

IRRIGATION IN SOUTHERN ALBERTA AND PLANS FOR THE SAME IN THE SPECIAL AREAS

Part three of a ten-part series about Oliver Longman and the history of the Special Areas

In Alberta, there are thirteen irrigation districts supplying water to nearly 1.4 million acres. The process got started in the late 1800s when Alexander Galt, a railroad investor and mine owner, constructed canals near Magrath and Sterling.

Impressed with the outcome, Lethbridge residents wanted irrigation too. They agreed to pay \$30,000 for canals to irrigate 20,000 acres around the city. By the beginning of the 20th century, there were 184 km of irrigation canals in the Lethbridge region.

In 1903, the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) initiated an irrigation project starting with a weir on the Bow River that supported canals delivering water to 200,000 acres. The region became known as the Western Block. The railroad's objective was to sell the land it had acquired from the federal government, thereby establishing new farms which would increase the CPR's shipping and rail traffic.

Not long afterward, the railway initiated an even larger irrigation project farther downstream, which for the better part of a decade leading up to 1935, had been losing \$40,000 a year.

In 1935, 800 farmers who had lost their land due to defaulted mortgages and tax arrears took over the CPR's money-losing project and immediately turned it around. They named it the Eastern Irrigation District (EID). By 1938, the year that the Special Areas Act was passed, their irrigation association posted a \$38,000 profit. About a decade later, nearly 90% of these farmers had reacquired their land titles.

Interestingly, many southern Alberta farmers suffered from prolonged drought in much the same way as the region that became the Special Areas. Many people don't realize that even the teens and 1920s had been brutal years for southern Alberta farmers.

Collectively, these early irrigation projects laid the foundation for government initiatives that would further encourage and expand southern Alberta's irrigation. Irrigation Districts were created that could sell bonds to finance development. The Districts received authority to levy taxes. The federal and provincial governments directly funded irrigation projects. (One source indicates that Alberta's irrigated land today produces over 19% of the province's agricultural output from less than 6% of the agricultural land.)

In the years when Oliver Longman (the father of the Special Areas) was serving as the Deputy Minister of Agriculture, another important farm leader was on the scene in the Special Areas. His name was Larry Helmer. Helmer was the first supervisor for the new Hanna-Coronation PFRA District. He was an advocate of better water management and large-scale irrigation. He knew that without irrigation, much of southern Alberta would look just like the Special Areas. Consequently, his vision was to see up to 900,000 acres in the Special Areas region come under irrigation.

During his tenure with the PFRA, Helmar was responsible for constructing nearly 200 dams and 1,200 dugouts. In the late 40s, working closely with the East Central Irrigation Association—a group of local farmers—he had 200 people assemble to look at the new Berry Creek Dam at Carolside, saying that it would be the first step in constructing Alberta's "East Central Irrigation District." The plan was for irrigation to start immediately east of Hanna, extend 70 miles southwest to the Red Deer River, run south and southeast of Coronation to Sounding Creek, and then beyond to Acadia Valley.

This commentary is produced by the editorial committee of the Hard Grass Landowners Council whose members include: Richard Bailey, Pat Rutledge, Mark Doolaege, and Jim Ness.