

# IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## REFERENCE SERIES

### BOISE PROJECT HISTORY, 1920-1945

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There was very little change in the population of the Boise Project area in the early 1920's. The 1920 project history reported 2,652 farms, with 2,020 of them farmed by their owners and 632 farmed by tenants. By 1924 the number of farmers had increased by only 50, to 2,702; however, the number of tenant farmers had increased considerably, from 632 to 1,147. Nearly all the farms were reported as being run by "experienced farmers;" and most by farmers experienced in irrigation farming, although presumably a good deal of that experience had been gained on the Boise Project during its early years.

There were several changes in crops during those years. The number of acres of clover hay, for example, was cut nearly in half, and that of alfalfa cut over ten percent. Barley, on the other hand, nearly doubled in acreage; so did Indian corn, while beans quadrupled.

The number of beef cattle and sheep remained stable, although the number of dairy cattle increased by about a quarter. Although the value of farm lands themselves did not increase very much, the value of farm equipment much more than doubled--from \$893,937 in 1920 to \$1,989,901 in 1924.

The crop and population statistics reflect the stability of the project itself. The miles of canals operated increased from 1920 to 1924 only from 1,002 to 1,019, and the number of acres actually irrigated decreased.

However, 1924 was a bad year for farmers on the project in many ways. It was a low-water year, with the river running approximately 61 percent below normal during the summer. And the agricultural depression of the 1920's was beginning to be felt--livestock prices declined in the area because a number of farmers and tenants were moving away and selling their livestock rather than having to pay to move it as well.

The sale of crops outside the immediate region was stable, too, at least in terms of what was shipped most. The rank was vegetables first (including potatoes) then livestock, hay and grain, fruit, and dairy products. Better highways meant an expanded local market, as it was much easier than it had been in the past to truck produce into mining and lumber camps.

The next major construction work on the project came in these years, too, when the Black Canyon Dam--the first segment of the Payette Division (except for the Notus Canal, 1919-1920) was authorized in 1922. The site had been surveyed in 1915, provoking a rush of settlers to the Emmett area who had no possibility of "new" water until the dam was built. The dam is primarily a diversion dam (replacing a small one built earlier at the site, some five miles above Emmett on the Payette River, to supply water to the orchards of

the Emmett valley), but there is also a power plant producing about 8,000 kilowatts used for pumping in the Emmett and Payette irrigation districts. Although the dam was finished in 1924, the canals to distribute the water collected behind it were not built--or even begun--for over ten years. The first of these, the Black Canyon Canal, was built between 1936 and 1940 to carry 1,300 cubic feet per second some twenty-nine miles west from the dam. The next two, the A Line and the D Line canals, divert from the main canal, the former some fifteen miles from the dam for thirty-three miles west to the Snake, and the latter from nearly the same point thirty-nine miles south and then west. Two other canals were later also added to the system, the C Line East and the C Line West, built between 1946 and 1948.

Quite aside from the new construction (which, because of lack of canals, had little immediate practical value), the outlook picked up a bit in 1925. Drains were constructed in several locations, solving some seepage problems, and farm prices picked up a bit, so the percentage of tenant farmers dropped. The most significant action on the project taken during the year was the formation of a "board of survey and adjustments," which first met in March of 1925. The board represented settlers, the Bureau of Reclamation, and the Idaho Department of Reclamation and included economists as well as the project supervisor. It drafted contracts with the various irrigation districts and in 1926, in effect turned itself into the Boise Project Board of Control, which continues to manage the Boise Project. The stability which this produced involved also a rearrangement of the way in which settlers could pay off their share of construction costs, contingent on the value of their crops from year to year. The Bureau of Reclamation did retain control of the more complex segments of the Project--Arrowrock Reservoir, the Diversion Dam, the headworks of the New York Canal, and the first half-mile of that canal. Otherwise, operation and maintenance of the system came under the board as representative of the five irrigation districts under the project. In many ways, the construction of this system of control may be as significant as the construction of any single part of the whole Project.

