

## A Brilliant Vision of Power



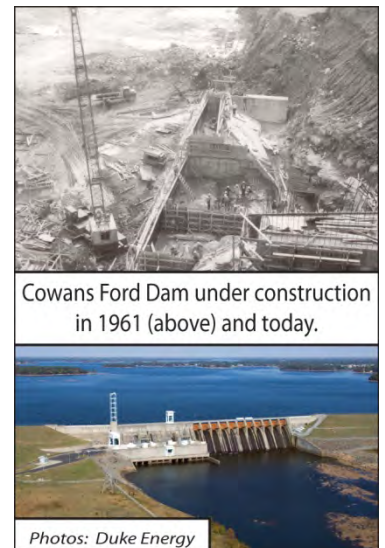
The dynamite blast on September 28, 1959 literally altered the landscape of our area forever. NC Governor Luther Hodges set off the historical explosion along the Catawba River, marking the commencement of the largest ever undertaking by the Duke Power Company. Three years later, in March of 1962, Cowans Ford Dam was completed and the waters that would define our destination began to flood through the spillway.

It took 11 months for Lake Norman to reach full-pond, holding some 3.4 trillion gallons of water. The lake was now the largest man-made body of water in the state, submerging farms, villages, and entire towns below its surface, a historical event within itself. Duke Power's creation represented a new era for the region and a significant advancement in hydroelectric power. Yet, just as remarkable are the stories of three men whose imaginative ideas intertwined to create one revolutionary reality.

Dr. Gill Wylie grew up close to the rocky and fierce Catawba River in Chester, SC. He made his way to New York, NY after fighting in the Civil War where he earned a medical degree and became a highly-sought after physician. While living in NY he became intrigued by the new technology of electricity and the dams being erected around Niagara Falls, using water as a source of power. Wylie was prompted to memories of the river back home. In 1895, before the Niagara project was finished, he had financed construction of a dam on the Rock River in Anderson, SC, chartered the Catawba Power Company, and begun building a dam on the Catawba near Rock Hill.

Dr. Wylie needed capital to sustain his ventures, so he reached out to one of his patients, James Buchanan "Buck" Duke. Wylie convinced Duke to invest in his enterprise, and in 1905 the Southern Power Company headquartered in Charlotte was formed. Duke saw financial value in the ability to provide electricity directly to his textile mills, and consequently organized the American Development Company to acquire land and water rights to the Catawba River. In 1906 he initiated the process of purchasing the land needed for dams along the river, with plans to eventually build a power station to surpass all others.

Entering into the mix was William S. Lee, a talented engineer who had worked with Wylie to design the original dams and power plants for Catawba Power Company. Lee had a dream of transforming the entire river valley into a hydroelectric system. Over the next 20 years, the shared foresight and partnerships created by Wylie, Duke and Lee produced ten dams along the Catawba River with enough powerhouses to supply electricity to 300 industrial companies and cotton mills. In 1927, the Southern Power Company was merged into Duke Power (now Duke Energy), and the conglomerate established an electrical grid capable of providing electricity to cities and towns across the central piedmont regions of NC and SC. Lee's grandson was tasked with designing the final dam to be located on the Catawba at the border of Mecklenburg and Lincoln Counties. His exceptional design became the Cowans Ford Dam and Hydro Station, which is still today the largest conventional hydroelectric power plant owned by Duke Energy. The station has been generating electricity since Lake Norman, named for former Duke President Norman Atwater Cocke, reached its fill level in 1963.



Cowans Ford Dam under construction in 1961 (above) and today.

Photos: Duke Energy

The ground-breaking on that autumn day in 1959 represented a culmination of more than 60 years of inventive resourcefulness and creative collaborations by men of true innovation. I am reminded of the saying, "While some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius. Because the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world, are the ones who do." This year we look forward to celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our beloved lake and the inspired genius of the visionaries who brought it to life.

**Sally Ashworth**  
Executive Director