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Steps taken to reduce flooding

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Steps taken to reduce flooding

By Wendy Richter
For the Siftings

Development of drainage districts in the early twentieth century benefitted Arkansas's economy, but their construction could often be controversial.

Without proper drainage, low-lying land was useless for farming: once cleared and drained, rich soil could be very productive. In Arkansas, the history of districts in the northeastern part of the state has been explored, but little attention has been given to south Arkansas.

The Terre Noire Creek's Ross Drainage District here in Clark County was just one of dozens of such entities created in the state between 1907 and 1927.

Terre Noire Creek crosses Clark County, flowing generally southeast, and drains much of the county's land. The name "Terre Noire" originated with the early French hunters and trappers, and is often spelled "Terre Noir" in many sources: it means "black earth" or "black land." The creek area's terrain varies a great deal, ranging from elevations of more than 600 feet above sea level to as low as 120 feet above sea level toward the southeast.

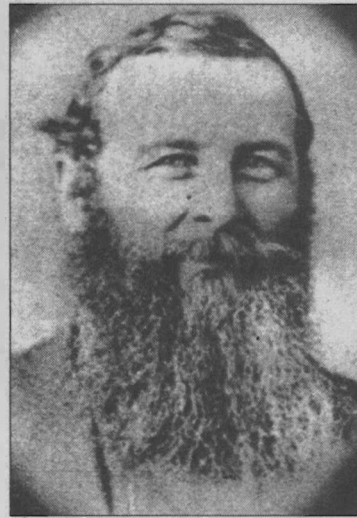
Terre Noire Creek receives water from numerous tributaries along the way. The change

in elevation means that more rapidly-flowing water upstream runs into slower-moving water in flatter areas to the southeast, resulting in a greater potential for flooding.

Even with the flooding issues, the soil around Terre Noire Creek was quite fertile, and the area became significant in growing cotton and other crops by the mid-1800s. In fact, Jesse Arendall Ross, for whom the drainage district would be named, was born in 1838 in Alabama and moved to Clark County with his family in 1846, where they began farming in the Terre Noire bottomlands.

As he grew older, Ross' experience with frequent flooding on his farm caused him to seek ways to mitigate the problem. He even manufactured drainage tiles to control overflows, enjoying a good bit of success with the business, since his tile products were used by many in Clark County and the surrounding area.

However, with the advent of steam shovels around the turn of the twentieth century, circumstances changed. A greater opportunity existed for diverting overflows in order to facilitate agricultural endeavors. Clark County's entrance into the drainage district era began in 1908, when organizers proposed a district to control flooding on



IMAGES COURTESY OF THE CLARK COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

Above left, Jesse A. Ross, for whom the Ross Drainage District is named. Above right, work on the Ross Drainage District.

Terre Noire Creek. Even though its stated purposes were to drain and reclaim land, "making them the most valuable lands in Clark County, for agricultural purposes, and at a reasonable cost, extending over a period of thirty years," a lengthy dispute ensued between land owners seeking to establish the district and out-of-state timber speculators, creating controversy for years.

According to the Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture, this is how the drainage district process worked: "Organization of drainage districts required landowners to petition the county courts to place a

lien on the lands through a court order. The court order insured that improvement taxes would be paid. Money collected from the taxes paid the principal; it and interest on bonds issued by the drainage district, along with proceeds from the bond sales, were used to build the levees and drainage canals."

Clark County native Dr. Ron Deaton has examined the fascinating story behind Clark County's Ross Drainage District, looking at the geographic, political, and economic factors involved in its completion. The results of Deaton's research will appear in the 2017 Clark County

Historical Journal. Plus, interested parties may also hear Deaton discuss the topic at the Clark County Historical Association's next meeting and program at noon on Tuesday, November 7, at Western Sizzlin' in Arkadelphia. The public is invited to attend.

To learn more about Clark County history, visit or contact the Clark County Historical Museum (www.clarkcountyhistory.org or (870) 230-1360) or the Clark County Historical Association's Archives at the Ouachita Baptist University Library (www.obu.edu/archives or (870) 245-5332).