



*Robert D. Young and  
the earth-filled dam built  
under his supervision.  
Photographs courtesy of  
the author.*

## Robert D. Young and the Otter Creek Reservoir

BY REVO M. YOUNG

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**T**HE SEVIER RIVER BECAME FAMOUS for the use of its water by means of dams, reservoirs, and canals. One of the most important is the Otter Creek Reservoir. It lies at the confluence of the Otter Creek with the east fork of the Sevier River at an elevation of 6,400 feet.

Mrs. Young is a resident of Richfield, Utah, and a daughter-in-law of the late Robert D. Young.

about two miles north of Antimony, Piute County, Utah. The reservoir has a capacity of 52,550 acre-feet of water, used mainly for irrigation in Sevier and Millard counties. The water is contained in the reservoir by an earthen dam built at the turn of the century and still serving its purpose.

Robert Dixon Young, known locally as the father of the Otter Creek Reservoir, was a prominent citizen of Richfield, Utah. Born in Kirkintilloch, Scotland, on July 24, 1867, he came to Utah with his parents in 1871, grew up in Richfield where he was active in pioneering the region, filled many civic positions, and was a key figure in farming, construction, and religion. Always involved in irrigation matters, he first superintended the construction of the Sevier Valley Canal. Then he was president and superintendent of the Otter Creek Reservoir Company during the time of the construction of the reservoir. He completed the Piute Reservoir started by another company. His company was the forerunner of the present Young Construction Company. These activities brought him recognition. He served as vice-president of the International Irrigation Congress that met in St. Louis in 1919. In 1922 he accompanied U. S. government officials on a survey trip down the Colorado River to locate dam sites, one of which was later utilized to build Hoover Dam. Young served as president of the Sevier Stake of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for twenty-three years, 1910-33. He left Richfield to become president of the Manti LDS Temple, 1933-42, and then president of the Salt Lake Temple, 1949-54. A vigorous man, he was still working at age ninety-four as a receptionist at the LDS church office building. He died in Salt Lake City on June 12, 1962.

Young left his family accounts of his activity in building the Otter Creek Reservoir. In these he described the dry years in the 1880s before the reservoir was built:

All through the eighties most of the seasons were extremely dry, particularly in the latter parts of the seasons. Sometimes . . . the river would get down to about 20 second feet of water. This was hardly enough to supply one-fourth of what was needed for one of the canals in Sevier Valley. There were feuds and battles over the inadequate supply of water from the river. Towns were against each other. Sometimes the quarrels were quite serious.

. . . Finally, Joseph F. Smith, President of the Church . . . , took it up and sent down . . . John Henry Smith and Anthon H. Lund. At conference in Monroe they advised the people, rather than quarreling,

to reservoir. They said the Church was not able, at that time, to give monetary aid, but would give moral support.<sup>1</sup>

The people of Sevier Valley, struggling to make a living under drought conditions, had to be converted, as they had no knowledge of water storage. They were reluctant to commit money and labor to something in which they had no faith. After several years of effort and numerous meetings in the various towns, the Sevier Stake presidency (William H. Seegmiller, Joseph Horne, and William H. Clark) was able to get nine canal companies to organize for a reservoir project. Robert D. Young was selected as president of the Otter Creek Reservoir Company with William Baker, secretary; William Ogden, treasurer; Jorgen Jorgensen, Peter Christensen, A. W. Bohman, Simon Christensen, James A. Ross, Beason Lewis, Carlow Hutchings, and James H. Wells, directors. Some of these men were presidents of local canal companies, and others were interested individuals.

Almost as soon as the new company was organized the officers "discovered that the laws of Utah prohibited companies taking stock in companies. Consequently," Young reported, "we had to wait and meet with the Legislature to get the law changed, which we did. Barney H. Greenwood was our Representative who sponsored the bill" during the 1897 legislative session.

