

**A River Imaginary: Nature and Narrative in the Columbia River Gorge**

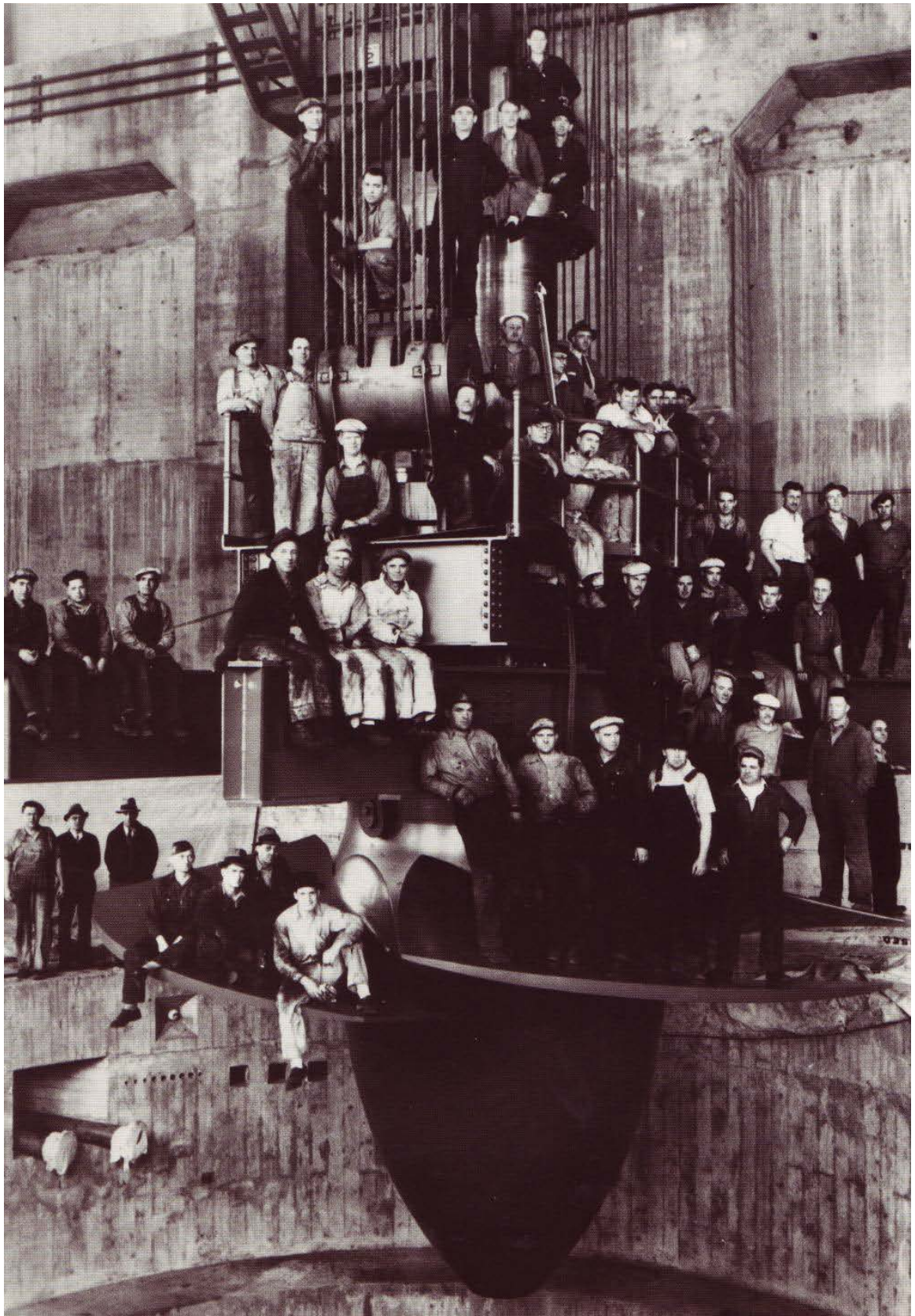
by

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Nearly twenty years ago, I accidentally deleted my mother's partially completed master's thesis from our family computer. Fighting back tears, she tossed a pillow across the room and told me, "I'm not mad at you, I am just mad at the situation."

It may have taken several decades, but I have finally come to understand both the gravity of my actions and the torrent of love that flows from her heart.

Thank you, Mom. This dissertation is dedicated to you.

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## ABSTRACT

A River Imaginary: Nature and Narrative in the Columbia River Gorge

By

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The Columbia River, one of the most dominant geographic features of the Pacific Northwest, drains nearly 259,000 square miles of territory as it traverses local, state, and national boundaries. From its headwaters in Canada to its mouth at the Pacific Ocean, the Columbia is vitally important to those who live near it, work on it, or depend upon the hydroelectric power that comes from it. This dissertation examines the development of the Columbia through the lens of cultural history. By identifying and tracking the divergent human meanings given to the river—a corpus of ideas that I refer to as the Columbia’s *river imaginary*—this study reveals how popular understandings of the river ebbed and flowed with the water itself, morphing and changing as the landscape of the river was transformed by hydroelectric dams, irrigation projects, navigation improvements, and the politics of salmon conservation.

To describe these physical and cultural changes this dissertation focuses narrowly on one particular section of the river, the Columbia River Gorge, and it engages a wide

array of cultural texts that describe the landscape—sources that include contemporaneous articles from local and national newspapers, federal and state government documents, tourist brochures, oral histories, environmentalist literature, folk music, photographs, landscape paintings, and documentary film. These sources reveal broad patterns in how people imagined the Columbia River’s history, its proper uses, and its relationship to the communities nearby. By tracing the patterns that emerge, this dissertation illuminates how the ‘cultural’ river and the ‘natural’ river interacted dialogically—explaining how the Columbia’s river imaginary shaped (and was shaped by) both the material ecology of the river and the political economy of the nation. This approach to the history of the Columbia reveals a dynamic but uneven process of continual reinvention, where culture and nature collide, abut, and overlap to shape the history of the river. In this analysis, cultural narratives appear not only as tools wielded, but also as the terrain upon which political, economic, and ecological contests were waged and won.

## Chapter 1

### Introduction: Reading Celilo

Forty miles east of Portland, Oregon sits Bonneville Dam, the last hydroelectric dam to span the Columbia River before it empties into the Pacific Ocean. A long, expansive structure, the dam stretches the width of the river, nearly a kilometer across.<sup>1</sup> Located on the western end of the Columbia Gorge, Bonneville creates a pool that stretches for nearly the entire length of the Columbia's path through the Cascade Mountain Range. The geography of this particular landscape is nothing short of spectacular: Four-thousand-foot mountains rise up on both sides of the river, and steep cliffs drop thousands of feet onto the valley floor. Tall, dark-green Douglas Fir line the valley's slopes, while cottonwood and poplar trees grow along the river's banks. Around eight hundred years ago, a massive landslide caused most of nearby Table Mountain to slide down into the river, blocking the Columbia's path through the mountains. What resulted was a vast inland lake—at least until the landslide gave way. Nobody knows precisely when the massive natural dam broke, but when it did, the water cut a permanent swath through the rock—creating a series of rapids that became known as the Cascades of the Columbia. For centuries, the Columbia ripped through this section of the Gorge with terrifying intensity. Today, this series of rapids is buried beneath the flat, blue

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<sup>1</sup> For an introduction to Bonneville and the other federal dams on the Columbia River, see *Comparing the Big Dams*, U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, [http://www.nwp.usace.army.mil/op/b/docs/brochures/Comparing\\_Big\\_Dams.pdf](http://www.nwp.usace.army.mil/op/b/docs/brochures/Comparing_Big_Dams.pdf), accessed November 10, 2006.

waters that collect behind Bonneville Dam, and the Columbia River's water flows over a different type of rock – that of a concrete spillway.<sup>2</sup>

On a self-guided tour of Bonneville Dam, visitors can stand on an island in the middle of the river and peer out across this unique landscape. From here they can look in any direction and see reminders of the dramatic changes that characterize the Columbia River's past and present. On one side the river is constantly controlled, its flows allocated, its path engineered to produce kilowatts of energy for Portland and Seattle. On the other side the Columbia continues on its path to the Pacific Ocean, gradually looking more and more like a wild and scenic river, flowing through its estuary with relatively less human interference, in a manner less influenced by concrete and computers. Looking downstream, away from the dam, it is all too easy to romanticize the old river, to imagine how it *used* to look before eleven large dams blocked its path, altered its flow, and transformed it into a thoroughly managed entity – what one historian termed “an organic machine.”<sup>3</sup> Looking upstream, one is tempted to marvel at the brashness of human intervention, to be amazed at how completely controlled this river is.

