

Shared Stories of the Kansas Land Reader's Theater Project

Dam the Rivers!

Water has the power to give life. It also has the power to destroy.

The Great Flood of 1951 wreaked extensive damage across Kansas. In response, the governor requested that Congress fund a dam on the Big Blue River for flood control. The proposal immediately sparked controversy.

The *Dam the Rivers* reader's theater script was created using excerpts from historical letters, reports, government documents, and newspaper articles. Following the reading, participants will have the opportunity to discuss the experiences of Kansans during these two major events and the role of government in times of natural disaster.

Please Note: Regional historians have reviewed the source materials used, the script, and the list of citations for accuracy.

For More Information:
Kansas Humanities Council

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Introduction

In July 1951, torrential downpours battered the Kansas River Basin. Some towns received nearly 19 inches of rain. The Great Flood of 1951 wreaked extensive damage across Kansas. Lives were lost. Damages cost over 725 million dollars. Not wanting Kansans to endure that kind of devastation again, Governor Edward F. Arn requested that Congress fund a dam on the Big Blue River, a tributary that meets the Kansas River in Manhattan. Congress complied and charged the US Army Corps of Engineers with designing and building it.

But the proposed dam immediately sparked controversy. Although all parties wanted flood control, some opposed the building of any dam, while others leaned toward soil conservation measures, smaller dams, or dry dams that would only hold water during flood years. Yet the Pick-Sloan Plan—also known as the Flood Control Act of 1944—envisioned the dam as an expansive recreational reservoir that would permanently hold water and put nearly 55,000 acres of fertile valley farmland under water. Three thousand people in ten towns—Stockdale, Randolph, Winkler, Cleburne, Irving, Blue Rapids, Shroyer, Garrison, Barrett, and Bigelow—would be forced to relocate elsewhere.

A grassroots movement formed in the Blue River Valley. The dam opponents, who dubbed the plan “Big Dam Foolishness,” wanted to “stop the rain where it fell” with the use of smaller dams on creeks. For a short time Congressman Howard Miller managed to stall plans for the dam. However, in 1955 Congress voted to restore funding. Construction began anew. On July 1, 1962, the dam opened for operation. The Big Blue expanded its reach into the valley from Marysville to Manhattan.

This script will focus on two events: the Great Flood of 1951 and the Tuttle Creek Dam controversy, highlighting the relationship between Kansans and their shared environmental heritage.

Shared Stories of the Kansas Land brings to life the voices of the people who lived through events that altered the land and the environment.

Group Discussion Questions

Instructions: The facilitator should pose one or more of these questions in advance of the reading of the script. At the conclusion of the reading, participants can return to the questions for consideration.

1. What else could government officials have done when faced with the decision to build the dam? Were there any alternatives that could have been chosen that neither party considered?
2. How does natural disaster influence the culture of the people who experience catastrophe?
3. Many of the dam’s opponents and proponents framed the building of the dam as a moral issue. What is the government’s role in managing natural disaster?

Script

Instructions: Each part will be read out loud by an assigned reader. Readers should stand and speak into a microphone when it's their turn. The source of the quote should also be read out loud (this is the information bolded beneath each quote).

NARRATOR *Episode One—July 13, 1951, “Black Friday”*

READER 1 Nature has a disconcerting way of frustrating man’s attempts to thwart her.

Kansas Farmer, February 2, 1952

READER 2 At 8 [a.m., Wednesday, July 11] there was a meeting to make more plans as by that time it was still raining—very hard, and the “Authorities” thought that this was IT. How right they were.

Evacuees began to file in but still most people refused to believe the warnings. Such hurrying and scurrying and bustle and confusion while the plans were shaping up for the sheltering in the [Municipal] Auditorium of whoever would not be able to find a place to stay.

Catharine Wright Menninger¹ of Topeka, July 19, 1951

NARRATOR *On July 13, 1951, the Big Blue River in the Kansas River Valley could no longer hold the water that had accumulated from three days of heavy rains. Manhattan was inundated with eight feet of water. Buildings, power lines, roads, and railroads were flooded and washed out.*

Soon, the water made its way east, continuing into Topeka, Lawrence, and Kansas City. In Topeka, Catharine Wright Menninger wrote to friends and family about the flooding and the efforts of the Red Cross and the community to help feed and shelter 20,000 people in North Topeka, who were left homeless in the aftermath.

