

Grand Lake O' the Cherokees

The year 2015 brought the 75th anniversary of the realization of Henry Holderman's vision for Pensacola Dam and Grand Lake.

Chapter 1—1:30

Introduction

Announcer: Henry Holderman, a member of the Cherokee Nation, was the first to dream of Grand River as a source for hydroelectric power for the Cherokee Nation. Prior to Oklahoma statehood in 1907, Holderman began building political support for such a project. A feasibility study by the Army Corps of Engineers attracted favorable attention in the Oklahoma legislature, leading to creation of the Grand River Dam Authority (GRDA), a state agency, in 1935.

Construction began in 1938 on the *Pensacola* Dam as a project of the Works Progress Administration, also known as the WPA. The dam was completed in March 1940, creating the lake behind it. Between 1941 and 1946, the U.S. government took control of Pensacola Dam to divert power to the war effort. Control was returned to the GRDA by the Congress and President Truman amid local celebration in August 1946.

Pensacola Dam is claimed to be the longest multiple arch dam in the world, supporting a walkway and a narrow two lane highway.

The project's chief engineer was W. R. Holway (who was also responsible for Tulsa's Spavinaw water project), while the architect of record for the Art Deco design of the dam and powerhouse was Tulsan John Duncan Forsyth.

Dr. Bruce Howell, who has become a historian for North Eastern Oklahoma, tells the story of the crown jewel of the state, Grand Lake O' the Cherokees on *VoicesofOklahoma.com*.

Chapter 2—7:18

Henry Holderman

John Erling: My name is John Erling. Today's date is December 2, 2014. You might say it's a 30-degree day, cold and cloudy, kind of gray day here at Grand Lake, but we like being

here anyway. And joining me here at the lake is Dr. Bruce Howell, and we're going to tell the story of the history of Grand Lake and how it came about.

Dr. Howell, you've been a teacher, a coach, superintendent of Tulsa Public Schools, professor and chair of the School of Educational Administration and Research at the University of Tulsa, forty-two years in education. Would that be accurate?

Bruce Howell: That's correct.

JE: Now you have become an historian of sorts for northeast Oklahoma, having written and put out a book not too long ago, which was called?

BH: *Echoes from the Past*, two volumes.

JE: And that was a series of articles that you had done about this area?

BH: Yes. And were published in area newspapers.

JE: You have become an historian because I don't think anybody else has researched this as much as you have. And at this date, you are writing the history of this area, *1806 History of Northeast Oklahoma*. That book, then, will be coming out and that will be different from your previous book?

BH: Yeah, that's a chronological history dating from the time that the first explorer actually discovered Three Forks, down at Muskogee, the confluence of the Grand and Arkansas and Verdigris Rivers.

JE: And that first explorer was?

BH: James Wilkinson. James Wilkinson started actually in Kansas and followed the Arkansas River on what he thought would be a two-week trip to New Orleans on the Arkansas River. And the Arkansas River is so fickle. He started in late October, it froze, it drained out, it filled up, and it took him fifty-four days just to get to Three Forks.

So that's the beginning of a long story.

JE: Well, we have a river here that became a lake as well, the Neosho River, also known as Grand River. We'll get into the names later on. And then, of course, we have Grand Lake O the Cherokees, but those names came about after much discussion. We should say that Grand Lake O the Cherokees is part of the Mississippi River system, which drains into the Gulf of Mexico. And then the lake follows the bed of the Neosho River.

BH: Neosho.

JE: But we start with the vision of a man by the name of Henry Holderman. And I believe he was sixteen when he had a vision. What can you tell us about him?

BH: The family lived in Chetopa, Kansas. Henry Holderman's dad would transport lumber down to Spavinaw, down to the mill at Spavinaw Lynch's Mill. Then they would return with ground grain of different kinds to Chetopa. On his way, of course, he had to cross the Grand River, basically near Pensacola. At the age of sixteen, he began getting this vision, this idea of building a dam somewhere on this river. And, of course, as a sixteen-year-old kid he had

no wherewithal, didn't understand what he was doing, he had some kind of an altercation, I think at Muskogee, that caused him to flee the territory. He ended up in Africa.

I guess he went to India after that. But during his time in India he learned how to build mud dams. And so he had somewhat of a background. And when he returned at the age of eighteen, after three or four years, he and his older brother floated down on a raft the full length of the Neosho River, all the way to Three Forks, the confluence of Arkansas, the Verdigris, and the Grand. He was looking for a place to locate a dam.

His brother had had some education as an engineer, a year or so, and so he had a little background. Believe it or not they almost picked the site where the Pensacola Dam was eventually located. Actually, the site they picked was about three hundred yards further south, on what was determined later became the Seneca Fault. Seneca Fault runs from Seneca, Missouri, to Prior. And when they considered building the dam there some of the workmen were losing their tools in this crevice. So as a result of that they moved the dam further north to its present location.

JE: I think by about three hundred yards.

BH: Three hundred yards.

JE: Which is the reason, I understand, that Langley, the main street doesn't directly butt up and make sense. You might tell them.

BH: Highway 28 was designated to go through Langley, and then directly across the dam. But Langley Main Street was built and then they made this discovery. So now, of course, 28 turns off and passes in front of the GRDA building and crosses further north.

JE: Now Henry was real remarkable because, as you've stated, fourteen and then eighteen, and he spent actually most of his adult life and money pursuing this dream.

