

Enlightened Selfishness

Great Falls and the Sun River Project

by Judith Fabry

In contrast to many other federal reclamation projects, it was not stock ranchers and dryland grain farmers living along the lower reaches of Montana's Sun River who sought a federal irrigation system for their land.¹ They, in fact, were little interested in such work. Rather, it was the Great Falls business community who contributed time and money to secure authorization and construction of the Sun River project, located between the Sun and Teton rivers about thirty miles west of Great Falls. The business leaders, motivated by what they called "enlightened selfishness," believed a federal reclamation project would ensure the city's economic future and return their investment in the enterprise many times over.²

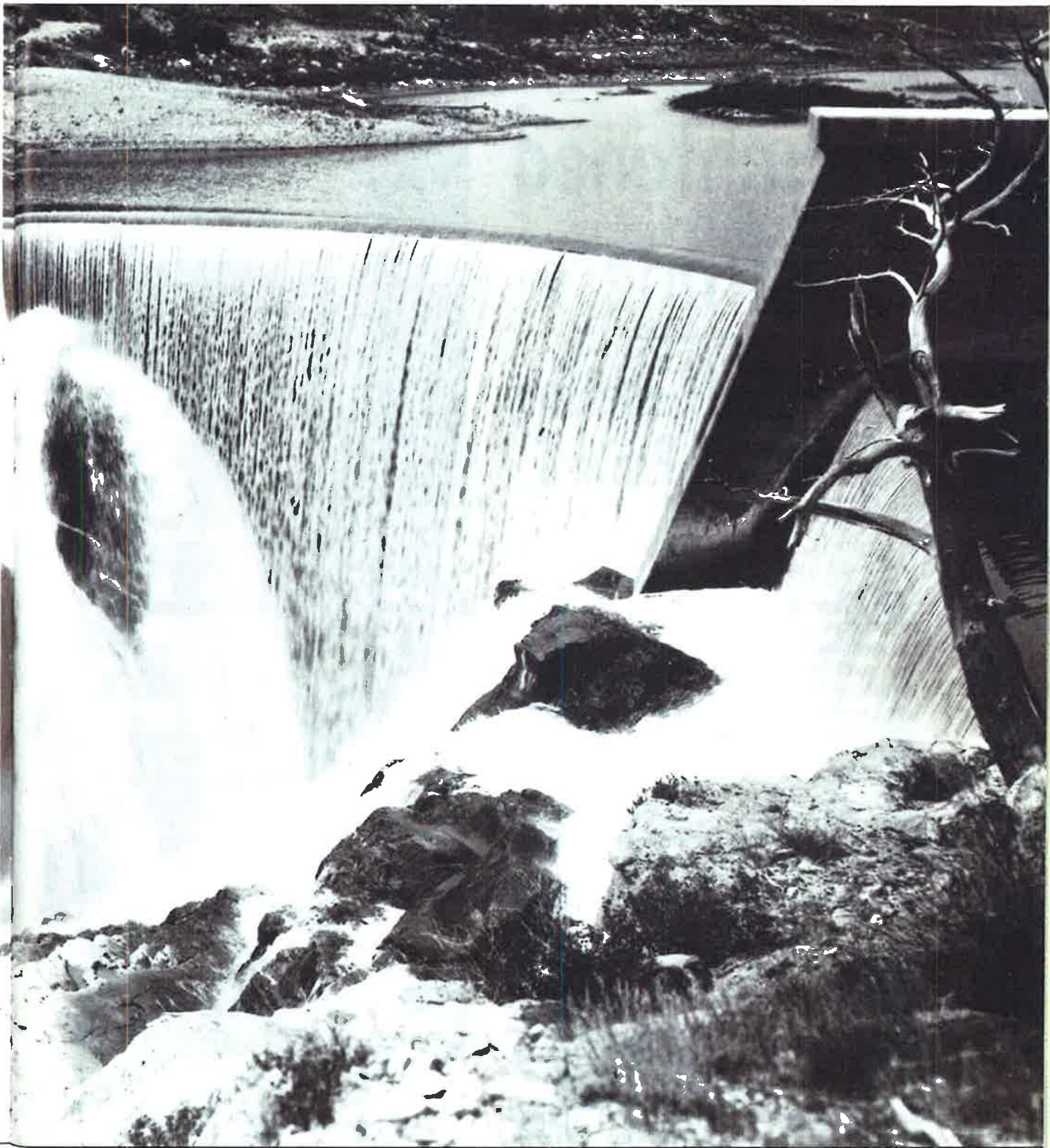
The Newlands Reclamation Act of 1902 authorized the federal government to reclaim unused or underused land in the West in places where it seemed likely that settlers on small, intensively farmed plots could develop permanent and prosperous homes. Those who took up the land would repay the government the cost of constructing the irrigation system in ten annual, interest-free payments. Great Falls residents reasoned that development of the lower Sun River valley under the provisions of the Reclamation Act would help the city revive its economic growth, which had begun to falter late in the 1890s. A reclamation project, they thought, would spur immigration to the region by offering productive farmland at moderate expense. The produce of the new settlers would lower the local cost of living, stimulate business and industry, and improve the county's tax base.

The business leaders failed to recognize that a speedy return on their investment was not guaranteed. More than twenty years after the enthusiastic beginning of the campaign to secure the Sun River project, farmers in the project's first division were just beginning to



MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

experience some economic stability. To achieve this level of financial return, farmers had not automatically chosen crops and produce beneficial to Great Falls's development. Instead, they managed their land and water in ways that made economic sense to them for their survival and eventual prosperity, with little concern for the desires and aspirations of their neighbors in Great Falls.



The Sun River Diversion Dam, completed in December 1914, rises 132 feet above its foundation.

The enlightened selfishness of Great Falls boosters reflected attitudes commonly held by westerners concerning federal reclamation, water as a commodity, and the benefits of growth. According to one observer, residents of western states viewed federal reclamation as a "benefits program, a way to stimulate local economic

development."³ This was precisely the viewpoint of the Great Falls business community. Business leaders, organized as the Great Falls Commercial Club, expected that securing a federal project near their city would give them a competitive edge in attracting new industry and thus increase the population of the area.

To business leaders, lobbying for a federal reclamation project was a form of economic competition to be fought and won, not unlike the battles towns waged for county seats or state institutions. Winning such battles required promotion not only of Great Falls's economic potential, but of the area's natural resources. Town boosters thought of water and land adjacent to the city as resources to be exploited for social and economic progress.⁴ To ignore such potential and leave the land as it lay was not only economic folly but social irresponsibility. Engineering and technology could divert and distribute water from the Sun River and make possible the creation of many highly productive farms on land that previously supported only livestock grazing. The presumed inevitable agricultural abundance of the valley and bench lands would be the key to Great Falls's sustained growth and prosperity.

After its founding in the early 1880s, Great Falls, like many western towns, grew rapidly. Its population nearly tripled during the early 1890s, then growth leveled off in the latter years of the decade, and by 1900 the population hovered at about 15,000 people. Paris Gibson, Great Falls's most recognized founder, decided something needed to be done to stimulate new growth.

