

A Legacy of Irrigation and Agriculture

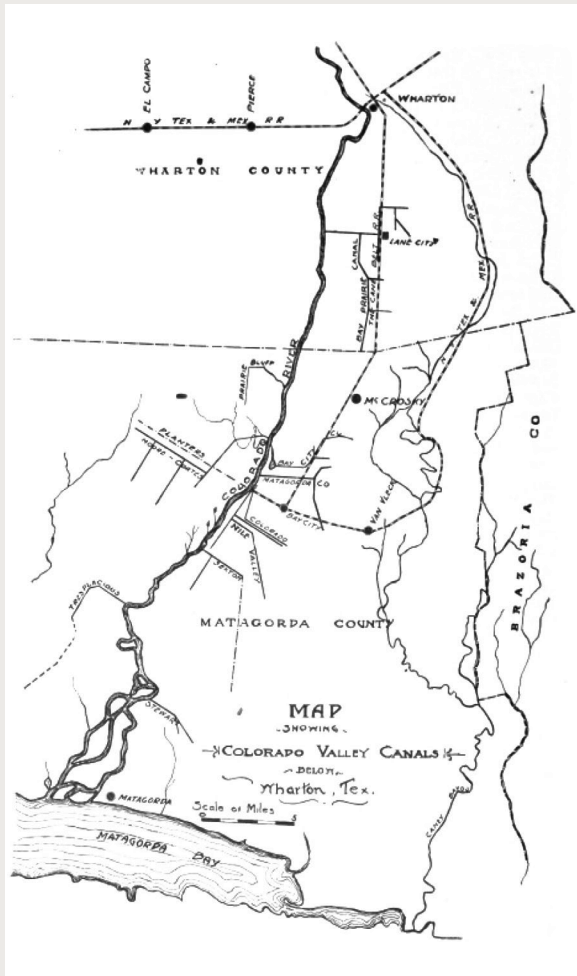
—
LANE CITY
IN WHARTON COUNTY



Why Build a Reservoir in Lane City?

As early as 1902, there were calls to create a place to store water in the lower basin along the Colorado River.

That idea has become a reality with the Lower Colorado River Authority's development of the Arbutle Reservoir in Wharton County.



Bay Prairie Canal, 1902

In the early days

This area has a rich and diverse past. This region was home to vast forests. Native Americans passed through this area, but the lands were largely unsettled until the arrival of European immigrants, many of German, Czech and Swedish heritage, as well as immigrants from Mexico, who revitalized the local economy that had been devastated by the Civil War.

Around 1900, the legendary Abel "Shanghai" Pierce acquired 25,000 acres in Wharton County, introducing the hardy Brahman stock, which has become a mainstay of the cattle industry.

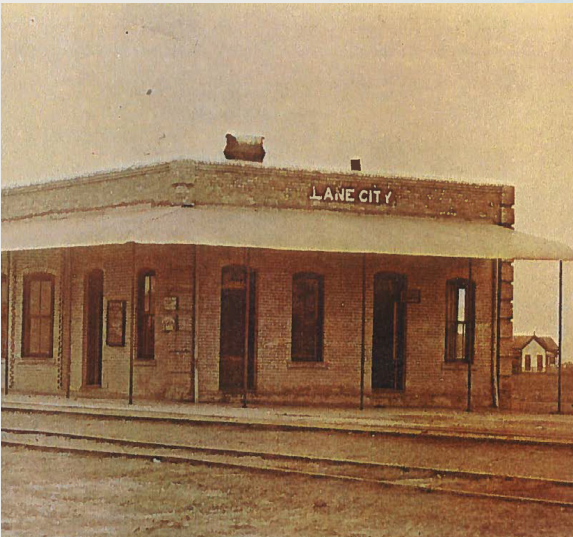
Meanwhile, settlers were diversifying their economic interests, and sugar cane, corn and hay fields began replacing woods and range.

A new industry

In 1862, experiments in irrigated rice production began in the area, using simple stream diversion. Rice production at an industrial scale started about 1893. The early success of many farmers led to a settlement boom as Texas rice production was marketed around the country and even the world. Prospective farmers were told they could raise cotton, rice, sugar, corn, oats, hay, tobacco, all types of cereal grain and numerous fruits, including citrus.

