Cheyenne Bottoms, Barton County.
CREATING A “SEA OF GALILEE”

The Rescue of Cheyenne Bottoms Wildlife Area, 1927–1930

by Douglas S. Harvey

Not long ago, Cheyenne Bottoms, located in Barton County, Kansas, was the only lake of any size in the state of Kansas. After a big rainstorm, it was the largest body of water within hundreds of miles. But when the rains failed to come, which was more often than not, the Bottoms would be invisible to the untrained eye—just another trough in a sea of grass. Before settlement, when the Indian and bison still dominated the region, ephemeral wetlands and springs such as these meant the difference between life and death for many inhabitants of the Central Plains. Eastward-flowing streams briefly interrupted the sea of grass and also provided wood, water, and shelter to the multitude of inhabitants, both two- and four-legged. Flocks of migratory birds filled the air in spring and fall, most migrating between nesting grounds in southern Canada and the arctic and wintering grounds near the Gulf of Mexico and the tropics. These migrants rejuvenated themselves on their long treks at these rivers, but especially they relied on the ephemeral wetlands that dotted the Plains when the rains came. ¹

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In the central Great Plains, just north of the great bend of the Arkansas River, Cheyenne Bottoms was the largest of these wetlands. Dry spells are frequent on the Plains, and the Bottoms was not spared from drought; it has been estimated that this wetland was dry or nearly so two out of three years. But even when it dried up, the fickle weather patterns of the region deposited rain somewhere, and those wetlands and streams would be available for the migrants. Today most of these wetlands have been drained for crop production, and it only has been through the diligent efforts of conservationists and environmentalists that Cheyenne Bottoms remains a viable stopover for migratory birds.

The period 1927–1930 was particularly important for the Bottoms because it was then that the marsh was legally spared from drainage, the common fate of most Kansas wetlands. During these years, federal legislation to subsidize a national game refuge program existed mainly in the minds of a few forward-looking conservationists, and previous attempts to alter the Bottoms was well within the living memory of contemporaries. Indeed, the Koen ditch project of 1900, which briefly brought water to Cheyenne Bottoms from the Arkansas River for the purposes of irrigation and development, was remembered as a failure at best and to some as a full-blown scam.2

The late 1920s witnessed the court battle waged by a coalition of conservation groups to protect the Bottoms from a similar coalition advocating drainage and production. This struggle, had it gone the other way, could have had a devastating effect on the population of many species of migratory birds. As it turned out, the door was opened to allow Cheyenne Bottoms to continue its existence as a wetland, one that has proven to be vital to the migrating birds of the western hemisphere. In a state that is 98 percent private property, where the grassland ecosystem is all but extinct, Cheyenne Bottoms, a manufactured environment though it is, provides a haven for wildlife in the heart of the country’s otherwise mono-cropped, homogenous “breadbasket.”

Wetland habitat in Kansas has largely been considered “swampland” that needed to be drained. Indeed the definition and use of the word “wetlands” as something wor-

2. Briefly, the Koen ditch was an attempt by area promoters to create a lake for irrigation and recreation by constructing a twelve-mile-long ditch from the Arkansas River. After years of organizing and months of constructing, the first major storm washed out the diversion dam, flooded farmers’ fields, and filled the Bottoms about knee-deep. The venture went into bankruptcy. For the Koen ditch story, see Douglas S. Harvey, “Drought Relief Efforts Delayed by Rain: The History of Cheyenne Bottoms Wildlife Area” (master’s thesis, Wichita State University, 2000), 104–15.
thy of preservation has evolved only recently. In 1956 hydrologists Samuel P. Shaw and C. Gordon Fredine coined the term while compiling a report for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Their inventory identified twenty wetland types and was designed to determine their distribution and value as wildlife habitat. Since then, the term “wetland” has become widely used by preservationists of various stripes to denote environments dominated by water.

Recent writing on the environmental history of the Central Plains has been sparse but significant although none has dealt directly with Cheyenne Bottoms. Historians H. Craig Miner, Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, and R. Douglas Hurt have offered sympathetic views toward the Anglo farmer’s experiences in Kansas, and Elliott West has provided two books on the nineteenth-century impact of both Euro-American immigration to the West and the Plains Indian horse culture upon the scarce resources of wood and water in western Kansas. John Zimmerman’s valuable book on the Bottoms looks at the area through a biologist’s eyes. Authors such as Donald Worster, Richard Manning, Ian Frazier, and James Sherow, who are more critical of the Euro-American immigrants to the region, have written that the market-driven bottom line has dominated land-use practices with harmful, often devastating, results. But it is Sherow’s study of water issues on the upper Arkansas River that is most relevant to this article; Cheyenne Bottoms managers divert water from that river in an attempt to maintain year-round water levels at the wetland. Without the Arkansas River water, management of the Bottoms would be even more difficult.

Although Donald Worster has shown how capitalism and agriculture can make uneasy partners in many ways, Cheyenne Bottoms represents an interesting case in that its rescue from drainage was generated in large part by capitalist interests. The game protection organizations of the 1920s, which did much of the lobbying for Cheyenne Bottoms in Congress, received the majority of their initial funding from gun manufacturers. The chambers of commerce of the communities surrounding the Bottoms also assisted in the salvation of the wetland through their realization that the frequency of hunters to the Bottoms meant more money to them than drainage and mono-crop production. In fact, it could be argued that Cheyenne Bottoms is a form of quasi-agriculture itself. The area has been ditched, dammed, diked, planted, burned, and mowed so that the migratory waterfowl of the western hemisphere could and would stop there—and this has been paid for in large part by those who wish to preserve these birds so they can continue to be “harvested.”

