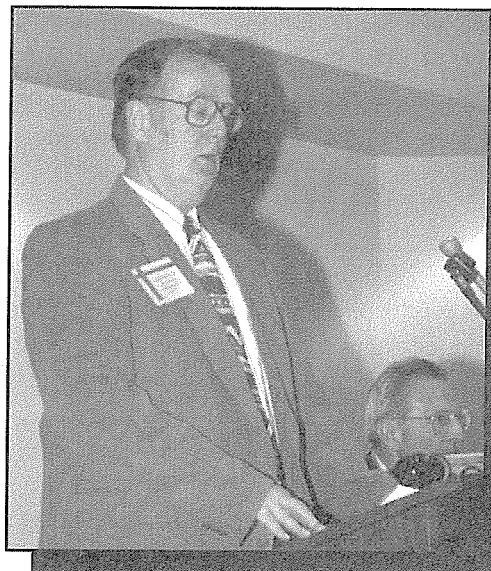


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PERSISTENCE: BRIEF DEVELOPMENT HISTORY OF THE TUCUMCARI IRRIGATION PROJECT (ARCH HURLEY CONSERVANCY DISTRICT)

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In preparing this address on the development of the Tucumcari Irrigation Project and Arch Hurley Conservancy District, I have relied heavily on a report prepared in March 1994 by David A. Phillips, Jr. (SWCA, Inc. Environmental Consultants, Albuquerque, New Mexico)

Located in the Canadian River valley, between the Canadian Escarpment on the north and the Llano Estacado to the south, the Tucumcari area was a natural travel corridor for countless generations of Native Americans and early European travelers. European settlement of the Tucumcari area did not begin in earnest until after the Civil War when the United States began the final conquest of the Southern Plains Indians.

Fort Bascomb was established near Tucumcari in 1863. Although the post was abandoned within a

decade, its establishment encouraged Hispanic migration into the area. Also established about this time was the tiny settlement named Liberty. Its primary function was to provide "liberty" to Fort Bascomb's soldiers.

While Texas Anglo cattlemen began migrating in numbers into northeast New Mexico in the 1870s, Tucumcari remained part of New Mexico's empty spaces until 1901, when it became widely known that the Rock Island Railroad would pass through the valley just north of Tucumcari Mountain. Land speculators quickly surveyed and platted a town-site before the railroad arrived. In 1902, five million acres of local public land was opened for development. Quay County was created in 1903.

One of the greatest hindrances to the development of the West was the spotty nature of reliable year-

round natural surface irrigation water. Tukumcari had virtually none. Many of the Anglo homesteaders who arrived in Tukumcari shortly after the railroad arrived decided to stake out a piece of this newly opened public land because of the high prices being paid for local farm products; prices created by above-normal rainfall. By the end of World War I, a series of agricultural centers were established in Quay County. All were based on small-scale ranching or dryland farming of crops such as hay and sorghum. Once drier more normal weather conditions returned, most of these local farming communities were quickly abandoned. Without irrigation, farming in and around Tukumcari was simply too risky to pursue.

As happened throughout the West, local boosters began eyeing any permanent stream as a potential source of irrigation water and developing plans on how to impound, store and deliver this water to previously dry farmland. Frequently, these boosters saw an irrigation project as their path to greater fame, glory and wealth—especially if they owned the lands to be irrigated. From 1911 until his death in 1927, Tukumcari's leading irrigation project developer/promoter was Ralph J. Freeland.

Freeland was involved in 1912 with the design of the first Tukumcari Irrigation Project. This project would store and divert water flowing in Pajarito Creek. Development would require the financing and construction of two large earthen dams; one dam for diversion purposes, the other for additional storage. Finally, it required the construction of 15 miles of main canal. Nothing came from this plan because construction costs for delivery were so enormous when compared to the value of the crops that could be raised with the delivered irrigation water.

The 1920s saw a group of local businessmen once again begin pushing for the one thing that would put northeastern New Mexico on the map—a reliable source of irrigation water. Key players in the 1925 formation of the “Canadian River Development Association” were three individuals who would play pivotal roles in the development of both the Tukumcari Irrigation Project and the Arch Hurley Conservancy District: Henry Burt (H.B.) Jones, James L. Briscoe, and Arch Hurley. The sole purpose of this organization was to lobby aggressively for the development of a water storage facility on the south Canadian River.

H.B. Jones was a pioneer banker in eastern New Mexico and one of the Development Association's first presidents. In 1901, H.B. was in Santa Rosa where he organized a bank that would eventually become The First National Bank of Santa Rosa. Being a bank owner in the 1920s made Jones one of the most powerful men in northeastern New Mexico. His financial and political power made him probably the most significant player in this struggle to develop an irrigation project and conservancy district. Jones preferred to remain in the background while others carried the fight to Washington and Santa Fe. Jones mainly relied on two associates, James L. Briscoe and Arch Hurley to win this battle.

James Briscoe was the Development Association's attorney and the leader of the effort that led to its formation. By this time, he was the senior partner of his own law firm. Previously, Jones served as both Quay County Assessor (1915-1916) and as Tukumcari's Mayor (1920-1921). Thus, he had wide reaching political connections at both the federal and state levels—political connections that would be used again and again as the formation of this irrigation district progressed.

Arch Hurley perfectly complemented Jones' financial and Briscoe's legal backgrounds. Arch Hurley's forte was lobbying and public relations. He acquired these talents initially by operating and later owning a chain of movie theaters. These endeavors provided him with a prominent and very visible position within Tukumcari and Quay County as well as throughout northeastern New Mexico. It is unclear, but he may also have been trained as a civil engineer.