Gibson's connection with Great Falls had begun in 1882. With the financial and personal support of his friend, James J. Hill, builder of the St. Paul, Minneapolis & Manitoba Railroad, Gibson started acquiring as much land as possible in central Montana along the falls of the Missouri River. He imagined harnessing the power of the falls and building a city that would rival Minneapolis.⁵ By 1900 his vision was partially realized; the falls provided power for smelting copper and lead-silver ores, making flour, and operating electric trolleys and city street lights.⁶ To encourage further growth, Gibson began a crusade to bring more farmers to the area. As city father, influential Democrat, and United States Senator from 1901 to 1905, Gibson had ready access to the

town's Democratic newspaper. He used his influence to advocate any plan, including reclamation and dry-land farming, that would permit distribution of the public domain in small parcels and encourage establishment of permanent family farms. For Gibson, cultivation of any type would benefit Great Falls more than the extensive stock-raising operations that had dominated the area during the nineteenth century.⁷

Despite Gibson's great influence, the people of Great Falls ultimately proclaimed S. B. Robbins the father of the Sun River project.⁸ Robbins was an engineer for the Reclamation Service, but more importantly, he was a longtime resident of the Great Falls area before he joined the service in 1902. He had concluded that upwards of one million acres of land in the vicinity of Great Falls could be irrigated from the Sun and Teton rivers. In 1893 he and several associates had incorporated a canal and colonization company to undertake irrigation of the bench lands west of Great Falls, but the economic panic later that year ended the company's plans.⁹ Robbins epitomized the prevailing attitude among reclamation advocates that water and land were commodities to be exploited and that technology such as dams, reservoirs, and canals could create a new economic and social order in the West. With less access to the press, Robbins's profile was lower than Gibson's, but he influenced significantly the thinking of Great Falls citizens. They trusted his expertise as an engineer and valued his connection with the Reclamation Service.¹⁰

Influenced by the ideals of Gibson and Robbins, who told them Reclamation Service surveyors had been working in the Sun River watershed in 1903 and 1904, Great Falls boosters wasted no time in pursuing the possibility of a federal reclamation project. In April 1905 a committee from Great Falls traveled to Washington, D. C., to hasten the Reclamation Service's evaluation of the Sun River project. The group spoke with President Theodore Roosevelt; F. H. Newell, head of the Reclamation Service; and C. D. Walcott, director of the United States Geological Survey, about the project. The officials assured the Montanans they believed the Sun River project was one of the most practical and simple of those being considered.¹¹

By midsummer the board of engineers charged with examining reclamation projects under consid-

1. Karen L. Smith's article, "The Campaign for Water in Central Arizona, 1890-1903," *Arizona and the West*, 23 (Summer 1981), 127-48, describes how owners of land along the Salt River sought authorization of a federal reclamation project.

2. Great Falls *Daily Tribune*, August 2, 1913, September 15, 1917.

3. Donald J. Pisani, *To Reclaim a Divided West: Water, Law, and Public Policy, 1848-1902* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992), 324.

4. For similar attitudes toward resource use see James Sherow, *Watering the Valley: Development along the High Plains Arkansas River, 1870-1950* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990), 3-4.

5. Richard B. Roeder, "A Settlement on the Plains: Paris Gibson and the Building of Great Falls," *Montana The Magazine of Western History*, 42 (Autumn 1992), 4-19; W. Thomas White, "Paris Gibson, James J. Hill and the 'New Minneapolis': The Great Falls Water Power and Townsite Company, 1882-1908," *Montana The Magazine of Western History*, 33 (Summer 1983), 60-69; James G. Handford, "Paris Gibson—A Montana Yankee," (master's thesis, University of Montana, Missoula, 1952).

6. Great Falls *Daily Tribune*, February 17, 1901, special section.

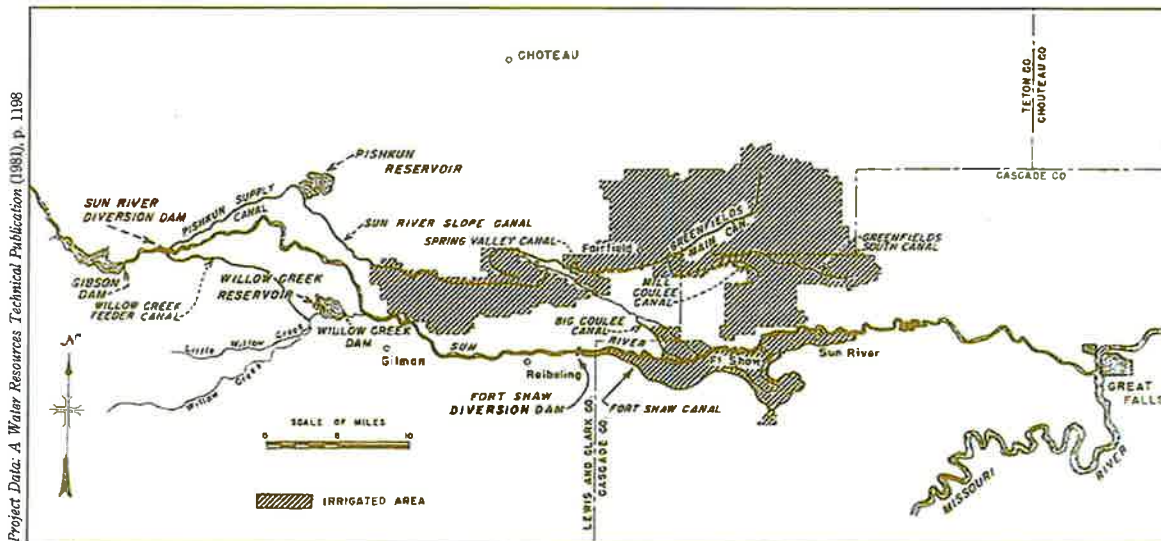
7. Great Falls *Daily Tribune*, March 28, June 3, 1900.

8. Great Falls *Daily Tribune*, February 8, 1907.

9. 1910 Project History, p. 12, Sun River Project, Montana, 1910-1919, vol. 4-6, Project Histories and Reports of the Reclamation Bureau Projects (Washington, D. C.: National Archives, 1947), reel 168, n. 96, File Microcopies of Records in the National Archives (hereafter RBPH), Montana State University Libraries, Bozeman. The agency name was changed from Reclamation Service to Bureau of Reclamation in 1923.

10. Great Falls *Daily Tribune*, June 15, 1904, June 3, 1905. For an interpretation of the multiple roles of engineers in federal reclamation, see Donald J. Pisani, "Reclamation and Social Engineering in the Progressive Era," *Agricultural History*, 57 (January 1983), 46-63.

