

T

he Image Collection: Fuerzas Hidroeléctricas del Segre



Lourdes
Martínez
Prado
Spain

The cataloguing and simultaneous digitisation of images generated by the Fuerzas Hidroeléctricas del Segre company is a project carried out in the National Archive of Catalonia in collaboration with the Fundación Endesa, resulting in the collection becoming easy to consult not only in the actual Archive, but also through the Internet. This was a long-cherished ambition of the ANC, since the Fuerzas Hidroeléctricas del Segre is one of the most comprehensive collections in terms of being able to monitor the construction of a hydroelectric complex. I am referring, more specifically, to the hydroelectric station of Oliana¹. Indeed, of the 2,723 units catalogued in the collection, approximately 1,500 pertain to the aforementioned project.

The construction of the Oliana dam was undertaken in 1946. The first photograph in the long series that illustrates the project is a snapshot of the official opening of the workers' canteen on 26 April of that same year. Thirteen years later, on 30 June 1959, the plant was officially opened by the head of the Spanish State at that time, General Francisco Franco. There are 28 photographs of that opening ceremony in the collection, 19 of which were taken by the photographer from Madrid José Demaría Vázquez, known professionally as Campúa², while the authors of the other 9 photos have not been identified. It should suffice to say that the greatest possible effort has been made, both with these and the other pictures in the collection, to identify the greatest number of people and places in them and to date the images as precisely as possible.

The long series of pictures taken of the Oliana site provides researchers with a great deal of information on many different aspects. This ranges from the work routines of the time, often somewhat risky (particular mention

should be made of the pictures of workers at great heights on the dam wall, transmission towers or bridges), to the difficulties posed by the weather. In this regard, the collection includes some photographs of the minor flooding events of the river in March 1947, December 1949, May 1950, and May 1956 (two or three photos per weather phenomenon), and also of the winds in the winter of 1949-1950. The great flood of June 1953 of the river Segre is particularly well documented, with 63 photographs, which convincingly convey how the river severely punished the area in general and more particularly building work on the dam.

These pictures also allow us to study the engineering techniques and tools used in the 1940s and 1950s, particularly the machinery used, but also the importance of the human factor, since a lot of the building work was done manually. It is very interesting to note the major leap taken in terms of automation of work between these two decades. If you look at the photographs of the excavation of the Pendía canal (which I shall address later), the first of which dates from September 1943, and then compare the huge amount of labour used, to say nothing of the rudimentary tools, to the photos of the work on the Oliana dam in the mid-50s, the magnitude of the evolution in this sector is patent.

Another aspect to consider in the Oliana dam is the building of the bridges and roads in the area. A total of eight bridges were built to negotiate the gulleys and the courses of the Segre and Sallent rivers (and more specifically the bridge of the Mala Muller, the bridge over the Segre, the Penella bridge, the Esplovins bridge, the bridges of l'Esquella and Soleri, the Fantasma bridge and the bridge of Sallent) and to make way for the **Leida-Puigcerda** road. Due



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Illuminated decorative arch built by CAME for the festival of Manresa. 1912. CAT/ ANC 1-319 uc. 451

to the lie of the land in the High Pyrenees (or Alt Segre, as the area was known in the documentation of the time) and the hardships of those years in terms of materials and machinery, scholars of the history of engineering, with the aid of these images, would find plotting the evolution of the work (the raising of pillars, arches, the use of concrete and metal structures) a very stimulating exercise.

Although the Oliana plant was the magnum opus of Fuerzas Hidroeléctricas del Segre, the Gomis family, which founded and owned the company, had been involved in the electricity business for a long time.

