

Album

FALL 2009 ▼ WINTER 2010

VOLUME XXII NUMBER 4 ▼ VOLUME XXIII NUMBER 1



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continued on page 3

As Historians look back, they will rank water resources development of equal importance with the building of transcontinental railroads 100 years ago.

—Dwight Metzler, Executive Director of the Kansas State Water Resources Board, 1963

Paying the Water Bill: The Development of Water District #1



Johnson County's phenomenal residential building boom after World War II made expansion of its water supply system necessary, and expensive. Prairie Village, shown here in 1948, was just one of northeast Johnson County's fast-growing suburbs.

The Early Years

Today, Water District #1 serves 400,000 people in 16 cities within a 270 square mile area of Johnson County, plus a small section of the northeast corner of Miami County. When getting water is as simple as turning the tap on your faucet, it is easy to forget the effort and planning that created the system delivering that water. When considering a resource as vital as water, it is not surprising that the system's development was sometimes controversial.

It didn't take long for tensions to rise regarding water service in northeast Johnson County. The Water Supply Company was established in 1917 and began service to the city of Mission. In 1923, the company incorporated as The Shawnee-Mission Water Company, and by the summer of 1924, steep water rates had some Johnson County residents crying foul.

In 1941, the Shawnee-Mission Water Company was sold to a Texas-based company and

renamed the Kansas City Suburban Water Company. Following this sale, the boards of Mission and Shawnee Townships proposed a plan to purchase the company and establish water supply as a public utility. The public, however, took a dim view of the purchase price—\$625,000 for a system that served about 10,000 people.

By the late 1940s, however, the residents of northeast Johnson County had begun to view their failure to purchase the water company as a costly mistake. In 1945, the J.C. Nichols Company sold its water distributing system in Leawood to the Kansas City Suburban Water Company, further enlarging the company's territory. Water bills rose dramatically as exponential population growth in the area made the system's expansion essential. Public outrage grew as the water company not only financed the expansion through customers' water bills, but also took advantage of state corporation rules which allowed it to charge enough to make a six percent profit. An article in *The Kansas City Star* recalled that by 1948, "Lawn watering was out of the

continued on page 4

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to explore your
understanding of
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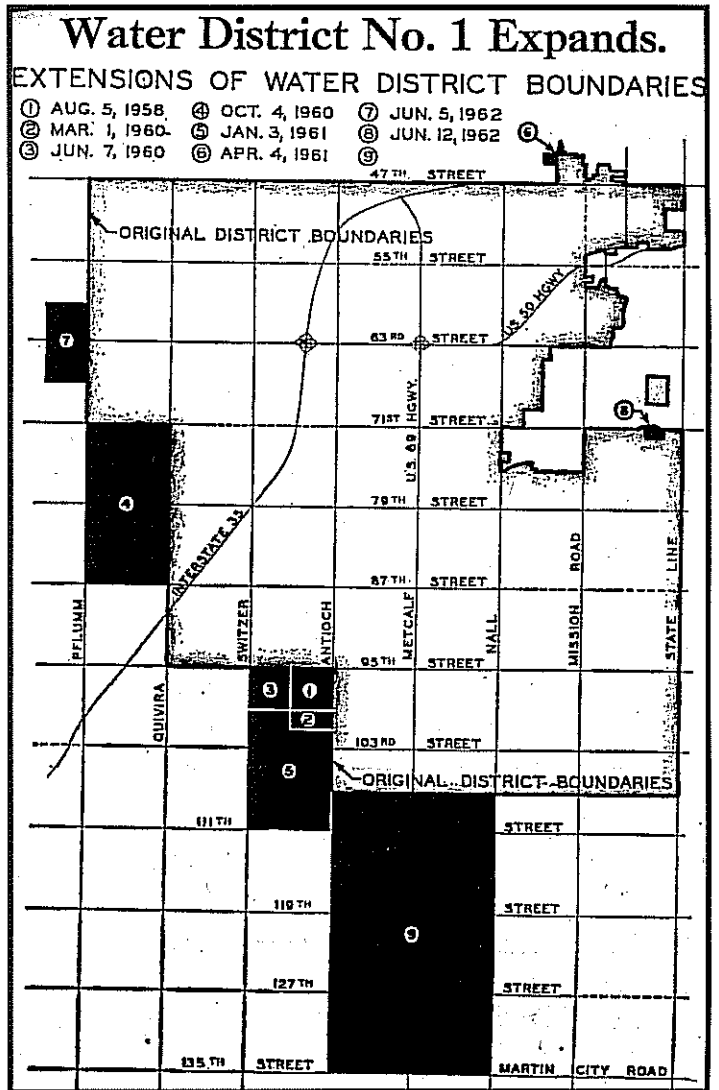
JOHNSON COUNTY Museum

