

THE HISTORY OF IRRIGATION IN THE YAKIMA VALLEY

Local History

A history of irrigation in the Yakima Valley comes near to being a history of everything in the Valley, for almost every enterprise here after the first era of range stock has been the outgrowth of irrigation. The history of irrigation is practically divisible into two distinct sections - first, that of private enterprise, and second, that under government direction.

There seems to be slight differences of opinion as to when the first irrigating canals in Yakima came into existence. There is a general agreement however, that the first ditch was that of KAMIAKIN, last Hero of the Yakimas, in about 1853, at his place near Tampico. According to Leonard Thorp, early pioneer, the first irrigation by persons other than Indians was performed in 1866 by Thomas and Benton Goodwin at a point about a mile south of the present city of Yakima. This ditch carried water from the Yakima River to a small five acre wheat field which yielded about 40 bushels per acre. According to an old government history the first was the Nelson Ditch of 1867.

The government record stated that this ditch took its water supply from the left bank of the Naches River a short distance north and west of the present Nelson's bridge on the Naches Highway. Also in 1867 a small cooperative system starting a mile above the mouth of the Naches River was constructed - this later became known as the Union Canal.

Several other small canals followed a few years later with Charles Carpenter raising the first hops under irrigation at his place on the Ahtanum in 1872. That same year Charles and Joseph Schanno and Sebastian Lauber made the first attempt at a more considerable size. They constructed a canal from a point on the Ahtanum near the Carpenter place to their half section of land which later became the site of Yakima City.

In 1874 the Schanno brothers undertook a much greater enterprise, a ditch that took off from the Naches River some eight miles from their places. This ditch, eighteen feet wide and eighteen inches deep, followed to a considerable extent a natural hollow which ran not far from the present railroad tracks. At first the water was used mainly for raising gardens and a small amount of wheat, but it wasn't until 1881 that Yakima's first great crop, alfalfa, was raised on land watered by the Schanno ditch.

During the 1880's and 90's a number of larger enterprises were launched, on the Naches rather than the main stream of the Yakima, supplying the water for the canals. The first important canal during this era was the Selah Valley Ditch Company. About the same time the Moxee Company was constructing a canal on the east bank of the river. During the same period, around 1878, canal construction began near Prosser and Kiona.

Down around Kennewick in the early 1890's several canals were started but folded up as a result of the "hard times" of 1890-95. It wasn't until 1902, when the Northern Pacific Railway acquired the canal interests, that construction was resumed in that area.

It was in 1902 that the governmental phases of irrigation came into the picture. A survey of the Tieton by a private group in that year created sufficient interest in the feasibility of an irrigation project for that area so that the Reclamation Service made their own surveys of 1903, 1904, and 1905. These resulted in the preliminary work begun in 1906 under government supervision and water was first delivered to the Naches branch of the Tieton Project in 1910. At the same time the Tieton Project was being carried through to completion, negotiations were under way which eventually led to the transfer of the property of the Washington Irrigation Company (The Sunnyside Canal) to the federal government.

With the completion of the Tieton Project and purchase of the Sunnyside Canal, the federal government was definitely in the irrigation business. In the years that followed, the government brought more land into production under the Kittitas, Kennewick Highlands, and Roza projects. The subjects, plus private irrigation systems, deliver a never failing supply of water to over 500,000 acres of rich volcanic soil, making the Yakima Valley one of the most productive areas in the nation.