

India Hook Dam changed life in the Catawba valley

The India Hook Dam, built between Rock Hill and Fort Mill in 1904, was the first dam built on the Catawba River. Before the damming of rivers to produce electric power became a practice, there were frequent massive floods.

The dam altered the landscape. Farmers whose land would be under water had to be paid by the Southern Power Co. Roads had to be rerouted. There was a commissioner of roads in York County, but he had very little power. Mostly, the commissioner reported problems after they had occurred and then waited for the county or state to allot the money to correct the damage. The labor came from the chain gang.

The Commercial Club of Rock Hill, a forerunner of the Chamber of Commerce, realized that the dam-building enterprise would create hard feelings among the river basin farmers if their land was not purchased before, rather than after, their fields were under the lake that would be created by the dam. Dr. Gill Wylie, an area native and New York surgeon, began raising money for purchasing those lands.

In July 1901 the Commercial Club hired William Church Whitner to survey all the roads that would be affected. The plan was to have replacement roads in place before the Catawba Lake came into being.

A very large flood, or freshet, occurred in August 1901. By that time, timber interests upriver in North Carolina's Catawba valley had stripped the countryside of every tree within reach. There was no thought of reforestation. Tremendous acreage was barren. There was open warfare between timber men and farmers.

Forest fires burned out the undergrowth. When a great deal of rain fell in Western North Carolina in July 1901, the land had no defense. The freshet tore vegeta-

tion from the river banks and created new channels.

All up and down the river (as far south as Camden), corn fields were washed away completely. Sand filled wheat fields 3 or 4 feet deep.

At Rock Hill the Catawba current ran 10 mph, which was called a "terrific and harmful pace." It was the highest volume anyone remembered. Many farmers lost all their crops. The farmers' crop losses and the offer to buy their land at decent prices was more important to the farmers than the promise of electric power.

The floods and deforestation of 1901 caused E.W. Myers of the U.S. Geological Survey to call for the establishment of Appalachian Park in order to protect trees, but nothing was done until 1931 when the Great Smokies National Park was established. By that time, however, most of the flooding had been curbed by the building of numerous electric power dams on the river with their large holding basins.

Before the India Hook dam could be built, the river bed had to be surveyed to find its contours and the nature of underlying rock. This was another task of W.C. Whitner, who, besides being a surveyor, was the engineer who built the first electric power plant in the world at Anderson. Whitner had married Catherine Roddey, daughter of Capt. W. Lyle Roddey, one of Rock Hill's business leaders, and was an initial investor in the India Hook dam-building project.

Whitner donned a diving helmet and goggles and personally mapped the river bottom. The mud and flooding nearly defeated him, but the final construction, which took three years, was an engineering marvel that paved the way for more dams and the eventual industrialization of numerous towns in the Catawba River valley.

At six o'clock in the morning on March 30, 1904, the first electricity generated on the Catawba River flowed from its source.

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