Regardless of his formal training or background, once bitten by the irrigation district bug, Arch Hurley dedicated the remainder of his life to the project by learning as much as he could about the formation, development and financing of irrigation districts. In addition to becoming a recognized expert on water resources development, he served as a director of the National Rivers and Harbor Congress. Undoubtedly, the political connections he established were sorely needed and tested during the 1930s, as the formation of this irrigation district sought to overcome one roadblock after another.

The death of Mr. R.J. Freeland in the early 1920s silenced one of this area's earliest and most persistent voices advocating the development of a “South

Canadian River" irrigation project. While he did initially serve as the secretary-treasurer of the Canadian River Development Association, he died before that group made any real progress.

Given the wide political tendrils of this close knit group, it is probably no coincidence that beginning shortly after the formation of this "Development Association," a series of studies of the Canadian River watershed were undertaken by both federal and state agencies. Volume 3 of the Corps of Engineers' 1924 Flood Control Study of the Arkansas River Watershed includes work undertaken in the South Canadian River basin. In 1925, New Mexico's State Engineer began his own study of the Canadian River Watershed. Between 1928-1930, the U.S. Geological Survey extensively surveyed and mapped land within the proposed irrigation district's boundaries.

While no activities leading to project construction occurred prior to early 1933 for political reasons, this group persisted in pursuing their goal. Republican control in both Washington and Santa Fe meant that governmental development and construction capital were virtually nonexistent, especially for this project since Jones, Briscoe and Hurley were staunch, active Democrats.

To overcome this major impediment to their plans, they shifted their focus to something that Republicans in both Washington and Santa Fe could and would support—flood control. They began to lobby aggressively for the construction of Conchas Dam as a "flood control" project knowing that once it was constructed, their irrigation project would not be far behind.

While political changes occurring after the 1932 federal and state elections gave the project a huge political boost, they did not ensure its success. During the period between 1933 and 1938, Arch Hurley made 34 separate trips to Washington to lobby Congress, the Arkansas Basin Commission, and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) for both the formation of the irrigation district and construction of Conchas Dam. It is clear from reading copies of letters written by Briscoe and Hurley during this period that the goal was never simply "authorization," but always "appropriation."

Jones, Briscoe and Hurley experienced their first political success on July 22, 1936, when Congress passed the "Flood Control Act" authorizing

construction and appropriating necessary funding for Conchas Dam. While Conchas Dam was built primarily as a flood control structure, Bureau of Reclamation's ability to use the resulting reservoir for irrigation purposes was based on a previously authorized upstream structure. Basically, the Bureau used the previously authorized funding for this upstream dam to construct what became the Tukumcari Irrigation Project.

The Bureau completed field studies for this project by April 1937. In February 1937, a meeting was held in Tukumcari to organize the local conservancy district. At this meeting, the City of Tukumcari decided to sponsor formation of the district to the New Mexico Legislature and to name it after Mr. Arch Hurley. On April 21, 1937, the New Mexico Legislature gave its approval for the formation of the Arch Hurley Conservancy District, and judicial confirmation was obtained on August 3, 1937.

On December 27, 1938, the Bureau and the newly formed conservancy district signed an agreement whereby the Bureau would build the Tukumcari Project and the conservancy district agreed to repay its construction costs from the sale of irrigation water. At long last, Tukumcari and the triad of Jones, Briscoe, and Hurley had their long sought conservation (irrigation) district.

However, even the signing of this agreement did not signal that this project was "out of the woods." The Bureau's more detailed construction estimates showed that construction of the project would cost more than they felt could be repaid over even a 40-year period at no interest solely from the sale of water. Arch Hurley returned to Washington. Several actions were required to save the project. First, the scope of the project had to be reduced. Second, President Roosevelt had to agree to commit \$2.5 million of WPA labor to this project. Third, the 1939 Reclamation Contract Act had to be amended to allow certain districts to tax non-irrigated properties. Arch Hurley Conservancy District is the only irrigation district of which I am aware that taxes non-irrigable land.

Obtaining an easement for the project's main canal from the Bell Ranch (the present day T-4 and Clabber Hill ranches) in exchange for providing the

ranch with irrigation water solved the final obstacle to construction.

The Corps completed construction of Conchas Dam—the “flood control” portion of this project in 1939. In 1940, the Bureau began construction of its portion of the project. The War Production Board stopped construction between December 1942 and sometime in 1944 when project backers were able to get its construction going again after the project was declared a “war priority.” Irrigation water flowed from the project onto the first 2,526 acres in 1946. Since its completion in 1954, Arch Hurley Conservancy District annually delivers irrigation water from Conchas Reservoir to some 42,321 acres of thirsty farmland.

Unfortunately, H.B. Jones, who was in all probability the real power behind the decades of effort needed to get the Arch Hurley Conservancy District formed and the Tucumcari Project built, never saw the fruits of his labor as he died in New Orleans in 1941.

For over 50 years, Arch Hurley Conservancy District has used the approximately 40 miles of main canal and 350 miles of smaller ditches and laterals constructed as part of the Tucumcari Project to deliver water, on average, to almost 700 different parcels of irrigated land. We deliver annually about 1.33 acre-feet of low-cost irrigation water to over 42,000 acres of irrigable land. Project water is used mainly for cattle, cattle feed, wheat and other cereal grains. The average value of these crops is \$2.7 million dollars, or approximately \$80 per acre of irrigated land.

To date, this area has not realized the full economic benefit of the irrigation project’s water. While the per-acre yield from these irrigated lands is markedly higher than for most of their non-irrigated neighbors, these irrigated lands are used basically to produce the same crops grown on a “dryland” basis on adjacent acreage. Only sporadically over the project’s fifty-year history have these irrigated acres been used to produce higher dollar value crops. Until this transition occurs permanently, the dream of Messrs. Briscoe, Freeland, Hurley, and Jones will not be truly complete.