

Fort Peck Project

Indian Projects

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The Fort Peck Project

Introduction

Under its initial phase, from 1908 to 1924, the Fort Peck Project never came to substantial fruition. Similar to other Indian irrigation projects, Fort Peck suffered from a lack of foresight as to the needs of the residents.¹ Many of the Sioux and Assiniboines of the reservation had limited interest in becoming farmers. At the same time, the project area had few enticements for white settlers. Yet providing irrigation water seemed to offer one solution to the unattractive locale. Ironically, the region experienced a dreadfully dry climate in the face of the plentiful Missouri River that ran along the southern border of the reservation. Reconciling the desire to aid Indians with their lack of interest proved difficult. In the end, more whites found opportunities in the Fort Peck Project than Indians, and mostly in livestock, not agriculture. Finally, the cost to benefit ratio simply did not pan out; although the total amount spent on Fort Peck remained small, the price tag in proportion to the acreage irrigated was dramatically lopsided. Despite these limitations, both Indians and whites benefitted to a certain extent. The Sioux and Assiniboine found work and received income on the project, while white residents established homes and ranches on inexpensive land that many Indians did not want. The history of Federal reclamation on the Fort Peck Project provides a clear illustration of the endurance required for living in the American West.

Project Location

Located on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation in Valley County in northeastern Montana, the Fort Peck Project covers an irrigable area of approximately 32,000 acres. The Missouri

1. For more information on the Indian Projects, see Garrit Voggeser, *The Indian Projects* Bureau of Reclamation History Program, Research on Historic Reclamation Projects (Denver, Colorado, 2001) and the other individual histories on the Blackfeet, Crow, Flathead, and San Carlos Projects.

River bounds the project on the south, the Milk River and Big Porcupine Creek on the west, a line parallel to and five miles south of the eighth parallel on the north, and Big Muddy Creek on the east. The water supply includes the Missouri and Poplar Rivers, and Wolf, Big Porcupine, Little Porcupine, and Big Muddy Creeks with an 85,000 square mile drainage basin. Project proposals included six divisions or units: Frazer-Wolf (Missouri River), Little Porcupine, Big Porcupine (Wiota), Poplar River, and Big Muddy. Reclamation characterized the soils of the irrigable land as heavy clay, loam, and “gumbo,” or variegated, and primarily free from alkali. The Missouri River Valley region of the project is flat, and the land closer to the river is a few feet higher than that of the more distant lands.²

Historic Setting

Pre-Contact

The early realm of the Assiniboines included an area from the Hudson Bay and present-day Minnesota on the east to the Rocky Mountains on the west, and from north of Lake Superior to the southern regions of the Dakotas and present-day Montana. Most ethnologists agree that the Assiniboines came from Siouan stock, originally Yanktonai, who separated from the parent stem only shortly before the arrival of a substantial number of Europeans. The period of separation probably occurred after the arrival of Columbus to the Americas and before 1600. Pressured by the Chippewa, Cree, and the Sioux, the Assiniboines moved north and east from the headwaters of the Mississippi. According to the first recorded contact with traders and Jesuit

2. DOI, USBR, *Fort Peck Project History, 1909*, Records of the Bureau of Reclamation, Record Group 115, National Archives and Records Administration – Rocky Mountain Region (Denver, Colorado), 7; DOI, USBR, *Eighth Annual Report of the Reclamation Service, 1908-1909* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1910), 94-6; DOI, USBR, *Ninth Annual Report of the Reclamation Service, 1909-1910* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1911), 146; DOI, BIA, *Water Supply for Three Operating Units of Fort Peck Indian Irrigation Project, Fort Peck Indian Reservation, Montana*, 30 June 1962, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Record Group 75, National Archives and Records Administration – Rocky Mountain Region (Denver, Colorado), 190-1.

missionaries in the late-1600s, the Assiniboines had come to dominate an area around Lake Winnipeg.³

The Sioux that ultimately ended up on the Fort Peck Reservation came from the westernmost Sioux tribes of the Yanktonai and Teton groups whose original territory overlapped into present-day Montana. The territory of the great Sioux Nation covered a vast area of the Great Plains north of the Platte River in Nebraska. The Sioux lived along the western edges of the Great Lakes region and throughout the upper Mississippi woodlands. Invasions by and hostilities with the Chippewa eventually pushed them westward to an area reaching from western Minnesota to eastern Montana and Wyoming.⁴

Post-Contact

By the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries, constant pressure from the French and British moving in from the Hudson Bay region pushed the Assiniboines farther and farther westward. In the eighteenth century, observers noted two groups of Assiniboines. One consisted of a more “vigorous western group” who hunted buffalo, ranged over a larger territory, and were more warlike. The second included a more “sedentary eastern group” who lived closer to the Great Lakes region, subsisted on moose, deer, and wild rice, and generally had more peaceful relations with other tribes. Some traders commented that the western group hunted fur-bearing animals for trade and the eastern group served as the middlemen to acquire vegetables, metal items, and firearms. The acquisition of the horse in the 1740s or 1750s allowed the tribe to range over a wider area, and they shifted farther west and to the south into the territory of the Blackfeet, Sioux, Mandan, and other Missouri River tribes. After 1750, the Assiniboines had

3. Michael Stephen Kennedy, ed., *The Assiniboines: From the Accounts of the Old Ones Told To First Boy (James Larpenteur Long)* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961), xx, xxiv, xxvi, xxviii; Michael P. Malone and Richard B. Roeder, *Montana: A History of Two Centuries* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1976), 14.

