

The Determined Pioneers settling Desert Lake and Victor

In the Fall of 1877, just before his death, Brigham Young issued his settlement plans by asking the people of Sanpete County to go East across the a mountain and settle the Castle Valley region. There were 50 families that answered their Prophet's call and gave up homes and established farms for the new region. The first settlements were along the creeks that flowed down from the mountains and easy access to the water supply. But as more took up the challenge the choice lands had already been claimed so the newcomers had to search out lands further out requiring ditches to be established. With more and more people coming between the dates of 1880 to 1900 the early small ditches were consolidated into large canals constructed including Huntington Canal 1884, Emery Canal 1885, Cleveland Canal 1885, and Wakefield ditch 1880, many of these ditches are still in service.

The topic of this paper concerns Desert Lake settlement and was established in 1885 and Victor in 1910. "In 1885 several families moved from the town of Cleveland to an area they called Desert Lake and built a 500 foot embankment dam to impound a 300 acre irrigation reservoir. In 1896 the dam broke causing significant damage. The LDS Church provided \$1000 to rebuild the dam, and also to extend a ditch from Cleveland.

"The 1900 Census reported Desert Lake's population at 127. Six years after the Census was taken, in 1906, had established a general store, several frame homes, an LDS Church and a school were constructed. The general store also housed the post office."

When the settlers arrived in the Desert Lake area they started building ditches from Cleveland to supply their new community with needed water. They used the water from Huntington and Cleveland that wasn't used and directed it to their settlements. The area adjacent to their properties presented a natural formation for a reservoir by building a dam in a narrow neck of land. They used horses with skids to carry the soil and with shovels laboring vigorously to complete the needed watering source for their crops. Much of this labor was done during the winter time when the soil was frozen making it more difficult to move. But these stalwart pioneers were not deterred in making a new life for themselves.

In 1896 when the reservoir's dam broke and flooded the area putting in peril the settlers lives, farms and structures brought up the alkali and made the land unfit for living or farming. It also eroded the adobe structures. So in 1910 the settlement known as Victor was established and homes and a school house were built. The area was dryer than Desert Lake and the sand dunes located near the town were blown onto the farms and building making life more difficult.

The area is divided with the Mancos Shale being on the West divided by the Ferron Sandstone formation, then the Tununk Shale, with different depths of soil above the shale formations. The area was once a ancient sea bed and when the soil depth isn't very deep the flood irrigation would bring the salt up from the shale levels as the pioneers would say sour the soil and make it unusable.

Communicable diseases were a problem for many in the pioneer era and diphtheria was one of the dreaded diseases when it appeared. One story concerns the Marsing family when Harriet took her children to Dr Hoyt to see why their throats were swollen and their breathing was difficult. They were very sick. Dr Hoyt was sorry to inform her that her children had diphtheria and that all of them would have to be quarantined so other families would not be susceptible to this dreaded disease. School was closed and no public meetings were held. Harriet's Sister wife Sarah and Betty came from Desert Lake to Price to assist the family in caring for the sick children. Their task became even greater for within two weeks, seven of the Marsing children died and had to be prepared for burial.

Ernest S Horsley, a city official had been assigned to assist the stricken families. It was his heart-rendering task to receive each body at the family's gate, placing each into a coffin and taking each to the cemetery. The quarantined family could not attend. This traumatic experience remained in the minds of these early settlers.

Not only was the land difficult to keep watered and producing but many hardships faced these brave settlers.

Another story concerns the Niels & Sarah Marsing family who were living quite comfortably in Joseph City but the men folk wanting cheap land to homestead moved to Desert Lake in 1885. They started their journey with a total of 18 people in four covered wagons pulled by three sturdy teams of horses and one of oxen in April and arrived eleven days later in Desert Lake. They found themselves living in the covered wagons while the men built a log cabin with dirt floor and a fireplace. The water they were looking for had run dry with nothing available for summer crops, only a few skimpy vegetables which were watered by scant rain fall. The family faced winter with little food for the family and the animals. The men scattered out to find work and took their animals to the lower crossing of the Huntington River to winter over.

In the Spring the men were determined to get water and with other settlers they helped dig a canal from Huntington. They used hand shovels and horse drawn plows and scrapers. Then they commenced working on the Desert Lake Dam trying to make it strong but did not understand the composition of the soil and its ability to wash away. That Fall a heavy amount of rain fell and the dam washed out flooding farms and washing away crops. The flood waters came up to Ellen's (Marsings daughter) log home and she had to put her children upon the beds and tables to keep them from harm. Sarah moved them all in with her until the clean up could be finished.

