

Lakes pumped life into Oconee County

BY NORMAN CANNADA
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John Powell remembers hearing a teacher in school first tell a group of students about plans to build Lake Keowee in Oconee County.

Little did he know that one event would change the direction of his own life.

"I was in sixth or seventh grade, it was in the mid 1960s," said Powell. "My FFA (Future Farmers of America) teacher told us they were going to build a lake and property values were going to go up to the thousands of dollars. We thought he was crazy, but he was right on the money. It wasn't long before they announced that Lake Keowee was going to be built."

Duke Energy's decision to build the Oconee Nuclear Station just outside of Seneca led to the construction of dams that formed Lake Keowee and Lake Jocassee.

And it affected Powell's life personally. By 1973, Powell was the first local person selling lake property for Keowee Key. He has remained in real estate ever since.

"Lake Keowee turned the light on for Oconee County," said Powell. "People were attracted to the area and started coming to it. Lake Keowee is a jewel we need to protect."

Dams at Keowee and Jocassee were constructed about a decade after the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers built Lake Hartwell closer to the South Carolina-Georgia border.

Before the lakes were built, Powell said property in the area in what would become Lake Keowee sold for \$200 to \$300 an acre. Today, lots that are three-fourths of an acres on Lake Keowee can cost as much as \$500,000.

Powell said the development of Lake Keowee has been good for the county and even helped the county during the time when textile mills in the Upstate were closing.

"I think it's been great," he said. "It has allowed us to have a lot of the infrastructure in terms of recreation that we have here in Oconee. I think Duke Power has done a good job of the development at the lake. I am not sure we, as a county, have done as good a job."

While Powell said he is a supporter of "controlled development" at Lake Keowee, he said he does not feel the same way about Lake Jocassee.

"I don't want to see them develop Jocassee," he said. "There's nothing like it. I think there's 20-30 waterfalls and wonderful trout fishing. It's a beautiful place."

Vincent Waldrop of Westminster came to Oconee County in 1968 as part of the first crew of mechanics hired by Duke to help build the Oconee Nuclear Station. Part of his work in those early years involved helping to build the dams at Jocassee and Keowee.

"It was pretty poor," Waldrop said of Oconee County when he first arrived. "I'd say Oconee County was probably one of the poorest counties in the state until Duke Power came here. If it wasn't for Duke Power it would still probably be one of the poorest counties in the state. There were about five or six businesses on the Bypass (Highway 123) in Seneca when I came here.

"Property wasn't worth anything much," Waldrop added. "It was cheap everywhere not only here. Prices and houses went up everywhere after Duke came in. By Duke coming here, it brought so many people here. The lake property, that's all changed. It wasn't worth anything before. It wasn't even lake property."

A native of rural western North Carolina, Waldrop said he was familiar with the rural south when he first moved to Oconee County, although it was much different than New York, where he had worked for the previous five years.

"It was just country," he said. "The people were working on farms and in the textile mills. Of course, the textile mills all

closed. I had grown up in North Carolina, so I had grown up in an area like this."

While many improvements have come to Oconee County over the years through the lakes, recreation and growth, Waldrop said the biggest contribution was to the county's economy.

"It's given so many people a good job, a good living," said Waldrop. "The nuclear plant is what brought the other industries in, connected to it. That's like Lowe's and Home Depot here. What business would they have had here if Duke had not built the nuclear plant? It really helped the economy in this county."

When he moved here more than 40 years ago, Waldrop said he came looking for a good-paying job and never expected to work at the plant 25 years and spend his retirement years here.

"I had always been in construction and was never used to staying in one place very long," said Waldrop.

When asked why he didn't move on to other work but stayed at the plant until his retirement in 1992, he replied, "The job didn't run out. It was the best-paying job around."



Workers burn brush to clear off the land to create Lake Keowee in 1967

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A 1968 view from Jumping Off Rock, before Lake Jocassee and Jocassee Hydroelectric Station were built. The Jocassee Hydroelectric Station was part of Duke Energy's plan to build a large power generating complex. The plan, called the Keowee-Toxaway Project, was announced to the public the second day of the new year in 1965.

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NOW

This is the view from Jumping Off Rock after Lake Jocassee and Jocassee Hydrostation were built, December 1973. Lake Jocassee is one of the cleanest lakes in the state, with 75 miles of shoreline.

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