

Origin of Lake Bennett

By SAM CLARK

In the summer of 1934, in the depth of the depression, drouth, and unemployment, the newly created Federal Soil Erosion Service, in the U. S. Department of the Interior, under the direction of Dr. Hugh Hammond Bennett, quietly investigated, selected, and planned a pioneer project in soil erosion control and moisture conservation to be carried out in Faulkner County, Arkansas. The significance of that project and the vast program which it heralded in the United States was lost on the general public at that time because of slight publicity, little notice, and lack of understanding of its meaning and importance.

Arriving in Conway, the county seat, in early summer, to start the project were: Fred Newport, one of the few soil erosion specialists with practical experience in the U. S., as the Director; and, Captain R. C. Sturgeon, a regular Army engineer, as Supervisor of construction and the physical operation of the program. Upon their arrival, these gentlemen informed the local agricultural leaders and public officials of the nature and purposes of the proposal, and the needs, requirements and benefits of the program. While the central objective of the program was soil erosion control and water conservation, additional benefits would be the provision of a public recreational area, the employment of local labor, and the utilization of local materials. The construction of a fresh water lake by impounding spring water and run-off water from a suitable water-shed behind an earthen dam was projected. The first requirement was that the necessary land be furnished free to the government.

After aerial observations and ground inspection of the topography and the terrain of Faulkner County, a suitable area in north central Faulkner County, known as Woolley Hollow, was found by the Director and his Engineer. It was further found that the exact spot where the earthen dam should be constructed belonged to a pioneer resident named M. M. Shumate, who had long owned and operated a rural store near the dam site. Mr. Shumate very generously agreed to donate the land necessary for the day, which agreement he carried out by executing a warranty deed to the government (Faulkner County), dated August 8, 1934, recorded in Deed Book 87, page 261, in the Office of the Recorder of Faulkner County, Arkansas.

But it was necessary to acquire at least 80 acres more for the reservoir and recreation area. It was learned that the additional 80 acres belonged to the Missouri Pacific R. R., which was insolvent and in receivership at that time. The late Walter E.



Street Scene, Conway, Arkansas, September, 1909.
In the left forefront of the picture is City Marshal James Robert Charles, father of Miss Myrtle E. Charles and Mabel Charles Sherin.

Browne, Conway business man took the lead in raising the funds and negotiating with the Mo. Pac. R. R. for the 80 acres, which had a usual going price of only \$1.25 per acre, or total price of \$100.00. On Sunday afternoon, July 15, 1934, an Agreement was drawn up at the office of Clark & Clark, in Conway, by which 20 persons subscribed \$5.00 each, and authorized Mr. Brown to offer it to the Mo. Pac. R. R. for the 80 acres, which Mr. Brown did. But the R. R. Land Commissioner refused to sell the 80 alone, explaining that the purchaser must purchase all of the adjoining lands owned by the Mo. Pac. R. R. amounting to 280 acres. Having only \$100.00 for that purpose, Mr. Browne prevailed upon the Land Commission to send in his written bid of 0.50 per acre, and guaranteed the additional \$40.00. The Federal Court Receiver, in St. Louis, accepted the bid of \$140.00, the additional money was raised and sent in, and the deed from the Mo. Pac. R. R. was executed, to Faulkner County, Arkansas, dated August 7, 1934, and recorded in the Deed Book 92, page 415, in the Faulkner County Recorder's Office.

In 1935, after the dam was completed and the lake filled and stocked with fish, J. A. Hutto, who was the Faulkner County Judge at that time, made and entered into the County Court Records, an Order in which he named a Board of Commissioners, consisting of five members, to maintain, govern and supervise the use of the area, which was named in Order as the WOOLLEY HOLLOW RECREATION CENTER, including the lake thereon which has been named Lake Bennett, in honor of the first Director of the U. S. Soil Conservation Service, whom we honor today. The following named persons were appointed to this first Board of Commissioners, namely: M. M. Shumate, Walter E. Browne, W. L. Hall, Jim Cantrell, and J. E. Winters.

Judge Hutto's order naming this first Board of Commissioners is recorded in Volume 27, page 343-5, of the Records of Faulkner County Court, and is dated September 2, 1935, and authorizes, empowers and directs John Griffith, the Clerk of the Faulkner County Court to execute, for and in the name of Faulkner County, a Lease for the term of 99 years, to the above named Board of Commissioners, which Lease was promptly executed by the county clerk to said Board of Commissioners, and after presentation to and approval by the County Judge, said Lease has been delivered to and recorded by the Board, and provides that the Board shall hold and govern the Woolley Hollow Recreational Area in accordance with the Cooperative Agreement with the U. S. Government and the Soil Conservation Service, attached to the Lease; and that the Board of Commissioners shall be self-perpetuating.

[This print is similar to the article as printed in *Faulkner Facts and Fiddlings*, but the line breaks and other aspects of the layout are slightly different.]