Big Dam Foolishness: Tuttle Creek Dam and its Effects on the Blue Valley

Most residents of Manhattan have no idea how the town used to be. For over 50 years now, the times of constant, heavy flooding have ceased. Many residents will never know how the Big Blue River naturally drained into the Kansas River as one of its major tributaries. Although the town now has a sparingly used lake available for recreation, they'll never know about the passionate, spirited group of people who made their living and created a culture cradled within the valley of the Big Blue. For over 100 years, from when A.G. Barrett established the first permanent settlement along the southern Big Blue River in 1855 to when the final residents were forcibly removed in 1962¹, the Big Blue River housed some of the most fertile ground and most agriculturally successful people in Kansas. In fact, the average family that was displaced from the Blue Valley region had been there for over 40 years. The roots in the area were real, and they were deep. The second woman to fly a solo Trans-Atlantic flight, the inventor of the clipboard², and thousands of other interesting people were born and raised in the valley of the Big Blue. However, those days are no more, buried under a small sea of water. This paper will show the effects urbanization had on the government and farmers hundreds of miles from where the issues were, a trend that is becoming more and more common. This will also focus on the changes the building of Tuttle Creek Dam had directly and indirectly on tens of thousands of former and potential residents of the Blue Valley region in Marshall, Riley, and Pottawatomie counties. Agricultural changes in the area will be presented as well.

² The D. Paul Cullimore Collection

¹ Byron E. Guise, Bluestem Pioneers: The History of Marshall County, (Clawson Printing, Frankfort KS) 1976, pg 12

Rural people, for the most part, don't take well to change. Mankind, throughout the course of history, has never taken well to having their property forcibly taken from them without any logical justification or any sort of fair compensation. Yet during the 1950's in northern Riley county and south-central Marshall county, that's exactly what happened. Had agriculture played as important of a role in society as it had just a decade before, during World War II, none of this may have happened. Had the population been divided as it had been in the late 19th century, when Marshall and Riley Counties started to take off, none of this may have happened. Yet urbanization led to a decreased role of the farmer in society, especially in the eyes of those making government decisions. The Tuttle Creek Dam tragedy is a little different from most however, as it is based on a lie.

One fact about the Blue Valley that was never argued by either side of the Tuttle Creek

Dam debate is that the farmland in the region was some of the most productive in the state, if not
the entire nation. Eastern Kansas receives more rainfall than the western portion. Northeast
Kansas receives, on average, around 36 inches of precipitation annually³. Not only did this make
the Big Blue the largest tributary to the Kaw in terms of volume⁴, it also allowed the valley an
abundant amount of agricultural wealth. Photos available at the Frankfort and Blue Rapids public
libraries show pictures that people generally don't associate with Kansas, featuring beautiful

creeks and a gorgeous river, with rock formations that had been carved out rising up over 100
feet from the river's surface. Many of these areas are no longer accessible, as they have either
been incorporated into Tuttle Creek Lake or are now located on government land. These pristine
hillsides provided opportunities for cattle to graze, while the areas below the hills in the

³ Gary P. Johnson, Robert R. Holmes, Jr., Loyd A. Waite, *The Great Flood of 1993 on the Upper Mississippi River—10 Years Later*, (U.S. Geological Survey, Urbana, IL) 2003, pg 2

⁴ Philip E. Meyer, Tuttle Creek Dam: A Case Study in Local Opposition, (Univ. of N. Carolina, Chapel Hill) 1962, pg 6

floodplains, or those areas near the river that weren't hilly, provided wonderful agricultural substance for the people of the area. The most populous county of the region throughout much of Kansas history up to 1950, Marshall County, utilized the fertile ground they were provided well. In 1872 and 73, they were ranked fifth in the state in wheat production out of the roughly 100 counties that existed back then. They were also 25th in the state in corn production in 1876, and remained in the top 15 wheat producing and top 35 corn producing counties in the state throughout the 19th century, falling only behind eastern counties, mostly located along the Kaw, with larger, more established populations. A farmer from Irving, who did nothing more than plow the soil he sowed his wheat seeds in, produced an astonishing 42 bushels per acre in 1878, one of the largest crops in the state up to that time. Even today, that's a respectable number, especially for farmers who do nothing more than plow their fields, plant their crops, and hope for the best. Marshall County in 1878 produced 47,240 bushels of wheat that were planted on 2,362 acres, leading to a county-wide average of 20 bushels per acre. This makes the statistics from the Blue Valley region of Marshall County all the more impressive, as it wasn't very uncommon for a farmer along the valley to have a wheat crop ranging between 30 and 40 acres per bushel⁵.

