

THE WICHITA

FALLS MODEL. Among those testifying before Congress after the 1927 flood was Ernest E. Blake, an Oklahoma City lawyer and former Ohio River steamboat pilot. Blake was also chairman of an interstate commission promoting control of the Arkansas and Red Rivers.

Interest was high in the region, in part because disastrous floods had struck Oklahoma in June and October of 1923. The Canadian River shattered Oklahoma City's water supply dam. In Tulsa the Arkansas destroyed the city waterworks and drove 4,000 from their homes. Nearly every wagon and railroad bridge in central Oklahoma was washed out, according to Kerr. Blake proposed building reservoirs on the Arkansas and Red Rivers, contending that they would catch one-third of the run-off from any storms and prevent serious flooding downstream.

"The 1927 flood on the Arkansas, the greatest ever known, came out of a little area here in southeastern Kansas," Kerr recalled that Blake told Congress. "The little stream of Walnut Creek poured about seven hundred thousand acre-feet of water into the Arkansas River at one time and caused a record stage in the Arkansas . . . The control basins of northeast Oklahoma, as we have proposed, would have a capacity of between three and four million acre-feet of water. Had these been installed at the time, there would have been no flood in the Arkansas River."

Kerr wrote that Blake took a second, giant step forward with his recommendations: he proposed the novel concept of an all-purpose reservoir that would contain water for flood control, irrigation, fish and game, recreation, municipal water supplies, and electric power generation. Blake knew of no such reservoirs, but he mentioned a small, local lake near Wichita Falls, Texas, that came close to his idea. It gave the town its water, was irrigating 40,000 acres of land, and helped control flooding.⁴

NAVIGATION? NEVER!

The idea that the Arkansas River could be made navigable above the mouth of the Grand River was an item of hot debate in the early 1900s.

Official policy was divided. On the one hand, Congress had appropriated funds in the 1870s and 1890s for a project as far upstream as Wichita, which would make the stream legally fall under the category known as "navigable."⁵

On the other hand, sand bars cannot float ships, and the mouth of the Grand had long been considered the head of Arkansas River navigation.⁶

So when the United States Attorney General needed to know, an 18-month-long argument by mail ensued. One conclusion was reported in The Daily Oklahoman, Dec. 16, 1915:

"The only way to make the Arkansas river navigable above the Grand river would be to build a canal with cement bottom and sides and fill it with filtered water.

"This emphatic opinion was read into the record in the legal contest for control of the valuable oil and gas deposits under the Arkansas river at the hearing Wednesday before Judge Cotteral in the federal court.

"It is the opinion of Brigadier General W.L. Sibart of the war department, who was once in charge of the government engineering station at Little Rock.

"Many pages of General Sibart's opinion as to the condition of the stream were introduced by the government as evidence in support of its assertion that the stream is not navigable above Fort Gibson . . .

"By their testimony the government sought to prove that the river, lacking sufficient water and containing a rolling mass of sand, is not and never has been available for practical purposes for river traffic . . ."⁷