Travel fifty miles upstream to the eastern end of the Columbia River Gorge, and you encounter another giant dam. At The Dalles Dam the green trees have disappeared, but the surroundings are equally spectacular; basalt cliffs, jagged escarpments, and arid, brown, shrub-steppe covered hills roll across the landscape. At this dam visitors can stand on the banks of the Columbia and look out at a similar stretch of river—wide, calm,

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<sup>2</sup> For an account of the history of this landslide, regionally known as “The Bridge of the Gods,” see John Eliot Allen, Marjorie Burns, and Sam C. Sargent, *Cataclysms on the Columbia: A Layman's Guide To The Features Produced By the Catastrophic Bretz Floods in the Pacific Northwest* (Portland, Oregon: Timber Press, 1986), 164-7. For a different perspective see Chuck Williams, *Bridge of the Gods, Mountains of Fire: A Return to the Columbia Gorge* (New York: Friends of the Earth, 1980), 25-35.

<sup>3</sup> Richard White, *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995).

blue, and quiet. One might not realize it, but buried below the slow-moving waters is one of the most storied and celebrated places in the Pacific Northwest—the historic Celilo Falls. For centuries, Native peoples came from all over the region to fish here for salmon. Celilo, which local Sahaptin-speaking peoples called *Wyam*, was among a series of good fishing spots that dotted a nine-mile stretch of rapids. Home to one of the oldest continually-inhabited communities on the continent, The Dalles-Celilo reach was the premier inland fishery in Native North America—an important gathering place where Indian peoples from around the region would come every summer to fish, trade, and socialize.<sup>4</sup> Located on the arid side of the Columbia River Gorge, The Dalles-Celilo reach benefited from the peculiarities of the region's geography. On this side of the Cascade Mountains the weather was hot and dry. The salmon, eels, sturgeon, pike and chub could be caught with dip nets, spears, or in fish seines—where they then could be filleted and dried in the warm winds of summer and early fall. The bounty of the harvest attracted great numbers of people and the Falls acted as a meeting ground.

Celilo was a revered, celebrated Native place in the centuries before and after the

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<sup>4</sup> Geographer Cain Allen argued that The Dalles-Celilo reach was one of the most productive inland fisheries because of the peculiarities of its location. As the fish traveled upstream they encountered strong currents and sought shelter from the force of the water by hugging the sides of the pools and eddies that dotted the river's path. This concentrated salmon into locations where they were much easier to catch, either via spear, seine, hooks, traps, but usually via dip-nets. Places like Big Eddy, the Short Narrows, Rabbit Island, and Skein all offered a chance for enterprising fishermen to remove salmon from the river. The most spectacular fishing location was Horseshoe Falls, where the river level dropped at the end of every summer, revealing twenty-foot high cataracts that spread a fine mist over anyone nearby. At this location Celilo Falls spread across the width of river and every rock, cliff, bank, or wooden platform could be a productive location for fishing. Immediate adjacent to this fishery was Celilo Village, where racks of salmon were laid out to dry. For specific information on the Indian fishery at Celilo see Cain Allen, "They Called It Progress': Indians, Salmon, and the Industrialization of the Columbia River," (MA Thesis, Portland State University, 2000), 71-73, "Replacing Salmon: Columbia River Indian Fishing Rights and the Geography of Fisheries Mitigation," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 104 (Summer 2003), 196-227, "Boils Swell & Whorl Pools': The Historical Landscape of The Dalles-Celilo Reach of the Columbia River," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 108 (Winter 2007): 546-61, Dan Landeen and Allen Pinkham, *Salmon and His People: Fish and Fishing in Nez Perce Culture* (Lewiston: Confluence Press, 1999), 68, and R. W. Shoning, T. R. Merrell, Jr., and D. R. Johnson, *The Indian Dip Net Fishery at Celilo Falls on the Columbia River* (Portland: Oregon Fish Commission, November 1951), 13-17.

Euro-Americans arrived, and it would remain centrally important to the mid-River Indians who fished at the falls up into the postwar era. It was then that the federal government made plans for a massive hydroelectric project, and in 1957, the Army Corps of Engineers lowered twenty-four large steel gates on The Dalles Dam, permanently flooding the rocks, rapids, and fishing spots where Indians had fished from time immemorial. Celilo, like the other rapids along this stretch of the river—the Long Narrows, Big Eddy, Five Mile Rapids, and Ten Mile Rapids—disappeared from the face of the earth. In its place would be a vast pool of water that formed behind the dam, which the Corps unapologetically named Lake Celilo. For the people who made the decision to flood the falls, the justification was compelling; the falls were a necessary sacrifice for the greater good, a lost landmark, yes, but a welcome change made in the name of progress. The promise of cheap hydropower, upland river navigation, water to irrigate dry lands, and help in preventing the Columbia's great floods proved too alluring for those who stood to benefit from the changes. But for Pacific Northwest Indians—the Yakama, Warm Springs, Umatilla, Nez Perce, and unenrolled River Indians—the loss of Celilo Falls was devastating. Their primary means of subsistence undermined, their economic and spiritual center destroyed, they would never be the same.<sup>5</sup> Today, many of these same tribes still come to fish the river every summer—but the river is calm and silent, the falls are buried, and the once-prolific fishery is now only a shadow of its former self—the salmon populations having nearly collapsed from the myriad number of

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<sup>5</sup> Historian Katrine Barber convincingly argues that the dam transformed “Indian-owned resources (salmon) and space (Celilo Falls) into primarily non-Native owned resources (hydroelectricity and transportation) and space (the dam and Celilo Lake) through the building of a large federal work.” For a balanced, detailed, and comprehensive account of Celilo and the nearby town of The Dalles, see Barber, *Death of Celilo Falls* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005). Quotation is from Barber, 7.

federal works on the river. Driving by on Interstate 84 at seventy miles per hour, you can see where Celilo used to crash and roar, but now you wouldn't suspect that anything was ever there.

Yet in some ways, Celilo persists. The thunder of its roar and the coolness of its spray may be gone, but the great waterfalls at Celilo live on in the recorded history and collective memory of the region. Today, images of Celilo Falls proliferate. References to the Falls appear in countless historical examinations of the Columbia River, in popular books, and in newspaper and magazine articles. Images of Celilo appear in gift shops, on postcards, in novels, paintings and songs. Ask a person in the Pacific Northwest about the Columbia River and you are likely to hear something about Celilo. Despite its disappearance, many people have powerful impressions of the place—Indian and non-Indian alike. Perhaps it is the scale and size of the Falls, or the immensity of the Columbia's voluminous flows. Perhaps it is the memory of Native men standing over rickety platforms, ropes around their waists, with nets plunged deep into a dangerous, raging whitewater, or perhaps it is the injustice of Celilo's demise—the unforgettable images of forlorn native peoples sorrowfully watching the waters slowly inundate their sacred place, a place protected by treaties yet still taken. What is clear is that something about Celilo resonates, permanently etched into the popular mythology of the Pacific Northwest. (figures 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 1.5)

Celilo, in all of its splendor, gathers stories like it gathered salmon; stories about the people who lived there, stories about the significance of the Columbia River, and stories about mankind's place in the natural world. Narratives simply inundate the place, even after its disappearance. Looking closer, one sees that the Columbia River itself is a



repository for many different types of human stories, complex narratives that have shaped the cultural milieu of the “Great River of the West.” An archaeology of these Columbia River stories reveals a gamut of human emotions: optimism, faith, fear, loss, and guilt.

