

HONDO PROJECT
12 miles southwest of Roswell on Rio Hondo
Roswell vicinity
Chaves County
New Mexico

HAER NM-21
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

FIELD RECORDS

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

HONDO PROJECT

HAER No. NM-21

Location: 12 miles southwest of Roswell on Rio Hondo, Roswell vicinity, Chaves County, New Mexico

Date of Construction: 1907

Original Owner, Use: U.S. Reclamation Service, irrigation, flood control

Current Owner, Use: U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, abandoned

Significance: The Hondo Project was one of the first reclamation works built by the federal government after the passage of the Reclamation Act (Newlands Act) in 1902. It is significant in the history of the U.S. Reclamation Service in that it was one of their first failures.

Description: The Hondo Reservoir is located east of the Hondo River and north of the town of Roswell, New Mexico. It is surrounded by privately-owned ranches. The Hondo Project was planned to divert water from the Rio Hondo via an earthen diversion dam measuring 100'. The diverted water followed an inlet canal 8,275' to a natural depression located off the river channel. The storage capacity of the depression was increased by the construction of six earthen embankments, varying in height from 6.8' to 25.5', around it. Water for irrigation could be released from the reservoir through an outlet tower. Downstream, this water could be recovered from the river and led onto fields by a series of diversion dams.

History: About 1890, the Pecos Valley Irrigation and Investment Company bought the property and rights of the New Mexico Reservoir and Irrigation Company. Among these were the property and rights of a reservoir site on the Rio Hondo. The Pecos Valley Company then proceeded to investigate this reservoir site 12 miles above Roswell on the Rio Hondo. However, economic uncertainty preceding the Panic of 1893 stalled construction.

In 1904, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation bought the site for the reservoir. The U.S. Geological Survey had reported on the site before construction at the request of the Reclamation Service and predicted that there would be no serious leaking. Soon work began on what the agency termed the

Hondo Reservoir. The reservoir was completed by 1907, but it was never completely filled because it was located over a large limestone formation that allowed water to leak through the bottom. Leakage was so great it reached a maximum of 200 cubic feet/second, making the reservoir worthless. After repeated efforts to stem the leakage, the reservoir was finally abandoned. For several years, the canal system built with the project was used for irrigation purposes, but now it remains virtually abandoned.

The failure of the Hondo Project was a valuable lesson for the Reclamation Service in its early years. Fortunately, the total cost of the project (\$360,000) was only one-third of 1 percent of Reclamation Service expenditures between 1902 and 1916.¹ The site has been undisturbed since its construction, and the structures are well preserved.

Sources:

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Shinkle, James D., Roswell, New Mexico. Interview by field team, June 26, 1971.

¹ Arthur Powell Davis, *Irrigation Works Constructed by the United States Government* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1917).

U.S. 83rd Congress, 2nd session. House Document No. 436. "Letter from the Chief of Engineers, Department of the Army...on a Survey of Rio Hondo at Roswell, New Mexico." Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1954.

Historians: Steve Rae and T. Lindsay Baker, June 26-27 and October 21, 1971

Project Information: The Hondo Project site was inventoried for the Historic American Engineering Record as part of the Southwest Water Resources Project, a joint project with the Texas Tech Water Resources Center. The survey was subsequently published as *Water for the Southwest: Historical Survey and Guide to Historic Sites* by the American Society of Civil Engineers in September 1973.