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THE BEGINNING OF THE NEW YORK CANAL

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Irrigated farming started on a substantial scale in Boise Valley the season after gold discoveries in Boise Basin, August 2, 1862, brought a rush of miners to the region. By 1864 farmers occupied all the land near the river that could be irrigated by direct diversion. Canals to water more desert land gradually were dug farther out into the valley, but two decades went by before construction of the major Boise Valley canal got underway. New York capitalists, in search of promising opportunities for large scale investment, undertook that project after 1882.

Mining as well as reclamation entered into the plans of the New York investors. Incorporating the Idaho Mining and Irrigation Company, June 23, 1882, they hoped, through gold production to recover some (if not all) of their cost of building a major canal that would have a permanent future serving potential farm land that existing irrigation systems could not reach. Water not needed for reclamation during the summer could be used to work many miles of Snake River placers. Snake River fine gold was attracting a lot of attention at that time, and if anyone ever had figured out an economical recovery process, a large number of expensive New York canals could have been constructed. (So far, a century of search has failed to provide a suitable process, but that discouraging aspect of the canal project could not be foreseen in 1882. A million or two dollars came from Snake River placers in spite of production difficulties.)

Even without the mining possibilities, the New York Canal project had great merit. Rail transportation was about to reach Boise Valley, and once water was available in the underdeveloped desert lands, plenty of farmers would be on hand to use it. Right from the beginning, the New York Canal was planned on an imperial scale. John H. Burns filed a claim for 3,000 second feet of water, November 13, 1882, and A. D. Foote, the company engineer, located 1,500 more the next year. With a canal capable of handling 4,500 second feet of water, they hoped eventually to irrigate 500,000 acres. In 1883 Foote surveyed a seventy-five mile main canal, along with a system of lateral ditches. By fall he had a truly handsome promotional map of a massive reclamation system for Boise Valley. Provision was made for 5,000 miles of lateral ditches. He had to spend \$4,000 a month to get this work done. Still, it was worth the cost. Without such an elaborate (if over-expensive) survey, investors would not be interested in providing the million or one and a half million dollars required for the initial stage of construction.

Foote did not propose to begin with a canal large enough to deliver 4,500 second feet of water. Still, he located his canal so that, when enlarged to that capacity, a 500,000 acre tract of land requiring that much water could be served. Actually, until large storage reservoirs could be

built on the river above his canal, he had no prospect of obtaining anywhere near that much water anyway. Although the river ran more than 10,000 second feet during spring runoff, and 20,000 and more during a good flood, conditions were different in August when irrigation really was needed. Anywhere from 600 to 800 second feet might be available during mid-summer, with low water running even less toward the end of the season. His plan called for a canal twenty-seven feet wide on the bottom, forty-seven feet on top, and seventeen and one-half feet deep. To run his canal at the highest practical elevation, he planned to start it in the river canyon above the valley; the initial three miles in the canyon, he figured, would require \$75,000 per mile. Five years work, he hoped, would get the main canal built. Work on his diversion facility, though, could not commence until low water at the end of the season in 1884. Meanwhile, pending the subscription of capital investment, he had a small crew begin to clear rocks off the canyon route. Then a modest beginning stage, with a canal that later could be enlarged, might follow if capital were forthcoming to underwrite the project.

With twelve to twenty-four men at work over the valley surveying and preparing promotional material, the project attracted local interest as well as eastern investment. On the strength of apparently excellent prospects for water to be delivered through the New York Canal, homesteaders went out into the desert to take up land. Even if the whole system might take five years for construction, water was expected to transform some of the land in two or three years. Agents of the company said very little concerning their financial resources or their backing. Their silence proved to be an asset for the company, but a disaster for the prospective farmers.

A national financial panic in February, 1884, delayed the ambitious New York Canal project. Failure of a Baltimore firm, which had subscribed the necessary capital, forced Foote's company to deal with the firm's creditors. When the creditors refused to negotiate, Foote could consider nothing but assessment work through 1886. He kept a crew of four men or so at work rolling and blasting rock in the canyon. Then the rock was hauled in wheel barrows to the edge of the proposed canal. This effort, necessary to enable the company to retain its water claim, made a fair amount of noise and attracted attention. And three or four men could go on indefinitely at that rate, without costing the company much money and without making enough progress to run out of lava rock to roll or blast in the canyon. The crew understood they were testing the practicality of the project.