The conservation movement, which had accompanied the Progressive movement into national prominence during the first two decades of the twentieth century, spawned such organizations as the American Game Protective Association (AGPA), the Izaak Walton League (IWL), and the Audubon Society. AGPA, founded in 1911, had been lobbying for game preserves since 1920. During the early years of its existence, the upper echelons of the organization supported “shooting grounds,” reflecting the fact that seven of twelve members of AGPA’s board of directors were directly employed by gun and ammunition companies. In addition, 77 percent of AGPA’s funding came from the arms industry with Remington, Winchester, and Du Pont contributing five thousand dollars each in 1921. The dominance of the organization by the gun companies dwindled, however, as rank and file members began exerting pressure for a stronger conservationist ethic. Founded in 1922 by a group of middle-class sportsmen in Chicago, the IWL began to publish the Izaak Walton Monthly, later renamed Outdoor America, which became the mouthpiece of the conservationist movement. IWL president Will Dilg’s words would be the call to arms for many sportsmen around the nation.


I am weary of civilization’s madness and I yearn for the harmonious gladness of the woods and of the streams. I am tired of your piles of buildings and I ache from your iron streets. I feel jailed in your greatest cities and I long for the unharnessed freedom of the big outside.

The arms industry’s subsidization of AGPA drove many sportsmen to the IWL, and it soon found itself the leader in the conservation movement. The distribution of the IWL’s Outdoor America brought membership in numbers of which other conservation groups could only dream. In the first three years alone, the IWL had attracted a membership of more than one hundred thousand at a time when similar groups had memberships of fewer than ten thousand. The Audubon Society was the oldest of these three groups. Originally known as the Audubon Association, state groups were established in the Northeast through the efforts of middle-class reformers bent on preserving heron habitat in the South. Much significant legislation such as the Lacey Act of 1900, which outlawed interstate transport of illegally hunted birds, was accomplished through the Audubon groups’ efforts.

In central Kansas, where commercial hunting at Cheyenne Bottoms had become a local industry by the turn of the century, some hunters considered these conservation groups more meddlers from the East Coast, the likes of which they had been resisting for decades. Nevertheless, the State of Kansas eventually responded to the need for improved conservation laws. Bag limits restricting the number of birds taken by hunters and enforced by local law officials were attempted in the early years of the new century. When it became apparent that this was an inadequate means of enforcement, the 1927 legislature created the Kansas Forestry, Fish and Game Department.

A commission of forestry, fish, and game had been set up in 1925 consisting of the governor, the fish and game warden (an office created by the Hunting Act of 1905), and three others appointed by the governor and the state senate. This commission had no enforcement power in the field, but it could use fish and game funds to secure title to lands deemed suitable for state parks. Surplus funds from hunting licenses as well as an expected increase in the number of state parks were fundamental in the legislature’s decision to establish a broader Forestry, Fish and Game Department two years later.

The momentum to preserve and perpetuate Cheyenne Bottoms as an annually dependable stopover for migratory fowl began, albeit quietly and unknowingly, with the activities of Frank Robl of rural Ellinwood. In 1923 Robl began banding ducks and geese as a hobby in his spare time. His hobby eventually became a major source of information on the habits of the migrating birds who used the Bottoms. The return of Robl’s bands from nineteen states, Alaska Territory, four Canadian provinces, and Mexico helped ornithologists establish that Cheyenne Bottoms was part of the great Central Flyway of North America, one of four major waterfowl migration corridors in the western hemisphere.

In central Kansas the efforts of local farmers to drain Cheyenne Bottoms and put the land into production brought counter efforts to establish the wetland as a refuge for migrating and wintering waterfowl. The idea of draining Cheyenne Bottoms began as early as 1899 but did not become a serious endeavor until thirty years later. In the late 1920s, when heavy rains filled Cheyenne Bottoms to overflowing, a number of area farmers formed a drainage district to build a canal below the Bottoms that would join with the Arkansas River east of Ellinwood. Other farmers opposing the attempt hired Frank Robl to raise funds to fight the drainage district. When the citizens of Hutchinson, Kansas, caught wind of the plan to drain the Bottoms, they opposed drainage on the grounds that it created an unnecessary flood hazard for their city, which it did. Regardless of this opposition the drainage district organized bonds for sale, and when the money was raised, a contract would be let and construction of a drainage canal would begin. However, a group of attorneys, in-

10. Frank W. Robl, “The ‘Duck Man’ Writes about Cheyenne Bottoms,” in *The Story of Cheyenne Bottoms* (N.p.: n.d.). This document also includes research data partially provided by Robl as well as minutes of an April 1928 meeting of the local Izaak Walton League.
6. Ibid., 161.
7. Ibid., 162, 152–53.
cluding Kansas attorney general William A. Smith; his special assistant R. C. “Coe” Russell; A. C. Malloy of Malloy, Davis and White; and the firm of Tincher and Shaffer of Hutchinson succeeded in obtaining a temporary restraining order against the drainage district. Pro-refuge forces hoped this would give them time to secure funding from Washington and legislation from Topeka to aid in their struggle to save Cheyenne Bottoms.

