

HELICOPTER LANDS ON LOON LAKE— THE REAL STORY

The California State Legislature in 1928 mandated that the Division of Water Resources collect and coordinate collection of snow and other data to prepare an estimate of the State's annual water "crop" and to publish and disseminate the same. This was the beginning of the California Cooperative Snow Survey Program (CCSS). The Program has been funded every year since, with the exception of two (?) years during the Great Depression when other cooperators maintained the snow surveys.

The first of the CCSS snow courses were established in 1929 and first measured in 1930.

In or about 1939 a number of snow courses were established in the American River Basin to supplement courses previously established by CCSS and cooperators. These included the "South Loon Lake Snow Course" at the south end of Georgetown Divide Water Company's 10,000af Loon Lake (constructed about 1883). South Loon Lake course was initially measured in 1940, and continued for a number of years, measured by snow surveyors on skis. This course and some others were eventually suspended because of remoteness requiring long snow survey trips on skis.

In about 1956 some of the suspended courses including South Loon Lake were re-established when Sacramento Municipal Utility District was designing the SMUD Upper American River Project (UARP).

In the late 1950's, the remoteness issue was resolved by the use of helicopters to transport snow surveyors to the more remote locations – and this is where "The Real Story" commences.

About February 1, 1960, Tom Stowell and I (snow surveyors from CCSS), joined Harry Rogers, the pilot with whom we had worked previously. He was flying a Hiller (E 4?). An important item to note at this point was that Harry's company had an identical Hiller at the Placerville Airport (enough said for now!).

We started out early in the day and measured most of the snow courses we intended to measure on that circuit. By mid-afternoon the sky was overcast, but not really "threatening".

The "old" Loon Lake (10,000af and the Georgetown Divide Public Utility Districts supply at that time) was very low. We landed on the snow covered area at the south end of the Lake, near South Loon Lake Snow Course (not on the frozen surface of the lake). 1960 was a "dry" year and the snowpack was light. Tom and I put on skis and Harry put on snowshoes and we proceeded to South Loon Lake Snow Course to make the measurements.

When we returned to the helicopter a short time later, visibility was very poor with occasional blowing snow. Harry decided we should wait it out, and he attempted to use the line-of sight radio to contact over flying commercial airliners to let the world know that we were OK. Unfortunately the antenna was on the underside of the aircraft. Either we were not getting a signal out, or no one was paying attention. No response.

Remember that light necessary to fly a helicopter disappears early in the day in February. We decided to proceed on skis and snowshoes to Schlein Ranger Station (indicated on the USGS Loon Lake quad sheet) where CCSS had earlier in the season placed a 50 gallon drum with food and sleeping bags for just such an occasion. We had the necessary keys for access. The cabin was perhaps 2 miles from the helicopter.

So there we were, perhaps "stranded", but with food, firewood, a stove, sleeping bags and bunks -- all in all very comfortable.

Of course the telephones at the cabin were disconnected and grounded to prevent winter damage – so still no communication with the outside world.

The morning dawned bright and sunny. The first item of note, while we were still eating breakfast was a slow flying aircraft, we assumed maybe the Telephone Company, which had loud speakers – not much help though as the plane was traveling near full throttle, and we could not determine what he was saying. We put out the OK signal in the snow near the cabin.

A very short time later, Bob Miller from CCSS came over in a Cessna, and communicated with us with a note inside a high tech roll of toilet paper. Once he determined that we were OK, he notified the helicopter company at Placerville and they decided to send in the other Hiller. Good move, as it turned out.

When we reached our helicopter the starter failed – not a battery issue, but the equivalent of the starter "Bendix spring" had failed, allowing the starter to turn but not engage the engine.

The second Hiller shortly arrived on scene. After some limited discussion it was decided to remove the starter from the second Hiller with the engine running. This had to be done carefully, and such was accomplished. The starter from the second Hiller was installed on our Hiller – and a start was accomplished!

The conclusion of the event was that "all's well that ends well!"

Sadly, during SMUD's construction of the SMUD's 78,000af Loon Lake Reservoir, road and recreational facility construction destroyed South Loon Lake Snow Course, and it was not re-established.

We still see Tom Stowell and his wife Linda who live near Sun River, Oregon – nearly every year and have often recalled that trip! We see Bob Miller annually at the DWR Alumni Picnic.