In actual fact, the Gomis family had been engaged in the sector since 1893, when Francesc Soler founded the Gomis Estate in Monistrol de Montserrat, on the banks of the river Llobregat³, dedicated, like many other mills along the river, to cotton spinning, where the owners of these industries leveraged the waterfalls along the river to power their looms. In 1909, when the brothers Francesc (who would soon pull out of the family business), Joaquim and Enric Gomis Cornet had already inherited the company's facilities, they founded Eléctrica Gomis to sell part of the energy produced by a small hydroelectric plant installed on the river to users in Central Catalonia, and their first client was the Abbey of Montserrat. The collection features 56 pictures of the Gomis Estate and its hydroelectric complex dated between 1904 and 1959, including some of the workers' houses and the old workshops, as well as photographs of the consecration ceremony held on 14 October 1930 in the Church of Our Lady of the Rosary, which was designed for the estate by the architect Alexandre Soler i March.

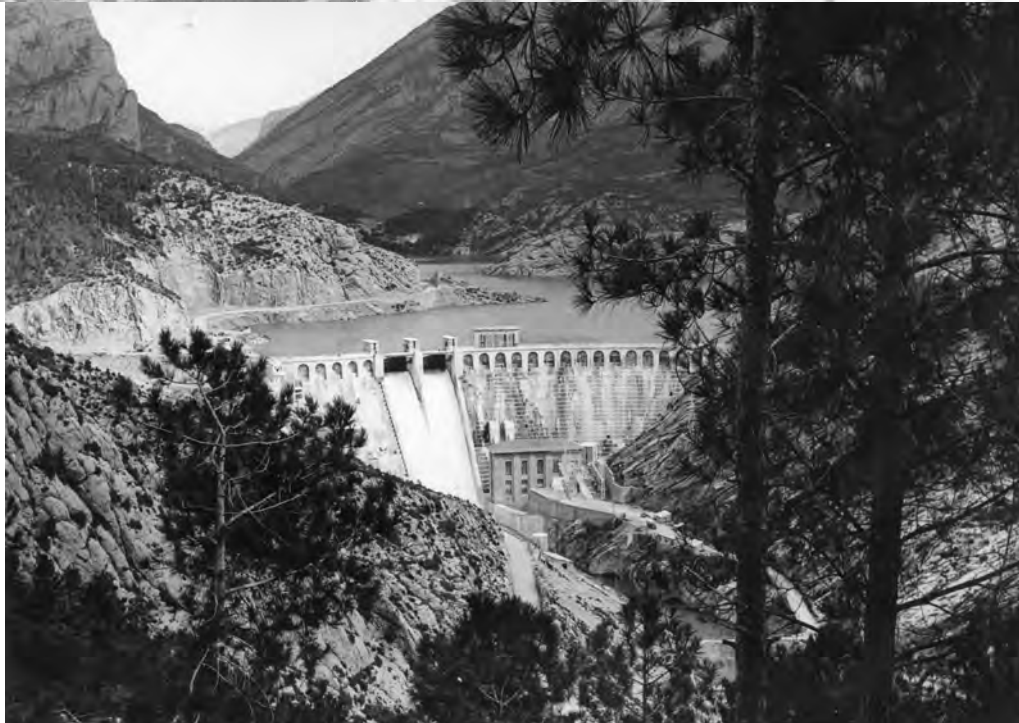
As of that moment, the brothers became increasingly more involved in the electricity busi-



ness. Thus, in 1921 they became the majority shareholders of CAME (Compañía Anónima Manresana de Electricidad), and in 1923 they incorporated FASA (Fuerzas y Alumbrado AG), whose initial headquarters were sited in the Gomis Estate, although they relocated to the Cots square in Manresa in 1936. Of this period, the collection contains images of the hydroelectric stations of Les Hortes (Sant Fruitós de Bages), Les Marcetes (Pont de Vilomara), Boades (Castellgalí) and Berga, as well as of the staff and the facilities of the famous power station in carrer Llussa in the town of Manresa, built by CAME in the gardens known as "del Buen Retiro" to supply



Oliana dam.
31 July 1959
CAT/ ANC
1-319 uc. 2402



electricity to the city. The collection also illustrates how these two companies were involved in social life in Manresa (in the case of CAME, even before it was taken over by the Gomis family). Thus, some of the pictures show us how the streets and buildings were illuminated for the annual local Festivities or for the so-called Light Festival.