The Kansas legislature first outlined the legal course of action for draining swampland in 1879 in “An Act providing for the drainage of swamp, bottom, or other low lands.” This type of legislation was common in the United States in the late nineteenth century. An economic system with the primary goals of profit and production was brought to Kansas with the new colonists from the eastern United States and Europe. Improved market accessibility via the railroad and increased prices as a result of booming immigrant populations in metropolitan areas meant profits from even marginal land. This led many state legislatures to create a legal mechanism for the formation of drainage districts. In Kansas a petition had to be filed, a bond paid, notice given to affected landowners, and costs dispersed equitably among the beneficiaries of the drainage project. Aggrieved persons could appeal to probate court where disputes would be settled by a jury of six “disinterested freeholders.” Initially, drainage districts were defined as organized efforts to drain five hundred or more acres, but this was amended in 1923 to one hundred sixty acres. Often, the formation of these districts was prompted by the inability of individuals to provide the needed capital to facilitate professional construction of drainage canals. Providing habitat for migratory birds was certainly not a consideration; establishing human “habitat” was the only concern. On the national level, this spirit took the form of the Reclamation Act of 1902, which provided an agency (the Bureau of Reclamation) that dealt with drainage and irrigation issues. However, the focus of that entity was to “make the desert bloom,” in reference to the more arid lands of the West and did not apply directly to the Cheyenne Bottoms area.

Riparian water law had been the rule of common law for centuries but was considered an insufficient legal power to drain swamplands. To drain wetlands, an established body of water would be eliminated and a new channel created to divert water that normally would settle in the wetland. Riparian law dealt with the rights to use and maintain a body of water, usually a stream, and gave landowners the right to the water on or adjacent to their land as long as flow was maintained. This concept of jurisprudence did not adequately apply to a central Kansas wetland. Creating drainage districts was one of the state’s methods of meeting the demand to alter the environment for profit. Three concepts provided the legal basis for the

Scene at the mouth of the old Koen Ditch project of 1900 that ended in failure.

15. For an interesting discussion of this legal phenomenon, see James Willard Hurst, Law and the Conditions of Freedom in the Nineteenth-Century United States (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1956), especially chapters one, “The Release of Energy,” and two, “The Control of the En-
Hurston discusses at length the influence of these forces on the creation of law in that century. Particularly relevant is his point that nineteenth-century America saw the concept of private property evolve from political to economic in its significance.


The potential for draining the wetland now was in equipoise with a state agency interested in preserving fish and game habitat. As if in response to this dichotomy, in August 1927 more than fourteen inches of rain fell in a matter of hours to the west and northwest of the Bottoms. For the first time since the arrival of Euro-American colonists, water was flowing out of the Bottoms through Little Cheyenne Creek. A lake of sixty-four thousand acres had been created overnight. It was this event that spurred the Forestry, Fish and Game Commission, led by State Game Warden Burt Doze, down the path of intensive wetland management—sixty-four square miles of water sparkling in the High Plains sun was too much to resist.

“Lake Cheyenne” was the largest body of water within five hundred miles, but it was not the first time this had occurred. The flooding and evaporating cycle of Cheyenne Bottoms, like other “occasional” wetlands in arid and semi-arid regions throughout the world, had been occurring for millennia. When the 1927 rains came, three similar events had occurred within living memory. Barton County settler Robert Mertow recalled a similar flood in May 1877 that had derailed a train east of Ellinwood. Clarence Aldrich could remember the late summer rains of 1885 and 1887 that had created a lake five by twelve miles at the Bottoms. But in those years, there was no Forestry, Fish and Game Commission and no Burt Doze in the state game warden’s chair.

In the first few weeks after the inundation, Warden Doze; Seventh District congressman Clifford Hope; Senator Charles Curtis, soon to become Herbert Hoover’s vice president; Henry Allen, who would replace Curtis as senator; and former governor and senator Arthur Capper, all were becoming familiar with Cheyenne Bottoms. They began the process of seeking refuge status for Cheyenne Bottoms as well as appropriations for land and easement.
purchases from Congress. Local sportsmen, many of whom belonged to the Cheyenne Bottoms Sportsmen’s Club, threw their energy into the fray by writing letters to the Izaak Walton League national office and other conservation groups that represented potential lobbyists for “the cause.” Invoking biblical references, Doze kept reminding everyone that “it is possible to create and maintain a sea 64 miles in area, exactly the size of the Sea of Galilee.”

Burt Doze to Clifford Hope, May 19, 1927, folder 7, box 32, Clifford Hope Collection, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society.

The rumblings from the drainage district in combination with the birds flocking on the now-brimming wetland led the Forestry, Fish and Game Commission to consult the federal government about establishing a bird refuge at the Bottoms. A lobbying group in Utah was applying for funding for the Bear River Marsh, a wetland adjoining the Great Salt Lake and similar in ecological function to Cheyenne Bottoms. The rising interest in preservationism around the country gave the federal government incentive to begin establishing funding guidelines for game preserves. In many ways it seemed the ideal time to seek federal funding.

