



Grand River Conservation Authority



The Grand: A Canadian Heritage River

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Cover photo

The July 11, 1939, sod turning ceremony for construction of Shand Dam, with Minister of Public Works Colin Campbell at the shovel.



Shand Dam a first for Canada

By Janet Baine
GRCA Communications Specialist

Before the Shand Dam and the other major reservoirs on the Grand River opened, the river was sometimes a raging, uncontrolled torrent that menaced property owners all along its banks, and at other times it was a smelly trickle of sewer water.

The first Grand River dam, the Shand Dam, started to change all that. It came about after years of struggle to find a reservoir plan, a political structure and funding. The first big step taken by the Grand River Conservation Commission (formed in 1934) was to hire H. G. Acres & Co. of Niagara Falls during the summer of 1938 to come up with a reservoir plan and then supervise construction of the new dam.

Soliciting government funds was another big problem that solved itself as the Great Depression lingered. Money flowed to the project

thanks to the lean years and what today's government would call infrastructure spending as part of an economic stimulus package.

The federal and provincial governments each kicked in 37.5 per cent of the \$2-million cost of the dam, while the eight local municipalities that made up the GRCC (Brantford, Galt, Fergus, Elora, Paris, Kitchener, Waterloo and Preston) paid 25 per cent. In return, the municipalities got the dam and jobs for some of the unemployed people in their communities, helping to lighten their welfare rolls.

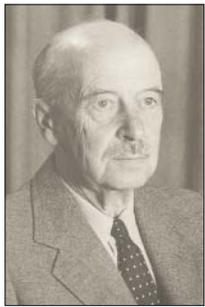
Municipalities contributed different amounts based on a formula that had been developed a few years earlier. The overall project cost included acquiring 2,000 acres of land. Half of Belwood, along with most of its businesses, were



affected by the construction.

The project got underway in 1939. At the peak, an on-site construction camp included a dozen buildings to house 200 men. Most of the unskilled labourers were from the towns and cities in the Grand River and they lived on the work-site. While machines were used, there was also lots of manual work.

When WW II began in September 1939, the provincial and federal governments decided the project was too far along to be put on hold for the war.



William Philip

Instead, once the high spring waters subsided in April 1940, there was big push to complete the dam quickly.

By Nov. 14, 1940, all Canadian records were broken when 256,000 cubic metres of clay

had been put in place and compacted in just five weeks. The dam's steel gates were installed and the dam was complete by the end of January 1942. The "last spike" on a railway that had to be moved due to the dam construction was driven in by Grand River Conservation Commission chair William Philip on March 9, and then the first train crossed over the dam.

Opened to great fanfare

It opened with great fanfare on Aug. 7, 1942, with 3,500 people on hand. There is still some film footage of the opening. A street dance and food for 5,000 people were provided by Raynor Construction, the firm hired to build the dam. It was the largest party ever held in Fergus. The post office even issued a special cancellation stamp on mail from Elora and Fergus that day.



At first, the new dam was called the Grand Valley Dam, but tourists searching for it ended up at Grand Valley, 18

km upstream. As a result, it was renamed the Shand Dam after a local pioneer family.

The Shand Dam garnered national and international attention. The Financial Post ran a front page story a year after the dam opened, with a headline that proclaimed "Grand Valley masters its river." The article began: "Post-war projects that will pay for themselves, prevent serious annual losses and permanent injury to otherwise productive land offer attractions impossible to ignore." It described the value of large engineering projects that would also provide post-war jobs for returning soldiers.

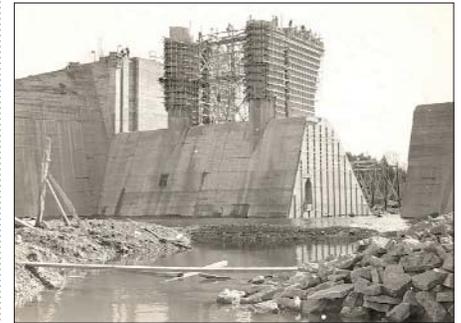
The Shand Dam was the first large-scale multi-purpose dam in Canada, and it formed a 12-km long lake — water that is held back to prevent flooding and then let out during the dry summer months to supply fresh water to communities downstream.

Damage costs averted

That value was proven after Hurricane Hazel in 1954. The Toronto area suffered tremendous loss of life and property, but no one died in the Grand River watershed as a result of the hurricane. The Toronto Star gave high praise to the Shand Dam for protecting people and property in a lead editorial with the headline "Big Dam Saved Cities."

The reservoir system in the Grand River watershed has made the lives of watershed residents much less susceptible to the problems of flooding. They have paid for themselves many times over. They reduced flood damage significantly twice this winter — once in the thaw in late December and a second time in mid-February.

Today we know that large engineering projects such as this minimize the impact of flooding and drought, but don't eliminate these problems. Instead, dams are one of several measures that help to keep people and property safe from flooding by counterbalancing the impact of climate change and development that removes water storage from the land.



Photos from top: sod turning ceremony for the Shand Dam; construction in October 1940; a visit to the worksite; logs on GRCC truck; mayors from the three communities that benefited from the dam were William Pelz of Preston, Joe Meinzingler of Kitchener and J. P. Ryan of Brantford.