



~ Part 27 ~
Reflections on a Common Theme
River Related Stories

To Read More about
Solomon Valley History
visit our website at
www.hwy24.org

CLOUD COUNTY

Pott's Ford River Bridge

by Joan Nothern

Glasco and Simpson were both established north of the Solomon River, making access from the south a challenge and bridges essential. It took a court settlement to resolve the location of this iron truss bridge. The bridge was built at Pott's Ford one mile south of Glasco in 1884.

Stories of the river are part of Glasco's lure. Often the old truss bridge figures in these stories: feats of diving off into the river, fishing from it, gathering in its shadow for immersion baptisms. An unsavory Glasco story includes using a noose suspended in the bridge structure—used trying to force a confession to a minor crime.

History is literally written on the bridge. The high water mark of the July 13, 1951, flood is drawn on the superstructure.

This bridge was posted to the National Register of Historic Places, January 4, 1990 (NRHP 89002173).

Information about the Pott's Ford bridge can be found on Bridgehunter.com and uglybridges.com. Annual inspection data indicates concern about the condition of the bridge. Reduced use might prolong its life—perhaps an idea to be seriously considered.

MITCHELL COUNTY

The Flood of 1951

by Barbara Axtell

(The following information was taken from issues of the Beloit Daily Call and Beloit Gazette.)

The worst flood in the history of Beloit covered the Solomon River Bridge on Highway 14 to a depth of 4 feet on July 13, 1951. There was also a tremendous amount of damage in Simpson and Asherville, both located in Mitchell County.

In Simpson the cleanup was hindered because of the absence of clean water with which to clean out. Only five or six houses were not flooded in Simpson.

Damage in Simpson included: the Simpson State Bank floor was warped, making entrance into the bank impossible; water was between eight and nine inches deep in the Simpson High School gymnasium; the Johnson Brothers store, which had the highest first-floor level, had 16 inches of water on the first floor, but Rubin and Martin had seen to it that their merchandise was all up off the floor and the lower shelves emptied. Their basement was full and considerable damage done to their foundation. Other stores on lower ground levels suffered heavy losses.

At the Hubert Anderson station north of Simpson water carried away three large storage tanks, 1,500 to 2,000 gallon capacity, which were set on rock foundations. The tanks were practically full of gasoline and other fuels.

Mr. and Mrs. Bob Vernon and Mrs. Bert Vernon and Arlene, who lived one mile north of Simpson, had approximately 30 persons from the Simpson vicinity in their home during the flood.

At the Simpson Grain Company, 3,500 bushels of wheat were in the pit which was filled with water. Bill Leinen of the grain company reported that the wheat would be taken out in time and dehydrated.

Damage at Shay's Market in Simpson was reported by owner Pete Shay to be between \$15,000 and \$20,000. Almost half of the stock was lost and the locker plant was ruined. Water in the store was 31 inches deep.

The telephone switchboard in Simpson was in 8 inches of water, however it was working "fairly good" after not working for five days. Mr. and Mrs. Ivan Huffman, who lived in the phone office, lost all of their furniture except for their stove and refrigerator.

In Asherville water was 16 inches deep in the bank. The flooring was ruined and had to be taken up. Some homes were not damaged, however water was the highest in the Lyle Strawn home in Asherville, 4 to 5 feet deep. Water was 8 inches deep in the Asherville Mercantile and there was about a foot and one-half of water in the school's gymnasium.

Asher Creek flooded the town of Asherville before the Solomon River rose and flooded the town.

In Beloit the Solomon River set an all-time flood record on July 13, 1951, when it crested at 39.29 feet, which was 3.41 feet higher than the previous record established in June 1941. Thousands of people viewed the flood at Beloit.

When water surged through the dike protecting the old power plant, the plant equipment was soon covered with water and the big engines were standing in 6 to 8 feet of water. The plant had to be shut down immediately. Supt. Ray Vollendorf had men disconnect the old plant and switch the full load for both the residential and business sections onto the new plant. Thanks to the members of the Beloit City governing body a new plant had been constructed. If Beloit had not had the new light and water plant in operation, the city would have been without light and water for a period of about four weeks and Beloit would have been without telephone service for a month.

According to the area kids, one of the greatest losses in the flood was the use of the city swimming pool, which was covered by the river.

The local National Guard troops were rescuing people from the flood south of the Solomon River when a wire fence that had washed across the street caught the propeller and upset the boat. Bob Newell managed to grab a limb and climbed into a tree. The Park brothers came along and picked up two National Guard Sergeants, Milon Axtell and Leroy Holway, who had been working on the south side of the river. Gene Waters and Jim Pestinger got Bob Newell from his tree perch, before a raging current flipped their boat over and tossed all three into the water. Gene landed on the roof of hog house several hundred yards to the southeast and just above the "high bank" of the O. L. Summers Place. The other five were washed on until they were able to land in trees on the Thompson place on the side of the river. Airplanes then took up the job of locating the men and succeeded.