The Bureau of Biological Survey (BBS) sent Orin Steele to investigate the situation at Cheyenne Bottoms. When Steele saw the lake supporting a mass of waterfowl arriving on their fall trek south, he reported favorably to his superiors. That brought BBS attorney Talbot Denmead and Izaak Walton League executive director Seth E. Gordon to the Bottoms for a follow-up inspection of the lake. On a very windy day in April they were escorted to the Bottoms, where incredible numbers of migrating birds were on the water. Realizing the area was an ideal refuge for migratory waterfowl, they recommended persistently urging the federal government for legislation.

In response to this suggestion, the Kansas Forestry, Fish and Game commissioners Giles Atherton and Lee Larabee, along with Warden Doze, traveled east to drum up support among conservation lobbying groups. The delegation met with representatives of the American Game Protection Association (AGPA) in New York, who were favorably impressed with the concept. One of this group’s main concerns was that the proposed refuge not be turned into a “shooting area.” Doze had written AGPA secretary-treasurer Carlos Avery in October 1927 to brief him on the situation. Warden Doze’s biblical inferences apparently were having an effect on his imagination as he informed Avery that Cheyenne Bottoms was fifteen miles long and six to seven miles wide, an exaggeration of about 100 percent. Those were heady days for the warden; he wrote Avery that he hoped “the boys” (meaning the U.S. Congress) could work out a bill that all could support. Doze supported a ten- to twenty-million-dollar appropriation, with state administration “under federal assistance of course.”

More practically speaking, Warden Doze stressed that the funds should come from a tax on guns and ammunition rather than increased hunting license fees, which he knew would draw a more negative reaction from Kansas hunters. Avery wrote to Doze that he soon would be giving a report on Congressman Hope’s newly introduced H.R. 7361, which proposed an appropriation for land purchases at the Bottoms, to the Conservation Committee of the Camp Fire Club, another large conservation organization. Avery requested more information regarding what steps had been taken, surveys that had been done, cost estimates, and especially whether the Bottoms was to be a public shooting grounds. He added in another letter ten days later that Doze had led the AGPA to believe that

19. “Cheyenne Bottoms is Biggest Game Refuge in Country.” While Doze was adamant about acquiring land for a refuge after the August rainstorm, the Kansas Forestry, Fish and Game Commission was aware of the area’s attraction to waterfowl. Just three months earlier, Doze had invited Congressman Clifford Hope to join him, Governor Ben Paulen, Senator Charles Curtis, and the commissioners in a trip across Kansas to assess potential areas of significance—Cheyenne Bottoms was one of the stops. Doze wanted to visit the Bottoms “as here is a federal project in water conservation and flood control.” See Burt Doze to Clifford Hope, May 19, 1927, folder 7, box 32, Clifford Hope Collection, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society.


22. Ibid., 33.


Cheyenne Bottoms would be a shooting refuge. Avery pointed out that Section 3 of Hope’s bill would create a migratory bird refuge, and he wished to be enlightened as to the Kansas Forestry, Fish and Game’s designs for the area. Doze replied with neither facts nor figures but with a colloquial air that probably did not help his cause. He informed Avery that he thought Cheyenne Bottoms should be taken over by the Bureau of Biological Survey to use it as “it sees best.” Missing the point of Avery’s letter, Doze wrote that it was okay with him if they wanted to use the Bottoms as a public shooting grounds: “we conducted public shooting on this property and with considerable success last year.” This was a dubious statement to make to a board member of a game protection organization that had recently experienced an inner rebellion of its members against the upper echelon’s continued acceptance of money from gun companies out to promote shooting grounds.  

Nevertheless, perhaps indicative of the degree to which conservation sentiment was then being fostered in the country, AGPA board chairman John B. Burnham told Kansas delegate and Forestry, Fish and Game secretary Alva Clapp that he was in favor of a refuge at “Cheyenne Flats” and that joint efforts would be much more likely to succeed in securing funding. The Game Refuge bill, also known as the Norbeck–Anthony bill, had been reported on favorably to the U.S. Senate with an amendment that at least 60 percent of a secured area be an inviolable refuge. Commission Secretary Clapp and Warden Doze were very active in their correspondence over the next few months, lobbying for acquisition of the Bottoms. Support was coming in from a variety of sources: representatives of the state game and fish organizations of Alabama, Massachusetts, and Texas; the Izaak Walton League; the magazine Forest and Stream; and the National Association of Audubon Societies all wrote to Kansas delegates in favor of establishing the Cheyenne Bottoms refuge during the year 1928.  

After meeting with representatives of AGPA, the warden’s entourage went to Washington to consult with the Kansas delegation. In April Congress passed a bill approving the establishment of Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge at the Great Salt Lake in Utah. President Calvin Coolidge signed the bill with an appropriation of two hundred thousand dollars to be used by the Department of Agriculture for land purchases there.  

