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Chapter 3 - Civil Works 1945-1986

Reservoir construction has played a major part in federal public works in the Southwest since World War II. By 1987 the Southwestern Division and its districts had designed and built dozens of reservoirs; water improvement projects such as bank stabilization's and channel modifications; and maintenance projects such as harbor dredging. Civil works responsibilities during these years expanded to include operation and maintenance of recreational facilities at its projects; regulatory permits; flood plain management; emergency disaster relief following hurricanes and tornadoes; and many special water development studies. Before the war ended, Congress planned to prevent a post-war depression by authorizing civil works projects, including reservoirs. Between 1944 and 1950 the legislators authorized 23 reservoirs within the Southwestern Division. The increased work led to the creation in 1950 of the Fort Worth District. It took on civil works responsibilities for most of Texas, except for the panhandle and the Gulf coast. The Galveston District handled coastal projects and military construction.

Establishment of AWRBIAC

From 1950 to 1955 the division participated in a special study of the Arkansas, White and Red river basins. This study was conducted by the first of two committees bearing the name Arkansas-White-Red Basins Interagency Committee, better known as AWRBIAC. The division's part in the study would result in a broadening of its activities in civil works. Also ordered to participate were the departments of Labor, Commerce and Interior, the Federal Power Commission and the Public Health Service. Governors of eight states were also invited to take part. President Harry S Truman designated the Department of the Army to be the chair agency for the committee. The Southwestern Division received operational responsibility for the task.

The first AWRBIAC's course was occasionally rocky, as the multitude of agencies strove for meaningful results in spite of differing missions and interests. Perhaps the most publicized disagreement was one between the Corps of Engineers and the Soil Conservation Service. The two differed on basic philosophy regarding the size and kind of dams that would best prevent flooding. But the Corps pointed out that each agency's method was meant ideally to complement the other's.

The internal friction delayed the AWRBIAC's report and led in September 1953 to a redefining of its objectives. The final document, completed in 1955, was intended as a framework for Congress to use in any development of the three river basins. It was not to serve as a basis for authorization of any project.

Division's role in AWRBIAC

The Southwestern Division's role in AWRBIAC had been administrative. Through the AWRBIAC office in Tulsa, Oklahoma, the division coordinated committee meetings and public hearings and handled budgeting. Its experience with AWRBIAC was important in several respects: committee duties became a major task for the Division as chair agency during the five-year study period; the AWRBIAC's data probably resulted in a better report than had previously been prepared on any river basin; the division also weathered the publicity storm over the Corps' differences with the Soil Conservation Service.

But probably most significant was the effect AWRBIAC had in opening the door for similar studies. In 1954, even before the final report was finished, AWRBIAC's parent agency, the Federal Interagency River Basins Committee, created a new AWRBIAC.

The second AWRBIAC's organization was designed to avoid the problems of the first. It started slowly, did not engender publicity, and its work at first did not lead to anything outstanding. Its greatest accomplishment was the friendly, cooperative atmosphere it maintained among its members. Such an atmosphere encouraged the exchange of information among those federal and state agencies with an interest in the three river basins. The Southwestern Division continues its activities in AWRBIAC to this day.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower's inauguration in 1953 ushered in an era of fiscal conservatism. But severe drought in Texas and Arkansas during the early 1950s nevertheless persuaded Congress to authorize several new reservoirs in those states.

Typically, the drought ended with a historic flood in the spring of 1957. The rains filled the new Garza-Little Elm (now Lewisville) Lake in just seven days. The new structure prevented catastrophic flooding in the Trinity watershed, but considerable damage still occurred. Had it and other lakes on the upper Trinity not been available, the division engineer said, floodwaters would have reached downtown Dallas.

Federal reservoirs on the Brazos River in Texas had the same beneficial effect, preventing devastation in Waco, Texas.

In 1958 the Southwestern Division became active in the U.S. Study Commission-Texas, a body that was to make a full-scale survey of water in Texas. It was to look at promotion of conservation, use and development and to formulate a comprehensive development plan for consideration by the President and Congress.

The commission operated quite well, in spite of the basic conflict between water interests in the dry western parts of Texas and east Texas, with its relatively abundant water resources.

Overall, water development measures during the Eisenhower administration were sparse. Election of John F. Kennedy in 1960 brought a new White House attitude toward water projects. Between 1960 and 1965, 25 new reservoirs were approved. The division's Galveston District kept busy with deep-draft channelization maintenance projects along the Gulf coast. These projects enabled ocean-going ships to reach ports through waterways such as the Houston Ship Channel, the best known deep-draft channel in the Southwest.

