

For awhile it was

## **THE ROAD**

**TO NOWHERE**, meaning it was a project with energetic backers but without support from some key players.

Kerr, Don McBride, Newt Graham, and other advocates for the project were picking up supporters along the way, of course, — such as Fort Smith newspaper editor Clarence F. Byrns, Arkansas Senators Fullbright and McClellan, and Tulsans John D. Mayo, Glade Kirkpatrick, John Dunkin, Gary Vandever, E. Fred Johnson, and (later) Oklahoma Representatives Ed Edmondson and Page Belcher. Even Oklahoma Senator Mike Monroney, who initially opposed the waterway, later “came around whole hog,” one supporter recalled.<sup>8</sup>

Kerr, ineligible to succeed himself as governor, was elected Oklahoma senator in 1948, two years after the waterway was authorized, although he said he almost lost the Senate race because “the oil men found out I was a New Dealer, and the New Dealers found out I was an oil man.”<sup>9</sup>

But still the waterway’s vision was sputtering . . . and the proposed project had plenty of company on the road to nowhere. More than 900 water projects had been authorized but not started, prompting a U.S. House committee to review their status beginning in 1951. Those 900 projects were estimated to cost \$8 billion, nearly as much as the total cost of all civil works projects that the Corps had completed or had underway.

The Arkansas River waterway was caught in the review. In 1954 General Chorpene (the former Tulsa District Engineer, now Assistant Chief of Engineers for Civil Works) scrapped the waterway from the active list and declared it “deferred for further study.”

The Corps was whipsawed between Congress and local interests pressing for the project, and opponents in the Eisenhower administration — including the Bureau of the Budget. Even within the Corps, for the early years of the 1950s, a hard nub of opposition was in power in the Corps’ Washington office: Chief of Engineers Sturgis, his Assistant for Civil Works Itschner, and their Executive for Civil Works Whipple.

So firm was their opposition that, as late as 1955, the Corps was using outdated benefits information that drastically underestimated the economic feasibility of the waterway and deadlocked the benefit/cost ratio at an anemic 1 to 1. Specifically, Settle reports, the Corps in 1955 was using the 1949 estimate of \$40 million in annual benefits, rather than the 1955 estimate of \$73 million benefits — which could have raised the benefit/cost ratio to a healthy 1.5 to 1.0.<sup>10</sup>



**Laying out great waterway plans were (left to right) Wayne Ferguson, Jim McCoy, Ira Krawitz, and Karl N. Reid.**