BH: Yes, his problem was that he didn't have enough credibility with the banking industry or the money industry. And as a result of that, every time he would set up a corporation, for one reason or another, it would fail. It was Cyrus Avery actually that began the first effort to build a dam.

JE: He wasn't a trained engineer. I guess that was his problem.

BH: That was one of his problems. That's true. Another byline, the guy was also adventuresome. He also took part, for example, when they were looking for a couple of brothers who had shot and killed a deputy marshal, and he joined Ike Gilstrap, who was Deputy Marshal for Judge Parker. They were hunting these fellows down and then Gilstrap got killed during that period and Holderman was one of the posse.

He has a varied background, he always seemed to be in the center of things.

JE: I think he lost the land allotments given him and his wife and children by the Cherokees.

He lost those, borrowed money from his friends, they didn't want anything to do with him.

BH: That's correct.

JE: And then when he went out East, those wealthy capitalist, they didn't want to do it once they learned the dam would be in Indian territory where only Indians could own land.

BH: Well, then he tried a scheme with some Chicago financiers and found what they wanted to do was kite the bond payments. He, in turn, rejected that. So it was a two-way street. Sometimes they rejected him. On at least one occasion he rejected an opportunity to possibly build the dam, although it was a long shot.

JE: Henry Holderman did see his dream come true after all, didn't he?

BH: Oh yes, he finished the lake for ten years after it was formed. It was formed in March of 1940, it was filled the following November. He didn't die for another ten or eleven years.

JE: I think he was seventy-seven when he died, but he died a pauper. And here's a man with this dream—it may have happened without him sometime, but may not have happened when it did.

BH: Well, it was certainly through his constant effort and encouragement, at least to push it along.

JE: Yeah, so we really have to give him full credit for it, we do.

BH: Absolutely. I think he and Bill Holway are the prime characters in this saga.

Chapter 3—3:45

Why Pensacola

John Erling: About Cyrus Avery, he was instrumental with others in forming the Grand River Dam Authority in 1907.

Bruce Howell: True. It eventually faded, along with two or three other attempts by various entities, but he was one of the first. Avery was an entrepreneur of the first water and he saw this as a great opportunity.

JE: And then we can point out the father of Route 66.

BH: Yes.

JE: And as I understand it, Route 66 comes through Tulsa because he was instrumental in making sure it went through Tulsa.

BH: That's my understanding.

JE: So Henry Holderman in 1911 had a plan, along with his wife, Maude, and E. L. Stegall, a banker from Strang, incorporated the Grand River Power and Electric Company with capital stock of five million dollars, but the group did not obtain the necessary financing to proceed. And this led to many, many financial plans, which I think you've already alluded to.

BH: They tried all sorts of plans. There was even an effort to build a canal across the two inlets on Monkey Island and develop something there that would create a mill. There was all kinds of schemes in this area.

JE: And then, this is about the time the stock market crashes, October 29, 1929, so you've got all that as a background.

BH: Yes.

JE: Tough to get somebody to make a venture in an investment.

BH: That's right.

JE: There was a point here that the United States Army Corps of Engineers conducted this study for the development of the Grand River area. And concluded that such a project was not economically justified.

BH: Well, it was a time when their main interest was flood control, not hydraulic dams of one or another. So until Roosevelt became president and eventually the TVA, Tennessee Valley Authority was developed there was really no federal effort to develop hydroelectric dams.

JE: The naming of the dam was Pensacola, and why was that?

BH: Well, Joe Martin had a hundred thousand-acre ranch. His home base was at Cabin Creek, and he named it Pensacola because the family had come from Georgia originally, and apparently had done business in Pensacola, Florida. There was really kind of a hazy question about exactly why the wording "Pensacola," but he had named his ranch Pensacola.

JE: So that's why the town became that?

BH: Yes eventually the town became that. Actually, Pensacola was relocated four times, first at Cabin Creek, then Richard, his son, later built a house, which by the way is still standing west of current Pensacola. And he had a trading post, if you will, on the military road there. And they started a Pensacola post office. And then further, after Richard shot his wife for infidelity and then shot himself, they moved the post office further north to a little community.

And then when Pensacola was organized, where the town is located now, the fellow that organized the town or developed the town convinced the merchant who had the post office at the little church community to move his business and the post office, which is what the guy really wanted, to the current Pensacola. So it has four sites, if you will, finally.

JE: But then naming the dam Pensacola came about—

BH: Because the Corps of Engineers' common practice was to take a geographical point name of a town and use that as a point of reference, if you will.

JE: The towns of Langley and Disney did not exist at that time.

BH: No, no, they came along afterwards.

Chapter 4—3:12**President Roosevelt**

John Erling: But then something happened in Washington, and you've alluded to it, that would benefit the Pensacola Project, and that is, the president Franklin Roosevelt proposed the Tennessee Valley Authority Act in May of 1933.

Bruce Howell: Yes.

JE: And what did that act call for?

BH: Well, it called for the development of a hydroelectric dam the first, and it set the precedent.

JE: So then if the federal government would help water power in the Tennessee River area why wouldn't they do it in other areas of the country as well? So that was a big boon for us.

BH: Well, that was a breakthrough, yes.

