



THE LATE, GREAT, BUENA VISTA LAKE

BY GEORGE GILBERT LYNCH



People fishing at Buena Vista Lake.
Provided by West Kern Oil Museum

A staff of life for the Native Americans who lived on its shores for centuries, evolving into a massive reservoir to store precious irrigation water and a great recreation and sporting lake for generations of Kern County residents.

The first European to leave a written description of the San Joaquin Valley was Don Pedro Fages, commander of the Presidio at Monterrey. In 1772, during a search for deserters from the Spanish Missions who had fled into the interior of California Fages entered the Valley from the south through the Cajon Pass and viewed the Buena Vista Lake from the hills south of Maricopa as he traveled west on his way to San Luis Obispo. He later visited a Yokuts village named Buena Vista (a good sight) located on the shores of Tulare Lake. Buena Vista Lake derived its name from his written records.

Before construction of Isabella Dam the Kern River had, for thousands of years, been in the process of wearing away the hard granite mantle of the Sierra Nevada Mountains and depositing the resulting sediment into the southern portion of the San Joaquin Valley. This annual flow of soil eventually formed a broad natural dam across the southern end of the San Joaquin Valley. This natural dam is the northern boundary of the Buena Vista Basin. Its lowest elevation was about 268 feet above sea level. During excessively wet years, the Kern River runoff would fill the Buena Vista Lake and adjacent Kern Lake to a maximum of about 292 feet above sea level at which time the water level would be high enough to begin flowing northward into Buena Vista Slough and continue flowing 40 miles north finally discharging into the great Tulare Lake. At this maximum filling, the lake then covered up to 150 square miles in surface area.

The high water mark of about 300 feet above sea level was the natural shore line for many thousands of years. This was the area in which early Native Americans built their villages along the shore of the lake. In prehistoric times, the Yokuts, (which literally means "The People"), occupied a large village named Tulamni (also known as Tulamniu) located on the northwest shore. It was situated on what is today part of the Coles Levee Ecosystem Preserve on Highway 119, about a mile from the Buena Vista Golf Course. Extensive archaeological excavating of this village over the years has revealed many burial grounds and cultural debris. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, the Civil Works Administration organized a large excavation of this area. It was supervised by the Smithsonian Institution and lasted about 3 months. The last large scale studies done at this site were in 1964-5 when test trenches were being dug in advance of construction of the California Aqueduct.

The knowledge gained from these combined excavations tell us this lake shore was inhabited as far back as 6,250 BC according to radiocarbon dating of fresh water clam shells found amid social debris from the four meter depth during the 1965 excavations. Evidence shows these first custodians of Buena Vista Lake found everything they needed for a good life on its shores and their descendents continued living there until the appearance of the Spanish explorers after which the tribes gradually disappeared.

Dry for many years now, this shallow lake, the size of which varied from 60 to 150 square miles, once teemed with fish, shellfish, turtles and many species of waterfowl. Herds of pronghorn antelope, elk, and deer were drawn to its shores. Buena Vista Lake held the key to life of the Tulamni Indians who lived on its banks. The shoreline constantly changed as the Kern River fed the lake according to the amount of spring runoff from the high Sierra Nevada Mountains. This shoreline was covered by endless miles of tule reeds. These slender bulrushes were of great value to the Yokuts' way of life. They were used in making clothing, baskets, rope, weaving of sleeping mattresses and mats for awnings. The versatile plant was used in covering their spherical dwellings and dried tules fed their cooking fires. Their tule rafts were used for transportation, fishing and hunting upon the lake. The plant's white roots, rich in starch, were a nourishing addition to the lake dweller's food supply.

As the Spanish inhabited western America and established missions along the Pacific coast, eventually, lack of immunity to foreign diseases and excessive land acquisition, practiced by the new inhabitants, diminished the Yokuts tribes and they left their homes along the western Buena Vista shores relinquishing their thousands of years of guardianship of Buena Vista Lake.

