

The Ririe Project

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The Ririe Project

The Army Corps of Engineers constructed the Ririe Project in the 1970s as a flood control dam following several decades of destructive flooding in Bonneville County Idaho. The Project was a cooperative effort between the Corps of Engineers (Corps) and the Bureau of Reclamation. After construction of Ririe Dam, the Corps turned the dam over to Reclamation for operation and maintenance under the administration of the Minidoka Project.

Project Location

Ririe Dam and Reservoir, of the Ririe Project, lie in Bonneville County Idaho, on Willow Creek. Bonneville County lies in eastern Idaho. The dam is fifteen miles northeast of Idaho Falls, and about four miles southeast of the town of Ririe, both of which are part of Bonneville County.¹

Historic Setting

Two Native American groups inhabited southeastern Idaho prior to immigration by Europeans, in the nineteenth century. The Bannocks, a Northern Paiute speaking people, migrated from Oregon to the area of the Snake River plains. They differed from other Northern Paiute in their acquisition of horses and organized buffalo hunts. The Bannocks co-existed peacefully in Idaho with the Northern Shoshone. Native grasses supported buffalo, hunted by both Indian groups, in the upper Snake River plains until about 1840. Fish also contributed largely to both groups' subsistence.²

In the 1850s, Mormon settlers established the Fort Lemhi mission in Idaho. By the end of the decade, escalating conflicts with the Bannocks turned violent. In 1857-58, these clashes coincided with a U.S. military expedition to Utah, convincing Brigham Young, Utah's territorial Governor and President of the L.D.S. Church, to recall the settlers to Utah. Mormon settlers returned to southern Idaho in the 1860s, however, and the lure of gold soon brought miners to

1. Water and Power Resources Service, *Project Data* (Denver: Government Printing Office, 1981), 1063.

2. Robert F. Murphy and Yolanda Murphy, "Northern Shoshone and Bannock," in *Handbook of North American Indians* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1986), ed. by William Sturtevant, vol. 11 *Great Basin*, vol. ed. by Warren L. D'Azevedo, 284, 285.

the Sawtooth Mountains in force.³

The Bannock and the various groups of the Shoshone found themselves placed on reservations starting in the late 1860s. The Federal government originally set up the Fort Hall Reservation in 1867, for the Boise and Bruneau Shoshone, and with the relocation of the Bannock and other Shoshone to the reservation in accordance with the Fort Bridger Treaty of 1868. The government established the Lemhi Reservation in 1875, for the Lemhi and the Sheepeater Shoshone, but shut it down in 1907, and then also moved its residents to Fort Hall. The swelling of the white population increased friction between the newcomers and the native inhabitants, and the reservation system did not prevent conflicts. One such conflict, the Bannock War of 1878, started in Idaho, but moved west and ended with the Northern Paiute in Oregon. Disputes between white miners and Sheepeater Shoshone erupted in the Sheepeater War of 1878-79. Both conflicts ended the same as other confrontations between Native Americans and whites, in favor of the whites.⁴

Project Authorization

Between 1911 and 1962 eight spring and nine winter floods caused considerable damage in the area around Ririe and Idaho Falls. The two largest were the spring flood of 1917 and the 1962 winter flood. The spring thaw caused the 1917 flood which inundated 3,000 acres of land for two to three weeks. Winter rain caused the 1962 flood which peaked at 5,080 cubic feet per second and covered 54,000 acres for two or three days. The Corps studied the possibility of a flood control dam in the region in 1949, but determined it was not economically feasible. A joint report by Reclamation and the Corps in 1961, advocated construction of Ririe Dam as soon as possible. On October 23, 1962, Congress passed the Flood Control Act of 1962 (76 Stat. 1193) authorizing the Corps to construct Ririe Dam.⁵

Construction History

The Walla Walla District of the Corps of Engineers carried out design and construction

3. F. Ross Peterson, *Idaho: A Bicentennial History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976), 51, 52; Murphy and Murphy, "Northern Shoshone and Bannock," 302.

4. Peterson, *Idaho*, 71, 72, 83-5; Murphy and Murphy, "Northern Shoshone and Bannock," 302.

5. Water and Power Resources, *Project Data*, 1063-4.

of Ririe Dam. The Corps awarded the construction contract for Ririe Dam to Gibbons and Reed Company of Salt Lake City, on December 29, 1972. The contractor started work on the dam in February 1973. Gibbons and Reed completed most of the dam by the end of 1974, nearly completing the structure at the end of 1975. At the beginning of 1976, only minor work remained on roads, recreation areas, other public use facilities, and completion of the outlet channel.⁶

Failure of the Teton Dam in Idaho, during construction of Ririe Dam, raised questions about Ririe's safety because it lay only about thirty miles from the Teton site. Homer Willis, of the Corps of Engineers, testified to a Senate subcommittee investigating the Teton failure, that Ririe sat on basalt, as opposed to the rhyolite under Teton. Willis testified Ririe was safe.⁷

Gibbons and Reed completed Ririe Dam and the spillway outlet works in 1976, and the Corps turned the Project over to Reclamation on October 14, 1976. The contractor continued working on the outlet channel through 1976 and 1977, completing it in 1978, and transferring it to Reclamation. Reclamation partially filled Ririe Reservoir and inspected it, noting slides in the banks during filling, that it did not consider serious⁸