This dissertation follows the contours of Columbia River stories—narratives crafted by those who asserted their own vision of the river's past, present, and future. My inquiry begins with one primary assertion: That a ‘river imaginary’—the human meanings given to the river—can be found in the texts created to represent it.<sup>6</sup> To investigate the Columbia’s river imaginary I turn to a wide array of texts, including personal memoirs, government documents, correspondence among key river constituents, newspaper and magazine articles, brochures, advertisements, photos, paintings, songs, literature, and film. This wide range of materials reveals broad patterns, or discourses, that encourage some understandings of the river while discouraging others. To get a closer look at these patterns, this study focuses on one section of the lower river, the Columbia River Gorge, and tracks river stories over a relatively long period of time, from the mid-nineteenth century to the late twentieth.<sup>7</sup> By focusing on the rise and fall of

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<sup>6</sup> My use of the term 'river imaginary' refers to the murky realm of ideology, where people craft common-sense understandings of the world they inhabit, and the production of meaning is constantly linked with expressions of power. In reading these discourses my aim is to describe what occupied the hearts and minds of those who crafted dominant conceptions of the Columbia. While these meanings are not completely *imagined*, they are also not necessarily bounded to verity. On one hand, Columbia River stories exist in the realm of culture. To some extent they are only imaginary significations, as perfect or flawed as any other human utterance, constrained by our ability to know what we know. On the other hand, these stories relate to a real river, which is part of a natural system that exists independent of human cognition, and thus demands a different type of ontological status (however imperfect our access to it may be). Yet, the world of culture and the world of nature are difficult, if not impossible, to separate. Intertwined and interdependent, even imaginary stories cannot be separated from real places, and thus, they have real consequences. And, as historian Michael Kammen has observed, “What people believe to be true about their past is usually more important in determining their true behavior than truth itself.” Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 38-39, as quoted in William Robbins, *Landscapes of Promise: The Oregon Story, 1800-1940* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 4.

<sup>7</sup> Nearly eighty miles long, the Columbia River Gorge has hillsides that rise as high as four-thousand feet above the river. Forming the boundary between Washington to the North and Oregon to the South, the Gorge stretches from the outskirts of the Portland/Vancouver metropolitan area in the West, past the city

these narratives, each chapter acts as a “snapshot” of a longer history—revealing moments of contingency that correspond with shifts in the Columbia's river imaginary. This approach to the history of the river reveals a dynamic but uneven process of continued reinvention, where culture and nature interact dialogically—colliding, abutting and overlapping to shape the history of the Columbia River.

For as long as people have lived near it, the Columbia has been at the center of the region’s social, economic, and ecologic systems. For centuries the river helped determine how people worked, how they played, what they ate, and it influenced how they hoped and dreamed.<sup>8</sup> The centrality of the Columbia is a constant theme in Pacific Northwest history, and in some way the river touches nearly everyone in the region. The water in the Columbia flows through two countries, six states, and countless local municipalities, creating multiple, diverse constituencies. (figures 1.6, 1.7) Today, groups of people rely on the river for subsistence and employment, for transportation and electricity, for recreation and entertainment. Because of this, many of the residents of Oregon, Washington, and Idaho depend on the river for a wide variety of uses, and the river's flows create vast amount of wealth. Not surprisingly, there are many different visions as to how the Columbia ought to be managed and what it should become. Various groups of river-users understand their relationship to the river in diverse, sometimes contradictory,

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of The Dalles to the Columbia’s confluence with the Deschutes River in the East. Differences between the dry, arid eastern region and the wet, rainy western side of the Cascade Mountains create a climatological divide that is as stark as any in the world. This difference in atmospheric pressure causes wind to blow through the Columbia River Gorge all year long. In recent years this attracted those interested in sailing, windsurfing, and kiteboarding on the wider parts of the river, on the reservoirs that formed behind the large dams. Today the Columbia River Gorge holds special federal status as a National Scenic Area.

<sup>8</sup> One of the most dominant geographic features of the Pacific Northwest, the Columbia drains nearly 259,000 square miles of territory and reaches across state and national borders into nearly every corner of the region. From its headwaters in Canada to its mouth in the Pacific Ocean, the Columbia is a vitally important resource to those who live near it. (figure 1.6)

ways. Different understandings as to the meanings and best uses of the Columbia lie beneath many of the controversies that characterize its twentieth-century history. Beginning in the 1930s, the federal government remade the physical characteristics of the river—burying its rapids, widening its banks, deepening its channels, and siphoning off its waters to thirsty farms throughout the region. From 1933 to 1984, fourteen hydroelectric dams transformed the Columbia from a free-flowing river known for its fierce rapids and seasonal flooding, into a body of water less like a river and more like a continual chain of lakes and reservoirs. The Columbia had been transformed, and as historian Don Worster put it, it was as if the river had died and been reborn as money.<sup>9</sup>

When an individual looked at the river, what he or she saw was shaped by their own experience, their own subjectivity. To some the Columbia River was the productive center of a regional economy – an essential resource in delivering water to arid farmlands, a producer of electricity for high-tech or atomic industries, a transportation route for large ships to pick up and deliver goods throughout the world. To others, the river was a great symbol of natural beauty, its salmon a natural treasure to be preserved and protected, its scenic wonders a national resource best used for pleasure and recreation. But for others the river was seen as a mix of all of the above, simultaneously a marker of the traditional and the modern, of the religious and the secular, of the cultural and the natural. As different people created ‘cognitive maps’ of what the Columbia was, what emerged was a portrait of the river that was highly political and nearly always contested.

To unlock the history of these contestations I turn to “river stories”—the

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<sup>9</sup> This anecdote was attributed to Donald Worster in Joseph Cone, *A Common Fate: Endangered Salmon and the People of the Pacific Northwest* (New York: Holt & Co., 1995), 119.

narratives, tropes, and ideas that claim to represent the real meaning of the Columbia.<sup>10</sup> Here I use the terms “story” and “narrative” interchangeably, to cast a wide net and catch the many different ways that people gave meanings to the world around them. I then ask, where did these stories come from? Why did some proliferate and others fade? And what were the political and ecological consequences of these imaginings? To answer those questions this study looks to politics, ecology, and culture, and how the three interacted to shape the history of one particular place. As such, it examines the interplay between natural systems, the political systems that govern them, and the ideologies upon which those systems are built. To demonstrate this approach, and to explain how it fits within the existing historical scholarship on the Columbia and the U. S. West, let us briefly return back to the river's sleeping giant, Celilo Falls.

The earliest stories given to Celilo were crafted by those who lived there first, and for the longest amount of time. In the bustling center of trade that abutted the falls every summer, Indian peoples danced and celebrated, argued and fought, gambled and played, and met and fell in love. Celilo was the backdrop for all of this, the reason to make the trip, and a memorable place that featured prominently in the lives of those connected to the Columbia River. On the shores of the river Indian peoples told stories about the

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<sup>10</sup> My approach to Columbia River stories stands directly upon the work of several deeply engaged, thoughtful scholars with long careers of historical research on the river. William L. Lang has written numerous essays describing the Columbia's twentieth century history, including several that form the basis of my approach to studying the river's stories. See William L. Lang, “What Has Happened to the Columbia? A Great River’s Fate in the Twentieth Century,” in *Great River of the West: Essays on the Columbia River*, ed. William Lang and Robert C. Carriker (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999) 144-67, and “Big Water, Great River: Two Ways of Looking at the Columbia River,” in *Landscapes and Communities on the Pacific Rim*, edited by Karen Gaul and Jackie Hiltz (Baltimore: M.E. Sharpe, 2000), 130-146. In his work Lang identified two major patterns in how people made sense of the Columbia; the river as “spiritual force” and the river as “cornucopian provider of economic value.” These two characterizations are certainly accurate, and I use them as a jumping-off point to probe for other narratives imbedded within each. The historian William G. Robbins adopted a similar nomenclature but came to different conclusions in his essay, “Narrative Form and Great River Myths: The Power of Columbia River Stories,” in *Environmental History Review* 17 (Summer 1993): 1-22.

natural world, and several featured a story about Coyote freeing the salmon. In Coyote's trickster tale, he fooled two women who were hoarding the fish for themselves, breaching their lake and thereby allowing the salmon to move upstream, to provide for all the people. Such stories described the formation of the world, proscribed altruistic ways of living, and they gave meaning to the abundance at Celilo. Stories like the one about Coyote helped constitute rules that governed the practices of fishing and allocation, and they ensured sustainability in the harvest. In Coyote stories, Celilo Falls and the people who lived near the river were not separated from one another, but were part of a syncretic whole—reflecting a worldview that failed to separate human beings from the world in which they lived.<sup>11</sup> And they were stories about the river.

