Project Envisioned 40 Years Ago Becoming Reality in Arkansas Basin

MAP OF PROJECT—Waters of the winding Arkansas and Verdigris rivers will be harnessed by a complex of locks and dams to create a waterway to the Mississippi river that should provide a gold mine of economic expansion to the Arkansas river basin. This newsmap shows area and location of three of the dams, Keyston, Oologah and Dardanelle (triangles). (UPI)

TAKING SHAPE—A project that was envisioned in the 1920s to create a navigable waterway from near Tulsa, Okla, to the Mississippi river begins to take shape as giant cranes work on Keystone dam in the Arkansas river west of Tulsa. The dam, one of 11 in the project, is scheduled for completion in 1964. Navigation from the Mississippi in the Arkansas river basin will be a reality by 1970. (UPI)

By EDWARD McMANUS
United Press International

Tulsa, Okla. —(UPI) Nearly 40 years ago, Newt Graham stood by the lazy Arkansas river and had a vision.

He saw reservoirs and dams in eastern Oklahoma and Arkansas, harnessing the waters of the winding stream. He saw huge barges moving up and down the river carrying oil, wheat, minerals, merchandise. And with this, his dream pictured a gold mine of economic expansion for the Arkansas River basin.

People laughed at Graham, but his dream is coming true. And the development may reach far beyond what he hoped for: A barge trip on the muddy Arkansas may be the first leg of a voyage to the moon.

Work Under Way

Work is well under way toward making navigable the Arkansas and one of its main tributaries, the Verdigris river in Oklahoma. The cost, by present calculations, will be $1.2 billion – more expensive than the great St. Lawrence Seaway and three times the cost of the Panama canal.

The job is to be finished, from the Mississippi river to a point near Tulsa, by 1970. By that time, North American Aviation expects to have a plant east of Tulsa turning out moon rocket components.

Water transportation is a must for North American's operations. The huge rocket fuselages and other items of space hardware the company will be putting out are much too big to fit on a truck on any highway, or on a railroad car. But a Saturn rocket booster, 33 feet in diameter and 80 feet long, would fit snugly on a big barge for the trip to the Mississippi, through the Gulf of Mexico to Cape Canaveral.

Final Phase Starts

Recently the final phase of construction began at the site of the Oologah dam and reservoir north of Tulsa. The Oologah is one of four major units now under construction in the navigation project. In time its reservoir will cover the birthplace of humorist Will Rogers, 3½ miles above the dam site, due for completion next year.

The Oologah dam will control the flow of water into the Verdigris, which winds through northeast Oklahoma to the city of Muskogee, where it meets the Grand and Arkansas rivers. From the little town of Catoosa, just east of Tulsa, to Muskogee, 40 miles south, the banks of the Verdigris will be stabilized and the channel will be narrowed and straightened, to permit barge traffic.

From Muskogee southeastward nearly 500 miles to the Mississippi river, the same thing will be done on the Arkansas.

Cheap Transportation

The net result will be a waterway providing cheap transportation, whether it be for moon rockets, oil or wheat moving out of the area or steel and other products being brought in to supply the expanding industry of the basin.

Only a few of the men who envisioned this project in the 1920s are still alive. The leader was the late Newton R. Graham, who took charge of a Tulsa chamber of commerce committee for water resources in 1925.

Graham was born near the banks of the Arkansas – but many miles upstream from Tulsa, at Pueblo, Colo. He started out in the newspaper business as a copy boy at Kansas City, Mo., and later moved to Oklahoma as an advertising man for the old Tulsa Democrat.

Then he went into banking, and eventually became president of the Tulsa Clearing House association.

Talking Navigation

Graham started talking Arkansas navigation long before most of his contemporaries considered it a possibility. Scoffers used to suggest that Newt put his energies into paving the Arkansas instead, to make a highway out of it. Admirers called him "the admiral of the Arkansas."

Graham gradually won supporters and kept close contact with congressmen from Oklahoma and Arkansas. He made innumerable trips to Washington to urge the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Interior department and the congress to look into his plans.

Graham died of a heart attack in 1957. He had spent the day attending a meeting of the Oklahoma Planning and Resources board, which has played a big part in setting up the project.

If Graham spearheaded the early days of planning the navigation project, Sen. Robert S. Kerr of Oklahoma has led the congressional battle for money to make it a reality.

Already Reaping Profits

For landlocked Oklahoma and western Arkansas, the project already is reaping profits.

Along the way, some ranchers and farmers have had their own personal dreams shattered as the construction crews moved in to build the dams and create the massive reservoirs which will inundate their land.

