



Earl history

Guy C. Earl

You know you're nearing Almanor country when you spot Mt Lassen, which used to be the only active volcano in the US. Its last official tantrum was in 1917 and since then it has become a national park - a good place to spend a day seeing the sulfur hot springs or climbing to the top of the 10,448 foot volcano to look out over Lake Almanor at its base.

Before there was a Lake Almanor, the Maidu Indians called it "oy-ding-koyo" or Big Meadows - the lush, bountiful land at the foot of the volcano where evil spirits dwelled. For a number of centuries the Maidu took from and repaid the land for their living, surviving the Sierra winters by migrating to lower elevations.

Spanish explorer Luis Arguillo was the first European to enter Feather River - named for the feathers floating on the waters. He was followed by a scattering of trappers, lone mountain men, until 1848 when Peter Lassen led a party bound

for California via a "short cut" from the Oregon trail that wound through Big Meadows. These were followed by other seekers: ranchers, dairymen, farmers and miners, who recognized the varied riches of the area and saw no need to travel farther.

Mountain streams, abundant hunting and fishing and the cool summer climate brought vacationers from the Sacramento Valley long before there was a lake. Since the 1860's travelers have come to Big Meadows from the hot valleys and busy cities to spend weeks or months.

Julius Howells, a geology student from Harvard University, visited the area in the early 1880's. When he returned in 1901, he envisioned the hydro-electric potential of the Feather River and convinced **Edwin and Guy C. Earl to finance the building of a dam. In 1914 the first dam was completed and Big Meadows became the bed of Lake Almanor, named for Guy Earl's three daughters-Alice, Martha and Eleanor.**

Historically, Big Meadows, which is now the site of Lake Almanor, has been inhabited by the California Indian, emigrant pioneer cattlemen and dairymen, gold miners, resort owners, hydroelectric developers, recreational summer dwellers and, finally, contemporary residents.

The "Big Meadows Indians" or "Feather River Indians" as they have been called actually belong to the California Maidu. However, the Indians had no particular name for themselves and the word "Maidu" simply means person. Big Meadows was one of the flat-bottomed valleys providing conditions well suited to the Indian way of life. Village areas were located along the margins of the meadows with two main settlements in the area. One was located along the west shore near what is now Almanor Inn and the other was at Big Springs on the east shore.

The Indians gathered edible plants for their principal sustenance. As with many other groups of California Indians, one of their most staple food items was acorns. In addition, the Indian hunted deer, bear and small game animals with bow and arrow and trapped fish in streams with nets.

The Maidu world was restricted to a very small geographical area. Individuals seldom traveled more than a few miles. Travel was not really necessary as the Indian learned to live with his surroundings with little disruption. One exception was the practice of burning the forest understory almost yearly. This practice kept the underbrush cleaned and allowed the Indian easy access through the forest while at the same time it rid the area of ambush sites for enemies. Should you ever have the need to walk through the thick manzanita and mountain whitethorn brush you will readily appreciate the reason for the Indian burning behavior. Early pioneers in Big Meadows stated that one could see for great distances through the forest because of the areas cleared by the understory burning. The last of the Maidu all but disappeared from Plumas County during the gold rush period as they possessed practically no resistance to white man diseases. Many were violently killed by the miners.

Today it is highly likely that you will discover arrowheads or at least arrowhead working materials scattered in the low, flat meadows around the periphery of the lake.

Although traps believed to have belonged to the Hudson's Bay Company have been found near the famous Lassen Trail, the first white man accredited to have been in the area was Peter Lassen. In 1848, he led a group of 10 wagons across the rugged mountains. In fact, the trip was so severe that Lassen was almost hanged near Big Meadows for having dragged the group through such an ordeal. Lassen was saved when pioneers from Oregon met them in Big Meadows and informed them of the Gold Discovery just 60 or 70 miles away at Coloma, California.

Although gold was found near Oroville a few months later and placer mining became the order of the day in the Feather River Canyon, the upper reaches including the north fork at Big Meadows produced very little gold.

However, during this period, the Lassen Trail, (locally called the "Humbug Trail") which passed directly through what is now Lake Almanor West, became established as the main route from the east side of the mountain to Chico. Supplies were brought into the local valleys over the trail and beef and dairy products which were beginning to be produced on a half dozen Big Meadows Ranches, were transported over the trail on the way to the Sacramento Valley.

An interesting story is told about a man named Stoddard, a prospector who found a lake near Big Meadows whose shores were freely covered with gold. In an encounter with Indians, Stoddard's companion was killed and he barely escaped. His story enticed many people to search for "Gold Lake." The subsequent influx of people helped populate the area and create the need to organize Plumas County on March 18, 1854.