Legislation regarding the Bottoms had been introduced into the House by Congressman Hope in the same session that had passed the Bear River bill. But the Cheyenne Bottoms bill had been referred to the respective committees for reports and recommendations. Budget Director Herbert Lord, who was about to rule favorably on the Bear River bill, had ruled on April 20 that “the legislation proposed in H.R. 7361 at this time would be in conflict with the financial program of the President.” BBS acting director H. P. Sheldon believed that the inclusion of the words “at this time” in Lord’s statement left the door open for the Kansas congressional delegation to approach the budget director and request his views regarding the program for the bill during the next session of Congress. Sheldon pointed out that it was unlikely that he himself could get Lord’s attention without assistance from Senators Curtis and Capper and Congressman Hope. In the meantime, Sheldon continued, a report on the water levels of Cheyenne Bottoms, the improvement in habitat, the growth of food plants for waterfowl, and the attitudes of landowners would be valuable. The BBS could present that information to the second session of the Seventieth Congress if the bill came up again. Sheldon also asked Doze to give the BBS some warning if he knew the bill would be addressed by the Kansas delegation, ostensibly so they could lobby for it.  

Upon being informed of Sheldon’s letter, George A. Clark, fellow Forestry, Fish and Game commissioner and Doze’s uncle, wrote to Doze that there was no use to discuss the matter with anyone but Congressman Hope and Senators Capper and Curtis. Clark said he would resume...
correspondence with the members of Congress when the second session opened.29 It was becoming apparent to the Bottoms’s supporters that efforts to get the land out of private hands would take some sustained and concerted effort. While these efforts to establish Cheyenne Bottoms as a wildlife refuge were under way in Washington, back in Barton County, Kansas, the biggest threat to the area since commercial hunting had materialized.

The momentum to preserve Cheyenne Bottoms as a stopover for migratory fowl began with Frank Robl of Ellinwood, whose practice of banding birds became a major source of information on migrating birds at the Bottoms.

Not everyone in Barton County was interested in the perpetuation of Cheyenne Bottoms as a place for birds and, ostensibly, hunters who would spend their money locally. Some remembered the flooding caused by the Koen ditch nearly thirty years earlier, a project that sought to bring water into the Bottoms from the Arkansas River to maintain a constant water level for irrigation and recreation. The twelve-mile-long canal had leaked badly, destroying crops and creating a flood of litigation.30 Many farmers felt that the Bottoms should be utilized as cropland. Wetland (or swamp) drainage had, after all, been fundamental in the westward movement of Euro-Americans. Swamps were things to be drained, not perpetuated. In April 1928 the law firm of Osmond, Cole, and Kelley filed, on behalf of a group of local farmers, Articles of Association of “The Cheyenne Bottoms Drainage District No. 1.” The drainage district laws had been updated in 1911 and 1923 but essentially followed the same principals outlined in 1879.31 The district sought to reclaim “wet, overflowed or swampy lands, and be protecting the same . . . from the effects of water, by drainage or otherwise.” In other words, they wished to dig a ditch from the Bottoms to the Arkansas River to control the flow of water through their lands via Little Cheyenne Creek. Total acreage in the district was roughly that of the new lake plus right-of-way to the Arkansas River, 18,562 acres in all.32

The intention to drain the Bottoms was published in the press as required by law to notify all effected parties. Resistance surfaced almost immediately in the form of a series of formal protests filed by adjoining landowners against the district. Absentee landowners were notified in Edwards, Saline, and Ellsworth Counties and elsewhere of the plan to drain the area, and it was not long before more protests poured in opposing the drainage district.33 The reasons given by this coalescing resistance were many and varied, such as the contention that Cheyenne Bottoms represented the largest body of water between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains, and its drainage would increase aridity in the region. The climate, petitioners maintained, would be adversely affected by increased temperature and decreased precipitation. Also, the Bottoms acted as flood control and should be allowed to continue in


32. “In the Matter of the Formation of ‘The Cheyenne Bottoms Drainage District No. 1,’” Abstract of Title No. 10001 (Great Bend, Kans.: Barton County Title Co., n.d), 171, 262.
that function, protesters argued. Cow Creek, below the Bottoms, almost never received any runoff from the Cheyenne Bottoms drainage basin. This was the right-of-way the district intended to take, which would have added an additional 234 square miles of drainage to the tiny Cow Creek system. The right-of-way was the main concern of the town of Hutchinson, which was among the drainage plan’s most avid protesters; Hutchinson would receive the brunt of any downstream flooding as a result of the disruption of Cheyenne Bottoms and its natural check on streamflow. It also was contended that the Drainage District was not acting in good faith and had undertaken the project to prevent the establishment of a wildlife refuge. Destruction of the refuge was opposed on the grounds that the area is a natural breeding, resting and nesting ground for a large number and variety of migratory and residental birds, both insectivorous and game; that it is now a fish and game refuge and is of very considerable value as such; and that the agricultural value of said territory is negligible on account of the character of the soil.

Moreover, by this time, the efforts of the Kansas congressional delegation to win appropriations for the Bottoms were under way. The protesters claimed that drainage would ruin efforts to make the area a permanent refuge; the laws of the state were not intended to enable the drainage of large natural lakes. They also argued that the land was not valuable enough to drain, that increased taxes on the lands would exceed its value. The landowners in the area would receive full value for their property from the federal government if it were condemned for a bird sanctuary, but draining the area would cause them to lose through “taxation and expense their entire interest in the said real estate.” On top of that, the lands to be drained were ill-suited for agriculture, being underlaid by salt water. Eventually a petition for leave to intervene in the organization of the drainage district was filed by Walter T. Griffin, assistant attorney general of Kansas and R. C. “Coe” Russell of Great Bend, representing Hutchinson. But on July 5, 1928, Twentieth Judicial District Court judge Ray H. Beals found for the drainage district, citing that the law required only that the area to be drained be greater than one hundred sixty acres, which Cheyenne Bottoms

