

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

FARMERS CO-OPERATIVE DITCH COMPANY (SEBREE CANAL)

Number 526

1974

The Sebree Canal commences on the north side of the Boise River at the Caldwell Bridge in Section 15, T4N, R3W. It runs through Sections 6, 8, 9, 15, and 16 of T4N, R3W, thence westerly through T5N, R4W, thence westerly and northerly through T6N, R6W.

In 1874, Peter Johnson acquired the right to divert and appropriate 1,000 inches of water under a four-inch pressure, and built a ditch. On March 20, 1878, Johnson filed notice of intent to divert 10,000 inches of water. With annual enlargements, the ditch by 1881 had the capacity to divert 5,000 inches. On November 30, 1883, he filed another notice of intent, this time on 15,000 inches. He continued to enlarge the ditch until January 1, 1887, when he sold his water rights and ditch to Howard Sebree. At the time of the sale, Johnson's ditch was five feet wide on the bottom, and three feet deep, and irrigated about 600 acres. This irrigated acreage consisted mainly of pasture land. Before purchasing Johnson's water rights, Sebree had surveys done which showed the feasibility of recovering over 40,000 acres. With this in mind, he bought the ditch and laid out plans for the construction of a canal twenty-three miles in length. With the exception of a small stretch at the beginning, the canal would basically be new. On January 12, 1887, Sebree filed a notice of intent to divert 20,000 inches of water.

In February of 1887, Sebree let out contracts for the construction of the first four miles. This work was to be finished by April 1, 1887, at a cost of \$6,000. By March, forty men and teams were at work. Initially, a wing dam was built to send water into the canal. At the diversion point, a finely-structured headgate was installed. Guarded by immense masses of lava rock to make it flood proof, the headgate measured 22 by 22 feet with four gates. Each gate maintained a 4- by 5-foot opening.

Construction on the canal terminated on June 2, 1888, with the completion of the twentieth mile. The canal at the beginning measured thirty feet wide on the bottom and twenty feet wide at the top; the bottom of the headgate was eighteen inches below the low water level in the river. These dimensions did not vary until the third mile of the canal. Between the third and twelfth mile, the bottom underwent a reduction to a width of fifteen feet. From the thirteenth to the twentieth mile, the canal was further reduced to twelve feet in width on the bottom. Throughout, it averaged six feet in depth. By June of 1888, all the land along the canal had been taken up, and houses and cultivated fields began appearing. The guarantee of water encouraged J. A. Goodhue to plant 5,000 fruit trees. Other property owners along the system started raising various varieties of grains and grasses.

In June of 1887, Sebree took an active part in the organization of the Idaho Irrigating and Colonization Company. This company maintained its headquarters in Salt Lake City, Utah. Sebree became the first president and treasurer. The company listed a capital of \$100,000 with 1,000 shares valued at \$100 each. The immediate purpose of this new organization was to purchase the then partially-completed Sebree Canal. A working capital of 875 shares was to be held by the company for payments to Sebree and to W. L. Geary and Company for the canal's completion.

Although organized in June of 1887, the Idaho Irrigating and Colonization Company did not

purchase the canal until January 16, 1889. The company rented water initially to the farmers at \$1.00 per inch. This worked out to be the equivalent of 50¢ per acre. The farmers also had the option of paying \$8.00 an inch for a perpetual water right, after which no costs would be incurred except a proportional share in the expense of keeping the canal in repair.

In 1893, the company ran into some difficulty when Z. S. Barnum sued them for damages. He based his complaint on the company's failure to deliver water onto his lands in 1890. Barnum won a judgment of nearly \$600 and, for some unexplained reason, the company failed to comply. Consequently, on June 4, 1893, the canal was purchased by P. A. Devers for \$1,000 at a sheriff's sale to satisfy the judgment. Observers thought it unbelievable that the company failed to comply after spending \$40,000 on its construction. The fact that the company enjoyed a good financial status with wealthy stockholders like Fred L. Eames of Boston and F. J. Keisel of Ogden, further deepened the mystery. However, shortly thereafter, the company redeemed the canal through an arrangement with Devers.

After an enlargement in 1894, the canal was able to divert 12,000 inches under a four-inch pressure. By 1900, the canal was twenty-three miles long with an average top width of twenty-five feet and an average grade of 1.6 feet per mile. It maintains a flow during the irrigating season of about 200 second feet and its cost was estimated at \$75,000. In addition, 5,500 acres received water.

The farmers' growing dissatisfaction toward the operation and management of the canal resulted in the formation of the Farmers Cooperative Ditch Company in 1901. In the spring of 1902, this newly-organized group purchased the canal and water rights from the Idaho Irrigation and Colonization Company. In 1903, the canal maintained a capacity of 347 second feet, extended twenty-three miles in length with thirty miles of laterals and irrigated over 8,500 acres. In 1906, the canal received water rights (60, 86, 105, 126) of 8,175 inches of water.