



Railroad Tracks Beneath Lake Murray

by Tyler Ryan

When you drive over the dam from Irmo to Lexington or stroll across in the walkway, stopping to affix a lock on the fence, it is hard to imagine anything but water, boats, and memories of summers out on the lake with family and friends.

The fact is, however, as recently as the mid-1920s, a slow rural lifestyle that some 5,000 people called home lined the area that would become Lake Murray. According to historian Randall Shealy, a few churches and an occasional general store were all that were placed within the wooded area that made up the communities.

In the late 1920s, William Murray was hired by the Lexington Water Power Company, now known as SGE&G, to engineer the world's biggest earthen dam (at the time), which would provide hydropower to meet the quickly growing industrial needs of factories in Columbia and the surrounding area.

Once the idea was approved, plans for the hydro-plant were

developed and a location for the dam selected, it came down to space ... space for all the water that would expand over the Saluda River and create a reservoir. That space came in a stretch of the Saluda River between Irmo and Lexington.

By the summer of 1927, the planned 50,000 acres of land had all but been secured, having been purchased from landowners. Many chose to take what they could from their homes, with the hope of re-purposing lumber, bricks, and other items on a new homestead, but many things were left behind, including some loved ones. Shealy says that, out of the 192 cemeteries and over 2,000 people buried in them, many families elected to have their departed remain.

Once the land deals were made, the clearing and creating of the dam itself began. The back-breaking task of clearing the 5,700-foot area stretching between Irmo and Lexington was ini-



Photo courtesy of University of South Carolina

tially done largely by hand by 2,000 men who were paid 50 cents a day.

Part of the task of the laborers was to install an intricate set of tracks, which in various machines, carts, and other apparatus could utilize to lay in the layer after layer of dirt, packed carefully, 200 feet high, to flood the area. According to Shealy, as the dirt continued to be piled, another set of tracks would be built, allowing the equipment to rise with the crest of the forming dam.

As with many personal belongings owned by the former landowners, as the dam started to take place, the very infrastructure used to create it was discarded and, as the water rose, slipped away into the distant memory, becoming simply a line-item on an expense report as a cost of business.

“There is a lot under there,” says local diving legend and owner of Wateree Dive Center, Andy Ogburn, of the lake. Although he points out that visibility isn’t great in what is known to divers as “Lake Murky,” history lies, in some cases, just a few feet down.

Fast forward nearly 90 years, and the reservoir created to support the growth of business now has become a business itself, with its own community made up of boaters, swimmers, and scuba divers. “There is a lot under there,” says local diving legend and owner of Wateree Dive Center Andy Ogburn of the lake. Although he points out that visibility isn’t great in what is known to divers as “Lake Murky,” history lies in some cases just a few feet down.

As an example, Ogburn says that locating the evidence of the building of the dam is an ideal way to touch history, as many of the tracks used nearly a century ago can still be found just off the Irmo side.



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Finding most anything under water can be something of a needle in a haystack, even with a good general starting point and great visibility. Often times, markers can be found, left by previous divers, to either assist others, or ensure they can relocate their find when they decide to make a return trip. For divers who are looking for the tracks on a Lake Murray adventure, it often starts with locating a few flags or other breadcrumbs, which have been left by previous divers, about 20 feet down, giving the indication you are on the right “track.”

After following a few flags and dropping a few more feet down, out of the murk, you see what appears to be a railroad tie, then the two iron bars that make the tracks. It is an eerie but cool feeling, and although they have years of algae, silt, and sand, if you close your eyes, you can imagine how they played a part in the creation of the very lake you are 25 feet under.

If you have ever played with a model railroad train set, you know the importance of a roundhouse to allow trains to switch to multiple tracks. The engineers of the lake and creators of rail system were no different. To the right of the tracks, you



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may find a small line that seems to lead off into the darkness.

As you keep your left hand on the guide line and trace it down, it follows the topography of the bottom of the lake. When you get to a depth of 40 or so feet, and have had several temperature changes due to crossing thermal lines, sunlight is scarce; although it seems dark on the left side of the line, as you follow the floor of the lake, if you peer to your right, there is an edge that drops off into the pitch dark, leaving the imagination to wonder what is down in the abyss.

Focusing on swimming forward, rather than spending too much time envisioning what lies below and to the right, you come to a pile of rocks; although “seen” more through feel than sight because of the rather dark conditions, you have found the trestle. The trestle that was once on dry land, and as the lake filled up, slowly slipped below the surface and became long forgotten about by the same men who had used it every day to build the dam.

After exploring around a while, you can locate the guide line and start the journey back toward the dam, with the past behind you, the abyss to your left, and a sole wire bringing you back ... perhaps a metaphor




Photo courtesy of University of South Carolina

for life ... one that leads you from a trip into history back into present day, all a few feet under the Lake Murray surface.

There are many other adventures in Lake Murray that await divers who want to try their hand at underwater exploration, right in our own backyard ... or off the

shore of the lake, as it were. ■

Tyler Ryan is a weather anchor and morning host for ABC Columbia as well as avid scuba diver and member of the Newberry County Water Search and Rescue Team.



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