34. Ibid., 273
35. Ibid., 276, 280.
certainly was. More influential in the decision, Judge Beals cited, was the technicality that no brief had been filed by the state or by the City of Hutchinson.\textsuperscript{36}

This setback meant the supporters of the refuge had to take a more organized approach to stop the drainage district before a canal was dug, and their whole case to loosen the purse strings of the U.S. Congress went meandering down the Arkansas River. Attorney General William A. Smith suggested the day after the decision that the law, not the district, should be challenged:

It does not look like good law to me that the majority of owners of 160 acres or more of swampy or overflowed land should be given the right to form a district including land of non-consenting owners and be able to compel the land of such non-consenting owners to bear the expense of whatever drainage operations may be had, absolutely regardless of the practicability of the drainage scheme, the relative cost of the undertaking and the benefits to be secured, regardless of whether the drainage operation will injure or damage the rest of the community and regardless of any and all questions of feasibility and public utility or desirability.\textsuperscript{37}

Smith told Doze that he would be communicating with Coe Russell and the firm of Mallow, Davis and White of Hutchinson regarding further proceedings that likely would take the way of “restraining the drainage district from proceeding in such manner as to injure parties or organizations concerned.”\textsuperscript{38}

Over the next year and a half battle lines were drawn, but one of the alliances began to suffer as well. The Cheyenne Bottoms Drainage District No. 1 began unraveling when a dispute broke out among the board members over which lands actually should be included in the district. Elias J. Eveleigh, president of the drainage district and owner of no fewer than twelve sections (7,680 acres) in the northeastern portions of Cheyenne Bottoms, filed a protest on September 11, 1929. Eveleigh claimed that certain lands incorporating the Cheyenne Bottoms Drainage District No. 1 would not benefit from drainage, specifically 870 acres of his total. Among the grounds for exemption, Eveleigh’s counsel claimed that the land was not wet, swampy, overflowed, or submerged and would not benefit from drainage. It was pointed out that the land had been farmed for years and did not fit the description for flooded lands given in the latest revised statutes. In addition, releasing these lands would benefit the district, freeing up funds to include other lands; that incorporation of these lands would constitute taking of property without due process; that he had already permitted 1,920 of his acres into the district; and finally, Eveleigh’s lawyer Clyde Allphin added, the land incorporation would cost him forty-five hundred dollars on top of the twenty thousand dollars he already had invested in the district. In short, as president of the Board of Supervisors for the district, he did not want the district doing to him what it was doing to the other landowners in the area. In fact, Eveleigh called for an expansion of the district’s incorporation in the direction of Claflin and Ellinwood—3,620 acres to be exact—away from his holdings.\textsuperscript{39}

In spite of these differences about what lands should be included in the drainage district, enough lands were agreed upon to execute bonds to the sum of $201,000 with the property as collateral. Plans were made to dig a ditch twelve to fifteen feet deep and sixteen feet wide from the Bottoms to the Arkansas River (amended from the earlier plan for a Cow Creek terminus) southeast of Ellinwood. Bids for construction of this ditch would be received beginning March 27, 1930. It appeared to many that the chances of Cheyenne Bottoms becoming a refuge for waterfowl and sport hunters were growing slim indeed.

Five days before the bidding was to begin, Attorney General William Smith filed a petition to block construction of the ditch and drainage of Cheyenne Bottoms. First, Smith claimed, the ditch was illegal because it would be “a great and continuing public nuisance, menace and hazard, dangerous to life, health, and property of an untold num-

\textsuperscript{36} William A. Smith to Burt Doze, July 6, 1928, Schwilling Collection; “In the Matter of the Formation of ‘The Cheyenne Bottoms Drainage District No. 1,’” 280–81.

\textsuperscript{37} “In the Matter of the Formation of ‘The Cheyenne Bottoms Drainage District No. 1,’” 280–81.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 350, 351–52, 333.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 380.
ber of citizens of the State of Kansas.” Second, Cheyenne Lake had existed “from time ‘whereof the memory of man runneth not to the contrary’” and the soil under the lake is therefore full of salt and alkali and would grow nothing but salt and marsh grass. This was demonstrated by the fact that a considerable portion of the lake bed had remained open to homesteading, but no one was interested. Third, chapter 257 of the 1925 Kansas session laws (amended in 1927), establishing the Forestry, Fish and Game Commission, was “supplemental and amendatory” to those sections of the drainage district act under which the Cheyenne Bottoms Drainage District No. 1 had been formed and was currently operating. Sections three and four of the above act gave the commission “the right to acquire, by donation, bequest, or condemnation proceedings, title to lands, waters and water rights within the State of Kansas for the purpose of establishing, keeping and maintaining the public forestry, fish and game preserves.” The supplemental amendment in 1927 enlarged methods of land acquisition to include “purchase.” Furthermore, the commission had attempted to acquire the lands of Cheyenne Bottoms long before the formation of the drainage district. Fourth, the commission advised that Kansas had only 354 square miles of water, the second smallest area of any state (Arizona had the smallest), and that they were endeavoring to increase this amount by preserving the natural lakes and basins of the state. Cheyenne Bottoms, Smith argued, was the largest body of water within a five-hundred-mile radius, supplying “tons of edible fish per year,” one million wild, edible migratory birds, and “several hundred thousand dollars’ worth of fur-bearing animals per year.” Here was the requisite economic argument needed in order to be taken seriously.

