

Robert S. Kerr and River Navigation

Robert S. Kerr was born to **tenant farmers** in the Chickasaw Nation, Indian Territory. In 1929 he established Anderson-Kerr Drilling Company with his brother-in-law. Six years later he began a collaboration with Phillips Petroleum Company that introduced him to **geologist** Dean A. McGee and led to the establishment of Kerr-McGee Oil Industries.

Kerr was elected Oklahoma's first native-born governor in 1942 and was elected to the US Senate in 1948. He helped secure funding for the McClelland-Kerr Arkansas River **Navigation** System, a 445-mile long system with 18 **locks** and **dams**, that creates a staircase on the Arkansas River from the Mississippi River to the Port of Catoosa, near Tulsa.

Commercial river navigation on the Arkansas got its start in 1824. The Florence was the first steamboat to navigate the river to Fort Gibson, in what was then Indian Territory. Service on the Arkansas expanded as **emigrant** tribesmen established farms and **plantations**. Steamships carried people and agricultural **commodities** from 22 landings along the Arkansas in Indian Territory into the **commerce** of the Mississippi River Valley and on to New Orleans. Returning steamboats brought passengers and goods to **frontier** villages and farmsteads. However, as railroads expanded into eastern Indian Territory, commercial traffic on the Arkansas River **diminished**.

The McClelland-Kerr Arkansas River Navigation System was the result of many years' effort by various groups to restore navigation on the Arkansas. From 1971 to 1990 an average of 7.6 million tons of commerce was carried on the system. At the end of the 20th Century sand, gravel and rock registered as the largest percentage of the commodities shipped along the **channel**. Today, the system provides an important transportation link for agriculture. **Cargo** includes chemical fertilizers, wheat, soybeans and other agricultural products.

Robert S. Kerr died in 1963, eight years before the completion of the McClelland-Kerr Arkansas River Navigation System in 1971.

Vocabulary

cargo— the goods transported in a ship, airplane, or vehicle

channel— the deeper part of a river, harbor, or strait

commerce— buying and selling of goods especially on a large scale and between different places

commodity— a product of agriculture or mining

dam— a barrier preventing the flow of water

diminish—to become gradually less (as in size or importance)

emigrant—someone who leaves a country or region to live elsewhere

frontier— a region that forms the edge of the settled part of a country

geologist— someone who works in the science that deals with the history of the earth and its life especially as recorded in rocks

lock— an enclosure (as in a canal) with gates at each end used in raising or lowering boats as they pass from level to level

plantation— a planted area, especially an agricultural estate worked by laborers

tenant farmer— a farmer who works land owned by another and pays rent either in cash or in shares of produce