

A lake's creation, a land's demise

Chris Cioffi | Posted: Sunday, March 6, 2016 12:00 am

As bulldozers carved a path for the basin that would become Leesville Lake, Danny Tuck and his family headed for higher ground.

And they took their house with them.

Tuck's family had spent generations farming tobacco and corn and running cattle at the edge of Bedford County, near the Roanoke River. The soil was fed by occasional floods that brought rich nutrients from upriver.

"It was some of the most fertile land in Bedford County," Tuck said. "Now it's all under water."

Much of the farm was swallowed by a rising Roanoke River as the Smith Mountain Dam project came to fruition in the mid-1960s. The Tuck family loaded their home onto the back of a trailer, hauling it up a hill to the top of a ridge on the far end of the sprawling homestead.

"It was kind of migrating to the highlands, I guess," said Tuck, now 68.

The contractor hired by Tuck's family to move the home couldn't complete the work in a day.

As night fell, the family took shelter in the half-moved home, Tuck recalled.

"We had to sleep in it right on the hill," he said.

Within a few years, the Tuck property was among tens of thousands of acres in Bedford, Campbell and Pittsylvania counties now covered by two reservoirs that tamed the flood-prone Roanoke River in Central Virginia — Smith Mountain and Leesville.

The Smith Mountain Lake reservoir reached full pond — 795 feet above sea level — 50 years ago Monday, on March 7, 1966. Tuck was a young teenager when the project was completed.

He now lives in Huddleston with his wife Gloria. Tuck retired to a life of farming after a career at what was then Bell Atlantic. All eight of his siblings have remained in the Lynchburg and Roanoke area, he said.



Danny Tuck

Danny Tuck stands on his great-grandfather's property that once was his family's farm land before the Smith Mountain Lake Project was built and the land was flooded by what now is Leesville Lake, in the background.

The Smith Mountain Lake project dates to an August 1940 hurricane that dumped buckets of rain on the area and caused a number of deaths, according to The News & Advance archives. Flood waters were measured at 18.25 feet on the Walnut Avenue gauge in Roanoke City, according to the National Weather Service. Flood stage at the gauge is 10 feet.

The Army Corps of Engineers devised a plan to control the river and generate power for the growing region.

Farmers and businessmen balked at the idea, saying the area didn't need more hydroelectric power, and accused the corps of fostering a socialist plot, a 1999 News & Advance article said.

Those living near the river weren't too fond of the plan, either, because it meant they would have to abandon their homes and livelihood.

"They told us, 'It's progress,'" Tuck said. "The public couldn't stand in the way of progress."

In the area that would become Smith Mountain Lake, everything that was to be 40 feet or closer to the surface of the lake was bulldozed into the deeper parts of the lake. The basin that was to become Leesville was stripped bare.

"They took the bulldozers, and just ran the bulldozers on anything that was standing up," Tuck said. "It was right devastating."

Tuck said the family adapted to ridge life, cutting trees and carving out spots for hogs and cows and an acre or so to grow feed corn for the animals. His father went to work in an Altavista textile mill.

Once the wood was cut, they would load it into the back of the school bus that Tuck drove for the county, and haul it to the train station in Leesville.

"We had to put the old pulpwood in the box cars," Tuck said. "That was a job."

The work was hard, but the family adapted, Tuck said. "We all had a good time and enjoyed life."

He fondly remembered how his mother once got a ticket for pulling too many fish out of the new lake.

"She was kind of getting fish for supper one night, and the game warden checked her fish and wrote her up," Tuck said.

As workers scraped and cut down trees along the riverbank, many Bedford County residents seized on the business opportunity to log forests that were destined to become lakebed.

"Everybody and his brother was cutting pulpwood," said Curry Martin, owner of Glenwood Oil and Automotive in Huddleston.

Smith Mountain Lake and its little sister Leesville Lake were created as a package.

Smith Mountain Dam, built by a South Bend, Indiana, company, cost more than \$60 million and was capable of producing 440 megawatts of power.

Today, the dam can crank out more than 605 megawatts for up to 11 hours and is designed to be used during peak hours. Off peak, the turbines reverse, and pump water from Leesville back to Smith Mountain for use the next day.

Martin remembers driving up to the fire tower on Smith Mountain with others to watch construction crews pouring the roughly 350,000 tons of concrete.

From there, “they looked like little ants down there to us,” he said.

Eventually, the dam stopped growing and water began to swallow fields, roads and bridges, marching nearly 40 miles upstream.

Martin, now a member of the Bedford County Board of Supervisors, grew up with Danny Tuck. He lived above the floodwaters, but said watching the dry land disappear from Smith Mountain felt like being at a gravesite.

“When you put someone in the coffin, and you see them close the door and put them into the ground, that person is gone forever,” he said.

Though the land was gone, Martin said he and his friends made the most of it, water skiing and fishing on the newly created lake.

“You could catch a 12-inch bass as fast as you could throw your hook in the water,” Martin said.

Because his family owned a gas station so close to the lake, Martin said the business thrived as more people passed by with boats and other recreational vehicles.

“Once it got here, I didn’t have any trouble making money off of it,” Martin said.

Selling to people who flocked to the area in search of fun and sun was something Staunton Church area farmer Winifred Saunders also capitalized on.

She told The News & Advance in 1999 that the waters of Smith Mountain Lake came up faster than expected, surrounding her cows, which the family scurried to higher ground.

Eventually, nearly 1,000 of the family’s 1,050 acres slipped below the water’s surface, but like many residents, Saunders and her husband adapted.

Her family opened Saunders’ marina and ran it until it was eventually sold by her son James. It is now called Parkway Marina.

“They figured they would make a living with it, instead of selling it,” said Saunders’ granddaughter, Virginia Saunders, who still lives in a home near the marina.

Members of the Saunders family were independent and strong-willed, she said. It wasn't out of character for them to stay put and find a new livelihood even after the banks of Smith Mountain Lake engulfed the farm.

"They definitely adapted real well," she said.