

## Water, Water Everywhere and All It Does Is Sink<sup>1</sup>

By Bob Dodd

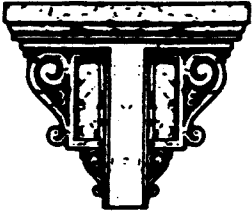
You turn on the faucet and water comes out. Leave it on as long as you want; it only costs a pittance. That is the way people in California used to think and perhaps we still think in Monroe County. But it is not that way any more in California and it used to not be in Bloomington. The history of Bloomington's water supply reveals many bumps along the way, especially in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. But even in the early 21st century there have been problems.<sup>2</sup>

The original source of water for residents of Bloomington was springs, wells, and cisterns. The city was not in the water supply business. Everyone was on his or her own. However, in 1885, the city drilled a well, 2,670 feet deep, on the courthouse square but found no usable water. Another well was drilled in 1908, this one only 130 feet deep. It found only polluted water. Toward the end of the 19th century the public and especially businesses in town began calling for a reliable public water supply. The first effort by the city to establish a water system consisted of construction of a small lake in 1894 southwest of town "on the Stanford Road." It was located at the present site of the city baseball and softball fields on West Second Street east of SR 37 (soon to be I-69). That supply soon proved to be inadequate. A second small lake was built in 1905 on the south side of the road, the two lakes being known as the Twin Lakes. The south lake still exists. In the summers of 1901, 1908, and 1913, especially serious shortages occurred resulting in efforts to ration the limited water supply. The city's answer to the shortages was to build more lakes southwest of town. Weimer Lake was built in 1909 and Leonard Springs Lake in 1915. Beginning in 1904 a serious movement was underway to move the water system from those locations to Griffy Creek Valley north of town. Geology Professor E. R. Cumings explained that the reservoirs southwest of town were built on limestone that contained caves and solution-widened fractures that allowed the water in the reservoirs to escape. On the other hand, the rock underlying the Griffy Valley was fine-grained and not porous and would prevent leakage of the impounded water. Despite this scientific explanation, many people in political power insisted that the present system southwest of town could be enlarged to meet the city's needs.

In 1911 Indiana University was so concerned about the water supply that it developed a supplementary small reservoir of its own on a tributary of Griffy Creek. That reservoir, University Lake, still exists north of the IU Golf Course. Although reliable, that source was too small to help much with the shortage. The university even shipped in water via railroad tanker car. The question of the water system eventually became a major political issue. Mayor John G. Harris was elected in 1921 partly on the basis of his stand against spending a large amount of money for a new reservoir in Griffy Creek Valley. Both Indiana University and Showers Furniture Company were considering moving to other locations if the water shortage could not be ended. Heated discussions occurred in 1922 in City Council meetings. The mayor and his supporters proposed expanding the size of Leonard Springs Lake. A 1999 article in the *Bloomington Herald-Times* describing the history of this controversy contains this quote from a Leonard Springs supporter during a summer meeting after a long drought: "They say the lake out there leaks. I was out there a few days ago and walked across the lake bed from side to side and you couldn't see any sign of a leak!"<sup>3</sup> Eventually the obvious need for a new reservoir resulted in construction of Griffy Lake in 1924. Water from Griffy was delivered to the city in early 1925. A sizable portion of the city's water continued to come from Leonard Springs until 1943.

As the city grew, even Griffy Lake proved to be inadequate. The height of the dam was raised slightly in the 1940s. After a drought period in 1948 the situation was becoming critical. The city laid a pipeline from Bean Blossom Creek to Griffy Lake to supplement the natural drainage into the lake. But ultimately a new reservoir was needed. To meet this need the city constructed Lake Lemon, which was completed in 1953. Rather than build a pipeline from Lake Lemon to Bloomington, the stored water in the new lake was allowed to flow down Bean Blossom Creek to the pumping station not far from Griffy Lake. The water was then pumped into Griffy where it was treated and pumped into the existing distribution system.

Lake Lemon was named after Thomas Lemon, who was the Democratic mayor of Bloomington when the lake was built. When the Republicans later took over the mayor's office they briefly changed the name of the lake to Bean Blossom Reservoir. There already was a Bean Blossom Lake in Morgan Monroe State Forest, so this resulted in some confusion. Ultimately, the name was changed back to Lake Lemon.



The Army Corps of Engineers completed Monroe Lake in 1962 as a flood control project. Secondary uses were recreation and a water supply for Bloomington. Monroe Lake was large enough that it was predicted to contain enough water to last the city and county for decades if not centuries. After its completion Lake Lemon and Griffy were no longer needed, but they remained functional for some years as an emergency supply.

The most recent chapter in the saga of Bloomington's water supply occurred in 2006 when Beurt SerVaas, former president of the Indianapolis City-County Council, proposed building a pipeline from Monroe Lake to Indianapolis to supplement its water supply. That threat to the Bloomington water supply was short lived when Governor Daniels decreed that Monroe Lake water could not be used for Indianapolis.

Although Monroe Lake contains an adequate supply of water for the city's needs, by 2005 the original treatment plant and pumping station were becoming inadequate. In 2007 the city announced a plan to enlarge the treatment capacity and install a second line for pumping water to Bloomington. That project has since been completed.

#### *Water Supply Timeline<sup>4</sup>*

- 1860 – Request for cisterns on courthouse square
- 1885 – 2,670' well drilled on courthouse square—no usable water found
- 1891 – Ordinance established franchise to provide water service
- 1894 – Plant not running—placed in receivership (Upper Twin Lake built)
- 1898 – Plant sold to city
- 1905 – Lower Twin Lake built to catch leakage from upper lake
- 1908 – 130' well drilled on courthouse square
- 1909 – Weimer Lake built
- 1911 – University Lake built
- 1915 – Leonard Springs Lake built
- 1924 – Griffy Lake built (after much controversy) (Leonard Springs continues to supply 1/3 of water until 1943)
- 1953 – Lake Lemon built
- 1962 – Monroe Lake built
- 2006 – Threat to take water from Monroe to Indianapolis
- 2007 – Expansion of treatment and pumping stations

#### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> A related museum exhibition, "Water Woes: Monroe County's Issues with H<sub>2</sub>O," can be seen in the Monroe County History Center's Brown Gallery until 16 January 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Useful summaries of portions of Bloomington's water supply history are included in Forest M. Hall, *Historic Treasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1922), 142; Carrol Krause, *Showers Brothers Furniture Company* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 226–29; "Your Reform Govt. Story of Bloomington's Water" (pamphlet in the Research Library's Vertical Files); and numerous articles from the *Bloomington Daily Telephone*, *Bloomington Herald-Times*, *Indiana Daily Student*, and *Indianapolis News* found in the Vertical Files.

<sup>3</sup> David Horn, "Utilities Worker Digs into History," *Bloomington Herald-Times*, 12 October 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Sources include these items from the Vertical Files: Horn, "Utilities Worker"; and "Bloomington Water History," [March 1998].