4. Malone and Roeder, 15.

many of the characteristics of the typical Plains tribes that centered on the use of buffalo.⁵

By the time of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, and probably prior to, the Assiniboines reached their peak population. In the 1820s, they numbered close to 28,000, including more than 7,000 warriors and 3,000 lodges – possibly a population larger than any other tribe at that time. Unfortunately, the glory days of the Assiniboines soon shattered. About that time, traders carried a series of smallpox epidemics to the tribe. In 1829, they numbered only about 8,000. They contracted the epidemic again in 1837, probably at Fort Union located on the later Montana-North Dakota border, and “died by the hundreds.” In 1843, the Indian Service placed their population at a mere 7,000. By the time government officials summoned the leaders of the Great Plains tribes to gather at Fort Laramie in 1851, the Assiniboines were more than ready to make a deal.⁶

From the early eighteenth century onward, pressure from Euro-Americans and other tribes increasingly pushed the Sioux further to the west, but they still laid claim to a massive territory stretching from the eastern Dakotas through the Black Hills and to the eastern expanses of Montana and Wyoming. The stretches of plains and inter-mountain West offered the Sioux a plethora of wild game for nourishment, including buffalo, elk, antelope, deer, and numerous other small mammals. To supplement their diet, and in times of scarcity, the tribe gathered roots, wild artichokes, wild peas, berries, and various other edible plants. Undoubtedly, the buffalo played a primary role not only in the Sioux diet, but in their material and spiritual culture. Known for their strength in battle and dominance of other Plains tribes, by the early-nineteenth century, the tribe included about 2,360 lodges and numbering close to 12,000. By the mid-1800s, the Sioux figured very largely in the character of the state of Montana, and perhaps

5. Kennedy, xxviii, xxx-xxxi; Malone and Roeder, 14.

6. Kennedy, xxxvii, xlvi; Malone and Roeder, 47, 87-8.

became best known for being among the last holdouts, most notably Sitting Bull and his band of Hunkpapa, from the encroachments of white Americans.⁷

The Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851 assigned a large tract of northeastern Montana to the Assiniboine, and later, bands of the Montana Sioux would join them on that reservation. In general, the treaty set the precedent for all future consignments of and reductions in the amount of land designated for each particular tribe. Confining the Sioux proved much more difficult. What historians commonly call the “Sioux Problem” amounted to a complex conflict between white Americans and the Sioux over the surging thrust of settlers into tribal territory. Most importantly, the Sioux resented the presence of whites in their “prized hunting lands” and the resulting disruption of their buffalo grounds. Hostilities, costing a great number of lives on both sides, erupted as settlers poured into Wyoming and Montana along the Bozeman Road. The travel route crossed key hunting lands along the Powder, Tongue, and Big Horn Rivers that the Sioux and the Crow considered their own. In the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868, the Sioux got what they wanted with the closing of the road, while the Federal Government persuaded them to accept a reservation centered in the Black Hills, consisting mainly of all of present-day South Dakota west of the Missouri River.⁸

The treaties settled most of the violence and other problems for several years. In 1873, the Federal Government assigned the Assiniboines and several bands of Sioux to an agency at Fort Peck near the confluence of the Milk and Missouri Rivers. An executive order by President Ulysses S. Grant in the same year set aside a vast territory for the Blackfeet, Gros Ventre, Assiniboines, and Sioux tribes, including all of northern Montana from the continental divide to

7. Edwin Thompson Denig, *Five Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri: Sioux, Arickaras, Assiniboines, Crees, and Crows*, ed. John C. Ewers (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961), 3-4, 10-5; Malone and Roeder, 15.

8. Malone and Roeder, 88, 94, 96-7.

the Dakota border, and with a southern boundary running along the Missouri and Sun Rivers. As historians Michael Malone and Richard Roeder observed, “This arrangement...meant the narrowing of horizons and a deepening dependence upon the federal government.” The “arrangement” eliminated some of the best hunting grounds and forced a deeper reliance on government rations.

The Black Hills gold boom of the 1870s spoiled the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty and once again exacerbated the animosity of the Sioux. As whites streamed into their territory, many Sioux headed west to join non-treaty bands in Yellowstone country. The conflict culminated in possibly the most recognized event in the history of the American West – the defeat of George Armstrong Custer at the battle of the Little Big Horn. Despite this memorable achievement, retribution by Federal troops in the next several years quickly “subdued” the Sioux. By 1881, the majority of Sioux had surrendered and reluctantly trudged to their designated reservations. The Montana tribes ceded much of their great reservation north of the Missouri in return for long-term annuities, and in 1889, the Montana Sioux joined the Assiniboinés at Fort Peck.⁹

Like most Indians, adjustment to reservation life did not come easy for the Fort Peck Tribes. Confined to a remote and isolated region and no longer able to count on buffalo and other wild game, the Assiniboinés and Sioux had few opportunities for income besides stockraising and meager crop production. In 1908, the Indian Service began allotment only to realize that the reservation held valuable coal deposits. The Federal Government ultimately reserved most of the lands with coal deposits for the benefit of the tribes. That same year, the Department of the Interior endorsed an irrigation project at Fort Peck in contemplation of improving the tribes’ chances for stability via agriculture. A short seven years later, the Indian

9. *Ibid.*, 91-2, 98, 100-1, 107-8; Kennedy, xxi.

