

Fair price

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on May 4, 1919, but work on the project wasn't fully completed until 1923.

At the time the dams were completed, they were the largest earthen dams in the world.

"It was an extremely large public works project, especially for this part of the country," said City of Morganton Engineer Wayne Harris, who has lived on the lake much of his life. "It was probably the biggest improvement that the citizens of Burke County could have received."

Harris rates creation of the lake and construction of Interstate 40 as the two most significant public works projects in the history of Burke County.

Several years before construction of the dams began, agents for Southern Power began crisscrossing the valleys at the future lake site purchasing land along the waterways. Contrary to popular perception, the company paid fair prices for the farms along the river bottoms, according to historical records and newspaper articles of the day.

An article from the Jan. 20, 1916, edition of The News Herald states, "Farmers who optioned their places took it as a joke and none thought any more would be heard of it, but not one option has been allowed to expire and every man giving an option has had a check shoved under his nose. The ones who showed inclination to be slow are financially far better off, although all got a big price; but at places 200 and 300 acre farms sold for \$8,000 to \$12,000 while adjoining farms of equal value brought

from \$20,000 to \$30,000, according to the inclination of the owner to sign an option."

The article continues, "Burke real estate activities have rivaled the far west after the rush in '49 and dozens of men who a few years ago bought farms at a few hundred or a few thousand dollars are now getting checks for 20 to 50 times as much.

"The surprising thing about it is the quietude with which the forces of millions have worked and information is carefully guarded but the register's office is daily telling the tale of the magnitude of the proposition, aided by the activities of scores of men in the various departments."

Before work on the dams started, a rail spur was built from a Southern Railway line at Bridgewater to the construction site to facilitate the transport of materials.

Construction of the dams met with several setbacks. The Great Flood of 1916 damaged the partially built structures, and because of the start of World War I, labor was in short supply. State prisoners were used to augment the workforce. Conditions for all workers were harsh.

According to one article of the period, "Workers were housed in rough, hastily erected shanties, and many convicts reportedly contracted influenza and died on the Lake James job. Workers in the sometimes rowdy camp tended to disappear after several days had passed.

"As a result, the company took on women as permanent help to do the always needed cooking and housekeeping. Their presence, however, led to numerous fights and killings, with bodies furtively

buried beneath the earthworks."

An excerpt from a construction contract illustrates how some of the work was done: "The contractor agrees to furnish eleven two-horse teams and one three-horse team and the equipment necessary for doing such grading, hauling and other similar work at Bridgewater, N.C., as may be designated by the engineer of the company at the rate of 70 cents per hour for the two-horse teams and \$1.05 per hour for the three-horse team."

A broad canal was dredged to connect the Catawba River arm of the lake with the Linville River/Paddy Creek arm.

Two small communities were swallowed by the cool waters of the lake, Fonta Flora, on the Linville River, and Gibbs, located on Paddy Creek.

Lake James, situated 1,200 feet above sea level, contains 94 billion gallons of water at full pond and has a maximum depth of 135 feet near the Linville dam.

The Bridgewater Hydroelectric Station, with a capacity of 20,000 kilowatts, represented 11 percent of the Southern Power system at the time it was brought on line. Today, the plant's capacity represents just one-tenth of 1 percent of the total Duke Energy system, according to Duke spokesman Joe Maher.

The lake proved its worth early on during a severe drought in 1921 when it helped provide power to industries all along the river chain.

An article in the June 8, 1922, edition of The News Herald noted, "Approximately 300 cotton mills are operated from the lines of the Southern Power Company, these mills having a total of 5 million spindles with their complement of