Another story from her daughter Sarah Pilling Winder told how she housed 22 of the teachers in the school which also functioned as their Church meeting house. There were about 40 children that attended the school, and she also was the janitor for the building as well, as keeping up with all the daily chores that was a woman's daily routine. Being very religious she also held many Church positions because their branch was so small.

“Sarah related how during the years I lived there the dam on the Desert Lake broke twice, first in 1896 when we were living in a four room log house with a dirt roof. The water came to our door yard. It took 40 hives of bees and nearly all our crops. When the dam broke I was afraid that I would never get anymore fish, so I went down in front of our house where the fish were flopping in the grass and picked them up and stacked them in my apron as many as I could carry.

“The second time the dam broke the water came right into my house. I was then living in a different house closer to the Price River. It rained and rained at the time too; the house leaked and everything was wet. I even had to put my baby in a box under the table to keep him dry from the leaking roof.

“The dam was built back but the water got so alkalized again that we couldn't use it. We hauled our water from the Price river 12 miles away. We drove our animals to water. We would go in wagons and take every vessel on the place that would hold water; while there we would do our washing and then return with everything full. Later on our men dug a spring at Soap Spring Wash where our animals could drink. We could use this water for washing too, but could not drink it. Sometimes we hauled our drinking water from Bull Holler.”

The hearty settlers went to work again building the dam and the lake grew to a depth of 150 feet, five hundred feet across and eight miles around. Soon several varieties of fish made their way to the lake giving the settlers supplementary food to survive on.

“We had to go to Huntington 12 miles for mail and groceries until there was a store in Cleveland. Before there was an LDS Church organization in Desert Lake we belonged to the Cleveland Ward. The first four people who died at Desert Lake were taken to Cleveland for burial. That was the beginning of the Cleveland Cemetery. In 1896 there was a cemetery at Desert Lake.”

Another story from John Lehi Thayne records how this pioneering family which consisted of his wife Annabelle and ten children moved from Woodland to Desert Lake. When they arrived they found it very dry and with lots of rattlesnakes. This demonstrated just how hard it was to rely entirely on farming for supporting a family. John made a living by homesteading some ground growing garden crops and hauling them to near by mining towns. He also hauled other items that were needed for the miners. They lived in Desert Lake for 13 years

Virl Winder related his experience at Desert Lake that gives a young man's point of view. “At the time there were twelve to fifteen families at Desert Lake. They farmed lucern to sell. They raised lots of hay there. Desert Lake sometimes looked like a city of haystacks. The shepherders brought the hay.

“There was always a need for water. They all worked, even through the winter on the dam we now call Desert Lake. They started from scratch carrying dirt in wagons and they stored the flood water around the valley and from Huntington.

“There was quicksand at the upper end of Desert Lake. It was like bread dough, slowly letting you sink, but not really under. We played there often. Sometimes we chased wild horses by Chimney Rock—way back by the mountains.

“We went to school about two blocks from Desert Lake dam in the meeting house where we held church. At first there were two rooms; then they changed it to one big room where they had dances too. My Grandpa would keep the “player piano” for the dances. Yes! People came from all over to dance there.

“We lived off from the others, sort of in the wilds. You could hear the coyotes in the evenings. We ice skated on the lake and rode horses to have fun. Grandpa leased out boat rides on Desert Lake with candy and popcorn for sale.

“Now Desert Lake has almost been forgotten. My memories of Desert Lake are still there—it will always be home to me.”

Loren Morgan Wells shared about his school teachers while living in Victor.. “In the fall we moved back to Victor where I started school in 1913. The year I was in the first grade my teacher was Dorcus Olsen. My second grade teacher was Olivia Nelson. My third grade teacher was Mamie Munk who later married my Uncle Ray. My fourth grade teacher was Glen Arnold, fifth grade teacher was Dave Lamp, sixth and seventh grade teacher was Lawrence Lemmon and eighth grade teacher was Evadean Crosby.

In the summer of 1920 Edith and I drove the mail truck from Victor to Huntington and in the winter of 1920 and 1921 I went with Glen Horsley to take care of a bunch of cows down on the Price River. We

didn't have hay and there wasn't much feed so we cut cottonwood trees down for them.”

These extracts of pioneer memories gives us a little understanding of how difficult the lives were of the settlers who had the fortitude to tame a harsh land. Many had left other areas with established homes and farms to adventure into the unknown. They had to depend on each other for sustenance in times of joy and difficulties. They provided their own entertainment and helped in child birthing. They planted crops, trees and enjoyed the beauties of wild yellow roses that grew to add some beauty to their surroundings.

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