Commissioner admitted that irrigation had not served the Indians' best interest and "its continuance would be a great injustice."¹⁰

Nevertheless, efforts to provide agricultural opportunities to the Assiniboines and Sioux continued. In the 1920s, faced with the enduring impoverished conditions on reservations, the Indian Service began the systematic "Five-Year Programs" to improve farming conditions. While the programs aided the livestock industry at Fort Peck, some accounts reported that the tribes were close to starvation and survived on prairie gophers and horsemeat. In the ensuing years, similar to the contested and difficult past, Federal officials continued to confront the complex problem of providing for and dealing with the Assiniboines and Sioux. They would find that no easy solution existed.¹¹

Project Authorization

Two acts of Congress authorized and provided for the administration of the Fort Peck Project. The act of authorization on May 1, 1908, stipulated for the construction of the project at no cost to the tribes, and to provide as much water as needed to "properly" irrigate their lands. The act, however, decreed that they would be "held accountable" for costs of operation and maintenance. The act of May 30, 1908 authorized the allotment of Fort Peck, reaffirmed the irrigation of Indian lands, and directed Reclamation to build the project to serve the lands of white settlers. The settlers would be responsible for the construction and operation costs for irrigating their land with the proceeds going to reimburse funds provided by the Indian Service.¹²

Construction History

Reclamation Construction

10. Donald J. Pisani, "Irrigation, Water Rights, and the Betrayal of Indian Allotment." *Environmental Review* 19 (Fall 1986): 159, quote on 169; Janet A. McDonnell, *The Dispossession of the American Indian, 1887-1934* (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 1991), 10-1.

11. McDonnell, 40-2.

12. *Fort Peck Project History, 1910*, vol. 1, 12; *Seventh Annual Report*, 8.

Prior to Reclamation involvement, the Indian Service and members of the Fort Peck Tribes built some small irrigation ditches that provided water to a few select tracts on the reservation. In the summer of 1908, Reclamation began survey and design plans for the Fort Peck Project. Surveyors concluded that the majority of the Missouri River bottom lands could be irrigated via gravity canals and pumping units. Reclamation divided the project into five divisions: Frazer-Wolf (Missouri River), Little Porcupine, Big Porcupine (Wiota), Poplar River, and Big Muddy. Plans included two dams and reservoirs, several diversion dams, and an extensive canal and lateral system. The project would primarily depend on the natural flow of rivers and creeks. This reliance meant less of an outlay for construction costs, but also dictated dependence on an amenable climate.¹³

Little Porcupine Division

Proposals for the Little Porcupine division included Frazer Dam and Reservoir , a diversion dam, and the irrigation of 2,000 acres diverted from Little Porcupine Creek. Work began in September of 1909 on the dams and reservoir. The construction of Frazer Dam, an earthen storage dam with brush mattress slopes and concrete outlet works, used 32,000 cubic yards of earth and 9,400 square yards of brush mattress. The storage reservoir spanned 390 acres and impounded approximately 3,900 acre-feet of water. Reclamation forces, primarily using Indian labor, completed the small dam and reservoir at the end of 1910 to irrigate 1,100 acres. In 1910, crews also began construction of a diversion dam, a four-foot high and 150-foot long rock-filled timber-crib diversion dam with a concrete weir. They started a flood canal with a 200 second-foot capacity and a length of 6,000 feet near the town of Frazer. In 1911, workers placed ninety-one small structures, including turnouts and culverts. By July of 1911, Reclamation

13. *Fort Peck Project History, 1909*, 12; *Fort Peck Project History, 1910*, vol. 1, 19, 23-4; *Eighth Annual Report*, 95-6.

substantially completed the division to deliver water to 2,300 acres.¹⁴

Poplar River Division

Plans for the Poplar River division called for the irrigation of 20,000 acres, extending along the Poplar River, which runs for approximately thirty-five miles from north to south through the reservation and empties into the Missouri River. Reclamation proposed to primarily divert water from the river, but also initially planned to construct a reservoir at the north end of the reservation. Poplar consisted of three units: Poplar A, stretching approximately sixteen miles from the proposed reservoir southeast to a diversion dam near the town of Kirn; Poplar B, a canal system on the west side of Poplar River from the diversion dam to a point about five miles north of the town of Poplar along the Missouri River; and, Poplar C, a canal system on the east side of Poplar River from the diversion dam to a point approximately one mile north of the Missouri and two miles east of the town of Poplar.¹⁵

Reclamation began construction on September 12, 1910. Work concentrated on the excavation of canals for Poplar B and C units. The canals diverted from a diversion dam, consisting of a concrete weir on a rock-filled timber-crib base with a concrete abutment, two concrete outlet structures, a structural height of four feet, and a length of 300 feet. In 1911, work did not begin until April 11 due to the winter weather. Indian labor crews finished the diversion dam on June 10. That summer, they completed the B canals, half of the laterals for the unit, and continued excavation on the C canals until July 31 when “all work was discontinued because the

14. *Eight Annual Report*, 95; DOI, USBR, *Ninth Annual Report of the Reclamation Service, 1909-1910* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1911), 146-7; DOI, USBR, *Tenth Annual Report of the Reclamation Service, 1910-1911* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1912), 128; DOI, USBR, *Eleventh Annual Report of the Reclamation Service, 1911-1912* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1913), 102; *Fort Peck Project History, 1910*, vol. 2, 7, 33; *Fort Peck Project History, 1911*, vol. 3, 8-9; DOI, USBR, *Sixteenth Annual Report of the Reclamation Service, 1916-1917* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1917), 377-8.