READER 2 The next day [July 12] more dikes broke, including one that flooded Oakland. People had one hour to get out of there. People who waited to leave North Topeka could not get trucks when they finally decided to leave. There were many trucks that came in from Forbes [Air Force Base] and they lined up on 8th St between Monroe and Jackson until sent to an address that was called in.

Catharine Wright Menninger of Topeka, July 19, 1951

NARRATOR *Before Black Friday, heavy rains had already filled the rivers in May and June to near capacity. These final days of rain tipped the scale—the water had nowhere else to go.*

READER 3 Frequent heavy to excessive rains over Kansas, Missouri, Iowa, and Nebraska for the past month and a half, with cloud burst rains in Kansas last night, have brought about one of the most serious flood situations in history in Missouri and Eastern Kansas.

Severe flooding is occurring in the area covered by the Kansas River and its tributaries. At Manhattan, on the Kansas River, a crest of nearly 17 feet above bankful is expected by tomorrow evening, five feet above the all-time high which was established in 1903.

The present very serious situation is almost sure to become worse due to further heavy rains that are forecast to fall over Kansas, Missouri, and southern Nebraska during the next 48 hours. The floods ... are really catastrophic.

J. R. Lloyd in a special radio broadcast, Kansas City, July 11, 1951

NARRATOR *Extensive flooding has a long history in Kansas. In 1903 and 1904, Topeka, Abilene, Council Grove, Fort Scott, and other towns underwent widespread destruction due to flooding. But the 1951 flood caused even more destruction.*

READER 4 Forced to whiz along in a ten-horsepower outboard motorboat in order to combat the still raging currents downtown late Saturday afternoon, details could not be noted—but shocking sights blended together into an almost unbelievable summary of flood destruction.

By that we mean that very few structures appear to remain standing. Two or three of the big old stone houses are upright—but persistent reports are that the Patterson-Harwood serum plant is gone.

It will take weeks for competent engineers and contractors to fully assess the damage, much of which is underground and not visible now—but it seems safe to say that 83 percent of the glass fronts in the downtown area are demolished.

Manhattan Mercury-Chronicle, July 17, 1951

READER 1 Eight feet of water in Manhattan Ice and Cold Storage Plant but all employees evacuated.

College bakery is baking bread for city.

A witness from a motorboat reported no goods left in the Army store in 200 block of Manhattan. “All goods swept away, only the building remains,” the witness said. Same witness reported, “Anything that would float is gone from the first floor of Cole’s department store in 300 block of Poyntz.”

Kansas State University, University Relations report, July 12, 1951

NARRATOR

In 1944, Congress passed an updated Flood Control Act. The act contained a combined plan proposed by Colonel Lewis A. Pick, who had requested the building of five large dams for flood control in the Midwest, and Bureau of Reclamation engineer Glenn Sloan, who wished to see better water conservation and usage. Pick would soon become the Army Corps Chief of Engineers.

While the Flood Control Act of 1946 authorized additional funds for the 1944 Pick-Sloan Plan, the plans for some of these dams lay dormant—until the Flood of 1951 hit Kansas. Soon thereafter, Governor Edward F. Arn issued a statement to Congress. The consensus was clear: Kansans wanted flood control, and soon.

READER 3

In order to render some assurance that such devastation will never occur again, all of the people of Kansas are insistent upon and vitally concerned with flood control, although there are some differences between individuals and groups as to how flood control can be best accomplished. However, the people of Kansas pretty well agree that flood control, to be effective, must involve a comprehensive plan embracing (a) the construction of dikes and levees for immediate city protection; (b) some of the large reservoirs on the main stems; and (c) a soil conservation and water-shed treatment program.

Governor Edward F. Arn², Statement delivered to the U.S. Congress, 1952

NARRATOR

What was not clear, however, was how to best implement safe and efficient flood control measures. Governor Arn considered the Tuttle Creek dam—one of dozens of proposed dam projects—to be the most necessary measure for flood control. And yet, along with many other Kansans, including some residents of the Blue River Valley, he wished to see the dam function as a dry dam. In a dry dam, the land would only be subject to occasional flooding.

READER 3 Therefore, if the Tuttle Creek dam from an engineering standpoint is definitely a key reservoir and absolutely essential to any plan for reservoir control of floods on the Kansas River, it should be constructed as a single-purpose project—that is to say, solely for flood control. To accomplish this purpose, it would seem that it could best be of the so-called “dry dam” construction, which would permit the use of many acres of the fertile Blue Valley farmland during non-flood years.