In addition to these arguments, Smith pointed out that evaporation from the lake had a positive effect on crops and greenery around that body of water; the Bureau of Biological Survey had made a number of studies toward establishing a federal preserve; and Congressman Hope was currently asking Congress for $350,000 to purchase the lands. The Norbeck–Anthony bill, then before Congress, would supply appropriations for the purchase and this information had been communicated to landowners in the drainage district well before the fact of its establishment. Therefore, the actions of the district attempted to circumvent the commission and the Bureau of Biological Survey and possibly were rooted in an attempt to ultimately extract more money from the government.

Smith then turned to constitutional issues. If the district court must decide the usefulness of the district to the public, he stated, then the court was vested with legislative power, violating Article II, section 1, of the Kansas Constitution. If the court was not deciding the public utility of these developments, then the landowners of the drainage district were being given legislative power—also unconstitutional. And if neither the court nor the district were deciding the matter, then the delegation of authority was absent, unless the district planned to drain every body of water in the state larger than 160 acres. Then it would be in violation of both the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution by attempting to “Abridge the privileges and immunities of citizens of the U.S.,” and section 1 of the Kansas Constitution, by depriving Kansas citizens of life and/or property without due process.

Smith pointed out that the original act for establishing drainage districts was meant to drain only arable lands subject to overflow. It was not meant to be applied to land unable to yield a greater value in crop production than the expense of drainage. Also, Smith stressed, construction of the ditch to the Arkansas River created a hazard to the cities of Hutchinson, Wichita, Arkansas City, and every other downstream town. The U.S. government’s flood control program advised using “containers” whenever possible. Cheyenne Bottoms was such a container. Arkansas City already had a considerable flood hazard, as did Wichita and Hutchinson to a lesser extent. Under the plan being considered by the commission and the biological survey, the Walnut River would be diverted from the Arkansas and into the Bottoms, removing twelve hundred square miles of drainage from potentially contributing to any downstream inundations. For that reason alone,

43. This is not to be confused with the Norbeck–Andreson bill, which ultimately provided funding for many wildlife refuge areas. See An Act to Provide that the United States shall aid the States in wildlife-restoration projects, and for other purposes, 75th Cong., 1st sess., 1937, H. Doc. 917.
Cheyenne Bottoms should be forever preserved as a place for “recreation, hunting, fishing, fur-bearing animals, migratory waterfowl,” and other wildlife. Judge Beals issued a restraining order against the drainage district on March 22, 1930. Named in the order were Elias J. and William G. Eveleigh, Arthur E. Taylor, J.R. Murphy, and George P. Wilson, supervisors of the Cheyenne Bottoms Drainage District No. 1.44

For the immediate future Cheyenne Bottoms was saved from being drained, but supporters still faced the obstacle of the U.S. Congress appropriating funds to purchase the lands and perhaps fund an inlet canal to maintain the water level. Almost everyone involved in the establishment of a refuge at the Bottoms believed that funding was imminent. In 1930, about the time the temporary restraining order was granted against the drainage district, the commission gave one thousand dollars to its secretary Alva Clapp to take a delegation to Washington and resume lobbying efforts. Clapp and ex-Congressman Jasper N. Tincher of Hutchinson went on the grant money; Will Townsly, editor of the Great Bend Tribune, paid his own way, and Seth Gordon, an executive director of the Izaak Walton League, made a special trip from Chicago. Special hearings were arranged by Congressman Hope and Senator Allen before the director of the Budget and the Senate Agriculture Committees. The Kansas legislature also passed a bill paving the way for a federally established game refuge. But the actual appropriations were still elusive: while Kansas was the first state to adopt a law permitting a federal game preserve within its

for the Utah reserve, thus establishing a precedent. Another bill in Congress, the Game Refuge and Marsh Land Act, would provide an annual appropriation of one million dollars for projects like Cheyenne Bottoms. The Senate had already passed this bill, and all the major conservation organizations in the country supported it. The perpetuation of Cheyenne Bottoms seemed certain, especially since it appeared that flood hazards had permanently foiled the

A favorable report from the Committee on Agriculture on establishing bird sanctuaries spurred Congress to pass a bill that paved the way for funding for migratory bird refuges in the United States. But much was still to be done. The Kansas Forestry, Fish and Game Commission gathered further data on “Lake Cheyenne” and prepared to testify before the House Agriculture Committee. Coe Russell and Warden Doze argued for funding before the committee, as did Kansas Congressman Homer Hoch of Marion and William A. Ayers of Wichita. Also testifying before the committee was Paul G. Redington, chief of the Bureau of Biological Survey, survey lawyer Talbot Denmead, and John B. Burnham of the American Game Protection Association. The Kansas delegation was asking for $350,000, but no action was taken on appropriations for the proposed game reserve. The committee offered to recommend $250,000, but this total was deemed inadequate. Congress subsequently adjourned, the recommendations of the Agriculture Committee did not go to the director of the budget, but the Kansans left Washington optimistic. After all, an almost identical appropriation had recently been approved

Because Cheyenne bottoms finally was officially designated a migratory bird refuge, hundreds of species, such as these Canadian geese, continue to stopover at the “Sea of Galilee” in Barton County.