11. Great Falls *Daily Tribune*, April 13, 1905.



This map, published by the United States Department of the Interior, Water and Power Services, traces the Sun River some seventy miles. Shaded areas between Great Falls on the east and Sun River and Gibson dams on the west indicate the land in three counties that was irrigated by water from the river.

eration, approved the Sun River project. Before construction could begin, however, water rights to the river had to be adjudicated. Once the rights of existing landowners to Sun River water were established, what remained of the river's normal flow would be the water available for settlers in a reclamation project. In addition to adjudication, the Reclamation Service sought some indication of a demand for an irrigation project and assurance that the land would be taken up by "bona fide" settlers.¹²

The Sun River valley was home to a number of pioneer ranching families who doubted the usefulness of a federal reclamation project in their neighborhood. While most of the ranchers used water from the river to irrigate gardens and hay fields and several groups had incorporated small canal companies, few believed that dividing the valley and bench lands into forty-acre irrigated farms was desirable. Reluctant to see their way of life change, some also thought Great Falls did not constitute a market large enough for the existing agricultural community, much less an expanded one.¹³

North of the river, the bench lands had been settled according to provisions of the Desert Land Act of 1877, which required settlers to establish irrigation works on their land. Although cooperative canal companies had done little in the way of construction, a federal reclamation project could affect prior settlers adversely. If the bench lands became part of a

federal project, for example, settlers on the bench would have to relinquish whatever land they may have claimed in excess of the limit the government established.

It soon became clear to the commercial interests of Great Falls that the people who owned land near the Sun River had no interest in securing a federal reclamation project; they had even less interest in initiating—and financing—an adjudication suit to determine water rights.

Recognizing this problem, William M. Boles, editor and part owner of the *Tribune* and an active reclamation booster, challenged local business people to respond to the government's call to adjudicate Sun water rights. Adjudication was unknown in the region because Montana laws made no provision for legal determination of water rights. Boles suggested enlisting help from the state engineer. While calling for water users' associations to express their desire for the government works, he claimed "the city will also greatly benefit by a population of thousands of families of farmers . . . when this irrigation project is once realized, and so it is entirely proper and wise for the Great Falls Commercial Club and Great Falls business men to take a practical interest in the matter of the prompt meeting of the government requirements." Within a few weeks the Commercial Club had organized committees to help satisfy Reclamation Service requirements.¹⁴

Up to this point, the desire of the Great Falls business community to secure a reclamation project near the city had required little more than attendance at meetings and enthusiastic support. Adjudication,

12. Great Falls *Daily Tribune*, August 1, 3, 1905.

13. For ranchers' opinions see Great Falls *Daily Tribune*, January 14, 1903, March 31, 1905, March 16, 1908, April 20, 1911.

14. Great Falls *Daily Tribune*, August 3, 31, 1905.



Clarence Bull, photographer, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

Dryland farmers from the Greenfield bench formed a motorcade to protest the Sun River irrigation project coming to their region.

however, meant money. By late 1905 business people had spent more than \$7,000 on a suit in district court to settle the water rights question. Operating according to the doctrine of prior appropriation, the method most commonly used to determine water rights elsewhere in the West, two deputy state engineers surveyed the Sun River basin and drew maps showing the amount of land each person owned, the types of crops raised, the extent of each landowner's irrigated and irrigable land, and the size and length of existing ditches. The Reclamation Service established stream gauging stations to determine available runoff. The service also metered the water being diverted into ditches and determined the maximum capacity of each ditch. This information plus the testimony of the landowners formed the basis on which the judge would assess the appropriateness of each person's claim to water from the Sun River.¹⁵

With adjudication underway, another contingent of people from Great Falls visited Washington during the winter of 1905–1906 to urge final approval of the Sun River project and appropriation of funds for construction. Among the delegates were bankers, attorneys, and merchants. Robbins, who by then was the project engineer, accompanied the group. Conspicuously absent was any representative of established agricultural interests in the valley. The

ranchers' continuing lack of support for the project apparently caused the boosters no distress, nor did it affect their credibility in Washington.¹⁶

After lengthy negotiations, the committee, aided by Montana's Senators Thomas H. Carter and William A. Clark and particularly Representative Joseph M. Dixon, convinced Interior Secretary E. A. Hitchcock to appropriate \$500,000 to begin the Fort Shaw division, the first phase of the Sun River project. Crews began moving earth in the Sun River valley to build the first canals in the summer of 1907, and the Reclamation Service opened the Fort Shaw division to settlement the following spring.¹⁷

Lying along the south bank of the Sun River, the Fort Shaw division was a mere 16,000 acres out of 300,000 acres the Reclamation Service initially designated for the project. Most of the land that had been set aside lay north of the Sun River. Believing that an average family could handle little more than forty acres of irrigated land, engineers laid out some two hundred farm units, each averaging sixty acres of irrigable land. Larger units containing some nonirrigable land for pasturing livestock also were available. The Reclamation Service built the irrigation works necessary to deliver water to each farm, but settlers were responsible for leveling and preparing their land to receive water.

The optimistic people who came to the Fort Shaw division believed, like Great Falls business promoters, that they were investing in their futures. They, too, considered federal reclamation a "benefit pro-

15. Great Falls *Daily Tribune*, April 23, 1906, March 21, 1911.

16. 1910 Project History, p. 53, RBPH.

17. Great Falls *Daily Tribune*, February 2, 3, March 21, 1906, May 4, 1907.

gram,⁷ but they perceived the benefits as pertaining primarily to themselves as individuals, not to a larger economic community. The most valuable part of their claim in the project was the right to use Sun River water. Accepting the premise that putting water on the land virtually guaranteed success in agriculture, the settlers, like their counterparts in other western irrigation projects, viewed water as a commodity that could be used to make any land more productive.

With improved farmland in the Midwest selling for more than one hundred dollars an acre, the low cost of claiming a farm in the Fort Shaw division seemed reasonable. Unlike many federal projects in which newcomers had to buy land from private owners, Fort Shaw settlers could make homestead claims. Homesteading meant living on the land for five years (later reduced to three), cultivating and improving at least one-half of the irrigable area, and paying a filing fee of ten cents per acre at the time of making the claim.¹⁸

Two additional costs applied to land in the Fort Shaw division. One was the cost of the irrigation system the government had built. At Fort Shaw this amount was thirty dollars per acre, still quite reasonable for irrigated farmland in 1910. The second cost was that of operating and maintaining the irrigation system, which the Reclamation Service referred to as O&M. This amount was not fixed and depended on the actual cost per acre of operating the system each year. Before 1910 settlers paid fifty cents per acre per year for O&M, but this cost continued to rise throughout the 1910s. Thus, based on a ten-year payback schedule, the annual costs for a sixty-acre farm during the early years of the division's operation would have been \$180 for construction and at least \$30 for O&M.

Despite all the hard work that went into getting the project approved, the Fort Shaw division got off to a slow start. When the division opened in May 1908, the crop year was too far advanced, and only 35 settlers filed on claims. Instead, most people arrived during the next two years. With few exceptions they were American citizens who had lived in small towns or on farms in the Midwest or in Montana. Of those who had taken up claims by 1912, 98 out of 180 settlers had no previous farming experience. Of those with experience, only 18 had practiced irrigated farming.¹⁹ In addition, settlers took up the smallest units first, an

indication of their limited resources. The Reclamation Service recommended that a person have a minimum of one thousand dollars to enter a claim, but no system existed to assure financial qualification.²⁰ Establishing a paying farm did not happen overnight, and many people suffered severe hardships the first four or five years after making a claim.

