

The History of the Elk Grove Water District

By ELIZABETH PINKERTON

Photos courtesy of LOUIS SILVEIRA,
ELK GROVE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

It rains, and we think of our water. We turn on the faucet, and there it is... water for a nice cold drink! We take a shower, and our water is there for us; we make the coffee, we use the clothes washer and the dishwasher. Our sprinklers water the lawn, our garden and trees, and we always expect our water to be there when we want it.

We should give thanks every day to our Elk Grove Water District, as this organization is responsible for our great water. Here are the people we need to thank for our great water. Mark Madison is the general manager, and the Board of Director members are as follows: Tom Nelson, Bob Gray, Sophia Scherman, Elliott Mulberg, and Lisa Medina. All are dedicated Elk Grove residents, and they have been involved with community service in many ways.

Read on to find out about the water district and the history of our water!

Our Elk Grove water system began more than a hundred years ago in 1893. It was created by local citizens after the devastating fire in 1892 that destroyed most of the little town of Elk Grove. The fire started from a spark on the new railroad that came through Elk Grove, and there was not enough water to put the fire out.

Here is a trip back to the past to learn about the history of the Elk Grove Water District. The next time you turn on the faucet or take a shower, you can think about this amazing story.

After the terrible 1892 fire, there was another fire in the Toronto Hotel on Main Street, and that made the Elk Grove folks realize that they really needed to put some money into a dependable



water source. Twelve men pooled their resources, and they came up with \$3,000 to create our first water company.

They drilled a well, and they built a large tank made of redwood that held 40,000 gallons and stood 85 feet in the air. It was in today's Old Elk Grove near the railroad tracks. It did not take long and water lines ran to the east and to the west along Main Street. Later, more lines were installed, and ten customers signed up. More customers signed up, and they had the advantage of having water whenever they needed it, and they didn't have to pump it. If you have ever pumped your own water, you will know how much that

was appreciated and what a good deal the water service was.

The water table in 1893 was about ten feet below the surface. You only had to dig down ten feet into the ground and there was all the water you needed. The average cost of laying pipe at that time was about 10 cents a foot, and that price included the cost of someone digging the ditch by hand.

However, there were problems according to information provided for us by the Jones family. It seems that the twelve stockholders could not agree on how to run the company. There were



Elk Grove's first Fire Department—1895

Elk Grove's first fire department, 1895.

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problems with assessment fees and with the repair of a steam boiler. Just three years later in 1896, one of the founders foreclosed on a loan that he had made to the business, and the enterprise became privately owned. But even with all these problems, the water company survived for a long, long time.

The Jones family entered the story of the Elk Grove's water company in 1906. Ira B. Jones had come to the Elk Grove area from Sweden with Selma, his wife. They first owned and operated a grocery store, but from the time of their 1906 purchase of the water company, the main business of the Jones family was water.

When Ira Jones put up his \$1,500 to purchase the water company, he didn't get a whole lot for his money. This is what he bought - the one original well, the big tank, and a steam powered pump. There were 15-20 customers and no employees.

Elk Grove had no fire truck at this time. When there was a fire, they just hooked the fire hose directly to the fire hydrant, and there was always plenty of water pressure to make it work. Things changed, however, when electric power came to Elk Grove in 1910. The line came through from Florin with the Great Western Power Company. It turned out that Mr. Jones had bought the water company at just the right time.



Toronto Hotel, 1890.

This is J.B. Jones' recollection of his grandparents' business:

"I remember visiting them and seeing Grandmother Selma hand writing bills in ink at her kitchen table. She was occasionally interrupted by people coming to the door to pay their bills. I remember riding with Grandpa Ira to take care of routine maintenance chores. Grandpa threw a pick and shovel in the back seat of his Studebaker sedan and they were off. When Grandpa had to dig in asphalt, he'd pour a gallon of gasoline on it, light it with a match to soften it, and then pick it. If the work required a crew, he'd head for Bob's Bar (yes, it's the same one that's there today) and grab the first five guys off the bar stools, and there was his crew."

Mr. Jones' recollections may seem like he was referring to a hundred years ago, but the time he spoke of was the early 1950s. By then the Water Company had grown to quite a sizable operation. In 1921 a new tank replaced the original one, no longer redwood, but modern stainless steel. Instead of a mere capacity of 40,000 gallons, the new tank held 52,000 gallons. According to Mr. Jones (J. B.), putting up that huge tank was quite

a thing, and old timers told him it was quite a spectacle. Mule teams and block and tackle were used to lift the tank in place. It was a job well done.

Sadly, water company founder Ira Jones was fatally injured in 1955 while crossing Main Street on his way to the Post Office. He was 82 at the time.

The leadership of the water company passed on to his son, Marvin B. (Bud) Jones. This second generation Jones combined the running of the water company with working for his employer of 45 years, the Gibson Wine Company. Mr. Jones (J. B.) remembered those days well for he often accompanied his father on water company duties as he had with his grandfather in earlier years.

"Basically, all the maintenance of the company was done on Saturdays. As a teenager, I'd go with my dad and we'd still use the pick and shovel. Our major technological breakthrough came in 1968 when we purchased a jackhammer and air compressor."

All of the company's original records were kept in the Jones home. The first real office on Elk Grove Boulevard opened when the number of customers reached 365. An office manager was employed to handle the telephone and billing. According to Mr. Jones, "It wasn't until the late



Above photos from left to right: (top) Water Treatment Plant & Storage Facility Office, Water Treatment Plant (bottom) Water Treatment Plant and Tank Cleaning.

1970s that we hired a pipe fitter as our first full time employee other than the office manager. The facility on Elk Grove Boulevard was opened in 1988, and was served by a general manager, two office persons, three field personnel, and two part time employees. The company came of age when it moved into computerized in-house billing that same year.

"I am proud that company accounts show my father expressed concern many years ago about the lowering of the water table. At the turn of the century, we initially found groundwater ten feet below the surface. In 1923, it had dropped to 23 feet."

Isn't that truly amazing? We have gone from having to dig only 10 feet into the ground to find water to over a thousand feet – in a little more than a hundred years!

This is a Native American saying, quoted by J.B. Jones, and it sums up the importance of water in our lives: "Thank you for this beautiful day regardless of what kind of day it is; Thank you for this life regardless of what the life is; Thank you for the water without which life would be impossible!"

Our Elk Grove Water District is a department of the Florin Resource Conservation District, and it serves a good part of our City of Elk Grove. Mark Madison, who has been the general manager for ten years will retire in a few months, and his place will be taken by Bruce Kaniolos. This message is from Mark Madison: "Our water system has been serving the Elk Grove community for 128 years. I have been here only 10 years. I feel like I have been a part of this community's history and I am grateful for that. Hopefully, I will leave a fingerprint that helps our community for years to come. I am proud of what has been accomplished and the Elk Grove community is fortunate to have the Elk Grove Water District. We have *People Helping People*, and I can think of few things that are nobler. Bruce is well qualified and I know that he will do well. Everybody is thrilled that the Board picked him. Our Board selected wisely."



Mark Madison, Elk Grove Water District General Manager



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