Early pioneers Elisha Stephens in 1844 and Tommy Fitzgerald in 1850, by canoe, entered Buena Vista Lake from Tulare Lake and trapped beaver and muskrat on Kern and Buena Vista Lakes. About 1859, Solomon Fried and Bill Dougherty raised hogs on the tule lined shores of Kern and Buena Vista. The hogs ran wild in the tule forests fattening on the starch rich tule roots. The ranchers, on horseback, used hound dogs to round up their hogs at slaughter time.

In 1858, Henry Miller and Charles Lux went into partnership in the butchering business in San Francisco where they realized there was more money in beef steak than digging for gold. They also were smart enough to cut out the middle man by raising their own cattle. They reinvested everything into buying more land to raise more cattle. Henry Miller's golden rule was simply, "buy land and never sell it". This credo made Miller & Lux the "Cattle Kings of America". Eventually, they owned or leased more than 15 million acres in three states and had their HH brand on over a million head of cattle.

In 1868, a pioneer of Bakersfield, James C. Crocker, convinced Miller to buy all the swamp land that lay between Tulare and Buena Vista Lakes on which to raise cattle. Eventually Miller and Lux, in partnership with Crocker, owned 80,000 acres of the tule covered bog with a brilliant plan of how to reclaim it into some of the richest farm land in the State.

The slough meandered through 40 miles of tule forests that made it impassable in wet or dry years but a solution to drying up the swamp was only a matter of money and engineering. Miller and Lux had plenty of both. The plan was to dig a very large 40 mile long canal, which connected Buena Vista and Tulare lakes. This canal would carry all the excess Kern River runoff up into Tulare Lake. This waterway would skirt the marsh land by being built along the foothills on the westward side. The swamp land would dry up enabling crews to clear and level the old tule beds into fertile farm land.

The partners envisioned the canal not only as a means to reclaim the 40 miles of Buena Vista Slough but they planned to make the waterway large enough to accommodate cargo ships and in time connect this canal into waterways, then being built, all the way to the port of Stockton. This was 10 years before a railroad came to this area and the transport of local crops, livestock, minerals and merchandise to the Stockton Port was expensive by wagon freight.

After the Southern Pacific Railroad finished their line over the Tehachapi Pass in 1876, many men who had labored building it were without a job. Henry Miller hired 250 of these laborers at 30 dollars a month, also carpenters, blacksmiths, and foremen at 45 to 60 dollars. Good wages considering Miller and Lux furnished their food and lodging. Immediately this labor force began constructing "The Kern Valley Water Company Canal". This waterway was 25 miles long and 250 feet wide by 15 feet deep. Specially built, one ton, Fresno Scrapers were pulled by 50 horse teams during its construction. This lake and canal system was designed to irrigate the entire 250,000 acre Miller and Lux alfalfa and grain crops throughout their reclaimed swamp land, the lake acting as a reservoir to store the excess water for use during times of drought. The crops raised were used as feed for the thousands of cattle, hogs, and sheep owned by the Miller and Lux Corporation, with the excess being sold to other ranchers.

The canal was finished in 1877, which proved to be the worst drought year of that century. No water flowed down the Kern River to fill Buena Vista Lake or the new Kern Valley Water Company's massive canal project they had started. What little water came out of Kern Canyon was detoured into Kern Land Company's system of canals before it could

ever reach the Buena Vista Lake. This led directly to the landmark legal battle over water rights of Miller and Lux versus Haggin and Tevis which lasted for 8 years.

After the long legal battle over water rights, in which only the crowd of lawyers profited, the land barons settled their dispute between themselves personally by sharing the Kern River water equally. In 1887, the court battle ended and at that time Henry Miller's partner Charles Lux passed away. Henry Miller then bought out the Lux heirs and became owner of the largest land and cattle enterprise, in history, to have a sole owner.

Haggin and Tevis of the Kern Land Company and Henry Miller then entered into a legal agreement to equally share the costs of building the entire "Buena Vista Lake Reservoir System", which Miller had been building for years. The complex to be built would increase the capacity of Buena Vista Lake for irrigation storage and dry up Kern Lake to reclaim 18 square miles of fertile lake bed.