Experiences of the Joe Crepeau family are typical of many early settlers in the Fort Shaw division. In 1907, after learning the Reclamation Service was seeking employees, the Crepeaus came to the Sun River valley from Minnesota. Crepeau and his brother Charles secured a contract to do grading and construct laterals for the Fort Shaw division. While Joe worked for the Reclamation Service, he and his family lived in a tent near the Sun River. After completing his contract in the summer of 1908, Crepeau filed on a 168-acre unit with 66 acres of irrigable land. He broke 40 acres in the fall and sowed oats, which yielded 30 bushels per acre the next year. The cash income from the oats did not cover expenses of planting, and in 1910 Crepeau sowed 20 acres each in alfalfa and grain. A hailstorm in July reduced the grain yield to 20 bushels per acre. Using the grain to feed his livestock, he had no cash income that year. In 1911 he had 48 acres in alfalfa and harvested enough to feed his own stock. The family of seven lived on Crepeau's wages from outside employment, a garden, and \$60 from the sale of poultry and dairy products. By the end of 1911 the family had spent \$3,400 for buildings and other permanent improvements to their property. In 1912 Crepeau again had to secure outside employment to make ends meet and sell most of his livestock to make construction and O&M payments, because he could not find a market for his alfalfa hay.²¹

As settlers took up land in the Fort Shaw division and began the arduous task of developing their claims, boosters in Great Falls launched their campaign to obtain funds for the next phase of the project, which would be on the bench lands north of the river.²² They began their efforts in summer 1909, but soon learned that the second campaign would be different from the first, for now the government would not only consider the interests of Great Falls but also the success and contentment of the Fort Shaw farmers.

In August 1909 the Senate Irrigation Committee and the secretary of the interior visited the Sun River project. Federal reclamation was under fire

18. Form letter signed by S. B. Robbins, p. 3, Engineering and Research Center Project Reports, 232 G-PP, December 10, 1923, box 1008, RG 115, Records of the Bureau of Reclamation, National Archives, Denver, Colorado (hereafter RG 115); Great Falls *Daily Tribune*, September 20, 1912.

19. 1912 Operation and Maintenance Report, p. 17, RBPH.

20. See "Sun River—Reclamation Project (Irrigation)," Cascade County Historical Society Archives, Great Falls. Although the cover is missing, this appears to be the brochure Great Northern Railroad agents used c. 1909. The brochure suggests prospective settlers should have at least \$1,000.

21. J. J. Crepeau to Senator Walsh, Subject File A (Montana), "Sun River Irrigation Project," box 137, Thomas J. Walsh Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (hereafter Walsh Papers); 1911 Operation and Maintenance Report, sheet 7, p. 7, RBPH.

22. Great Falls *Daily Tribune*, April 4, 1909.

nationally from people who feared creeping socialism and disliked the special benefits a few Americans seemed to be receiving. The committee's purpose was to evaluate the projects that were already in operation to help them decide how to legislate in the future regarding irrigation. Shortly before the irrigation committee senators arrived in Great Falls, the *Great Falls Tribune* editorialized that any "natural born kickers" among the settlers at Fort Shaw should be silenced and that the "satisfied and prosperous settlers" should be the ones to whom the senators spoke when they visited the Sun River project.²³ The writer seemed unaware that the barely established farmers of Fort Shaw were far from prosperous.

Fort Shaw residents probably disappointed the *Tribune* when they appointed five men to present their responses to the questionnaire the Senate Irrigation Committee sent prior to its visit. Although the project was little more than a year old, the settlers found plenty to criticize. They focused complaints on work the Reclamation Service already had done, including the small size of their farms, but they also reproached Great Falls for its poor produce market and the lack of rail transportation to the city.²⁴ Clearly, many of the settlers had lost their initial optimism for the economic potential of the project. They viewed the Reclamation Service and the city of Great Falls not as benefactors but as fraudulent promoters and obstacles to their success.

Perhaps the committee's visit was more boondoggle than investigation, for the complaints of the settlers seemed to have no effect on the proposed extension of the project. In Great Falls the Commercial Club forged ahead with its campaign for more funds, ignoring settlers' complaints and relegating resolution of the problems to the Reclamation Service. Early in 1910 the club sent a delegation to Washington to seek additional funds. At the end of the year the Reclamation Service rewarded their efforts by allotting \$3,278,000 to the Greenfields division of the Sun River project, to be spent in equal annual amounts over the next four years. Less than two months passed, however, before the Commercial Club found it necessary to send still another committee to Washington to protect its interest in the project. Word had reached Great Falls that the first of the annual allocations for construction of the Greenfields division was to be diverted to another project. In Washington, while

assuring the committee that the allotment was safe, Secretary of the Interior Richard A. Ballinger stipulated that the adjudication of water rights, begun in 1905 but never completed, had to be finished.²⁵

The adjudication process had ground to a halt in 1907 when Fletcher Maddox, attorney for the Great Falls interests, accepted an appointment in Washington. At that time he had turned over to the Reclamation Service all records of testimony, maps, and gaugings. Secretary Ballinger was advised that work already done was adequate and was told "informally" that many of the defendants were willing to accept the amount of water to which the state engineers had determined they were entitled.²⁶

The Commercial Club revived the suit in April 1911. As Ballinger had been informed, even the most recalcitrant of the old-time ranchers accepted the determinations of state engineers and Reclamation Service officials and settled out of court. Still there was resentment. One of the more outspoken ranchers remarked after talking with the lawyers, "I want to see this matter settled up so that the people will come in and I can sell out. . . . Why, a bunch of college graduates are running things up there now. They tell you how much water you can use out of the rivers; how much timber you can cut out of the woods. Do we like taking orders from these immature government officials? I should say not." On June 13, 1911, a district court judge filed the 232-page report of the referee, giving the force of law to the rights it described.²⁷ The Commercial Club had spent some \$12,000 for adjudication.²⁸

The willingness of Commercial Club members to contribute more time and money to the adjudication suit is evidence of their strong desire to see construction of the Greenfields division begin. Their continuing concern with the division forced them in 1912 to take seriously the project's lack of rail transportation. The settlers had begun complaining about the difficulty of getting their produce to market three years earlier. The nearest depot was in Vaughn, some ten to twenty miles east, depending on a farm's location in the project. The wagon road to Great Falls often was in bad shape or impassable during wet weather. Even under good conditions, Fort Shaw settlers faced a two-day trip to sell produce in Great Falls. Although officials of the Great Northern Railroad had offered special rates and trains for home-

23. *Great Falls Daily Tribune*, August 20, 1909.