The most important factor in the destruction of the Blue Valley, urbanization, wasn't a factor 60 years prior. In 1878, the population of Marshall County was 14,433.⁶ The population of Wyandotte County, where the main problems with the levee system proposed in 1934, was only 13,161.⁷ Had the population stayed proportionate throughout the next fifty years, Tuttle Creek Dam would have never happened, as urbanization would have worked in favor of the Blue Valley region. However, Kansas City grew at a monstrous rate, especially compared to the two

⁵ KS Board of Agriculture, First Biennial Report: Marshall County, (KS. Board of Ag., Topeka) 1878

⁶ KS Board of Agriculture, 1878

KS Board of Agriculture, First Biennial Report: Wyandotte County, (KS. Board of Ag., Topeka) 1878

largest cities along the Big Blue, Marysville, and, the city that took over as the largest along the Big Blue in the 1920's, Manhattan.

While agriculture was top dog in the early days in the Blue Valley region, it wasn't the only game available. General stores popped up in the towns that formed, and one of the first blacksmith shops in Kansas was opened in Barrett in 1856 by Simon Massie. Over 90 years later, Simon's grandsons, Rex, Milford, and Lloyd, would all see the writing on the wall and head out of the Barrett region to either Colorado or Frankfort, respectively, while another grandson, James, would have to be removed forcibly from Barrett by law enforcement officials to the new home provided for him in the town of Vermillion, in east-central Marshall County. The area would see other businesses and social provisions arrive however, such as the Wetmore Institute for Women, the second college established in the Blue Valley after Bluemont College. The Wetmore Institute was located in Irving, and was closed prior to the dam controversy. Irving did, however, have a rubber belt and bearings conglomerate that was centrally located there, making it easier for them to ship their products to all 48 states, which they did. The second college is all the states, which they did.

In 1934, following an overlook of the population along the Kansas River and the problems with flooding in Kansas City, the Army Corps of Engineers proposed a dam along the Kansas River just to the west of Topeka. They also determined the best solution for flooding in Kansas City was to raise the levees that were already in place in town. However, this would have disrupted transportation, forced roadways to move, and would have shut down the railroad temporarily while they raised bridges to accommodate the new dikes. As a result, with the blessing of the Natural Resources Board, the KCK and KCMo chambers of commerce submitted

⁸ The Rex Massie Collection, 2007

⁹ Claude Backman, *The Irving Story* (Clawson Printing, Frankfort) 1972, pg. 6,18

a joint resolution proposing two dams along tributaries of the Kaw in lieu of the levee improvements and the Kiro Dam, as the dam west of Topeka had been named. The groups proposed damming up the Republican River near the town of Wakefield, and damming the Big Blue River at Manhattan. On March 31, 1938, the Kansas City group sent Army Corps of Engineers Missouri River Division Engineer, Col. C.L. Sturdevant, to speak to the Capital Hill to speak with House of Representatives Committee on Flood Control. When asked by the Chairman of the Committee, "Would there by any towns or villages destroyed or required to be removed by the construction of either of these two reservoirs, Milford or Tuttle Creek?" Sturdevant simply replied, "No." With one dishonest word, Col. Sturdevant sealed the fate of the citizens and histories of the towns of Irving, Bigelow, Barrett, Stockdale, Cleburne, Garrison, and Randolph, without the consent or knowledge of any of them. Not surprisingly, the Irving Leader for the first week of April made no mention of Big Blue Dam, as it was called up north when it was first learned of. 11 No one in the area would know for some time, and by the time they would learn it would be too late to nip the idea in the bud. Instead, the citizens had to fight wheels already in motion to try and save their homeland and their farms.

