

100 years of hauling water about to come to an end

Weather cycles in western Kansas seem to fluctuate between wet and dry, but for the most part, it's been way too dry. Residents surrounding Phillipsburg could have used a rural water district 40 years ago. Too many years of empty pasture ponds and dry wells made hauling water for homes and livestock the drudgery that defined the lives of several generations of many Phillips County families. Anticipation of opening the first faucet on the Rural Water District No.1 Phillips County water system will turn to joy by December 29 of this year. Many of the owners of the 232 benefit units that have signed on hope it will happen sooner.

Water district startup



Dan Knupp
Communications

Board member and past Board President, Doug Kaup, remembers, "Late in 1988, after several very dry years, Larry Meili, Phillips County NCRS agent, kept after several of us landowners to get motivated and start a rural water district. He recommended that we talk to the rural water people and so early in 1989 Elmer Ronnebaum from the Kansas Rural Water Association (KRWA) came out here for a meeting."

The meeting of a few Phillipsburg city dignitaries and nearly 200 farmers and ranchers filled the main floor of the local National Guard Armory. "The meeting was an introduction to the

organization and development of a rural water district," KRWA General Manager Elmer Ronnebaum recalled. "Working at Eatherly Constructors in the late 70's and early 80's, the company developed a slide show that presented construction practices, information about having operable easements and good water system operation. I remember making that presentation at the Phillipsburg meeting; everyone was ready to go out and start digging," Elmer recalled.

The group put together a steering committee to start organizing and laying the groundwork for the new water district (an official board of directors would come a lot later). The steering committee set about collecting \$100 from each of nearly 200 benefit units. That

\$100 down payment on the then priced \$1,000 benefit unit, was the needed seed money to start a search for a water source to get the district going.

Water, too little then too much

"After having been so dry for many years, we were fortunate that in the early 90s it turned so wet. It kept system planning at bay while we continued searching for a water source," Kaup noted. "The real road block for those years was finding the quantity and quality of water that could serve everyone."

To help in the search for a water source and provide engineering design for the water system, the steering committee contracted with the engineering firm, Schwab-Eaton, P.A. of Manhattan and Wichita. Project



This project sign proclaims good news to the 232 subscribers of Rural Water District No. 1, Phillips County, Kan. USDA Rural Development approved a loan of \$1,484,000 and a grant of \$1,269,000 for the project. Applicant contributions and other local grants from charitable organizations total \$407,000.

engineer Mike Butler has worked with the steering committee and later the district board from 1990 until today.

"There were some wild goose chases across Phillips County in the search for water," Butler said. "The City of Phillipsburg offered to sell water but the price was just not affordable for this new district," Butler said.

Butler, several district board members and Larry Meili, who continued to pass along leads to the group, worked for several

"We thought we could haul water for a year before getting the system started," Deb Hays quickly said. "It's been now 17 years and counting!" Board member Anthony Kirchhoff is another one who will be



The storage tank for Phillips County RWD 1 is a 100,000-gallon glass-fused-to-steel Aquastore system. The District chose this style with the expectation that it will give years of maintenance free service. It was erected in just over one week; the cost was \$165,000. The contractor was EAI International.

Left: Board Chairman Kay Kinter, board member Allan Jackson, KRWA's Bert Zerr and board members Anthony Kirchhoff and Doug Kaup review construction plans for the District.

Below: Eatherly Constructors, Garden City Kansas, has installed up to 4.5 miles of pipeline in one day; the average day is 2 to 3 miles.



years but turned up nothing. "There are a lot of low volume wells that are high in nitrates around the county," explained Butler. "We couldn't really get going on the project without answering two basic questions -- source and cost."

Things looked a little dim for the water district but as it happens so many times, someone steps forward to carry the torch that builds a fire under volunteers that reignites their passions. The wet years during the early 90's had gradually turned to another eight to nine year drought that inspired torch bearer and board member, Deb Hays and her husband Leroy, to get things turned around. They purchased their property in 1991,

especially happy to quit counting the years. He has made a twenty mile round trip every day for many years with his 1,000 gallon tank hauling water to keep his farm operational. There are many days when he makes multiple trips.

"Bob Vincent, President of Ground Water Associates of Wichita, rode around the county with me a couple of times and he didn't think the odds were good of finding water other than in the northern part of the county," Kaup said. The break for the group came in 2000 and it came from up north.



Ultimately the generous descendants of Sam and Alice Kats donated the water to make the rural water district a reality.

Board member, John White, (John later resigned from the board in order to work as inspector for RWD pipeline construction) drilled a well on inherited land in the northwest corner of the county. It was located in northwestern Phillips County in the Republican River watershed coming out of Nebraska. It pumped good water in quantity from a small finger of the Ogallala Aquifer close to the little town of Long Island.

Unfortunately the quantity was good but not good enough and it turned out that this was considered to be water belonging to Nebraska. A frantic dash to the Division of Water Resources in Stockton to secure a permit on this property was in vain.

"Subsequently, a chance meeting between Leroy Hays and Stanley Kats in 2001 provided a second opportunity. The Sam and Alice Kats family own a piece of ground south of John's land and with their permission, a test well was put down. Testing of this well and examination of the underground formations indicated that wells on this land would yield the quantity of water needed for a district. Ultimately the generous descendants of Sam and Alice donated the water to make the district a reality. Finally a rural water district was possible.

"It actually is a good thing the arrangement with the City of Phillipsburg didn't work out," Mike Butler explained. "A Phillipsburg-based project would

have consisted of three separate systems, each with a pump and tower that would have been very expensive to build and run. The system now being built couldn't be more economical. We pump a very short distance from the wells to a ground level water storage tank, which is much less expensive than a tower model. The system elevation then drops 300 feet from the storage tank to the lowest point far to the south, allowing the use of five pressure reducing valves rather than expensive inline pumps. Three main wells, two primary and one back-up, will supply the needed water to customers and no water storage is needed down system with the design."

The contractor for the wells is Clarke Well & Equipment, Great Bend, Kan.

Pipeline in the district is 8-inch leaving the tank down through 1.5-inch for service lines. Water is pumped a relatively short distance of 3 miles from the well field to the tank.

RWD Board Chairman Kay Kinter indicated how great it is to work with the folks in the area.

"We need 400-plus easements to construct our water system. Approximately 90% of the easements were researched, prepared, signed and recorded in less than five months. All were granted to support the project with no financial or other incentive given to the landowner. We are all grateful for the donation of the water, the easements granted and the countless volunteer hours that have been given to this project over the years."

It's been nearly 20 years since that first informational meeting in Phillipsburg. As of June 20, 2007, construction is approximately 60 percent complete. The district anticipates starting to provide water service by December 29. Rates for the new RWD have not been finalized as of June 20.

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