

The Little River Drainage District collection

*Carl Pracht and
Julie Banks*

The authors

Carl Pracht is Associate Professor and Julie Banks is Professor, both at Kent Library, Southeast Missouri State University, Cape Girardeau, Missouri, USA.

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Abstract

Southeast Missouri is prosperous today as a rich, agricultural center partly because of the Little River Drainage District (LRDD), the body responsible for digging the levees, channels, and canals during the early twentieth century that drained the swampland which covered much of Southeast Missouri. The LRDD collected all the records related to the engineering project and to various aspects of people's lives during that time, including tax records, plats, maps, catalogs, field reports, etc., and asked Southeast Missouri State University's Kent Library to house them. Because of space considerations, the collection has been placed at the Bootheel Center, in Malden, Missouri. This article gives a brief history of Southeast Missouri and the LRDD, describes the collection, and highlights why these papers are of fundamental importance to the citizens of Southeast Missouri.

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Introduction

"Swampeast", Missouri, near the convergence of the Mississippi and Ohio rivers, held great agricultural promise. To gain access to the rich soil beneath and to realize its full potential, however, farmers first had to control the water problem. With the goal of draining water off the land, the circuit court of Butler County, Missouri, created the Little River Drainage District (LRDD), in 1907, to administer a drainage project in all seven counties of Southeast Missouri – Bollinger, Cape Girardeau, Dunklin, New Madrid, Pemiscot, Scott, and Stoddard. The undertaking consisted of digging a network of ditches, canals, and levees. It lasted from 1914 to 1928, and at first seemed doomed to failure. However, after the court awarded more land, the venture proved wildly successful. Today the LRDD still exists for the purpose of overseeing the drainage network with the help of the Army Corps of Engineers, and it owns all the historical records relating to various aspects of people's lives, the time, and the marvelous engineering feat that resulted in a drastically changed landscape and future of Southeast Missouri, especially the Bootheel area. This article describes briefly the history of the drainage district, discusses the collection that is temporarily housed in the Bootheel Educational Center, one of Southeast Missouri State University's (SEMO) learning centers located in Malden, Missouri, and identifies material that remains at the LRDD offices in Cape Girardeau, Missouri, and Wardell, Missouri.

The project

Bootheel pioneers knew the land had to be drained in order to reap its wealth. The problem was that all the rivers – the Mississippi, Ohio, Little, White, Castor, and St Francis – naturally flowed, and often overflowed, in the area, causing flooding. Even with this situation, lumbermen were able to take advantage of the abundant forest stands. Once the trees were harvested, however, the swampy land discouraged any meaningful use. Thus, the LRDD came into being. Its goal was to harness the rivers by building a series of ditches, canals,



and levees to drain away the unwanted water and to prevent future flooding. Its price tag eventually came to \$11.1 million, initially paid for by bonds. Today, the landowners who benefit from the drainage network pay an assessed value.

The hard work, done mostly in the 1920s, of moving more yards of earth than were moved in the building of the Panama Canal, has clearly paid off, with 957.8 miles of ditches, 304.43 miles of levees, and 96 percent water-free, exceedingly-rich cropland that today supports soybean, corn, grain sorghum, cotton, and rice farming. Comprising over 540,000 acres of land and contributing to the drainage of over 1.2 million acres of land, the LRDD is the largest drainage district in the USA, extending about 90 miles south from Cape Girardeau to the Missouri-Arkansas border and between ten to 20 miles wide. Its canal system is smaller in size, but more complicated, than that of the Everglades. Specific details about the LRDD can be found in *The Little River Drainage District of Southeast Missouri: 1907 – Present* (1989), which is a good source for reading about the LRDD. In the next two years, the corporate body plans to publish an updated brochure. Currently, another good source of information about the size, shape, and history of the LRDD is under the "community history" link of the Web site www.gideon.k12.mo.us

LRDD collection

Though the LRDD collection might not be well-known beyond historical circles, its importance to the citizens of Missouri, especially those who have some connection to the Bootheel, is paramount. The significance of the collection partly rests on the value of the drainage project itself and partly on the wealth of information available about all phases of life and activity during the engineering project. These records give a snapshot of what life was like in Southeast Missouri during the early 1900s and highlight the engineering processes and end results of digging and moving so much land.

Because of the LRDD connection to the drainage project and the related papers, it is not surprising that until recently the majority of the

collection was housed at the LRDD's Cape Girardeau office in the H&H Building. However, the records were stored in an unheated, cramped basement. Thus, to gain space, to preserve the material, and to make the records more accessible, the agency contacted SEMO's Kent Library with a request to house most of the LRDD collection in the library. Because of space considerations, however, the decision was made to send the collection to SEMO's climatically-controlled Bootheel Education Center, in Malden, Missouri, for five years. What will happen to the material after that is uncertain, for both the University of Missouri-Columbia and the University of Missouri-Rolla have expressed an interest in acquiring it.

For the present time, the papers are grouped by subject matter, e.g. the Delta camp, and type of material, e.g. field books. Loose documents are in boxes that are interspersed with large volumes on 308 regular bookshelves. There are some records from other drainage districts in the collection, but the preponderance of materials – maps, blueprints, ledgers, field books, tax records, and various catalogs – is about life, times, and project connected to the LRDD. Papers dealing with three African-American Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) settlements, Delta camp being the one that was home to those who did some of the ditch maintenance, are one example of the kind of material a researcher might find here. Another is engineering data on the actual dredging projects. A third is furniture catalogs used to buy furniture for people who had no access to stores. These three examples provide only a glimpse of the breadth of rich primary material one can retrieve from the collection.

In addition to the materials in Malden, a small working collection, including some tax records and the photography collection, continues to reside in the LRDD's office in Cape Girardeau. The photographs remain there because the LRDD did not want to send them, and the other records are used for reference purposes. Maps and plats are housed in Wardell, Missouri, because it is a district office.

The LRDD owns the collection and SEMO's Bootheel Center houses it, but the Missouri Secretary of State's office controls it because of

its historical value. A part-time archivist, who has been assigned to work with the material, provides access to it through specific appointments. She also facilitates selective microfilming of the papers, one box at a time. For example, records relating to the CCC and to George S. Hanford, the secretary-treasurer for the district from 1907-1920, have been microfilmed. The LRDD gets the working copy, and the original remains in Jefferson City, Missouri's state capital. Interested parties can obtain copies of the microfilm for research purposes.

Even with all the wonderful documents available to researchers and with the Secretary of State's administration, the collection continues to be underutilized because Malden is in a remote part of the state, some 90 miles from the SEMO campus. When the LRDD approached Kent Library about storing the papers, the only available space large enough to

accommodate it and protect it was this storage facility, a converted Pepsi bottling factory. Another contributing factor to its low use is its limited indexing, consisting only of an inventory list that includes the documents' title/description, subtitle/description/location, beginning date, ending date, and box number. The list does not include microfilmed records by the Missouri State Archives. Simple research is, therefore, time consuming. Perhaps, however, the greatest reason so few have accessed this treasure is that people are generally unaware of its existence. Hopefully, this article will, at least partially, remedy that.

Reference

Little River Drainage District (1989), *The Little River Drainage District of Southeast Missouri: 1907-Present*, Drainage District, Cape Girardeau, MO.