With the New York Canal able to keep up only enough work to avoid loss of its water rights, some Nampa promoters tried in 1886 to bring water into part of the New York Canal tract. That way, some of the New York Canal homesteaders might avert disaster. Their newly organized Phyllis Canal Company, regarded as part of the dormant New York project, sought to extend the Settlers ditch into some of the projected New York Canal system. After this effort collapsed in the fall of 1886, C. H. Tompkins (president of the Idaho Mining and Canal Company) finally secured a stock option from the company's recalcitrant creditors in December 1886. By purchasing the creditors' stock for a small amount, he planned to clear out the old obligations at a small fraction of their value so that he could proceed to raise construction funds for the New York and Phyllis canals. Meanwhile, builders of the Idaho Central Railway also expressed interest in taking over the defunct Phyllis Canal in order to help the ruined homesteaders and to develop increased traffic for their line designed to connect Boise with the

Oregon Short Line and Nampa. When the Phyllis company resisted this possibility, the New York Canal, along with the Phyllis, appeared to be a fraud of the first magnitude. Only \$500 worth of work had been done on the Phyllis, and the two men equipped with wheel barrows seemed to be making little or no headway in the canyon on the mammoth New York Canal. The Statesman, July 23, 1887, complained that "they could bale out the Pacific ocean as soon [as] they could paw the dirt off this ditch from its beginning to its ending. . ." If a corporation entices innocent men, with or without families, into such a trap [of homesteading desert land for which water is not provided], it should be made to pay the damages which these parties have suffered. . . But judging from the amount of work done on this imaginative canal their exchequer needs to be replenished."

In order to get the New York Canal started the Idaho Mining and Irrigation Company began surveying, February 3, 1888, for a ditch that they could afford to construct. Later that year, the Phyllis Canal enterprise was returned to the parent company, and serious work finally began on the system in the spring of 1890. (Token efforts designed only as work to retain the water right which had been kept up continuously since 1883, at last could be abandoned.) Under contract from the Idaho Mining and Irrigation Company, W. C. Bradbury quickly put the Phyllis Canal into operation. Aside from getting water to farmers who had desert land in the original New York Canal system, this ditch gave the company access (through a short cut) to some of the Snake River placers which also constituted part of their objective. Then in July, 1890, Bradbury began construction of the New York Canal, two years after the original projected completion date.

Bradbury managed to build only six of the sixty miles of the New York Canal project during the year that he worked on the project. By March 1891, a dispute between New York and British bondholders led to termination of funding for the Idaho Mining and Irrigation Company. Some of the subcontractors quit at that point, but Bradbury continued under his sixty mile contract until July. With 200 to 500 men and 100 to 250 teams of horses, Bradbury utilized "every convenience in machinery that was possible." Altogether, he spent \$386,825.81 on the New York Canal. This included \$208,000 of his own funds. His resources exhausted, Bradbury had to quit without a usable canal to justify his efforts. Bradbury had spent \$150,000 in the three mile canyon stretch without actually getting a canal finished there. He had fourteen miles of canal under construction, but less than half of that portion finished when he had to halt work. The completed six miles extended from the head of the valley onto the benches above Boise. The New York Canal now started several miles below the source for water, or to look at the situation another way, quite a number of feet above the nearest possible diversion point in the river. Worse still, the canal ended about three miles from Boise at a spot quite a few miles from most of the lands that were to be watered. Either a high diversion dam or the canyon stretch of the canal (necessary to close the gap from the original diversion point to the section Bradbury had built) could be built only at a lot more expense.

Discouraged by this unfortunate turn of events, A. J. Foote withdrew from the New York Canal project altogether, and started a new Boise City Canal enterprise in 1892, which the city council accepted because of an offer for free water. In the absence of token efforts by two men equipped with wheel barrows in the canyon, C. H. Tompkins had to keep relocating his New

York Canal water right of 2,000 second feet every sixty days. He kept up this poor man's substitute for doing assessment work "for a long time."

