

Finney RWD 1, Largest Rural Water System in Western Kansas

People do not generally consider there to be a need for rural water systems in far western Kansas as the area sits on top of the Ogallala Aquifer. But there are several and the largest is Rural Water District No. 1, Finney County. The project services customers generally located between Garden City and Holcomb, six miles west.

Finney RWD 1 began more than 20 years ago when two local residents were somewhat frustrated from having to deal with all the regulations of operating their own public water systems. KDHE asked KRWA to try to be of assistance to bring numerous trailer courts and other users into one system. Shirley Ball and her husband owned a small trailer court. Doyle Kohen was a local builder who owned and operated a small development and truck stop north of Garden City known as The Hilands Addition. Both systems were classified as public water systems. Both were saddled with the regulatory requirements, plus the maintenance issues of operating their own water supply system. With a great deal of help and numerous trips by KRWA General Manager, Elmer Ronnebaum to community meetings held in Holcomb, the rural water district was incorporated. It gained the support of numerous trailer courts on the west side of Garden City. Today the project serves nearly 600 customers. The connection fee is \$2,000. Compare that to the installation of a small private well that will cost in the neighborhood of \$16,000 to construct due to the depth to water. Home loans are much easier to obtain now that the public water supply system is available.

The project was constructed at a cost of approximately \$2 million in 1995 with funding through the Department of

Commerce Community Development Block Grant program and the Kansas Public Water Supply Loan Fund administered by the Kansas Department of Health and Environment. Use of the new loan program was somewhat unusual as most water districts were funded through USDA Rural Development. Finney RWD 1 will be debt free in 2019 except for the costs of the office that was purchased. Paul Nixon, now retired, with Nixon and Associates, Parker, Colorado, was the original engineer. The district purchases water from Wheatland Electric Cooperative, which also produces water that is sold to Garden City. The district has managed the water loss over its 32 miles of PVC pipelines at five percent. They are also presently replacing all of the original Sensus meters with newer style Sensus meters. The original water rates were \$24 minimum with 3,000 gallons included and \$1.80/1000 thereafter. Current rates that went into effect in 2012 are \$55 for the monthly minimum, and no water and \$3.50/1,000 gallons for all water used. The district is very well managed and maintained. Perry Smith is manager/operator.

Many changes have occurred over the years for the district. I have enjoyed working with Perry Smith. Perry started his tenure in the waterworks industry in 1989 when he began work for the city of Holcomb. For the past 15 years, Perry has been with Wheatland Electric managing their water treatment and production system of a reverse osmosis treatment plant, 16 water supply wells and 22 miles of 24-inch transmission line. Wheatland Electric furnishes approximately 2.7 million gallons per day for Garden City as well as water for the RWD.



This 16 x 150-foot standpipe provides water storage for Rural Water District No. 1, Finney County in far-western Kansas.



The district recently purchased a 6,000-sq. ft. office at auction; this attractive sign is a welcome.



Kerri Ralston is the district's office manager.



Perry Smith, (left), Manager of Water Works for Wheatland Electric Cooperative and Superintendent for Finney County Rural Water District No. 1 and Francis Loblmeier, water technician at Wheatland, and operator at RWD 1, pause for a photo.

One of the issues I assisted Perry with was cleaning the original standpipe. Finney RWD 1 purchased an existing well and drilled one additional well. Both were Dakota wells with low quality water; the water had high levels of iron and manganese. I recall in 2000 the standpipe had two feet of the most nasty discolored, foul smelling sludge in the bottom that I had ever seen.

I will never forget a conversation I had with groundwater geologist/hydrologist Robert Vincent, President of Ground Water Associates in Wichita. Robert assisted the district at the time of the installation of the second well. Robert reported that the district drilled right down through 300 feet of the most beautiful Ogallala water but couldn't use a drop of it since no more permits were being issued by the Division of Water Resources in that formation. So they had to use the deeper water from the Dakota formation which was much

poorer quality water. Both wells were eventually shut down for good in 2007 when the agreement was reached to purchase water from Wheatland Electric.

A maintenance agreement had to be secured as a condition of funding and the city of Holcomb stepped up to the plate and agreed to help with billing and maintenance with Perry Smith as operator and then City Clerk Robin Lujan taking care of the district's billing.

Another unfortunate incident the district experienced was when the city of Garden City fire department was flushing hydrants and proceeded to flush west of town unknowingly opening hydrants on the rural water district, thinking they were flushing city hydrants. Apparently the RWD tank that was purchased as part of the original system had a few issues and one of those deficiencies was too small of a vent. With many hydrants open at

the same time, the roof of the standpipe collapsed. That tank was removed at a cost of \$17,000 and a new standpipe measuring 16 feet x 150 feet was constructed; that tank has a capacity of 223,000 gallons.

New office

The district serves several businesses and rural customers between Garden City and Holcomb. The district also has consolidated its operations into an attractive 6,000 square-foot facility at 4532 West Jones, the main street between Garden City and Holcomb. The district recently hired Kerri Ralston as its first full-time office manager. The office building is actually more than the district required but it was purchased at a very reduced price at auction. The plan is for renting out the unneeded space and also providing an area for training. The building was originally owned by Chesapeake Energy but was sold due to reduced operations.

Perry Smith emphasized the key role that Wheatland Electric played in working with the RWD and the local communities serving the needs of both water and electricity. Wheatland is committed to working with Finney RWD 1 to help the businesses and residents in the area survive and thrive.

Jon Steele has been employed by KRWA as a Circuit Rider since 1995. Jon is certified as a water and wastewater operator. He has more than twenty-five years experience in public works, construction and industrial arts.