15. *Eighth Annual Report*, 95; *Eleventh Annual Report*, 101-2; *Fort Peck Project History, 1923*, vol. 15, project map insert.

appropriation was exhausted and no allotment had been made for continuing work.”

Construction did not resume until October 10, 1912. In June of 1913, Indian crews completed Poplar B and the work on fifteen miles of the main canal on Poplar C. In the next two years, they finished the last sections of Poplar C and installed bridges and lateral turnouts for the unit.¹⁶

From 1916 to 1917, Reclamation conducted some revision work on the canals to enlarge their capacities, finishing the systems to irrigate 2,560 acres from the B unit and 5,330 acres from the C unit. Low appropriations hampered any future work on the Poplar division. In 1918, Reclamation constructed a “fishway” – to allow for the passage of fish – at the request of settlers. Low precipitation severely hindered irrigation on Poplar. Throughout construction on the division, project managers repeatedly requested funding to build a storage reservoir. As the typical summer season wore on and the Poplar River slowed to a trickle, they simply did not have enough water to meet even the minimal demands of irrigators. By 1922, the lack of storage and low precipitation prompted the project engineer to admit, “Such a condition practically eliminates any settlement plans on this division.”¹⁷

Big Porcupine (Wiota) Division

In 1908, Reclamation surveyed 8,000 acres in the vicinity of “Milk River Station” – an area near the confluence of the Milk and Missouri Rivers in the southwest portion of the reservation – to provide for irrigation. The final plan for the division called for the diversion of water from Big Porcupine Creek, which flowed from north to south into the Milk River above its

16. *Fort Peck Project History, 1910*, vol. 2, 21; *Fort Peck Project History, 1911*, vol. 4-5; *Tenth Annual Report*, 128-9; *Eleventh Annual Report*, 102; DOI, USBR, *Twelfth Annual Report of the Reclamation Service, 1912-1913* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1914), 119-20; *Fort Peck Project History, 1913*, vol. 7, 45; *Thirteenth Annual Report of the Reclamation Service, 1913-1914* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1915), 142; *Fort Peck Project History, 1914*, vol. 7, 2; *Fort Peck Project History, 1915*, vol. 7, 23.

17. DOI, USBR, *Sixteenth Annual Report of the Reclamation Service, 1916-1917* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1917), 377-8; *Fort Peck Project History, 1916*, vol. 8, 26; *Fort Peck Project History, 1918*, vol. 10, 31; *Fort Peck Project History, 1922*, vol. 14, 6-7.

junction with the Missouri, for irrigating 4,000 acres of reservation land. The proposal included the construction of: a storage reservoir and dam on the middle fork of Big Porcupine Creek in the northwest corner of the reservation to supplement flows when the creek went dry in the summer months; a diversion dam on the creek above its confluence with the Milk; and, seven miles of canal and accompanying lateral systems.¹⁸

Reclamation work, using Indian labor, began on October 28, 1913, and proceeded until November 30 when winter weather halted construction. The next spring Reclamation renewed work. At the end of 1914, crews had completed the excavation of the main canal with a 100 second-feet capacity, approximately 80 percent of the lateral system, and about 50 percent of the diversion dam, a concrete weir type on a rock-filled timber crib base. In the next two years, Reclamation forces worked on the diversion dam and distribution system, completing the unit to irrigate 4,000 acres. On April 15, 1917, they started Big Porcupine Reservoir and Dam. That spring, runoff destroyed the headworks and broke the main canal in five places, requiring substantial repair work.¹⁹

Despite the delay, by the end of the year crews finished the embankment, spillway dike, concrete spillway, and outlet works on the dam. They completed the paving on the structure and thus the dam on June 17, 1918, to a capacity of 3,800 acre-feet. From 1919 to 1921 the unit required no further work. In 1922, the local agent for the Indian Service requested that Reclamation construct an extra two miles of laterals to supply irrigation to about 320 acres of land that Indians farmed “to some extent.” The agent hoped that by providing extra irrigation the Indians “would make use of the water and by doing so encourage its use by other Indians of

18. *Eighth Annual Report*, 95 *Eleventh Annual Report*, 99; *Fort Peck Project History, 1917*, vol. 9, 33.

19. *Thirteenth Annual Report*, 142; DOI, USBR, *Fourteenth Annual Report of the Reclamation Service, 1914-1915* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1915), 127; *Fort Peck Project History, 1913*, vol. 5, 2; *Fort Peck Project History, 1914*, vol. 6, 2; *Fort Peck Project History, 1915*, vol. 7, 25; *Fort Peck Project History, 1916*, vol. 8, 26, 63; *Fort Peck Project History, 1917*, vol. 9, viii, 2, 33, 53.

the division.”²⁰

Big Muddy Division

In 1908, Reclamation conducted surveys for irrigating 15,000 acres lying along the west side of Big Muddy Creek on the eastern edge of the Fort Peck Reservation. Big Muddy Creek flowed from north to south along the eastern boundary of the reservation and met with the Missouri River at the southeast corner of the reservation. Plans for the division called for three diversion dams, an extensive distribution system, and two storage reservoirs and dams. Designs for the Wolf Creek Reservoir site, situated about five miles south of the Canadian border and about one mile north of the reservation boundary along Wolf Creek, included a reservoir with a capacity of 4,550 acre-feet and an earthen dam. Proposals for the Smoke Creek Reservoir site, located about five miles northwest of the confluence of Smoke Creek and Big Muddy Creek and about twenty miles north of the Missouri River, encompassed a reservoir with a capacity of 5,300 acre-feet and an earthen dam. By 1917, delays in the construction of the unit prompted the Indian Service to repeatedly request that Reclamation get underway. According to the project manager, the Indian Service was extremely anxious for commencement “more as a matter of protecting water-right[s] than because of any desire or request of the Indians for irrigation of their land.”²¹

