

James Hugh Wise - Power Company Pioneer

Excerpts from an article by Bill Wilson, in the Auburn Sentinel, October 18, 1991

Wise, an engineer with energy and personality effervescence, had taken charge of the South Yuba and Bear River Hydro-electric project, a water and electric development a few detractors said was impossible to complete. When he died at the age of 32 in a traffic accident in San Francisco, the young utility company of Pacific Gas & Electric Co. suffered a tragedy that some thought might end its most ambitious hydroelectric project.

. . . Doubting thomases exhorted questions about the project, but Wise and PG&E President Frank Drum were confident that the harnessing of the watershed to provide water and power was th future of the utility company.

. . . The aggressive and intuitive Wise came to California when he was 12 years of age where he attended Lick School in San Francisco and one classmate referred to him as: "A crackerjack in mathematics and he used to lend us pocket money."

. . . The enterprising engineer later became a partner with Baum, who had started his own consultant business, and in Feb. 1910 Wise was retained as a PG&E consultant in hydraulic matters, one of his specialities.

. . . Wise encouraged by some of the fledgling PG&E then-thought-of lofty development plans, rejoined the growing San Francisco-based utility company in 1912 and turned his attention to the Sierra. The water sheds—Yuba and Bear River—intrigued him, and when he became assistant manager of the firm he and the other PG&E engineers envisioned a plan to construct a power plant on the Bear River near the Nevada County narrow gauge railroad trestle north-east of Colfax. The project was studied for 18 months and later abandoned.

Farther upstream, however, Wise could see greater water and power potential, and at his and other utility company officials directions, a plan was put together to impound the water, build a series of power plants, with water as a by-product or power production. He started construction of the Spaulding Reservoir and Drum Powerhouse before he was killed.

The innovative, yet extremely expensive project at the time, was referred to as the "Greatest Pacific Service". It was a project involving almost unheard of miles of canals, some 20 man-made reservoirs, with the main water storage at Spaulding reservoir above Yuba Gap. On May 28, 1912, clearing was begun by some 1400 men after most of the snow had melted. At the time, reservoir capacity was estimated at four billion cubic feet. With gravity flow, the water was to serve middle and western Placer County.

In 1912, PG&E employed 4,500 persons, had 11 hydroelectric plants in its system, including four steam plants and 17 gas works. It served two-thirds of the State's population. Work on the Yuba-Bear River project solidified the status of the company, even though there were questions in the business sections of the media and from customers about the huge outlay of private funds used to construct it.

When Spaulding was completed, the canal system and water works was tied into the Drum Powerhouse, along with a number of reservoirs and forebays and afterbays. Work also was begun on the Halsey Powerhouse at Clipper Gap(named for M. H. Halsey, a New York bond consultant who helped in financing the PG&E project.) and a powerhouse a mile west of Auburn that was to be named the James Wise Powerhouse. In March of 1917, the Wise Powerhouse went on line. The Wise unit was planned to supply power as far as the San Francisco Bay. (Wise Power House is located at the beginning of Wise Road, just below Auburn, off of Ophir Road). A complete history of this project is available at the Placer County Archives.