On July 30, 1887, the Caldwell Tribune described that area of Idaho as “a resort for jack rabbits and badgers.” Then irrigation projects brought Boise River water to the land. In early 1886, two major canals began to deliver water to the area and allow development of irrigated farms and ranches.

By December 1901, Pioneer Irrigation District was formally organized and confirmed by judicial action. This allowed the completion of an extensive system of main canals, lateral ditches, and related facilities that eventually provided a reliable supply of irrigation water to 34,000 acres in Canyon County. From 1890 to 1915, sagebrush lands upgradient of the Pioneer lands either had already been developed with irrigation systems or plans for development were proceeding. Soon, the United States Reclamation Service started to implement the major irrigation system improvements of the Boise Project. Over 200,000 acres of desert lands were converted to habitable agricultural properties by the addition of irrigation water from the project.

Unfortunately, contrary to expectations, this expansion of irrigated agriculture in the Treasure Valley caused a new contradiction—too much water. In Pioneer, owners began complaining of waterlogged lands as soon as December 1904. Because of Pioneer’s location, down-gradient from the lands on the benches above the Boise River, the increase of subsurface water
from irrigation of formerly desert lands rapidly caused elevated ground water levels. Irrigation within Pioneer from its system also contributed to the problem.

Because the Reclamation Service recognized its role in causing the problem, in part due to the Boise Project facilities, it began working with Pioneer and the Nampa & Meridian Irrigation District to develop solutions. No one had contended with this problem before. Because major irrigation projects on this scale had never been attempted before, the Reclamation Service and the irrigation districts had to create something new.

The problem continued to worsen over the ensuing 10 years, until June 1914, when electric-powered dredges began to construct an interconnected system of major drains.

The drains came almost too late for some landowners. In Pioneer, a district of 34,000 acres, approximately 12,000 acres had standing water or were too waterlogged to sustain crops. Drainage of the excess water became the new imperative. Fortunately, the drains provided ancillary benefits: drainage water would supply an additional source for lands within the district that could not be irrigated with the relatively junior Boise River water rights of the District. Consequently, the engineering plans developed by the Reclamation Service included

"Scene on Upper Wilson Slough four miles above where the dredge is now working . . . [This will be] made ready for crops in 1915. Four years ago this was some of the finest agricultural land in the Boise Valley, now a lake of rushes.”

"View on Mason Creek Drain showing large discharge of water from water bearing strata. This picture was taken 30 days after the dredge passed this point. The drain through this section of the country is developing approximately 7 sec. ft. of water per mile.”
“feeder ditches,” which were to convey the water captured by the drains to the Pioneer irrigation delivery system. At this point, Lake Lowell (now Deer Flat Reservoir) was the only significant irrigation storage reservoir in the Boise River drainage.

The planned drainage system worked. Over approximately five years, pursuant to cost repayment contracts with the districts, the Reclamation Service built hundreds of miles of major open drains throughout the Boise Project. Construction started in Pioneer, because it had the most serious problems and it was closest to the Boise River, the necessary terminus of each drain system. Construction then proceeded into the higher elevation lands of the Nampa & Meridian Irrigation District.

This network of drainage ditches and interconnecting “feeder canals” continues to operate today, providing an essential component in the intricate web of irrigation water delivery and removal that allowed a former “resort for jack rabbits and badgers” to become a productive agricultural region, a center of commerce, and a pleasant residential environment for so many.

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