

# The First Five: A Brief History of the Milk River Project

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As in most western territories, farming in the Montana region saw little activity until the 1860s, although limited agriculture occurred earlier near the fur trading posts. The gold miners rushing to stake and work their claims did not want or have the time to till the soil for vegetables and grains, requiring the need of others to provide those commodities. Farmers soon came to cultivate the land and construct small water delivery systems. Although the Milk River Valley in northeastern Montana receives approximately 20 inches of rainfall, irrigation was a necessity. The communities of Chinook and Harlem developed canal systems with a communal diversion dam, as did the Bureau of Indian Affairs for the Assiniboine and Gros Ventre tribes on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation. By the turn of the century, farmers irrigated 35,000 acres, growing oats, vegetables and pasturage for livestock. But without a stable water supply, the economic growth of the region could not be assured.<sup>1</sup>

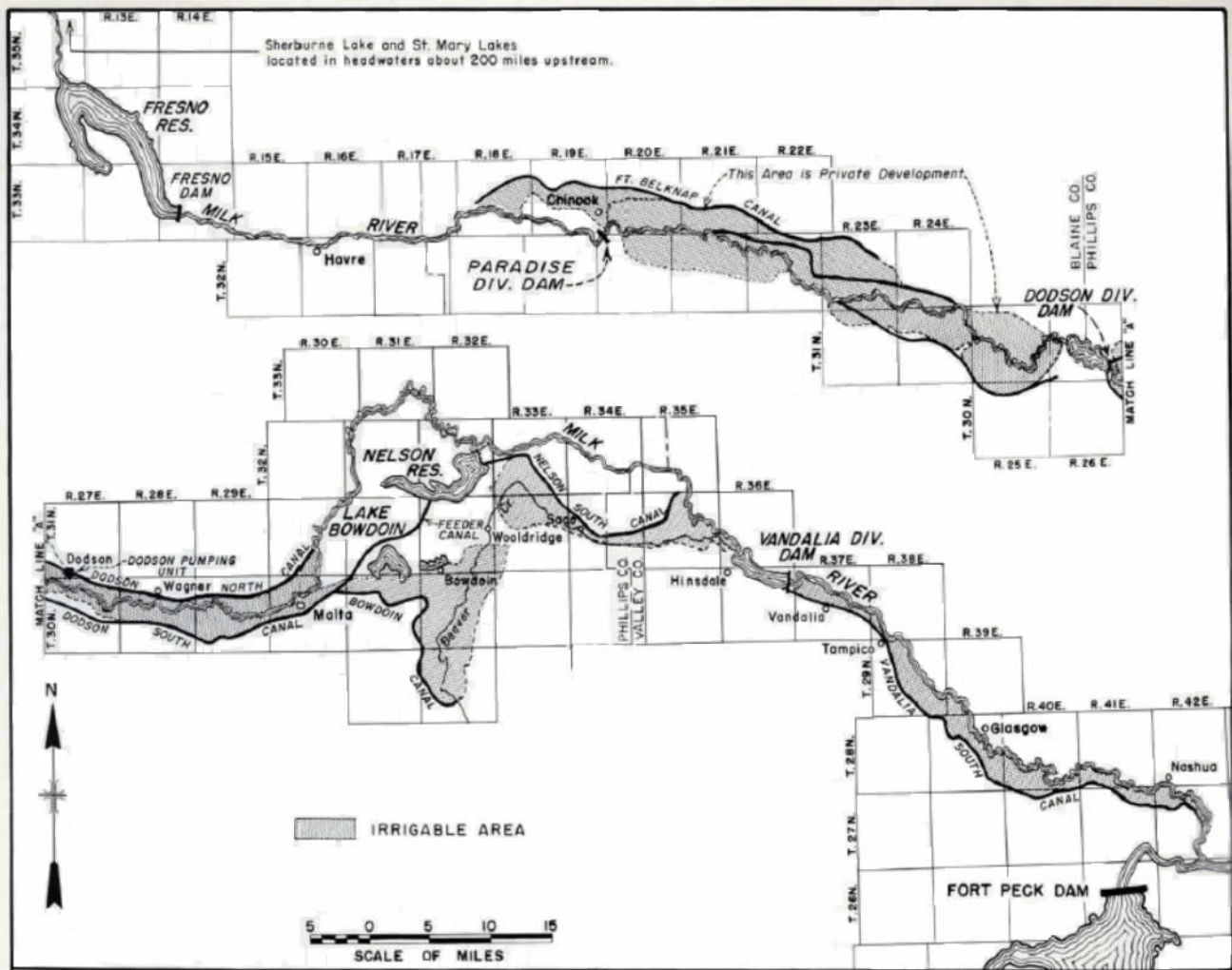
Under the instructions of Frederick Newell, Geological Survey Engineer Gerard H. Matthews studied the feasibility of diverting the water from the St. Mary River to the Milk River in 1900. The engineers determined that with the construction of a gravity canal between the two rivers, it was possible to transport water from one river to the other. Cyrus Babb continued the survey of the region, investigating various diversion points and identifying what lands needed to be withdrawn. Eventual plans depended, however, on an agreement between the governments of Canada and the United States, because the waters of the St. Mary River traveled through Canada before returning to the United States. Although a treaty would not be reached for almost a decade, the Reclamation Service suggested that the Milk River Project be among the first approved. The waters of the Milk River Project also created problems within the continental United States when, as requested by the Reclamation Service, a determination of water rights was set in motion in 1905. The U.S. Supreme Court, in deciding the case of *U.S. v Winters* in 1908, established the Indian and federal reserved rights doctrine, followed by today's judicial system.

