

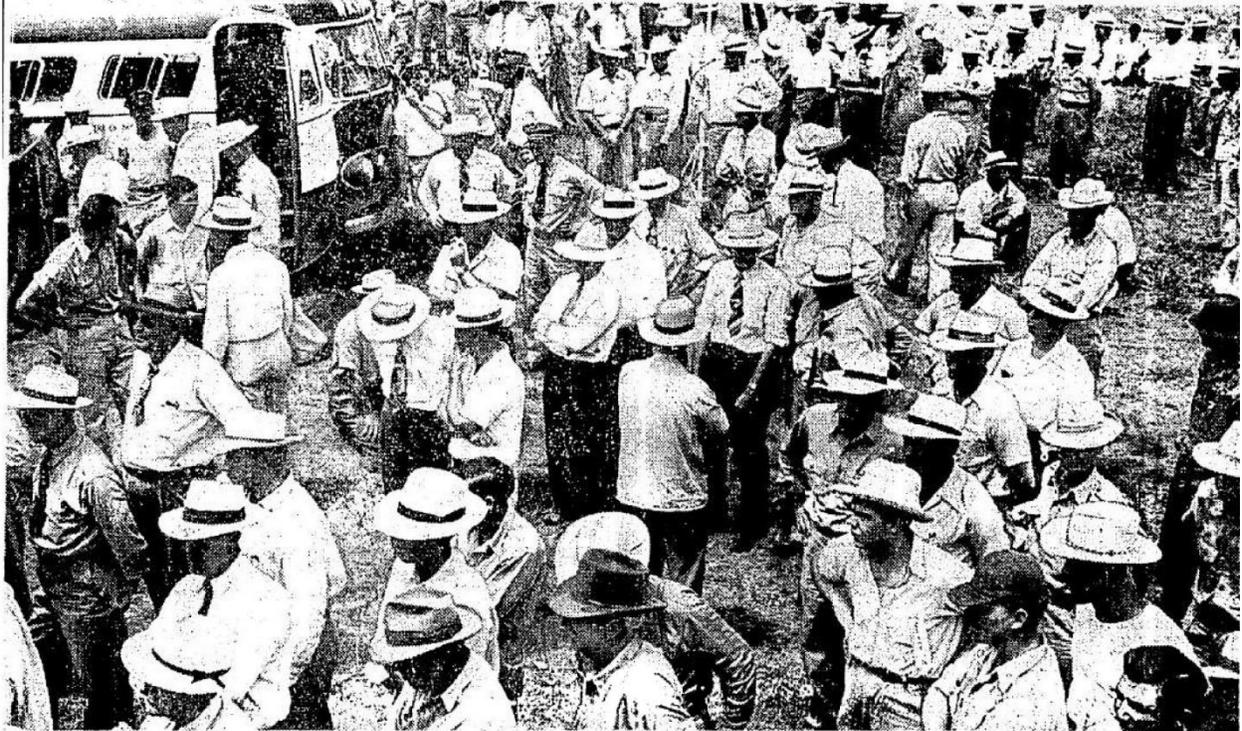
## FIRST IN THE NATION WATERSHED DAM: CLOUD CREEK SITE No. 1 CELEBRATES 75 YEARS



This aerial photo taken in May 1949 shows Cloud Creek Detention Reservoir No. 1 with conservation practices applied to the surrounding landscape and the Wichita Mountains in the background.

[\(Oklahoma Conservation Historical Society Collection\)](#)

July 2023 marks the 75th anniversary of the dedication of Cloud Creek Detention Reservoir No. 1 on July 8, 1948. That day thousands of people from across Oklahoma and the United States came to the Troy Orr farm, a few miles southeast of Cordell in Washita County, to take part in celebrating completion of the nation's first upstream watershed dam — first in the country to be built as part of a national program authorized by the [1944 Flood Control Act \(P.L.534\)](#).



**Watershed Dedicated** A crowd estimated as large as 10,000 persons swarmed over the Cloud creek watershed southeast of Cordell Thursday to inspect the novel flood control project and hear dedication speeches. Above, a segment of the crowd is shown as it