Reclamation crews started the excavation of the main canal on June 14, 1918, and by the end of the year completed five miles of the canal and 20 percent of the lateral system with the ability to irrigate 2,000 acres. In 1919 and 1920, work continued on the canal, laterals, and surface drains. In that same period crews built two diversion dams: Homestead laying on Big

20. *Fort Peck Project History, 1917*, vol. 9, 32, 77; *Fort Peck Project History, 1918*, vol. 10, viii; DOI, USBR, *Seventeenth Annual Report of the Reclamation Service, 1917-1918* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1918), 428; *Fort Peck Project History, 1922*, vol. 14, 24-5.

21. *Eighth Annual Report*, 95; *Eleventh Annual Report*, 99; *Fort Peck Project History, 1917*, vol. 9, 77; *Fort Peck Project History, 1918*, vol. 10, 36.

Muddy Creek about twenty miles north of its confluence with the Missouri; and Big Muddy, situated on the creek approximately fifteen miles north of the Missouri. Both dams were of the concrete weir type on a rock-filled timber crib base. In 1921, Reclamation finished the distribution system to irrigate 4,000 acres, but unfortunately it had not built any “dependable storage system,” limiting the potential for irrigation. Because of lack of funding and low demand for water, Reclamation conducted no further work on Big Muddy, leaving the storage reservoirs and much of the distribution system on the drawing table.²²

Frazer-Wolf (Missouri River) Division

By far, the Frazer-Wolf (Missouri River) division involved the biggest and most complex plans for the Fort Peck Project. The problem was that they remained plans. However, they revealed the potential for efficiently irrigating lands within and outside the reservation. Reclamation proposed to irrigate 84,000 acres lying along the Missouri River via a 104-mile gravity canal and four pumping plants. The four plants, moving from west to east, included: Frazer, delivering 165 second-feet with a twenty-four foot lift and covering lands between towns of Frazer and Wolf Point; Wolf Point, providing 197 second-feet with a thirty-foot lift and distributing water to lands between the towns of Wolf Point and Chelsea; Chelsea, requiring a twenty-two foot lift to deliver 137 second-feet of water to the area between Chelsea and the bottom land southeast of the town of Poplar; and Brockton, using a twenty-five foot lift to supply 106 second-feet of water to the region southwest of the town of Brockton to the area near the town of Blair at the confluence of the Big Muddy and Missouri Rivers.²³

Reclamation intended to run the pumping units on steampower generated from coal

22. *Fort Peck Project History, 1919*, vol. 11, 3, 31; *Fort Peck Project History, 1920*, vol. 12, 4; *Fort Peck Project History, 1921*, vol. 13, 2; DOI, USBR, *Nineteenth Annual Report of the Reclamation Service, 1919-1920* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1920), 454-5; *Fort Peck Project History, 1922*, vol. 14, 50.

23. *Fort Peck Project History, 1910*, vol. 1, 23-4; *Eleventh Annual Report*, 99-100.

obtained on the reservation. Large deposits of coal existed near Brockton and at a large number of points along the south side of the Missouri River. The plans for the extensive gravity canal required a number of tunnels, a 300-foot concrete siphon under the Milk River, and a large quantity of structures for crossing various creeks and streams. Unfortunately, Reclamation neither had the time nor received the funding to construct this “most feasible plan” for irrigating the lands of the Fort Peck Reservation.²⁴

Indians and Labor

Similar to the other Indian irrigation projects, Indian labor played a significant role. The remoteness and isolation of the reservation offered limited opportunities for wage labor, and thus the project was a boon to the economic stability of the Fort Peck Tribes. Despite the benefits, Indian labor set limits for the project. The role and impact of Indian labor reflected the decline in funding for the project, the limits of Indian irrigation, the problems with the allotment system, and the limitations of the project to change the Indians’ lives in an enduring manner.

Using Indian labor meant that Reclamation depended on their experience, reliability, and desire to work. Problems emerged as early as 1912 when a large agricultural harvest attracted the Indians to higher-paying work in North Dakota. Another consistent and ironic problem arose from the Indian Service’s and Reclamation’s competing goals. In 1913, the project engineer complained that Indian work crews did not report until the end of May because they were being “good farmers” and planting crops – exactly what the Indian Service had intended. Then, that July and August, the supply of labor fell off because the “Indians were celebrating and cutting hay”; the traditional practices of raising livestock and cultural festivities proved more important to the tribes than building ditches. Finally, the inherent problems of the allotment system

24. The *Eighth Annual Report* includes a lengthy description of the unit and all its features. *Eighth Annual Report*, 95-6.

hindered progress. In 1916, operations had been “retarded by the scarcity of labor.” As one project official explained, “A considerable number [of Indians] have received patent in fee to their lands or some deceased land and with the money obtained from the sale of land or the money expected from some future sale, they did not feel the necessity of working as much as usual.”²⁵

