



# Conquering The River II

## Flood Control Project Turned Yankton Area Into Recreation Destination

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The Yankton area has had a rich history. Lewis and Clark met with the Yankton Sioux Tribe here in 1804. It became the first territorial capital of the Dakotas in 1861. In 1924 the Meridian Bridge connected South Dakota and Nebraska.

Today, Yankton is thought of as the water recreation capital of Southeast South Dakota. People from all over the mid-west come to Gavins Point Dam, constructed by the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers, and Lewis and Clark Lake to spend their leisure time. It's hard to imagine Yankton without the lake, but it has been here for just under 60 years. Some can still remember a time when the Missouri River flowed untamed, at times wreaking havoc on those who depended on it for their survival and livelihood.

Historically, the Missouri River flooded almost annually. These floods were devastating to homes, businesses, property and people. One particularly bad flood was in the spring of 1943. This flood caused an estimated \$40 million in land and property damage. It was with floods like this in mind that Congress passed the Flood Control Act of 1944. Within this act is the Pick-Sloan Plan, named for Colonel Lewis Pick with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and William Sloan with the Bureau of Land Management. This plan provided for the construction of 5 dams on the Missouri River downstream from Ft. Peck Dam in Montana.

Gavins Point was the third of these dams constructed. Gavins Point was named for Michael J. Gavins, a prominent farmer and businessman who owned the land where the dam was originally scheduled to be built, about two miles west from its present location. The alternate site was chosen because of two islands in the river that would lessen the amount of fill needed for the embankment. As if to confirm the validity of the construction of the dam, one of the worst floods ever recorded on the Missouri river took place in the spring of 1952, the same year construction was scheduled to begin. Though the groundbreaking ceremony took place May 18, 1952, the actual construction was delayed because the flood had carved a new channel into the Nebraska shoreline.

All attention was focused on Yankton with the onset of construction. The opening ceremony was a huge event with over 8,000 in attendance. Dignitaries included Pick, now a Lieutenant General, Nebraska Governor Val Peterson and South Dakota Governor Sigurd Anderson. Lt. General Pick detonated the ceremonial first explosion to signify the beginning of construction.

Construction began with the building of diversion dikes upstream from the dam site to channelize the water away from the construction area. The dam itself, called an earthen dam, was constructed out of rolled dirt and chalk. It took 7 million cubic yards of this fill material to make the dam embankment. To put this in perspective, if all of the fill material was placed in dump trucks lined bumper to bumper they would stretch from Yankton to New York City. Load after load of fill material was dumped starting from the Nebraska shoreline. Then heavy equipment ran across it to compress the fill. By August of 1953 the embankment was two thirds of the way to the South Dakota shoreline. The next two years were spent working on the powerhouse and spillway.

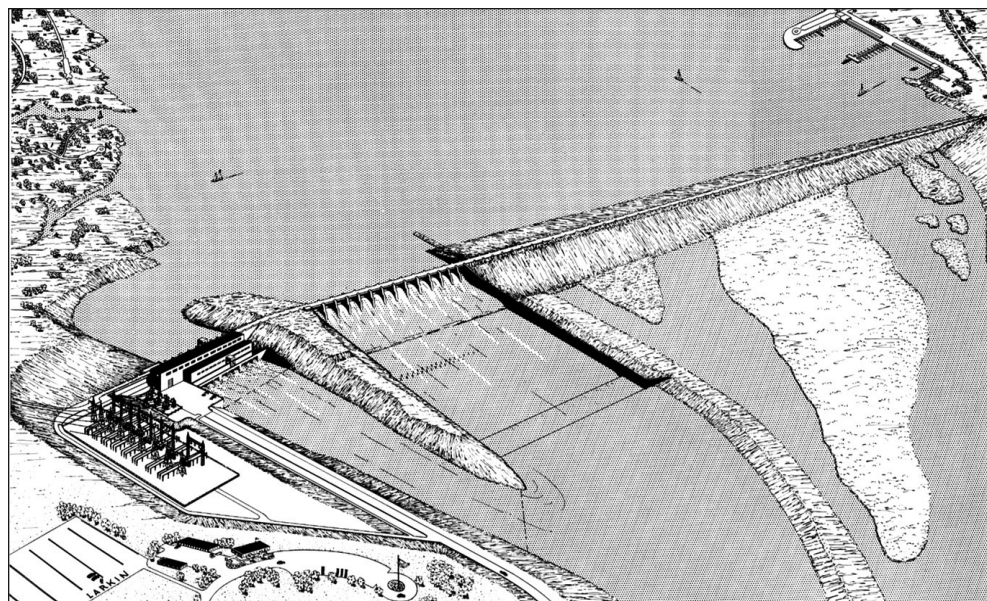
Powerhouse and spillway construction required the excavation of rock and earth from Calumet Bluff. Special rock-cutting tools were brought in to cut through the rock in areas that could not be blasted. This auger-like tool had huge