JE: Well, there is a point then when members of our state's Washington delegation, Senators Josh Lee, Elmer Thomas, and Wesley Disney asked President Roosevelt for funding of a survey through the War Department in a meeting in July of 1935. But no action took place. Then in 1936, something did happen when President Roosevelt traveled to Texas.

BH: Yes he went to Texas to a rally, and on his return, they returned on the Katy Line up through northeast Oklahoma. The Vinita town fathers had passed some ordinance that all sitting presidents must stop in Vinita on their way through. Which, of course, he didn't have to do that but he honored it and did spend about ten or fifteen minutes on the platform. And he was informed of the potential of the Pensacola Project. From there on it began to catch fire.

JE: They say a crowd of about five thousand gathered there at the M Katy Station in Vinita. Can you imagine how excited everybody was, June 13, 1936?

BH: I can't even imagine there were five thousand people in the region that could get there, but—

JE: Mrs. Roosevelt was with him on the train.

BH: Yes.

JE: In fact, I guess somebody snuck a string of catfish up to them.

BH: Well, there are all kinds of stories about what did or didn't happen then.

JE: So then is it true that George Shaffer, owner of the office supply store, shout from the crowd to the president, "Mr. President, you're now within twelve miles of the proposed site of the Grand River Dam and we want it built"?

BH: Yes, he initiated that conversation after Roosevelt had made a few remarks. That caught Roosevelt's attention and he followed up and said that if it's possible we'll see that it gets done.

JE: So that was a key part of this whole story?

BH: Well, absolutely. I mean, if Roosevelt hadn't come through on the Katy Railroad the prospects of building it would be very slim, because you consider how close the dam was finished at the time the Second World War began. Had it been delayed another couple years the war would have started and all the resources that ordinarily government might have spent on infrastructure would have gone to the military. So there's a very good possibility that if George hadn't shouted out that the timing wouldn't have worked out.

JE: I'm jumping ahead of ourselves but the power from the dam was used in the war effort.

BH: That's true. As a matter of fact, it was off limits to the public during the war and the government actually took the dam over and returned it in 1945.

Chapter 5—2:20

Nay Sayers

John Erling: So \$125,000 was appropriated to perform a survey. So now we had the federal government involved, and that was real key to this.

Bruce Howell: Yes. And Wesley Disney was also a catalyst to be sure that it kept coming.

JE: Then there was an undersecretary of the Interior, L. E. Brulu, who became a strong friend of this proposal. And apparently had the president's ear. He then was speaking to the president about it.

BH: Well, that kept it alive. And, of course, there have been other hydroelectric dams built as a result of that, those sequence of dams. But somebody had to keep the president informed. This wasn't his only project.

JE: Right. We had a war brewing. Well, that was in '37, I guess '39 is when the Germans invaded Poland would be the beginning of that. So this was the lead-up to that.

And I understand the *Tulsa World* carried this quote from Henry Holderman, "Our work has just begun. We've got to unite the cities of Northeastern Oklahoma into making the paradise spot of the nation." Certainly, I would imagine, through this area, whatever towns, there were the naysayers.

BH: Well, the naysayers could not understand why you would want to antedate perfectly good farmland, probably the best farmland in the region because it was river farmland. So there were those that were opposed to it, obviously, and those who were for it.

I think Ray McNaughton's speech that he made. Ray McNaughton became chairman eventually of the GRDA, lawyer. He made comment that this was employing as many at that time as five hundred people and would possibly employ over two thousand. Well, that

was music to the ears of poverty-stricken people in the '30s. That was another turning point. There were arguments pro and con, but the job's argument, as it is today, would be a strong one.

JE: Right. Then many of these people were without electricity, so the promise too of electricity to these towns and rural areas had to be a strong argument.

BH: Well, you have to know that mostly only towns had electricity. Very frequently the electricity was shut off so that power could be rebuilt. It was shut off at nine o'clock at night. So whatever you wanted to do with electric power you did before nine, after that it was lamps.

Chapter 6—6:14

W. R. Holway

John Erling: Then enters the man you've referenced, W. R. Holway. He too was very young as he began to become interested in the construction of dams. I believe he was fourteen years old.

Bruce Howell: Actually it was a canal.

JE: Oh?

BH: In the Northeast, around Cape Cod. He grew up in that area and eventually received his degree, I believe, at MIT. Shortly thereafter matriculated to Tulsa.

JE: An interesting thing about him is that he fell in love with his high school teacher.

BH: Hope was seven years older than he was and she was a high school teacher and she might have been even principal of the school. She also played in a local dance band; I think one of his brothers or sisters was involved. So he would, as a kid, go to the dances and he would get the last dance with Hope. This, of course, wasn't going to work out at the time, so after he graduated from college he returned home, proposed to Hope, she accepted, and they were married. And that was a very happy relationship.

JE: And she was Frances Hope Kerr. By the way, we should point out, he probably came back here to this area and to Tulsa only because of Hope.

BH: Possibly.

JE: This man contributed so much to our area, but because of his love for this woman that he came back.

BH: Yes.

JE: What was interesting about Mr. Holway is he was an agnostic, became the second president of the Unitarian Church in Tulsa.

BH: And, of course, Hope was honored with having a second Unitarian church named there in her honor.

JE: Right. They were founders of All Souls Unitarian and then Hope Unitarian is named in honor of her.

BH: That's correct.

JE: Is it true then that Mr. Holway came to Tulsa in 1918 to take charge of the water filtration system?

