

A Hundred Years of Hydro

Holter Dam



Work began on the dam in 1909 but was not finished until 1918.



The construction camp at Holter included 115 buildings or structures.

While Holter Dam was completed in 1918, planning and work on the structure began many years earlier. Early backers of the dam included Samuel Hauser, Anton Holter and numerous other Helena-area business and civic leaders who saw the role that affordable, abundant electricity would play in the region's economic development.

Holter, the dam's namesake, came to the United States from Norway in 1854, when he was 23. He got his business start by selling lumber to mining operations. He became known as the "father of the lumber business in Montana," with lumber yards in Virginia City, Nevada City, Helena, Great Falls, Sun River and Fort Benton. He founded the A.M. Holter Hardware Company, and became involved in a variety of mining, agricultural and real estate ventures. Along with the dam and lake, the Holter Art Museum in Helena is named for Holter and his family members.

Holter was a partner with the entrepreneurial Hauser, a former territorial governor, in a number of business enterprises, including dam construction. Holter Dam, originally known as the Wolf Creek Project, was on the drawing board during the construction of Hauser Dam, and after that upstream dam failed in 1908, Hauser launched an ambitious plan to rebuild the dam and construct another at Wolf Creek in the same time frame.

While the rebuild of Hauser Dam was finished in 1911, the Wolf Creek Project faltered, the victim of cost over-runs and false optimism. While initial work began in 1909, it was halted after financial backers feared bankruptcy. Just a portion of the dam's concrete foundation had been poured when work was stopped.

In the next few years, the stalled Wolf Creek Project and Hauser Dam, started by the United Missouri River Power Co., became part of the fledgling Montana Power Co., due to the efforts of John D. Ryan, the Amalgamated Copper executive who played a big role in the formation of MPC in 1912.

Work on Holter Dam resumed in March 1916. A year later, about 490 workers were on the job. The first generation unit was operational in 1917 to be joined by three others by the dam's commissioning date in 1918. The construction camp at Holter was the largest built by Montana Power and included more than 115 structures, including a bunkhouse, dormitories, cottages, a dining hall, bath house, school, hospital and photography studio.

The finished dam was 1,350 feet long and at more than 110 feet high, it was the tallest dam on the Missouri River at the time. The construction of Holter also marked sixth dam completed by Montana Power and its predecessor companies within a decade.

Montana Power owned Holter Dam until 1999, when it sold all of its Montana generation facilities to PPL Montana. NorthWestern Energy bought the PPL Montana hydro facilities in November 2014.

Today, Holter Dam has a nameplate capacity of 50 megawatts and fronts a reservoir with a capacity of about 240,000 acre-feet of water. The electricity produced at Holter is used to supply more than 365,000 residential and commercial customers electric customers in Montana with clean, affordable and reliable energy.