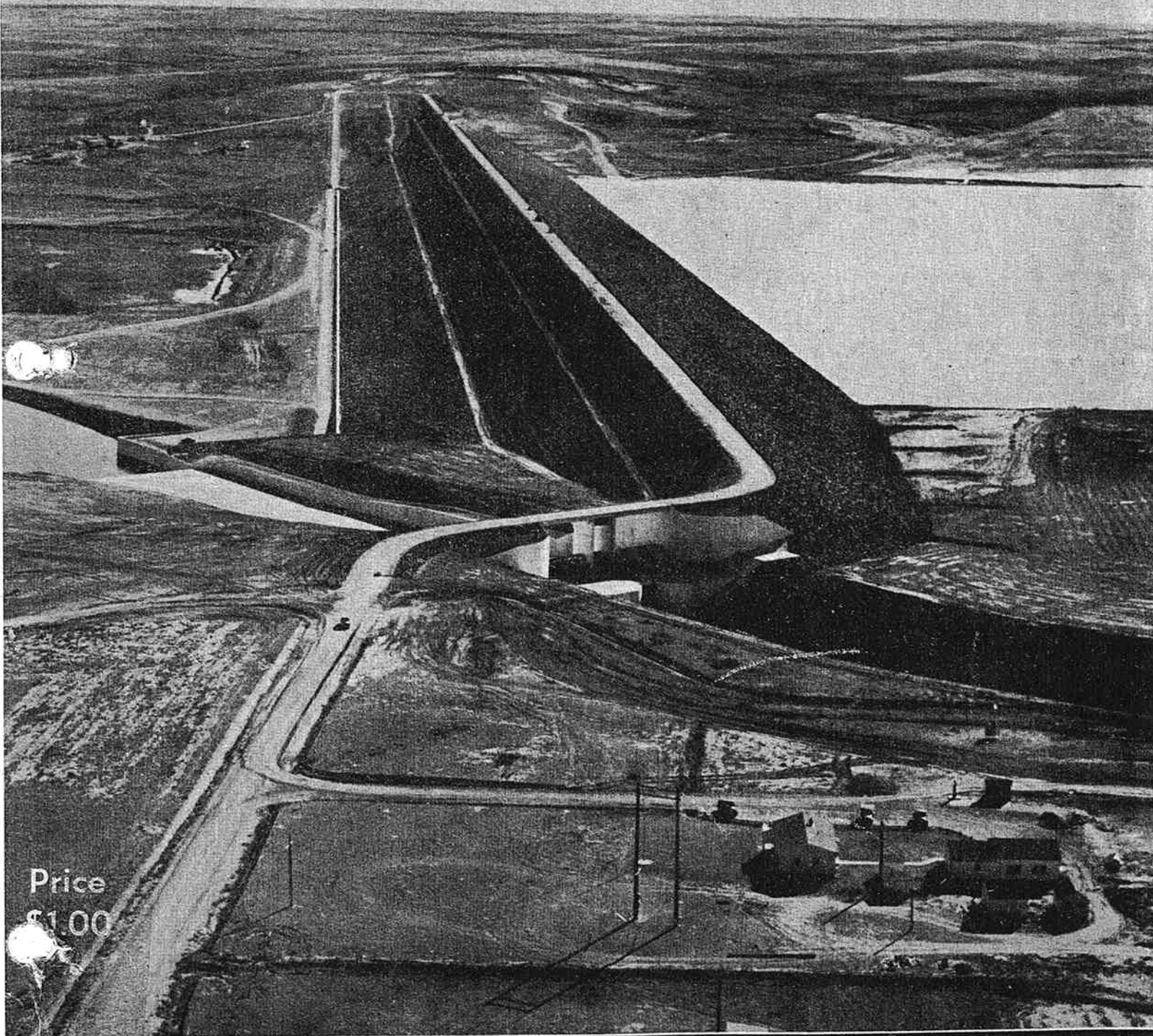
