

The History of Twin Falls

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Located in south-central Idaho, Twin Falls is the regional center for a rich agricultural area whose development can be solely attributed to the vast reclamation network constructed during the first two decades of this century. The various reclamation projects were known as "tracts" and in the Twin Falls vicinity include Minidoka, Salmon, Northside, and the one specifically responsible for the genesis of Twin Falls: the Twin Falls Southside Irrigation Tract. This project, involving the construction of Milner Dam and its related canal system,

has provided water to more than 200,000 acres on the south side of the Snake River since it opened in 1905. The efforts of the Twin Falls Land and Water Company, the organization formed in 1900 to provide the financial backing and leadership in building the system and opening the tract, represented the earliest and most successful example of reclamation under the Carey Act of 1894. This legislation was intended to foster a cooperative venture between private investment, state supervision and local management so that large areas of arid federal land might become agriculturally productive. The completion of the reclamation projects and development of numerous communities in this part of Idaho represent the successful resolution of such a partnership.

For almost forty years, government officials, financiers and countless settlers dreamed of distributing water to the vast, arid Snake River Plain - an area that stretches across Idaho encompassing about a third of the state. Southern Idaho has never had the mineral and timber resources that assured development in other parts of the state; instead it was the economic potential of the Snake River and its tributaries that intrigued travelers and settlers as early as the 1860's. Settlers and officials tried various types of organizations to harness the river, including private canal companies that local farmers created and entrepreneurial efforts such as the New York Canal Company near Boise, but regardless of whether the attempt was on a private, cooperative, public or capitalistic basis, by 1900 reclamation on a large scale continued to elude southern Idahoans.

The technology existed to create large irrigation systems, but it required a huge financial commitment, one that was available only through private sources outside of the state. At the same time, the management and ultimate control of the public land, once reclaimed, had to occur at the local level, so that an irrigation system operated smoothly every season. Finally, impartial review by either state or federal agents was necessary to protect farmers and investors from fraud. The Carey Act of 1894 was intended to provide the necessary framework to address the needs of these interests. This legislation provided one million acres of federal land per state to settlers in arid acres after private investors supplied the capital to build the necessary dams and canals. The investors would recoup their money by selling water rights to the settlers, and once

the farmers had successfully reclaimed their land they could apply for a deed. Although initial efforts in Idaho to apply this legislation failed, the Twin Falls project was an outstanding success because it had the necessary financial backing and knowledgeable engineers.

Ira B. Perrine, a pre-reclamation settler who lived at the bottom of the Snake River canyon near present-day Twin Falls, is credited with devising a rough plan for the project and generating interest in it. Beginning in 1884, Perrine wintered his dairy cows at his farm in the canyon, and successfully raised wheat, fruit, vegetables and berries that he sold to miners in the Wood River area and in Cassia County, north and south of the river, respectively. Presumably this farming experience, combined with the necessity of developing a rudimentary irrigation system in the canyon, inspired his drive to provide water to the thousands of empty acres on either side of the Snake River, but as John Rosholt writes, another factor spurred his interest:

According to the only existing interview with Perrine regarding how he got the idea of reclaiming the land above the Snake River Canyon, he was asked in 1895 by the Oregon Short Line Railroad to find a bridge site over the river between Lincoln and Cassia counties because the Southern Pacific Railroad was drawing all the trade from Cassia County. He explored the river and located the present site of Milner Dam as a railroad bridge. The Carey Act of 1894 having made area reclamation feasible, Perrine's plan took shape.

Perrine filed on the Snake River, and formed the Twin Falls Land and Water Company (TFLWC) in 1900. The TFLWC requested segregation of 244,025 acres on August 15, 1900, in order to make an initial survey. The company was officially incorporated on September 3, 1900, in Salt Lake City, Utah. The completed survey was presented to the state engineer on October 6, 1900, and water rights were granted by the engineer two days later. Some lots were left out of the segregation in order to allow for establishment of townsites; these lots later became the communities of Twin Falls, Kimberly, Buhl, Filer, Hansen and Murtaugh.