The Blue Valley continued to farm and live as they always had, even after those fateful words were muttered on Capital Hill. Businesses continued to thrive, and farms continued to operate successfully. Riley, Pottawatomie, and Marshall Counties, with the benefits of the Big Blue and Kaw Rivers, were leaders in the state in corn production. In 1937, a year that saw residents of Finney County getting two bushel per acre out of their corn, and even more agriculturally suited counties like Saline getting 14 bushels per acre, the Blue Valley area was near the top of the state, with Marshall County pulling 24.6 bushel per acre, Riley County

¹⁰ Meyer, 1962, pg 5,8

¹¹ The Irving Leader, April 4, 1938

achieving 25.8 bushel per acre, and Pottawatomie County earning an astonishing 34.4 bushel per acre. Marshall County produced the third most corn in the state at 2,275,500 bushel, while Pottawatomie County was fifth with 1,744,080 bushel of corn.¹²

Residents living in the Blue Valley region didn't even know their homeland was under attack until 1944, when the Pick-Sloan Plan passed Congress and was signed by President Roosevelt. The plan allowed for creation of dams from Montana to Missouri in order to control the outflow of the Missouri River into the Mississippi. This tragic adjustment to nature also provided funding for the damming of tributaries of the Missouri, ¹³ which was the perfect storm to bring about the end of the Blue Valley. This time, people took notice. Newspapers in Irving, Randolph, Blue Rapids, and Frankfort all took note of the new legislation that had come to their attention that threatened their way of life. Groups were assembled and meetings were scheduled with their Congressman in Washington, as well as the Governor of Kansas. However, no word of the resistance would actually reach the U.S. Congress until 1949, 11 years after the wheels for Tuttle Creek Dam had initially been set into motion.

The urbanization that hadn't existed back in the 1800's, as noted earlier, made a key impact by the time 1950 rolled around and Tuttle Creek Dam was becoming a major possibility. The population of Marshall County, after peaking over 23,000 just 20 years before, had fallen to just under 18,000 in 1950. The reason for the shrinkage in population was partially due to Tuttle Creek Dam, as some residents of the area had seen the writing on the wall and had left already. While southern Marshall County still had a decent number of citizens, the number had

¹² KS Board of Agriculture, *Kansas Statistics 1937-1938*, (KS Board of Ag., Topeka) 1938, pg 21

¹³ http://www.usbr.gov/projects/Project.jsp?proj Name=Pick+Sloan+Missouri+Basin+Program, 2010

¹⁴ Richard L. Forstall, KANSAS: Population of Counties by Decennial Census: 1900 to 1990, (U.S. Bureau of the Census, Washington D.C.) 1995

thinned out in the area. On a related note, the populations of Frankfort, Blue Rapids, Vermillion, and Marysville in Marshall County rose slightly during the 1950's and 60's.

Rex Massie was one of those people who read the writing on the wall. The Massie family was the second family to arrive in Barrett following the Barrett family themselves. When Rex was born in 1919, part of the family had continued to operate the successful blacksmith shop in Barrett, which was open until the day the town was officially shut down in 1955. Rex's father, Simon, had built a successful farming operation between Frankfort and Barrett, and he operated over 400 acres of crops with some cattle as well. Rex and his brothers, Milford and Lloyd, stayed within a few miles of home in order to help their father with his expanding farming business as Simon's health started to fail. However, the first of the boys to see the area wouldn't be farmable for much longer was Lloyd, who was detached from the emotions of the situation while he received word of the Pick-Sloan Plan during the European Theatre of World War II. When he returned home following an honorable discharge in 1945, Lloyd purchased a farm just north of Frankfort. Rex was the next to leave. As he and his bride of four years decided it was time to start a family, they also determined that a community on the way out wasn't the place to be. Rex and Frances Massie had their first daughter, Sharon, born in the Onaga Hospital, along the northern edge of Pottawatomie Couty, safe from the destruction. However, shortly after the birth • of their daughter, Sharon, the three moved to the family's new farm, near Platteville, Colorado, in the shadow of the Rocky Mountains. Milford was the last to go. Following the death of his father, Milford finally gave the farm up and was bought out by the government in 1956. He too moved north of Frankfort, near his brother Lloyd. 15 The Massie family is like many from the area

¹⁵ The Rex Massie Collection, 2007

at that time, and provided another statistic that the big wigs in Kansas City and at the Corps of Engineers wanted to hear.