By the end of 1892, the Idaho Mining and Irrigation Company bondholders' conflict was reported solved. But funding to resume construction of the New York Canal failed to materialize during the panic of 1893. Worse still, the Phyllis Canal (the only part of the development that Bradbury had completed) had gone into receivership for two years. Obtaining the legal counsel of William E. Borah, a young Boise attorney, Bradbury had a mechanics lien filed for \$208,000 against the Idaho Mining and Irrigation Company, April 8, 1893. Finally, on February 8, 1894, Borah purchased all of the New York and Phyllis Canal property for Bradbury at a sheriff's sale, February 8, 1894. When the time approached for the New York Canal water right to expire (because of failure to do assessment work), two groups of builders competed to take over the project. Ern Eagleson, who had extensive holdings in need of water on the bench above Boise, located a water right about a mile above the proposed New York Canal diversion, January 18, 1896. He and his associates proposed to open their enterprise to interested farmers, and organized the Ada County Farmers Irrigation Company, February 10, 1896, for that purpose. A number of valley farmers, including some of Bradbury's sub-contractors, also began to jump the New York Canal claim. Organized as the Farmers' Canal Company of Ada County, they filed on 1,500 second feet of New York Canal water right, January 24, 1896. With about 175 farmers for stockholders, this group decided to finish the canal themselves. They agreed, February 21, to purchase whatever interest Bradbury had in the New York Canal, and on April 20, 1896, these farmers drove the Eagleson group (already at work building the canal) out by force. This conflict went to the State Supreme Court, which gave the Eagleson Company the canyon portion of the canal and the other farmers the rest. W. C. Bradbury now planned a new diversion dam to turn water into the canal at the head of the valley where his six mile canal stretch already was completed. That way the expensive canyon section could be eliminated from the project, and the Eagleson part of the canal need not be finished.

Prior to settlement of the New York Canal litigation by the supreme court, January 24, 1898, the Farmers Canal Company did about \$3,000 worth of work on the ditch, using anywhere from four to twenty teams provided by those farmers who were inspired to go out to work on the canal during slack times. They hoped to get a ditch through to their lands by the voluntary system within five years. But such an effort did not get them very far. Eagleson, who had put twelve to fifteen teams in the canyon before his scrap with the other farmers, finished between 2,600 and 3,000 feet of a ditch ten feet wide and five feet deep after the supreme court awarded him the canyon stretch. Then a flood washed out the upper part of his work. He also had to bring a right of way suit against the farmers who had the lower part of the canal. Whether a ditch ever would have been finished under such adverse circumstances hardly can be determined.

Finally, in 1899, Charles Fifer brought both companies into a new combine--The New York Canal Company. Owned by the stockholders, who got water in proportion to their shares of stock, this enterprise was also exempt from taxation under legislation of 1897. Another \$100,000 spent by the new company got a small 300 second foot canal through the canyon, as well as a total of twenty-five miles in main canal and laterals that reached the lands of the stockholders. Water was turned in June 20, 1900. Another \$25,000 was sufficient to complete

this initial development.

With a canal built to carry only 300 second feet through the first three miles in the canyon, and 2,200 second feet for the next six miles built in 1890-1891, and then only 200 to 300 second feet on down to the farms where irrigation commenced in 1900, much remained to be done to realize anything like A. J. Foote's original plan for a project of 300,000 to 500,000 acres.

A rubble diversion dam of hay, straw, and loose rock had to be replaced and torn out each season at an annual cost of \$2,000. This arrangement, along with the canyon part of the canal--a ditch six feet deep and twenty-three feet three inches down to sixteen feet wide from top to bottom, with a grade of nineteen inches to the mile--could be abandoned if a permanent diversion dam were constructed at the lower end of the canyon. When storage facilities made more water available, the lower portion of the canal could be enlarged to handle a great deal more water. Only a small part of the project was opened in 1900; after the canal was filled that year with 200 second feet of water, only small amounts went through while the farmers were getting started: 60 second feet in 1901, 80 in 1902, 160 in 1903, 200 in 1904, and 240 in 1905. By then, only 10,000 acres of the vast tract originally envisioned were receiving water. About 28,000 more were subject to irrigation in 1906, but provision for storage and for permanent diversion had to be made before the canal could be much of a success. This was accomplished by developing the Boise project under the United States Reclamation Service. In 1908, the New York Canal was enlarged to handle the project that Foote originally had planned. A substantial diversion dam was constructed below the canyon so that that difficult canyon stretch could be omitted from the canal. Diversion Dam was built high enough to run water into the canal at that point, and on February 22, 1909, some three thousand people lined the canal below the dam for a mile or two to watch when water finally was diverted into the large canal. Deer Flat reservoir (later known as Lake Lowell) also had been built in time to receive water from the New York Canal in 1909.

With the completion of the New York Canal, A. D. Foote finally received credit for having designed a massive irrigation system for the valley. Two years later, construction began on Arrowrock Dam--the world's highest for almost twenty years after completion in 1915. Then, to provide supplemental water for dry years, a still higher dam (456 feet) followed at Anderson ranch in 1952. Finally, a major flood control dam was built just above A. D. Foote's canyon house near the head of the original New York Canal. With these substantial additions, projects far more ambitious than the original New York Canal proposal, A. D. Foote's early dream for Boise Valley irrigation finally was realized.

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