When the first Euro-American explorers passed through the region, they too had stories to leave at Celilo. Some of the new visitors heard the Coyote stories, but the two peoples crafted meanings according to different epistemological systems, and their respective understandings were not entirely legible to one another. Their encounters were marked by mutual misunderstandings, missteps in an overlapping zone of difference. When newcomers like Lewis and Clark, David Thompson, and Alexander Ross looked at the falls, they drew on different histories, different traditions, different worldviews, and they saw something else entirely.<sup>12</sup> Euro-American explorers who came to Celilo

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<sup>11</sup> For examples of Coyote stories about Celilo, see Virginia Beavert, *The Way It Was: Anaku Iwacha, Yakima Indian Legends* (Yakima, Washington : Franklin Press, 1974), 34-8, Martin Louie Sr., "Tales of Coyote: Eastern Washington Traditions," in *A Time of Gathering: Native Heritage in Washington State*, ed. Robin K. Wright (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991), 164-9, and Jarold Ramsey, *Coyote Was Going There: Indian Literature of the Oregon Country* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1977), 47-9. On reciprocal stories and Sahaptin-speaking peoples see Eugene Hunn with James Selam and Family, *Neh'i-Wana, "The Big River": Mid-Columbia Indians and Their Land* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990), 151-4, 222-3, and *Wishram Texts*, ed. Edward Spair (Leyden: E. J. Brill, 1909), 3-7.

<sup>12</sup> Historian Charles Wilkinson called the arrival of Lewis and Clark, a "crackling, lightening-bolt event" for the peoples who lived along the river. *Crossing the Next Meridian: Land, Water, and the Future of*

recorded stories of grandeur—romantic impressions that conveyed the spectacular natural geography of the place, God's grand design, national desire, and descriptive warnings about the danger posed for those who didn't know the river. Concurrently, these new visitors understood nature to be governed by physical forces that acted according to laws. Such laws were predictable and observable. Imbibed with enlightenment rationality, these men recorded impressions of the Falls that were structured by what they already knew—deducing meanings about the place based on what they could see, touch, measure, and record. In their encounters with the river, they recorded details that native peoples would have found peculiar, even useless. The stories they told of Celilo were both romantic *and* scientific, and both ways of looking at a landscape were dramatically different from the stories that were told before.

When the steady trickle of Euro-American settlers turned into a flood, the political, social, and cultural worlds of The Dalles-Celilo area were made anew, and the Falls were at the center of these dramatic changes. In the context of shifting national boundaries, Celilo was a prized fishery that mid-River Indian peoples refused to

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*the West* (Washington D. C.: Island Press, 1992), 178. By all indications Lewis and Clark were the first European peoples to encounter Native communities along the river. They are *certainly* the most well-documented. For a more detailed discussion of Lewis and Clark on the Columbia, see John Logan Allen, *Passage Through the Garden: Lewis and Clark and the Image of the American Northwest* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 306-41, William L. Lang, "Lewis and Clark on the Columbia: The Power of Landscape in the Exploration Experience," in *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 87 (Summer 1996): 141-148, "Exploring a Foreign Place: The Lewis and Clark Expedition in Oregon Country," in *Two Centuries of Lewis and Clark: Reflections on the Voyage of Discovery* (Portland: Oregon Historical Society Press, 2004), 9-59, "Describing a New Environment: Lewis and Clark and Enlightenment Science in the Columbia River Basin," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 105 (Fall 2004): 360-389, Donald W. Meinig, *The Great Columbia Plain: A Historical Geography, 1805-1910* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968), 26-34, Jim E. O'Conner, "The Evolving Landscape of the Columbia River Gorge: Lewis and Clark and Cataclysms on the Columbia," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 107 (Fall 2004), 390-421, and James Ronda, *Lewis and Clark Among the Indians* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 163-180. For an early account of the Wascopam Mission near the Celilo area, see Robert Boyd, *People of The Dalles: The Indians of Wascopam Mission, a historical ethnography based on the papers of the Methodist Missionaries* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 14.

relinquish. But disease, warfare, and the endless influx of white immigrants fractured the social and cultural fabric of Indian life, and by 1855, the four tribes that claimed fishing rights signed treaties ceding land to the U.S. Government—reserving the right to fish at their “usual and accustomed places.” Many of the River People left for reservations during this era, reservations that were over a hundred miles away. Others stayed in their communities alongside the river, including some at Celilo Village.<sup>13</sup> The Falls persisted, but its shifting meanings reflected shifting power relations on the river. Older ways of knowing the place were still there, but they now overlapped and abutted with new stories. Like the stories of the Columbia River proper, some proliferated, others faded.

Over time, more narratives put their mark upon the falls. As understandings of the salmon changed, understandings of the Falls changed with them. In the 1890s, the Seufert Brothers built a cannery and moved in abreast of Big Eddy. The cannery's fishwheel was brutally efficient in the harvest, often catching more salmon during one day of the peak run than previous technologies had caught in an entire season. Salmon had always been a unit for trade, but now the fish became commodities exchanged in far away markets. Fish taken at Celilo provided wealth to new and different constituencies—and commercial interests were equally adept at capturing Celilo's abundance, shifting it over time (by preserving the fish in cans) and over space (by transporting it to markets throughout the nation) to make a healthy profit. Fishing practices changed, as did the rules governing allocation at the Falls. New ways of understanding the meaning, usefulness, and purpose of catching fish was mapped onto

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<sup>13</sup> Katrine Barber, “After Celilo Falls: The Dalles Dam, Indian Fishing Rights, and Federal Energy Policy on the Mid-Columbia River,” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Washington State University, 1999), 23.

the river.<sup>14</sup>

In 1915 the Columbia River Highway came to Celilo, snaking its way right up to the edge of Celilo Village. (figure 1.8) The first paved road in the region, the highway put increased emphasis on the act of looking at the water. Soon visual images of the falls proliferated in guidebooks, brochures, and postcards. In shortening the time it took to get to Celilo from Portland, the highway also reduced the social distance between the two places. As more and more people visited Celilo, it became one of the region's most popular tourist destinations. Visitors flocked to come and see the jumping salmon, and in the touristed space next to the Falls, non-Native visitors paid cash money for freshly caught fish, and more to get their picture taken with the Indian fishermen nearby. Ideas about racial difference, national identity, and economic privilege swirled around the shores of the river, in a complex exchange of money, power, and ideology.<sup>15</sup> In these encounters Native peoples utilized the tourists to meet their own needs, and competition among Indians for the best fishing spots increased. Non-Native visitors watched with interest, and cast the Indian fishermen into archetypal stories about primitive men and vanishing races. Celilo became a spectacular backdrop for a bigger story about social evolution, national expansion, and the march of civilization. The river absorbed these stories as well. (figure 1.9)

While the highway changed Celilo from the direction of the land, the federal government changed it from the direction of the water. From 1905 to 1915, the Army

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<sup>14</sup> For information about canneries and change to the fishery see Chris Friday, *Organizing Asian American Labor: the Pacific Coast Canned Salmon Industry, 1870-1942* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), and Joseph Taylor III, *Making Salmon: An Environmental History of the Northwest Fisheries Crisis* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999).

<sup>15</sup> For a fascinating account of tourists at the falls, see Ed Edmo, "After Celilo," in *Talking Leaves: Contemporary Native American Short Stories*, ed. Craig Lesley (New York: Dell Publishing, 1991), 71. For an interpretation of Edmo's story see Katrine Barber, "After Celilo Falls," 1-2.



Corps of Engineers constructed The Dalles-Celilo Canal, allowing some boats to travel around the falls and up the river, at least when the river level was manageable. (figure 1.10, 1.11) But with the canal came other aspirations. As early as the turn of the century, local and regional leaders proposed hydroelectric developments near The Dalles-Celilo area. To proponents of a dam, harnessing the Columbia promised a number of economic benefits: irrigation, improved navigation routes, hydropower, flood control, even recreation. In 1925 the Corps began mapping the channels and investigating the feasibility of multiple-use projects. A large dam at The Dalles was proposed in nearly every Corps reports about the river, including major studies in 1932, 1938, and 1948.<sup>16</sup> But more importantly, aspirations for a dam were bound up in other larger stories. For most of the twentieth century, dams were equated with social and technological progress, and the presence of a big dam signaled that the region was changing for the better. Promoters of The Dalles Dam thought that rivers, if harnessed correctly, could free the region from its economic shackles, free farmers from toiling on the land, and free women from tedious chores around the house.<sup>17</sup>

Local and regional business interests recognized that they had much to gain from the project: The chance to control the Columbia's major floods, a bridge to connect the Oregon and Washington sides of the river, a small but promising port, river passage up to Lewiston, cheap hydroelectricity to fuel industry and create jobs, and improvements in national security in the context of the Cold War. In the litany of reasons for building the dam, boosters heard the drumbeat of progress. In an era marked by faith in science, engineering, and the capacity of the federal government to get things done, this vision of

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<sup>16</sup> Cain Allen, "They Called It Progress," 88.