Intensive work to aid farmers in procuring water will be continued until a substantial rain is received. Nothing will be left undone.

—Johnson County Democrat, 26 July 1934

All of Johnson County's water supplies were not created equal. In rural areas, residents often depended on wells and ponds. During the drought years of the Great Depression, the Kansas Emergency Relief Commission funded the construction of a number of farm ponds to expand the rural water supply. In 1941, the Kansas Rural Water District Act established the guidelines for the formations of rural water districts, which helped to bring clean drinking water into more homes. Of the seven rural water districts that once existed in Johnson County, all but three have since merged with Water District #1, which serves most of the eastern half of Johnson County.

Within each of the county's municipalities, the methods of obtaining and delivering water have varied. For instance, in 1913, the J.C. Nichols Company established its own water department which served areas, including parts of Westwood Hills, Fairway, Mission Woods, Mission Hills, and Prairie Village, that had been developed by the Nichols Company. The company purchased water from Kansas City, Missouri. Olathe pumped water from Olathe Lake; during dry spells, the city was forced to haul in water from other locations. Over the years, Olathe has increased its water supply through the addition of a second reservoir and four wells near the mouth of Cedar Creek. During the drought years of the 1930s, Lenexa, which relied primarily on wells, pumped water from Indian Creek. In 1937, WPA workers constructed a seven mile water line between from Kansas City, Missouri, to Lenexa to establish a more reliable water source for the community. While Olathe continues to supply its residents, and the residents of some rural areas, with water through a municipal system, Lenexa and the areas once served by the J.C. Nichols Company are now part of the area served by Water District #1.



The boundaries of Water District #1 have expanded many times since it began serving Johnson County in 1957. This 1962 map outlines the district's original boundaries, and illustrates its rapid expansion. The area omitted from the district in the upper northeast corner received its water supply from the J.C. Nichols Company. Courtesy of The Kansas City Times.

question. Bills ran from \$6 to \$10 a month compared to rates of from \$1 to \$3 in many other areas.” (In 1948, \$6 to \$10 a month would have been the equivalent of \$54 to \$89 a month in 2009 dollars; in comparison, \$1 to \$3 a month in 1948 would have been equal to \$9 to \$27 a month in today's dollars.)

Residents were dismayed not only by their water bills, but also by recently introduced legislative hurdles that prohibited the establishment of an alternative to the Kansas City Suburban Water Company. Before 1943, Kansas law had allowed townships to establish their own water supply and distribution systems. However, a bill passed in 1943 repealed that right. In order to possess a water system, a township had to be in a county with a first class city—a stipulation that prevented the townships of Mission or Shawnee from establishing their own water systems. Legal action to overturn the measure, spearheaded by the Northeast Johnson County Council of Homeowners, resulted in the passage of Kansas Statute 19-3502 in 1951. This statute allowed for the establishment of quasi-municipal water districts in Miami, Franklin, Johnson, and Wyandotte Counties. Although areas already served by municipal water systems were exempt, the water districts allowed by this statute could disregard county, city, or township boundaries, and were not subject to the control of counties, cities, or townships. Instead, the water district would be managed by five elected board members.