Governor Edward F. Arn, Statement delivered to US Congress, 1952

NARRATOR *Congress appropriated the funds. A battle between grassroots movements and government policy began in earnest in the Blue River Valley.*

NARRATOR *Episode Two—“Big Dam Foolishness”*

READER 3 Water is one of the natural resources in Kansas, and the only self-renewing resource we have. The challenge to the people of Kansas is to use every means we find appropriate to the conservation, development, and utilization of our water that will meet the needs of agriculture, industry, and public health.

Governor Edward F. Arn at a flood control forum at Kansas State College, November 1951

READER 1 The crying need in water resources management, as in other enterprises in government, is honesty. If we could have a water management program based on real facts soundly interpreted, there would be no significant disagreements or controversies.

Edith Monfort, Secretary of the Kansas Watershed Association, in a letter to Republican presidential nominee Dwight Eisenhower, August 19, 1952

NARRATOR *The citizens of the Blue River Valley quickly jumped into action. The Tuttle Creek dam and reservoir would flood their lands, forcing them to leave their homes and livelihoods. Farmers soon organized and began letter-writing campaigns to local, state, and national politicians. They wished to instill doubt in the Pick-Sloan Plan by picking apart its very foundations.*

READER 4 General Pick surely had enough things he could say truthfully to strengthen his point, so if he can tell untruths easily because he is in

authority, how can we know that other things he says are true? How can we know that a smaller dam located farther upstream on the Blue would not be just as effective and more money would be available to help other cities flood-control their streams? How can we know that giving up these fertile farms and seeking homes someplace else is going to work out for the best for the greatest number of people? How can we know that this huge dam will be better than many small ones?

Ruby M. Johnson, farmer, in a letter to Governor Arn, July 12, 1951

NARRATOR *Officials of national organizations agreed with the residents' sentiments toward the Pick-Sloan Plan.*

READER 3 The main thing which has stood in the way of effective flood control on the Missouri River has been the discredited Pick-Sloan Plan. Wrong in purpose, and wrong in method, this so-called plan would do so much damage that the people of the Valley have been up in arms against it whenever particular projects came up for appropriation.

Under no circumstances must the present tragedy become the excuse for going any further with the discredited Pick-Sloan proposals.

Philip Murray, President of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, in a letter to President Truman, July 24, 1951

NARRATOR *Blue River Valley residents wanted alternatives that would allow them to stay on land that many of them had farmed for generations. They saw the building of the dam as a moral issue—was it right for the government to authorize their removal from the land?*

READER 1 Tuttle Creek is morally wrong because the entire project has been promoted by a series of falsehoods. During the original hearings before Congress in 1938 the Chairman of the Flood Control Committee asked the Army Engineer who appeared before them, if any towns or villages would be inundated by Tuttle Creek Dam. The Army Engineer replied that there would be no towns or villages inundated. This is a matter of printed record. Now we find that 9 or 10 towns will be flooded.

As far as the official record goes, Congress is acting on the false advice of General Pick.

Glenn D. Stockwell Sr.³ of Randolph, in a letter to Leslie G. Templin, executive secretary for the Commission on Town & Country Work, November 1, 1955

NARRATOR *Glenn D. Stockwell Sr. attacked the plan from every possible angle. A lifelong resident of the Blue River Valley, he envisioned the aftermath of the dam—entire communities uprooted and relocated elsewhere, and not just in the Blue River Valley, but other valleys as well.*

Other residents of the valley organized, too. The wives of farmers, dubbed the “Blue Valley Belles,” went to great lengths to meet with President Truman in Kansas City and later presidential nominee Dwight Eisenhower in Denver. These residents also engaged in letter-writing campaigns to politicians, urging them to consider alternative options.

READER 2 We are opposed to Tuttle Creek Dam, because it is not this one dam—but 20 or 40 dams that are proposed for Kansas. That will drown out every valley of the state.

We need flood control, but not with big dams at the mouth of rivers. As we all know if all the Pick-Sloan dams were built last summer before the big July flood, they would have been full of water from the May and June rains. So the July rains would have flowed over the dams uncontrolled.

Kansas is opposed to its valleys being destroyed, when they are sure that there is a better plan that will give flood control and save our soil.

We ask that this highly controversial Tuttle Creek Dam be delayed and studied by the President’s Mississippi Basin Review Committee.