<sup>17</sup> Barber, *Death of Celilo Falls*, 31.

an engineered river was a compelling one, a story propagated by people who had the most to gain and the least to lose. In their view, Celilo Falls was just an obstacle that stood in the way.<sup>18</sup> So in 1957, when the Corps pushed the buttons that lowered the gates of the dam, it only took about six hours for the new lake to back up to the base of Celilo. The next morning, it was gone. (figure 1.12)

But Celilo would not be forgotten. In the second half of the twentieth century, a different type of river story emerged. This new narrative was pushed by those with less at stake in the material wealth provided by the river, and they questioned the dominant vision so commonly espoused. But more importantly, the Columbia River itself had given them a reason to pause. In the second half of the century, as the Columbia became increasingly developed, its ecological health began to decline. On the main stem of the Columbia, the salmon runs—long seen as a symbol of the region's natural abundance—teetered on the verge of collapse. When this became known, many in the Northwest took notice. The Columbia's large dams, long seen as symbols of modernity and progress, shifted into symbols of hubris and environmental decline. In this context, the inundation of Celilo Falls became a central component of a new story—a tragic story that suggested the Columbia River had been mismanaged. The destruction of Celilo, which once marked mankind's dominance over the natural world, soon evoked feelings of sadness, and loss. This new type of story gave power to the memory of Celilo, and it stood in direct contrast to the celebratory narratives that had structured so much of the river's recent history.

Some of the stories about Celilo celebrated the abundance of the natural world. Others celebrated mankind's ability to remove that abundance, to monetize it, and to

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 32.

master it. Still other stories connected the Columbia to broader ideas about the nation or the region, their ascendance, and eventually, their environmental decline. Through the waters of the Columbia flowed discourses of modernity, progress, the march of civilization, nature's nation, sublimity, injustice and decline—all of these appear in stories told about Celilo and in the Columbia itself. Some stories celebrated. Other stories mourned. Narratives on the river competed and collided, with consequences for the river and the people who lived nearby. Tracing the origins and consequences of the Columbia's stories reveals the scope and tenor of power relations on the river. Today, the waterway acts as a repository for many of these stories, a place full of meanings larger than itself. On the Columbia, stories mattered. What was perceived to be true, had very true consequences—both for the river and the people living around it. Examining these stories reveals shifting patterns of social relations—the tipping points and cleavages, the moments wherein cultural representations were a means of constituting power, of enacting it, or of toppling it.

### **On Nature and Narrative**

Naturally, a river the size of the Columbia demanded a lot of attention, and many historians have studied the river. Today, discussions of the Columbia's historiography begin with Richard White's masterfully written, *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (1995). A short (but sweet) monograph, White's approach to describing the vagaries and contradictions of the contemporary Columbia is a compelling model for making sense of the river's transformation. To him the Columbia acted as a vast machine, a system that transferred flows of energy from nature to humans. As a central organizing principle for the text, White's "geography of energy" described the

relationship between humans and the river, humans and salmon, and to give meanings people gave to the Columbia's dams. White argued that using the Columbia had always been part of the cultural fabric of the region, and that contemporary declension narratives emphasizing its pure past over a polluted present didn't offer much useful in understanding the contemporary river. To White river had not died, it had just changed.

My approach to the Columbia builds off of White's contributions, pushing and probing at the moments where ecological and cultural change was indeterminate. Such moments of contingency lead me to a different type of archive—a collection of primary materials clustered around key moments, or “snapshots,” where groups or individuals interacted with forces that White described. In addition, my study delves deeper into the social and cultural terrain of those who interacted with the river on a daily basis. While *The Organic Machine* elucidates the Columbia's broad social and cultural currents, my approach investigates these currents on a smaller scale—acting as a case study to track the complex exchange between culture, politics, and the environment on a more localized entity, the Columbia River Gorge, allowing for a different scope and focus of analysis.

While Richard White looms large in the field of Columbia River history, other scholars loom even larger, with detailed, committed and ongoing research on the river. Foremost among these is William L. Lang, founder and former director of the Center for Columbia River History. Lang's book, *Great River of the West: Essays on the Columbia River* (1995), which he edited with Robert Carriker, emerged from a 1992 National Endowment of the Humanities conference on the river. The resulting text provides the most comprehensive view of the scholarship on the subject. Take a casual glance around any of these footnotes, and you will see that William Lang authored a number of relevant

articles that provided essential background to this study, including essays on Celilo Falls, Lewis and Clark on the Columbia, the Columbia Valley Authority, the Columbia River Historical Expedition, and the fate of Columbia River salmon.

Another historical study, *Death of Celilo Falls* (2005), by Katrine Barber, focused on individual reactions to a changing Columbia in two adjacent communities—the Indian community of Celilo Village and the mostly non-Indian city of The Dalles. Barber's account of the inundation of the falls is compelling, and she describes some of the same trajectories of power as this study, but Barber limits the discussion to focus upon the two communities negotiated the sweeping changes to the river. Barber's scholarship is detailed and her writing eloquent, but her focus is necessarily narrow and there remains plenty of space for a study that focuses more broadly on the lower river. Other relatively recent contributions to the secondary literature provide a point of departure into areas of the Columbia River Gorge's recent past. *Planning a New West* (1997) is a study of the Columbia River Gorge Scenic Area that focused on its creation and management, and Andrew Fisher's forthcoming, *Shadow Tribe* (2010) explores the shifting (yet persisting) Indian identities among Native peoples in the Columbia River Gorge. *Empty Nets* (1999) is an ethnography of the mid-River Indians who had their fishing sites destroyed by Bonneville Dam, and Joseph Taylor's *Making Salmon* (1999) is a brilliantly nuanced study of the Pacific Northwest salmon fishery, its management, and the social and environmental factors that led to its decline.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Carl Abbott, Sy Adler, and Margery Post Abbott, *Planning a New West: The Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1997), Katrine Barber, *Death of Celilo Falls* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), Joseph E. Taylor III, *Making Salmon*, Roberta Ulrich, *Empty Nets: Indians, Dams, and the Columbia River* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1999). Other recent books on the Columbia include several popular press titles, *Northwest Passage* by William Dietrich, *River of the West*, by Robert Clark, and *A River Lost* by Blaine Harden. Dietrich is measured in his discussion of river management, while Harden sees only tragedy in the changes to the

Early historical studies of the Columbia River are also primary sources for this study. Most of the river's earliest appearances in Euro-American written history could be characterized as romantic, as the river formed a backdrop for the heroic actions featuring fur traders, immigrants, and explorers. In the late 1880s and early 1890s, Hubert Howe Bancroft's *History of Washington, Idaho, and Montana 1845-1889* (1890) offered the first comprehensive history of the region that placed the river at the center of the action. Written by Frances Fuller Victor, this history was the first to frame the Columbia as "impressively grand and wild"—the most prevalent way of understanding the river's historical significance in this era.<sup>20</sup> A similar theme inspired several amateur historians to publish dozens of articles from 1906 to 1935, framing the Columbia as a 'river of heroes.'<sup>21</sup> Like nearly all Columbia River histories, these accounts focused on the powerful, spectacular, physical nature of the river – which also served the function of elevating the people and places featured in their articles to heroic or exceptional status. In imagining the Columbia in this fashion they were following in a long tradition of looking at natural landscapes in particular ways. Ever since cartographers began representing the "vast river of the West" on their maps, the Columbia was primarily understood as arterial – connecting the coast with the inland plateau, linking the arid east with the temperate west.<sup>22</sup> This imagining as the Columbia fit well with the Turnerian

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Columbia in the twentieth century. Robert Clark's literary treatment of the historical characters that occupy the river is deeply compelling. William Dietrich, *Northwest Passage: The Great Columbia River* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996), Blaine Harden, *A River Lost: The Life and Death of the Columbia* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), Robert Clark, *River of the West: Stories from the Columbia* (San Francisco: HarperCollinsWest, 1995).