The wages paid to laborers on the project not only reflected the benefits to the Assiniboines and Sioux, but apparent inequities and the eventual decline of the project. Initially, the Indians profited greatly from working on the Fort Peck Project. In the first four years of construction, Reclamation, via Indian Service funds, paid laborers close to \$100,000. In the beginning, Indian labor consistently represented over 75 percent of the workforce. In 1913, Reclamation paid white laborers an average total of \$855 and Indians only \$588. This differential did not reflect inequitable treatment but the fact that whites tended to work in more skilled positions. Until 1914, Indians, by virtue of larger numbers, made a greater total amount of money. However, the dedication to improving the lot of the Indians eventually dwindled as work on the project became more and more restricted.²⁶

While Indian laborers earned \$59,233 in 1914, they made a mere \$6,207 in 1915. In addition, after 1914 and for the duration of the project, white laborers garnered a larger total income than Indians.²⁷ The disparity between wages became almost tragic in 1917 when white laborers made over \$65,000 and Indians earned only \$13,707. Of course, part of this was due to the unwillingness of Indians who had sold their allotments to work, but the gap in earned wages

25. *Fort Peck Project History, 1912*, vol. 4, 3; *Fort Peck Project History, 1913*, vol. 5, 8; *Fort Peck Project History, 1916*, vol. 8, 3.

26. *Fort Peck Project History, 1912*, vol. 4, 3, 9; *Fort Peck Project History, 1913*, vol. 5, 9; *Fort Peck Project History, 1914*, vol. 6, 10.

27. For example, in 1916 (the second year in a row that whites made more than Indians), whites earned over \$20,000 and Indians earned just over \$9,000.

endured and increased until the end of the project. By the last year of the project, Indians made a mere \$1,184.75, while whites earned over ten times as much. A few trends emerge from this data. First, and most positively, Indian laborers brought in almost \$315,000 through their work on the Fort Peck Project. This income substantially improved their situation, at least in the initial stages of the project. Next, the general decline in both Indian and white wages symbolized the downward spiral of funding for the project. On the whole, the amount of money spent on labor was equal to more than one-third of the total cost for constructing the irrigation system.²⁸

While providing a positive impact, the labor system certainly raises questions about the intentions of the project managers and their goals to aid Indians. In the end, the Indians were not better off because of irrigation water, but because of wage labor. The Fort Peck Project's major function was serving as an employment agency in an area with few real jobs.

Irrigation and Crops

The principal crops grown on Fort Peck changed little throughout Reclamation's tenure on the irrigation project. The majority of farmers – or perhaps the term ranchers more accurately describes the situation – raised oats, wheat, flax, a small amount of vegetables in individual gardens, and a “large tonnage of blue joint hay.” The significant emphasis placed on the production of hay and certain grains reflected the concentration on livestock enterprises. In addition to this focus, several obstacles not only hindered irrigation for food production, but irrigation in general.²⁹

In 1913, Reclamation began operating portions of the Little Porcupine and Poplar River

28. *Fort Peck Project History, 1914*, vol. 6, 10; *Fort Peck Project History, 1915*, vol. 7, 11; *Fort Peck Project History, 1916*, vol. 8, 12; *Fort Peck Project History, 1917*, vol. 9, 14; *Fort Peck Project History, 1918*, vol. 19, 15-6; *Fort Peck Project History, 1923*, vol. 15, 9, 11.

29. *Fourteenth Annual Report*, 128-9.

divisions, but provided very little water. During the next season, the project irrigated approximately 1,000 acres. Precipitation itself hampered the effectiveness of the Fort Peck Project in more than one way. On several occasions from 1913 to 1924, heavy rains in the spring and early summer reduced the desire, or need, for irrigation water. More particularly, the Indians had a fairly long tradition of dry farming to grow hay and other feed for cattle, making it difficult for Reclamation to convince Indians to supplement their use of water. Limited rain and snowfall also caused problems. In 1917, when the reservation only received 6.42 inches of precipitation, the Poplar River division provided very little irrigation due to a lack of natural flow in the streams. For a great number of years, small runoff and drought kept the flow of Big and Little Porcupine Creeks, the Poplar River, and several other waterways too low to supply a sufficient amount of water for the canal systems. Besides reflecting the uncontrollable consequences of drought, the limited amount of water for irrigation pointed to a very real shortcoming of the Fort Peck Project – the lack of storage facilities. Project engineers repeatedly requested appropriations to construct reservoirs for preserving the spring runoff, but they consistently received a negative response.³⁰

Even when an ample amount of water was available, the Fort Peck Project achieved little success. In 1915, Indians irrigated 600 acres of hay and 306 acres of grain. The problem arose from limited appropriations. Without prompt and adequate funding Reclamation found itself, more than once, forced to hold off operation of the canals until late summer. The desires and practices of Indians also conflicted with the use of irrigation. In general, the Fort Peck Tribes had very little land under cultivation, and many chose not to live on their agricultural allotments.

30. *Thirteenth Annual Report*, 142-3; *Fort Peck Project History, 1913*, vol. 5, 46; *Fort Peck Project History, 1914*, vol. 6, 41-2; *Fort Peck Project History, 1917*, vol. 9, 4; *Fort Peck Project History, 1918*, vol. 10, 5-6, 48-9; *Fort Peck Project History, 1922*, vol. 14, 6.