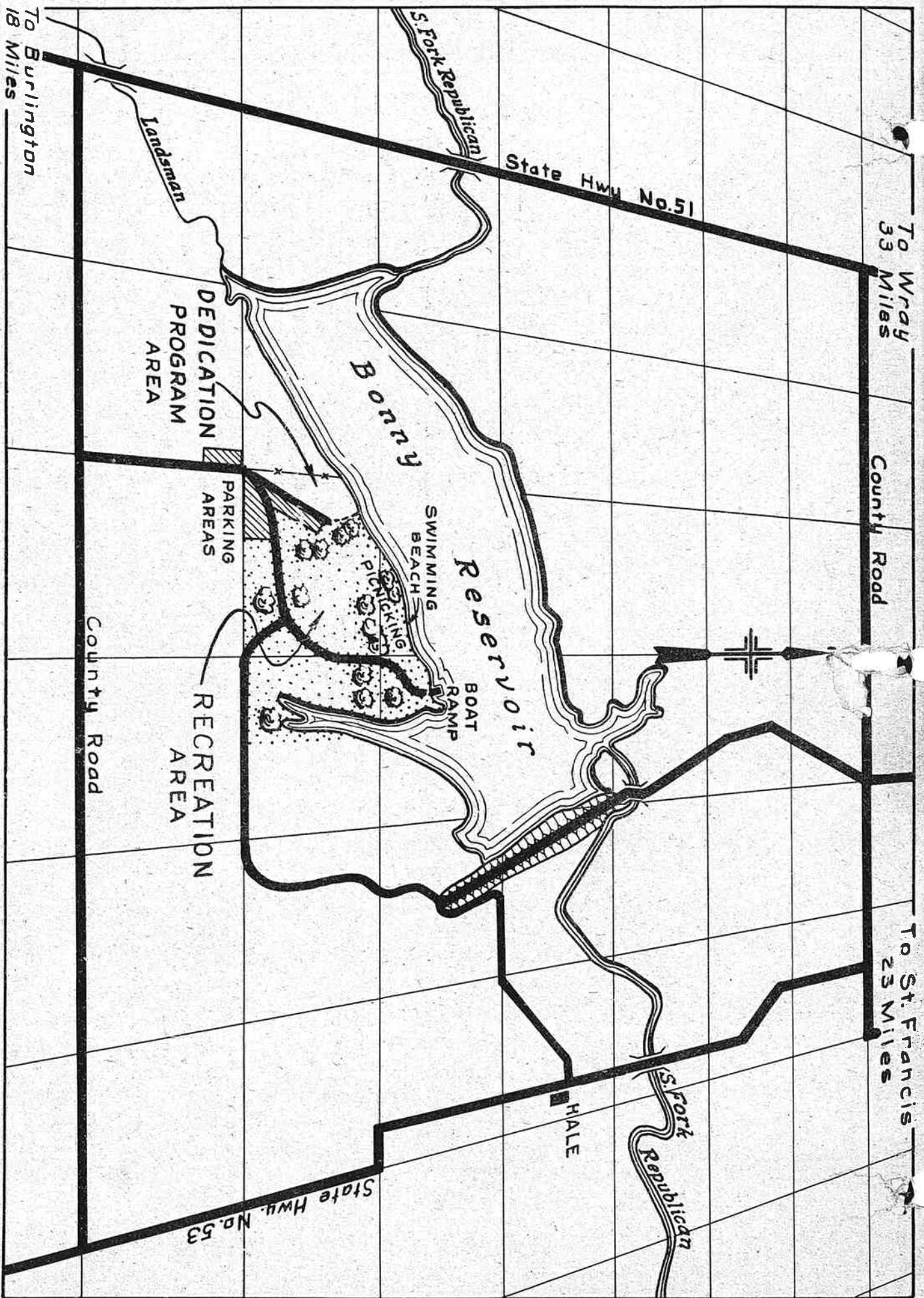


