

Fish Lake Canal Company

By George Kramer

The Fish Lake Water Company was organized in Medford in 1898 to create a plan for the irrigation of more than 50,000 acres of land that it would develop in the fertile Rogue Valley, which has hot summers and long growing seasons. The company proposed to enlarge Fish Lake, about thirty-five miles east of Medford, by building a dam that would impound and store water to ensure adequate flow into Little Butte Creek. The Fish Lake Canal proved the benefits of irrigation and led to other irrigation projects that supported the rapid growth in agriculture in southern Oregon.

In 1900, the Fish Lake Ditch Company, a successor firm, began to plan for the Fish Lake Canal, the first large-scale irrigation system in the Rogue Valley. V.T. McCray, a California irrigation engineer, was in charge of the design and oversaw construction. A temporary dam was built between 1902 and 1908 to expand Fish Lake, the headwaters of the North Fork of Little Butte Creek. The canal was to be over fifty miles in length, with water entering the company's main canal after being diverted from the North Fork at altitude 1,720 feet.

Water began to flow through the first eighteen miles of the canal by spring 1902, and by 1906 plans were announced to extend the canal to the town of Central Point. Completion of the Fish Lake Canal spurred a period of rapid agricultural development and population growth in Jackson County, known as the Orchard Boom.

In 1909, ownership of the Fish Lake Ditch Company passed to a group of investors and local irrigators headed by Fred N. Cummings and Patrick Welch, who planned a significant expansion of the system. The company spent about \$10,000 a month on survey and construction. By September 1910, the new owners, generally called the "Welch Interests," had reorganized the company and renamed it the Rogue River Valley Canal Company (RRVCC).

In late 1911, the enlarged Fish Lake Canal, which now extended to the Hopkins Orchard in Central Point, added 3,000 acres to the company's service area. The portion of the canal below the Bradshaw Drop, at the terminus of the main canal, was informally renamed the Hopkins Canal. In 1915, Fish Lake and Fourmile Lake were connected by the 8.8-mile-long Cascade Canal, diverting water across the Cascade Range crest from the Klamath River basin into the Rogue River basin and irrigation systems there.

In 1917, Medford voters approved the creation of the Medford Irrigation District (MID), which contracted with the RRVCC for water and enabled additional construction and expansion. The modified temporary dams at Fish Lake were replaced in 1922 with a larger permanent structure, which has since been enlarged and modified. Contract disputes and service problems led to an agreement in March 1929 whereby MID purchased two-thirds of the water rights and property of the RRVCC, which retained ownership of the remaining third of the water and the Hopkins Canal. In September 1929, property owners along the Hopkins Canal voted, 130 to 32, to form the Rogue River Valley Irrigation District (RRVID), which purchased the remaining assets of the RRVCC.

The Rogue River Valley Irrigation District operates and maintains the twenty-five-mile-long upgraded Hopkins Canal as part of its system, which now irrigates 8,813 acres. Headgates at the terminus of the main canal mark the division of the original Fish Lake project in 1929 and the creation of the Medford Irrigation District and the RRVID, both reliant on the main canal, above Bradshaw Drop. Two gates feed MID's Medford Canal, and a third sends water to the RRVID Hopkins Canal.

Sources

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