

War Relocation Authority
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TRI-COUNTY IRRIGATION PROJECT IN SOUTH CENTRAL NEBRASKA

by

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We have been trying for some time to get evacuee farmers interested in the Tri-County Irrigation District of South-Central Nebraska. To date we have not found the right approach or have not had enough appeal in the offers. We have had eight boys working in the territory on seasonal work who seem to be exceptionally well satisfied with the acceptance in the community. What they have written back to their friends in the centers, I cannot say. I know of no reason why they should make anything but a favorable report. I am going to try and give as complete a picture of the area as possible in hopes that it might assist you in getting some of the farmers in your centers interested in relocating here.

Location

The district lies south of the Platte River and varies in width from 10 to 15 miles. It is approximately 50 miles from Minden on the east to Smithfield on the west. Holdrege is the largest town in the district and is located on the south edge and near the half-way point east and west. It is about 150 miles east to Lincoln, the state capital, and about 325 miles southwest to Denver from Holdrege. On the south there are seven towns. From east to west they are, Minden, Axtell, Funk, Holdrege, Loomis, Bertrand, and Smithfield. To the north in the Platte River Valley, from west to east are Lexington, Overton, Elm Creek, Kearney, and Gibbon. Just west of Kearney a few miles is the location of the famous 1733 Ranch. This ranch became famous in the early days because it is the half-way point between the east and west coasts. It is also about 100 miles north of the mid-way point north and south across the United States.

Project Organization

The project is organized as a power and irrigation district. Funds were obtained by Federal appropriation for the construction of the system. The directors are elected locally and the responsibility of the organization is in their hands. The revenue from the electric power sales makes the irrigation phase of the project much more desirable. Water is sold the users on the basis of \$2.50 per acre foot for the number of acres contracted. There is no maintenance charge in addition. The project takes care of all canals and laterals without extra charge. There is no priority on the water either from the standpoint of location in the area or kinds of crops being grown. The storage capacity of the reservoirs is approximately 400,000 acre feet. There are 170,000 acres of irrigable land in the project or a supply of 3 acre feet of water for each acre if it were all watered.

Soils

Soils found in the area are all of Hastings and Holdrege types. They vary from loams and sandy loams to loamy sand. The area is known as the Loess plains and the soil is a high table of wind-blown origin. Probably nowhere in Nebraska could we find as large an area of as uniformly high quality soil as we have here. It has been said by men who know all of the irrigation projects in the United States, that no other project has as large an area with such highly productive soil as the Tri-County. Experienced vegetable men say that most any kind of vegetables can be grown satisfactorily on these soils. Fruit growers feel that there is a wonderful opportunity for all kinds of fruit that are adapted to this climate. The top soil is from 10 to 20 feet deep with a clay subsoil of about the same depth. Below this is a sandy layer which extends down into the water bearing gravel at about 150 feet.

Climate

Attached is a 64-year record of precipitation for Nebraska. This area, as marked out, falls within the central Nebraska division. All data is taken from the United States Weather Bureau records. You will notice that 76 percent of the total is received during the six months from April 1st to November 1st. Notice also how closely this conforms to the frost free period for the area. This is a very important factor where crops are grown that need large amounts of water during the growing season. The average number of days between frosts during the ten-year period from 1931 to 1940 was 178. That would be considered the growing season. Extremes were April 2nd for the earliest day for the last frost in the spring and November 5th as the latest date for the first killing frost in the fall. These dates were recorded on different years. The mean January temperature for a long period of years has been 25 degrees above zero. The mean for July during the same years, taken from several stations in the area over a period of 40 to 50 years, is 76 degrees. During the summer there are several days that will reach 100. During the winter it is not uncommon to have near zero temperatures for several days. The altitude at Holdrege is 2324 feet. The number of days on which the sun shines during the growing season is very high.

Transportation

It would be difficult to locate in a more strategic place from the standpoint of transportation. On the north the area is bordered by the Union Pacific railroad and US Highway No. 30. On the South it is bordered by the Burlington railroad and US Highway No. 6. Both railroads are the mainline, cross-continent roads. The two highways mentioned are both transcontinental and probably carry more traffic than any other two roads in the country. Being located midway between the two coasts and with this kind of transportation the markets available are unlimited. Highway 83 which is one of our main north and south highways, passes through the area. Overnight truck shipments can be made to Denver, Omaha, Lincoln, and Kansas City. Chicago, St. Louis, and Minneapolis are only 24 hours by refrigerated express. Potatoes loaded out this year at Loomis were picked up at 2 AM one day and were on the Chicago market the morning of the following day. Since the icing of cars was restricted to one icing, by War Transportation, it was possible to market these potatoes in a much better condition than those with a longer haul.

Markets

In addition to the markets mentioned above there are a number of smaller cities such as Hastings, Grand Island, and North Platte, Nebraska, Sioux City, Iowa, St. Joseph, Missouri, Topeka, Salina, Lawrence, Wichita, and Manhattan, Kansas. All of these places are within a few hours by truck and have a big local demand for vegetables and fruits.

Housing

In years past this territory was recognized as one of the most stable and substantial in Nebraska. It has been built up by a thrifty people who built well but not elaborately. In the early part of this century, farming units were developed on the basis of family size farms. Consequently we find on an average of one set of farm buildings to each 160 acres. During the drought years of the 1930's many of these farms were abandoned by the owners. Dry-land farming methods were developed which increased the size of the units. At the present time the average size is 280 acres. With irrigation coming in we have the natural change back to smaller units. Fortunately we have the buildings which have not been used for a few years and which need only to be repaired, that can again be used to house the new families coming in. Some of these are comparatively new and in good condition, others are older and at this time badly in need of repair. Those sets which were not sufficiently good to be rehabilitated have been demolished during the last few years. It has been estimated that there are 75 sets of these buildings in the area. In addition there are many houses in the smaller towns that can be occupied. This would give the older people an opportunity to live in the territory near their families who might be living on the farms.

Nationality

Swedish, Danish, and German descendants predominate in the area. Many of these people are of the second generation. They are a very thrifty, conservative, home-loving people. They are aware of the fact that more people are needed to properly develop and maintain this project. It is their desire to have people come into the territory who are familiar with the production of more intensified crops. The principal crops have been wheat and corn. They do not have sufficient labor to make a rapid change to the other crops which require more labor. The living standards of these people are moderate and substantial.

Schools and Churches

All of the towns in and near the district have very good elementary and high schools. There are two consolidated districts served by buses. The rural schools go to the eighth grade and they are located so that the greatest distance to a school is 2 miles. Kearney has a state supported and accredited Teachers College with a full four-year course. All towns have a variety of churches and there are country churches scattered throughout the area. The church groups have taken a very active interest in our program and are anxious to assist in every way possible.