The 1927 season showed increases in two areas; market for crops, and the number of prospective buyers of farms. There was no increase in land under irrigation, no additions to the system, and thus no room for additional farms. Marketing remained a serious problem for the farmers of the valley: perishable products that relied on a single railroad line over a long distance simply could not compete. One interesting change in statistics for the project region, probably more a commentary on a broader change in society, is the increase in automobiles during 1927 from 131 to 180.

During 1928 one small but significant change in farm ownership took place: nearly all the farms which had been foreclosed in the preceding years were sold again into private hands. Land values began to increase as a result. Long-distance marketing remained a problem, although apparently a good market for dairy products had grown up in the Los Angeles area. The local market was increasing as population increased--and so did food-processing companies. But partly as a result of the transportation problems, farmers were gradually shifting to crops which could be shipped in concentrated form in one way or

another.

Thanks in part to this need for concentration, the dairy industry was probably the fastest growing segment of the project, The Dairymen's Cooperative Creamery, with headquarters in Caldwell, had a membership of 2,400 in 1929, and except for a very small local trade all its product was marketed in Los Angeles. Another cooperative was begun in Ada County in 1929, also marketing almost exclusively in Southern California.

The next physical change in the project came between 1929 and 1931, with the construction of the Deadwood Dam. The Deadwood Reservoir was intended as a storage facility for the Black Canyon Canals (even though they were not yet built), and it was built on Deadwood River, about twenty-five miles southeast of Cascade. It has an active capacity of 161,900 acre-feet, slightly smaller than that of Lake Lowell--and it had no immediate practical effect on the project.

In 1929 and 1930 some experimentation took place in the western end of the valley with both green peas and beans. Test plots were established, and those varieties which produced well in the soil and climate were then concentrated on. By 1931, the enthusiasm for such new ventures had lessened considerably, and was being summarized by statements like "On the whole, the project farmers are not in as good financial condition as last year." That remark was only a warning; in the 1932 report, bartering was noted as a partial solution to the lack of market for farm produce, and it was noted that crops were left unharvested. Although the acreage planted was almost identical with that of 1930, the crop value had dropped by two-thirds. A moratorium was declared on both water tolls and seed loans, in an effort to keep farms functioning. By 1933, although dairying was increasing on the project, the plight of some farmers was described as "desperate." And 1934 was a short-water year, which did not help. However, prices did begin to increase a bit, and so did the morale of the settlers. Enrollment increased in high schools and colleges, as did the purchase of automobiles and refrigerators (both classed in 1934 as "luxury items"). By 1935, even land values seemed to be increasing slightly.

And another hopeful sign was also apparent: the impending completion of the U.S. 95 route to Winnemucca and on to California via U.S. 40, which was to make an enormous difference in the practicality and economics of motor freight to California.

Also in 1935, at least one positive benefit of the Depression was noted. Three Civilian Conservation Corps camps were established on the project, not only providing a market for a certain amount of food but also providing a source of labor on the project works. The camps and the WPA projects were accepted in the community, and their results were welcomed--unlike incipient labor unions, noted in 1936.

In that latter year, there was a small amount of additional work done on project facilities: the process of raising Arrowrock Dam five feet was begun, to be completed the next year. Meanwhile, more farmers were looking at the Payette Division lands, where work had at least begun on the first canal. There was, however, some concern that farmers who had moved from midwest drought conditions might take up lands in the Payette Division too soon and be as bad off as they had been previously.

Other farmers, already established, were doing better. Crop values increased nearly twenty-five percent between 1935 and 1936,

although this was balanced by a shortage of late-season water. A beet-sugar factory was being planned in Nyssa, and another was possible for the valley (later to be built in Nampa). As a result, sugar beets were in increased production; and other truck and seed crops were increasing as well. Meanwhile, alfalfa--long the principal crop in the valley--was declining in production on the older lands because it was the best crop for newer lands in the Owyhee and Black Canyon areas; and apples, as well as other fruits, were declining in popularity because they were too chancy a crop.