BH: Yeah, the Arkansas.

JE: Of the Arkansas River?

BH: Right.

JE: And that's when he then began to design a new water supply system for Tulsa.

BH: Yes. He also gained a reputation internationally; he did work out of the country as well. He was quite an exceptional individual as far as his knowledge of water resources and the dams and things of that nature.

Then he came back, they had a need for a water supply. The town fathers in Tulsa were well aware that if their city was going to grow they had to find more water than they had access to at the time. And his idea seemed laughable at the time.

JE: And that idea was?

BH: It was gravity flow. He contended that there was a water source, the Spavinaw Creek in Eastern Oklahoma, that could be dammed. Originally people didn't think that was possible, but eventually he convinced enough of the power structure that it could be done. A fifty-four-mile, I believe, channel was developed gravity flow by 1924.

JE: Let's point out that Tulsa was getting their water from the Arkansas River.

BH: Which was salty.

JE: Yeah. It was not very good.

BH: No, well, it was right out of the Cimarron, if you will, in all—

JE: Right.

BH: Right out of the western part of Kansas and all of those points west. Yeah.

JE: And, of course, members of the Tulsa Water Commission doubted that the water would actually flow that far from Spavinaw to Tulsa.

BH: But, fortunately, it did. There are other all kinds of stories about Calvin Coolidge pushing the button that started the water-flow. Whether that actually happened or not is questionable because actually I think the button was pushed at the Spavinaw. But nevertheless, some politician convinced the president that he needed to be involved in this.

JE: As Chamber of Commerce people might do this was a publicity stunt by this man by the name of Charles Border. He wanted national publicity and he asked W. R. Holway to put

his fifteen thousand dollar check in a waterproof container, let it flow through the gravity line to Tulsa.

BH: He dropped it in at the last well spot before it popped up in Lake Yahola.

JE: And then he asked President Calvin Coolidge to press this button. Well, that was just the stunt because you're right, the gates were hand-operated. They placed the box in the Mohawk Reservoir and then twentieth century Fox Newsreel comes along and films all this and the publicity stunt let them believe that that actually happened, but it didn't.

BH: Anyway, Tulsa got its water, and that was the main objective. And that did bear fruit.

JE: It's interesting for Tulsans to know that, but the experience that Mr. Holway gained from that helped them then for the Pensacola Dam.

BH: Yes. Of course, he not only built a dam eventually, but I think another remarkable experiment, I believe there was only one other pump back in the United States. Pump backs were familiar to Europeans, that is, when the water-flow diminishes at the dam, why you have a reservoir by previously pumping water to a higher level.

And so, later when he constructed Kerr Dam and built Lake Hudson he built what was called the Salina Pump Back. The W. R. Holway Lake is a reservoir for the times when the water gets low in the dam, they can release that water from a higher level and generate electricity that way.

So the man was brilliant in many respects.

JE: I understand members of the Klu Klux Klan wanted him to fire some of the engineers because they attended the Roman Catholic Church.

BH: Well, he obviously ignored that. As a matter of fact, Holway ignored everyone's advice but his own. He started from that premise, and for the most part, he was usually right. That just strengthened his resolve, and, of course, he booted the Klu Klux Klan off and they didn't succeed in their demands at all.

But I might say as an aside, at that time they were a very powerful entity in Oklahoma. They ruled the roost in many communities and I guess they thought at the time they were going to rule Holway. No one did.

Chapter 7—2:55

GRDA

John Erling: We talk about people coming up from Mexico, laborers didn't want to do the cement work on the dam, but they protested and they ran off the Mexican workers that were brought in to do the work.

Bruce Howell: As I say, there are all kinds of sidebars here. People were supposed to have fallen in the cement and died and things like that. It's sometimes hard to separate fact from fiction.

JE: Yeah. I think you've alluded to this already, but I'm going to cover it anyway. They were taking core samples at the site for the dam, proposed by the Army Corps of Engineers, and that's when the drillers found their tools slipping away into the ground.

BH: In the Seneca Fault, yes.

JE: And it actually penetrated the roof of a cave, which was as large as a good-size storeroom and was very close to the Seneca Fault line.

BH: Yeah. It certainly gave them cause for pause to say, "Well, I don't think we want to build a heavy dam over this fault. And so that's when they moved it.

JE: Three hundred yards north of the original site.

There's a lot of yin and yang that we're not getting into here, GRDA and arguments and fights and so forth, which maybe would be boring, but it probably didn't go slowly as we're talking about. Many hurdles of ownership, finally the GRDA was considered owner, a legal state agency.

BH: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: This went to the state Supreme Court, you had all that fighting going on.

BH: There was obviously a tug and pull between the private corporations, private electric corporations, and the possibility of having a public entity that would generate electricity. And so, as usual in politics, what you see isn't what you're getting. What you see is people obstructing the efforts of other people. But the real rationale isn't known, and the real rationale here was simply that this was going to cut into the profits of private electrical companies.

So the governor and others became involved in this.

JE: And, consequently, some of the governors then perhaps, their campaigns had been contributed to by some of these electric companies?

BH: Some things never change, John.

JE: No they don't. They—

BH: They never change.

JE: No they don't. So—

BH: They're bought and paid for and they have to produce—

JE: Right.

BH: ...or they leave office.

JE: Governor Philips, I think, was one of those that was against it.

BH: Yes.

