

The Mann Creek Project

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The Mann Creek Project

Throughout much of the American West, the problem was the same: winter snows stored badly needed water high in the mountains, providing an abundant runoff each spring. But in the late summer, when the water is most needed for irrigation, the rivers and streams that supplied water to the irrigation ditches ran almost dry. This situation played out year after year throughout the west, and was the same situation that faced farmers along Mann and Monroe Creeks in western Idaho.

Project Location

The Mann Creek Project is located in west-central Idaho encompassing about 5,000 acres northeast of Weiser, Idaho. The primary features of the project are Mann Creek Dam¹ and Reservoir, located on Mann Creek, about 14 miles northeast of Weiser. Water from the reservoir is used to provide supplemental irrigation to lands along Mann and Monroe Creeks, both tributaries of the Weiser River.²

Historic Setting

Pre-History

Idaho is a land of significant variability: high mountains tower over wide plains, deep canyons slice through massive plateaus, and dense evergreen forests push up against great sagebrush deserts. Throughout its history, the region was home to several races of people who were forced to adapt to the variations in the environment.

About 14,000 years ago, the region, including Idaho, was inhabited by a race of people who survived by hunting game and gathering fruits and other plants. Evidence indicates that the

1. Mann Creek Dam was originally called Spangler Dam. The name was changed to Mann Creek at the request of the water users shortly before the dam was dedicated in 1967.

2. United States Department of the Interior, Water and Power Resources Service, *Project Data*, (Denver: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1981), 607.

region received a great deal of moisture, leading to an abundance of game. About 10,000 years ago, a gradual change began to take place. The climate became more arid, and the grass-covered plain that supported the game turned to deserts. The game moved to less arid regions, followed by many who relied on them for survival. Those who remained behind became more dependant on small game, roots, and berries for their survival.

About 4,500 years ago, the climate began to shift again, becoming cooler. The inhabitants of the mountains and valleys began to build pit houses for protection and developed a pattern of migration that took them to the mountains during the summer months and back to the plains during the winter. They continued to survive on roots, berries, small game, and fish. About 1,200 years ago, pottery became common, and the inhabitants of the southern desert region made baskets that could be used for cooking as well as gathering seeds and berries.

For centuries, the inhabitants of the Idaho region had survived by adapting to changes in their environment and developing new ways of living. As the eighteenth-century dawned in the Americas, bringing the first Europeans into the area, the inhabitants of the Idaho region faced changes unlike any that had come before.³

History

Many of the region's native population felt the effects of European contact long before the first white men entered the region. Through trading contacts with other native groups, the native people of the Idaho region acquired horses and tools, ultimately traceable to the Spanish in New Mexico and California. In turn, they introduced these items to other groups. Along with the benefits associated with European contact, there came negative consequences. Smallpox and

3. Merle Wells and Arthur A. Hart, *Idaho, Gem of the Mountains*, (Northridge: Windsor Publications Inc., 1985), 13-8.

other European diseases for which the native population had no natural immunity, devastated many native groups.

In 1805, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark became the first white men to travel into the Idaho region. Soon after, Canadian fur trappers began to explore the northern regions, establishing a post on the shores of Lake Pend Oreille. Before long, Idaho became a center for trapping activities in the western United States. Following in the footsteps of the trappers, missionaries soon moved into the area seeking game of a different sort, the souls of the native population. Beginning in the mid-1830s, Catholic and Protestant missionaries traveled the lands in the north, ministering to the Nez Perce and Coeur d'Alene Indians, while in the central and southern regions, Mormon missionaries ministered to the Shoshoni.⁴

In the 1840s and 1850s, the California gold rush largely passed Idaho by, but in the early 1860s, the region experienced a gold rush of its own. During construction of a road from Fort Walla Walla in eastern Washington to Fort Benton in Montana, construction crews discovered gold near the Idaho-Washington border. Word soon got out, and hundreds of gold hungry miners descended upon the region. By 1861, Lewiston, near the Washington-Idaho border, had grown into a major outfitting and supply center for the northern Idaho gold fields. In early 1862, a group of prospectors ventured into the Boise Basin. Turned back by Indians, they returned later in the year, striking it rich at Idaho City. The digging in the Boise Basin turned out to be the most productive in the region, producing more than \$ 24,000,000 worth of gold by 1866.

For those who did not wish to participate in the hectic activities of the gold diggings, other opportunities were available. Agriculture grew to meet the needs of the miners, and many

4. *Ibid.*, 18-30.

who failed in the diggings became successful supplying the miners. Before long, Boise became the primary supply center for Idaho's mining industry.