Bonny Dam
Dedication



Price
\$1.00

Hale, Colorado -- at Bonny Reservoir • June 1, 1952



Bonny Dam Dedication — June 1, 1952

The Great Flood of 1935

By *Bonny Gould*

As we of this area participate in the dedication of this modern wonder, Bonny Dam, and share with each other the feeling of a great work well done, the minds of many hark back to a less propitious time—to the dread Memorial Day flood of 1935. On that night occurred a disaster that did more than anything to focus attention on the need of such structures as Bonny Dam, and that marked the real beginning of large-scale flood control in the western United States. We honor, and rightly, the men and women who lost their lives in our wars, but we should honor no less the men and women who were taken in the terrible waters of the night of May 30, 1935. There were more than 100 of them, and by their deaths and by the property destruction wrought that night, the leaders of our nation were spurred to action, leading to the building of such flood-control structures as Bonny Dam.

Fourteen Million Damage

The facts of the unprecedented downpour and floods of that Memorial Day are contained in a Government report issued later. But cold facts can not begin to describe the terror of that time for those living along the water-courses of the stricken area, nor do the figures of \$14,000,000.00 given for property damage begin to express the real losses that stretched over all the years since, as represented by sand-covered fields and rich topsoil carried away to the sea.

Dust Clouds—Rain Clouds

A series of dry years, beginning in the late 1920's, culminated in the driest-of-all years, 1934, when less than a five-inch total was recorded in much of the Great Plains area. The "Black Blizzards" of the Dust Bowl days darkened the skies at midday. The year 1935 began no less ominously. Up to the first of May little moisture had fallen. Then began three weeks of almost unceasing rains. The ground was soaked and county roads were like bogs. About May 25 the rains stopped. Up to the afternoon of May 30, mild and sunny days prevailed. Memorial services were held under auspicious weather conditions, although in a few places light afternoon showers occurred.

Towards evening, dwellers in the tri-corner of Colorado, Kansas and Nebraska described heavy cloud banks in the northeast. Similarly in the locality where Colorado and its three southern neighbors meet, thunder heads were observed at dusk, away to the southwest.

Two Giants Meeting

How little those who idly noticed the cloud banks realized just what was taking place! For three days a tremendous low pressure area had been developing along the Canadian border and moving eastward towards the Great Lakes. In like manner, a storm center had been generated in lower California and Arizona and was moving eastward into New Mexico. During the forenoon of May 29, the storm-center nearing the Great Lakes suddenly halted, changed course and began mov-

ing at accelerated speed to the southeast. It was as if the two storm foci, like two huge angry giants, had suddenly sighted each other and halting, moved forward to do battle. By evening of May 30, the one storm center was over Central Nebraska while the other was at the Southern Colorado border. The stage was set for the most terrifying clash of opposing aerial forces ever seen in this country! The center of that stage was a spot just within the Colorado border, an area in north-east Colorado, between the Republican River and the Arickaree, where those streams cross the state line. There, was the focus of the low-pressure area and there, the two opposing storms met. From that whirling vortex the tempest spread in all directions for perhaps 150 miles.