46. Establishment of Inviolate Sanctuaries to Give Further Protection to Migratory Birds, 70th Cong., 2d sess., 1929, H. Doc. 2265, serial 8979; see also Cheyenne Bottoms Migratory-Bird Refuge, 71st Cong., 2d sess., 1930, H. Doc. 467.

47. “Cheyenne Bottoms,” Kansas Forestry, Fish and Game Department, Second Biennial Report, 34.
M. Jardine estimated that $100,000 would be adequate for the fiscal year 1931 provided he was authorized to “incur obligations and enter into contracts for an additional sum of $150,000.” This made a total appropriation of $250,000—$100,000 less than the Kansas delegation had hoped for, but it was a start. However, the proponents of Cheyenne Bottoms would soon learn that neither the Fates nor the farmers were entirely in their corner.48

It was not until October 8, 1942, that the Kansas Forestry, Fish and Game Department made its first significant land purchase (sixty-eight hundred acres) at Cheyenne Bottoms with funds from the Pittman–Robertson bill of 1937 that provided funding from a tax on guns and ammunition, an idea Warden Doze had suggested ten years earlier.49 The road from 1930 to 1942 ran through the rough terrain of the Great Depression. Some funds were secured for a water study in the middle of that period, but most appropriations for wildlife refuges focused on nesting grounds rather than stopover areas such as the Bottoms. Since then wildlife biologists have realized that without the stopover grounds, the birds would never make it to the nesting grounds. Farmers also contributed to the delay in funding land purchases by asking high prices for their lands that would have forced the government purchasing agent to resort to eminent domain proceedings, a step the federal government was unwilling to take during the 1930s. Ironically, the government ended up paying more for the land in the 1940s than it would have in the 1930s.50

Cheyenne Bottoms has proven to be the “Jewel of the Prairie,” especially to the wildlife that depend on the wetland. A number of currently “non-harvestable” species, which have become rare or endangered in recent years, are found at the Bottoms. Among these are the Bald Eagle, the Peregrine Falcon, the Least Tern, the Piping Plover, the Whooping Crane, and the once-believed-extinct Eskimo Curlew.51 Perhaps more significant is the fact that more than 45 percent of all shorebirds in the Western Hemisphere stop at Cheyenne Bottoms during the spring migration.52

The complexity of the environment at the Bottoms as well as the grassland ecosystem of central Kansas in general has become increasingly apparent since water manipulation structures were constructed in the late 1950s and subsequently overhauled in the 1990s. But as the area’s designation as a “Wetland of International Significance” by the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands indicates the continued existence of Cheyenne Bottoms is as essential to the wildlife that utilize the Western Hemisphere’s Central Flyway as it is to species native to central Kansas.

The inclination of agricultural interests in the state of Kansas to drain “swamplands” was somehow overcome at Cheyenne Bottoms. Ironically perhaps, it was the money-making potential of the area as a wildlife refuge that saved it from drainage. Intensive management has drastically altered the nature of the Bottoms in an effort to counteract the massive drainage of Kansas wetlands that has occurred in the last half century. A once-ephemeral wetland is now, if the rains cooperate, a year-round lake. The dreams of such an entity, first imagined in the 1890s, were in some ways not so different from the reality that has come to pass. Cheyenne Bottoms may not be the “Sea of Galilee,” but it continues to hold profound significance for humans as well as birds.

48. An Act Authorizing the establishment of a migratory bird refuge in the Cheyenne Bottoms, Barton County, Kansas, 71st Cong., 2d sess., 1930, H. Doc. 467, serial 9252. The Hope bill (H.R. 7361) originally had asked for $350,000. Senate bill 3950, introduced by Senator Henry Allen, who had taken Charles Curtis’s vacant seat upon his election as Herbert Hoover’s vice president, asked for $250,000, and it was this amount that Secretary Jardine recommended. A Bill to Establish Cheyenne Bottoms Migratory-Bird Refuge, 70th Cong., 1st sess., 1927, S. Rept. 105, serial 8829; A Bill to Establish a Migratory Bird Refuge at Cheyenne Bottoms, Barton County, Kansas, 70th Cong., 2d sess., 1930, S. Rept. 1271, serial 8979.

49. “The Game Commission Plans an 11,000-Acre Lake,” Kansas Fish and Game 4 (October 1942): 2. A few parcels of land had already been obtained, but not enough to implement a management program. For a brief summary of Pittman–Robertson, see “Digest of Federal Resource Laws of Interest to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service,” http://www.fws.gov/laws/digest/reslaws/fawild.html. The hunting lobby had advocated a tax on guns and ammunition for years to establish game preserves. There is no reason to believe that Warden Doze was the first to suggest it.


51. While there is an unconfirmed report of an Eskimo Curlew at Cheyenne Bottoms in 1982, it is most likely that this bird would favor upland range over the Bottoms’s mudflats. See Max C. Thompson and Charles Ely, Birds in Kansas, vol. 1 (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1989), 232–33; Helen Hands, assistant manager, Cheyenne Bottoms Wildlife Area, interview by author, March 13, 2000.