PHOTO: CORPS OF ENGINEERS ARCHIVES  
ABOVE: This image shows construction work being done on the Gavins Point Dam spillway bridge on May 16, 1955. The construction trestle on the right is being disassembled. TOP: A view of Gavins Point Dam in July 2011, with the spillway discharging a record 160,000 cubic feet per second due to the historic flooding on the Missouri River.



LEFT: A photo of the groundbreaking ceremony for the Gavins Point Dam project. While the project's primary purpose was flood control, the reservoir created by the dam has been a recreation draw for Yankton. (P&D archive photo). RIGHT: An early artistic conception of what the area around the dam might look like after the completion of the dam. Notice the difference in the shape and size of Lake Yankton. However, other aspects of the drawing are quite recognizable today. (Corps of Engineers archive photo)



teeth that would spin while cutting into the rock. This cleared the way for the actual construction to begin. Massive amounts of concrete and steel were used in the structures. On the spillway alone 179,000 cubic yards of concrete and 3,250 tons of reinforcing steel were used.

By June 1955 the spillway was ready for use. Diversion dikes were cut to allow water to flow through the spillway gates. Then all attention was turned to closing the remaining portion of the river. Fill material was brought across the completed portion of the dam from the Nebraska side and from the South Dakota side. More than 1,000 cubic yards of earth was moved each hour. By

July 30, 1955, crowds had gathered in anticipation to watch the closure. At 4:05 a.m. on July 31 the wait was over. The dam was officially closed, with the water behind the dam filling to form Lewis and Clark Lake. By mid-morning nearly 7,000 people had gathered to celebrate. The completed dam structure is 8,700 feet long, 74 feet tall and 850 feet wide at the base. Though the powerhouse first produced power in 1956 the actual construction was not completed until 1957. It took 5 1/2 years at a cost of nearly \$50 million.

The completion of Gavins Point Dam allowed the Corps of Engineers to perform its congressionally mandated missions: flood damage reduction,

hydropower generation, downstream navigation, irrigation, water supply and quality, environmental stewardship and recreation. Gavins Point Project now has an annual economic benefit to the area of approximately \$35 million. The lake brings people to boat, fish, swim, picnic, camp and just enjoy the beautiful surroundings.

Constantly striving to improve facilities for visitors, the Corps of Engineers built a visitor center on Calumet Bluff. More than one million people have passed through the doors of the Lewis and Clark Visitor Center since it opened in 1976. Nebraska Tailwaters and Cottonwood campgrounds have recently undergone renovations to improve

roadways, restrooms, campsites and electrical service. Day use parks have picnic shelters for group functions, individual picnic sites, a swim beach, boating access and new playground equipment.

For more information about the Gavins Point Project, call 402-667-2546 or visit our web page at [https://w3.nwo.usace.army.mil/html/Lake\\_Proj/gavinspoint/welcome.html](https://w3.nwo.usace.army.mil/html/Lake_Proj/gavinspoint/welcome.html). Follow the Omaha District Corps of Engineers on Facebook or Twitter.

Karla Zeutenhorst is a Park Ranger with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and manages the Lewis and Clark Visitor Center.

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