Most estimates state that just over 3,000 people were moved in order to make preparations for Tuttle Creek Dam. 16 That value is only partially valid. Just over 3,000 people were moved when construction kicked into high gear in 1955 and when the dam was officially completed in 1962. Not helping the matter was the gross overestimates of the Corp of Engineers. James Massie, mentioned earlier as one of the residents to be forcibly removed from his home by law enforcement officials, was told that where his home stood inside Barrett city limits would be underneath a minimum of 30 feet of water at all times. ¹⁷ At the time of Massie's death in 2010, his old home site had been under water once, in 1993. The 3,000 citizens figure also does not include the people that simply didn't leave. While law required the citizens of the towns to be removed, rural residents of Marshall County that refused to be bought out by the government were allowed to stay until the water reached their doorsteps, so to say. The theory was that those people would see the wrong of their ways and evacuate immediately once they realized flooding of their homes couldn't be avoided. Instead what it has done is allowed families to maintain land their families had homesteaded over 150 years ago, like the Jones farm a mile south of the old Barrett townsite. And while it couldn't protect the second largest round barn in the United States, • which was located near Irving, it has protected other historic sites, like the Underground Railroad barn located on what is now the Hawkinson farm, about two miles southwest of the Barrett townsite. Ironically, the Hawkinson family moved to the area from Cleburne, when they were left to make way for the dam around 1950. They have maintained their property near Barrett since then.

http://www.nwk.usace.army.mil/tc/History.cfm, 2010
 The James Massie Collection, 2010

Being able to say they were displacing 3,000 people instead of just under 6,000, as was estimated, proved to be beneficial for the pro-dam folks. It also wreaked havoc on agriculture in the Blue Valley region. Many farms, like the Massie's had near Barrett, were essentially abandoned. The government began buying up farms around the Big Blue River and in the Barrett and Bigelow areas. A very few other farms were simply left to be reclaimed by extremely disheartened folks who chose to move into a town or leave the area completely. 18 As should be expected, the turmoil and uncertainty in the region, combine with the exodus that precluded Tuttle Creek Dam, effected agriculture immensely all the way to the end. In 1961, Marshall County produced 2,250,000 bushels of wheat in fields averaging 30 bushels per acre. ¹⁹ In 1962. the year Tuttle Creek was officially completed and the last court ordered residence were forced to leave and turn their land over to the federal government, only 1,885,000 bushels were produced in Marshall County at an average of about 29 bushel per acre²⁰. While the bushel per acre difference isn't anything specifically notable, that does go to show even further how much less land was available for crops. A bigger difference could be seen in corn production throughout Marshall and Riley Counties. In 1960, Marshall and Riley County produced 3,724,000 bushel and 1,306,800 bushel, respectively. In 1962, a year of record corn crops, Marshall County produced only 3,025,000 bushel, while Riley County provided 989,800 bushel. However, 1962 saw Marshall County have an incredible ten bushel per acre improvement over 1960, while Riley County experienced a five bushel per acre improvement across those two years. The difference was Tuttle Creek and the amount of land available to plant to corn. In 1960, Riley County planted 30,000 acres to corn, while Marshall County put forth 95,000 acres

¹⁸ The James Massie Collection, 2010

¹⁹ Jasper E. Pallesen, *Farm Facts 1961/62*, (Kansas State Board of Agriculture Statistical Division, Topeka) 1962, pg

²⁰ Jasper E. Pallesen, *Farm Facts 1962/63*, (Kansas State Board of Agriculture Statistical Division, Topeka) 1963, pg

for the yellow stuff.²¹ In 1962, Riley County was only able to plant 23,000 acres of corn, while Marshall County, which had seen big corn production around the Irving area over the years, only seeding 63,000 acres to the county's primary crop.²²

