



Lake Lagunitas, "A Clear and Polished Gem"

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Ah...a lovely afternoon fishing on the lake. This photograph, though undated, was taken at Lake Lagunitas some time between 1915 and 1925. On close inspection, the solitary fisherman stands leisurely along the shoreline and seems to be gazing at the couple in the boat. A young man is rowing towards the shore, his oar just striking the water, while his companion, her knees folded under her, is fishing off the stern of the boat. The image was captured by Edward K. Spotton, a longtime resident of Ross.

Lake Lagunitas was the first reservoir on Mt. Tamalpais. The earthen dam that created the lake was the brain-child of early San Rafael entrepreneur, William T. Coleman. Coleman had purchased 1000 acres in the Irwin Ranch area, which he renamed Magnolia Park (today's Dominican neighborhood), and needed a steady supply of water to supply his planned development. In 1872, he hired engineer Herman Shussler to design a dam, reservoir and gravity-fed transmission system that was built by Chinese laborers over the next year. The dam was 480 feet in length, over 40 ft high and covered nearly twenty acres of land. The reservoir got its name, Lagunitas, ("little lakes" in Spanish) from the many small ponds that existed in the area before the dam was built. A newspaper article described the lake as, "... a clear and polished gem, set in a fringe of rugged, natural beauty." Coleman and his business partners formed the Marin County Water Company and soon had water flowing into San Rafael and to San Quentin Prison through a separate line. Coleman relinquished control of the system in 1877, selling the company to a British firm who expanded their customer base to the towns of Larkspur, Corte Madera, Tiburion and Belvedere.

By 1910, the company was feeling the wrath of their customers as periodic droughts and an overtaxed distribution system had caused numerous water shortages and rate hikes. In 1911, the California State Legislature passed the *Water Districts Act* which allowed voters to establish publicly-owned municipal water districts. In April of 1912, Marin residents

voted to form the Marin Municipal Water District (MMWD) which would bring the county's water distribution system under public control and provide thousands of acres of land for recreational use. By 1916, MMWD had bought out the assets of both the Marin County Water Company and the separate Marin Water and Power Company that served Mill Valley and Belvedere. Over the next few decades, the district built the Alpine, Bon Tempe, Nicasio, Kent and Soulajule reservoirs. Today, MMWD provides more than 80% of Marin's water needs.

But let's get back to fishing, which is allowed at all seven of the district reservoirs. The smallest, and oldest, Lake Lagunitas, can be reached by car, bicycle and hiking. Once there, visitors can walk a lovely, relatively-flat 1.6 mile hiking trail around the lake or cast a line into the pristine waters of this Mt. Tamalpais "gem."

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