Prior to August 1897 much preliminary work had been done by committees and individuals. The site for the reservoir had been selected and surveyed, water filed on, subscriptions taken to pay lawyers, surveyors, etc. Robert D. Young and L. P. Hansen made legal claim in April 1896 to the reservoir site, Young wrote, "just three days ahead of a Texas company" that had "made application to take all the surplus Sevier River water down to Millard County." A site was also found for the Piute Reservoir.

Although the company obtained options on the ranches along Otter Creek that would be inundated by the reservoir, it had no money to purchase the land. "The rest of the land, with the exception of the 160 acres, belonged to the government and came to us as a gift because we were reservoiring," Young wrote. "We were pioneers in reservoiring for irrigation purposes, among the very first in the United States."

<sup>1</sup> All of the quotes attributed to Robert D. Young and Mary Young are edited versions of "From Sagebrush to Roses" by Robert D. Young in *Voices from the Past: Diaries, Journals, and Autobiographies*, comp. Campus Education Week (Provo, Ut: Brigham Young University Press, 1980).

The company applied for a loan of \$18,000 to pay for the ranch land, but no bank in Utah would venture to lend the money, Young said, "although we were ready to mortgage practically everything worthwhile in Sevier County, including the holdings of nine irrigation companies, which meant their land and all."

When it came time to vote on whether to proceed with building the Otter Creek Reservoir strong feelings were expressed. Some felt that an out-of-state company might be in a better position to finance and build the structure. Others like Young remembered that "the Brethren had warned us to build it ourselves and not put ourselves in bondage as had the Children of Israel, and have to pay high prices for our water." Some saw the banks' refusal to loan money as the sign of "an unsure deal." Other interested parties thought the project was too costly to be paid for without outside help.

When "the meeting was called to order and its purpose stated," Young recalled, "six of the directors put on their hats and walked out." An attorney present suggested that their action ended the project, but Young persisted, saying, "I have the inspiration that we can go ahead. How many directors were here in response to the notice?" he inquired. When told that eight had been present, Young "called for the motion. James Andrew Ross moved that we build a reservoir and that we proceed immediately." Ross, Jorgen Jorgensen, and James H. Wells voted in favor of the motion by standing up. When Young called for those opposed to stand, no one did. He thereupon called the vote for construction of the reservoir unanimous.

A superintendent was needed to oversee the construction project. The supportive members of the board were too old to take the responsibility. The younger directors felt they were too busy and could not afford to do the work. Rather than let the project fail, Young said, "In Sevier Valley we ought to bring under cultivation the beautiful virgin land that is now lying in sagebrush, greasewood and shadscale. . . . If my wife is willing, I will volunteer to go and superintend the work for one year without pay to show the people that reservoiring is our only chance for success." Young was at the time about thirty years of age and with no previous experience except what he had gained in canal construction.

Mary Young agreed to leave her new brick home in Richfield and move into the log cabins on the barren, windswept hill at Otter Creek. The cabins had been moved from the ranches on the reservoir site, one for a cookhouse and one for a bunkhouse. Mary had



*Mary S. P. Young and others at Otter Creek Reservoir cook/bunkhouse. Some workers on the reservoir slept in the bunkhouse and took their meals with the Youngs, but others lived camp style on their own.*

two small children and was expecting another in February. She said, "We have flour and meat for ourselves. If the men will furnish their own food, I will cook it and wash their dishes if it will encourage them."

With Young installed as superintendent, the project moved through the final pre-construction stage. Willard Young, a retired engineer, and R. C. Gemmel, the state engineer, came from Salt Lake City to view the site and give the company "some ideas and some sort of a plan." Young recalled their extraordinary visit:

I took them up to the reservoir site in my white-top buggy. I had only \$2.50 in cash, but hotels in those days were very reasonable with good beds and meals. The first night we stopped in Kingston. The \$2.50 covered the bill for the engineers . . . I told them my condition, which they naturally thought was my health, would not permit me to sleep or eat inside. It was a fabrication, of course, . . . the money was the question. I slept in the straw stack. My good wife had put up a lunch for me. We had plenty of food to eat.