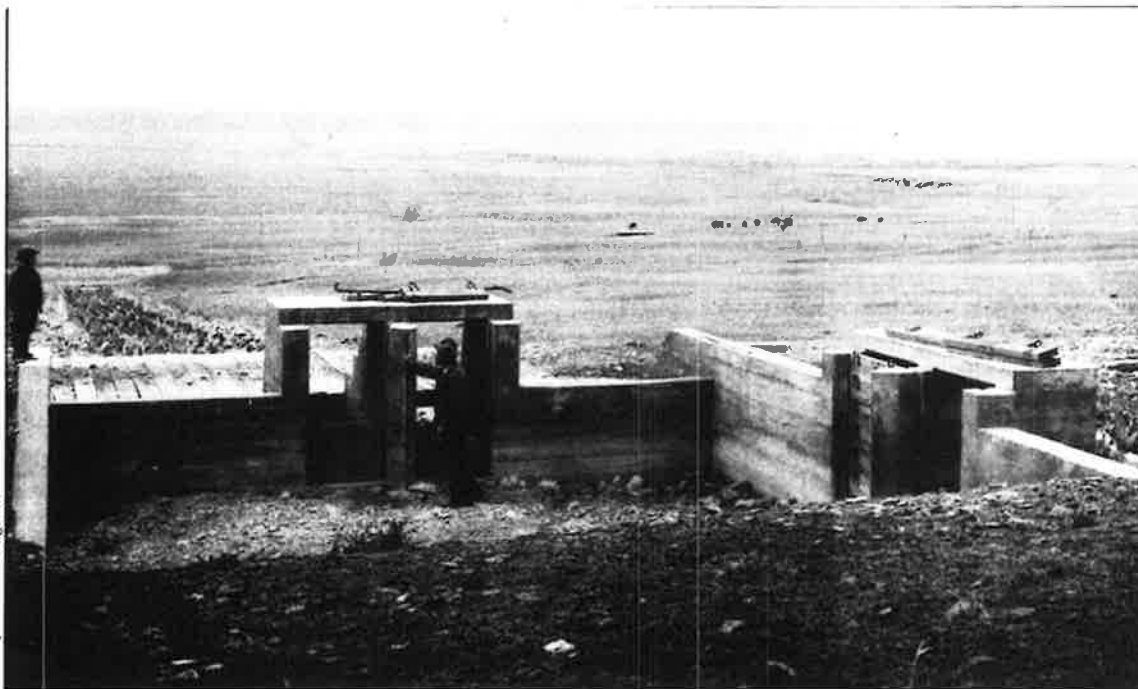
24. *Great Falls Daily Tribune*, August 20, 21, 1909.

25. *Great Falls Daily Tribune*, February 4, 11, 1910, February 28, 1911.

26. *Great Falls Daily Tribune*, March 21, 1911.

27. *Great Falls Daily Tribune*, February 4, 11, 1910, February 28, June 14, 1911. Water rights adjudication was codified by the legislature in 1979 following the procedure used for the Sun River. For development of Montana's water law code see Robert G. Dunbar, *Forging New Rights in Western Waters* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 129-32, and Robert G. Dunbar, "The Search for a Stable Water Right in Montana," *Agricultural History*, 28 (October 1954), 138-49.

28. *Montana Farmer*, December 1, 1920.



S. B. Robbins and his son stand at C Drop of the Fort Shaw Irrigation Project about 1908. D Canal is to the right and C Canal curves from the drop across the field.

seekers who wished to visit the Fort Shaw division, they made no commitment to build a rail line through the project.²⁹

In an attempt to eliminate qualms potential settlers might have about taking up land ten to twenty miles from a depot, a group of entrepreneurs from Great Falls, including project engineer S. B. Robbins, secured permission from the county board of commissioners in summer 1908 to build an electric railway up the Sun River valley.³⁰ By early 1910 the proposed line was still on the drawing board when the Great Northern company announced it would soon start construction of a fifty-eight-mile line from Vaughn to Gilman, near the head of the Sun River valley.³¹ Despite this promise, Great Northern crews had prepared only the road-bed two years later, and nothing indicated that track would be laid any time soon.³²

The situation became critical in May 1912, when F. H. Newell, Reclamation Service chief, reported to the secretary of the interior that the Sun River project had serious problems, including the location of its reservoir sites and construction of a storage dam that would be one of the largest and highest masonry dams ever built. Newell noted that transportation of construction materials "had been a controlling and undetermined factor."³³

When the Washington correspondent of the Great Falls *Tribune* sent a copy of Newell's memorandum back to the newspaper, Boles struck back in an editorial. How could the project be in such sorry condition after nine years of surveying and evaluation, he asked in an editorial, and why had the project been determined feasible if railroad service was so important? Boles wired Louis Hill, president of the Great Northern Railroad, to learn of Hill's position on completion of the Sun River line. Hill replied that his company would finish the line to Gilman when the government assured him it would begin active construction. Hill also conveyed this information to the Reclamation Service, and within several weeks that agency and the Great Northern secured promises from each other to complete the rail line and reauthorize construction of the Greenfields division.³⁴ By December 1912 Fort Shaw division farmers, whose needs played no part whatsoever in these negotiations, finally had rail service to Great Falls three times a week.³⁵

In April 1913 the Reclamation Service called for bids for canal work in the Greenfields division. The project seemed to be moving along smoothly, but undercurrents of dissatisfaction were about to spill over.³⁶ Conflict between Fort Shaw settlers and the Reclamation Service surfaced in May and soon

29. Report from M. J. Costello to W. W. Broughton and F. I. Whitney, August 5, 1905, folder 12, box 4013, 22D 14 6F, Great Northern Railroad Records, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul (hereafter GN Records); Settlers' letters, Walsh Papers; Great Falls *Daily Tribune*, May 6, 1906, April 2, July 12, August 3, 1908.

30. Great Falls *Daily Tribune*, August 13, 1908.

31. Great Falls *Daily Tribune*, January 9, 1910.

32. For the effect of Great Northern construction on Augusta and Gilman, see Jeffrey L. Cuniiff, "A Tale of Two Towns: Gilman and Augusta," *Montana The Magazine of Western History*, 26 (April 1976), 42-53.

33. Great Falls *Daily Tribune*, May 21, 1912.

34. Assistant to the President (Great Northern) to H. N. Savage, May 27, 1912, box 4756, 22E 9 2F, GN Records; Great Falls *Daily Tribune*, May 22, 1912.

35. Assistant to the President to H. N. Savage, May 27, 1912, box 4756, 22E 9 2F, GN Records; Great Falls *Daily Tribune*, May 22, 1912; Samuel Adams to President of the Great Northern Railroad [L. W. Hill], June 10, 1912, L. W. Hill to Samuel Adams, June 19, 1912, box 4756, 22E 9 2F, GN Records; 1912 Project History, p. 66, RBPH.

36. Great Falls *Daily Tribune*, April 6, 1913.

embroiled the business community, becoming so heated that by summer's end the secretary of the interior came to Great Falls to investigate.

