

WESLEY DISNEY'S LEGACY

Wesley Disney doesn't get the credit he deserves for his efforts toward creation of the Pensacola Dam at Langley, even though a post office honoring his name was opened on May 21, 1938. When stories are told about the founding of the town of Disney, its namesake is frequently overshadowed by the activities of C.D. Armstrong, an engaging entrepreneur, who purchased what he called an island the following year, because of the pending location of spillways on either side of the town site. Armstrong's antics and his overblown claims of the town as potentially "the resort center of the Midwest" that could boast "650,000 visitors annually" still receives more press.

So, Disney deserves a more substantive look, one that reveals at least a few of the vital contributions he made toward construction of the dam as a Washington insider. It had been a long quest. Ever since 1898, when Henry Holderman first advanced the idea, different corporate entities had been created with a vision of capturing the waters of the Grand River for hydro-electric power. But financing was always the stumbling block, at least until the mid 1930's, when a combination of events that placed Disney in the middle, offered what might be the best opportunity to achieve that dream.

Born October 31, 1883, Wesley Ernest Disney grew up in Richland, Kansas and attended the University of Kansas where he obtained his law degree. At the age of 25 and fresh out of college, in 1908 he moved to Muskogee and established a law office. In 1911 he entered the political arena and was elected county attorney, a position he held until 1915. His political skills were honed when, in 1919, Disney was elected to the Oklahoma House of Representatives serving three terms. By this time, it had become apparent that he was a natural for the political arena. Using his engaging personality and state experience, he ran for first district congressman in 1930, eventually being re-elected six times. Disney's chief interest and talent was in finance and he became known in congress as "the watchdog of the treasury" while serving on the Banking and Ways and Means Committees. By 1935 he had become quite familiar with Washington politics which made him an ideal contact.

Meanwhile back home, advocates for the dam had done their homework and on April 26, 1935, the Oklahoma Legislature passed an enabling act authorizing formation of a Board of Directors, the Grand River Dam Authority. Their charge was to construct dams on the Grand River, but more specifically at that time, what would become the Pensacola Dam. Of course, with the creation of the Authority, the same objective that had eluded its predecessor's was to find funding for construction, and this time in the middle of the worst depression in the history of the United States.

Early in the Roosevelt administration and due to what has been labeled "The Great Depression," a Public Works Administration (PWA) had been formed that was empowered to make loans or grants to stimulate public projects through the oversight of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Two existing agencies, the Corps of Engineers and the Federal Power Commission were also government entities with responsibilities for the development of hydro-electric power. All would be involved in the complex politics creating the dam, either due to financial issues or for regulatory purposes.

As the following examples illustrate, Disney proved to be invaluable on almost a daily basis. Not only was he instrumental in arranging meetings with appropriate officials and steering the "Rainbow Chasers," a name the local delegation to Washington acquired, he also put out fires from unexpected sources. Almost immediately a crisis emerged, this one

in Oklahoma. The director of the state WPA “turned down” the Authorities’ application for construction, “on the grounds that there might be a dangerous geological fault that ran through the area.” With the assistance of the engineer, W.R. Holway, Disney was able to successfully convince federal officials that plans were already underway to move the dam site 300 yards north of the original site. Back in Washington, as expected in most government projects, pressure was exerted to select favored contractors. In just one instance among many, Disney was able to divert pressure away from the use of inferior gravel for concrete from a pit owned by friends of a wealthy political contributor. A running battle with the Corps of Engineers regarding the lake level was finally resolved after months of negotiations. In addition, there were day to day hurdles involving the Federal Power Administration, the forerunner of the current Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) concerning licensing and the potential distribution of electricity.

As these examples illustrate, while most accounts focus on the approval of \$20 million dollars in funding as the ultimate accomplishment, the devil proved to be in the details. Until the dam was completed in 1940, bureaucratic and political issues continued to surface and were addressed. While Wesley Disney is given credit as being part of the “team” that enabled construction of the Pensacola Dam, he was much more. In the parlance of football hype, and like the blocking back running interference for the star, he has been given far too little credit for clearing the field in Washington that resulted in construction of Pensacola Dam.