We went to the reservoir site on Otter Creek the next morning. . . . They said the dam would be a treacherous and difficult project and we couldn't start without from twenty-five to a hundred thousand dollars

worth of machinery. . . . They laughed when I told them we had spent the last \$2.50 we had for their bed, and that we planned to build without money, as a cooperative project with good honest, earnest work on the part of the people. All we asked of them was, when it was completed, to tell whether or not it was worthy of backing water against the dam.

Ground was broken for the Otter Creek Reservoir on October 19, 1897. The construction crew consisted of three boys and one man to begin the job. Wages were 18 cents an hour for single hands and 32 cents an hour for a man and team. Usually, credit was given to canal water shareholders for their assessments. In other cases, shares in the Otter Creek Reservoir Company were given, to be paid in water. Busy farmers usually sent their sons or hired men to work their allotments. Thus the reservoir was said to have been built by boys.

Some of the workers slept in the bunkhouse and ate their meals with the Youngs. The majority, however, brought tents, bedrolls, and grub boxes and lived camp style for from two weeks to several months at a time.

Frank M. Ogden remembered going to work on the dam the summer he was twenty along with his brother Charles who was eighteen. Some of the boys working there were "so small they had to stand on the wagon tongues to bridle their horses," he said.<sup>2</sup> The Ogden boys made their home with the Youngs as did Chris Christensen, Jim Peterson, and others. Frank Ogden recalled that "Whenever any of us came from Richfield we would bring a load of vegetables from the gardens and some meat." He also remembered another custom:

Night and morning we had family prayer — the [Young] family and the boy workers, of whom there weren't so many at first, just about half dozen. Later, the engineer, a Gentile government man was staying at Youngs. He was the only one who wouldn't join in prayer. He just sat on the plank that ran the length of the table, while the others knelt. R. D. told him it was our custom to pray, and if he was afraid he wouldn't get his share of the food, Mrs. Young would dish up his and save it for him. Years later this same man called R. D. and identified himself as "the man you taught to pray."

There was a swamp about 150 feet across the dam site from ledge to ledge. It had to be excavated in order to get down to bedrock

<sup>2</sup>This quote and subsequent quotes attributed to Frank and Charles Ogden and Joseph H. Christensen are from a compilation made by Revo M. Young in 1964 entitled "Men and Boys Who Worked on the Otter Creek Reservoir," MS in author's possession.

where the dam was to be built. The tangle of roots on the surface was difficult to cut. It would not support horses, so most of the labor came from manpower. First, two coffer dams were made, using horse-drawn scrapers and fresnos, to hold back the water from the bog.

To cut through the tough entangled bog a plowshare was attached to a chain that was strung across the swamp and anchored on each side. A team of horses on one bank drew the plow one way and a team on the opposite bank drew it the other. Young described the removal process:

As we got into the excavation of the bog, it became very difficult. It was a terrible place to work, without machinery, a steam shovel, etc. We could not get in; in fact we needed a drag line with machinery so we could be on dry ground to drag it out for it was slow and dirty work. Much of the bog was taken out by teams standing on the bank, hitched to man-directed-scrapers by means of a long chain.

The Ogden brothers remembered working in the bog, Charles with a scraper and Frank in "mud up to our armpits. We pushed the scrapers as the teams pulled on the drag lines." The lack of power machinery and the constant seepage of water into the bog made this excavation one of the most difficult parts of the dam construction.

To add to Young's frustration, "Just when we were having our worst time, the six discouraged directors called a meeting [in Richfield] and decided to shut us down. . . . People were jeering . . . we had no money. They said I had run them and the county into a lot of debt." Two board members were sent to the construction site to tell Young to close down. Young's arguments against stopping the project failed to convince the two directors. Nevertheless, the following morning Young called the men out to work and told the visitors:

The people are fighting for water and there's no water to get. We're going to go ahead and we're going to complete this reservoir! There's a lot of discouragement right now among the men working in this mud, and you're not helping it out any. I'm president and general manager of this reservoir; when a meeting is called for the purpose of shutting down, I'll call it. Now you two men get in your white-top buggy and get down the canyon! I haven't very kind regards to send to the directors. You go home and stay there until I call a meeting legally and lawfully.