Unable to make their land pay, Fort Shaw settlers, like settlers on most western reclamation projects, fell behind in their payments to the government. In July 1912 the project engineer for the division had, without notice, refused water to those who had not paid current O&M charges. Crops were damaged and the Fort Shaw water users' association protested loudly to its congressman. Thereafter, relations between the Reclamation Service and the settlers deteriorated.³⁷

Settlers claimed they could not meet their payments and blamed their lack of money on poor soil, poor markets, and poor management of the irrigation system. O&M costs had increased steadily. Settlers thought they were being charged unfairly for such things as advertising and reconstruction of poorly built parts of the irrigation system. When soil scientists classified the soil of the Fort Shaw division in the 1920s, their examination confirmed what settlers knew from harsh experience. Twenty-nine percent of the land was unsuitable for cultivation. Of the remainder, only 11 percent was considered highly productive, the rest being of average or less than average productivity.³⁸

The Reclamation Service was again under fire in 1913, when Woodrow Wilson became president and appointed Franklin Lane secretary of the interior. The charge this time was that some reclamation projects constituted pork barrel wastefulness. Montana projects were among those criticized. As Lane evaluated these assessments, and as he learned of the Sun River settlers' problems, he reopened the question of whether to extend the project to the bench lands north of the river. To have an opportunity to hear for himself the claims of disgruntled settlers on all federal reclamation projects, Lane invited project representatives to a meeting in Washington, D.C., in May 1913.

Two factors may have brought about Lane's interest in the settlers' points of view. First, Lane was a westerner, having gone to Washington from California. He was aware of problems associated with agriculture in semiarid places, and he had seen the success of irrigation in California. Wanting to hear firsthand the experiences of people who were actu-

ally on the land and coping with irrigation problems would not have been an unusual response from a person with Lane's background. Lane also was part of an administration that had campaigned for equality of opportunity and freedom for fair competition. Aside from Lane's personal interest, investigating the settlers' side of reclamation issues was a manifestation of larger political trends in 1913.

Fort Shaw division settlers sent H. E. Culver to Lane's conference. Culver had come to the Sun River project in 1908 and filed on 160 acres of land, 49 acres of which were irrigable. Before coming west for his health, Culver lived in St. Louis, Missouri, where he was a copy reader for a newspaper.³⁹ An articulate man, Culver soon became a leader in the project's emerging community. As president of the water users' association and vice president of the Fort Shaw Civic Club, he was a logical choice to send to Lane's conference.

During two hours of testimony in Washington, Culver said the settlers needed more time to pay back construction charges and they wanted the government, not themselves, to pay to reclaim land in the unit that had become waterlogged. Culver also told Lane that settlers wanted to be consulted on measures that would reduce O&M costs.⁴⁰

In addition to these requests, Culver said settlers were unwilling to pay higher construction costs. Based on conversations with his neighbors who lived on the bench lands north of the river, Culver told Lane he did not believe these people would be willing to pay more than thirty-five dollars per acre to construct an irrigation system. Rumors of construction costs as high as sixty dollars per acre had left some owners thinking the bench lands should not be reclaimed, especially when they saw how the Fort Shaw settlers were struggling to survive.⁴¹ Culver's testimony brought howls of indignation from Great Falls boosters who feared for the project's future.

The responses Culver's testimony evoked from Great Falls business interests and the settlers of the Fort Shaw division illustrate the differences in perception between the two groups. The boosters thought Culver and other Sun River settlers the worst kind of citizens—ones who "croaked" about their situation. The Fort Shaw people, who had never considered themselves part of the Great Falls community, countered these criticisms by calling the Great Falls business interests "selfish and self serving." The settlers claimed that the city's business people were only concerned with how much money the government and settlers spent in their establishments. They

37. 1912 Project History, p. 65, RBPH; Great Falls *Daily Tribune*, August 16, 1912.

38. P. L. Slagsvold, "An Analysis of the Present Status of Agriculture on the Sun River Irrigation Project," Montana State College Agricultural Experiment Station, Bulletin 321 (Bozeman, 1936), 9-10.

39. Jane Stuwe, *Valley Ventures* (n.p., 1965), 73.

40. Great Falls *Daily Tribune*, May 25, 1913.

41. H. E. Culver to Great Falls *Tribune*, June 2, 1913, Subject File A (Montana), "Irrigation and Reclamation," box 59, Walsh Papers.

thought the people of Great Falls cared little about whether the farmers failed, as long as new people replaced those who left. Also, the Fort Shaw farmers condemned the bankers' unwillingness to extend credit to them and criticized the weak market in Great Falls for farm produce. In response to these challenges, the business people of Great Falls sent still another delegation to Washington to counter Culver's claims.⁴² Unwilling to have their position misunderstood, the settlers of Fort Shaw invited the Commercial Club of Great Falls to send a committee to the Fort Shaw division to learn firsthand the situation of settlers there.⁴³

A few days later Robbins, acting as a private citizen because he was no longer associated with the Reclamation Service, led a contingent of two railroad officials and a member of the Commercial Club to a meeting in Fort Shaw. They spoke with settlement leaders and made plans for a future meeting to discuss improved marketing methods, at which the water users' association, the Fort Shaw Grange, and the Great Falls business community would be represented.⁴⁴

During the next few weeks the Great Falls *Tribune* editorialized on the superiority of irrigated farming in the Great Falls area. With the rush to take up dryland homesteads largely over, the paper feared "that dry farming literature and speakers—and possibly land locators—have intoxicated [the bench land farmers] with too much enthusiasm."⁴⁵ Robbins and others from Great Falls met with people living on the bench to learn their views and tried to persuade them not to oppose the reclamation work.⁴⁶ The *Tribune* claimed that, contrary to the attitude of some Sun River people, Great Falls residents did have an interest in extending the project. The newspaper reminded its readers that the project would not have existed without the efforts of people from Great Falls.⁴⁷

In August Secretary Lane visited Great Falls and the Sun River project. He met with Fort Shaw residents and discovered that their grievances had not changed since Culver had spoken in Washington. When he visited bench land communities, he found divided opinions. The people at Fairfield were eager to pursue irrigation while people at Dutton preferred dry farming. Lane then toured Great Falls and addressed the city's business people. The farmers, he said, thought they did not get "proper encourage-

ment from the city." While he said he believed this was not the case, he noted the large quantity of food Great Falls imported from eastern states and urged use of homegrown produce.⁴⁸

The next month Lane approved the Greenfields division for construction and released the Dutton lands from the project.⁴⁹ In 1913 and 1914 the Reclamation Service extended the period for repayment of construction and delinquent O&M costs to twenty years, enabling many settlers to remain on the land. During the 1920s, as the farmers and the federal government negotiated the contract under which water users would assume management of the irrigation system, the government made additional concessions: it removed unproductive land from construction payments; it wrote off a disputed \$35,000 O&M deficit that had accumulated prior to 1914; and it changed the repayment of construction costs to a percentage of the average annual gross crop values. The latter decision extended the period of payment an indefinite number of years.⁵⁰