Lake recreation

Where lakes full of clean water come into being, boaters, fishers, swimmers and lake-shore residents are sure to follow. Thus, construction of so many reservoirs in the Southwest brought a new dimension to the operation and maintenance of the division's projects: recreation.

Throughout the United States the public increasingly used Corps reservoirs for boating, fishing, picnicking and other leisure-time activities. In the Flood Control Act of 1944 Congress recognized the recreational potential of reservoir projects and the responsibility of the federal government to make these resources available for public use. The act granted general authority to the Corps to construct recreational facilities at its reservoirs. Those facilities included boat launching ramps, access roads, picnic tables and cooking grills, rest rooms, parking areas, water supply and swimming areas and boat anchorage areas.

But because the Corps still regarded flood damage reduction as its major objective, it placed a low priority on recreation during this time. So its development of these facilities was slow. Public use of reservoirs, however, grew rapidly. In 1946 the division recorded 673,000 visitors to its projects. By 1952 the figure had climbed to 11 million. In 1981 a record-breaking 145 million people visited division lakes.

By 1954 the public began to complain about the inadequate recreational facilities at the projects. This reaction and suggestions by the Corps brought congressional action in 1962 allowing project budgets to include allocations for outdoor recreation. Soon after, Southwestern Division engineers were conducting seminars on recreational development and including it in project plans.

In 1970 the Chief of Engineers established recreation branches at division and district level to handle the workload. The next year the Southwestern Division started a ranger-training program to teach personnel to assist the public. These rangers learned fish and wildlife management, recreation administration and conservation. They could not carry weapons, but they were authorized to issue citations for violations of the rules and regulations governing the lands and waters administered by the Corps.

Lakeshore Management Program

Closely allied to the Corps' recreation activity was its Lakeshore Management Program. One outgrowth of the increased recreational use of reservoirs was increased demand by adjacent landowners for exclusive use of facilities such as boat docks and other floating structures.

When the reservoirs had first been built, there had been more than enough land, water and shoreline to accommodate requests for private use. But mushrooming growth around many lakes created problems with pollution and other environmental impacts; encroachment on public land; law enforcement; and the need for adequate public facilities. The situation forced the Army Corps of Engineers to develop a program for managing its shorelines. The Southwestern Division formulated guidance for its five districts, weighing provisions for public access, environmental protection, prevention of encroachment and protection of landowners' rights.

After most of the lakeshore management plans were completed, it became evident that the division needed a policy that provided for review and revision. As development around the lakes continued to increase, public pressure again grew for areas to be re-zoned to allow for construction of private boat docks and other floating structures. To handle the requests, the division developed a policy of regular review and updating of the plans.

Development of non-federal hydropower

One of the Southwestern Division's major responsibilities over the years had been the construction and operation of hydropower plants at many of its water projects. In the 1970s, as a result of the energy shortages, a new twist appeared: construction of hydropower plants at Corps dams by a non-federal sponsor. President Ronald Reagan's mandate to promote privatization carried this development forward into the 1980s.

By 1986 the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission had issued 28 permits or licenses for non-federal hydropower plants within the Southwestern Division's area. Two projects were under construction on the McClellan-Kerr Waterway in Little Rock District in 1986; design was under way on projects in other districts. The sponsors use the Corps' design and construction criteria for their projects. The Corps must review and approve designs, plans and specifications and inspect construction at the licensee's expense.

A similar but independent project occurred at the Town Bluff Dam at B. A. Steinhagen Lake near Jasper, Texas, in the Fort Worth District. The financing arrangements for this project were unique.

The Corps will build and own the unit, but the Sam Rayburn Municipal Power Agency is to pay for installation of the hydropower facility. In return, it is guaranteed use of the energy for 50 years.

Summary

As the Southwestern Division approached its 50th anniversary, its work on the traditional dam and reservoir projects was drawing to a close, and no new ones were anticipated. Even the Corps' practice of building hydropower plants in its own dams was changing.

In contrast, the large number of visitors to the many existing reservoirs and anticipated visitation at those under construction had made recreational maintenance and operation a major task. This development occurred throughout the United States, but the division's significantly large percentage of the total Corps visitation level gave it one of the larger recreational and lakeshore management programs in the Corps.