A new city

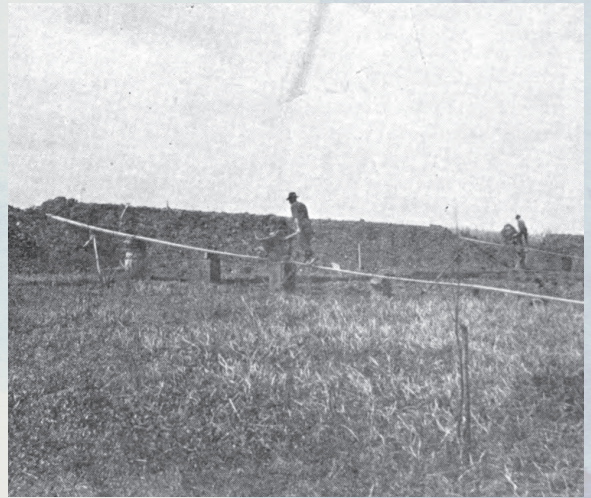
In 1901, Pierce sold his 25,000 acres in Wharton County to Jonathan Lane. At the same time, a new pumping plant was being built on the Colorado River, and a railroad spur was routed to the new pumping plant as part of construction of the Cane Belt Railroad. The junction became Lane City. Shortly after, Lane sold his land to the Missouri-Lincoln Trust Company, which marketed irrigable lands supplied by the Bay Prairie Irrigation Company, managed by Thomas Lane. Lane City was a growing, vibrant community until 1909, when hurricane-spawned storms destroyed many of the buildings. The town never fully recovered.



Train depot in 1913, after losing a second story to the storms of 1909

Creating a system

As the pumping plant pulled water from the river, a system was needed to distribute the water to nearby fields. Early canals were built by workers equipped with shovels, picks and wheelbarrows. Horsepower and then steam engines made the work easier, and in 1902 there were nearly 35 miles of canals serving 15,000 acres in the Bay Prairie Irrigation system.



Workers building a canal

The system grows

As demand increased, so did the capacity of the pumping plant and canals. The original 1901 plant was rebuilt in 1908, and in 1909 there were 65 miles of canals and lateral lines (secondary canals). A completely new plant was built in 1927, then replaced in 1949.

The people

Tenant farming was common, and in some cases was a comfortable life. Tenants rotated corn with cotton and rice with pasture. Stock fed off the rice stubble and in turn fertilized the fields. Tenants were generally of direct European or Mexican descent. African-Americans provided much of the wage labor needed to sustain the agriculture.

Among the earliest rice farmers were immigrants from Japan. One of the most successful settlements was the Onishi Colony near Mackay. The Onishi family shared out 100-acre parcels to other Japanese settlers for harvesting rice in the Onishi Colony. African-American and Mexican-American workers grew cotton, and a successful company town was established. The colony lasted until 1924,



Harvesting rice in the Onishi Colony

when a drastic drop in the rice market devastated much of the industry. Many of the Japanese farmers made their homes in nearby communities.

Today, while rice is still an important economic pursuit, the agricultural base has diversified to include large areas of corn, cotton and grains, and numerous farms now specialize in turf grass production. As it was 100 years ago, the wise and efficient use of water remains essential for the economic health of the region.



Canal and 1949 pump plant

The project

In January 2012, the LCRA Board of Directors set a goal of adding 100,000 acre-feet a year to the region's water supply by 2017. The Board of Directors authorized a reservoir project in August 2012 and purchased land in Wharton County in June 2013.

With those steps, the Board laid the groundwork for the current Arbuckle Reservoir, which adds up to 90,000 acre-feet a year to LCRA's firm water supply. It can hold about 40,000 acre-feet of water, but can be filled and used multiple times over the course of a year.

In November 2017, the Board named the reservoir in honor of former Director J. Scott Arbuckle.

The Arbuckle Reservoir lessens the need to send Highland Lakes water to customers near the coast while improving agricultural water reliability and efficiency. It is the first project that allows LCRA to capture and store significant amounts of water downstream of the Highland Lakes for use by multiple industrial, agricultural and environmental customers.

Cover photo:

A family outing at the Bay Prairie Irrigation Plant, built in 1901. Photo c. 1913.



Lower Colorado River Authority

—

P.O. Box 220 | Austin, TX 78767-0220
lcra.org · 800-776-5272