

Chapter 18

Recreation, the ‘Frosting on the Cake’

Even before the completion of New Don Pedro Dam, the Modesto Irrigation District entered the recreation field somewhat reluctantly. In designing the project, Bechtel engineers described recreation development as “frosting on the cake.” Before the work was completed, the districts had put far more frosting on the cake than was anticipated initially.

The Federal Power Commission, the State of California and common sense ruled that recreation demands upon reservoir the size of Don Pedro Lake would be tremendous. After all, California’s fifth largest reservoir was to extend 26 miles upstream, have a surface area of 13,000 acres and a shoreline of 160 miles. With a population of 600,000 living within 50 miles of lake and 6.3 million within 150 miles, 400,000 visitors were expected annually. Adequate provisions had to be made to meet this demand.

Although required to develop recreation resources as part of its basic construction project, the districts initially wanted no part of operating the facility when it was completed.

The California Department of Water Resources was willing to fund much of the recreation development, but the state Department of Parks and Recreation made it clear at the outset that it wanted no part of operating the project. Although it had established a state park at Turlock’s regulating reservoir, the agency claimed the New Don Pedro site did not warrant similar consideration because it had neither native landscape nor historical importance. Furthermore, it contended there were enough recreational opportunities at other Central Sierra foothill reservoirs.

In the fall of 1967 when construction of New Don Pedro got under way, project sponsors were inclined to meet the minimum requirements of the FPC license. They also were firm in their determination to get some other agency to operate the facilities. This had been done at Modesto Reservoir, where the Stanislaus County Parks Department had developed and now maintains recreation facilities. Turlock’s Owens Reservoir had become Turlock Lake State Park.

Even after the California Water Commission approved an initial \$7 million grant for basic recreation development, a majority of MID directors were not enthusiastic about entering the recreation field, despite editorial pressure from *The Modesto Bee* to do so. Thomas K. Beard, MID board president at

the time who became a positive force in subsequent development of recreation facilities, recalls, “There were a lot of people worked up about the district going into the recreation business.”

The turning point came when San Francisco Public Utilities Manager James K. Carr arranged a tour of Northern California recreation projects. Irrigation district directors saw what could be accomplished at places such as the National Park Service’s Whiskeytown Reservoir and the U. S. Forest Service’s Shasta Lake, and what should not be done at Napa County’s Lake Berryessa. As undersecretary of interior under Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, Carr had played a major role in the development of the Shasta-Trinity-Whiskeytown National Recreation Area, working closely with the legislative father of the project, Northern California Congressman Harold T. (Bizz) Johnson.

Those making the tour returned determined to do a first-class job at Don Pedro Lake. Over their “nervous stage,” MID directors urged increasing the design capacity by an additional 100,000 visitors per year and, with their partner, went to work to achieve a goal of providing excellent recreation facilities. Before they were done, \$7 million was invested in the effort.

The Don Pedro Recreation Agency, comprised of representatives of the three Tuolumne River partners – the Modesto and Turlock Irrigation Districts and the City of San Francisco, was created to oversee the development and operation until a suitable agency could be found to take over.

A retired veteran of 37 years of experience in recreation and conservation management with the U. S. Forest Service, George S. James was hired as recreation agency manager. As a federal forester, James had been regional director of all national forests in the northeastern quarter of the United States, ranging from Minnesota and Missouri to New England.

MID President Beard summarized the district’s determination to provide excellent recreation opportunities with the comment, “We always thought of water and power as the main purpose of this (New Don Pedro_ project, but recreation has become a third equally important use.”

Beard’s philosophy was endorsed enthusiastically by fellow MID Directors Mathew Fiscalini and Milton Kidd, who played crucial roles in the decision to develop more than the minimum required. The latter was described by recreation area manager James as a “ball of fire when it came to recreation development.”

Kidd, who had served as an MID director for 35 years including three terms as president, died suddenly on February 5, 1971, while in San Francisco for joint meetings on the New Don Pedro Project and did not live to see the realization of his dream of the recreation area achieving statewide acclaim.

Eulogized as a “man of the people,” Kidd had served on the MID Board of Directors longer than any other person. Not only was he a forceful supporter of developing the best possible recreation facilities, he also had taken an active role in all aspects of the New Don Pedro Project and other modernization programs of the rapidly-expanding Modesto district’s operations through a challenging three-and-a-half decades of service.

