

By BETTY HALE
Journal Correspondent

TYHEE— Bill Hall, 82, retired this year after 32 years as watermaster on the Blackfoot River.

"I tried to retire three years ago, but they wouldn't let me," he says.

Asked if he had ever had a fight over water in those 32 years, he replied, "I've seen a few but I've never been in one. Oh, I've had some kind of mad at me until they found out I was right but nobody ever whipped me... I've enjoyed it all."

Hall was only 13 years old when the Blackfoot Reservoir was built, interrupting the flow of the upper and lower Blackfoot rivers. It was built for the Indian Service, Hall says, and at that time it was established that storage rights in the reservoir rest with the Bureau of Indian Affairs while the natural flow rights remain primarily with users on the north side of the river. The south side of the Blackfoot forms the reservation boundary for much of its length.

"Big springs come in in several places," Hall comments, continuing, "the first filing on the Blackfoot River was in 1869. Most of the natural flow is deeded water. The owner holds a deed just like you hold a deed on your land and it can be bought, sold or traded. This natural flow is way down this year. In the last month, since the reservoir closed, the water raised just two inches."

"If a man doesn't use his water for five years, he loses it," Hall adds. "In my 32 years I only know of one man who deserved to lose it but they gave it back to him."

"When I first started in this business I had 125 headgates to check on every day on horseback," he remarks. When asked how he covered that much ground, he says "I just kept the horse loping." Hall was paid \$148 a month for six months of the year, had to furnish and feed two horses and was furnished a house at \$15 monthly rent.

He remembers that the Blackfoot formerly wound along in great horseshoe bends and during the spring it would often overflow its banks, causing much damage.

In 1966 the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers set out to straighten the river.

"In some places a quarter of a mile cut would take out two miles of river," he says. "They made such a straight channel that the river ran too fast and washed away banks and bordering farmland. Then we had them thundering past with thousands of loads of rocks on big 10-wheelers to rip-rap the bank."

Hall ran a team and dragline during the building of the Hilina canal. "We had three shifts around the clock. The night shift worked with carbide lamps. There were 14 men to a crew. My wife cooked and her kitchen was moved up the line each day. When the survey crews and others found they had a cook shack sometimes she served up to 20 people," he recalls.

"I didn't mind, though," adds Mrs. Hall. "I had anything I wanted to cook with for the first time in my life." Her only assistant was a nine-year-old brother.

Discussing damage to the Blackfoot River fishery when the streamflow was shut off at the reservoir two weeks ago, Hall told of seeing 24 campers parked along the lane below the dam, fishing fish out of the lowered water.

"I remember the day when the fish and game men would gather the game fish out of the tunnel in tubs and dump them back into the reservoir," says Hall.

He suggests that Fort Hall water users would benefit greatly if the dam were raised six feet to store an additional year's supply of water, and if a small reservoir were built at the mouth of Wolverine Creek, the last to flow into the river.

"Any change in the dam takes three days or more to be seen at Fort Hall," he explains. "With a little storage space on Wolverine surplus water could be stored and when there was a shortage extra water could be only a few hours away."

He estimates that water users will not be too short if there is an average winter, explaining that six feet of snow in Diamond Creek, the river's largest source, produced ample water two years ago.