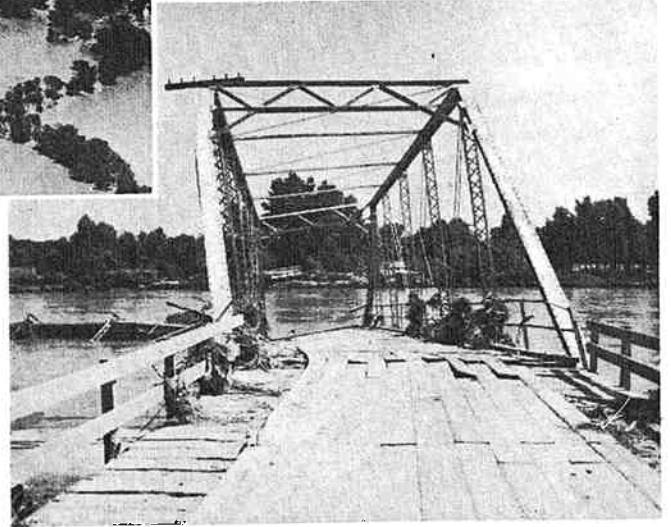
Cataclyst and Earth Tremors

At the focal point of the cloudburst, twenty-four inches of water fell, and most of it in the forty minutes of the storm's greatest fury. Fifty miles away in the same period of less than an hour saw as much as twelve inches of rainfall. It staggers the imagination to picture two feet of water being laid down over hill and valley in less than an hour. The downpour was accompanied by the most incessant and vivid lightning, while the earth shook with the continual roll of thunder. Over most of the area the height of the storm came between 7:30 and 9:00 p.m., although it was a few hours later that the sweeping waters reached the area around what is now Bonny Dam. People huddled terrified in such groups as could get together. At the height of the cataclysm in the western part of Kit Carson County, Colorado, several earth tremors were distinctly felt. None tried to reason this out nor to account for it at the time, but the explanation, or at least the result, was shown later.

Searchers Picture the Deaths

At last the rain settled to a mild drizzle. By midnight most of the fury of the elements was spent. The day dawned clear, with fleecy clouds overhead and low valleys wrapped in feathery fog. By 10:00 a.m. the wind came up and from the rapidly drying surface of the ground, dust was whipped up in a few places to form miniature but growing "black blizzards."

But what a scene of havoc and death greeted the eyes of the thousands of searchers who were out at day-break along the valleys of the river and creeks. Word had spread that many who had retired early had been caught by the rushing walls of the water that swept down the usually dry creeks and river beds, and carried away to die, in a hopeless battle against the icy waters, in darkness and alone. Scores of houses in the lower valleys had been quickly toppled from their foundations. Survivors who had escaped and fought their way to shore told tales of unimaginable horror. Many, who had clung to debris, to buildings or to trees through the long night, had, when daylight came, found themselves surrounded by animals dead and dying. Often human



beings were hard put to hold their places of safety against the approach of desperately swimming animals and snakes. For, struggling in the frigid flood, trying to avoid the debris of houses, fences, trees, hay and floating animals, the victims faced the added danger of venomous rattlesnakes, coral snakes and other vipers.

The Prehistoric Fossils Exposed

Hay meadows that had been warm and green in the May sunshine were now only desolate patches of hot and glistening sand. The channels of streams had been altered; huge bowls torn in the rivers' beds revealed the bones of beasts that dwelt on this earth ages before the coming of man. A single leg bone measured nine feet, while a tooth from some prehistoric monster was found to weigh twenty-seven pounds.

The deluge that drowned thousands of jackrabbits and birds on the plains also washed away millions of cubic yards of the rich topsoil requiring countless thousands of years to build up. Hundreds upon hundreds of old Indian camps were brought to light, and it was revealed that at one time this country had been covered by dense and huge timber.

The Earth Yawned

Those who had believed they felt the earth tremble at the height of the storm had ample proof of their belief. All over the northwestern part of Kit Carson County and that part of southern Washington County huge cracks had been opened, leading into the bowels of the earth. Some of these cracks, extending for miles, were as much as six feet across, and in them, hundreds

of feet below the surface, the roar of rushing water could be heard for days. Wind and farming operations have filled the upper parts or obliterated these crevices since, but there are plenty of creditable witnesses to testify to their reality. An earthquake? Well, with nature in such a convulsion, is it to be doubted?

No More Floods Like This

The storm was one of the major disasters in America's western history. More than 100 lives lost, and the loss in farm and town property, highway and railroad bridges and roadbeds was estimated conservatively at the fourteen million dollar figure. No one could guess nor calculate the loss caused by depleted soil; people had been made homeless and all the other products of this tragic clash of the elements. Rivers more in name than in fact, that usually were dry water-courses, ran a mile wide and twenty feet deep, carrying a wealth of property and topsoil into the sea.

To most of us, Bonny Dam, and the many similar dams all over this plains country, are places of beauty, of rest and recreation. But back of all this lies the comforting thought that should there come such another flood, or even any of the many that occur each year in lesser violence, this dam stands as a bulwark of safety.

Augmented by the practices of soil erosion prevention at the community and individual level, such structures guarantee us against another like disaster as that of the memorable night of May 30, 1935. For Bonny Dam indeed makes possible the slogan: Preservation of the soil saves death and loss and toil.