Of course, the ranches were developing with many of the cattlemen from the Sacramento Valley using the lush meadows as summer grazing range. It has been estimated that as many as 10,000 head of cattle grazed the area the summer of 1857. Dairying operations grew and in 1870 butter produced in Big Meadows sold for 35 cents a pound in Chico.

One rancher, Jacob Bonner, first introduced Dr. Willard Pratt to the area. Dr. Pratt proceeded to construct a hotel in 1867 at Prattville, which became a resort community known far and wide. Several other resort hotels followed including the Bunnell House and the Butterfield House near Bunnell point and the Olsen House in Chester. People from as far away as Los Angeles traveled by Concord coach to spend pleasant summer days at the resorts. In the early 1880's there were as many as 2,000 tourists annually visiting the meadows and by the turn of the century this number was doubled.

Reservations were necessary a year in advance in order to assure accommodations. Weekly, tourists took trips to Lassen Peak to climb its peak and enjoy the magnificent scenery. Many tourists returned home with pleasant memories and a few pounds of Big Meadows butter.

In the early 1900's electric transmission problems had been solved and hydro-electric power development was sweeping the country. It is not unusual then that when a civil engineer, Julius Howells, visited the area in 1901 he quickly

envisioned a storage reservoir on the North Fork Feather River which shortly thereafter came into being.

Howells interested the Earl brothers of San Francisco enough in the project so that they formed the Western Power Company to build the dam and hydro-electric facilities. Howells suggested that the President of Western, Guy C. Earl, name the lake in honor of his three daughters, Alice, Martha and Elinor.

Construction of the dam commenced in 1910 after property and certain water rights had been obtained. The dam was completed in 1914 and Lake Almanor with less than a fifth of its present capacity was formed. The dam has been expanded in size twice since 1914 to create the magnificent lake at its present dimensions.

Western Power merged into Great Western Power Company which in turn was later sold to the North American Company. In 1930 North American sold its Great Western holdings to Pacific Gas and Electric Company who has since operated the lake.

By nature of its existence, the lake increased commercial and recreational activities in the area. Massive timber harvesting was necessary to clear the lake area and the Red River Lumber Company accomplished this task. The trees were hauled by rail to the thriving company town, Westwood, just 6 or 7 miles east. Logging continued in the area and of course is today still economically important to the community. Collins Pine Lumber Company is now the main forest products firm in the area, although forest land holdings around the lake by the U.S. Forest Service, Kimberly Clark and Shasta Forest Products are significant.

The landscape in which Lake Almanor is situated abounds with natural beauty. The magnificent view of Lassen Peak beyond the sky blue lake, framed by the deep evergreen forests creates an impressive setting. Within this setting many people have come to purchase property to relax and enjoy their leisure hours.

This part concludes "The PG&E Story" with the history of Great Western Power Company and the merger that brought both San Joaquin and Great Western into the PG&E system.

Great Western Develops The Feather River; Mergers Create the PG&E System of Today

Reining in his horse, Julius Howells looked out across the rolling expanse of Big Meadows.

With the trained eye of an engineer, Howells took in most of the 50 square miles of high valley. He noted with particular interest the point where the river flowed out of the valley through a narrow gorge and began its steep descent into the Feather River canyon.

A dam across that gorge, he knew, would convert Big Meadows into a superb storage reservoir.

Thus in the early 1880s, was planted the seed that many years later would grow into Great Western Power Company -- which in turn was a late, major addition to the PG&E system.

But nothing dramatic occurred immediately. With Big Meadows well to the back of his mind, Howells explored the Sierra farther south, locating water rights and playing a part in the events that led to development of San Joaquin Light and Power.

Then in 1901 Howells got the backing of Edwin T. Earl of Los Angeles and his brother Guy C. Earl of Oakland to develop what the engineer knew to be one of the finest hydroelectric sites in all of California. That year and the next options were quietly secured on thousands of acres of Big Meadows land. In 1902 Howells went into the mountains to post and record a claim to water rights. There a dramatic incident occurred.

Nailing a notice to a tree, Howells and a companion then turned their horses heads downstream. In a few minutes they came upon a pair of strangers, also posting a notice claiming water rights!

A bone-jarring race in spring wagons (legend has transformed this into a moonlight chase through the snow in sleighs) followed. Howells won by just 40 minutes. He filed his papers with the county recorder in Quincy and shared the great prize which was to become Lake Almanor.

In March 1902, the Earl brothers incorporated Western Power Company. With Big Meadows land and water now available, engineers saddled up to hunt powerhouse sites. They found a splendid one at Big Bend, 65 miles downriver from Big Meadows and about 16 miles from Oroville.