JE: But once it was decided that it was a legal state agency then that kicked off a huge celebration in Vinita and in Ketchum and in Disney.

BH: Well, certainly. By this time, the locals had caught the vision; the jobs, the potential, the recreational center here in Northeast Oklahoma, in addition to the electricity, of course. I always hie back to something that J. Howard Langley wrote. He said he would rather buy his cotton socks from mills in Oklahoma than Massachusetts.

And, of course, J. Howard was the first chairman, briefly, of the GRDA.

Chapter 8—3:04

January 13, 1938

John Erling: All told then, the Pensacola Project included the dam, the main spillway, two auxiliary spillways, a powerhouse, a switchyard, and an observation house. The dam was 150 feet high.

Bruce Howell: And a mile long.

JE: And a mile long, right.

BH: It was patterned after the Buchanan Dam in Texas, which is kind of unique. You can see the uniqueness, it's not as you would assume any dam would like, with the bubbles on the back and on the downside of the dam.

JE: Wasn't it known that it's the longest multiple-arch dam that was built in the United States?

BH: That's correct, yes. But it was patterned after the Buchanan Dam.

JE: So then the first dirt for the excavation was moved on January 13, 1938.

BH: And the dam was opened, that is, the spillway was closed on March of 1940. And believe it or not, they had two years of drought in Kansas, where there was hardly any rainfall during that whole period. So that they could proceed with clearing the land the water would cover. Also it expedited the building of the dam, which was, by the way, on a twenty-four/seven basis.

Things went well and the spring that the dam gate was finally closed, March, became one of the heaviest rainfalls in Kansas and Missouri.

JE: Hmm.

BH: And the lake was filled by the following December.

JE: Following a timeline, by the end of November '39, concrete had been poured in 77 percent of the main dam. All of the main spillways, twenty-seven buttresses and twenty-two arches, 453,000 cubic yards of concrete had been poured through December of '39. And then the hydraulic turbines, governor's valves, and generators were installed at the powerhouse by January 26 of 1940. And then, as you said, the final openings in the dam were closed March 21 of 1940.

BH: You know, there's a little byline story on that between Philips and Holway.

JE: Governor Philips that we referred to.

BH: Yes, Red Philips. Apparently Ray McNaughton and Philips had an agreement that Philips would be notified when the final gate was to be closed. Apparently, W. R. Holway was concerned that Philips was going to in some way delay the opening because he was still not happy with the payment that the government had made for the roads and bridges. As a matter of fact, he had sued the government for eight hundred thousand dollars, in addition to whatever amount they had already given. So Holway was fearful that Philips would in some way delay it. So he ordered the dam to be closed.

When Philips heard about this he made the remark that Holway snuck down and closed the gates without permission. That he had specifically talked to Ray McNaughton about this.

Holway said he had talked to McNaughton, but he hadn't talked to me.

JE: Right. As we've already said, nothing changes.

Chapter 9—7:47

Clearing of the Land

John Erling: So then, Mr. Holway reported August 13, 1940, to the GRDA board that the dam was completed. At that time the lake elevation was 713.3 feet above sea level. Twenty-one thousand acres north of the dam were covered by water, and by the end of 1940, 27,000 of the eventual 46,500 officially then built October 23, 1940.

Bruce Howell: That's right.

JE: There still were issues at the GRDA that needed to be worked out before the water could come in. Land had to be acquired and towns were flooded.

Let's talk about the acquiring and clearing of the land.

BH: Of course, the pushback against the clearing of the land was the value of the land. There isn't question that it was fertile soil, so the farmers, as anyone would do, thought their land was worth much more than the GRDA thought it was worth. Eventually the GRDA would win those battles.

There was also the issue of exhuming bodies from cemeteries, moving them. The two towns that were inundated were Old Bernice and Echo. Echo is underneath what is now Echo Bay, as you're approaching Monkey Island on the left. And Old Bernice, in the low water in the fall you can still see some of the foundation from Old Bernice.

Now Old Bernice, interestingly enough, had been the Needmore. Needmore was roughly a mile east of the Baptist church on Monkey Island. It was a small community. And then when the railroad was built in 1912, Bernice was founded, Old Bernice was founded, and the people from Needmore matriculated the mile or so over to Old Bernice.

Then when the lake was inundated, they moved Old Bernice to Bernice as we know it today, New Bernice, I guess we'd call it. The MOG railroad track, which is now part of the highway that runs through Bernice was the original railroad track after it had been moved. The railroad tracks runs then on down to Littlefield's Corner and on beyond over to Copeland Switch.

So those two towns were inundated. I guess the one thing that we lost in that inundation was in Bernice when the original Highway 59 went on both sides of the town pump in Old Bernice. So we lost that feature when it was inundated.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative). Oil pipelines had to be moved. There was an Ajax pipeline and Shell pipeline near Wyandotte, across the Grand River Valley had to be relocated.

BH: Those had to be relocated because of the Spring and the Neosho Rivers just south of there where those rivers join and form what we call the Grand River. Obviously it inundated that area and they had to move those.

JE: Telephone lines obviously had to be inundated. The GRDA provided a new intake pumping station and filter plant for Grove. Which brings up an interesting story because as this whole project was developing they needed a bridge to be built at Grove.