Wyandotte County, which was profiled earlier with a population notably smaller than Marshall County in 1878, became an urban center once the Tuttle Creek battle erupted. Of the 1,905,299 people in the state of Kansas counted in the 1950 census, 165,318 of them resided in Wyandotte County.²³ The county that had been economically inferior to the rural Marshall County only two generations before contained over 11 percent of the Kansas population when the Tuttle Creek fiasco began. People have a voice, and no matter how many people in the Blue Valley banded together, they wouldn't be able to come close to the population in Wyandotte County alone, much less the 62,783 residents of Johnson County²⁴ and those on the Missouri side of the Missouri River that had a vested interest in stopping the floods that had ravished their home areas. While they weren't even close to as passionate or as proportionately active about the building of the dam, those in charge knew the population distribution, and where their votes came from. However, the people of the Blue Valley knew about the population disparity, and they also knew the best way to protect themselves was on a larger, more even playing field.

The Blue Valley folks campaigned for Democrat Howard Miller of Hiawatha, leading him into a seemingly pointless campaign against Albert Cole, a Republican whip seeking his fifth term in the U.S. House. The First District of Kansas had never sent a Democrat to Congress ever. And to make matters even worse, the First District at that time included Topeka, a city that

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²¹ Jasper E. Pallesen, *Farm Facts 1960/61*, (Kansas State Board of Agriculture Statistical Division, Topeka) 1961, pg 27

²² Jasper E. Pallesen, *Farm Facts 1962/63*, (Kansas State Board of Agriculture Statistical Division, Topeka) 1963, pg 23F

²³ Forstall, 1995

²⁴ Forstall, 1995

had a vested interest in getting Tuttle Creek Dam built. Needless to say, all signs pointed towards a sweep for Cole, a supporter of flooding the Blue Valley as well as building Milford Lake, which lost him the support of the Clay Center area. Miller campaigned on a one issue platform, and that was saving the towns in the Blue Valley region and along the proposed Milford Dam site. Those people who stood to lose their homes and business interests worked hard to put Miller in office. Cole received support from the Topeka Daily Capital as well as the Kansas City Star, which had a small circulation in the First District, but besides those two papers every other paper in the district lent their support to Miller. The Blue Valley residents went barnstorming throughout the district, and when the votes were counted the residents along the proposed Tuttle Creek and Milford dam sites had carried Miller to Capital Hill, 68,909 to 66,963 over Cole. To exemplify how many party lines had been crossed to save peoples' homes and businesses, Dwight Eisenhower, Republican, also carried the district in that year's vote for President of the United States, by a slim margin of 102,151 to 41,923 over Adlai Stevenson.²⁵ Miller received the support of his fellow Kansan in the White House, as President Eisenhower left out appropriations for continuing work on the barely begun Tuttle Creek Dam in 1952 and 1953. It seemed, following all the fighting and the recent dry dam idea's introduction, that the people of the Blue Valley may have saved their homes after all. The era of good feelings lasted until 1955, the fourth year that President Eisenhower had chosen not to fund Tuttle Creek Dam. But on June 10, 1955, Rep. Errett P. Scrivner, a six-term Republican Congressman from Newton, put his reputation on the line when he called for a vote to provide \$7,500,000 to continue work on Tuttle Creek Dam.²⁶ Had Scrivner proposed that vote in a Republican-controlled Congress, or a Congress with Rep. Miller from Hiawatha, he may have failed. Yet Miller had been defeated in

²⁵ Meyer, pg 41

²⁶ Meyer, pg 66-68

the previous election by a moderately anti-dam Republican, who narrowly carried the First

District, and the Democrats had taken control of the House in that election as well.²⁷ The fate of the area was sealed, and appraisals of properties began in 1956.²⁸ Every town along the Blue

Valley was razed with the exception of Randolph, which was left to be covered by thousands of gallons of water. The Randolph that exists today is a miles north, and much higher in elevation, than the original townsite. Post offices were closed in late 1955 in order to show that the change coming was, in fact, permanent. The many residence of Barrett, Bigelow, and Irving that hadn't had time to move now found themselves part of the rural mail route, and saw bulldozers ominously waiting in town to take down their houses. Law enforcement and Army officials forcibly removed the few folks that refused to move from their homes, which now laid on government land.²⁹ The beautiful Irving High School building met its end with an intentional fire started by Army officials sent by the Corps of Engineers.³⁰ Irving, which had survived two ungodly destructive tornadoes in the late 1800's, wasn't allowed to survive a lie and a pushy Congressman's call to vote.

