

Meet the Beardsley of Beardsley Road -- Signs of our Past by Ed Allen

A road, a canal, a recreation center and a sign along the railroad all bear the Beardsley name raising the question, "Who was this Beardsley?"

The story begins long before there was a Sun City. Earliest settlers along the Salt River had begun clearing ancient Indian canals, bringing water to the thirsty, but fertile, desert. There was plenty of cheap land available from the government, and the area went "canal crazy" in the late 1800s building canals up to 40 miles long bringing water as far west as State Farm Stadium.

The activity in the Salt River Valley caused a group of local men to look further westward at what might be accomplished in the Aqua Fria River watershed. They laid plans for 5 dams and two canals to deliver water to 160,000 acres to the west.



Engineer George Beardsley was so excited about the project he called his brother William to join him. The two organized a construction company to bring the project into existence. George died shortly afterward, and it would be his brother William who would bring the project into existence, overcoming obstacle after obstacle.

Work started on a dam and canal in 1892. The canal was planned to go as far south as the Hassayampa River some 40 miles away. Heavy rains in 1895 brought Beardsley his first setback, washing away a major portion of the new dam, and bankrupting Beardsley's company.

Beardsley found new investors among friends in the East, and soon was repairing the dam and pushing ahead with the canal. The next setback came in 1902 when Congress passed the National Reclamation Act to provide federal help in building dams to store water in the arid southwest. Roosevelt Dam would be the first to be constructed, and the government pulled public lands from sale, not only in the SRV, but in the Agua Fria River watershed as well. Suddenly, Beardsley had no land to irrigate with his privately-financed dam and canal.

He came up with a clever solution involving the railroad. It was able to exchange worthless, arid land along its right-of-way in northern Arizona for government land elsewhere. It acquired 39,000 acres in the Agua Fria watershed, which they then sold to Beardsley for \$2.50/acre. He was back in business, and promptly sold 6,000 acres for \$20/acre to Goodyear, which was looking for land to grow cotton.

Beardsley next laid plans for a much larger dam and to reassure investors, he renamed his Aqua Fria Land & Water Co. the "Maricopa County Municipal Water District." It still exists today on Grand Ave. at the site of the former town of Beardsley, AZ. In 1919, he hired a young engineer, Carl Pleasant, who recommended a new dam design using huge buttresses to withstand the weight of the water. This design required one quarter of the material used in Roosevelt Dam and reduced the cost considerably. Just as the project was finally underway, Beardsley died in 1925, two years before the dam was completed. Fortunately, his engineer son had joined him, and would carry the project forward.



There's much more to the story ... the finished dam developed cracks in the buttresses and it would be years before it was declared safe. Years later, a much larger dam was built, which is the one we see today. You'll find all the details at the Lake Pleasant Discovery Center ... call 602-372-7470 for hours.