In 1902, however, the TFLWC almost folded, and when reorganization occurred the following year only one of the original partners, Stanley Milner, remained involved. Once all the transactions were taken care of the Twin Falls Land and Water Company had four partners; Milner, with 37.49 percent; Walter Filer, with 10 percent; Frank Buhl with 52.5 percent of the stock; and Frank Knox, with .01 percent. Milner was a Salt Lake City resident and director of the National Bank of the Republic in Salt Lake; he had extensive mining interests in Utah and Nevada. However, his health was not good, and this hindered his involvement. He died in 1906, shortly after assisting with the opening of the Buhl townsite. Filer was a mining associate of Milner's who was involved in the survey of the town of Milner (which no longer exists) and planning the construction camp. Buhl was a wealthy Pennsylvania businessman with substantial mining interest whose assets were estimated at \$25,000,000 in 1902. After learning of Buhl

through Filer, it was he whom Perrine approached after unsuccessful attempts to interest other financiers, and it was Buhl's involvement that led to the successful reorganization of the company. Knox was a mining and banking associate of Milner's.

Work on the Milner Dam and the canal system began in March, 1903; the contractor was Faris and Kesl, of Boise. Simply outlined, the construction of the entire system consists of Milner Dam; Murtaugh Lake, also known as Dry Creek Reservoir, a smaller earth fill dam used for flood control and regulation of the canals located nine miles downstream from the dam; the Main Line Canal that begins at Murtaugh Lake and flows approximately six miles northwest almost to the canyon and six miles southwest; and the Highline and Lowline canals that branch off from the Main Line Canal approximately eighteen miles west of the dam. The town of Milner, near the dam site, was created to serve as a staging area for the dam construction and as a service center for the workmen and families of some of the company's foreman and partners. Milner became a thriving community, accommodating not only those associated with the project but also the many tourists attracted to the site. Once construction of the entire project was underway the Canal Company employed over 500 men. The dam opened on March 1, 1905; the ceremony was held in front of the headgates of the Main Line Canal, with Murtaugh Lake in the background, when the canals were opened the following day. The State Land Board required assurance that the entire system was in good working order, requiring the TFLWC to repair the dam's tunnels, replace some of the concrete of the canal piers and make any other necessary repairs. Once this was completed the settlers formally accepted the tract on September 15, 1909, and the TFLWC was turned over to the settlers, and became known as the Twin Falls Canal Company.

Growth of the Community

Although the response to the first land drawing, held on July 1, 1903, was disappointing, interest grew in the project as the work progressed. The second opening, held on October 20, 1904, was encouraging and the response indicated that the project would be a success. Settlers poured in from all over the country, eager to establish a new life and transplant the community institutions and amenities they had relied upon elsewhere. Only a few months after the dam opened on March 1, 1905 the new city had a bank, doctor, attorney, dentist, school, newspaper, bakery and rooming house.

The tract was widely promoted throughout the United States, and in fact, the TFLWC hired a photographer, George Bisbee, to help advertise the area's rapid growth and prosperity. Bisbee, an acquaintance of the Twin Falls News founder Charles Diehl, arrived in Twin Falls from Illinois in January, 1906 and had a studio until he retired in 1939. His early photographs are particularly interesting because they portray how quickly the sagebrush desert was transformed into agricultural riches - possible only through irrigation.

Additional federal legislation was enacted after the turn of the century to develop reclamation in the west and this, along with the success of the Twin Falls tract enticed other investors to undertake similar projects across the entire Snake River Plain. Those in south-central Idaho included the Northside, Salmon Falls and Minidoka projects. The promoters of the first two encountered numerous problems yet the irrigation systems eventually became operational. In the vicinity of Twin Falls, reclamation was responsible for the cultivation of almost 600,000 acres, and the settlement it attracted led to the development of new towns such as Jerome, Rupert and Burley, augmenting and securing Twin Falls' role as the regional commercial center.