

Flood Waters, Thirst, and Drowning Mccurley's Prairie: A History of Lewisville Lake

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Lewisville Lake in Denton County, Texas is a combination of two reservoirs. It is fed primarily by the Trinity River and supports a growing human demand with its vast fresh water spread of 29,980-acres as well as providing an important flood-control pool.¹ The Trinity River attracted settlements in the Denton area for hundreds of years. Initially providing a source of water, the river and its tributaries came to support a growing metropolis whose inhabitants have attempted to wrangle its flow to both satisfy thirst and lessen the destruction of flooding in communities south of Denton. Therein rests a piece of Texas history in which two massive reservoir engineering projects merge to encompass a singular saga of sacrifice for the greater good.

Denton County ecology includes Blackland Prairie; its quality soil is in geological contrast to the sandy loam of the adjacent Eastern Cross Timbers which reaches southward from Oklahoma into the middle of the Denton County. Receiving an average thirty-three inches of rain annually and having more than 226-days in a growing season, the area was judged by early settlers to be worthy of growing crops and supporting livestock.² William S. Peters, a Pennsylvania businessman, had immigrated to the United States in 1827 from England. Peters sought interest in a land venture with the Republic of Texas that included present-day Denton County and a subsequent segment of the Trinity River. The land deal was a Peters' family affair with close relatives involved as well as investor support from England. In August of 1841, after negotiations with stakeholders and the Republic of Texas, Peters and his son-in-law Samuel Browning signed the first of several land acquisition agreements.³

The American Civil War had yet to begin when settlers were moving into north Texas. The Republic of Texas' land was marketed to potential settlers and emigrants, with publications such as *Niles' National Register* of August 9, 1845, extolling, "...the celebrated Cross Timbers and the Upper Trinity river and its numerous tributaries, running one hundred and sixty-four miles..." The propaganda explained:

The lands have a gentle undulating surface, and are so well proportioned with woodland and prairie that nearly every settler may have woodland sufficient for all the purposes of

¹ "Lewisville Lake History," U. S. Army Corps of Engineers (2014), accessed May 2, 2016, <http://www.swfwc.usace.army.mil/lewisville/Information/>.

² Dale E. Odom, "Denton, TX (Denton County)," *Handbook of Texas Online* (2011), accessed May 2, 2016, <https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hed05>.

³ Harry E. Wade, "Peters Colony," *Handbook of Texas Online* (15 June 2010), accessed May 2, 2016, <https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/uep02>.

fuel, fencing, and agriculture, and enough rich prairie to relieve him of the tedious, expensive, and laborious work of clearing a plantation...⁴

The settlement venture would eventually encompass twenty-three north Texas counties or portions thereof. In 1856, Jonas McCurley, accompanied by his wife Sarah, trekked from Illinois to Texas and claimed 640 acres southeast of the present-day city of Lake Dallas in Denton County. Soon joined by Jonas' brother George McCurley and his family, the area would eventually be known as McCurley's Prairie. With the arrival of the railroads by the 1880s, population and agriculture expanded.

As the nineteenth-century dawned, Denton County had a population of 28,318 and was considered a rural agricultural community; land not farmed was predominantly prairie or oak forest. The population of neighboring Dallas County reached 82,726 during the same time, and the Trinity River could be a significant threat to life and property.⁵ The Trinity River climbed 52.6 feet according to the article and its width span 1.5 miles beyond its normal banks. McKinney Avenue in downtown Dallas was covered under 12-feet of flood waters. Eleven people died, and an estimated \$2.5 million in damages resulted.⁶ Four-thousand Dallas residents were displaced due to the 1908 flood:

The magnitude of the Trinity River flood is considered the largest ever recorded at Dallas. The Trinity River was about two miles wide between West Dallas and downtown Dallas. The entire City was completely dark for three days with no telephone, telegraph, or rail service. Oak Cliff could only be reached by boat."⁷

City leaders and residents demanded flood control measures to protect Dallas from the Trinity's raging waters. Engineers embarked on the Dallas Floodway project with a system of levees but soon the focus turned north to Denton County. Impounding water to mitigate its southward flow into Dallas was a reasonable solution and could provide

⁴ Jeremiah Hughes, *Niles' National Register*, Vol. 67 – 68 (Baltimore: Jeremiah Hughes, 1845).

⁵ Richard L. Forstall, "Texas: Population of Counties by Decennial Census: 1900 to 1990," US Census Bureau (27 March 1995), accessed May 2, 2016, <https://www.census.gov/population/cencounts/tx190090.txt>.

⁶ Michael Darling and Jessica Jones, "Dallas at 150: A Look Back," *D Magazine* (February 2006), accessed April 5, 2014, <http://www.dmagazine.com/publications/d-magazine/2006/february/dallas-at-150-a-look-back>.