Some entire communities—very small ones—will be either eliminated or relocated. But these problems have not been major, and in most cases, property owners have profited financially.

The benefits appear to outweigh greatly any disadvantages. The corps of engineers has forecast economic benefits of $64.5 million annually from the multi-purpose development of the Arkansas basin. Nearly two-thirds of this total is expected to come from the 13 million tons of commerce forecast to move annually. Other benefits will be derived from hydroelectric power, flood control, recreational uses and the saving of riverbank land through bank stabilization.

Recreation Attractive

Recreation alone has been an attractive outgrowth of the navigation project and its companion water projects built in the area over the years, before the navigation work got approval in Washington. Boating and fishing have made Arkansas and eastern Oklahoma popular tourist areas.

North American, which expects to employ 10,000 to 12,000 persons at its Tulsa plant eventually, is not the only company planning to make use of the river transportation.

Avco Manufacturing company has set up an aerospace research facility here; Sunray DX Oil company, headquartered at Tulsa, will use the Arkansas to transport much of the oil it now moves by pipeline; John Deere Chemical company and Dewey Portland Cement company both chose the Tulsa area to locate plants, with the idea in mind of future river navigation.

Other cities on the route—Muskogee, Fort Smith, Ark., and Little Rock—also are attracting new industry.

Population is expected to mount rapidly with completion of the navigation project. The army engineers predict that the Tulsa county population, set at 346,038 by the 1960 census, will increase to 420,000 by 1970, to 520,000 by 1980 and to 1,200,000 by the year 2020.

The engineers have predicted population jumps for Coffeyville and Independence, Kan., among others. The project is expected to have a wide economic impact – affecting central and western Oklahoma, southern Kansas and southwest Missouri as well.

Not Always Landlocked

Oklahoma and Arkansas have not always been landlocked.

Indians and French traders made use of the river with dugout canoes and steamboats plied the waters of the Arkansas early in the 19th century.

The heyday of the riverboat was in the 1840s and 1850s and the boat whistle was a familiar sound at such ports as Napoleon, Little Rock, Van Buren and Fort Smith, Ark., and Fort Gibson, Okla.

But low water and sandbars hampered the traffic, and the end of the paddlewheelers was signaled on Christmas day, 1871, when the first KATY (Missouri-Kansas-Texas railroad) locomotive crossed the Arkansas.

Ironically, it is the railroad industry that stands to lose the most from revitalization of the Arkansas river. The trains just can't move freight as cheaply as water transportation.

Paddlewheel Boat Fire Injures 18

Dallas—(UPI)—The inboard motor of the paddlewheel boat "Dixie Bell" exploded Tuesday night during a pleasure cruise on a lagoon at the State Fair of Texas, injuring at least 18 persons.

A puff of blue flame shot up, partially burning the 20-foot-long canopy covered boat. Witnesses said the 20 occupants of the craft tumbled into the five-foot-deep lagoon water.

Six persons waded into the water and pulled the boat to shore. The flames were extinguished quickly.

Telemeters Useful For Testing Autos

North Hollywood, Calif. —(UPI) – The same type of equipment used to check on earth-orbiting satellites and missiles is helping automobile engineers make cars quieter.

To get an accurate check on all noise and vibration, car manufacturers can use a two-channel electronic telemetry system that "listens" to the sounds test cars make on the road and transmits signals to a sensitive receiver in a following vehicle. The system was designed by the Bendix corporation here, which built the telemetry equipment used in the Project Mercury program to receive data from U. S. astronauts.

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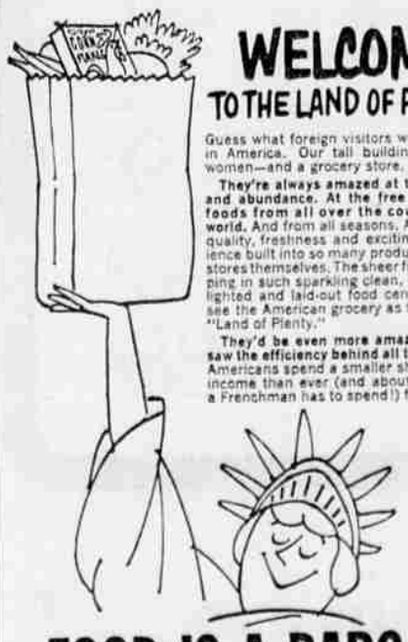

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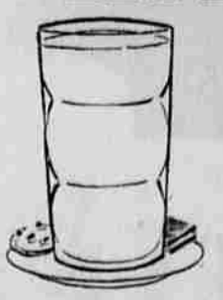

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