

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

PHYLLIS CANAL

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The Phyllis Canal begins on the south bank of the Boise River about twelve miles below Boise opposite the lower part of Eagle Island in Section 24, T4N, R1W. It runs in a generally westerly direction through T4N, R1W; T3N, R1W; T3N, R2W; T3N, R3W; T4N, R3W; T4N, R4W; T4N, R5W, T5N, R5W; T5N, R6W; and T4N, R6W to Idaho's western boundary line.

In the fall of 1882, John H. Burns, a New York capitalist, arrived in Boise. On November 13, 1882, he filed two claims to appropriate and divert 140,000 inches for agricultural, mining, and milling purposes, on behalf of the Idaho Mining and Irrigation Company. This company foresaw the building of two canals. These canals were to aid in the recovery of fine gold from the Snake River and at the same time, furnish the company with capital by the rental of water to settlers along the routes of the canals. The main canal--the New York--was to originate above Boise and the other--the Phyllis--was to be a western distributing lateral. A. D. Foote and John Sherman arrived in Boise from New York in September of 1883 to oversee the project. On October 26, 1883, Foote filed on an additional 75,000 inches of water. Between 1883 and 1891, construction on the main canal was carried on intermittently. Concentrating mainly on problems associated with building the New York Canal, the company shelved the plans for western lateral until a later date.

In the interim, J. M. Stewart and James A. McGee, agents of a Philadelphia company, arrived in Boise in 1885. Their interest focused on the undeveloped western project. On November 6, 1885, they incorporated the Phyllis Canal Company for agricultural and mining purposes. The canal was named for the daughter of McGee. At first they encountered problems in securing a right of way, but newspaper and public resentment aided in obtaining the necessary easements. Work on the Phyllis Canal began in the spring of 1886. However, money for the project soon ran out and the canal was sold to the Idaho Mining and Irrigation Company on October 14, 1888. The new owners attempted to utilize local labor but work progressed so slowly that they resorted in early 1890 to hiring an outside firm, W. C. Bradbury Company, to complete the project. This Denver-based company began work in February of 1890. By September, water was running in the Phyllis Canal as far as Nampa. In 1891, all thirty-five miles of the canal were completed. When finished \$135,000 had been expended on construction. In March of 1891, just prior to completion of the project, the Idaho Mining and Irrigation Company failed, due to a lack of funds. The Bradbury Company reacted

by obtaining the legal services of W. E. Borah and in July of 1891, filed a mechanic's lien against the company for \$208,000. On February 8, 1894, Bradbury purchased both the Phyllis and the New York canals at an Ada County sheriff's sale for \$184,000. Owning canals was not exactly Bradbury's forte, but he planned to retain the two systems and run them in an economical and profitable manner as possible. Bradbury assigned John D. Bloomfield to act as a manager and water master for the Phyllis Canal. Bloomfield retained this post until the canal was sold in 1902.

In 1895, the canal supplied water to 1,261 acres; in 1896, 1,716 acres; in 1897, 2,393 acres; in 1898, 2,735.5 acres; in 1899, 3,058.5 acres; in 1900, 3,737 acres, and in 1901, 4,695 acres. The canal measured twelve feet wide at the bottom, twenty-two feet at the top, and five feet in depth.

The Bradbury Company levied a charge of \$10 per acre for a water right and \$1.50 an acre for water rental. To the water users these charges seemed unreasonably high. Even at these high rates, the canal did not return the profits expected by Bradbury.

The canal was designed to service in excess of 30,000 acres, but by 1901 only supplied water to just over 4,500 acres. Following the original construction, Bradbury appeared somewhat reluctant to improve the system and add new customers. This, coupled with the high rates, did not set too well with the settlers under the canal. The farmers retaliated against what they considered unfair management and formed the Pioneer Irrigation District. On April 13, 1902, this newly organized group purchased the canal from Bradbury for \$75,000. The Pioneer Irrigation District began an immediate enlargement of the canal in an effort to bring more acres under cultivation. In 1903, the canal maintained a capacity of 550 second feet, extended 37 miles in length with 155 miles of laterals and irrigated 8,501.5 acres.

After completion of the enlargements in 1904, the canal measured 27 feet on the bottom, 40-1/2 feet at the top, and five feet in depth and utilized a grade of 3/100 to 100 feet. In 1906, the canal received water rights (117, 135) of 12,817 inches.

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