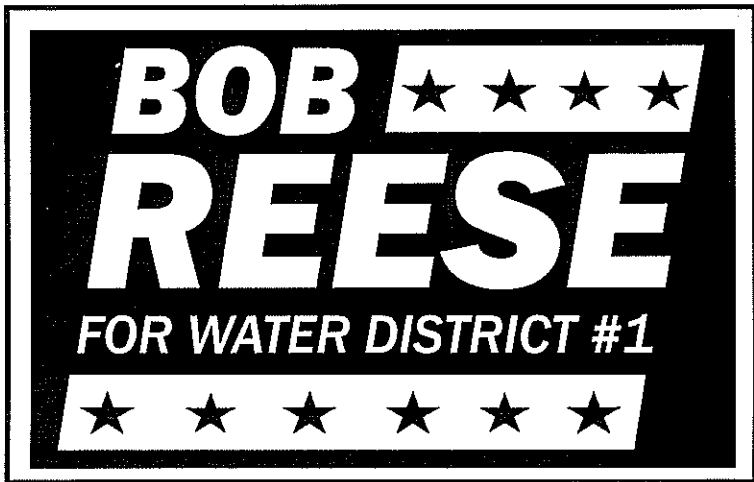


Many residents of rural Johnson County relied on wells for their water supply. Ernest P. Smith, shown here in about 1910, farmed near the present-day intersection of 75th and Lamar in Overland Park.

Voting "Yes" for Water District #1

I'm for public ownership. I'm for rates going down. I'm voting 'Yes' so that my kids, at least, will be able to water the grass.
—Overheard at the bond election, 1956.

Water District #1 was organized on November 2, 1953. The first five members of the Water District Board—Tom C. Hansen, Murry W. Maxwell, E.A. Mattingly, Arthur C. Hueners, and W.J. Roberts—were elected on December 15, 1953. The original boundaries of the district included State Line Road on the east, 107th Street on the south, Quivira and Pflumm on the west, and the Johnson County-Wyandotte County line on the north. These boundaries contained forty-four square miles and included most of Mission Township and about half of Shawnee Township. It was another three years before Water District #1 actually got into the water supply business: on November 17, 1956, the Water District Board called a special election on the ques-



Bob Reese, current Chairman of WaterOne's governing board, used this postcard in his 2005 election campaign. The board, originally comprised of five members, now has seven elected members.