BH: Well, before the Sailboat Bridge, is what you're referring to was built, it was a long haul around the lake, either to go east almost through Arkansas, or west, which of course, would be all the way to Pensacola almost. So the construction of the bridge, which the governor laughingly called Sailboat Bridge because of the arch. And it was built, as a matter of fact, so boats could get under it.

What most people weren't aware of was that after the bridge was constructed the state government was supposed to build the approaches to the bridge, which Philips kept delaying and delaying and delaying. So here sat this bridge without any approaches, until finally the good citizens of Grove filled it in themselves so they could get across on the shortcut to Copeland Switch. That's the way they finally got connected to the rest of the world.

JE: Pointing out again that Sailboat Bridge was named in a derogatory manner by Governor Philips.

BH: Oh absolutely.

JE: And it stuck.

BH: Yes. He was not a fan of the whole project.

JE: So then when we think about inundating this area we've got all these trees and underbrush, and you might have thought, *That's no big deal, we don't have to move these trees, we can just flood them.* But that was not to be.

BH: That was not to be. And that's different, interestingly enough, than we'll say Keystone Lake, where they didn't cut the trees to the bottom. A lot of those logs continue to float up from time to time as they rot away. Certainly I've sailed on Keystone Lake enough with my rudder down to know that there are logs under there in Salt Creek and other places.

Here they burned, they cut trees, they used equipment to clear out the land and did a good job of clearing the brush, burning the brush, and so forth. They were working on that, literally, up until the gates were closed.

JE: Hmm. And then you'd see the smoke in this area for a long, long time. One person said the air smoky for two or three years.

BH: Well, of course, because they were burning thousands of acres of timber.

I know as I stand on the overlook where I live and look at Grand Lake and try to envision where the river actually flowed and where the meadows would have been in that area, and you consider as you look at the trees surrounding the lake that the same was occurring right up to the river itself. And all those had to be cut. And all the brush had to be cleared. It was an enormous task. Building the dam was the premiere objective but clearing the land was certainly an enormous accomplishment.

JE: Most of 48,780 acres in four counties involve private properties owned, obviously by individuals. Most of that land is where we are right now in Delaware County.

BH: Yes. And, of course, there's still the complaint at Miami about the backup and the potential flooding as a result of the lake being built. And that contention is still going on. It started then and it continues today.

JE: Wow. Some eight hundred graves, as we talked about, had to be relocated. Two thousand separate settlements, many of them taken to court.

BH: Well, another byline on the graves is the effort by the University of Oklahoma to excavate prehistoric sites. One in Woodward Hollow was of particular interest because apparently during prehistoric times the gatherers would come up from the southern part of the state and spend the summers here gathering berries and whatever else. In many cases they housed themselves in caves at Woodward Hollow. Woodward Hollow turned out to be a treasure trove, unbeknownst to folks until the time came to almost antedate the lake, and so they frantically cleared out hundreds of skeletons and other artifacts that would be inundated shortly by the river.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

BH: Those are housed right now at the Museum of Natural History at Norman.

JE: You talked about the farmers, they weren't getting the price they wanted, they were getting \$35 to \$85 an acre. But many could not buy land at that price, so this didn't always work for everybody.

BH: No. It wasn't a smooth road, let's put it that way.

Chapter 10—2:10**Groveport**

John Erling: But then there was a man who had a vision to put a port there.

Bruce Howell: Yeah, this is an interesting kind of a byline. Of course, everybody began to see this as a recreational venue for the whole Midwest. And so, Walter Eaton developed what he called Groveport, which was on the south side of the current Sailboat Bridge. Groveport was also to be a port where large planes, seagoing planes could land.

The Chinese Clipper was popular in those days as it went across the Pacific. And his vision was at the time, and this was, of course, before the Second World War, that this could be a transcontinental stop for large flying boats, as well as other planes with the capacity to land on water. He thought it could be a military coup, if you will.

So he built Groveport with the idea that it would be a recreational spot, but also it could serve these other capacities. And in so doing he thought he would embellish the place by building a sand beach around Groveport, which promptly disappeared the following spring during the first flood and ended up somewhere north of the dam. So the whole project never came to fruition because about this time the Second World War began and, of course, the military didn't use flying boats.

JE: Yeah, not all dreams come true, do they? Just the ones that apparently they're well thought out.

BH: Eaton's dream didn't come true. He had no idea that the Japanese were going to attack Pearl Harbor.

JE: Right. And then relocating railroads too and highways was a practi—

BH: Well, that was burr under the governor's saddle, that they weren't paying enough for those accoutrements that had been built by the state and funded by the state. So he wanted more money and, as a matter of fact, sued the federal government for eight hundred thousand dollars and, ironically, shortly after Philips died the government paid up eight hundred thousand dollars to the state of Oklahoma, in addition to whatever they had paid in the past.

Chapter 11—0:58**Lives Lost**

John Erling: About workers, I understand there were thirteen workers that were killed during the construction of the dam.

Bruce Howell: Yes. Most of them they fell or were crushed. You know, the guy did it, they fell in the dam, never materialized.

JE: Yeah there was that old wives' tale that they fell into the wet concrete, which wasn't true. But one was killed by a tree falling on him. Another one killed on a conveyer. Another a truck drove over him. The boom of a crane dropped on him, and others slipped and fell from a construction trestle.

BH: Well, you know, there were over two thousand workers on the dam. They were working on the dam twenty-four hours a day. It was probably one of the first lighted projects where they worked all night long. And obviously those accidents would occasionally occur.