In 1932, the Gomis brothers, who also had businesses in the Llobregat basin in central Catalonia, began to take over small electricity companies in the Plain of Lleida and founded EHSA (Explotaciones Hidroeléctricas Sociedad Anónima) to leverage hydroelectric resources in Lleida. The collection boasts 25 photos directly related to EHSA's activities, including 15 pictures of the damage caused by fighting during the battles of the Ebro and

Segre, towards the end of 1938, to the towns and villages of Borges Blanques, Balaguer, Vilanova de la Barca and la Rapita de Balaguer.

After the Civil War, the brothers Joaquim and Enric Gomis Cornet resumed their businesses, reviving an old CAME company project which had originally been conceived in 1913 and based on a plan for using the Bastareny river and the Pendís watercourse in the county of Bergueda. More than 150 photographs dating between 1943 and 1960 depict the construction, operation and evolution of these facilities.

Finally, Fuerzas Hidroeléctricas del Segre was established in 1945, and the great project of the hydro-electric station of Oliana, which I referred to above, was commissioned and undertaken.





The collection also contains photos of the installation, operation and repair of power lines (including photographs of the effects of the sabotage of a transmission tower in Fonollosa in February 1961), of a field study trip made by the staff of Fuerzas Hidroeléctricas del Segre to Switzerland, or some visits by prominent personalities of the era to the company's facilities, such as the bishop of Vic Ramon Masnou to attend the official opening of the transformation substation of Manresa in 1957, or by the abbot of Montserrat Aureli Maria Escarré to the same facility around the same time.

The aerial photographs, of which the glass negatives have been preserved and which were taken by the Instituto Geográfico in the late 20s or early 30s, merit special mention, although there is no related information. There are also some photos (five, to be exact) of the events of the Festivities for the Liberation of Manresa⁴ on 24 January 1942, where the great importance the Falange continued to enjoy in such ceremonies, which exalted Franco's regime, is evident.

The collection also contains some curios, such as a series of negatives and contacts depicting household scenes, possibly of the photographer's family, or another series, also comprised

of negatives, of the pages of different scientific journals from North America and other countries that specialised in biochemistry.

There can be no doubt that the production and distribution of electricity in Catalonia, due to its complex terrain, the numerous difficulties specific to the twentieth century, the risk involved in investing in a business which, while it promised major profits, was also fraught with possible huge losses spawned by surprises in or on the land where the dams were to be built, or adverse weather conditions, to mention but two of the many imponderable variables. Furthermore, the duress of the work to be performed and the danger involved in certain operations meant that it was a huge undertaking that required a great deal of courage on the part of the industrialists and the other stakeholders. This is borne out by the words engraved on a commemorative plaque (of which there are pictures in the collection) dedicated to the Gomis brothers, both of whom are now deceased, in 1984, to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the inauguration of the Oliana hydro-electric station: "To Joaquim Gomis and Enric Cornet, the organisers of power in Catalonia, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of a work which has become part of us."

Notes:

- 1.- Municipality of the Catalan region of Alt Urgell (province of Lleida).
- 2.- Demaría Vázquez "Campúa", son of José Luís López Demaría, also a photographer, and from whom he inherited the "Campúa" pseudonym. He became a renowned photojournalist after starting out in 1920. In the 1940s he created the Campúa Graphic Agency and was one of the regular photographers at the events in which General Franco participated.
- 3.- This and other information was obtained thanks to the work of Dr. Mercedes Arroyo Huguet "Empresarios y técnicos en la electrificación del territorio. Fuerzas Hidroeléctricas del Segre (1909-1988)". Barcelona: Printulibro Intergrup. [ISBN: 978-84-2665-2; D.L. B-34086-2010] Digital version: <http://www.bubok.com/libros/191940/Empresarios-y-tecnicos-en-la-electricacion-del-territorio-Fuerzas-Hidroelectricas-del-Segre-19091988> [On line]
- 4.- Institutional Festivity commemorating the day Franco's troops entered the city on 24 January 1939.