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CHAPTER 8

The Durbrow Years and the Creation of Scotts Flat Reservoir



By 1929 the District was supplying water. Despite tight budgets and financial difficulties, NID continued to expand its services.

NID's headquarters on East Main Street in 1936.

Internally, Manager Fred Miller resigned from the position on August 7, 1929. The August 28 Board Minutes indicated that he stated that "he had been with the District four years without vacation and asked that consideration be given to granting him two weeks' vacation on pay."

In a quick turn-around, William Durbrow, an experienced agriculturalist who had served as Manager of the Glenn-Colusa Irrigation District, was approved by the Board on August 18, 1929, with a monthly salary set at \$600. His employment started on August 22, 1929. His NID tenure, from 1929 through 1947, became known as "The Durbrow Years."

In addition, he was president of the Irrigation Districts Association from 1923 to 1933.

William Durbrow



As he assumed NID's top management post, the District was finalizing the \$5,000 purchase of 80 acres from Edward Van Giesen, owner of the land now occupied by Combie Reservoir and the Van Giesen Dam, which was completed in 1928.

By 1929, having expanded into Placer County and acquiring the Parker Reservoir site in 1926, members of the NID Board envisioned selling water to Sacramento, an idea that would not materialize.

Durbrow hardly had been in the managerial position before the U.S. stock market crashed that October. The impact was devastating, wiping out Wall Street and millions of investors. The Great Depression was the worst economic downturn in the history of the industrialized world, lasting from 1929 to

An NID crew works on the Gold Hill Flume in 1935.



1939. Like the rest of the nation, California was hit hard by the economic collapse, and businesses failed, workers lost their jobs and families fell into poverty. However, while the rest of the country ground to a halt, Nevada County was insulated, thanks to its mining-based economy. The Empire Mine produced enough gold to keep residents employed and the local economy intact.

During the Depression, agricultural lands, in general, declined. Although with the formation of NID and availability of irrigation water, a rapid expansion of agriculture took place during both the 1920s and 1930s. During this time, the California Division of Engineering and Irrigation reported that 11,704 acres were being irrigated within NID's boundaries. In Nevada County, the prominent crops were for forage, while only 30 percent of agricultural lands were orchards. Only one-third of Nevada County's portion of the District's distribution system was complete. In Placer County, nearly all of the irrigated lands were in orchards, but as a newcomer to the District, none of the county's distribution system was complete.

Meanwhile, District leaders wrestled with inequities in rate structures in Nevada County and the newly acquired lands in Placer County. In 1930, four years after the Placer County addition, Placer County ratepayers were paying nearly twice as much for water as their Nevada County neighbors. Placer residents were paying the PG&E rate of \$45 per acre-foot while the NID orchard rate in Nevada County was \$24.

In a University of California, Berkeley interview in 1957, Durbrow recalled his early days with the District. During the 1930s Depression, Durbrow said he focused much of his attention on negotiating and renegotiating NID's financial arrangements. A bond refunding in 1931 reduced the interest NID paid on its outstanding debt from 5.5 percent to 4 percent.

Despite the challenges, the District continued to grow. The Durbrow years brought a tremendous amount of ditch and pipeline construction to NID as local property owners clamored for public water supplies.

In 1933, NID purchased the Gold Hill water system in Placer County for \$225,000 from PG&E, expanding District presence there. The acquisition included the canal and Bear River water rights dating to 1852, Camp Far West Canal and water rights dating to 1880, and Valley View Canal and Auburn Ravine system and water rights dating to 1851.

In August 1939 Congress approved a project for the development of storage facilities on the Yuba, Bear, and American rivers having a total estimated cost of about \$7 million. On the Bear River, a dam was proposed to be constructed at Dog Bar, about six miles above the Combie Dam. The report noted NID built the Combie Dam on the Bear River in 1928, some 37 miles above the river's mouth and about 3.5 miles west of Clipper Gap. Debris storage space in the reservoir was sold to the mines above the dam until November 1938, when mining was stopped by court action. It seemed that water was diverted from the river at a point between the mines and the reservoir, and before there was an opportunity for debris settlement.

The report indicated, "The system of restraint will be continued until the rivers in their improved condition can carry the material brought down. The estimated cost of this improvement is: Dam on Bear River at Van Giesen's \$150,000."

World War II impacts the District

The United States did not enter World War II until after the Japanese bombed the American fleet in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7, 1941. Like elsewhere throughout the nation, young men and women were called to duty. Newspaper headlines warned about spies and communism. Food and necessities were rationed. To buy beef, a special coupon was needed.