While mining drove the settlement of the western and northern regions of Idaho, a different settlement pattern was taking hold in southeastern Idaho. The early Mormon settlers had been driven out of the region by hostile Indians in the late 1850s only to return a few years later to found Franklin, the first permanent white settlement in what was then known as the Washington Territory. As Franklin grew, a fort was built and an irrigation ditch was constructed and placed into service. Several other Mormon settlements sprang up in southeastern Idaho, repeating the Franklin pattern, and by the end of the Civil War, irrigated agriculture had firm foothold in the region.⁵

The first settlers in the Mann Creek area northwest of Boise, were attracted by the agricultural potential of the rich bottom lands along the creeks. Many of the first settlers were stockmen. Settlement was boosted by the construction of Olds Ferry across the Snake River and three forts near Weiser. The completion of the Union Pacific Railroad through Weiser in the 1890s further stimulated settlement. The first development of irrigation in the region was through direct diversion from Mann and Monroe Creeks. Many ditches were constructed to meet the needs of individual farms and the water rights for these ditches were established in 1919 by the Mann Creek Decree which outlined the rights for the various ditches that diverted from Mann Creek. In the late 1930s, the Bureau of Reclamation began looking into construction of a storage reservoir in the Mann Creek area to supply late-season irrigation water to area farmers.⁶

5. F. Ross Peterson, *Idaho, A Bicentennial History*, The States and the Nation Series. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1976), 53-8.

6. *Project Data*, 609.

Project Authorization

The Mann Creek Project was initially approved for construction by the Water Conservation and Utilization Act of July 1941, but failure by the area landowners to approve the repayment contract resulted in cancellation of the authorization. The land owners rejected the plan because some lands would be left without water during low reservoir periods. An alternative site about one mile upstream from the original site was investigated and found to be suitable. The project was reauthorized along with several other projects as part of a plan to finance irrigation projects with revenues from power projects in the Columbia River Basin, but this plan failed to gain the approval of Congress, and the project was once again put on hold. In 1958, a new plan was prepared using the original site and submitted to Congress for authorization. The Mann Creek Project was authorized under Public Law 87-589 on August 16, 1962. The original appropriation limit for construction was \$ 3,490,000. In 1965, that limit was raised to \$ 4,180,000.⁷

Repayment contracts between the United States and the Mann Creek and Monroe Creek Irrigation Districts were approved by the water users in elections held in November 1964. Those contracts were validated by the District Court for the 7th Judicial District, State of Idaho for the County of Washington, in early 1965, and executed on behalf of the United States by Reclamation's Regional Director on July 1, 1967. The contracts called for the repayment of

7. *Project Data*, 609; National Archives and Records Administration, Rocky Mountain Region, Records of the Bureau of Reclamation, Record Group 115, "Project Histories: Mann Creek Project," 1966 & Previous Years, 1 (hereafter cited as "Project History" with year and page).

\$ 810,800 of the project's total cost (\$ 3,851,437 as of June 30, 1969), with the remaining cost to be repaid by revenues from power marketed through the Federal power system in southern Idaho. The first of 40 equal payment was due and paid in 1969.⁸

Construction History

The plan of development for the Mann Creek Project called for the construction of Mann Creek Dam and Reservoir, control structures on two existing irrigation ditches: the Joslyn and Mann Creek Ditches, and the rehabilitation of about 4 miles of the Lolley Ditch. The existing diversion, distribution, and drainage systems within the project area would continue to be used.⁹

Bids for construction of Spangler Dam (the name was changed to Mann Creek Dam at the request of the water users in 1967) were opened October 26, 1965. The contract for construction was awarded to Murphy Brothers, Inc., of Spokane, Washington, on November 17, 1965. The accepted bid was \$2,146,782. Notice to proceed was given and clearing of the reservoir area and excavations of the foundation area had begun by the end of November.¹⁰

Work at the dam site progressed at a steady pace, and by the end on 1965, excavations for the foundation and outlet works were well under way. Excavations for the spillway structures began in January 1966. Drilling and grouting of the foundation began in late February with work on the left abutment completed the following month. Concrete placement began in early April with placement of portions of the outlet conduit and intake structure, and portions of the spillway intake structure. When completed, the outlet conduit was used to divert Mann Creek

8. "Project History," 1966, 71; United States Department of the Interior, Bureau of Reclamation, *Repayment of Reclamation Projects*, (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972), 227.

9. *Ibid.*, 607.

10. "Project History," 1966, 16-7; United States Department of the Interior, Bureau of Reclamation, "SEED Report: Mann Creek Dam," (Division of Dam Safety, May 1986), C-1: 5.

around the construction site. Drilling and grouting of the right abutment was completed in May 1966.¹¹

Work at the site was halted on June 2, 1966, by a strike of the Operating Engineers Local No. 370. After negotiations, the dispute was resolved and work resumed on June 19. Placement of embankment materials began in late June with placement of compacted backfill around structures of the outlet works. Work continued at a rapid pace throughout the remainder of 1966. Drilling and grouting of the foundation was completed in mid-July with excavations of the spillway stilling basin completed in September. Embankment placing operations were halted in mid-December due to poor weather conditions. At that time, the embankment had been completed to an elevation of 2,875 feet. The plans called for a final elevation of 2,903 feet. By the end of 1966, the dam was 89% complete with only 45% of the contract time having elapsed.¹²

The rehabilitation of Lolley Ditch was carried out by the Tony Russell Construction Company, who was awarded the contract in September 1966, after submitting the low bid of \$61,307. Work under the contract was completed the following summer. Lolley Ditch is operated by the Monroe Creek Irrigation District.¹³

Concrete placement resumed in early January, 1967, and concrete placement in the spillway structure was completed by the end of the month. Embankment placing resumed in late February, and continued without significant delays. The first storage of water took place on the evening of March 27, 1967, when a bulkhead gate was lowered, closing the diversion conduit. The dam embankment was topped out on April 13, and the control gates were installed during

11. "Project History," 1966, 16-7, 20-32; "SEED Report," C-1: 5.