Here was a great sweeping 12-mile loop in the river, its downstream end only 3 miles from the upstream end -- and with a tunnel already driven through this narrow neck.

The tunnel was the work of patent-medicine king Ray V. Pierce. ("Dr. Pierce" signs once covered barn roofs across the nation.) Pierce's gold-mining scheme involving the tunnel hadn't panned out, and he was ready to sell.

Now all that was needed was money. It was found in the east, though not without a tangle of agreements, contracts, holding companies, and issuance of stocks and bonds -- all typical of financing in those days.

From this tangle emerged Western Power Company (later Western Power Corporation) of New Jersey, a holding company incorporated in 1906. At the same time, Great Western Power Company was incorporated in California, with

practically all of its stock held by the New Jersey company. Edwin Hawley was the first president and Guy C. Earl the first vice-president of Great Western.

Work began immediately at Big Bend. Dr. Pierce's tunnel was reamed out to a larger diameter and extended to provide a fall of water of 465 feet. A first 10,000-kilowatt unit went into operation in December 1908.

Five more units were added later to bring the total capacity to 70,000 kw. (The Big Bend plant spun out kilowatts until September 1967. Early in 1968 the pioneer plant was covered by the rising waters of the state's big Oroville reservoir.) W. G. B. Euler, who went on to become executive vice-president of PG&E, began his utility career on the Big Bend construction job.

Big Bend power was transmitted on a steel tower line to Brighton Substation at Sacramento, thence to Oakland. The first voltage was 60,000 volts. In late 1909 this was boosted to 100,000 volts -- "EHV" for that early day.

To firm up Big Bend's output (especially important at first, because until the upstream reservoir was finally built the powerhouse depended on the natural flow of the river) a 10,500-kw steam plant was built in Oakland.

But there difficulties began. After bringing power all the way to Oakland, the young company had to wholesale it to the Pacific Gas and Electric Company. Great Western had no franchises or distribution system. But it was going to.

A major battle now shaped up. Great Western bought the San Francisco system of City Electric Co., formed in 1907 by Mortimer and Herbert Fleishacker. By the time of the purchase in 1911 City Electric had carved a considerable foothold, in the competitive San Francisco market. The Fleishackers now became directors of Great Western. In 1912 Mortimer was elected president, a post he held for 12 years. Herbert became a vice- president.

And in 1912 the first of several underwater cables across the bay delivered Big Bend power to San Francisco.

Great Western expanded elsewhere. Small companies were bought whenever the chance came -- one in Sacramento and another in San Leandro; one to South San Francisco, yet another in Half Moon Bay. The line to Half Moon Bay gave access to other Peninsula communities.

Great Western achieved an interesting "first" in 1912 when under a new state law it was the first utility required to show "convenience and necessity," for an extension of service to four North Bay counties. PG&E opposed the application to the State Railroad Commission (now the California Public Utilities Commission). But Great Western won.

Meanwhile, back in the mountains, Great Western engineers were dusting off studies for a dam at Big Meadows. A tough -- and sometimes bitter -- road lay ahead.

Workmen began building a multiple-arch dam in 1910. After five of the planned 22 concrete arches were finished diggers began to find they had to go much deeper through a seam of clay to find bedrock than had been expected. Word leaked out and first-class controversy was building up when Guy Earl announced that the dam would be abandoned. Construction stopped in 1912.

Now a hydraulic-filled dam was begun upstream. Sand, gravel and clay in great quantities were sliced between the canyon walls to form a core, with more sand and gravel on the outside slopes. Howells, one of the originators of this type of construction was a consulting engineer.

He also gave the lake a name -- Almanor. He derived this from the names of Guy Earl's three daughters, ALice, MARtha and EleaNOR. (A few years ago it was established that the last daughter spelled her name Elinore; but Almanor it was and remains.)

This first dam was finished in June 1914. It was 72 feet high from streambed to crest, extended 650 feet from one canyon wall to the other, and created a reservoir with a capacity of 220,000 acre feet.

Two years later flashboards along the spillway crest increased the capacity of Almanor by half. Then in 1926 increased demand on the Great Western system required building more hydro plants.

To supply the needed water power, a new hydraulic-fill dam was completed in 1927, just below the old dam and joined to it. With its height of 130 feet and a crest length of 1,200 feet the massive structure increased the maximum possible water storage to 1,308,000 acre- feet.

Again Howells was consulting engineer, and W. G. B. Euler, now general superintendent of Great Western, supervised construction.

Not all the problems at Almanor were with nature. The small but ambitious Oro Electric Company of Oroville had plans of its own in the area. As part of them, the company built a small wooden diversion dam across Butte Creek, which flows into the Feather just below Almanor Dam.