They opted instead to reside near tracts of grazing land, making it “difficult for them to irrigate their land.” In 1921, although the Big Muddy division had an “abundance of water” and the potential to irrigate 2,000 acres, farmers did not irrigate any land. The project manager reported that only one Anglo family lived on the entire 4,000 acres of the first development of the division, and none of the Indian allottees resided there. Exasperated by the problem, he concluded that the 1,042 acres irrigated out of a potential 20,000 on the entire project was a “very poor showing.”³¹

In 1923, residents of the project irrigated 2,069 out of the 22,794 acres Reclamation could have supplied water to. A number of disappointing factors interconnected with those statistics. Reclamation hired ditchriders and other maintenance crews to operate and maintain the full distribution system, but a sufficient number of water users did not exist to cover those costs. The operation and maintenance budget was over \$96,000 in debt from non-payment for water. In 1923, at the end of Reclamation’s management and using Indian Service funds, the two bureaus had spent \$435.85 per acre to irrigate on Fort Peck.³² Reclamation officials came to several conclusions. As the manager put it, “The project is unfortunately located.” Few white farmers had settled on the project, the Indians failed to utilize the water, and neither Indians nor whites seemed to “appreciate the possibilities of irrigation farming.” Even when they used irrigation, they lacked the adequate experience to make it prosperous.³³

Summing Up Reclamation Work

The Fort Peck Project supplied a number of complex and difficult obstacles for

31. *Fort Peck Project History, 1915*, vol. 7, 53; *Fort Peck Project History, 1916*, vol. 8, 4; *Fort Peck Project History, 1921*, vol. 13, 40.

32. This figure was arrived at by dividing the total costs (\$901,776.25) by the number of acres irrigated (2,069) in 1923.

33. *Fort Peck Project History, 1923*, vol. 15, 4, 9, 27, 50; *Fort Peck Project History, 1921*, vol. 13, 42; *Fort Peck Project History, 1918*, vol. 10, 7.

Reclamation. The erratic and often deficient funding hampered progress on project features. Yet more emphasis must be placed on a general lack of interest in the project itself. The Fort Peck Tribes simply did not need a great deal of irrigation to grow feed for their livestock. Although the number of settlers grew as the project proceeded, a lack of Anglo water users persisted throughout Reclamation's tenure. Attempts to attract new settlers also came with a string of difficulties. Much of the land remained trust patent land that was exempt from taxation. That meant that white settlers would have to bear the burden of taxation for schools, roads, and other public facilities and improvements until around 1940 when the patents expired. Preserving Indian treaty rights to their land came at the cost of deflecting white settlement. By the end of 1923, the project had cost over \$900,000 to irrigate a possible 23,000 acres. The low use of irrigation had resulted in an operation deficit each year. At the beginning of 1924, the project manager reported that "because of Congressional action" – or inaction, take your pick – Reclamation involvement in the Fort Peck Project had been discontinued.³⁴

Post-Construction History: Construction By Indian Service and Completion

In the spring of 1924, Secretary of the Interior Hubert Work transferred responsibility for the Fort Peck Project to the Indian Service. The Indian Service did not envision many beneficial prospects in the project, but vowed to make every effort to induce the Sioux and Assiniboines to increase the irrigation and cultivation of their lands. Despite the verbal commitment, the Indian Service found the task easier said than done. For the next five years, it accomplished little on the project. Similar to Reclamation's endeavors, the Indian Service's work would ride the crest of optimism and dejection. In 1930, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs reported that operations

34. *Nineteenth Annual Report*, 458; DOI, USBR, *Twenty-First Annual Report of the Reclamation Service, 1921-1922* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1922), 140-1; *Fort Peck Project History, 1923*, vol. 15, 2.

had been “satisfactorily conducted.” The Indian Service planned to extend the Big and Little Porcupine division canals, and to expand the west (B) canal of the Poplar River division to cover 4,000 acres. A short year later, the Commissioner, calling Fort Peck a “minor” undertaking, declared that the limited use of the project made it probable that very little construction would be required. Like Reclamation before them, Indian Service officials quickly realized the formidable challenges of bringing irrigation to Fort Peck.³⁵

Due to a lack of detailed documentation it is difficult to pinpoint the exact timing of and work accomplished by the Indian Service on Fort Peck, however, some general information can be gleaned from the sources. In 1928, the Big Porcupine Dam failed when a flood nearly destroyed it. The Indian Service rebuilt the dam, but in 1939 another flood demolished the spillway and the bureau never rebuilt it, resulting in a loss of storage for irrigating approximately 2,000 acres. Many of the improvements to the Fort Peck Project came in the same period as the building of Fort Peck Dam and Reservoir, located about 18 miles southeast of Glasgow, Montana and south of the reservation, by the Army Corps of Engineers.³⁶ The Corps began construction of the dam, reservoir, and powerplant in October of 1933, while under a joint agreement Reclamation marketed and distributed the electrical power.³⁷

One of the side benefits of the work by the Corps and Reclamation from 1933 to 1973 was that it supplied the Fort Peck (Indian) Project with power to operate pumping units that utilized water from the Missouri River watershed. Under the auspices of Reclamation’s initial plan for the Frazer-Wolf or Missouri River division, the Indian Service developed what had been

35. *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1924* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1924), 19; *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1930* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1930), 24; *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1931* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1931), 20.

36. For more information see Toni Rae Linenberger, *The Fort Peck Project*, Bureau of Reclamation History Program, Research on Historic Reclamation Projects (Denver, Colorado, 1998).