He was succeeded on the district’s board of directors by his nephew, John E. Kidd, who shared his enthusiasm for recreation and represented the MID on the joint agency that implemented the Don Pedro Lake recreation program.

One of the first steps to expand the recreation opportunities was the purchase of additional land to provide better boat-launching ramps and other facilities. Construction contracts were awarded. All buildings were of pole-type construction with rough-sawn redwood to blend into the environment. All utilities were placed underground. The districts and San Francisco set about creating, in James’ words, “a hospitable environment.”

A private Lake Don Pedro Corporation, headed by Emory Bonnier of Turlock, was formed and became the successful bidder for concession operations at the west end of the lake. The concessionaire returns to the districts and San Francisco 4.5 percent of its gross earnings, which currently top the \$2 million mark annually. Twice expanded, the marina now has 234 slips for motor and sail boats, a houseboat dock for 66 boats and moorings for an additional 129 houseboats. The concession operations also include a restaurant and related marina, grocery and visitor services.

By the time the recreation area was dedicated formally on May 7, 1972, Don Pedro Lake already was enjoying considerable use by boaters, water skiers, fishermen, swimmers, campers and picnickers. In spite of low-water levels during the summer of 1972, the reservoir park facilities continued “to pack them in.”

Meanwhile, the search for a permanent operator continued.

Tuolumne County, the Federal Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, U. S. Forest Service and the Federal Bureau of Outdoor Recreation all expressed interest in managing the facilities.

As early as 1967 Tuolumne County Supervisor Ralph Thiel campaigned to have his county take over the management. He claimed Tuolumne County was responsible for the inclusion of recreation requirements in the FPC license and should take advantage of it.

Modesto directors and their partners were concerned, however, about the adequacy of Tuolumne County's resources to handle such a massive undertaking. This concern was increased by visits to Lake Berryessa, where Napa County had contracted the entire operation to a concessionaire in a manner similar to what Tuolumne County was planning. Lake Berryessa's recreation operations were considered distressing.

Not everyone in Tuolumne County favored county involvement. The county Farm Bureau urged the board of supervisors to "stick to government" and not get involved in ventures such as this. Ultimately, Tuolumne County modified its demand that the county operate the park. The county continued to insist, however, that no federal agency should take over.

This became a moot point when all federal agencies subsequently declined to participate. The last to abandon the idea was the Federal Bureau of Land Management, which manages the publicly owned foothill lands in the vicinity of the reservoir. The desire was there, but congressional appropriations were not.

The districts and San Francisco came to the realization in 1979 that they were left with the responsibility of not only developing recreation facilities but also of operating and maintaining them.

Although it was a decision made largely by default, hindsight has proved it to be most wise.

Once the decision was made, the determination that the recreation area would be operated and maintained at the highest standards of quality was reaffirmed. The districts also insisted that it be self sufficient once necessary improvements had been made.

Until this time recreation area managers had been employed on an interim basis, part of their responsibility being to find another operating agency.

Recognizing that they were in the recreation business for keeps, the Don Pedro Lake Recreation Agency in April 1980 hired Carl Rust, a retired U. S. Forest Service recreation and resources specialist. He was given the task of achieving the two goals: modernization and self sufficiency.

Both have been achieved under Rust's management.

Today the districts take great pride in the operation of what is rated as one of the best recreation areas in the West. State and federal recreation agencies point to Don Pedro Lake as the prime example of how it should be done.

That the public has responded is shown by visitor figures for 1986. Visits to recreation areas such as Yosemite National Park, the Stanislaus National Forest and nearby Exchequer Reservoir were on the decline. Don Pedro Lake, however, is attracting more people, currently hovering at or above the maximum design capacity of 500,000 visitor days of use annually. On Memorial Day 1986 there were 10,000 people at the lake. The total visitor-day use for the three-day weekend was 30,000. There were 3,000 boats on the lake at times that weekend. In the fall of 1986 reservations for 1987 were running well ahead of past records.

Today Don Pedro Lake offers 550 tent and recreation vehicle campsites, complete with hot water showers. About half of these are at Fleming Meadow at the eastern end of the dam. Also located there are the largest boat launching area, picnic areas, a white sand-lined swimming lagoon with filtered water and an extensive marina, restaurant and grocery facilities.

The Blue Oak Recreation Area on the west end of the dam, formerly called Mexican Gulch, has campgrounds, a picnic area and boat-launching facilities. Moccasin Point 18 miles up the lake has camping and picnic areas, and a marina and concession services operated by the R. D. Meeker family.