<sup>20</sup> This argument is made by William Lang in "Creating the Columbia: Historians and the Great River of the West, 1890-1935," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 93 (Fall 1992): 235-262.

<sup>21</sup> William L Lang, "Creating the Columbia," 236.

<sup>22</sup> Historians have frequently referred to the river as "an artery," causing Historian Patricia Limerick to quip, "if the Columbia River is the region's artery, then there is only one meaning available within that metaphor for a dam. The Columbia River has become a very clogged artery, and the Army Corps of

metaphor of movement, in particular the movement from east to west. These amateur historians viewed the Columbia as yet another force of nature to be conquered in the Republic's expansion.<sup>23</sup> The first book to focus exclusively on the river was W.D. Lyman's *The Columbia River: Its History, Its Myths, Its Scenery, Its Commerce* (1909), which was notable for its enthusiasm for development.<sup>24</sup>

In the later half of the twentieth century, growing concern for the river's ecology prompted increased interest from professional historians. In the 1960s and 1970s concern for the river inspired several authors to undertake ambitious studies of the Columbia River salmon runs. The first of these was Anthony Netboy's *The Columbia River Salmon and Steelhead Trout: Their Fight for Survival* in 1980. Around the same time, legal historians began to focus on the political fight that local native peoples waged in order to protect their access to the salmon fishery, including Fay Cohen's *Treaties on Trial* in 1982. The interest in the salmon fishery from both the legal and ecological viewpoints continued into the 1990s, where a proliferation of studies appeared: Joseph Cone's *A Common Fate*, Keith Petersen's *River of Life, Channel of Death*, Joseph Taylor's *Making*

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Engineers and Bureau of Reclamation have been agents for the production, distribution, and installation of cholesterol, bringing the entire area to the verge of a major stroke." Patty Limerick, "Meetings Along the Great River of the West," in *Great River of the West*, 92.

<sup>23</sup> By the 1920s historians wrote about the Columbia both in terms of utility and in terms of heroism. In this era, William Lang wrote about an interesting, if overly celebratory, train tour – the Columbia River Historical Expedition, financed by the Great Northern Railway Company in 1926. Designed to travel across the region from east to west, the expedition honored the Columbia's heroes in a most explicit fashion, by holding commemoration ceremonies up and down the river. Well known Pacific Northwest figures like Robert Gray, Lewis and Clark, John Jacob Astor, John McLoughlin, and Marcus and Narcissa Whitman were the focus of much of the historians' attention. In the esteem of the tours participants, the Columbia was an exceptional river, once that allowed the human beings along its shores to do exceptional deeds. See Lang, "Creating the Columbia," 235-62.

<sup>24</sup> Lyman's text was a form of advocacy history that emphasized how useful the river could be if it was developed for agricultural purposes. Lang commented that Lyman's book "detailed a patriotic and heroic version of the Columbia's role in Northwest history while it championed the idea of a manipulated river." See William L. Lang, "Creating the Columbia," 243-6. Hubert H. Bancroft, *History of Washington, Idaho and Montana, 1845-1889* (San Francisco: History Co., 1890), W.D. Lyman, *The Columbia River: Its History, Its Myths, Its Scenery, Its Commerce* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1909).

*Salmon*, and Lisa Mighetto and Wes Ebel's *Saving the Salmon*.<sup>25</sup> Recently, other scholars addressed facets of the Columbia's twentieth century history that weren't directly connected to fishing, including atomic energy at the Hanford Nuclear Facility, the construction of Grand Coulee Dam, and more literary mediations on the notion of place and the river.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to the historical scholarship on the Columbia River, this dissertation contributes to a number of other sub-fields. In emphasizing the role of culture and ecology, this dissertation contributes to a broader exchange of ideas within environmental, cultural, and western U. S. history. Located within a tradition that is commonly identified with the work of historian William Cronon, my study probes the intersection between nature and culture. By interrogating a wide array of cultural texts, this method of inquiry links ideology to the ecology of the natural world, and to the political economy that determines its management. Here the Columbia River is real, but its status as a national treasure or hydroelectric resource is very much a human invention.

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<sup>25</sup> William L. Lang and Robert C. Carriker suggest that the proliferation of scholarship addressing the Columbia River in the 1990s resulted (at least partly) through concern about the environmental health of the river. See Lang and Carriker, "Introduction" in *Great River of the West*, 4. For other important works that addressed the development of the river and environmental decline see, Oral Bullard, *Crisis on the Columbia* (Portland, Oregon: Touchstone Press, 1968), Fay Cohen, *Treaties on Trial: The Continuing Controversy Over Northwest Indian Fishing Rights* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1986), Joseph Cone, *A Common Fate*, Donald Meinig, *The Great Columbia Plain*, Anthony Netboy, *The Columbia River Salmon and Steelhead Trout: Their Fight for Survival* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1980), and Keith Petersen, *River of Life, Channel of Death: Fish and Dams on the Lower Snake* (Lewiston: Confluence Press, 1995).

<sup>26</sup> For information about Hanford see Michael D'Antonio, *Atomic Harvest: Hanford and the Lethal Toll of America's Nuclear Arsenal* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1993). On Grand Coulee Dam see Robert Ficken, *Rufus Woods, the Columbia River, & the building of Modern Washington* (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1995), and Paul C. Pitzer, *Grand Coulee: Harnessing a Dream* (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1994). For literary mediations on the Columbia see Robin Cody, *Voyage of a Summer Sun* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), David James Duncan, *My Story As Told By Water: confessions, Druidic rants, reflections, bird-watchings, fish-stalkings, visions, songs and prayers refracting light, from living rivers, in the age* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2002), Craig Lesley, *River song* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), Sam McKinney, *Reach of Tide, Ring of History* (Portland: Oregon Historical Society Press, 1987), and Robert Michael Pyle, *Wintergreen: Listening to the Land's Heart* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986).



My approach to Columbia River stories has its origins in an approach to narrative made famous by the work of historian Hayden White. In 1980, White described how language and narrative were the building blocks of experience, the foundations of meaning in everyday life. In his book, *Metahistory*, White described narration as a process whereby people fit events into causal sequences, and make choices as to what information is included and what is omitted. Because every story has a beginning, middle, and end, narrative becomes the vehicle by which large numbers of events become coherent—the linking of these events into patterns with explicit meanings. White concluded that narrative acted as the foundation through which we know what we know. Meaning is crafted by what is included, and what is not included in any particular story. By linking causal sequences together and mobilizing our understanding of other events, certain types of narratives become more common (and more powerful) while others fade away. Moreover, White asserted that the lessons, morals, or messages of any particular narrative often fit well-established patterns. Narratives that are celebratory contrast with those that emphasize decline. Some emphasize heroic deeds and while others lament tragic losses. Some narratives are romantic, others satirical or comedic. All stories lose or gain traction according to needs or desires of any particular individual, but some stories have more *coherence*. Other stories may be more inclusive. Some have greater depth, others breadth. As the historian William Cronon remarked, all stories are not created equal.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> For a discussion of narrative and history see David Carr, “Narrative and the Real World: An Argument for Continuity,” *History and Theory* 25 (May 1986): 117-31, William Cronon, “A Place For Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative,” *Journal of American History* 78 (March 1992): 1347-76, Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 623-25, Hayden White, “The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Thought,” *History and Theory* 23 (February 1984): 1-33, and *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1973).