The Beloit Daily Call reported on July 14, 1951, that the worst of the flood was past, and the river had receded to 37.40 feet.

Tom Conroy, head of the Mitchell County Red Cross office, reported that about 15 Asherville families and around 20 from the Simpson community had been housed in Beloit following flooding of their homes. Also between 40 and 50 families in south and southwest Beloit and just south of the city limits were evacuated to escape high water. Five people were evacuated from Solomon Rapids.

People whose drinking water might have been contaminated were advised to take typhoid vaccines.

Following the flood, a Flood Control Meeting was scheduled for July 19, 1951, for the Solomon Valley Basin Flood Control Association in Minneapolis, with City Councilman Chalon Guard representing Beloit.

Also, the Solomon Valley Flood Control and Water Conservation Association was officially organized in Beloit on February 24, 1959. One of their objectives was flood control on the Solomon River. The purpose of the Association was to promote a better understanding of WATER management for its beneficent use as it pertains to the Solomon Valley and its many tributaries. The organization was affiliated with the Missouri-Arkansas Basins Flood Control Conservation Association with headquarters in Kansas City. Regular meetings of the executive committee and directors up and down the valley were held from 1959 to when the groundbreaking ceremonies were held, October 1, 1964, for the Glen Elder Dam. Approximately, 6,000 persons attended the ground breaking ceremony at the dam site south of Glen Elder. Construction of the dam proceeded at a pace ahead of schedule. The dam project was completed in 1968 and provides a high degree of protection to the lower Solomon River Valley. When operated in conjunction with other basin reservoirs it contributes effectively to the control of flooding on the lower Smoky Hill and Kansas Rivers.

ROOKS COUNTY

The Webster Unit: A Webster Lake History

by Robert Autobee -- Bureau of Reclamation, 1995 -- excerpts

A handful of family homesteads. The Webster Cash general store. The quaint hotel built of chalk limestone blocks and the local school house. The farm community of Webster, Kansas once held these buildings, and more. But, after decades of hard times, instead of slowly dematerializing into a ghost town, remnants of the village sit 53 feet underwater at the bottom of Webster Reservoir. The reservoir is one of those lakes west of the Missouri River where Reclamation flooded a town in order to save a way of life. Unlike their neighbors on the North Fork of the Solomon River, along the banks of the Solomon's South Fork, the local priority was a dam primarily for irrigation over flood control. A dam for any purpose would have been beneficial during the rainy summer of 1951, as a tremendous flood washed out much of Kansas and Missouri. The July deluge was a dramatic step in a story that began as a little girl's observation almost 70 years previous.

The Webster Unit sits on 8,000 acres of Rooks and Osborne Counties between the towns of Woodston and Osborne on the north side of the South Fork of the Solomon River. The Webster Dam, eight miles west of the city of Stockton, is the principal feature of the unit. The Woodston Diversion Dam, four pumping plants, the 32.6-mile long Osborne Canal, laterals, and drains are also part of the unit's facilities.

The impetus to dam the South Fork of the Solomon originated with the following inquiry to the Rooks County Record "Out of the Mail Box" column in 1933: "Dear Friends: Why not dam the Solomon River and make this valley a beautiful and productive center?"

The questioner was Mrs. Curtis Fry of Stockton, Kansas. Born Lavina Armstrong, it was always Mrs. Curtis Fry every time she spoke in public on the matter of damming the Solomon.

Her desire to block the river was rooted in a strong memory from childhood. In 1878, the Armstrongs farmed just below the eventual site of the Webster Dam. As a child, Lavina and her sister would drive the family's cattle to the South Fork, taking shovels to dig holes in the sand, creating little pools for the cattle to drink from the following day. On one of these trips, it occurred to Lavina, why doesn't someone dam up the entire stream?

By the time the Armstrong family and other pioneers came to Kansas, both the Indians and the buffalo had been subjugated by America's westward expansion. Life for migrating bands of Pawnee, Cheyenne, Arapaho and Sioux centered around hunting buffalo and game.

Statehood for Kansas came in 1861, but Osborne County was not settled until 1869, and the soil of Rooks County would not be broken until two years later. Swarms of grasshoppers were the first major calamity to strike Osborne and Rooks Counties in 1874. Eventually overcoming the hunger of the insatiable locusts, the population of both Osborne and Rooks had grown to 20,630 by the start of the 1880s, as most newcomers had been farmers in Iowa, Nebraska, and Wisconsin.