The construction would follow the engineering plans drafted in October, 1885 by Walter James and F.P. McCray which included a 6 mile long levee on the east side separating Kern Lake from Buena Vista Lake, about 6 miles of levees on the north lake side to direct the river's flow into the lake, and in addition, canals, head-gates, flow gauging stations, weirs, levees, bridges, and dredging necessary to complete the reservoir-irrigation complex. The costs of these improvements were shared equally between the two giant land barons by legal contract. The pact stipulated these improvements would be started and completed within a specified time limit. The following years were filled with active construction by the old Lake's new custodians.

To begin the massive reservoir construction, Miller purchased an 1888 model Marion steam shovel, the 72nd built by that company, and had it transported from Marion, Ohio to Bakersfield. The 20 ton machine was then disassembled and hauled by wagons from the Southern Pacific rail yards to the Buena Vista Lake shore where a crew of ship's carpenters constructed the largest dredging boat ever used in the inland Valley. The crew mounted the steam shovel upon the barge, supervised by the shovel's designer G.W. Barnhart, general manager of the Marion Steam Shovel



Boats on Buena Vista Lake.
Provided by West Kern Oil Museum

Company. Under the direction of Miller's Buttonwillow Ranch foreman, Simon W. Wible, the wood burning, steam dredge was launched into the lake in 1889. This giant dredging machine had a bucket capacity of one and a half cubic yards and weighed 30 tons. To operate the dredge required an engineer, fireman, crane operator, and two roustabouts. The wood fueled boiler required two cords of wood per 10 hour shift.

The object of the dredging was to deepen 10 miles of the eastern side and up the mouth of the lake to permit the complete emptying of the reservoir into the Kern Valley Canal to irrigate crop land to the north. To accomplish this feat, a system of head gates was constructed at the lake's entrance where the river originally flowed into the lake. Named "The Western Water Works" these weirs could either let all of Kern River's water empty into the lake or send it north via the Kern Valley Canal. The resulting 36 square mile reservoir and its canal system created out of the old Buena Vista Lake was recognized, world wide, as the largest artificial reservoir-irrigation complex in the United States at that time. The Kern Valley Water Company Canal, Wible's Concrete Weir, and evidence of the dredging work and levees can still be seen at the site of the dry Buena Vista lake bed.

As this dredging was in progress, a 20 foot high earthen levee six miles in length, running north and south, was being built between old Kern Lake and Buena Vista Lake using mule teams and Fresno Scrapers, the only earth moving equipment of that era. As fast as this levee could be constructed, wave action from the 36 square mile lake would wash it out in some areas. Thousands of wagon loads of brush and tumble weeds were dumped onto the lakeside of the levee in an effort to curtail the constant erosion from large waves, but the problem continued. The only logical solution to the erosion problem was to lay large stones on the lakeside of the levee (called rip-rapping). The nearest available rock formations were located in the mountains 12 miles to the south.

To transport the thousands of tons of rock needed to reinforce the levee a railroad had to be built. In 1892, a contractor, George Stone Construction Company, was engaged to build a narrow gauge railroad on top of the levee and continue south to the San Emidio Mountains where rock was quarried to be hauled over the railroad by a wood burning, eight ton, steam locomotive and 24 dump cars. Simon Wible, foreman of Miller and Lux Ranch, climbed onto the engine to inspect the workings when this small steam locomotive arrived at the Southern Pacific railroad yards in East Bakersfield. After viewing its small size, the local newspapers jokingly referred to the new arrival as "Wible's Baby-buggy", and the little steamer did prove too small for the task of pulling 24 loaded cars from the quarry at the mountains. Its boiler burst while straining to pull the train. The explosion blew the engineer from the cab but he was only slightly injured. While the little engine was undergoing repairs, another larger locomotive of 15 tons was purchased. Upon its arrival in East Bakersfield, plans were laid to transport the heavy machine to the levee site about 40 miles southwest of town.

The largest wagons of that era were the 10 ton capacity borax wagons of 20 mule team borax fame. Three of these massive wagons were acquired from Mojave and the 15 ton locomotive was disassembled, removing wheels, drive rods, cab, and boiler. The parts were loaded into the big wagons and hauled south on Union Avenue to Maricopa Road then west to the railroad where it was re-assembled. With the two locomotives working, levee construction was continued at full speed.