37. *Water Supply for Three Operating Units of Fort Peck Indian Irrigation Project*, 4, 191; Linenberger, 2-3.

the most significant proposal for irrigation on and near Fort Peck. The pumping system includes three units: Wiota (Big Porcupine), Little Porcupine, and Frazer-Wolf. The Wiota pumping plant draws water from the Milk and Missouri River. In 1931, the Indian Service built the plant, situated 3.75 miles northeast of the confluence of the Milk and Missouri Rivers, to irrigate lands under the Big Porcupine division south of the plant. When Big Porcupine Dam washed out for the second time in 1939, the lands north of the plant were placed in the “permanent non-irrigable” status.³⁸

A diversion dam on Little Porcupine Creek and the Little Porcupine gravity pumping unit diverts water through a one mile, 200 cfs ditch into Frazer Reservoir for storage and is impounded by Frazer Dam. However, in recent years, Frazer Reservoir has been utilized less for irrigation and primarily for wildlife habitat. The Frazer-Wolf unit pumps water from the Missouri River at a point two miles southeast of the town of Frazer. BIA constructed the plant from 1936 to 1939, and it consists of three pumping units with a capacity of 200 cfs.

The story of the Poplar River and Big Muddy divisions since the end of Reclamation participation is less illustrious. Between 1933 and the mid-1960s, the insufficient water supply on the Poplar River division limited irrigation, and practically all farming, almost to the point of non-existence. From 1923 to 1935, farmers irrigated an average of 665 acres on the Big Muddy division. One BIA report concluded that from 1935 to the mid-1960s no record existed of irrigation due to the uncertainty of the water supply and the steady increase in the “alkaline and saline condition of the soil.” The current status of irrigation on the two divisions is limited.³⁹

38. Linenberger, 4-6; *Water Supply for Three Operating Units of Fort Peck Indian Irrigation Project*, 1, 3, 191.

39. *Water Supply for Three Operating Units of Fort Peck Indian Irrigation Project*, 1-2, 5, 190-2; DOI, USBR, *Examinations of Dams and Appurtenant Facilities Designed and Constructed By the Bureau of Reclamation for the Bureau of Indian Affairs* (Denver, Colorado, November 1964), 2-3, Appendix 1; USBR and BIA, *1997 Initial Seed Examination Report, Frazer Dam, Fort Peck Indian Reservation, Montana* (Denver, Colorado, May 1998), 1-2.

Settlement of Project Lands

By an act of Congress on May 31, 1908, the Federal Government classified the lands of the reservation as irrigable, timber, grazing, agricultural, or mineral. The government allotted 320 acres of grazing or agricultural land, 40 acres of irrigable land, and 20 acres of timber land to each member of the Fort Peck Tribes alive when allotment began. Officials later amended this act to provide children with 320 acres of grazing land as long as any land remained open for entry. In June of 1914, the federal government opened the unallotted grazing and agricultural tracts for settlement. The settlement of lands went slowly in 1914 and 1915, but in 1916 a large number of white settlers made entries and took up a good portion of the “desirable land.” Whites purchased 200 Indian allotments, with each including 320 acres, for prices ranging from \$1,900 to \$4,050.⁴⁰

In 1921, despite the earlier rush, 75 percent of the land remained in Indian hands. Of the originally allotted acreage of irrigable land, Indians owned 10,352 acres, whites owned 4,830 acres, and a substantial tract remained unallotted. These lands included only thirty-five irrigated farms. The astounding feature of that statistic was that in 1920 residents had owned 70 farms. Four years of drought had pushed the inhabitants of Fort Peck to the brink. At the beginning of December, due in part to this alarming situation, Secretary of the Interior Albert Fall stipulated repayment of the construction costs for the project. His decision directed a repayment charge of fifty cents per irrigable acre “for all lands under canals whether water was used thereon or not.” The repayments remained in the red for the duration of Reclamation’s control of the project. According to the project manager, the major problem lay in the fact that much of the land was

40. *Fort Peck Project History, 1915*, vol. 7, 65; *Fort Peck Project History, 1916*, vol. 8, 56; DOI, USBR, *Fifteenth Annual Report of the Reclamation Service, 1915-1916* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1916), 567-8.

trust patent land and the Indian Service had not collected any payments. He concluded that the only option to make the project pay would be the sale of Indian lands to white settlers. Near the end of Reclamation's tenure, the project had a mere thirty irrigated farms.⁴¹

Conclusion

Assessing the impact of Reclamation's involvement with the Fort Peck Project from 1908 to 1924 goes well beyond the confines of irrigation. The region remained largely unsettled and isolated, and life continued to offer challenges for even the most devout farmer or rancher. Wage labor had brought a brief respite to a number of Indians. Like the streams that so often ran dry, funding declined to a mere trickle and income from the project became less and less of a possibility. On the other hand, many residents, both Indian and white, adjusted to the pitfalls of an arid climate by concentrating on livestock. They knew that even in years with less irrigation or precipitation enough hay would grow to feed at least modest amounts of cattle. Essentially, in times of deficiency, they turned to the dry-farming techniques that had helped people survive for a long time in vast stretches of the West. It must be admitted that Federal reclamation was not always wholly successful. However, sometimes reclamation can be more of a psychological challenge – a test of will – than a physical act. The Sioux and Assiniboines, as well as the white settlers that ventured to the region of the Fort Peck Project, claimed a rightful ownership to the land by managing to persevere and survive the trials that aridity laid before them.

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41. *Fort Peck Project History, 1921*, vol. 13, 5, 34; DOI, USBR, *Twenty-Second Annual Report of the Reclamation Service, 1922-1923* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1923), 149; *Fort Peck Project History, 1920*, vol. 12, 6; *Fort Peck Project History, 1922*, vol. 14, 6, 12; *Fort Peck Project History, 1923*, vol. 15, 5.

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