Families' lives were forever altered in the foothills. And the economics of Nevada County shifted. Thousands of acres, including large parcels of irrigated pasture, were taken out of production by the expansion of Beale Air Force Base – originally formed as "Camp Beale" in 1940 near Spenceville to function as a training post. When the veterans returned from war to the fields and farms, many of them found higher paying

opportunities. What's more, property became more valuable for housing than for farming, and large acreages were broken up into residential lots. More NID customers were connecting their properties to NID ditches. Reports began noting that some people were using ditch water as their domestic supplies.

NID continued to supply water despite a tight budget and 40 employees. In May of 1943, voters overwhelmingly approved an issuance of an additional \$1.5 million in bonds to support the District.

After 18 years as Manager, Durbrow was ready to retire. When it was announced that a new Manager would be hired, the community turned out during the 297th regular meeting of the Board of Directors on August 8, 1947. The minutes of the meeting noted, "As there were so many people present the directors room was much too small to accommodate the crowd so the meeting adjourned to the Hennessey School Mr. Griffith, Chairman of the Committee which was appointed some time ago to select a new Manager, reported and offered the following resolution ... and unanimously carried: Be it resolved that the Board of Directors of Nevada Irrigation District interview the men whose applications we have received and select a man to fill the job as Manager of Nevada Irrigation District." On August 16, 1947 Directors interviewed NID's Chief Engineer Forrest F. Varney, who would become the next Manager.



Forrest Varney

The construction of Scotts Flat Dam

While the process to find a new Manager was ongoing, a significant accomplishment of the Durbrow years was underway with the construction of a 135-foot-tall dam at Scotts Flat east of Nevada City. The \$1.1 million dam would impound 27,700 acre-feet of water (today Scotts Flat, enlarged in 1964, holds 48,500 acre-feet). This infrastructure greatly improved water availability and reliability into the greater Grass Valley-Nevada City area. Plus, the reservoir would become a popular destination for outdoor recreation.



Early View of NID
Headquarters

The Charles T. Brown Company was hired in 1947 to construct the dam. Directors received a report during their August 22 meeting that a test on material being placed for the earthen dam was satisfactory, and that progress was being made.

Newly appointed Manager Varney wrote in a letter to the board on October 10, 1947: "The District has scarcely begun its development. Barren, dry, gentle sloping fields are inviting the application of water to transform them into green pastures or blooming orchards. Water is the lifeblood of the state and no less vital to this region. Beneficial use is the criterion of water appropriation and it would be unfortunate if the District ever lost the rights it now holds because of continued non-use. Completion of Scotts Flat will help solve a great problem. ... Parker Reservoir site on the Bear River must be used in the near future to insure water for the growth in population. Additional storage in the mountains must be provided to increase the amount to be needed in the lower regions."

Constructing the Scotts Flat Dam and spillway were quite the engineering feat, and Directors were kept apprised throughout the process. For example, during the November 11, 1947, meeting, after hearing that the concrete pouring for the spillway area was about to commence, Directors directed questions to the Contracting Engineer Harold Wood, of Blackie and Wood, about the use of materials and design features of the overall infrastructure. The meeting minutes noted: "With reference to installation of a three-foot pipe in the existing six-foot tunnel he stated that requirements by state specifications made it more economical to place a steel pipe through the central portion of the dam rather than placing reinforced concrete lining in the existing tunnel. The pipe was designed to provide adequate capacity for irrigation water deliveries even with a low reservoir. Consideration had also been given to provide an intake tower rather than the submerged inlet provided under present plans. Economy of construction dictated the latter as being preferred in view of the fact that no operational difficulties were anticipated."

Although no formal recreational facilities were planned around the Scotts Flat Reservoir, the community was eager to take advantage of outdoor opportunities on the waterfront. For example, on June 28, 1947, well before the dam was complete, a Girl Scout committee from Nevada City appeared before the board to request a camp site. The minutes noted: "It was the general opinion of the Board that there was no objection to such site providing it did not interfere with the District's construction or operation plans."

In April 1948 Jack Frank of the Grass Valley Sportsmen's Club requested the organization be considered should the Board of Directors adopt a policy of granting leases to individuals or organizations. During the May 14, 1948 meeting, the Board acknowledged its aim to make use of the District's facilities for public benefit. Directors unanimously approved a long-term lease to the Grass Valley Sportsmen's Club to build a clubhouse and provide for recreational facilities on the small bay at the north side of the reservoir immediately above the dam. The Club agreed they would abide by whatever regulations and would conform to Forest Service and state sanitary codes adopted by the District. ■



Workers construct the Reille Ditch in Placer County during the 1930s.