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Conservation Tactics

By DeeAnn Dowd

The first few generations of Oklahoma farmers were threatened by drought and floods. The 1923 flood of the North Canadian River destroyed Western Oklahoma's transportation systems. All bridges, for wagons and railroads, between Oklahoma City and Woodward, were washed away. George Sheppard, a civil engineer surveying Oklahoma several years later, under the direction of the U.S. War Department, estimated the damage in excess of three million dollars to state and county road and rail bridges and other public utilities. This estimate did not include the loss and damage to the land itself.

Following this disaster, many Oklahomans became interested in finding a solution to the water problem — especially the rail companies, whose repeated loss of bridges was proving expensive! As a result, the Rock Island Railroad had its civil engineer, Ernest E. Blake, survey the river and make recommendations on how to control the recurring floods.

Blake's report resulted in the formation of the Blaine County Flood Control Association on May 31, 1931. Officers elected at that first meeting were: Frank Raab, Canton, president; Smith Cunningham, Watonga, vice-president; C. V. (Salty) Waters, Hitchcock, secretary/treasurer. Directors were appointed from each community in the county: B. H. Burnham, Canton; Andy Marks, Okeene; Elmer Kennison, Watonga; Bryan Long, Eagle City; U. H. Warner, Geary; and Bill Allsman, Longdale.

The association worked diligently to gain public interest. They wrote letters, sent telegrams and held numerous meetings outlining a plan that would divert flood water, by canal, into Salt Creek Canyon, south of Southard.

They were faced, however, with little support downstream. Oklahoma City filed a law suit against the association, naming each member and their communities in the suit, 147 defendants in all, represented by 11 attorneys. The suit claimed that the diversion of waters would jeopardize Oklahoma City's water rights and contaminate the water with salt deposits. They, also, claimed virtually all the water flowing down the river as theirs. After approximately two years of lengthy debate, and study of water laws (or the lack of such laws), the two sides reached a compromise the morning they went into court.

The Blaine County Flood Control Association recognized Oklahoma City's two objections as valid. This decision led them to reorganize the association and expand it to include the entire watershed from Oklahoma City west to the head waters of the stream. Additional members joining the association and lending their help in promoting the project were: Julius Cox, Boise City; J. Hiner Dale, Guymon; Bill Cooksey, Beaver City; Vern Miller, Laverne; Dr. James Day, Ft. Supply; Mayor Burdick, Woodward;

Stanley Shepherd, Seiling; Fred Gwaltney, Greenfield; Henry Breeze and A. H. Thompson, Calumet; Ray Dyer and Merle Woods, El Reno; and Editor Endment, Yukon.

The larger association gave the group the benefit of three congressional districts, allowing them a stronger voice in Congress. The help of these Congressmen proved very valuable through the years.

The new organization took the name of North Canadian River Flood Control and Improvement Association. They adopted a three reservoir plan which include the present sites of the Optima Reservoir, Ft. Supply Reservoir, and Canton Reservoir. The Association stipulated in their recommendations that the control of the river and development of each project be a multiple purpose project, including flood control, water supply, irrigation, recreation, fish and wildlife benefits.

The Association still faced many obstacles, delays and disappointments. Frank Raab and Salty Waters made several trips to Washington D. C. at their own expense, lobbying Congress for legislation necessary for the funding of the project. They, also, tried to gain the backing of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and persuade them to survey the project locations. The Corps, however, were only authorized to construct harbor inland waterway levy systems on the lower reaches of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers.

Finally, in 1935, Congress enacted legislation giving the Corps the authority for some tributary stream system improvements. The Corps procrastinated on the North Canadian project, until the Association feared the time limit on the funds would run out. Frank Raab contacted his Congressman, a member of the Appropriation Committee, and the survey started within a few weeks.

Construction began on the flood control project at Ft. Supply in 1937, Canton in 1940 and Optima in 1978. The last, Optima Reservoir (Hardesty site) being dedicated in 1980, nearly 50 years from the first Association meeting.

In 1983 an estimate on the benefits from the projects claimed over \$9,542,000 of flood damage had been saved. The dedicated efforts of those men in the North Canadian River Flood Control and Improvement Association resulted in these savings, plus, conservation of the land, and the benefit of the recreational facilities we enjoy today. It should be noted that none of the members of the Association received any pay for their tireless efforts. They were true pacesetters of Oklahoma and the Country. Only two members are living today, Frank Raab of Canton and Julius Cox of Boise City. ■

DEEANN DOWD of Canton is a commuting student in Elementary Education at SOSU. "Conservation Tactics" is her first published work.