People still came in the 1880s, but prosperity never really stayed along the South Fork. Periods of favorable precipitation, and the resultant good crop yields, were only breaks from protracted cycles of drought. The unpredictability of the weather was enough to curtail new settlement and drive many of the pioneers away by the 1890s. A few who stuck it out experimented with small pumping plants to irrigate their fields. The pumps never resulted in permanent installations, as the general interest in irrigation was almost nonexistent, due to the river often running low and muddy.

As the fortunes of South Fork settlers soared and stumbled, during that same period, Lavina Armstrong grew up, married, and became Mrs. Curtis Fry. Years after imagining a dam across the South Fork, Mrs. Fry sent her first letter to a local politician, later printed in the Rooks County Record. Another letter followed to Republican Governor Alfred Landon in February 1934, followed by a plea to George S. Knapp, chief engineer of the Kansas Water Resources Division. Intrigued, Knapp soon joined Mrs. Fry's cause, acting on behalf of the state government investigating the proposal and advising a local group that had grown in her wake.

The vindictive weather of the thirties dramatized why multipurpose dams were needed in Kansas. An almost decade-long drought was interrupted by a major flood in 1938. On Armistice Day of the same year, the twin crusades of irrigation and flood control bound locals together as a petition circulated supporting construction of a dam. Local appeals were forwarded to the United States Congress, the State of Kansas and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Torrential rains and devastating floods carried by most of Kansas' rivers and tributaries in May, June and July 1951 awakened Washington to the importance of flood regulation. In July, a record peak discharge at Webster measured 55,200 cubic feet per second (cfs). In the month's second

week, as floodwaters threatened to decimate Kansas City, Missouri, Arkansas Senator John McClellan lamented, "If congress a few years ago had appropriated \$300 million for flood control reservoirs in Kansas we would have been spared this flood loss of at least twice that amount."

Once an appropriation act passed Congress in July 1951 to build dams throughout the Missouri River Basin, one local peculiarity held up construction at Webster—the town itself.

Born of big hopes in the 1870s, Webster was on a downward slide by the 1930s. In more prosperous times around 1910, the town was home to 200 people, and could boast of a bank, hotel, and a daily mail stage to the towns of Stockton and Bogue. The shocks brought by the Depression and Dust Bowl were more than the community could take. The Bureau's land agents and lawyers were busy in the autumn of 1952, negotiating and dealing with landowners. Haste was at a premium, as Reclamation scheduled the town of Webster for underwater burial by the spring 1953. In order to fill a diversion pool, Reclamation planned to move houses, businesses, and the town cemetery, submerging any structures left behind. Those abandoning their buildings received salvage value compensation from the Bureau. Operating on a budget of \$40,000, the Farm Unit Development/ Settler Assistance program had, by the end of 1952, acquired 55 out of 164 ownerships earmarked for the future lake. Earth moving work on the dam's foundation began March 14, 1953, but the Bureau granted a sixty day extension the following day for locals to relinquish possession of their property in order to allow Webster's children to complete the school year in the community school house.

Under the terms of their contract with the government, Rodgers and Sons won the right to excavate more than 1.75 million cubic yards of earth, place 1.25 million cubic yards of sand and gravel fill to form the dam, and divert the South Fork within 380 calendar days. Rodgers received the notice to proceed on December 12, 1952, making the completion date December 27, 1953. On January 12, the last permissible day after receipt of notice, the contractor sent three men and a foreman to clear the dam's axis, but they were on the job for only a week. Two months were lost, as clearing operations resumed in March, leaving Rodgers in a tight spot to finish the foundation on time.

The \$500,000 appropriation allocated for Rodgers, and \$25,000 due the firm of Trowbridge-Oehring of Columbus, Nebraska for building the construction camp were both exhausted by the end of May 1953. Instead of shutting all operations, the contractor cut their two nine-hour shifts per day schedule down to five days a week between June 9 and July 20.

When the fiscal year began in July with a fresh supply of money, most that year's funding was budgeted toward obtaining land for the dam and borrow pits. The weather also showed its capriciousness that year, as blowing dirt hampered operations. The contractor fought back by watering the haul roads and embankments heavily. A summer with little rain did help progress on the dam's embankment, as with no measurable flow, workers easily diverted the South Fork.

