

MIDWEST HISTORICAL & GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY

ALERT

VOLUME 45 NUMBER 3

JUNE 2023

MITCH MITCHELL AND THE BIG DITCH

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Library Hours:

Tuesday and Saturday
10 to 4 pm.

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When Wichita's Founding Fathers looked across the lovely Arkansas River Valley and declared it the perfect spot for a town, they didn't take into account one important factor: this valley was fed by two rivers and two creeks that belched floodwaters when hit with heavy rains.

At first, it didn't seem like much of a problem; some settlers just admitted the land was a little swampy in places. But as Wichita grew, so did the threat of floods. The city was hit by particularly damaging floods in 1877, 1904, 1916, 1923, 1944, 1951, and 1955 when the Big and Little Arkansas Rivers, and the Cowskin and Chisholm Creeks all left their banks.

In 1923, more than 18 inches of rain fell on Wichita from May 15 to June 15. More than 600 blocks were underwater. One of the city's worst floods was in 1944 when over 100 rivers throughout Kansas and Missouri were overflowing after a wicked summer storm. When the floodwaters came surging through Wichita, over 5,000 people were left homeless. That spring, Wichita was flooded three times in 11 days.



Scene from downtown Wichita during the Flood of 1923. Photo from sign board at Big Arkansas River Park



A young Mitch Mitchell surveys during the early stages of construction. Photo from Wichita.gov, "Big Ditch," Photo Gallery

So the City Commission decided it was time to appoint a flood control committee.

Calvin Schofield served as the first flood control director, and hatched the idea of some kind of diversion ditch. He called on a civil engineer acquaintance to come to Wichita for six weeks or so. So Mitch Mitchell came to Wichita—and never left.

Mitchell designed a floodwater diversion project that was one of the largest in the country! It required the U.S. Army corps of



Construction site, mid-50's. Photo from Wichita.gov, "Big Ditch," Photo Gallery.

Engineers, the Sedgwick County Government, and the City of Wichita to work together. Six thousand acres of land were purchased for rights-of-way. It took nearly a decade to complete, and involved 41 separate contracts. When finished, it was 18 miles long with 50 miles of connecting channels, 100 miles of levees, and 150 control structures. Sixty-two bridges had to be constructed, including 6 railroad crossings and 1 pedestrian bridge. But temporary wooden or low water bridges had to be built first to be used while the permanent ones could be completed.

The Big Ditch allowed water from the Big Arkansas and Little Arkansas Rivers to flow down their natural channels while diverting excess water around the city. Diversion canals also redirected floodwaters from the Cowskin and Chisholm Creeks.

During the construction, Mitchell met with considerable opposition. As expected,

property owners who lost land to the project were hostile. Other folks thought the \$20 million price tag was ridiculous.

Farmers would plow up the survey

stakes. Mitchell was cursed at, spat at, and even shot at. The project was officially named the Wichita-Valley Center Flood Control Project, but critics labeled it "The Big Ditch," and called Mitchell "Big Ditch Mitch." They even took out ads in the paper listing their arguments against the project.

But then, when the construction was nearly finished, Wichita was hit with the flood of 1957. Even incomplete, the Big Ditch saved the city around \$10 million, and the critics'

voices were suddenly silent. It's interesting that although the term Big Ditch was created as a slur, the name stuck, and its negative connotation has faded away.

The Big Ditch has proven its value over and over, and even received recognition outside of Wichita. In 1960, only one year after its completion, the Floodway was named one of the Top 12 Engineering Feats in the United States by the American Society of Civil Engineers.

Mitch Mitchell spent the rest of his life serving Wichita in various capacities until his death in 2017 at the age of 91. In 2019, to honor him for his work, the Wichita-



Headline from protest editorial, Wichita Eagle, August 22, 1949.

Valley Center Flood Control Project was officially renamed the M.S. "Mitch" Mitchell Floodway.

Sedgwick County Commissioner David Dennis called Mitchell "a visionary public servant...whose work continues to serve our residents today." Mitchell's friend, Fred Menefee said, "He saved this town! The people of Wichita ...owe him a big 'thank you!'" Former Mayor Bob Knight wrote, "He was and is a legend...We owe him a debt of gratitude, but most people today don't understand the significance of the Big Ditch—unless they are old enough to remember."

Thank you, Big Ditch Mitch.

Sources:

Dion Lefler, the Wichita Eagle, July 4, 2019;

Chance Swain, the Wichita Eagle, September 28, 2018

Beccy Tanner, the Wichita Eagle, March 12, 2017

Kevin Yale, City of Wichita, Flood Control Supervisor, email May 9, 2023

Photo of Mitch Mitchell from KSNW, July 3, 2019.



Protest sign posted near construction site. Photo from sign board at BAR Park.



NEW ADDITIONS TO OUR LIBRARY COLLECTION

Ark Valley Crossroads	R-210 SG 095 V 32-33
The Seeker	R-210 CR 06 V 51-52
Tree Trackers	R-210 PL 08 #179-190
Gen-Tree	R-210 CQ 03 19-23
Heritage Harvester	R-210 SU 32 V 17-25
Harper County Connections	R-210 HP 08 V 24-25
The Tree Tracers	R-390 115 V 44-46
Making Money Out of Thin Air: My Life as a High Time Pilot	G-S 170
Airplane Beans	G-W 138

USING THE AVERAGE HELPS

If your research in the pioneering period (before 1850) has “dead ended”, it’s time for creative thinking. You may find these trends helpful in analyzing your problems.

There are approximately three generations per century.

Average age for men to marry was 24. They rarely married before 20.

First marriages were usually between couples near the same age. Women generally outlived their husbands, but older widowers frequently married much younger women who had never been married before.

(Remember those old Revolutionary War Soldiers!).

More hints next month!!!

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Please see the Google calendar or our Facebook page for details.

GENEALOGY ROUNDTABLE SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP	DAUGHTERS OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION AND SONS OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION
Second Tuesday @ 1:30 to 3 pm Led by Julia Langel	Fourth Tuesday @ 1:30 pm Led by Twila Ackley Brown
PHOTO MYSTERIES	
Third Tuesday @ 1:30 to 3 pm Led by Rex Riley	

Midwest Historical and Genealogical Society
P.O. Box 1121
Wichita, Kansas 67201

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