

This was

AN AWESOME CHALLENGE,

this plan that called for a navigation system from the Mississippi clear up to Catoosa near Tulsa. The system would travel up hill toward the landlocked regions. It included channel cutoffs, canals, bank stabilization, dredging, snagging, the building of 34 locks and dams (later reduced to 17), along with three sediment control dams and other impoundments.

The report, Settle summarized, outlined those challenges: “the awesome challenge of sediment control; inundation of and removal from production of fertile farmlands; the displacement of people and communities; costly relocations of highways, bridges, utilities, and public buildings; bank stabilization; construction sequence and schedule; future decisions as to route below Little Rock; and technical aspects of the system.”

And with annual costs estimated at \$19.5 million, the report established the benefit-to-cost ratio at a razor-thin 1.01 to 1.00, barely above the 1:1 minimum ratio required for favorable consideration.

“A lot of people had to do some unpopular things to get this off the ground,” recalls Francis Wilson, who as district engineer signed the 1945 report that declared the Arkansas navigable. In his later years, Wilson would speak with pride of that decision and recall the criticism he received then. “Some of my old friends called me aside and said, ‘Son, why did you ever put your name on a thing like that?’”⁵

Now the real confrontations began, inside and outside hearings, meetings, and plan revisions. On the one hand, the Tulsa District reckoned with Graham and other navigation advocates who argued that the report understated benefits and overstated costs. On the other hand, it dealt with opponents such as railway companies and groups who wanted the plan to give priority to hydropower production rather than flood control and navigation. Some wanted to build flood control works upstream in the watershed, others downstream — and still others not at all.

Never underestimate

THE WHITE HOUSE CONNECTION.

Revised, scrutinized, and revised again, the plan by the fall of 1945 estimated costs that were reduced by more than \$400 million because new federal legislation shifted power transmission and disposal costs to the Department of the Interior. By August 1946 the plan had a benefit-to-cost ratio of 1.08 to 1.00.

And it was still stalled in Washington — until Governor Kerr, Don McBride, and Newt Graham presented it to President Harry S. Truman in a special White House meeting Aug. 17.

In less than a month, the report was issued, but the Board of Engineers for Rivers and Harbors recommended that the navigation portions be deferred for further study. Sept. 20 Eugene Reybold (by that time Chief of Engineers in Washington) in effect overruled the Board. Gen. Reybold said he was “fully convinced that the construction of the navigation features is fully warranted and should be authorized at this time.” With additional modifications, the benefit-to-cost ratio improved still further, to 1.2 to 1.0.

Now the campaign for congressional passage stepped up. Graham and his friend John Dunkin helped organize the Arkansas Basin Development Association and, in one fabled dinner party, raised \$80,000 to wage the campaign.

They had a chance to mount the crest of a wave, because the government was looking to water resource projects as one means to stabilize post-war employment.

On the other hand, a fight against congressional authorization was mounted by powerful Oklahoma City newspaper publisher E.K. Gaylord, who denounced the navigation project as bad fiscal policy, and Gaylord’s ally, Oklahoma Congressman Mike Monroney, who wanted the Arkansas waterway project delayed for further study.