This narrow gauge railroad was locally dubbed, "The Buena Vista Reservoir Railroad". The large rocks and earth were dumped onto the lakeside of the levee preventing erosion of the dike. The railroad project eventually cost over \$100,000.00 (two and a half million in today's dollars). This project was continued for about two years, working only when the lake's water level was low. When the rip-rapping work was completed, the contractor removed the narrow gauge railroad that ran from the San Emidio Mountains to the north end of the long levee. Ten years later in 1901, the "Sunset Railroad" to Maricopa and Taft was built using a portion of this old road bed along the top of the levee. This levee and the abandoned Sunset Railroad still exist on the eastern shore of the old lake-bed about 30 miles southwest of Bakersfield.

This irrigation system functioned efficiently, just as designed. When the Kern River was in flood stage, the 36 square mile lake would fill to capacity, flow north through the Kern Valley Water Company's 250 foot wide canal and empty into the old Tulare Lake bed. The water



Flood waters surround the Lakeside Ranch Headquarters after the levee broke.

Provided by Kern County Museum

railroad was washed away which prompted the rebuilding of that portion of the Sunset Railroad upon higher ground. The railroad was repaired in 34 days. An estimated million dollars damage was caused by this levee failure and nearly two years passed before the flooded acreage could again be farmed.

In the summer of 1913, the lake was nearly dry and the trusty old steam dredge took this opportunity to do some dredging to deepen the lake near the Taft Highway Bridge. When the lake was nearly dry, farmers would lease the hundreds of acres of rich, black, bottom land exposed by the receding waters. A bumper crop of barley or corn could be raised in that rich soil before another wet year again filled the reservoir. This gradually became a common practice over the years through the 1940s.

Old Buena Vista Lake, from its beginning, and through the 1950s, was a fishing and frogging paradise with its miles of shoreline. The waterfowl hunting was outstanding. Fishing from the "Wible Weir", at the lake's northern end near Tupman, was always productive because of the many different kinds of fish that could be caught while fishing from the tall concrete structure. Carp, bluegill, catfish, whitefish, bass, turtles, and amazingly Koi fish abounded there. No one knows where the multi-colored Koi came from but they were always there near the spillway of the big weir. During the heat of the day, many families could be seen swimming above the weir to cool off. In the summer, when the fish were biting, hundreds of fishermen could be seen along that channel on weekends. The crumbling, 100 year old concrete structure called, "Wible's Weir", still stands on the "Kern River Flood Channel" one mile west of the Tule Elk State Preserve.

From the beginning, the lake was very popular for power boating and sailing. The first nationally sanctioned boat regatta was held on May 14, 1939 and was attended by 5,600 cheering spectators. A full field of power boats, about 80, raced throughout the day. Local hydroplane racing legend and rancher, John Kovacevich, driving his famous, Muscat Kid, won his class and another driver set a world record in his outboard hydroplane class. The regatta was sponsored by The South San Joaquin Valley Yacht Club and the Bakersfield Boat Club. After this successful race, more were presented in the next few years.

As the years passed Lake Isabella was finally built for flood control and water storage plus the California Aqueduct was built alongside the old lake's western shore. After 60 years as a reservoir for irrigation water and a fishing and hunting paradise, the Buena Vista Lake had outlived its usefulness. The dark, rich lake bed was more valuable to raise crops than to store water. Today, the old, rich lake bed displays miles of lush, green crops irrigated by electrically pumped ground water or from the impounded waters of Isabella Lake and the California Aqueduct. The Kern River's entrance at the old lake's north end has been redesigned so any flood water can be shunted into the old Kern Valley Canal, (now re-named "Kern River Flood Channel"), thus

impounded in Buena Vista reservoir would be retained until needed the following year or when required for future irrigation.