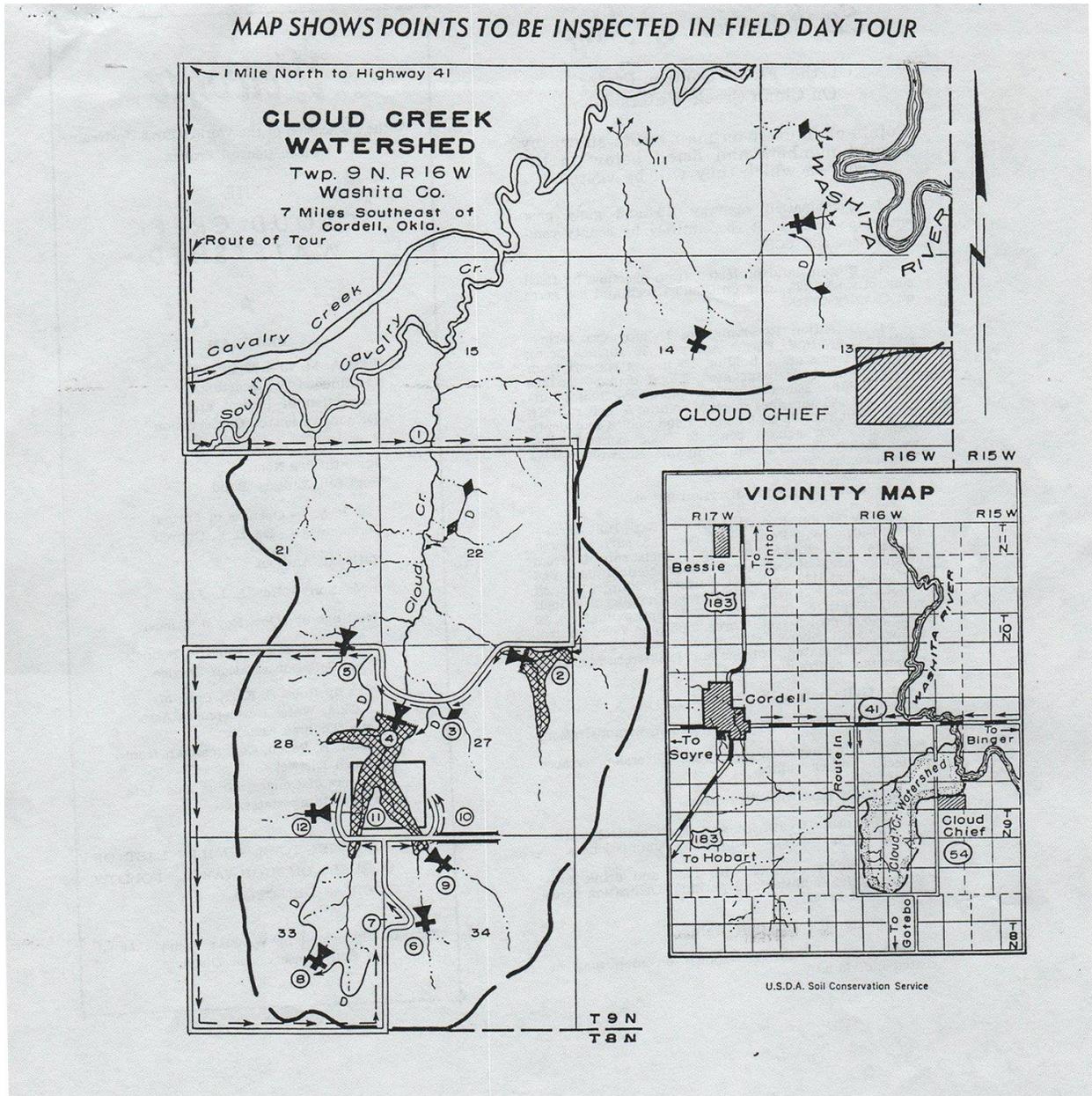
gathered in front of the speaker's stand to hear the project explained. Below, a slope of the hill above the No. 1 detention reservoir is jammed with a portion of the visitors' automobiles, indicating the huge crowd that gathered for the event.

—Daily Oklahoman Staff Photo

Photographs and description of the Cloud Creek No. 1 dedication from the July 9, 1948 issues of the *The Daily Oklahoman* ([The Oklahoman Digital Archives](#))

The Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce boasted of sending more than 30,000 invitations to farmers, ranchers, county agents, 4-H and FFA men, conservation districts, and businessmen — to all interested in soil conservation to come celebrate the dedication. About 10,000 people from across the state and nation answered the invitation in person. The morning of the dedication visitors toured the dam site and inspected conservation practices on surrounding farms. After lunch, the Fort Sill military band entertained the assembled crowd. Master of ceremonies was Dr. Lloyd E. Church, local dentist, chairman of the Washita Valley council of soil conservation conservation district supervisors, and a leader in the campaign for upstream flood control. Speakers on the dais included Governor of Oklahoma Roy Turner, U.S. Senator [Elmer Thomas](#) and Soon-to-be U.S. Senator [Robert S. Kerr](#). The keynote address delivered by

Soil Conservation Service (SCS) Chief [Hugh Hammond Bennett](#), who had come to western Oklahoma from Washington, D.C. to tell this audience the story of upstream watershed flood control.



