



## The Time It Never Rained

# Texas' Historic 1950's Drought

*By James Barnes*

*Lake Lavon Dam, site of  
a famous barbecue.*



*"During the long Texas drought of the 1950's, ... (it) was told again and again about a man who bet several of his friends that it would never rain again, and collected from two of them."*

**Elmer Kelton, *The Time It Never Rained***

Drought and Texas are inseparable. If you are a citizen of Garland older than three, you have already lived in the time of a severe drought. The disastrous Dust Bowl era of the 1930s included episodic droughts, but the otherworldly clouds of dust that caused the largest forced migration of U.S. citizens in our history was largely the result of intemperate agricultural processes that stripped land of the drought-resistant grasses whose roots held the dirt in place.

The 1950s Texas Drought was the worst in our region in recorded history, and it deserves equivalent disaster status, and its capitalized title, with the Dust Bowl. Drought actually started in late 1949 in West Texas, and by 1951 it was statewide from El Paso to Texarkana. It took a terrible toll on agriculture, with some areas losing almost all livestock, either from forced relocation or from death by starvation. Just before its end, and despite almost generalized and sometimes draconian rationing, some municipalities ran out, or almost ran out, of water. This shortage included Dallas, which was remembered to have only a few months water supply left in early 1957.

Post-World War I Garland had a population of about 1,200 and no water or sewer system. Rural accommodations translated into our town setting; water came from individual wells; sewer facilities were outhouses. In the early '20's, voters passed a \$100,000 bond issue to dig a 2,300-foot artesian well to provide the town with its first water and sewer systems. A popular story arose that the city failed to reach accommodation with the Texas Power & Light for the "juice"



### **Backyard facilities in 1906 Garland**

control. Lake Texoma, completed in 1944, was a flood control project of the Corps as was Lavon when its construction was started in 1948. Garland's population was 14,000, and the 1920s water supply system was stressed beyond capacity. Fortunately, mayors from towns that would form the North Texas Municipal Water District entreated the Corps of Engineers to consider that Garland and other cities and towns in North Texas also needed a large reservoir for a water supply, not just for flood control.

Garland in 1949 received 41 inches of rain, almost 5 inches above normal. If normal rainfall had continued, Lavon was estimated to take five years to become a usable water source, but expert prophesy clashed with reality by the fall of 1950, the beginning of six years of skimpy to non-existent rainfall. Every summer of those years, "the city ran a dead heat with disaster," to quote Michael Hayslip in one of his historical writings. Dallas started rationing water by 1952, as the city was caught short in its reservoir capacity with an unfilled and unfinished addition to Lake Dallas in Denton County.

The Lavon dam closed in October of 1953 accompanied by a large barbecue party on the premises, where Ben Jackson of Garland supplied two calves for the celebration. Shortly thereafter, and without any plausible explanation or expectation, Lavon started accumulating water. In the worst of the drought in 1956 only three years after the sacrifice of Jackson's cattle, and despite not close to being filled, Lavon became an additional useable water supply not only for Garland and its sister cities in the NTMWD, but also as a help for Dallas with a supply line through Garland directly to the Lake June pumping station. Despite this respite, 1957 began with the reality of impending disasters statewide. It just had to rain in the spring; it always had rained in the spring or in the fall or sometime during the year; except it hadn't - for six years in a row.

President Eisenhower visited San Angelo in January of 1957 to show support to our neighbors where the drought was even worse than it was here. Ike's visit was an equivalent "good omen" to the 1953 BBQ at Lavon; Ike's presage did not take 3 years for fruition; it took just 3 months. In the spring of 1957, rain returned with a vengeance,

to run the pumps. However, it is also reasonable to assume that Garland basically decided to go into the electricity business along with its newly created waterworks. The city bought a new generator on credit, creating Garland Power and Light and almost 50 years of contentiousness between the city and TP&L.

After World War II, the Trinity Improvement Program by the Army Corps of Engineers, which included Lake Lavon and other projects, experienced a resurrection from its wartime dormancy. The Corps stated its singular purpose with this program was flood

and despite all planned flood control efforts, disastrous flooding occurred in every major river in Texas. Water went over the spillway at Lake Texoma, something the Corps considered might never happen. (An anecdote heard but not confirmed: the Corps provided the unusual Texoma spillway only as an afterthought, which subsequently saved the Denison Dam that was within 30 feet of being overtopped in April 1957.) Garza Little Elm and Lavon filled to capacity in a few weeks instead of a few years. Garland, Dallas, and the cities in the NTMWD again had ample water, until they didn't. Drought was over, until it wasn't. Life goes on in Texas, as it always has.

## A MAN PAID TO MAKE IT RAIN

Irving Krick (1906-1996) was a noted meteorologist of somewhat ill repute, his celebrity based mostly on his work as a consultant in the film industry. He used "historical" maps and prior weather events to make forecasts that had no scientific basis or evidence of effectiveness.

His tireless self-promotion got the attention of General Hap Arnold, who hired him for the weather forecasting team assembled prior to the 1944 D-Day landings in Normandy. Krick assured everyone, despite disagreement from his peers, that June 5, the original date, would be a calm and sunny day. He was wrong, and the accurate forecast allowed for a critical one-day delay from June 5 to June 6 that took the Germans by complete surprise a lull in the storm.

Ignoring his failure with D-Day, he promoted himself to commercial long-term forecaster and cloud seeder after the war. During The 1950s Texas Drought, his team was brought to Dallas as the desperate city engaged him to employ his rain making technology. Some news reports said his compensation for the cloud-seeding experiment was \$30,000 per year. Fortunately for our taxpayers, the City of Garland did not participate in funding this unsuccessful operation, but everyone would have happily dug an umbrella out of the back of the closet had the scheme worked. Nature eventually came to the rescue several months after Krick departed and the region was rewarded with higher than normal rainfall for the next few years.



***Irving Krick (in black glasses) who started a "for profit" weather forecasting service along with a sideline of cloud seeding is seen hard at work with his crew charting weather patterns in the western United States. His attempt at cloud seeding for the Dallas area failed.***

***(Photos in this edition are from Garland Landmark Society archives, except for cover photo of Lavon Dam, which is from Wikipedia)***

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