A major unresolved financial problem also plagued the superintendent. The option on the ranches was about to run out. Just three days before it did the company was able to persuade a



*Otter Creek ca. 1912  
with gatehouse on  
top.*



*No. 1 diversion point  
showing creek and  
bulkhead, August  
1915.*

bank in Mount Pleasant to sponsor the company for a loan with a New York bank for \$18,000. With this matter settled in February 1898 other institutions soon began lending funds. By trading, the company was able to get the use of an engine and boiler to assist in removing the bog.

Despite loans and equipment purchases, the building methods remained fairly primitive. For \$300 the company bought 50,000 feet of red pine planks to make a core for the dam. Lacking a piledriver, Young directed the men to build one from red pine poles and scrap iron gathered from the surrounding towns. A hammer made of red pine was lifted by horse-powered pulleys. It worked well enough to drive in the lumber, one layer overlapping another.

As the work proceeded, the rear coffer dam was continually being raised higher and higher to store water behind it. The stored water, Young said, "was our bank to pay our debts when they came due in six to eight months."

Ralph Fairbanks of Annabella drove a spillway tunnel 274 feet long through the solid rock cliff at the north end of the dam at a cost of \$1,813. It was lined with cement. The two gates to control the flow cost \$875. A spillway was also provided to control high water.

With the dam foundation in and the tunnel complete and working, Young asked the board of directors to visit the site. "We are burning up in the valley," they said. Several miles of water were backed up behind the coffer dam. Young thought he could provide 150 second-feet of water daily. The directors "were jubilant when they saw the water coming through the tunnel! They all felt so good that they voted me \$2.50 a day from then on. They got busy and paid the lumber bill of \$300.00. They asked me to stay on the job."

The farmers in the valley were also jubilant, for their crops were saved. They also saw the value of completing the work, for "about a hundred teams came up and we soon finished the job," Young recounted.

The lumber piling core of the dam was lined front and back with clay and earth. Then thousands of loads of rock from the surrounding hills were dumped against the core, making the dam eighty feet thick at the base. The rocks, from a few hundred pounds in weight to several tons, were loaded and dumped by manpower using ingenious methods. Joseph H. Christensen remembered that the men would load the rocks onto their wagons by leaning poles against the wagons and then working the rocks into them. "Some of

the rocks were so large that one rock would be a full wagon load," he said. Last of all, the dam was riprapped with rock.

By 1901 the major part of the dam was finished, and Young took a leave of absence until 1904 to fill an LDS church mission to Australia. While he was away E. C. Peterson was superintendent with L. P. Hansen as his assistant.

Work around the dam went on for several years as additions and improvements such as diversion canals, spillways, and channels were made.

Young concluded his account of the dam by noting that "After the dam was finished the state authorities were probably a little bit dubious of it and they called in Mr. Quinton, one of the leading engineers in the United States. . . . to come out and pass on it. . . . he declared it one of the best and most secure earth reservoir dams in the country."

Repairs and upgrading of the reservoir facilities in recent years have cost between four and five hundred thousand dollars. A new control tower with hydraulically controlled gates has been built. Damage caused by floods in 1983 forced repairs along the feeder canal to the reservoir and made it necessary to construct a new diversion at the head of the canal. These improvements greatly enhanced the company's ability to control the flow into the reservoir.

Otter Creek Reservoir continues to be an important factor in southern Utah life. Along with providing the needed water storage for irrigation downstream, it has become a popular recreational site. In 1965 Otter Creek State Park was opened on the southwest end of the reservoir with camping and picnicking units and fishing and boating facilities. The Bureau of Land Management has constructed camping facilities on the west side of the reservoir. Nevertheless, increasing recreational use of the reservoir will not supersede its basic importance of providing water for irrigation for southern Utah farmers.