well. The towns of Blue Rapids and Frankfort had levee systems built for them near the Big Blue and Black Vermillion Rivers, respectively. The two towns were also prohibited any further expansion towards the rivers, meaning Frankfort could no longer expand south and Blue Rapids could no longer expand north or east. While the dikes were a welcome idea to those communities, which had also experienced heavy flooding in the past, the first year they

Destruction of the pristine Blue Valley area led to changes in the surrounding areas as

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themselves were the cause of flooding.

²⁷ Meyer, pg 68

²⁸ Backman, pg 33

²⁹ James Massie Collection, 2010

³⁰ The Betty Backman Collection, 2010

"We were very glad when the dikes were finally finished," said Elsie Wessel, a lifelong resident of the Bigelow and Frankfort areas. Elsie spent her first 17 years of life near Bigelow, but upon her marriage in 1957, she moved to Frankfort to live with her husband, Vince. Wessel's first-hand experience tells the first story of Frankfort's levees best. "We knew how bad the floods were in Frankfort and were glad those were finally going to stop, but that first year there was no drainage system in the dikes so the snowmelt flooded in the whole town." Large spillway doors were installed along the dikes in 1959, proving the problem would never happen again. 31

More than just snowfall proved to be an issue for residents of Frankfort and Blue Rapids however, as many displaced farmers and country-folk had to find themselves new homes, and it wasn't going to be easy anywhere near home. Farmland in the counties was already occupied, and the prices the government was paying the residents of the Blue Valley weren't even justifiable for the land that was being taken, much less enough to acquire a new farm in the area. Rex Massie shared with several of his friends about his stake near Platteville, Colorado, and something of a mini-exodus began. It is estimated that over a dozen families still living in the Platteville and Milliken areas of Colorado can trace their roots to Irving, Barrett, Bigelow, and the Blue Valley. The townsfolk that had operated businesses had much less trouble moving. Many residents of Irving, along with St. Elizabeth's Catholic Church in Irving, made the move to Blue Rapids. A decent number of Irving families also moved to Vliets, located halfway between Vermillion and Frankfort. Almost all fifty families left in Barrett picked up and went to Vermillion, and the Bigelow families made the move to Frankfort and Beattie. Though their

³¹ The Elsie Wessel Collection, 2010

Backman, pg 33
 The Dianna Younger Collection, 2010

history lived, the Blue Valley region, with its historical cultural and agricultural connections, were no more. The government now owned what so many families had homesteaded, and they also laid claim to thousands of livelihoods.

In the late 1850's, a locally historic yet little known about battle was fought on Twin Mounds, located in southern Marshall County. The two massive hills, which are two of the highest points in the state and once served as an Indian burial ground, served as a battlefield for hundreds of Indians and dozens of white settlers passing through the area. The white settlers with their rifles outmatched the Indians, and took their land. 34 One hundred years later, the ancestors of those settlers had their land taken from them, when they were outmatched by the Corp of Engineers and the federal government, the same federal government that had allowed them to homestead all those lands in the first place. A simple drive around rural Riley and Marshall Counties will show that corn is no longer the king crop. While it is making a recent resurgence, wheat has been the crop of choice in the area the last 50 years. In 2000, Marshall County produced 4,286,000 bushel of corn, yet only 42,100 acres was dedicated to the crop, far below the 1960 number.³⁵ Wheat production in the county also averaged out at 46 bushel per acre in 2000, an impressive number, yet only six bushel per acre over the simple Irving farmer in the Blue Valley way back in 1878. Agriculture and life have changed drastically in the area since • Tuttle Creek Dam was constructed, and it's a shame so few in the protected area know how much some people were forced to give.

³⁴ The Rex Massie Collection, 2007

³⁵Jamie Clover Adams, *Kansas Farm Facts 2001*, 9Kansas State Board of Agriculture Statistical Division, Topeka) 2001, pg 39

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