Rodgers and Sons resumed their two nine-hour shifts schedule in late July after the government notified them funds were available. The firm employed an average of 50 men to clear the foundation. A common laborer earned \$1.25 an hour from the contractor, while a heavy mechanic was rewarded with \$2.20 an hour. Embankment placement of Zones 2 and 3 were finished by the end of September with Zone 1 material set by early November. The scheduled completion date was in sight, but rain and a nine-inch snowstorm during the first week of November suspended progress for a month. After a brief resumption in December, the weather again prevented the company from completion.

The finished Webster Dam is a modified homogeneous earth fill embankment stretching along two miles, from above resembling a bending, linear strip breaking the flatness of the Kansas plains. The dam's upstream face is protected by 3.5 feet of riprap, while downstream two feet of chalk rockfill is now overgrown with grasses and weeds. An asphalt highway crosses the top of the dam. Disturbing the structure's topographic symmetry is the spillway on the left abutment. The outlet releases water into the South Fork for use downstream and for diversion into the Osborne Canal at Woodston Diversion Dam.

The total capacity of the Webster Reservoir is 260,740 acre-feet, of which 183,370 acre feet is meant for flood control, while 72,070 is slated for irrigation. At normal conservation level, the reservoir is 53 feet deep at the dam, six miles long and 1.5 miles wide, covering an area of about 3,445 surface acres. For most of its history, the reservoir has never been filled.

Periods of drought, and changes in farming practices in the upstream watershed, often drained the reservoir.

Not everybody felt the Webster Unit was a turning point upward for their community. In a 1985 centennial history of the town of Woodston, the author referred to the Webster Dam, the Woodston Diversion Dam, and the canal system as more “boondoggle” than boon, as “After a few years of operation, there were insufficient supplies of water for the project. It was a local exhibit of poor public planning and the waste of taxpayers’ money.”

In spite of its flat surroundings, the Webster story has its share of peaks and valleys, but all it took was water to get the Webster Dam some respect from the community it serves. A few saw the unit as unnecessary, but that was before it met its first test of storage in the mid-1990s.

Pieced together by a maze of subcontractors, physically, certain aspects of the dam have not aged well, and economically the unit did not provide any monumental fiscal benefits to the towns of Rooks and Osborne Counties. But, as a barrier to hold the angry, unforeseen storms of the Midwest, Webster passed one of its main objectives.

GRAHAM COUNTY

The Duck Pond

If “the Duck Pond” had been nothing more than a topographical anomaly, it would have merited its place in Graham county legend and lore. However, this “trench” near the Solomon River a mile south from Hill City was, for over three decades, an integral part of the lives of the county’s residents.

Probably Willie Terrell, later a Millbrook resident, erred when he reported that he had heard the meteor which dug the crater in the mid-1870s; doubtless early pioneers who described the pond’s depth as “beyond measurement” were wrong as well.

What is definitely known is that the river-level pond was, in the county’s early days, the most important venue for swimming, baptizing, picnicking, skating, buggy washing, ice harvesting, drinking water hauling, public bathing, and, eventually, trash dumping.

In March 1888 the state-appointed county health officer indicted “the Duck Pond” as the primary cause of illness at Hill City, noting “an accumulation of muddy slime on the bottoms and sides of buckets” used to fill 10-cent barrels of water to be hauled to Hill City to supplement the production of the city’s two windmills.

With the drilling of a number of water wells later in 1888, “the Duck Pond’s” waters were used less and less for drinking, though a large ice house was constructed at the pond’s north bank.

In May 1911 “the Duck Pond,” perhaps 300 feet long and 15 feet deep, was declared a public nuisance, and men “with teams and shovels” descended upon the stagnating pond to erase it from the county scene.

Although town residents had expressed concern over using unsanitary ice from “the Duck Pond,” the Solomon River, and various ponds, it wasn’t until 1923 before an ice plant was built in Hill City. After having secured the requisite machinery from a Kansas City firm, Perry Wiseman of Hill City constructed a 24’ x 50’ plant at the intersection of North Fourth Avenue and West McFarland: the plant began production on May 28, 1923, utilizing 84 freezing tanks, each capable of casting a 300-pound ice block. On June 1, 1923, Wiseman provided first-day free ice by horse-drawn wagon to any Hill City resident who requested delivery and to all area farmers who called at the plant.

By June 14, between 50 and 70 tons of ice were held in storage at the plant, a supply exhausted by July 4, when the plant went into 24-hours-per-day production. Wiseman’s dependability, and that of his plant, was legendary; the January 1, 1925, Reveille New Era, for example, reported that Mr. Wiseman delivered ice to patrons in Hill City in 17-below-zero winter weather.

The Hill City Ice Company’s refrigeration plant with its huge one-cylinder flywheel engine operated for almost three decades before closing in the early 1950s and it was dismantled later in the same decade.