⁷ John N. Furlong, PE, Greg Ajemian, PE, and Tommie McPherson, "History of the Dallas Floodway," *DocPlayer* (2003), accessed May 2, 2016, <http://docplayer.net/6064375-History-of-the-dallas-floodway-by-john-n-furlong-p-e-1-greg-ajemian-p-e-2-and-ms-tommie-mcpherson-p-e-3.html>.

a new water reserve. This was important since in 1913, the State of Texas "...had only four major reservoirs with a total storage capacity of 288,340 acre-feet".⁸

By 1920, the Dallas City Council had retained an engineering firm to study water sources as its population had reached nearly a quarter-million. After three years, engineers reached the conclusion that Denton County would be best suited for a dam on the Trinity River to curtail flood waters and provide impoundment. The engineers concluded the reservoir would serve as an ample source of water for the city of Dallas for an estimated 40 to 50 years in the future. Not all residents of Dallas were pleased with a reservoir location outside of Dallas County. The engineer's plan appeared to impound an excessive amount of water, and some Dallas residents did not want to provide what would become a recreational lake for Denton County residents. On Friday, December 12, 1924, the McKinney area Rotarians held a luncheon with guest speaker O. N. Floyd, an engineer on the dam project and subsequent reservoir between the village of Garza and the town of Little Elm. The *McKinney Daily Courier-Gazette* reported on Floyd's speech, stating that:

This immense dam is expected to be completed by March 1926. It will have a storage capacity of 63.2 billion gallons and will have a drainage area above the dam. Dallas commenced the preliminary investigation of the project August 1, 1923, the final report recommended the Garza [present day Lake Dallas] was submitted January 17, 1924. The contract was awarded for this immense dam on August 15, 1924 to W. E. Callahan Construction Company which concern started the work in a few days thereafter. It will be an earth dam with a maximum height of 80 feet. It will have 3500-foot length across the river valley. Its total length will be 11,000 feet and its width at the base 533 feet. A thirty-foot highway will run along the top of the dam.⁹

The *El Paso Herald* reported on the discourse in a June 6, 1925 article indicating some of the Dallas residents were so upset about possible land deals in connection with the new lake that they wanted Mayor Louis Blaylock and city commissioners recalled. "Their petition relating to the commission alleges irregularities in the land deals in connection with the location of the Garza dam project in Denton County."¹⁰ Land developers quickly honed-in on the potential of a lakeside summer playground. A marketing campaign soon advertised cottage lots starting at \$98 in the Garza Beach Estates. "Garza

⁸ Texas State Historical Association, "Lakes and Reservoirs" (2016), accessed May 2, 2016.
<http://texasalmanac.com/topics/environment/lakes-and-reservoirs>.

⁹ "Rotarians Told of Garza Dam by Engineer," *The Daily Courier-Gazette*, December 12, 1924,
<http://www.newspapers.com/image/#58726926>.

¹⁰ "Citizens of Dallas Would Recall Mayors," *El Paso Herald*, June 6, 1925.

is calling you. Buy your summer home site today while prices are low... on the new gigantic reservoir lake soon to be constructed by the city of Dallas..." the newspaper advertisement proclaimed.¹¹

Construction started in 1924, and by 1927, the reservoir and dam project was complete. The following year, motorists were traversing Highway 24 over the dam which provided a new east-west connection for the communities of Garza and Little Elm; locals called it, 'the dam road.' In time, an unforeseen problem was developing as waters flowed southward depositing silt accumulation in the new reservoir. A retrospective report of civil engineering projects in Dallas titled, *A Century in the Works: 100 Years of Progress in Civil and Environmental Engineering*, provided a historical viewpoint of the original Garza dam and reservoir at its completion, stating "...the dam impounded 63-billion gallons (194,000 acre-feet), nine times the combined capacity of the six small water supply reservoirs then serving the City of Dallas.¹²

Not only was the collection of silt in the new reservoir impeding water storage capacity but World War II had concluded and America was experiencing a population boom in north Texas. In 1948, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers took steps to initiate construction of a new dam south of the existing one.¹³ According to an article on *The Paris News*:

Major General R. A. Wheeler, Chief of the Army Engineers, has approved a \$22 million cost estimate for the proposed Garza-Little Elm dam on the Trinity River above Dallas...The Garza-Little Elm Project was authorized by Congress as two separate dams. Plans later were revised to provide for only one dam and reservoir which would cover the present lake and impound much more water than would two separate dams."¹⁴

The Army engineer's new plans would overtake the small hamlet of McCurleys' Prairie. By the 1900s, several generations of the McCurley family had settled into daily life on their prairie. Barbara McCurley Price of Houston, Texas is a descendent of Jonas and Sarah. Price reflected on her early Texas pioneer family in a 2014 interview, "Jonas arrived first and later came George with his family -- they split the section of land and it became known as McCurleys' Prairie. More than Jonas, George focused on farming the

¹¹ "Drive to Garza Beach Estates: McKinney's New Summer Playground," *The Daily Courier-Gazette*, July 19, 1924.