Map from the July 8, 1948 Cloud Creek No. 1 dedication ceremony shows the location of the Cloud Creek detention reservoirs and locations to be inspected on the field day tour. (Oklahoma Conservation Historical Society)

Bennett reflected on the significance of Cloud Creek No. 1. He noted that completion of this dam represented the culmination of an almost two decade long effort to establish a federal program of watershed flood control that integrated the construction of upstream reservoirs with soil conservation practices on surrounding landscapes. “For the first time,” Bennett told his audience, “we are going into the small watersheds, far upstream and out on tributaries of our main waterways, and there we are seeking to provide relief from floods to the small farmer or landowner.” The goal, as he often said, was to hold the raindrop where it falls. “Our main objective is to retard the discharge of water from upstream areas until it can be absorbed by the land or carried off without destructive effects. And, while we are thus retarding runoff, we are at the same time, and by the same means, reducing the effects of erosion; and we are storing in the soil for later use the water that may mean a good crop instead of a poor one or a failure.” While Cloud Creek No. 1 was only a single small dam and reservoir, Bennett concluded, its completion was “symbolic of a comprehensive program of proper soil and water use and treatment already well under way” that would tie the Washita River watershed and watersheds across the United States together into a national program of small watersheds.



Photograph from May 1948 showing construction of the detention dam for Cloud Creek Reservoir No. 2, which was completed about the same time as Cloud Creek No 2. Together these two reservoirs on Cloud Creek would serve to contain excess runoff from heavy rains, catch sediment from flowing downstream, and provide numerous benefits to surrounding communities. ([Oklahoma Conservation Historical Society Photography Collection](#))

Cloud Creek No. 1 may have been the first dam completed in the nation’s small watershed program, but it certainly would not be the last. In the coming years, more than 1,140 dams would be built on the other tributaries of the Washita River — streams such as Sandstone, Sergeant Major, Barnitz, Panther, Whiteshield, Big Kiowa, and Soldier Creeks, among many others.

These dams, augmented by other engineering measures — countless gully plugs, drop inlets, and flumes — and working together with soil conservation practices — contour plowing, terraces, stubble mulching, revegetation of eroded land with native grasses — applied to surrounding farm and range lands, would serve to manage the flow of water across the entire watershed of the Washita River from its headwaters near Canadian, Texas to its confluence with the Red River at Lake Texoma.



This photograph taken August 20, 1951 near Hammon, Oklahoma in the Upper Washita Soil Conservation District shows Marshall Jordan, SCS, technician examining a gully that had been healed by a planting of native grass. After 1948, more than 10,000 acres within the Washita River watershed would be replanted to native grasses. Revegetation and other soil conservation practices worked together with the small reservoirs to hold the drop of rain where it falls. (Oklahoma Conservation Historical Society)

In the decades since their construction, these dams combined with soil conservation practices have provided numerous benefits to local communities, state, and nation. Larry Caldwell, Oklahoma Conservation Historical Society board member and national expert on small watershed dams, observes that dams in the Washita River watershed have held back about 240,000 acre feet of sediment from flowing downstream to Lake Texoma, and provide 580,000 acre feet of flood storage, which is about twenty percent of the total flood storage offered by Lake Texoma. Other benefits that these reservoirs provide include a supply of water, wildlife habitat, and recreation for local residents.



This photograph taken May 12, 1950 shows officials from the Oklahoma State Fish & Game Commission Hatchery at Medicine Park delivering 10,000 bass fry to the SCS office in Cordell for stocking Cloud Creek Detention Reservoir No. 1. ([Oklahoma Conservation Historical Society Photography Collection](#))

Today Cloud Creek No. 1 is maintained by the Washita County Conservation District. Along with the twenty nine other dams built on the Calvary Creek Watershed, it continues to provide flood control and other benefits to the people of Washita County and the entire state. Since its inception in 1935, the Soil Conservation Service, renamed the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) agency in 1994, has assisted communities and local sponsors to design and build over 29,000 dams in the United States. This is approximately one-third of the dams in the national inventory of dams. This includes over 11,850 dams that were constructed in cooperation with local project sponsors of dams in watershed projects in 47 states.



This photograph taken in July 1949 shows the Cloud Creek No. 1 dam and detention reservoir half filled with water. ([Oklahoma Conservation Historical Society Photography Collection](#))

In July 1948, ten thousand people gathered to celebrate completion of the nation's first upstream watershed dam. Today seventy five years later, Cloud Creek No. 1 continues to do its job — a silent testament to the lasting efforts of the men and women who campaigned so tirelessly for a national program of upstream flood control and soil conservation during the 1930s and 1940s. But, that job is not done. Many Americans today are unaware of the important role played by dams like Cloud Creek No. 1 in protecting lives and property across the country. Watershed infrastructure requires constant oversight and maintenance to ensure that it can continue to do the work it was designed to do. That is why it is important as ever for today's conservationists to share the message heard by the crowd on that long ago July afternoon that together through public investment and the conservation partnership we can manage our nation's resource for the mutual prosperity of all.

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