

The Bandera PROPHECY

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Frontier Tales

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The Bandera Prophet

Medina Lake is a very special place that was born of a fantastic dream – a dream as big as Texas that ultimately took the tenacity, skill, and imagination of a cast of thousands. Yet, the lake’s crystal-clear waters belie the controversy that has existed since a group of developers first saw the potential to build a dam and create a lake from the waters of the Medina River.

The river has a long history of providing sustenance. The Native Americans took advantage of the vast resources of fish, pecans, and wildlife and used the caves high in the limestone bluffs as shelter. After the Civil War, herds of cattle from South Texas followed the Medina River on their way to the Western Trail and northern markets. Families came to farm the fertile riverbank, graze cattle and raise goats and sheep along the rocky limestone outcroppings.

But the farmers in the Medina River Valley were at the mercy of harsh droughts and devastating floods. The need for irrigation was an early concern. In the 1840s, Henri Castro explored this area and saw the river could be used for irrigation by his colony of Castroville if there was a way to harness the periodic floods that rushed through the river’s canyons. An earthen and stone dam was built, but Castro knew that one day an even bigger dam should be built.

In 1894, while hunting in the river’s canyons, Alex Walton, a young man from San Antonio, also saw the potential of capturing the Medina’s floodwaters. His belief in a future dam was so fervent, he became an engineer. It took 17 years before he could bring his idea to fruition. In 1910, with fellow engineers, Terrell Bartlett and Willis Ranney, they

enlisted the help of Dr. Frederick Pearson, an American engineer who built dams in North and South America. They raised \$6,000,000 in financing from British investors and established the Medina Irrigation Company. Construction on the concrete dam began in November 1911. With laborers from Mexico and south Texas, a railroad was built to bring supplies to the remote location and a cement plant was built on-site. A camp of tents for the workers and houses for management was established. The camp became its own little town with shops, a school and a much-needed hospital for the hazardous work of building a dam. The dam was completed in only a year and, at the time, was the largest dam in Texas and the fourth largest in the United States. Yet, it came at a cost for those whose homesteads were on land that was destined to be flooded by the newly formed lake. Some of the families adjusted and opened businesses that catered to recreation on the lake. But the lake has never been stable. With extended droughts and the use of the lake for irrigation by farms south of the dam, lake residents and business owners have seen their fortunes rise and fall with the waters while the turmoil of who has control of the water levels has been a constant.