(The fight continued in the courts and the State Railroad Commission until 1917 when PG&E ended it by buying Oro Electric and its properties.)

Great Western protested that Oro had no claim to the water. Oro ignored the protest. So a Great Western crew under superintendent J. W. Bumgarner went in with dynamite and blew the offending structure to splinters. There were giants in those days.

Once Lake Almanor was created the way lay open for further development.

Work started on Caribou Powerhouse in 1919 and first operation came in May 1921; three generators with capacity of 73,000 kw were installed.

By 1920, Great Western was serving 31,615 domestic, agricultural and industrial customers in 15 Northern California counties.

Two important system additions during the 1920s were Bucks Creek Powerhouse on the Feather River and a steam plant at Hunters Point in San Francisco.

Bucks Creek was completed in March 1928, with a capacity of 60,000 kw and what was for some years the highest head in the Western Hemisphere -- water here drops a vertical distance of 2,561 feet before hitting the turbine blades.

What is now called Hunters Point Power Plant was first put in operation in December 1929. Initial capacity was 42,000 kw. (Today it is 448,000 kw.)

As the 1920s opened there were three major utility systems in Northern and Central California -- those of Great Western, San Joaquin Light and Power, and largest of all, PG&E. During this decade the economics of the utility business inexorably drew the three systems toward consolidation.

As early as 1922 PG&E was offered a chance to buy the stock of Western Power Corporation, the eastern holding company which controlled Great Western. PG&E declined, but it was just a question of time. Western Power meanwhile offered to buy San Joaquin Light and Power.

It made sense. The combined territories would take in a large part of California north of the Tehachapi; the largely agricultural San Joaquin load would complement the heavily metropolitan Great Western load.

Negotiations began in 1924 and a young Californian who had already risen swiftly in the utility business came into the spotlight: James B. Black.

Black had gone to work for Great Western in 1912 as a service inspector. By 1922 he had become general manager and a year later, at the age of 33, he was vice-president and general manager. In the Great Western-San Joaquin negotiations and in even more significant discussions to come, he became the principal architect of the PG&E system of today.

The 1924 negotiations went smoothly. In November Western Power agreed to buy a controlling interest in the San Joaquin system. It and Great Western were interconnected by a 103-mile line from Brighton sub to Wilson sub near Merced. They now had a common owner, but the two companies were not now merged.

Meanwhile, even before the transaction was complete, The North American Company, a larger New York investment firm, obtained stock control of Western Power Corporation -- and thus of Great Western and San Joaquin Light and Power.

North American also obtained James Black. He went to New York as a vice president of North American and its newly acquired subsidiary, Western Power Corp.

And the wheels of consolidation kept turning.

Persuaded by Black that North American could not acquire the bigger, stronger PG&E as it had the other companies, North American now offered to exchange its holdings in Great Western and San Joaquin for PG&E stock.

After off-again, on-again negotiations reminiscent of old-time horse trading, the deal was made. On March 29, 1930, PG&E agreed to deliver shares of its common stock, worth \$114 million at the current price, to North American.

In return PG&E got stock that represented control of Great Western Power, San Joaquin Light and Power and a smaller utility, Midland Counties Public Service. The logical conclusion had been reached: PG&E now served essentially all of Northern and Central California.

The actual merger took a while. Great Western was made a direct part of PG&E, in 1935; San Joaquin Light and Power stayed under its existing management and was not merged into the PG&E system as San Joaquin Power (now simply San Joaquin) Division until 1938.

In 1935 Great Western President Guy Earl, along with James Black, was named to the PG&E board of directors. That November James B. Black was named president of PG&E. He held that job for 20 critical, formative years of company history and then served as chairman of the board until his death March 20, 1965, at the age of 74.

The material in this and preceding installments of The PG&E Story has been drawn from "PG&E of California," by the late Charles Coleman. We conclude this series with his words on the meaning of the final mergers:

"PG&E had fulfilled its destiny. It had reached the peak of its long climb to a point where it could give to all Northern California, with only minor exceptions, the benefits of gas and electric service by one integrated system, administered by one company. Those benefits under state regulation were to be the economic advantages of...light, heat and power to communities, to industry and to agriculture, provided with maximum efficiency at minimum costs to the customer."

At the very end of his book, Coleman summed up our company:

"...if one may brave the cynicism of a materialistic world, he will find in this utility organization, evolved during a century of development, an intangible quality, a spirit and strength and a purpose of its own that are above and beyond the strength and purpose of individuals. Instead of being merely a corporate

body, a thing of bylaws and rules, it has become a living, lasting entity, with a character and a tradition based firmly on its dedication to public service.

"This is PG&E of California."