

Old American Falls

For most of the year, the waters of American Falls reservoir, along Idaho's Snake River, conceal an ambitious chapter in the state's history. But on occasion, the waters recede and the rising shoreline reveals the remarkable story of a fallen community... Idaho's own Pompeii.

Valerie Hoyberg has spent years collecting bits and pieces of the American Falls story. "This area was suffering from a drought in the early 1900's," she says. "And to overcome that, they decided they better build a reservoir; and this was a natural reservoir."

But that meant they had to move an entire town! It was the first time anything of this magnitude had ever been attempted.

As construction of the dam neared completion, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation spearheaded the effort to move more than 300 structures from the old townsite... to higher ground. Steam powered tractors did much of the heavy hauling. Some smaller buildings were hitched up to teams of horses. It was the largest government relocation project of its time!

Hoyberg recalls a story she heard about the move. "The Lutheran Church was in the process of being moved, and the faithful were not going to stop just because their church was up on a wagon. So they went to church in the wagon. Some said they kind of sang quiet that day, because they were worried about too much noise."

During the fall of 2004, the waters of the reservoir receded to near-historic lows. The old town of American Falls was visible, its sidewalks ending in broken down memories; the dog prints on cement recollect a lazy Sunday afternoon; the crumbled foundations hold the stories of young school children, now grown and gone.

But soon the waters will rise again. And the old town will be forgotten for another season.



Culvert under the Oregon Short Line Railroad, Old American Falls townsite, (October, 1987).

Construction of the American Falls Dam

by Cook Photography, Bannock County Historical Society Collection.

The first three photos were taken looking east from nearly the same spot, on the northwest side of the Snake River, during construction of the new American Falls Dam and relocation of the original town.

Photo taken probably in March or April, 1925, during the first stages of construction of the American Falls Dam. The Snake River is impounded by a temporary dam, with its spillway in the right center. The new dam will be constructed on the rectangular impoundment (cofferdam) directly in front of the camera. The concrete-mixing batching plant will be located immediately southeast of the impoundment. The old town of American Falls, the old Oregon Short Line mainline and depot, and the grain elevator are still functioning. But, also note houses and buildings south of the railroad on high ground that was the original American Falls townsite. The area that was to be flooded ("Old American Falls") was called the "Riverside and Union Additions" in a 1924 town plat. In the center distance is the new school building; the new Power County courthouse has not yet been constructed. High spring runoff has raised the level of the river and flooded the trees in the foreground. The railroad bridge in the far right is the early one, not yet raised or enlarged, but the new mainline with new light-colored fill can be seen to the east of the bridge.

Building the American Falls Dam, probably early spring, 1926. In the left distance are new grain elevators and buildings, some moved from their previous location in the old town. Note the railroad yard and concrete batching plant in the center middle distance. The railroad is still using its original depot; the new one is not yet ready for use. The railroad bridge has not yet been elevated, but light-colored fill has been installed on the new mainline east of the river. Just on the west side of the river in the left foreground are construction vehicles (railroad cars towed by dinkey (small steam) engines). The rail line in the foreground was constructed for purposes of building the dam only.

View after completion of the American Falls Dam, probably spring of 1928. Spring runoff has filled the reservoir and flooded the former townsite; the grain elevator stands above the water and the drowned trees have sent out leaves for the last time. It is interesting that these trees were not cut down before the area was flooded. The new school is in the middle distance, with the courthouse in the right distance. Note that mature trees are present, in the original townsite. The railroad fill has been completed and the mainline bridge elevated. The bridge was enlarged and raised again in the 1970s. The railroad yard and batching plant that had been directly across the river are gone. The bare area in the middle distance, across the tracks and beyond the curve of the railroad mainline is now the American Falls golf course. The road over the dam is not yet finished.

Railroad bridge at American Falls, finished in 1927. Picture was probably taken in early 1926; looking northeast. In the middle distance under the bridge is the batching plant where concrete was mixed for the American Falls Dam, which is nearing completion. The growing reservoir is in the left distance. The mill race for the new power plant is off the picture to the right. The stone building in the right foreground is the first power plant, built at American Falls in 1902. The train on the new bridge is composed of Southern Pacific and Union Pacific

refrigerator cars. These cars, operated by PFE (Pacific Fruit Express), were cooled by blocks of ice put in bunkers at the ends of the cars. A large icing plant was at the northwest end of the Pocatello railroad complex.

