

Natural Resources in Lancaster and Cass Counties: A Pre-NRD History

Compiled by the Lower Platte South Natural Resources District, 1998

Euro-American settlement of the area that now comprises the Lower Platte South NRD began in 1856 and increased greatly after the completion of the Overland Trail, which ran through the area. The Village of Lancaster, later renamed Lincoln, was founded in 1859.

The prairie sods which had protected the land from excessive erosion and runoff were plowed under by farmers eager to develop the land for agriculture. The effects of this loss of ground cover were soon felt.

Flooding is a natural phenomenon and floods have occurred in this area throughout history. Development of the land by settlers accelerated runoff and as a result, floods became more frequent and more severe. By 1861, only five years after the initial settlement, the first recorded major flood occurred in the Salt Valley. Floods continued on a regular basis, and by 1874 they became such a problem a group of Lincoln residents met to discuss ways of reducing flood damage to the city. However, nothing was done at that time and the floods continued.

In 1891 the first political response to the flooding problem took place. Sanitary District #1 of Lancaster County was organized. It was the district's responsibility to dispose of and carry off sewage and other drainage. The district also proposed to straighten and deepen the Salt Creek channel, hoping the increased flow velocity would reduce flooding.

On July 6, 1908 a major flood in the Salt Valley took many lives and covered the flood plain with several feet of water. Again, the solution to flood control was perceived to be straightening and deepening Salt Creek, and work resumed with greater vigor in 1909.

To the east, settlers of a large area drained by Weeping Water Creek were having similar problems. Residents of about 3,000 acres in Cass and Otoe counties were watching large amounts of their fertile soil disappear from nearly annual flooding. Almost 11,000 acres in the watershed experienced major flooding at about a ten year frequency, with often-fatal consequences.

During the 1930's, other resource problems dealing with soil erosion became more pronounced as dust bowl conditions gripped the Great Plains. In response, Congress, in 1933, created the Soil Erosion Service (SES), the first in a series of New Deal legislation that made conservation practices a national concern. The Soil Conservation Service was created in 1935 and absorbed the



Ed Pallas, of Ceresco, competes in a terracing contest south of Wahoo in 1948.

SES. Finally, in 1937, a Standard Act to create soil conservation Districts was passed by Congress. It was adopted by the State of Nebraska that same year. As a result, soil conservation districts were created throughout the state.

Sediment from a construction site accumulates in an Antelope Creek tributary, threaten

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ing the creek and Lincoln's Holmes Lake. Meanwhile, flooding had re-mained a serious problem for area residents. Public response to further channel work was becoming increasingly negative and in 1945 Sanitary District #1 was informed by federal authorities they would probably not assist these activities in the future. The floods continued. On May 8, 1950 a major flood occurred in the Salt Valley. Nine lives were lost and extensive damage to both land and property resulted.

Soon after the May 8 flood, a group of citizens led by Otto Liebers and Raymond McConnell formed the Salt-Wahoo Watershed Association. The goal of the association was to bring to all land owners and people in the area the benefits of water conservation, erosion control, flood abatement, recreation and wildlife development. The association involved both rural and urban interests and recognized the close relationship of the two interests in conservation efforts.

The federal government was also concerned with natural resources problems. In 1954, Congress passed the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act (Public Law 83-566). The Upper Salt Watershed Project in southern Lancaster County was a "pilot" project under the act and the Plattsmouth Watershed Project became the first actual PL 566 project in the nation. The act provided funds to local units of government for flood control, including structural and land treatment measures.

The importance of conservation was reinforced in 1959, with the creation of Soil and Water Conservation Districts by the State Legislature. The districts, following county boundaries, were responsible for water conservation, water quality management and management of recreational facilities.

The Salt-Wahoo Watershed District was formed in 1960 to sponsor a Corps of Engineers project to construct ten major flood control structures, channel improvements and levee construction. The project was completed by 1968.



Project Engineer Lew Kehne directs construction of an Upper Salt Creek flood control structure in 1954.

Residents of the Weeping Water Watershed also found the prospects of PL 566 attractive and the Weeping Water Watershed Conservancy District was organized in the 1960's. Several other area groups followed suit. These included the North Oaks, Rock Creek, Stevens-Callahan and Northeast Cass watersheds.

By the late 1960's many had begun to realize the need for a single multipurpose authority to carry out interrelated resource management activities. This desire was fulfilled in 1972 when 24 Natural Resource Districts were created by the state, combining the responsibilities of some 154 special purpose districts. The new NRDs were given statutory authority to conserve and manage the state's natural resources.