

ANGOSTURA IRRIGATION DISTRICT
Box 346
Oral, SD 57766

Kenneth Parr
U.S. Bureau of Reclamation
Rapid City Field Office
515 9th Street, Room 101
Rapid City, SD 57701



Dear Kenneth:

The Angostura Irrigation District Board of Directors has contacted several of the older generation who grew up living near the Cheyenne River east of Oral, east of Buffalo Gap and east of Fairburn before the Angostura Dam was built. They were asked about the Cheyenne River flow prior to the dam construction. They all said the same thing, that the river was "unpredictable."

Thomasetta (Wilson) Kuhl said they would prepare to go to Hot Springs from their ranch east of Buffalo Gap, never knowing if they would be able to ford the river or not, since they couldn't see the river from their ranch. If the clouds looked threatening, they knew to stay away from the river. But they still got caught from time to time on the wrong side and couldn't get home until the water went down.

Bill Nolan lived next to the river east of Buffalo Gap. He said there were times you could jump across the river. Most of the time it required a saddle horse or a team, before the bridge was built. When the ice went out every spring the river would run high or flood. Rainfall in Wyoming controlled the flow of the river. The bridge washed out in 1931. The river has had a much more sustained and predictable water level since the Angostura Dam was built.

Jack Markitan, who still lives east of Fairburn, said they used to cross the river in an auto before the bridge was built 1 mile east of Red Shirt. The river flow was up a lot more times before the dam because of flood water. It was higher in spring when the ice went out and got lower throughout the summer, except for flood times. There were many more sandbars before the dam was built because the river was so low much of the time. Now the river maintains a fairly continuous flow.

Joe Gamet grew up east of Oral near the Cheyenne River, and later worked for the Soil Conservation Service and the Bureau of Reclamation. He recalls things beginning with 1920 when there was a bad flood. The ice built up to where it was up to two feet thick, depending on how much water was in the river. In the spring when the ice went out, there were ice jams. One year it flooded clear out on Barta's ranch, probably to an 8 foot depth. In summer it was very low. Anytime there a dry spell of more than two weeks, a person could wade the river. Joe crossed the river once and while he was across, the river came up. He got on his horse bareback and hung on for dear life as the horse swam across. Normal flow was a foot or a foot and half-deep in places and about 20 feet wide and that was how it stayed until the next flood.

Joel Rickenbach, former state legislator and a life-long area rancher from east of Oelrichs, told of ranchers who would cross the river to check their cattle, and before they could go back across even an hour later, the river had come up and they were stranded.

Area history books and personal diaries from people who lived near the Cheyenne River were also researched.

From Our Yesterdays, a history of the Fairburn and Buffalo Gap areas.

From the story of the Markitans, page 440

"There are still indentations on the (Cheyenne) River bottom that were once fox holes dug by the US Cavalry when fighting the Sioux."

From Sunshine and Sagebrush, a history of the Oral and Smithwick areas.

From the story called Cheyenne River Bridges, page 63

"When this area was first settled the river had to be forded and the firm rocky bottom aided the settlers" A bridge was put in 1903-04, and another one in 1920 but they both washed out. "An enterprising local man, William Timma, constructed a ferry to take people across while the water was still high. The ferry was towed by another local man, Vic Willoughby, and brave and daring man who rode his horse through the high water to take the tow rope across the river."

"After the water receded, two troughs were rigged and hardy motorists drove their cars across, straddling the open water."

From the story by Lakota Ash Sieger, page 421

"The cattle pasture was on one side of the river and Siegers lived on the other side. One day as Gene was crossing the river with the cattle he saw a wall of water about ten foot high coming. He was lucky to get the cattle and himself across ahead of it. The Cheyenne River could be dangerous at times. There were many flash floods. When the river went down Gene would go down and spear catfish with a pitch fork."

From the diary of Laura Gamet, September 4, 1938 "Had a cloud burst at Buffalo Gap. Took out all the railroad bridges between there and the Cheyenne River. Also done a lot more damage at Hot Springs. Took out some of the retaining wall in there. Cut off the lights and other damages. Floyd Sewright and Helen McVey were drowned between Hot Springs and Buffalo Gap."

1 [The board would like you to consider these oral and written histories which support the fact that the flow of the Cheyenne River has been more predictable and more sustained since the construction of Angostura Dam.]

Sincerely,

Lyle Hartshorn, President
Angostura Irrigation District

1. Noted.