Several long-range changes were noted in the project history for 1937. In the first place, the raising of Arrowrock Dam was completed, though not without some difficulties caused by cold weather. Two changes in farming practices, occasioned partly by increased educational programs for farmers, were made: greater effort by government agencies and the farmer to control noxious weeds, and the increased use of commercial fertilizers (along with considerable discussion of using the phosphates known to exist in southeastern Idaho). In addition, the increase of sugar beets and truck crops meant an increase in seasonal labor--and the arrival of the First Mexican and Philippine migrant laborers in the valley. At the same time, economic stability continued to grow, and the farmers themselves urged an end to the project-cost repayment moratorium.

By 1938, the Bureau of Reclamation was beginning to look seriously for additional storage facilities on the Boise River. Test drillings were conducted at the Twin Springs site, some twenty-five miles above Arrowrock, and a final report was submitted in early 1939.

In November of 1939, a topographic survey was conducted at the Anderson Ranch site on the south fork of the Boise and it was this site which was later selected to provide additional storage. Meanwhile, farmers actually grew crops on the Payette Division in 1939, and new settlers were moving in rapidly. Sugar beet crops increased on the older lands in the Arrowrock Division; and, although the new highway route to California still had not been completed, marketing had improved with the coming of regular air freight service through the new Boise Airport.

Final testing work took place on the Anderson Ranch damsite in 1941, although no one could have guessed how long it would take to complete the project. Completion date was supposed to be August 24, 1946, and work proceeded rapidly for the first year and a half: a third of the work was done in just over a quarter of the allotted time. But then wartime shortages of both men and materials closed in.

Work continued, but on a vastly decreased scale. Part of the slowdown involved problems with clearing timber from the reservoir site: the trees were too small to be of value as timber, so that part of the job was something of a loss. By December of 1945, water was being stored, and by the end of 1950, the dam was regarded as complete--with an active storage capacity of 423,200 acre-feet of water. Like Diversion Dam and Black Canyon Dam, it had power-generating facilities with a current capacity of 27,000 kilowatts and space for another 13,500-kilowatt generator. Anderson Ranch is a good (or bad) example of what delays in construction can cost in a time of inflation: its original expected cost was less than \$10,000,000 and its final cost (of which slightly less than half was assigned to water-users) was \$26,122,800.

Anderson Ranch Dam was not the only factor encouraging project farmers. A commitment had been made for a new sugar factory at Nampa, and crop values went up in 1941 some forty percent over 1940. The war, as far as the project area was concerned, had little economic impact during 1941; but the completion of the U.S. 95-40 route to California did. The growth in crop value continued steadily through the war years--total value in 1945 was two and one-half times that for 1941. Labor shortages did make a difference--dairy herds were broken up; during harvest seasons and other concentrated work times, here as in other farming areas, white-collar workers and school children headed for the fields.

Two corporate changes took place in the early years of the war; the Simplot dehydrating plant in Caldwell used up a considerable amount of local crops of potatoes and onions; and the first signs of corporate farming appeared on leased lands at several spots in the valley. The Reclamation Bureau's comment was "The desirability of this development is uncertain."

Two other major construction projects--one actually under the Bureau of Reclamation, the other closely related to Bureau projects--took place soon after the war. The first of these was Cascade Reservoir, on the North Fork of the Payette River, which was built between 1946 and 1948. Its purpose is storage for the Payette Division, and it holds back the largest reservoir in the system: an active capacity of 653,200 acre-feet. The original preliminary work--relocating a railway--had begun in the year before the war but was halted in the summer of 1942. The other dam was Lucky Peak, ten miles above Boise on the Boise River. Lucky Peak is an Army Corps of Engineers project, exclusively for flood control with neither power nor diversion facilities; but its value as a storage facility, supplementing Arrowrock and making that dam even more useful, has been great. The dam was begun in 1949, completed in 1955, and brought in at half a million dollars under its estimated cost.