Even before the Reclamation Service made its financial concessions of 1913 and 1914, improved communication between the Fort Shaw farmers and the Great Falls business people eased local tensions. Taking the farmers' marketing problems seriously, the business community began several projects in summer 1913 designed to increase economic opportunities for farmers. The first was a plan to increase dairying in the Fort Shaw division. With the Great Northern rail line completed through the project, farmers could ship milk and cream to Great Falls. Good dairy stock, however, cost between seventy-five dollars and one hundred dollars per head, and Fort Shaw farmers seemed unable to finance such an undertaking. After six months of negotiations between farmers and Commercial Club representatives, Great Falls business leaders offered ten thousand dollars in loans to Fort Shaw farmers to buy cows. The 13.5 percent interest rate first offered attracted few takers, so the rate was reduced to 8 percent. A year after the discussion began, Fort Shaw farmers had purchased only 40 cows under the loan program while buying 360 on their own initiative. Dairying proved profitable, and by 1919 the dairies of Great Falls received most of their milk and cream from farmers in the valley.⁵¹ Both the people of Great Falls and the farmers at

42. Ibid.; Great Falls *Daily Tribune*, June 6, 7, 1913.

43. Great Falls *Daily Tribune*, June 7, 1913.

44. Great Falls *Daily Tribune*, June 12, 1913.

45. Great Falls *Daily Tribune*, June 7, 1913. On early twentieth-century dryland homesteading, see Mary Wilma M. Hargreaves, *Dry Farming in the Northern Great Plains, 1900-1925* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957). For a more colorful account of dryland homesteading in Montana, see Joseph Kinsey Howard, *Montana: High, Wide, and Handsome* (1943; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983).

46. Great Falls *Daily Tribune*, June 22, 1913.

47. Great Falls *Daily Tribune*, June 24, 1913.

48. Great Falls *Daily Tribune*, October 20, 1916, August 6, 7, 1913.

49. Great Falls *Daily Tribune*, September 10, 1913.

50. 1926 Project History, pp. 80, 89-91, RG 115.

51. Great Falls *Daily Tribune*, May 30, July 5, October 31, December 4, 1913, April 25, August 20, 1914; 1919 Project History, p. 32, RBFH.

Neither Market Hall (right), built by Great Falls in 1914, nor the pork packing department added to the Great Falls Meat Company (below) about the same time, helped Sun River farmers sell their produce.



MHS Photograph Archives, Helena



MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

tant source of income for many Sun River settlers. In the early years, when farmers urgently needed cash, problems associated with marketing such things as vegetables and fresh meat made their production too risky. Instead of food, alfalfa became the chief cash crop of the Fort Shaw farmers who, after 1915, planted approximately half of their irrigated acreage to

alfalfa. They sold most of the crop to area ranchers. Fort Shaw farmers also used alfalfa in their dairying operations and in small livestock feeding operations.

Some Fort Shaw farmers also experimented with raising hogs. When the farmers and the Commercial Club opened their dialogue in 1913, farmers urged locating a packing plant in Great Falls. Soon after, the Great Falls Meat Company announced it would add a pork packing department capable of handling 100 hogs per hour. Accordingly, Fort Shaw farmers increased the number of hogs they kept from 1,500 to 3,200, but by fall 1914 they found no local market for their animals. A buyer for the Great Falls Meat Company told J. E. Jones, a Simms farmer who was feeding 160 hogs, that he "did not know there were so many hogs in the world as are being offered for sale in Montana right now." Giving up on the local market, Sun River valley hog farmers shipped eleven cars of hogs to Seattle.⁵⁵ Afterward, most Fort Shaw farmers abandoned specialized hog raising, and by 1920 the Great Falls Meat Company bought most of its hogs from North and South Dakota.⁵⁶

In another attempt at cooperation the Commercial Club joined with the county in 1914 to hire a county agent. Associated with the state agricultural college, the county agent was to share with farmers

52. Great Falls *Daily Tribune*, January 15, 1911; Great Falls *Daily Leader*, February 11, 1911.

53. Great Falls *Daily Leader*, June 15, 1913; Great Falls *Daily Tribune*, November 16, 1913, July 13, 1914; Great Falls *Daily Leader*, April 5, 1914.

54. See for example Great Falls *Daily Leader*, May 22, 1915; Great Falls *Daily Tribune*, February 20, 1916.

55. Great Falls *Daily Leader*, June 15, 1913; Great Falls *Daily Tribune*, August 29, 1913, November 18, December 15, 1914.

56. Annual Crop Reports, 1912-1926, 1916 Project History, p. 216, 1918 Project History, p. 153, RBPB; Great Falls *Daily Leader*, April 19, 1920.



Chief Engineer S. B. Robbins leans against the huge pipe—more than five feet inside diameter—that carried the irrigation canal over a creek.

the results of research done at the college and help farmers improve farm management. Some farmers in the county resented being given advice by a young college graduate, but most Fort Shaw farmers appreciated his help.⁵⁷ As a result of the county agent's advice, dairying, beekeeping, and alfalfa growing became important income sources for the farmers.

Despite these successes, county extension agents failed repeatedly in two areas. They could not sell farmers on the idea of marketing their produce cooperatively nor on raising sugar beets. In the years before 1927, farmers started a cooperative cheese factory and cooperative associations for selling potatoes, eggs, and hay, but none of the operations survived more than two years.⁵⁸

57. 1914 Operation & Maintenance Report, pp. 31-32, 1918 Project History, p. 27, RBPH.

58. Great Falls *Daily Tribune*, February 1, 9, April 2, May 25, 1915, March 18, 1920; 1914 Project History, p. 152, 1915 Project History, p. 285, 1918 Project History, p. 30, RBPH; 1920 Annual Narrative Report, Cascade County Farm Bureau, p. 19, Reel 4, 1927 Annual Narrative Report, Cascade County, p. 21, Reel 14, RG 33, Extension Service Annual Reports, Burlingame Special Collections, Montana State University, Bozeman, Montana, National Archives and Records in Annual Narrative and Statistical Reports from State Offices and County Agents (1951 filming) Administration microfilm.

59. Great Falls *Daily Tribune*, March 4, 1902, August 1, 1903, November 20, 1905, May 5, 1906, February 7, 1909.

When Great Falls business leaders began their campaign for authorization of the Sun River project in 1903, its members eagerly anticipated the day when sugar beet production would bring a sugar factory to Great Falls. As early as 1901 the idea had seized the imagination of the town's commercial interests. Newspapers ran stories routinely about Cinderella-like transformations of languishing communities after the arrival of beet factories. A few Great Falls area farmers experimented with beets on a small scale in the early 1900s. Their crops produced high sugar content, fueling the belief that local land was well suited to high quality sugar beet production. In 1905 a beet sugar company had rejected Great Falls as a location for expansion, but four years later—and less than one year after the Fort Shaw division had opened—city business leaders believed that they had enough irrigation farmers to lure a sugar factory.⁵⁹ The boosters' expectations proved premature, however, for the sugar factory failed to materialize.