Although it is not clear why the Milk River Project was among the first chosen, the United States government may have wanted to protect the water supply of the Milk River from overuse by the Canadian farmers or possibly guarantee it as a stable source of water for the Indians on the Fort Belknap Reservation. In his autobiography, Newell noted that the Milk River Project had "international complications," and like the other first projects, he was instrumental in sending out the engineers to survey potential reservoir sites and alignments for canals.<sup>2</sup>

The Reclamation Service engineers designed a system of irrigation canals and dams which would deliver water to the farmers for the irrigation of 120,000 acres. Beginning with the construction of Lake Sherburne Dam, the stored water would be released into the St. Mary River before being diverted into the twenty-nine mile long St. Mary Canal and then discharged into the Milk River. The water continues to flow northward into Alberta, Canada before re entering the United States, traveling more than 200 miles where it is stored in the Fresno Reservoir until it is needed by the farmers, proceeding through a series of diversion dams having journeyed through 200 miles of canals, 219 miles of laterals, and 295 miles of drains.<sup>3</sup>

As construction of the engineering features continued through several decades, settlement of the lands progressed slowly. Even though there was no formal opening of the Milk River Project by the Secretary of the Interior for many years, the Reclamation Service allowed World War I veterans to file entries on the public lands in 1920. During the next decade, landowners with large holdings were not eager to divide their land into the smaller units as required by the Reclamation Act, hindered development on the Project. New farmers also had a difficult time adjusting to the farming conditions and many left within the year after planting their first crop. Those that remained produced good yields of grains, hardy vegetables, and alfalfa, which supported the local livestock industry.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout the Montana drought of the late 1920s, and the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, the Milk River Project acted as haven for those farmers who lost everything. The federal government assisted in relocating the 'dry land farmers' who had tried to make a living in other parts of Montana and Texas and Oklahoma settlers who saw their lands blown away. The Bureau of Reclamation still supported the small farmer with making a living and settling the arid West.<sup>5</sup>



Milk River Project

## Notes

1. Rolla L. Queen, "Historic Cultural Resources of the Milk River Project," vol. 1: History and Resource Overview. USBR, 1991, 32-34.
2. Newe11, "Autobiography" [67].
3. Wm. Joe Simonds, "Milk River Project," U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, Internet version. U.S. Water and Power Resources Service, *Project Data*, (Denver: Government Printing Office, 1981), 632-633.
4. U.S. Dept. of the Interior, *Federal Irrigation Projects*, 30.
5. Simons, "Milk River Project."