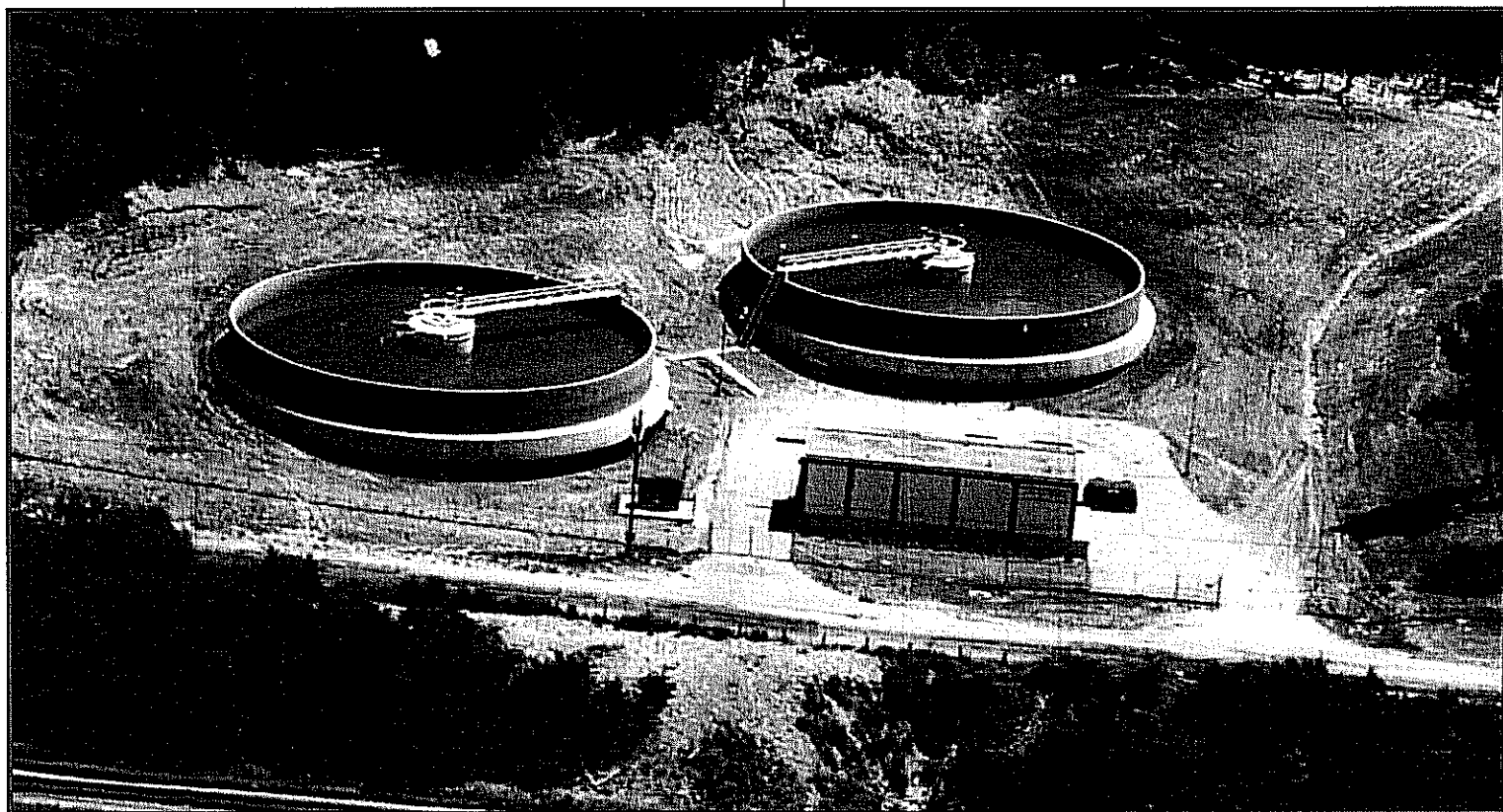
tion of whether or not to purchase the Kansas City Suburban Water Company, with a bond for \$20 million. An overwhelming majority of voters—8,813 to 1,750—passed the measure. An estimated 80,000 water customers were affected by the decision.

Another point of contention concerning Johnson County's water supply was its source—the cities of Kansas City, Kansas, and Kansas City, Missouri. By the mid-1950s, Kansas City, Kansas, was looking across its southern border with covetous eyes—and saw its water policy as a means by which to influence Johnson County's growth. In 1954, the city's manager submitted a report which summarized Kansas City, Kansas's attitude towards Johnson County's development:

Perhaps the most distressing effect of the city's present [water] policy has been to encourage the development of fringe or satellite communities. The residents of these fringe developments, most of whom owe their livelihood to Kansas City, relieve themselves of their fair share of the cost of maintaining the facilities and services that afford them their employment. Certainly, Kansas City's policy for water service should not foster the trend toward 'suburbanitis'—rather it should be viewed as one means of assuring orderly growth and development in those areas which may logically and eventually become a part of Kansas City.

In an effort to provide northeast Johnson County residents with independence from Kansas City's water supply, a new purification and treatment plant was built on the Kansas River near Morris. The Morris plant initially drew water from a series of wells. This plant allowed water to be pumped to 67th Street and Quivira Road, where it connected to an existing distribution system; this transmission line was completed in 1959. That same year, a new storage tank was installed at Delmar and 79th Streets in Prairie Village to increase the system's capacity. The following year, three additional storage tanks were planned at a site near 49th and Quivira Road.

