MT. WHITNEY FISH HATCHERY
Independence, California

A History of a California State Fish Hatchery

"To design a building that would match the mountains, would last forever, and be a showplace for all time."
M.J. Connell, Fish and Game Commissioner, 1915

Finding the Perfect Location

When the proposal to construct a new fish hatchery was first discussed in the early 1900s, it created tremendous competition between several locations. Among sites that were believed to be considered were Tuttle Creek west of Lone Pine, Bishop Creek west of Bishop, Oak Creek west of Independence, and a possible site in San Bernardino County. W.H. Shebley, a Fish Culturist of thirty-two years at the time, had stated that, "the site chosen is as near ideal as can be conceived; abundant water supply and no legal complications over it; central location and excellent transportation facilities." The following factors led to the selection of Oak Creek. First, the forty acre parcel of land would be a gift to the state from the local citizens. Second, the guaranteed use of water from Oak Creek. Third, the temperature of the water was better suited to fish production. All of these factors made Oak Creek the best location.

Community Support

The Inyo Independent, December 15, 1915, reported that: On Thursday afternoon December 15, 1915, the citizens of Independence and vicinity held a little meeting in the courthouse of which everyone may justly be proud. It was called to raise $1500.00 to purchase a state fish hatchery site on Oak Creek, and while not quite the entire amount was raised at the meeting, enough was raised so that the balance was immediately guaranteed, and with a very little work done later the amount subscribed went over the $1500.00 mark.

There was no oratory, just business. Judge Deby called the meeting to order and explained the purpose of it. George W. Naylor read the paper which had been prepared for signatures of those desiring to assist in the matter. A.W. Eibeshutz spoke about a dozen words, and the ball started rolling. No one got stage fright, but they just walked up and signed their names. The $125-pieces took the lead, followed by the hundreds, the twenties, the twenty fives, and so on down the line. There was no talk, no coaxing; everyone seemed to know just what they wanted to do—and they did it. It was certainly a liberal subscription.

Mt. Whitney Fish Hatchery towers above the Owens Valley today as a monument to the foresight and dedication of the citizens of Independence and the California Department of Fish and Game.
Once the site was selected, the process of designing the building started. The building was designed by a team of six men led by Charles Dean of the State Department of Engineering. The team was instructed by Fish and Game Commissioner M. J. Connell, "To design a building that would match the mountains, would last forever, and would be a showplace for all time." Commissioner Connell expressed great foresight by stating these guidelines which created a one-of-a-kind showplace for the state.

The hatchery building is constructed of native granite collected within a quarter of a mile of the site. The walls are two to three feet thick. None of the stones used in construction were cut, but were "sorted to fit." The roof is red Spanish tile made in Lincoln, California from red clay found at that location. The interior is finished with Oregon ash. The grounds of the hatchery were landscaped by a gardener brought in from Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. Approximately 3,500 tons of boulders used in the walls were guaranteed not to "crumble until the mountains shall fall."

Construction was started in late March of 1916 with the goal of completing the project in time to receive eggs in the spring of 1917. Mr. H. V. Grant, superintendent of construction for the State Department of Engineering, was in charge of construction. The decision to use local help and on-site stone reduced the cost of construction. Initial cost was estimated at $30,000. Final cost was reported to be $60,000.

Raising Trout

The early operation of the hatchery is reflected in comments made by F. A. Shelby, Superintendent of Mt. Whitney Fish Hatchery, in 1917. "The Mt Whitney Fish Hatchery is the largest and best equipped fish hatchery in California and is under the jurisdiction of the State Fish and Game Commission. It has a yearly capacity of 2,000,000 fry." The first trout hatched in 1917 were from eggs collected at Rae Lakes. The eggs were transported from the collecting station at Rae Lakes via Baxter Pass by mule train to the hatchery. After the 1927 spawning season, eggs were no longer collected at Rae Lakes due to declining production.

The spawning season of 1918 saw the first collection of golden trout eggs from the Cottonwood Lakes. This program continues to this day and has provided golden trout for planting throughout the Sierra Nevada. This program is handled by the Mt. Whitney Fish Hatchery and is the sole source of golden trout eggs in California. Since the golden trout is the California state fish, it is obvious that Mt. Whitney Hatchery is vital to its continued success.