



## Smith Mountain Lake celebrates golden anniversary



Where fields of tobacco and rows of tomatoes once grew, the waters of a grand lake now flow.

What was farmland in Bedford, Franklin and Pittsylvania counties in the western edge of Southside Electric Cooperative's (SEC) service territory is now Smith Mountain Lake. SEC serves members on the lake's northern shores in Bedford County, and also provides electricity to the facilities at Smith Mountain Lake State Park.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the lake, which spans more than 20,000 acres and has 500 miles of shoreline. The lake reached full pond at 5:03 a.m. on March 7, 1966. The golden anniversary is being marked by a year of celebrations.

Smith Mountain Lake is a highly developed area with numerous residential developments, water-related and other businesses, and recreational opportunities, including swimming, boating, fishing, hiking and golf. There's a 4-H center and, within a short drive, several historical sites.

It is part of a two-dam, two-lake project by Appalachian Power Co. to produce electricity. Along with the smaller Leesville Lake, which is much less developed, the project has the capacity to produce 600

megawatts of power. Construction on the two dams started in 1960 and took three years. Total cost of the massive project was \$66 million.

Vicki Gardner, executive director of the Smith Mountain Lake Regional Chamber of Commerce, says the lake brought the largely rural area to life and focused the eyes of the world on the region.

“It’s just transformed the area from a quiet farming area, sparsely populated area, to a vibrant vacation and recreation area,” adds Larry Jackson, manager of external affairs for Appalachian Power in Lynchburg. He notes that some 12,000 people live at the lake at any given time.



**Vicki Gardner, left, and Barb Nocera, who work for the Smith Mountain Lake Regional Chamber of Commerce, say lake residents enjoy giving back to the community.**

## HISTORY

Talk about a dam in the gap at Smith Mountain, named for early inhabitants Daniel and Gideon Smith, started in the early 1900s. Appalachian Power acquired the land and began work on the project in 1954.

Charles Poindexter, who represents the 9th District in the Virginia House of Delegates, says talk about building a dam got “hot and heated” in the latter part of the 1950s. He says it was a “scary time” for many people living near the Roanoke and Blackwater rivers, who feared losing their rich farmland, homes and way of life.



**Del. Charles Poindexter says several reasons led to development at Smith Mountain Lake.**

“It was a sad, sad time to have to go and sign a deed to move out of your house and see your ancestors’ graves being moved,” says Poindexter, whose House district covers part of Franklin County. More than 1,300 graves were relocated as part of the project.

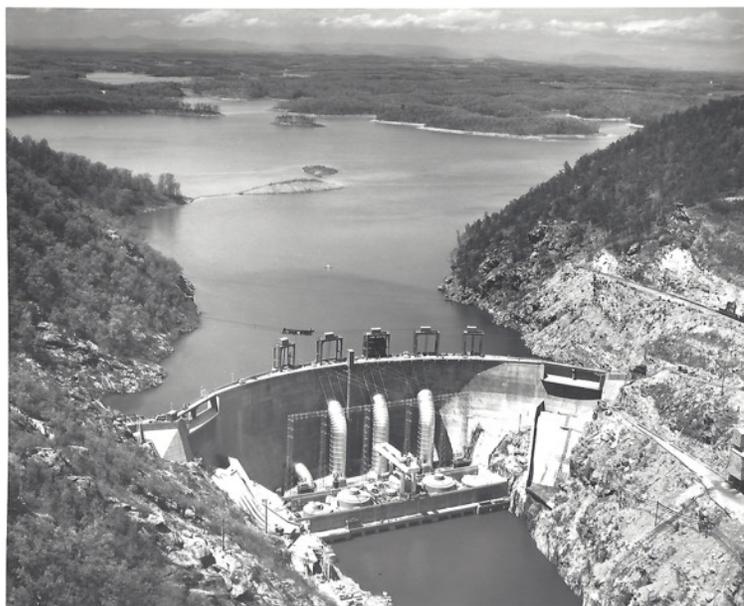
While Jackson says some people didn’t want the dam and lake, he said others were eager for the development. He notes some built docks before the area was flooded, knowing how high the water would rise.

Where the two lakes are now was farmland before the development.

“Everybody was a farmer,” says Glenn Ayers, who taught at nearby Staunton River High School for more than 30 years. He says tobacco was the big cash crop, while tomatoes were a growing industry during the 1940s. A blight in the latter part of the decade ended large-scale growing. Other farmers raised beef cattle and operated small dairies. There were canneries for processing vegetables and meat.

Calvin Woodford, after getting a degree in poultry husbandry from Virginia Tech, worked in his dad’s chicken business in Moneta producing 90,000 broilers a year before moving to an egg operation. He had 28,000 laying hens. In 1973, he opened Moneta Farm Service, now known as Moneta Farm & Home Center. He credits the lake as a main reason for his store’s growth.