The Corps of Engineers created four recreation areas around Ririe Reservoir. Three of these areas became operational in 1979, they were; Blacktail Park, Benchland Park, and Juniper Park. Creekside Park became operational later. In August 1983, Reclamation awarded a contract for rehabilitating an access road to Blacktail Park, and expansion of the park's parking lot. The contractor completed the work in November 1983.⁹

6. Bureau of Reclamation, *Annual Project History, Minidoka Project, 1972*, Record Group 115, 4; Bureau of Reclamation, *Annual Project History, Minidoka Project, 1984*, Record Group 115, 108-9; Bureau of Reclamation, *Annual Project History, Minidoka Project, 1975*, Record Group 115, 2, 28; Bureau of Reclamation, *SEED (Safety Evaluation of Existing Dams) Report on Ririe Dam, Ririe Project, Idaho, Pacific Northwest Region*, Bureau of Reclamation, Division of Dam Safety, Assistant Commissioner--Engineering and Research, Denver, January 4, 1988, Sec. C-1, 7, 13; Army Corps of Engineers, *Ririe Lake, Willow Creek, Idaho: Inspection Report No. 2*, Walla Walla District, Army Corps of Engineers, February 1977. Hereafter Record Group 115 cited as RG 115.

7. Congress, Senate, Subcommittee on Energy Research and Development of the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, *Teton Dam Failure, Prepared at the Request of Frank Church for the Subcommittee on Energy Research and Development of the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, U.S. Senate, June 1977* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1977), 22-3.

8. Bureau of Reclamation, *Annual Project History, Minidoka Project, 1976*, RG 115, 1, 3; Reclamation, *Project History, Minidoka Project, 1978*, 1, 37; Reclamation, *Project History, Minidoka Project, 1984*, 109.

9. Bureau of Reclamation, *Annual Project History, Minidoka Project, 1979*, RG 115, 45; Bureau of Reclamation, *Annual Project History, Minidoka Project, 1984*, RG 115, 111.

Reclamation and the Idaho Department of Fish and Game established the Tex Creek Wildlife Area above Ririe Reservoir to replace wildlife habitat lost to construction of Teton and Ririe Dams. The two agencies combined public and private land in the Tex Creek area creating a wildlife reserve of about 15,000 acres. Through an agreement with Reclamation, the Corps also gave an area about six miles west of Rexburg to the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, for establishment of the Cartier Slough Wildlife Area.¹⁰

Ririe Dam is a zoned earth and rockfill embankment. The dam is 253 feet high with a 1,070 foot crest length. Ririe Dam is thirty-four feet wide on top and has a maximum base width of 1,100 feet. The total volume of the dam is 2,676,000 cubic yards. The spillway is a 1,000 foot long concrete lined chute at the right abutment controlled by two 40.5 by 27.32 foot gates. Ririe Reservoir has a total capacity of 100,500 acre-feet.¹¹

Post Construction History

An inspection by Reclamation, at the time of the dam's transfer from the Corps, revealed the need for repair work on the floor of the outlet works stilling basin. Because the damage was not severe, Reclamation postponed the work until 1982, when a crew from Palisades Dam completed the repairs.¹²

On May 4, 1983, Reclamation held an emergency preparedness test exercise at Ririe Dam in conjunction with local civil defense agencies. The test studied the emergency procedures involved during a total failure of the dam. Based on the results, Reclamation officials believed the test went well. They advised only minor modifications in emergency protocols, mostly in communications.¹³

Settlement

Settlement around the Ririe Project had little to do with construction of Ririe Dam. Settlement of the area occurred long before dam construction. Bonneville County had a

10. Bureau of Reclamation, *Annual Project History, Minidoka Project, 1980*, RG 115, 43; Bureau of Reclamation, *Annual Project History, Teton Basin Project, 1976-82*, RG 115, 37.

11. Water and Power Resources, *Project Data*, 1065; Reclamation, *SEED Report on Ririe Dam*, Management Summary, 1.

12. Bureau of Reclamation, *Annual Project History, Minidoka Project, 1982*, RG 115, 71.

13. Bureau of Reclamation, *Annual Project History, Minidoka Project, 1983*, RG 115, 001, 289.

population of 72,207 in 1990. The majority of that population resided in Idaho Falls which had a population of 43,929. The town of Ririe, the closest community to Ririe Dam, only had 596 inhabitants in 1990.¹⁴

Uses of Project Water

Ririe Dam primarily functions as a flood control structure. The reservoir provides ample opportunity for recreation. The four parks provide public recreation facilities for visitors. Juniper, Blacktail, and Benchland Parks all border the lake. Benchland Park is only accessible by boat. Creekside Park is below the dam, along Willow Creek. Ririe caters to visitors interested in boating, swimming, picnicking, camping, and fishing.¹⁵

Conclusion

The Ririe Project was an example of occasional cooperation between Reclamation and the Corps of Engineers. As on some other projects, the Corps built the flood control structure, and Reclamation operated and maintained it under the Minidoka Project. Ririe Dam and Reservoir proved narrow in its scope of activity, limited to flood control and recreation.

About the Author

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14. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Twenty-First Census of the United States, 1990: Population and Housing*, Bureau of the Census, 1990, on CD-Rom.

15. Water and Power Resources, *Project Data*, 1065.

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