In telling stories about the natural world, individuals and groups craft narratives that often have explicitly political consequences. At the most basic level, stories include some things and exclude others, emphasizing causation, and crafting significance. In doing so they empower some ways of knowing landscapes, while disempowering others. To tell a story about a mountain or a river is to craft knowledge of that particular landscape, to make sense of it, and communicate that understanding to others. Yet, each and every story often presents just a small part of the various ways one could “know” the world around them. Natural systems exist separate from human cognition, from language, from discourse, from what we call “history.” But as others have pointed out, all that we write and discuss about nature is emplotted in the form of narrative, as stories that explain aspects of these natural systems. These stories, argues William Cronon, “...belong as much to rhetoric and human discourse as to ecology and nature. It is for this reason that we cannot escape the challenge of confronting the challenge of multiple competing narratives in our efforts to understand both nature and the human past.”<sup>28</sup>

“The idea of nature contains,” cultural studies scholar Raymond Williams once wrote, “...an extraordinary amount of human history.”<sup>29</sup> In drawing attention to the term ‘nature,’ Williams called for a more thorough understanding of the interplay between the social and the natural. Not long after Williams wrote those words, environmental historians (who, at the time, were not necessarily known as such) began investigating the word’s long and complicated human history. “Nature,” added Cronon, “is as much a

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Cronon's comment is from a talk he gave at the University of Michigan on March 25, 2010 titled, “The Portage: Time, Memory, and Storytelling in the Making of an American Place.”

<sup>28</sup> William Cronon, “A Place For Stories,” 1367.

<sup>29</sup> Raymond Williams, “Ideas of Nature” in *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980), 67.

human idea as it is a non-human thing.”<sup>30</sup> Before the subfield of environmental history pushed this understanding of nature into the mainstream of historical practice, most historians understood both nature and culture as stable, holistic, immutable, and (essentially) measurable categories.<sup>31</sup> “Nature” and the world “out there” were both seen to be separate and distinct from that which was human. Eventually, historians complicated that understanding and described both human affairs and natural systems as more dynamic, less constant, and mutually constitutive. In the process, they argued that our ability to understand and comprehend these interconnections needed to be framed in terms of imperfection and uncertainty.<sup>32</sup>

Thinking of environmental change as being either natural or cultural feels both logical and intuitive. Yet, categorically separating the ‘natural’ from the ‘cultural’ can be difficult and not as black and white as it may seem. Both are subject to social processes, and because our interactions with natural systems (like rivers, or forests, or even other animals) are never ontologically pure, our understandings of nature are always constrained by the ways in which we see the world, comprehend it, and give it order. Language, perception, and ideology are never far below the surface of our experience, and as such they condition ‘how we know what we know.’ Culture then becomes

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<sup>30</sup> See William Cronon’s edited collection, *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 20.

<sup>31</sup> Douglas R. Wiener, “A Death-Defying Attempt to Articulate a Coherent Definition of Environmental History,” in *Environmental History*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (July 2005), paragraph 5.

<sup>32</sup> For a description of the field of environmental history, see William Cronon, “Kennecott Journey: The Paths Out of Town” in *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America’s Western Past*, ed. William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), 28-51, Adam Rome, et. al., “Anniversary Forum: What’s Next For Environmental History?” *Environmental History* 10 (January 2005): 30-109, Ellen Stroud, “Does Nature Always Matter? Following Dirt Through History,” *History and Theory* 42 (December 2003): 75-81, Douglas Weiner, “A Death-Defying Attempt,” Richard White, “Environmental History: The Development of a New Historical Field,” *Pacific Historical Review* 54 (August 1985): 297-335, and “Environmental History: Watching A Historical Field Mature,” *Pacific Historical Review* 70 (February 2001): 103-112,. For an discussion of the “cultural” approach to understanding landscapes, see William Cronon, “Introduction: In Search of Nature,” in *Uncommon Ground*, 23-68.

essential to our understandings of nature as the lens through which humans get access to the world around us. This isn't to say that nature only exists in our minds, but it does assert that our knowledge of natural systems can never be complete, perfect, or separated from the realm of language or cognition. Most often, our perceptions of nature overlap with the natural systems that make up the physical world. My approach to study the Columbia River flows from the premise that separating the two can be very difficult, if not impossible. This dissertation tracks the ways that everyday people shaped and were shaped by the changing *cultures* of the Columbia River, and thus it fits into an expansive historiography describing water development in the U. S. West.

The vast majority of scholarship on rivers (and water) in North American contexts takes its cue from Donald Worster's comprehensive and ambitious book, *Rivers of Empire* (1985).<sup>33</sup> Worster, keen to diagnose the more exploitative elements of the capitalist system, described the West as a “hydraulic society” that concentrated power in the hands of the powerful. The powerful also happened to be those who controlled the water, and Worster convincingly argued that this oligarchy was the key to the development of the region, the foundation of the nation's empire.<sup>34</sup> In Worster's study he emphasizes a centralized, bureaucratic state that encouraged unfettered capitalism, ecological disaster, and subverted democracy.<sup>35</sup> Here government institutions collaborated with private

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<sup>33</sup> Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

<sup>34</sup> Worster, 206.

<sup>35</sup> Other historians have disagreed with Donald Worster, arguing that development was not controlled by the elite but by many different groups, and that access to water has been more democratic than he let on. Some historians saw the intensity of water-fights as evidence that the federal government has not been all-powerful, and that western water development was much more democratic or pluralistic. For examples see John Opie, *Ogallala: Water for A Dry Land, a Historical Study in the Possibilities for American Sustainable Agriculture* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), Norris Hundley Jr., *The Great Thirst: Californians and Water, 1770s – 1990s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), and James Sherrow, *Watering the Valley: Development Along the High Plains Arkansas River*,

interests to siphon off vast amounts of wealth from the public commons. He argued that the state forced policies onto the populace, built projects that were unnecessary, and generally wreaked ecological havoc on Western landscapes. Following in Worster's footsteps were a rash of books, some popular, some academic, including a few that focused specifically on individual rivers.<sup>36</sup>

Many of these studies elaborated on the role of local, state, and federal institutions in constructing and maintaining the various water-development facilities, like dams, and most of these books focused either on the political machinations that led to construction, or the ecological consequences for the landscapes that were transformed. More the recent scholarship focused on some combination of the two.<sup>37</sup> My approach differs from most of the existing historiography by virtue of the types of sources that I investigate. By turning to a cultural history archive, my approach offers a richly detailed account of how individuals and groups encountered the ideological aspects of state power, as wielded by the federal government and allied interests. Importantly, my concept of the river imaginary offers more nuance in describing how the federal government was able to achieve, and maintain the power necessary to enact such policies upon western landscapes, and how that power was not as absolute as Donald Worster and others have argued. In reading river stories this dissertation details how some people consented,

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1870-1950 (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990).

<sup>36</sup> See Wendy Espeland, *The Struggle for Water: Politics, Rationality, and Identity in the American Southwest* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), Mark Fiege, *Irrigated Eden: The Making of an Agricultural Landscape in the American West* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), John McPhee, *Encounters with the Archdruid* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1971), Karen M. O'Neill, *Rivers by Design: State Power and the Origins of U.S. Flood Control* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water* (New York: Viking, 1986), Robert Kelley Schneiders, *Unruly River: Two Centuries of Change Along the Missouri* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999).

<sup>37</sup> With regard to federal power, much of the literature on water focuses on interest groups, and the internecine fights between states, government agencies, and various other communities to obtain and protect access.

mediated, and ultimately challenged the dominance of hegemonic discourses about technology and progress, the foundation of state power in crafting water policy.<sup>38</sup>

By identifying the movement of river stories over time, this dissertation emphasizes that these stories were not only reflections of social attitudes and ideas, but active sites of struggle and negotiation, where different groups of people competed to shape the popular understandings of the past, present, and future of the river. In the cultural world of the Columbia, visual images, texts, exploration journals, scientific reports, newspaper articles, histories, and many other cultural utterances, coalesced around general tropes, or *discourses* that posited a meaning and proper use of the river. These discourses were made up of multiple voices and they made knowledge-claims by being coherent and lucid. Dominant discourses made reference to observable conditions and were self-referential, they avoided contradictions and shaped their own rules. They determined what could be said and what could be known, and each discourse was distinguished by its own rules for indicating what was true, real, legitimate, or acceptable.<sup>39</sup> Hegemonic discourses were the stories that held a lock on the public's imagination. They claimed knowledge of the “real” Columbia, and they often served the needs of those who propagated them.<sup>40</sup> Assertions of what the river was and wasn't were

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<sup>38</sup> For examples of river studies that do focus on “culture” see Mark Cioc, *The Rhine: An Eco-biography, 1815-2000* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002), Candace Slater, *Entangled Edens: Visions of the Amazon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), and Richard White, *The Organic Machine*. For other studies that focus on intersections of culture and nature see Jenny Price, *Flight Maps: Adventures with nature in Modern America* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), William Cronon's *Uncommon Ground*, and David Blackbourn, *The Conquest of Nature: Water, Landscape, and the Making of Modern Germany* (New York: Norton, 2006).