Despite the continued growth of the water district's infrastructure, northeast Johnson County remained dependent on the two Kansas Cities for a portion of its water supply through the mid-1960s. By 1965, however, construction was finally underway on a plan that had been conceived a decade earlier—an intake on the Kansas River. This intake, located on the south bank of the Kansas River near the entrance to the Lake Quivira



This water intake on the Kansas River, constructed in the 1960s, greatly increased the supply of water available to the water district. The "candy cane" structure, which was used to divert water, no longer exists. Courtesy of Water One.

continued on page 6

Country Club, was projected to offer an ultimate capacity of 100 million gallons of water per day. With an independent water supply in its sights, the water district agreed to supply water to the City of Lenexa, which had also been receiving its water from Kansas City, Missouri. By 1975, the Kansas River was supplying 75 percent of the district's water, with 21 alluvium wells making up the difference.

The Price of Water

I bought this water system and sold patrons on the theory of public ownership, mainly on the basis of reduced water rates. But I haven't been able to reduce the rates because of the cost of the district's rapid expansion.

—E.A. Mattingly, Water District #1 Board Member, 1964

Water District #1 was able to act on its promise to reduce water rates twice—in 1964, rates were reduced by 6% to 7%, and in 1967, the district was able to offer its customers a 10% rate reduction. The relief was shortlived, however. By 1968, soaring interest rates on the bonds the district needed to sell to continue its expansion prompted a 20% rate increase.

A decade later, customers were again shocked to discover that their water rate had been increased by an average of 35%. Although the rampant inflation of the late 1970s played a role in the price hike, growth continued to be the primary culprit. In 1976, a study conducted by engineering firm Black and Veatch concluded that, in order to ensure an adequate water supply for the area through the year 2025, a line would have to be built to take water from the Missouri River. That project became the first phase of a four-part project which would ultimately increase the system's capacity by over 100 million gallons a day. The plans, and the rate increase, prompted protests from a number of city mayors. The city of Lenexa filed a class-action lawsuit in hopes of blocking the rate increase. The board of Johnson County Commissioners requested a moratorium on the expansion plans, and even commissioned a study of their own to determine the feasibility of bringing the water district under county



This storage tank, located at Delmar and 79th Streets in Prairie Village, was erected in 1959; this photograph was taken in the early 1960s. Courtesy of Water One.

control. To their surprise, however, they discovered that the county commission had no authority over the board of the water district, which was governed by state legislation. The board moved forward with its expansion plans, and the first phase was completed in 1984. The second phase followed suit in 1990, and phase three was completed in 1992. The fourth phase, which brought the system's total capacity to 180 million gallons of water a day, was finished in 2004.

Given the history of Water District #1—now known as WaterOne—it should come as no surprise that growth, and how to pay for it, are still issues for the district. In 1984, Lenexa and Lake Quivira became part of the territory of Water District #1. Between 1988 and 1990, when Rural Water Districts 2, 3, and 5, and the area served by the Kansas Water Company—the water service originally provided by the J.C. Nichols Company—merged with the district, nearly tripling its size. In 2002, Rural Water District #1 also merged with Water District #1. The comprehensive master plan adopted in the late 1970s has been amended as population projections for Johnson County are revised upward. Additional expansion phases now aim for a capacity of 330 million gallons of water per day by the year 2032.

Letter from the Director

continued from page 2



are a huge hit with the kids. A final area is in development which will provide families and grade school students the opportunity to compare and contrast rural, suburban and urban areas in an interactive environment, and learn basic concepts in urban planning.

In other news, the Museum received a federal grant for \$121,321 from the Institute of Museum and Library Services to begin planning the exhibits and programs for the Museum's vision to create a new museum focused on suburban history and Johnson County's role in that story nationally. The Johnson County Museum is the only museum in the metropolitan area to receive one of these highly-competitive grants from the federal agency. The planning is underway with a team of consultants, and we look forward to hearing your ideas and opinions about those plans. We will be providing updates to you and the entire community throughout the process. We look forward to your participation in this exciting initiative!

Mindi C. Love