



Chapter 3

THE BIRTH OF THE TULSA DISTRICT

*"This dusty old dust is getting my home,
And I've got to be drifting along."*

— Woody Guthrie

if the

NUMBER ONE PEACETIME BUSINESS

of the Army Engineers in the 1800s was navigation, the number one problem in that business was flooding. But it took time to understand the interrelationship fully.

Following ravaging floods along the Mississippi River, Congress in 1850 handed the Corps of Topographical Engineers a major challenge: to develop a practical plan for flood control and navigation at the Mississippi's mouth.

Thus the Corps undertook the first comprehensive analysis of topography and hydrology ever conducted for a major river basin. This study, and a companion study by civilian engineer Charles Ellet, disagreed on the best approach to controlling floods—levees or reservoirs. In 1861, a larger report submitted by Topographical Engineers Andrew A. Humphreys and Henry L. Abbot discredited Ellet's reservoir approach and effectively instituted a levees only policy that dominated the Corps into the 20th century.¹

In 1917, after disastrous floods in 1912 and 1913, Congress passed the first major flood control legislation, appropriating \$45 million for Mississippi levees work by the Secretary of War. In fact, over the years from 1882 to 1926, \$300 million would be invested in levees along the lower Mississippi River, including \$162 million in local bonds that Kerr insisted were still being paid in 1960.²

The "levees of lakes?" debate erupted again after a catastrophic flood hit the lower Mississippi in 1927. More than 300 died, property damage was in the millions of dollars, crops were destroyed, towns were flooded, thousands were homeless, and large portions of the entire Mississippi Valley were inundated. Half the state of Arkansas was under water because of flooding along the Arkansas River.³

**And the rains descended,
and the floods came . . .**

— *Matthew 7:25*