The hopes of the Great Falls business people rose and fell for the next twenty years as sugar companies came to investigate and contract beet acreage with the farmers. But the irrigation farmers preferred growing wheat and alfalfa. After planting eighty acres



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Fourth of July festivities brought together townspeople and farmers for a spirited display of cohesiveness in irrigation project towns. This girls' race ended in a tie at Simms' July Fourth celebration, about 1912.

to sugar beets in 1916, no one in the Fort Shaw division planted beets again until 1923, when several farmers planted a total of thirty acres.⁶⁰ Beet growing required heavy fertilization and hiring outside labor to tend and harvest the beets. These constituted up-front expenses that few Fort Shaw farmers could finance. Fort Shaw farmers planted an unprecedented 255 acres of beets in 1925, however, lured by the willingness of the new Utah and Idaho (U&I) sugar factory at Chinook to pay nearly all beet transportation charges. To enhance the farmers' chances for success, U&I and the Great Falls Commercial Club split the cost of hiring a beet-growing expert to help the farmers in the reclamation project.⁶¹ To the disappointment of all concerned, the crop season was what the county agent later described as the worst year for beet growing that one could imagine.⁶² In coming years farmers in the Fort Shaw division and on other irrigated land in the county continued to plant sugar beets, but never in enough quantity to bring the coveted sugar factory to Great Falls.

The early history of the Sun River project suggests, as have other project histories, that federal intervention to create large-scale irrigation projects in the West had little effect on local economies or local control of water. In Nevada, for example, the Newlands reclamation project did not add greatly to the population of the county nor did farmers who took up land in the project change the former agricultural basis of the area, which had been alfalfa and livestock production. Efforts of the Reclamation Service to engineer social and economic change were of

little use.⁶³ Similarly, the Sun River project brought only modest changes to the population and agricultural economy of central Montana. By 1930 irrigated land in the project comprised approximately 4 percent of the farmland in production in each of Cascade and Teton counties.⁶⁴ The project had added some two thousand persons to the local population. This was far from the anticipated fifteen thousand new people the hopeful boosters of Great Falls had projected when enumerating the benefits of a federal reclamation project. The dryland homesteading boom of the early decades of the century brought at least twice as many people to the area as did reclamation, but the stay of many of those farmers was short-lived. Severe drought in the late 1910s and plummeting grain prices after 1920 brought an end to the prosperity of all Montana farmers and prompted the exodus of thousands of people from central Montana. In contrast to the expectations of people like Paris Gibson, from 1910 to 1930 the growth in Cascade County was urban, not rural. During that time the rural population suffered a net decrease of 5,000 while Great Falls grew by 17,000, accounting for an increase in the county population from 29,000 to 41,000 residents.⁶⁵

Farmers who came to the Sun River project integrated their operations into the existing agricultural economy rather than adopting the high-value crops that the Great Falls business community envisioned.

60. 1916 Project History, p. 234, RBPH; *Fairfield Times*, February 22, October 18, December 27, 1923; 1922-23 Project History, RG 115.

61. *Fairfield Times*, February 26, March 12, April 24, June 28, 1925.

62. *Fairfield Times*, September 9, 1926.

63. Mary Ellen Glass, "The First Nationally Sponsored Arid Land Reclamation Project: The Newlands Act in Churchill County, Nevada," *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly*, 14 (Spring 1971), 2-12.

64. By comparison, within the entire state in 1930, 23 percent of the cultivated land was classified as irrigated but less was actually watered. P. L. Slagsvold, *Readjusting Montana's Agriculture: VI. Montana's Irrigation Resources*, Montana State College Agricultural Experiment Station, Bulletin no. 315 (Bozeman, 1936), 6-7.

65. Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States: 1910; Population*, Volume II (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1913), 1138, 1152; Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940; Population*, Volume I (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1942), 619. An accurate count of dryland homesteaders coming to Cascade County from 1900 through 1915 is difficult to establish because of the absence of a mid-decade census. By 1910 the federal census showed the county's rural population had increased by 4,000 (approximately 600 of whom were irrigation farmers).

66. See Arthur Maass and Raymond Anderson, ... *And the Desert Shall Rejoice: Conflict, Growth, and Justice in Arid Environments* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1978), 367.

67. Pisani, *To Reclaim a Divided West*, 336.

68. For a different conclusion on the effects of large-scale irrigation projects, see Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985); and Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1987), 87.

The primary contribution of the Fort Shaw division to the economy of Great Falls was an increased supply of dairy products and, beginning in the late 1920s, poultry products. The farmers' adoption of alfalfa as their chief crop not only had little effect on Great Falls, it enhanced the area's earlier agricultural base of livestock raising. To the present day, farmers in the Sun River project produce primarily alfalfa, grain, and seed crops.

The most profound effect of the Sun River project was to give legal control of Sun River water to the farmers, thereby placing them in a position to direct development of the region. Similar patterns were found in a comparative study of other large-scale irrigation projects where farmers, if organized, could "pretty well call the tune, even where the central government has built the works." When water users in Utah's Strawberry valley project failed to organize to assume management of the irrigation system, for instance, the federal government offered "additional inducements" for them to do so.⁶⁶

The federal government treated Fort Shaw farmers in much the same way. Well aware of the amount of money the government was losing as a result of the inability or failure of water users to make construction and O&M payments, reclamation officials made significant financial concessions during the 1920s to encourage farmers to take over management of the division. Beginning in 1927 when the farmers' organization—the Fort Shaw Irrigation District—took over operation of their canal system, federal officials no longer had to worry about delinquent payments. Having reached an agreement about the total amount the irrigation district owed the government and the method by which it would be paid, all payments were collected as local taxes. If defi-

ciencies occurred, the irrigation district was obligated to cover them or lose the district's land.

"The water story," as a historian of federal reclamation concluded, "illustrates the way institutions resist change and the ways people find to preserve their autonomy."⁶⁷ In the case of the Sun River project, large-scale irrigation did not lead to control of water in the West by social and political elites or the federal government.⁶⁸ Rather than attempting to maintain control of the area's water, the primary goal of the federal government in the Sun River project was to cut its losses. Similarly, the business community in Great Falls, which had worked hard to obtain the federally-funded project, lost interest quickly when it realized the magnitude of effort and financial assistance required. With the exception of attempting to attract a beet sugar factory, local business people hesitated to make the accommodations necessary for influencing the kind of agriculture adopted by farmers in the project. The farmers, too, guarded their economic autonomy and operated as farmers did in other sections of the United States, producing commodities that brought the best returns and marketing them where prices were best. Like other programs of its time, the Sun River project—the product of federal reclamation and local "enlightened selfishness"—failed by the end of its first generation of operation to change significantly the social or economic structures of central Montana. ~

JUDITH FABRY is a recent graduate of the doctoral program in agricultural history and rural studies, Iowa State University, Ames. This essay is based on research she conducted in the Montana Historical Society collections as a Bradley Graduate Fellow in 1991. She now lives in Georgetown, Texas.



• The Farm Security Administration photographed this and other Sun River project farms about 1940 to illustrate the need for a loan to pay for improvements.