

## **Echoes From the Past**

### **W.R. HOLWAY, PENSACOLA'S ARCHITECT**

Lady luck was certainly smiling on the GRDA Board of Directors when on October 27, 1937 they selected the Holway and Neuffer Engineering Firm from Tulsa to oversee construction of what would become the longest multi-arched dam in the world. William Rea Holway proved to not only have the ability to superbly direct construction, but also the integrity needed to fend off various attempted bribes and political attacks.

A Massachusetts Yankee, Holway was born April 29, 1893 in Sandwich' the offspring of a family whose roots in America dated back to 1637. Baptized in the West Barnstable Congregational Church his first jobs were carrying milk at one cent a bottle, herding cows to the town's common field, and working in his fathers livery stable. After graduation from the Sandwich Academy he attended Dartmouth College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

During his high school years, W.R. became infatuated with a teacher named Frances Hope Kerr whose family roots also dated back to the origins of the country. Hope, born in 1886, graduated from Radcliffe College in 1910 and in addition to teaching played piano for a local orchestra. "Willie" as he was called by the family, often rode along with the orchestra during their various appearances and according to Hope, they usually had the last dance. Suffice to say as time passed, infatuation eventually turned to love and the couple was married July 28, 1916.

Holway's first job was as assistant engineer at Providence, Rhode Island and after that he was in charge of the waterworks plant in Alliance, Ohio. In 1918 he was hired as city waterworks engineer in Tulsa and also went into business on a paving job in Sand Springs. By 1920, Tulsa was seeking an additional water supply and selected him to be consulting engineer for construction of a water source from Spavinaw. Despite considerable second guessing Holway was successful in developing a pipeline that depended on gravity to flow from Spavinaw to Tulsa. According to rumor, to prove his "gravity flow" point he supposedly requested that his final check be placed in a bottle at Lake Spavinaw and he retrieved it with a flourish at the outlet at Lake Yahola in Tulsa.

After his selection and while government funding was being secured for construction of the dam, Holway delved into research that would produce an economical and structurally sound structure. He contacted Clarence McDonough an M I T classmate who had supervised development of a multi-arched dam at Buchanan, Texas and after visiting concluded that the design was exactly what he wanted to pursue. In the meantime local promoters, the "Grandma's," those who stayed home and the "Rainbow Chasers," those who lobbied the project in Washington had procured \$20 million for the project. The contract was let January 1, 1938 and bids were taken the following June 3<sup>rd</sup>.

As construction evolved, the inevitable bribery tactics emerged. Holway relates that in one instance a spokesman for a senator came to his office wanting him to use a gravel pit used by a constituent with the promise that W. R. would be well rewarded. In his account, Holway notes that "the fellow left his office much more quickly than he entered." However, the most publicized issues involved Governor Leon "Red" Phillips. Phillips was

either convinced that the state was being inadequately compensated for roads and bridges that would be inundated by the lake or he viewed the whole project as a “cash cow” for the state of Oklahoma. During the summer of 1939 Phillips tried to gain control of the GRDA Board by recommending to the legislature that five of the nine appointees should be selected by the governor. Failing to achieve that take-over and failing in other attempts, in March of 1940 he called out the National Guard in an attempt to stop construction and enforce a restraining order for more compensation.

By this time the dam was virtually completed and the gates ready to be closed. Mother Nature had smiled on the project by providing a two year drought that resulted in the lowest river flow since 1895, however spring was coming and there was no assurance that luck would hold. Chairman of GRDA, Ray McNaughton had promised the governor he would notify him before the last gate sealing the dam would be closed. But at 10:00 p.m. on March 21, 1940 the gates were closed by the contractor with Holway’s approval and without notifying anyone. McNaughton challenged Holway about his promise to the governor at which W.R. reminded him that, “I heard you promise him, I didn’t.” By 1940 “Willie” Holway had succeeded in making a dream, fostered by Henry Holderman in 1895, a reality.