Alicia Vandahl of Randolph, in a letter to Representative Albert Cole, February 4, 1952

READER 4 First, in order to wipe out confusion, competition and unnecessary cost, we must move swiftly toward a water management plan which will start where the raindrop falls; not downstream. Second, we must have an overall review board to check the planning and management. This must be separate from the government agencies who build the flood control works. As it is, the Corps of Army Engineers plan figures the cost and benefits, builds the dams, and we STILL have floods.

The USDA soil conservation and detention dams to control water where it falls is the one program that makes sense for the Blue River Valley.

“Keep Our Soil Home,” anonymous pamphlet, Leonardville, 1950s

READER 2 Gentlemen, let me here emphasize that flood protection is definitely and desperately needed in Kansas. Let there be no misunderstanding about

this. No one denies or debates this need. The disagreement is solely on that of method. Congress has committed flood control plans for the Kansas River basin to the Corps of Engineers, and the Engineers, without consent of the people in the affected areas, have developed a flood control program based upon the construction of large reservoirs near the mouth of tributary streams, together with local protection works for the towns and cities, along the main river.

William P. Edwards, a farmer from Bigelow, in a Statement to Congress, May 11, 1954

NARRATOR

What, then, would the Tuttle Creek dam look like in the future? What would be the long-term costs of the dam? Citizens cautioned politicians, with lively language, as to what those effects could potentially be. Other publications reiterated the importance of soil conservation practices and the use of dry dams.

READER 3

If built, in less than two generations this reservoir will be filled with silt and ruin thousands of best Kansas farms and drive people from their homes just to satisfy the whims of an over-jealous job-holding clique of bureaucrats and political office seekers hell-bent for power to spend tax payers money. If I were John W. Gates, Wall Street fame of past years, I would wager a million dollars the Tuttle Creek dam will be a colossal failure and other dams if built along the Kaw to KC as well. These dams then will be the stigmatic monuments of those whose stupid acts brought forth these dams.

H.C. Jacobs of Wichita in a letter to Governor Fred Hall, June 17, 1955

READER 1

[University of Kansas] Professor Jones thinks if thorough soil conservation and water control were practices on farms, plus hundreds of dry dams in creeks and in draws in the various watersheds, then cities along the lower end of main streams could be protected by dikes, channel improvements and other engineering improvements. Some farm homes and some industries might have to be moved back in some areas, he admits. However, the overall cost would be less and great areas of rich valley land would not be permanently lost due to reservoir inundation, he believes.

“Flood Control Where?”, article in *Kansas Farmer*, February 2, 1952

READER 2

We should not be surprised if sinners sometimes sin and floodplains sometimes flood. Sinning and flooding seem to be well-established

habits. Although much money has been spent on both, so far the results are not reassuring.

Now that we have established farms, homes, and cities in this and other floodways, we seem to be surprised and outraged when flood waters cover a floodplain and bring additional deposits of alluvium. Widespread is the clamor that the flooding beasts be contained and put in their cages, and that the door be securely locked. The propaganda barrage to which the people of Kansas are now being subjected has convinced many that flood control is a rather simple matter when public money is appropriated in “reasonable” amounts to carry out various plans. Unfortunately, a solution is not that simple.

University of Kansas Professor Walter M. Kollmorgen, published in *Upstream*, November 1951

NARRATOR

The Army Corps of Engineers had a different idea, viewing both the large dams and soil conservation measures necessary. In his response to a request to write an editorial for the Topeka Daily Capital, District Engineer L.J. Lincoln summarized his position clearly.

READER 3

It would be distasteful for me to write the article from the point of view of the “advantages of the Pick-Sloan Plan over watershed programs.” I feel that it would be like a doctor treating a patient with two broken legs trying to convince him that there was some advantage to his setting his right leg rather than his left leg, whereas, in fact, both legs need extensive treatment. While the so-called watershed program will not result in adequate flood control on the main stems, it is nevertheless a vital program for the purpose of controlling soil erosion and other reasons.

I feel that it is very dangerous for the future of both soil conservation and flood control if the two programs are put in the light of competing with each other. Both are essential, and neither is a substitute for the other.

Colonel L.J. Lincoln, Corps of Engineers, in a letter to editor Jim Reid of *The Topeka Daily Capital*, October 30, 1951

NARRATOR

While the citizens of the Blue River Valley cared about the environment they depended upon, they also cared about the culture of their small towns. Many citizens lamented the loss of these communities.

READER 4

There is more to building a reservoir that can be expressed in hydrological computations. There are social and cultural losses suffered from the uprooting of a substantial citizenry with their contribution to

society. These losses, though not measurable in monetary terms, are nonetheless real.