Poindexter, known in Richmond as “Mr. Smith Mountain Lake,” recalls raising 1,000 chickens every year as a boy growing up in the area. He remembers fishing in the Blackwater and nearby creeks for catfish, bream and eels, hunting squirrels and watching out for rattlesnakes.



Aerial photo from April 1965 shows Smith Mountain dam and lake.

Construction on both dams started in 1960. The Smith Mountain dam stands 235 feet tall and stretches 816 feet, while the one at Leesville is 90 feet high and 980 feet long.

Freda Smith’s late dad, Samuel Smith, worked for Appalachian Power in Roanoke and was interested in the dam construction, although he wasn’t involved in the actual work. She recalls her family driving to the area on Saturdays, always taking a picnic and walking on the dam before the lake filled up.

She has a color photograph from 1963 of her mother Violet, sister Rebecca and her sitting under Hales Ford Bridge. There was no water under the bridge.

She recalls the first year after Smith Mountain Lake filled, trees were still sticking up out of the water. She remembers having to dodge them while waterskiing.

Curry Martin, who represents part of Smith Mountain Lake on the Bedford County Board of Supervisors, recalls going to the lake and watching progress of the rising water. His dad would put a stick in the water one Sunday and check it the following Sunday to see how much the water had risen in a week. He says sometimes the stick would be gone.

While Smith Mountain didn't reach full pond until early in 1966, the 3,410-acre Leesville Lake, which is in Bedford, Campbell and Pittsylvania counties, reached full pond in 1965, says Sherwood Zimmerman, president of the Leesville Lake Association. The group celebrated that golden anniversary last year.

Zimmerman says a good part of Leesville's 100 miles of shoreline is undeveloped. There is little commercial development around the lake; Zimmerman estimates there are 300-325 homes.

## GROWTH

Holding up a double-page photo in a magazine showing the developed Smith Mountain Lake, Poindexter says, "I don't think any of us had the foresight, including myself, to imagine this picture."

Gardner says the lake's growth didn't come overnight.

"It's been 50 years of steady growth," she says. She credits businessman Ron Willard Sr., founder of The Willard Companies, for seeing potential and beginning to develop the area in a first-class way. She says he went out and marketed the area and told the outside world about the lake and its 500 miles of shoreline.

Gardner says people started coming to the lake to live, saw various needs and set up businesses. It was "very grassroots" growth.

Poindexter recalls two or three people selling boats, some mobile homes and a few houses in the early years. He says things took off in the 1980s.

He says because a majority of land was privately owned, that allowed for development at Smith Mountain Lake. He adds the low cost of living compared to other areas, fairly inexpensive land, low



Smith Mountain Lake has 500 miles of shoreline.

taxes, natural beauty of the area, good climate and decent roads helped.

Barb Nocera, who's heading up anniversary events for the lake chamber, says the internet also helped. She says it meant people could move to the lake and still do their jobs, but online instead of in an office.

Martin and Nocera agree that the water is a big attraction. For Nocera, the lake drew her to the area, but as she's been there four



years, it's the people, the sense of community, that makes Smith Mountain Lake special for her.

"There are so many opportunities, so many chances for volunteer activities," she says.

Adds Gardner, "People are very serious about helping, giving back." That includes the anniversary events.

She says 90 events on the calendar are directly or indirectly related to the 50th anniversary. She says people have been pitching in to do lots of different things.

The growth has been so dramatic that it's difficult to find anything missing from the lake community. A ride along Route 122 shows grocery stores, a variety of retailers, financial services, places to live and have dinner, opportunities for recreation and medical providers.

Gardner, who came to the area 30 years ago, says health care was one thing people left the lake for in the early years. Now, she says, residents and visitors alike can find every kind of medical service they need.

"There is no reason you would want to go any other place," Gardner says.

"This was positive progress," Poindexter says about the lake. A former member of the Franklin County Board of Supervisors, he says the lake allowed the county to have funding for education, invest in industrial parks, enhance public safety and services, and build infrastructure. He says it has brought and continues to bring tourists, who stop for gas, dinner and a night's stay.

Pittsylvania County Administrator Clarence Monday says the lake adds to the quality of life for people in the area with its beauty and recreational opportunities. Plus as an attractive destination, it gives economic developers a resource to use to recruit business and industry to the area.

Looking ahead, Gardner hopes to see a small convention center at the lake, to include a place for a library, offices for groups like the chamber, auditorium, visitor center and a location for the community to gather. A feasibility study is underway for the Smith Mountain Lake Center. Meanwhile, for the rest of 2016, the celebrations will continue for Smith Mountain Lake's golden anniversary. For more information, call 540-721-1203 or visit [www.visitsmithmountainlake.com](http://www.visitsmithmountainlake.com).

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