Two hundred seventy-four houseboats, including two rental fleets, are moored at the Fleming Meadow and Moccasin marina. Fishing is good. Swimming, power boating, sailing are excellent. Campgrounds and picnic areas are clean and restaurants and other concession services well received.

The districts and the city have insisted upon maintaining high standards of cleanliness and sanitation throughout the area's history. Directors emphasized the importance of family-type recreation and as a result Don Pedro is described as "everybody's lake."

The recreation opportunities at the popular reservoir are among the best in the state, disproving completely the California Beaches and Parks Department's earlier contention that there had been enough water-oriented recreation opportunities in Central California.

While Modesto Irrigation District directors and their partners in New Don Pedro's operation were learning the ropes about recreation management, they still were involved in the fishery problems.

In 1965 when the United States Supreme Court let stand a lower court decision upholding the validity of the Federal Power Commission's New Don Pedro license requirements, on issue was the required releases from New Don Pedro to sustain the salmon fishery. When state Davis-Grunsky funds were sought to help finance solving the fishery problems as well as the Don Pedro Lake recreation development, the state required, in addition to the water releases, the improvement and maintenance of some 2 million square feet of gravel-spawning beds along a 17.2 mile downstream stretch of the Tuolumne River between La Grange and Waterford.

Involved were the areas from which contractors had taken gold dredge tailings for use in building New Don Pedro Dam. In many areas the districts had not acquired title to the property, buying only the tailings. When the areas were to be reworked for spawning beds, the property owners objected. Ultimately the purchases were not required.

While the state fish and game emphasis at the time was on improved spawning beds, the districts in November 1970 voluntarily increased releases from New Don Pedro to aid in the fall salmon-spawning run in the river.

In September 1971 the districts, following fish and game specifications, were forced to complete the first-stage spawning bed rehabilitation of 1 million square feet in an area where the districts did hold title to the land. Spawning beds described as "plush" were created, but the fish didn't especially care for them. Initial on-the-scene reports indicated that most of the more than 20,000 salmon which came up the river that fall spurned the man-made beds and found natural beds.

Although subsequent Fish and Game Department reports claimed that 60 percent of the run had used 18 percent of the beds, the state agency changed its mind. The districts, after all the fuss, now were not required to rehabilitate the remainder of the designated gravel beds. Fishery experts decided once again

that the key to improved spawning would be found in the controlled releases of water, not man-made spawning beds. Thus, \$1 million in Davis-Grunsky funds earmarked for this purpose was withdrawn.

Although state fish and game biologists were to change directions several times, constant reservoir releases favorable to spawning were maintained, even though on many occasions water had to be diverted through both the MID and TID main canals and dumped back into the river below the spawning areas.

Fluctuations in the salmon run have been recorded, but in the fall of 1985 more than 40,000 fish swam up the Tuolumne to spawn. In the opinion of long-time La Grange resident Bill Keeler, an ardent fisherman who has watched the salmon run for 75 years, 1985 was the best he has seen, before or after construction of New Don Pedro.

Under the provisions of the Federal Power Commission license and subsequent cooperative agreements between the districts and the state and federal agencies, a program to monitor and evaluate the salmon fishery will continue until 1993 at a cost to the irrigation districts of several hundreds of thousands of dollars. The study that was initiated shortly after the issuance of the FPC license was delayed due to changing philosophies within the state and federal fish and game agencies.

After negotiating with the fish and game agencies in 1986, MID Chief Executive Officer H. L. Brooks, said the current release schedule of between 100 and 385 cubic feet per second between October 1st and the end of April each year and no less than 3 second feet of water the remainder of the year appears satisfactory.

Brooks warned, however, that the districts must diligently protect their water supplies in considering any future water-release flow agreements.

The results of this study undoubtedly will provide further information on the enhancement of fisheries in other areas. Thus, in agreeing to finance the research, the Modesto and Turlock districts once again are proving themselves pathfinders in efforts which will benefit the rest of the state and nation.

The local dispute had statewide implications in another direction.

As a result of protests by the riverside property owner, California Attorney General Evelle J. Younger ruled that the Tuolumne River proper was open for boating, fishing, hunting and recreation purposes, much to the objections of the property owners. Historically, property owners had prevented such intrusions, some by erecting fences across the river.

The ruling, confirmed and broadened in subsequent years by case law resulting from court actions, now has statewide implications as to the accessibility of rivers bordered by private property.