William P. Edwards of Bigelow in a statement to Congress, May 11, 1954

READER 1

[Garrison] was a good community, kindly, tolerant, and cooperative. Neighbors gathered to dig graves when members of the community passed away. There were woodcutting bees. There were sleigh-riding parties when young and old gathered on the hill tops for the long, breath-taking slides. There were excursions to the timber to cut the family Christmas tree. Whenever a farmer became ill, neighbors took care of his crops and livestock.

Unsigned editorial in *The News Letter*, Garrison, December 31, 1959

READER 2

We have been flooded out too year after year and we too would like flood control above us so that the wonderful fertile soil here could be saved and kept in production. Young farmers just starting on their farms and not having them paid for yet—will they receive enough compensation from the government so that they will be able to begin again some new place? Will the government just seize our property?

But can you see the heaviness in the heart of each one who has to leave everything material he has worked all his life to build up, his friends and neighbors are scattered, his church community gone. It is quite an adjustment.

Ruby M. Johnson of Randolph in a letter to Governor Arn, July 12, 1951

READER 3

The Blue Valley has, you might say, a unique culture. The prosperity and education enable the people to engage in civic affairs and furnish leadership. The Blue Valley people have shown a spiritual unity and faith that is outstanding. The nation can hardly afford to lose a culture like this.

Most of the people in the reservoir area must move away. There is no place for them unless they displace others. Those who move cannot take their schools, churches, and community facilities with them.

Glenn D. Stockwell Sr. of Randolph in a letter to Leslie G. Templin, executive secretary for the Commission on Town & Country Work, November 1, 1955

NARRATOR

Despite protest, with a four-year drought that brought about serious concerns for water, Congress appropriated funds to continue work on the dam. Upon its completion, the cost for the Tuttle Creek dam totaled 80 million federal dollars.

The dam opened on July 1, 1962. Water soon flooded what remained of the Blue River Valley towns—Stockdale, Randolph, Winkler, Cleburne, Irving, Blue Rapids, Shroyer, Garrison, Barrett, and Bigelow. The multipurpose reservoir was to provide flood control, water storage, and recreation.

And yet the larger question of water policy still loomed.

READER 4

Who should make the flood control policy for Kansas—the people concerned, the National Congress, or an agency of the government, which in turn is then given the power to carry out the policy they developed? When we try to unify flood control thinking in Kansas, we are told by the pro-dammers that the policy has already been decided—Pick-Sloan or nothing.

Dare we to suggest that it is time to stop the present piecemeal approach to the problem, the present vague and illusionary ramblings, the present autocratic methods used with no regard for public objections, the present bureaucratic bungling with no attempt at local control or participation.

William P. Edwards of Bigelow in a statement to Congress, May 11, 1954

NARRATOR

A little over 30 years later, in 1993, another great flood struck the Kansas River Basin. Although there was still damage, the dam held much of the water. Recently reinforced in 2009 to prevent damage or failure due to an earthquake, the Tuttle Creek reservoir continues to fill with silt, which has begun to affect its storage capacity. It will not be put to the full test until a flood comparable to that of 1951 visits Kansas.

READER 1

Water knows no artificial delineations of jurisdiction in its continuous flow from the land, along the streets and to the sea...

Edith Monfort, Secretary of the Kansas Watershed Association, in a letter to Dwight Eisenhower, August 19, 1952

—End—

Footnotes:

¹ **Catharine “Cay” Wright Menninger** (1902-1994) married Dr. William “Will” C. Menninger in December of 1925 and moved to Topeka. She served on a number of philanthropic and volunteer organizations throughout her lifetime, including serving as Chair of Volunteer Services for the Red Cross during the time of the Great Flood of 1951.

² **Governor Edward F. Arn** (1906-1998), a member of the Republican Party, was the 32nd Governor of Kansas (1951-1955). He had previously served as Attorney General of Kansas and as an Associate Justice on the Kansas Supreme Court. He continued to practice law in Wichita after he left office.

³ **Glenn Dale Stockwell, Sr.** (1901-1964) lived in the Blue River Valley his entire life. He farmed land near Randolph that had been homestead in 1857 by his wife’s German grandparents. He received an undergraduate degree in agricultural economics from Kansas State College (Kansas State University). He became president of the Blue Valley Study Association in 1951 and helped rally the Tuttle Creek dam opposition.