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Taming the Arkansas River

Sherry Laymon



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Problems of flooding and bank cave-ins had long made the Arkansas River a nuisance to farmers, planters, businessmen, merchants, and others who lived, worked, or owned property in the river valley. For captains who transported passengers and goods on the river, underwater snags, fallen trees, and shallow water levels created minute-to-minute crises. The river's "fits of uncontrollable rage and prolonged spells of stubborn torpidity" generated cross currents and swirling eddies that continually created unseen hazards for boatmen. In 1872, the Arkansas Gazette listed 117 submerged river vessels, most of which sunk after being ripped apart by snags. The federal government had responded sporadically to numerous requests for assistance with river development. After John McClellan became a senator in 1942, he began making progress, however slowly, in getting measures passed to tame the river. Robert Kerr of Oklahoma, joined McClellan in the Senate in 1948, and they worked together removing obstacles until the project became finally became a reality in 1971.

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