¹² Simon W. Freese, P. E., and D. L. Sizemore, "A Century in the Works: 100 Years of Progress in Civil and Environmental Engineering," *Freese and Nichols, Inc* (1994), accessed May 2, 2016, <https://www.freese.com/sites/default/files/Century.pdf>.

¹³ HNTB Corporation, *Lewisville Lake Corridor Study*, (Dallas: North Texas Tollway Authority, 2000).

¹⁴ "Trinity River Dam Gets Cost Approval," *The Paris News*, January 23, 1948.

land." The close families remained in the area for generations and others were welcome to settle and build their own lives.¹⁵ Historian Randolph B. Campbell writes:

McCurley was two miles southeast of the town of Lake Dallas [known then as Garza] in Denton County. It was named for the McCurley brothers, who settled there in the 1850s. A school district probably existed as early as the 1880s. In 1936, McCurley had a rural school and a separate school for blacks. The community was submerged by the waters of Lewisville Lake in the 1950s.¹⁶

With the advent of reservoir expansion and a new dam, the McCurleys would eventually sell out. The homes and buildings on McCurleys' Prairie would be destroyed or moved, and the local cemetery dating back to 1871 with 106 identified graves would be relocated to neighboring Lewisville. Some residents were not eager to leave settled land in the name of progress for Dallas. On November 23, 1948, it was reported in the *Denton Record-Chronicle*, "Senator Tom Connolly will deliver the main address of the ground breaking program and will turn the first earth with a silver spade." Specifics for the project were outlined in the article:

The Garza-Little Elm Reservoir, along with the three other upper Trinity reservoirs at Benbrook, Lavon and Grapevine... serve [to] regulate the flow of the river; to store after for municipal, industrial and agricultural use; and to make available for the cultivation frequently flooded bottom lands downstream from the dams. The completion of the Lewisville project will allow the upper Trinity reservoirs to be coordinated into a system of flood control.¹⁷

Two days later, the *Denton Record-Chronicle* reported on property attainment for the lake: "Acquisition of the first eight tracts of land needed by the federal government for the first phase of construction on the Garza Little Elm Reservoir north of Lewisville has been started with condemnation suits filed to pave the way for work to begin."¹⁸

Less than one year later on September 30, 1949, the *Chronicle* reports on discourse in an article titled: "Victims of progress hard hit: Construction of Garza Dam heavy blow to many families." "I thought we fought a war just recently against this sort of thing," an unnamed local World War II Veteran was quoted as saying. The article

¹⁵ Julie Chapman "Interview with Barbara McCurley Price," *McCurleys' Prairie* (April 9, 2014).

¹⁶ Randolph B. Campbell, "McCurley Texas," *Handbook of Texas Online* (15 June 2010), accessed May 2, 2016, <https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hvm56>.

¹⁷ "Plans Readied for Garza Dam Event Nov. 23," *Denton Record-Chronicle*, November 23, 1948, newspapers.com.

¹⁸ "Acquisition of land for lake underway," *Denton Record-Chronicle*, November 25, 1948, Newspaper archive.

continues, "More than 500 families will be forced from their homes by the reservoir that will inundate 66,000 acres of Denton County's best farming and pasture land." According to the newspaper story, many residents could not afford to relocate including Mahaley Johnson, an owner of 40-acres of "bottom land" and an African-American. Her story was not unlike those of the Great Mississippi Flood in 1927 when residents were pushed out of their homes and livelihoods without adequate compensation to restart elsewhere. Johnson was offered \$40 per acre for her family's land while others in the area, having lesser quality land according to the article, were offered more than \$100 per acre.¹⁹ Virgil McLarry, a resident of Lewisville, worked on the crew building the new dam hauling dirt and operating a 'Turner Pull.' The city of Lewisville collected an oral history of the new reservoir's construction for historic preservation and included McLarry's account. Work started in November of 1948, and McLarry reflected on the area just before construction commenced, "There was a windmill, a few fences, and some old barns, but I don't remember any houses. They moved the McCurley Cemetery..."²⁰

After completion, engineers with the State of Texas described the new dam and lake in 1957: "Reservoir is formed by a rolled earth-fill dam with a 560 ft. uncontrolled concrete spillway. Outlet works consist of a 16 ft. diameter concrete conduit controlled by three 6.5 x 13 foot broome-type gates and two 60-inch steel pipes controlled by service valves. Gates closed Nov. 1, 1954 and dam completed January 1955."²¹ The new reservoir's excavation and dam was complete, and filled by the spring of 1957.