12. "Project History," 1966, 35-65; "SEED Report," C-1: 6; *Project Data*, 611.

13. "Project History" 1966, 53-65; 1967, 40-70, 1968, 1.

the same month. Concrete work on the dam was completed in May, and on June 15, water reached the lip of the spillway and began flowing through the spillway for the first time. The project was inspected by officials of the Bureau of Reclamation and the Mann Creek Irrigation District on August 8, 1967, and in September, Murphy Brothers signed off on the contract. Final payment to Murphy Brothers was made on October 10, 1967. Mann Creek Dam and Reservoir was transferred to the Mann Creek Irrigation District for operation and maintenance on March 1, 1968.¹⁴

Mann Creek Dam is zoned earth and rockfill structure 1,176 feet long with a maximum height of 148 feet above the deepest point in the foundation excavations. The crest is 30 feet wide, and the maximum width of the embankment from upstream toe to down stream toe is 700 feet. The spillway is located along the right abutment and consists of a concrete morning-glory spillway connected to a concrete conduit 13-feet in diameter which drains into a concrete stilling basin. The outlet works consist of a concrete intake structure and conduit running along the left abutment. Flows through the outlet works are controlled by two high-pressure gates in the control house and one high-pressure emergency gate located in the gate chamber. A second control house contains valves which control flows to the Mann Creek and Joslyn Irrigation Ditches.

Mann Creek Reservoir has a capacity of 12,950 acre-feet (af), of which 11,100 af is available for irrigation storage. At maximum capacity, the reservoir is 1.8 miles long with a surface area of 282 acres.¹⁵

Post Construction History

14. "Project History," 1967, 40-70, 1968, 1; "SEED Report," C-1: 6-7.

15. *Project Data*, 607, 611, 613 (drawing).

Mann Creek Dam and Reservoir was officially dedicated on September 9, 1967. Just a few weeks before, on August 26, at the request of area water users, the name of the dam had been changed from Spangler Dam to Mann Creek Dam. Among the dignitaries in attendance at the dedication were Idaho Governor Don Samuelson, Idaho Senator Frank Church, and the Assistant Commissioner of Reclamation Gilbert Stamm. The guests were entertained by the Weiser High School Band and the Idaho Old-Time Fiddlers Organization. There was also a barbeque and a boating demonstration by the Weiser Boat Club.¹⁶

Since its completion in late 1967, Mann Creek Dam has performed without incident. Aside from normal maintenance, the facility has required no major repairs or modifications. Frequent inspections assure that all features of the dam and appurtenant structures operate properly, and that wear and deterioration do not threaten the integrity of the unit.

Settlement of Project Lands

The area surrounding the Mann Creek Project was already extensively settled prior to construction of Mann Creek Dam, so no lands were withdrawn for future settlement. In 1992, the project supplied supplemental irrigation service to about 100 full-time farms and 15 part-time farms, providing for the needs of almost 300 people.¹⁷

Project Benefits and Uses of Project Water

Water supplied by the Mann Creek Project is used for supplemental irrigation of about 5,000 acres of land along Mann and Monroe Creeks. In 1992, just over 37,000 af of water was delivered to 4,800 acres of project lands. The primary crops grown on the project are alfalfa, barley, and corn. In addition, there are 1,200 acres of irrigated pasture lands that receive project

16. "Project History," 1967, 1-2.

17. United States Department of the Interior, Bureau of Reclamation, *1992 Summary Statistics: Water, Land, and Related Data*, (Denver: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1995), 60, 63.

water. In 1992, the value of crops grown on lands irrigated with project water was just over \$1,000,000.¹⁸

Mann Creek Reservoir provides many recreational opportunities to nearby residents. The primary recreational activities enjoyed at the reservoir are camping, fishing, and hunting. Recreation activities at Mann Creek Reservoir are administered by the Bureau of Reclamation. Mann Creek Reservoir also provides a degree of flood control, helping to prevent flood damage to lands downstream from the reservoir.¹⁹

Conclusion

The Mann Creek Project solved the problem that faced farmers along Mann and Monroe Creeks - how to hold the spring run-off for use during the late summer irrigation season. The construction of Mann Creek Dam assured water users that sufficient water would be available to bring the crops in without fear of a late season drought. Given its record of reliability during more than three decades of service, it seems likely that the Mann Creek Project will continue to provide for the late-season water needs of local farmers for many decades to come.

About the Author

William Joe Simonds was born and raised in Colorado and has a clear understanding of the importance of water in the American West and its influence on the development of that region. He attended Colorado State University where he received a BA in History in 1992 and a Masters in Public History in 1995. He lives with his wife and two children in Fort Collins, Colorado.

18. Ibid., 70, 161.

19. Ibid., 107, 113; *Project Data*, 609.

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