The only failure in the Buena Vista Irrigation complex happened in July, 1907. During the night, high winds caused large waves to batter a breach in the six-mile long east levee. The lake was filled to capacity which caused a huge rush of water to spill out into the 18 square miles of crops planted in the reclaimed land of the old Kern Lake bed. Three to four hundred men fought to close the breach in the dike for two days, even hastily building another dike four feet high by four miles long in their struggle to stop the inundation upon the homes, barns, farm equipment, and fields of ripe grain. Every attempt failed to stop the flood before it could wash out the newly built Sunset Railroad along the top of the levee. Twelve miles of

diverting any flood water north to the old Tulare Lake bed area.

Old Buena Vista Lake was all but forgotten for 20 years until 1973 when the County of Kern built the new Buena Vista Aquatic Recreational Area on the north shore of the old lake bed. The artificial lakes contain 6,800 acre feet of water obtained from the California Aqueduct. These lakes are teeming with fish regularly stocked by the Kern Parks and Recreation Department. Large beds of tules now grow along these lake shallows, reminiscent of the tule lined shores of "The Late, Great, Buena Vista Lake".



Men working at Buena Vista Lake in 1925

Provided by West Kern Oil Museum



Boat regatta at Buena Vista Lake, May 1939

Provided by Kern County Museum

BAKERFIELD

BY A. J. H. (PROBABLY A. J. HANSON, METHODIST MINISTER)

FROM THE BAKERSFIELD COURIER, OCTOBER 24, 1874

At the extreme southern limit of the great San Joaquin Basin lies the subject of this sketch, a town of growing importance for the section of California in which it is located. Nearly three hundred and fifty miles by rail from San Francisco, and far re-moved from other centers of traffic, it seems almost out of the world to him who has never paid it a visit. Los Angeles is 150 miles southward, Santa Barbara, 90 westward, and Visalia, 75 northward. Yet we are here in civilization and constantly behold faces that but a few days since were seen in San Jose or San Francisco, and but just a moment ago there came to the ear the familiar whistle of a passing locomotive, drawing its freighted train across the magnificent railroad bridge, which spans the Kern River. Step on the train which leaves San Francisco at four p.m. and by ten a.m. of the next day you will be delivered safe and sound at our Bakersfield depot. After a wearisome ride over one broad expanse of dry, sun-browned plain, it is quite refreshing to enter a place, green and luxuriant with the vegetation of a semi-tropical climate. . . . Low and moist, it becomes hot and somewhat malarial in summer months, yet as cultivation is bestowed and a thick growth of willow underbrush cleared away, less trouble is experienced and in time the place can be made quite as healthy as any other in a similar situation.

Some 700 inhabitants compose the town, and of these quite a large number are Spanish and Chinese. Our American citizens have gathered here from various parts of California, as the history of the place extends back but four or five years, and but few from older states have found their way directly to this spot. Active, enterprising and respectable people are these, who occupied the best social position in other places and are here endeavoring to make pleasant society for themselves and children.

The county seat has been recently transferred to this place from Havilah, a mining town some forty miles distant, and we are favored with the presence of the various officials of the body politic. A Court House costing \$30,000 is to be erected soon, and that will add to the significance of the town.

Our M. E. Church has been erected within the last year, costing about \$1,800, but still unfinished on the inside. When complete, it will be a very neat structure, accommodating between 200 and 300 worshippers. Ours is the only church publicly represented at present, though we learn our Presbyterian friends expect to organize ere long, and that Catholics design to erect a place of worship shortly. We need religious teachers, so let them come and do what good they can.

Here are published two weekly papers of good character, The **Kern County Courier** and the **Southern Californian**, so that our appetite for news is entirely appeased.

There is a bank in town with moderate capital, which serves the purpose of trade quite well.

In the way of entertainment there is a brass band which furnishes music of a very respectable character, while a circulating library furnishes considerable reading matter at moderate cost.

Seven or more saloons are in full blast, and sending out constant streams of moral (?) influence. There is a brewery in town; so unfailing fountains of lager beer gush out in our midst. No want of the necessaries of life, you will perceive.

Prices are high, board still higher, and money scarce, though business is becoming better as the cool weather approaches. When winter is upon us, rain falls in the valley and snow covers the mountain heights nearby, no spot in California can be more attractive.

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