JE: So the dam itself took how long?

BH: Well, the dam itself too two years, and the twenty million dollars, which is a laughable figure in today's terms.

Chapter 12—4:35

The Name Game

John Erling: Selection of the name Grand lake, official name is Grand Lake O the Cherokees. I understand Henry Holderman, whose dream it was for the lake to happen, suggested Lake Marian in honor of his father.

Bruce Howell: Well, there were, of course, a lot of names suggested, but since this was Cherokee country it seemed logical to honor the Cherokees in that respect.

JE: Indian Lake was thought of as Langley Lake, Will Rogers Lake, Wiley Post Lake. The *Tulsa Tribune* and the *Vinita Daily Journal* conducted a contest for names. Six hundred entries came in on March 22, 1940. Then we had Margaret Buffington Warner, the forty-seven-year-old medical secretary from Vinita.

BH: Named the lake O the Cherokees.

JE: Right. No one seems to know what she meant by the abbreviation "O." Might have been Lake of the Cherokees. And she never came real clear, I don't think, on that.

BH: I think that's for scholars to debate.

JE: Some believe the name meant Lake over the Cherokees. The lake is likely over some Cherokee graves that were not identified. The lake was located in the heart of the Cherokee Nation allotment, so it's where the name came from.

BH: Again, it's one of those things that you can discuss when you don't have absolutely anything else to talk about.

JE: And then the lake became better known as Grand Lake. However, the official name of the river is not Grand River.

BH: That's true, it's Neosho.

JE: Neosho River.

BH: By the way, Neosho itself had something in the neighborhood of twelve names by various French, Spanish, and Indian tribes. They named the Bull River, Six Bulls.

JE: Before it was officially named Neosho?

BH: Yes. Neosho, I believe, is an Osage word.

JE: I understand it means "clear" or "bright water."

BH: Um-hmm (affirmative). This was Osage country originally. The Osage were in this part of the world from roughly 1300 and absolutely owned everything from the Missouri River to the Red River, essentially from the Mississippi to the Rocky Mountains. And these Osage tribesmen were fierce fighters, six to seven feet tall. If looking at them wouldn't scare the opponents to death the fighting would be something else.

They absolutely owned the territory, but when the United States government started inundating them with Western Cherokees, Eastern Cherokees, the other civilized tribes, and white people, finally, they were just overwhelmed by numbers. But a lot of these names that we have are Osage oriented.

JE: And then Grand may have come from the French word—

BH: Yeah.

JE: ...meaning big, great, or large.

BH: Right. As a matter of fact, I think Jean Shoto would call it "La River Grande."

JE: Okay.

BH: La River Grande.

JE: All right.

BH: He was one of the first.

JE: But then the Osages, were they pushed then? We have Osage County and the Osages were dominant in that area of Oklahoma.

BH: In 1836, the government formally treated with them to move them to Kansas because they had just literally been run out. They hadn't fought back and there had been all kinds of clashes between the Cherokee and the other tribes. But by 1836, they agreed to move to Kansas, and then some way they ended back up in Osage County.

JE: There's still controversy about the name Grand Lake O the Cherokees, or Grand Lake, so finally, in an effort to resolve, now we're getting into modern time. The issue, the Oklahoma Board of Geographic Names recommended Grand Lake O the Cherokees as the official name. I notice they made a capital "O" and Ms. Warner had a small "o," which is a small thing that we can discuss later at another time. But it's something I noticed.

But anyway, they make it the Cherokee as the official name.

BH: Discuss that over drinks.

JE: They suggested that Grand Lake be the recommended version of the name to be used on maps and publications. So this is interesting, it was in 1995 that the Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt officially informed Oklahoma Governor Frank Keating that the federal government had accepted the name change as recommended by the state board. And so in '95, the whole thing that is completed.

BH: Well, we're pleased to see once again that the government moves slowly but accurately.

Chapter 13—5:12

The Land Becomes a Lake

John Erling: Then overall we should point out that the project was a major economic boon to Northeastern Oklahoma, and it changed the lives of many citizens.

Bruce Howell: Absolutely. Consider all the jobs it has created as a result of the tourism influx and recreations. Right now I think one of the big problems is getting out-of-state tourists to understand that Grand Lake is here as they drive down I-44. And hopefully this new venue over in Vinita, the Glass House renovation, will acquaint these people.

I understand twenty thousand cars or trucks pass under that venue every day, six thousand stop. Surely if more effort would be made to get visibility for the Grand Lake area there it would encourage more of them to come over and see it.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative). Many of us who use the lake for water and all, we think they did it for recreation, and they didn't. It was for generating power.

BH: Yeah.

JE: That was number one. And then flood control. And recreation was the least of what they were trying to provide.

BH: Well, the Grand River Dam Authority and the Corps actually share responsibility for the dam and the lake level. If the lake level reach flood proportion it becomes the authority of the major organization. And otherwise it belongs to Grand River Dam Authority.

JE: So the day finally arrives, October 3, 1940, and GRDA board chairman Ray McNaughton of Miami flips the handle on a small master switch at the power plant below the dam. And that's when all the volts of energy surged into the big, four, giant transformers of the dam. And the first hydroelectric facility of its type in Oklahoma was operational. So reasonably priced electric power was available in Northeastern Oklahoma.

