

Lake Wylie History

The doctor and the river *Lake Wylie honors physician who brought electric power to region*

By Tom Hanchett - *Special to the Observer*

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Heading out to Lake Wylie for boating or fishing or other fun this fall? Here's the guy to thank.

Dr. Gill Wylie grew up near Chester, S.C., close by the Catawba River. When Gill was a boy in the years before the Civil War, the river was more of a frustration than an asset to folks in the Carolina Piedmont. Rocks and waterfalls made it almost impassable by boat, unusable for the important work of transporting crops to market.

Young Gill was go-getter. He volunteered for the Confederate Army at age 16, and when fighting finished he made his way to New York City and earned a medical degree. He became one of the city's most sought-after physicians, founder of the Bellvue School of Nursing and professor at the Polyclinic School of Medicine.



By the 1890s, New York City was buzzing with talk of the amazing new technology of electricity. Over in New Jersey, Thomas Edison had just invented the light bulb. Upstate at Niagara Falls, dams were rising that would harness waterpower to generate electric current. The talk sparked Dr. Wylie's memory of the rocky rivers of the Carolina Piedmont. Maybe those falls and shoals, so bad for boats, could be turned to some use after all.

Wylie still had friends in Carolina. In 1895, even before the Niagara Falls project was completed, Wylie bankrolled construction of a dam on the Rock River outside of Anderson, S.C. Soon it was sending current to street lamps in downtown Anderson, which local boosters re-christened "The Electric City."

In 1900, Gill Wylie and his brother Robert chartered the Catawba Power Company to begin making such investments in earnest. They hired an engineer from the Anderson project, William States Lee, and began building a dam at India Hook Shoals on the Catawba River outside Rock Hill. The lake created by that dam would eventually become Lake Wylie – but much more had to transpire first.

Starting a power company burned through capital at a prodigious rate. Millions of dollars of dams, poles and lines had to be in place before the first cent of revenue came in. Gill Wylie knew just who to turn to. Among his New Jersey patients was James Buchanan "Buck" Duke, head of mammoth American Tobacco. American had been the first company to mass produce cigarettes, making Carolina-born Buck one of the world's richest men.

Dr. Wylie heard that Buck was suffering from an inflamed foot. He seized the opportunity to get his own foot in the door. Wylie visited Duke and convinced him to invest in a new Southern Power Company, headquartered in Charlotte. Backed by Duke's millions, it soon spun a web of electric lines fanning out from dams along the Catawba. In 1935 the company changed its name to Duke Power. It is now Duke Energy – one of the ten largest utility companies in the world.

Today the Catawba is no longer a wild-flowing rocky river, but a chain of hydro-electric lakes: Lake James, Rhodhiss Lake, Lake Hickory, Lake Norman, Lake Wateree – and Lake Wylie, expanded several times from that first dam at India Hook Shoals and re-christened in 1960 to honor the doctor who made it all happen.

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