

Echoes From the Past

HENRY COVEL HOLDERMAN... A DAM VISIONARY

Most who are interested in the history of the Pensacola Dam at Langley know that its construction was first envisioned by Henry Holderman when he was a teenager, but many don't know "the rest of the story." Born in 1874 in Chetopa, Kansas Henry obtained a fifth grade education at the Wyandotte Mission School and worked at the family sawmill. In fact, the idea of building a dam first occurred to him while hauling lumber from Chetopa to the Spavinaw Hills. Unfortunately his plans were derailed in 1890 when at the age of 16 he became involved in a "youthful altercation" during a dance and ran away from home. He not only ran away from home but left the country reappearing first in Africa where he worked in the diamond mines and served as a hunting guide and then in India assisting in the construction of mud and log dams. Holderman returned only after his mother wrote a reassuring letter in which she explained that "his problems had been solved."

In 1896, after his return to Chetopa and obsessed with his idea, Henry, his brother Bert and two classmates from Muskogee's Spaulding Institute built a boat, outfitted it and floated from Iola, Kansas down the Grand River to Three Forks at Muskogee. It's interesting to note that Holderman and his friends determined, just as professional engineers did 40 years later, that the vicinity of the current site was the best place for a dam. Shortly thereafter and now 22 years of age, Henry began his quest for construction of the dam by attempting to persuade Eastern cotton manufacturers to move to Oklahoma where cotton was available and only hydro-electric power was needed. This first effort failed and proved to be the predictable pattern for all of his future attempts. The cotton manufacturing idea re-emerged much later in a letter written in 1936 by J. Howard Langley, who later became the first Chairman of the Grand River Dam Authority Board of Directors. Langley noted, "All I want is for my cotton socks to be manufactured in Oklahoma."

Not to be discouraged, Holderman continued to seek funding and in 1907 succeeded in persuading Cyrus Avery, a Sand Springs entrepreneur, to form the Grand River Power Company, but there were no further proceedings. In 1911, after completing an engineering course, he attempted to obtain financing through the Muskogee Chamber of Commerce and later the Kansas Oklahoma and Gulf Railroad. Railroad executives almost agreed to underwrite the project by 1914, but again fate stepped in with the beginning of the First World War and they suspended further negotiations. The previous year, 1913, Henry, his wife Maude and E.L. Stegall of Strang had formed the Grand River Power and Electric Company, but after negotiations with the railroad fell through there was no further evidence of activity on the part of that corporation. Still focused on the construction of a dam, in 1917 he founded the Grand River Hydro-Electric Company with several others and they were issued a permit in 1922 to build at the present site, but again no further action was taken. In the meantime, he had contacted a group of Chicago venture capitalists to sell bonds and underwrite the costs of construction, but that plan also fell

through when he discovered they wanted to sell “watered stock” as a get rich scheme with no intentions of funding construction.

During this time frame and always short of personal funds, Henry now 44, moved to Polk County, Arkansas, working in the mines and living with his wife at Cutters Hotel. But he continued his quest through the Grand River Hydro-Electric Company and in 1923 some rights were transferred to another entity, the Oklahoma Hydro-Electric Company who purchased land for construction just below the present dam site. Later exploration would indicate that site was inappropriate since it nearly straddled the Seneca Fault, a break in the earths crust running from Seneca, Missouri to Pryor, Oklahoma.

By 1930, Holderman now 56 years of age and living in Craig County was running out of time and energy. Always cash strapped, hence usually on the outside looking in with negotiations, his last attempt to see his dream fulfilled was also shattered. When President Franklin Roosevelt announced the formation of the Tennessee Valley Authority to build a series of dams, Henry saw an opportunity to obtain federal funds for construction of his project. He organized a group of political leaders from Oklahoma and surrounding states but shortly they pushed him aside as inconsequential to the project. But in a convoluted way, Henry Holdermans 34 year quest was fulfilled even though the vision was consummated by others before he died. The Pensacola Dam created by a state enabling act became reality in the spring of 1940. Henry died in 1951 and is buried in the Wyandotte Cemetery.