BH: That's the story and it didn't change until the coal facility was built down by Prior and Shoto. And now a majority of the electricity is generated there.

- JE:** The GRDA, they have to deal with recreational issues, but nobody realized when the GRDA was formed how much the recreation was going to be a part of the GRDA board.
- BH:** Or residences on the lake, you know. There's still a daily dispute, arguments about who can build what, where, in terms of the GRDA requirements and the Corps requirements. So it's residences as well as recreation that is a whole venue that the original board didn't even think about.
- JE:** Right. Nearly two months earlier before October 30, 1940, the road across the dam had been opened and hundreds crossed the dam on the afternoon of August 13, 1940. It created a major, major celebration when that happened. The entire Pensacola Project was completed in three years, four months, twenty-six days, if you consider the start of the project to be September 16, 1937, when President Roosevelt signed the twenty million dollar appropriation bill. And the finish of the project, March 14, 1941, when the contract for the Observation House was completed, that's the span of time.
- BH:** And then shortly thereafter the government took it over because of the Second World War.
- JE:** So on May 10, 1947, the official dedication ceremony, the greatest massing, they say, of watercraft ever conducted in Oklahoma. An estimated fifty expensive cabin cruisers maneuvered near the dam and control station.
- BH:** It was probably a marvelous sight of old boats, classic boats, and I would have liked to have been there.
- JE:** I would too. You're a classic old boat fan, I know.
- BH:** Former.
- JE:** Former? And I'm former too, by the way. I had one, probably not as classic as what they're talking about. But right now we get hundreds of boats in Duck Creek for the fireworks. That's a massive picture, a very impressive picture. They're not all expensive boats, but from the smallest to the largest we gather for the Duck Creek fireworks celebration.
- BH:** I'm constantly amazed that somebody doesn't get killed—
- JE:** Yeah.
- BH:** ...in that melee when they leave.
- JE:** When they leave. But somehow everything slows down and everybody is so respectful.
- BH:** I think it's out of fear.
- JE:** Right. Yeah, you're right, exactly, you're protecting yourself. So there's the story of this part of the country. You came out of the Midwest.
- BH:** I came out of Iowa, yes.
- JE:** And I came out of North Dakota. I guess they're pretty much landlocked and we didn't have many lakes up there.
- BH:** We had one of importance, Lake Okoboji.
- JE:** Yeah.

BH: Which is a blue water lake, by the way.

JE: And I sampled some lakes in Minnesota. So we gravitated here to this part in Northeastern Oklahoma, it's called Green Country. There was a purpose for it because the rest of the state is not as green as we are over here. Now does the western part of the state, they have lakes, but they certainly don't have what we have here in Grand Lake.

BH: No, this is a remarkable corner of the universe, as far as I'm concerned.

Chapter 14—2:40

They Never Gave Up

John Erling: So can we give credit here, as we wrap up our discussion, to Henry Holderman?

Bruce Howell: And W. R. Holway.

JE: Yes.

BH: I think those two men had the foresight, and in one case the ability and the other to create something that is everlasting for generations.

JE: And they withstood controversy, naysayers, they kept their eye on their vision and didn't sway one bit.

BH: That's correct. It's amazing as you look back and consider the tenacity that Holderman had and the ability that Holway had and they didn't even know each other at the time.

JE: Yeah. There ought to be a place you put up statues of these men somewhere.

BH: Yeah. Are you familiar with Holway Point?

JE: I'm not.

BH: You just go up here past Duck Creek and on your right, as you're heading to Drowning Creek is Holway Point.

JE: Okay.

BH: He bought, I don't know, a hundred acres there before the lake was filled, or during the time. They have a home over there. Polly was there. Her husband, Donald. She invited me to her home in Tulsa. Donald died and she had this book that Hope had written on the history of the family. And I've got a copy, she gave it to me.

JE: Hmm.

BH: It's really fascinating.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

BH: Because it goes into the details of their life on Cape Cod. It details about how they met and so forth.

JE: Yeah.

BH: But you probably looked at the volume that she wrote on Grand Lake that he has authored. She actually did a lot of the work on that book.

JE: And then we should give credit here to the book, *Grand Lake, the Crown Jewel of Oklahoma* that was written by Jim Weeks. You knew Jim Weeks and, in fact, you were involved in some of this book.

BH: To the extent that we were trying to promote it after Jim's death, Mickey, his wife, and I. And finally succeeded in getting that done. It's a story that needed to be told, and it needed to be told only the way Jim Weeks could tell it.

JE: Yeah. If you go to our bookstore or on our website, voicesofoklahoma.com, you'll see this book there. It'll show you how that book may be obtained.

Bruce, I want to thank you for helping us tell this story. You told this story, I think I'm going to officially proclaim you an historian. I know that wasn't your field. You shy away from that because you say you just read and talk about it. Well, so do all historians, I believe.

Thank you. It was a delight and I appreciate your comments today.

BH: Thank you. It's a pleasure to chat with you.

JE: Thank you.

Chapter 15—0:33

Conclusion

Announcer: This oral history presentation is made possible through the support of our generous foundation-funders. We encourage you to join them by making your donation, which will allow us to record future stories. Students, teachers, and librarians are using this website for research and the general public is listening everyday to these great Oklahoman's share their life experience. Thank you for your support as we preserve Oklahoma's legacy one voice at a time on VoicesofOklahoma.com.