larger divisions, Nos. 2 and 3, the vote was 205-15 and 188-9, respectively. The vote was unanimous in Divisions 1, 4, and 5 as farmers in former strongholds of opposition either stayed home on election day, January 13, 1902, or decided, "If you can't beat them, join them."

The latter certainly appears to be the philosophy of the two "anti-irrigationists" remaining on the board, C. C. Baker and L. A. Finney. They continued to serve for several more years without dissension, supporting the moves to refinance the indebtedness and getting construction under way again.

With the refinancing bonds approved, the district board set about to raise its \$71,000 share of the construction money. The bonds approved in 1895 but never sold were purchased by Oramil McHenry, president of the First National Bank of Modesto and owner of the 6,000-acre Bald Eagle Ranch.

Throughout subsequent months during which construction proceeded, McHenry provided the financial backing for many contractors and farmers in developing laterals and ditches.

Once funds were available, contracts were awarded for rehabilitating the main canal which had suffered serious deterioration during years of disuse, completing unfinished portions of the canal and constructing a steel flume across Dry Creek and a number of lateral canals.

Through contracts and by working for contractors, many farmers used their own teams and equipment to work off unpaid assessments during the year of restoration.

The main canal was operative to the district's boundary when water from La Grange Dam first flowed into Dry Creek at 7 AM on April 3, 1903.

A few days later, the steel flume crossing of Dry Creek, built by Pacific Construction Company, was ready for testing and a flow of 200 cubic feet per second was sent down the canal from La Grange Dam for the first time April 10th. During May and June, the main canal portions below Dry Creek and several laterals were completed.

On June 27, 1903, the water that had been promised more than 16 years earlier when the Wright Act was signed into law finally arrived. Farmers along the main canal soon were helping themselves to water and by September some laterals were delivering water.

The spirit of the community was summed up by the *Stanislaus County News* in reporting the initial flow of the Tuolumne River water across the Dry Creek flume in the simple declaration: “The water is here!”

It was truly a cause for celebration.