McLarry's account continues, "We had a lot of rain, and it started going over the [original dam] spillway." On April 26, 1957, the Denton area and parts of the north had received record amounts of rain. The 'dam road' was closed, never to be opened again. The two reservoirs were attempting to merge on their own accord. "Waters of Lake Dallas were lashing at the upstream side of the dam as the lake level reached approximately 532 feet. At the same time, an estimated seven-feet of water in Garza-Little Elm Reservoir whipped at the top of the dam on the downstream side," according to an April 28, 1957, report in the *Denton Record-Chronicle*. The dangerous rising water levels in the dual reservoirs required action. The Army engineers made the decision to breach the original dam and allow both bodies of water to equalize.²²

¹⁹ "Victims of progress hard hit: Construction of Garza Dam heavy blow to many families," Denton Record-Chronicle, September 30, 1949, Newspaper archive.

²⁰ LaJuana Hale, "Lewisville Dam and Fish Hatchery," in *Lewisville Oral History* (Lewisville: City of Lewisville Public Library, Oral History Collection, 1997), 1-85.

²¹ State of Texas: Board of Water Engineers, "Texas Water Development Board," *Texas Floods: April, May, June 1957*, (October), accessed May 2, 2016,

http://www.twdtexas.gov/publications/reports/historic_groundwater_reports/doc/M278.pdf.

²² "Cars blocked from roadway on the lake dam," *Denton Record-Chronicle*, April 27, 1957, Newspaper archive.

On October 28, 1957, a hole was carved out of the old dam allowing water from the original reservoir to flow south into the new reservoir section. McLarry reflected on how the hole was created. "They throw that bucket out there and drag it, and it fills full of dirt. They raise it and dump it in the truck." Bucket-by-bucket, the work crew dredged the gap in the 31-year old dam. When the job was complete, the merged reservoirs measured thirteen-miles long with 183-miles of shore line, and a capacity of 436,000 acre-feet of storage capacity at a pool elevation of 515 feet. It was a vast body of water consuming a significant amount of Denton County real estate.²³

In time, the joined bodies of water would be simply known as 'Lewisville Lake' in homage to the city with the most shoreline:

The joining of Lake Dallas and Garza-Little Elm Reservoir apparently led to confusion concerning the facility's legal name, a problem which was compounded when the government re-designated the dam as Lewisville Dam in 1955 and the lake as Lewisville Reservoir in 1960. However, the decision concerning the lake's name was reversed the following year. Garza-Little Elm Reservoir remained the lake's official title until the mid-1970s when it was renamed Lewisville Lake.²⁴

The new name brought grief to the city of Lake Dallas residents, as earlier generations of Garza citizens had changed the city's name to Lake Dallas as a tribute to the original reservoir.²⁵ There are certainly countless lost stories of Texas history under the lake's surface water. I often wonder where Mahaley Johnson made a new home. Also, I have visited Old Hall Cemetery in Lewisville where the remains of the McCurley Cemetery inhabitants now rest. In 1984, a Texas State Historical Marker was placed and read:

The McCurley family of Illinois settled in Denton County in 1852. George Collins McCurley set aside land for a burial ground, church, and school. A traveling stranger may have been the first burial, but George's brother, Abraham, who died in 1871, was the first family member buried at the site. The first marked graves date from 1877 when the plot began to be used by neighbors. In 1951 the 106 graves which then comprised the cemetery had to be relocated because of the construction of Lewisville Lake. They were moved here, adjoining Old Hall Cemetery, burial place of George C. McCurley.²⁶

According to the most recent US Census Bureau' data, Texas has more than 7,000 square miles of surface water area; yet it remains thirsty for more.²⁷ A new 30 million-

²³ Hale, "Lewisville Dam and Fish Hatchery."

²⁴ Odom, "Denton, TX (Denton County)."

²⁵ David Minor, *Handbook of Texas Online* (15 June 2010), accessed May 2, 2016, <https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hgl05>.

²⁶ "Denton County Historical Markers: Lewisville," Denton County (2016), accessed May 2, 2016, <http://apps.dentoncounty.com/website/historicalmarkers/historical-markers.htm#Lewisville%20&%20Area>.

²⁷ Ibid.

gallon reservoir is proposed to be located approximately 60-miles northeast of Lewisville Lake and slated to be named, Lake Ralph Hall.²⁸

²⁸ "Lake Ralph Hall," Upper Trinity Regional Water District (2016), accessed May 2, 2016, http://www.lakeralphallinfo.com/Lake_Facts.html.