<sup>39</sup> In Columbia stories, truth was often an effect of power, one that, according to Michel Foucault, was formed through language but enforced in the social order. Foucault argued that truth was produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint, noting “Each society has its regime of truth, its general politics of truth: that is, the types of discourse that it accepts and makes function as true.” Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power,” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and other Writings 1972-1977* ed. C. Gorgon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 131.

<sup>40</sup> For this discussion of hegemony and the state I draw on James C. Scott's, *Seeing like a State: How*

discursive—they were ordered, embodied, limited, timed, and spaced, according to the needs of the those who shaped them.<sup>41</sup> In this study I argue that the stories told in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were important precursors to the river’s mid-twentieth century transformation. In these early contexts, some Columbia River stories held more explanatory power than others, but no story was so dominant that it became capable of obscuring or encompassing others. That would happen later, in the years before and after the construction of Bonneville Dam.

The completion of Bonneville (and the creation of the engineered Columbia) is one of several important moments wherein power relations can be seen moving with the river itself. Here the ecology of the Columbia River acts as a useful marker to measure the emergence and subsequent imposition of a dominating federal presence within the region. During the years when the lower Columbia changed from fast-moving river to slow-moving reservoir, the federal government consolidated both political and *cultural* power in the region. After the completion of the dams, many communities along the Columbia articulated their understanding of the river (and hence their management interests) in relation to a thoroughly transformed river. It was then that the power of the state *literally* moved with the currents of the water.

The engineered Columbia’s more trepid flow masked the relatively quick

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*Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998) and Stuart Hall’s discussion of Antonio Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*, in “Gramsci’s Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity” in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, edited by David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 428.

<sup>41</sup> The power to define the Columbia is a major source of hegemony, the process by which politically powerful groups (groups that Antonio Gramsci labeled “hegemonic blocs”) maintain their power. Hegemonic blocs present their view of as “common-sense” and natural for those who are marginalized by their decisions. The power to enact their own understanding of the Columbia as a thoroughly engineered river, was not a political act constituted by force, but by persuasion and consent. Importantly, the concept of hegemony never supposes outright domination, but a continual negotiation, a give and take between competing forces that enabled some to capture and control the river. This concept of hegemony explains how power over the Columbia River was consolidated, and eventually contested. Cultural representation is a key site of such struggles.

movement of the dominant discourse. Here the Columbia was more than a hydroelectric “cash-cow” or superhighway for river barges, it was a vehicle for the dominant bloc to transform the economy of the region and alter the ‘river imaginary’ of those who lived nearby. As the ideology of the engineered river became the dominant ‘common-sense’ narrative, dissenting voices received little attention, and alternative understandings were absorbed by the reality of a re-engineered landscape that demanded new and pragmatic understandings. What followed was a period of unity, wherein most (but not all) individuals and communities consented to what was the new reality – the engineered river. Here the federal government utilized the Columbia to be an administrative and coercive apparatus, and in cultural and ecological terms, an instructive one. As the federal government encouraged some ways of knowing the Columbia and not others, it limited the ways in which the people of the region could imagine the river, its uses, its future, and its past.

But the twentieth century history of the Columbia would not be a straightforward tale of political and cultural domination. For several decades after the completion of the first two dams, the Columbia flowed downstream at a much more measured pace, and the totality of the government's control over the river *seemed* absolute. But unintended ecological consequences of the river's numerous dams soon served to disrupt the dominant bloc's grasp on power. The ecology of the river was creating outcomes that couldn't have been foreseen—environmental consequences that subverted the established political order on the river. When the decline of the salmon prompted change to dominant river discourses, the ecology of the river became a factor in re-shaping its evolving meanings. The dominant story that had held sway over the Columbia's river



imaginary for decades began to change. This interplay between the physical Columbia and its river imaginary shaped the outcome of political contests, and helped determine new cultural meanings given to the river. Those new meanings then refashioned river politics—making a whole different type of “hydrologic cycle.” By identifying and tracking the movement of new and distinct river stories over time, this dissertation investigates how these dominant discourses appeared, rose, obscured and then ultimately fractured in response to other stories that challenged the legitimacy of their popular appeal. In this analysis, river stories are more than windows into the public's attitudes and ideas, but active sites of struggle and negotiation, where people compete to fashion the past, present, and future of the river.

Representations of the Columbia, as seen in the many different types of cultural texts produced about it, are essential to producing, sustaining, and disseminating power and knowledge about the river. By taking a closer look at texts associated with the river, one sees a different type of struggle, one that was related to the realm of policy and politics but manifested in the ways people conceived of the Columbia's social and cultural meanings. To track these meanings, this dissertation examines a number of key turning points in the Columbia River's twentieth century history.

In my second chapter, “Enduring Narratives: Exploration Stories, Landscape Art and the Columbia River, 1859-1868,” I investigate ideas and images created by two different artists, Albert Bierstadt and John Mix Stanley, who each traveled down the Columbia River during the middle of the nineteenth century. By reading their paintings and investigating their experiences, this chapter establishes how early, seemingly contradictory visions of the Columbia River as romantic or utilitarian, were, in fact,

mutually constitutive representations of a complex cultural landscape.

The third chapter, “Building a Scenic River: Nature and History on the Columbia River Highway, 1913-1920” examines the planning, promotion, and construction of the Columbia River Highway—a winding, scenic road that was the first to traverse the length of the Columbia River Gorge. In this chapter I investigate the emergence of scenic tourism as the dominant way of experiencing the river. By traveling in automobiles, visitors engaged in an experience that emphasized both the pristine timelessness of the place and the modernity of the observer, a pattern that would have long-term effects for the river's twentieth-century history.

In the fourth chapter I unlock the meaning of the Columbia's first large-scale hydroelectric dam—Bonneville, finished in 1937. In “*Hydro!*, Bonneville Dam, and the Making of a Modern Columbia River, 1933-1941” I do a close reading of a government-sponsored documentary film, created by the Bonneville Power Administration in the early years of the dam's operation. *Hydro!*, first released in 1939, used voice over narration to sing the praises of river development. In looking closely at the film I track the ascendance of a modern and utilitarian river story—the narrative of technological progress—as it became a story so powerful that few questioned the dramatic physical transformation of the river's form and function.

Conversely, in the fifth chapter, I examine the legacies of the dams. In “Of Floods and Fishes: New Narratives of the Columbia River” I trace the emergence of new Columbia River stories by looking at the decline of the river's storied salmon runs—an iconic fish long revered by many in the region. As the salmon populations plummeted and the ecological health of the river declined, a different type of story emerged, one that

challenged the existing cultural conceptions of the river. By the close of the twentieth century, clashing stories had changed the meanings of the Columbia's large dams, and a new narrative of environmental decline took hold among many in the Pacific Northwest.

Finally, in the epilogue, I return to the Columbia River Gorge in the present, to see evidence of how these clashing, swirling, persistent river stories touch the political, cultural, and ecological features of the current Columbia.

**Figure 1.1**



**Celilo Falls. By Benjamin Gifford. 1907.**

Source: Terry Toedtemeier and John Laursen, *Wild Beauty, Photographs of the Columbia River Gorge, 1867-1957* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2008), 115.

**Figure 1.2**



**Whirl-pool, Celilo Falls. By Benjamin Gifford. 1901.**

Source: *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 105 (Spring 2004): 435.

**Figure 1.3**



**Celilo Falls. By Herb Alden. 1954.** This image was probably taken in the 1940s or 1950s, when the falls had become a busier place and competition for the best fishing spots had increased.

Source: Oregon Historical Society, 007237

**Figure 1.4**



**Celilo Falls, Low Water. By Fred and Oscar Kiser. 1903.** It was when the water level was at its lowest that Celilo became the most spectacular, as numerous falls, rocks and eddies emerged from under the Columbia's surface.

Source: Terry Toedtemeier and John Laursen, *Wild Beauty, Photographs of the Columbia River Gorge, 1867-1957* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2008), 135.

**Figure 1.5**



**Celilo. By Ray Atkeson. 1930s.**

Source: Terry Toedtemeier and John Laursen, *Wild Beauty, Photographs of the Columbia River Gorge, 1867-1957* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2008), 239.



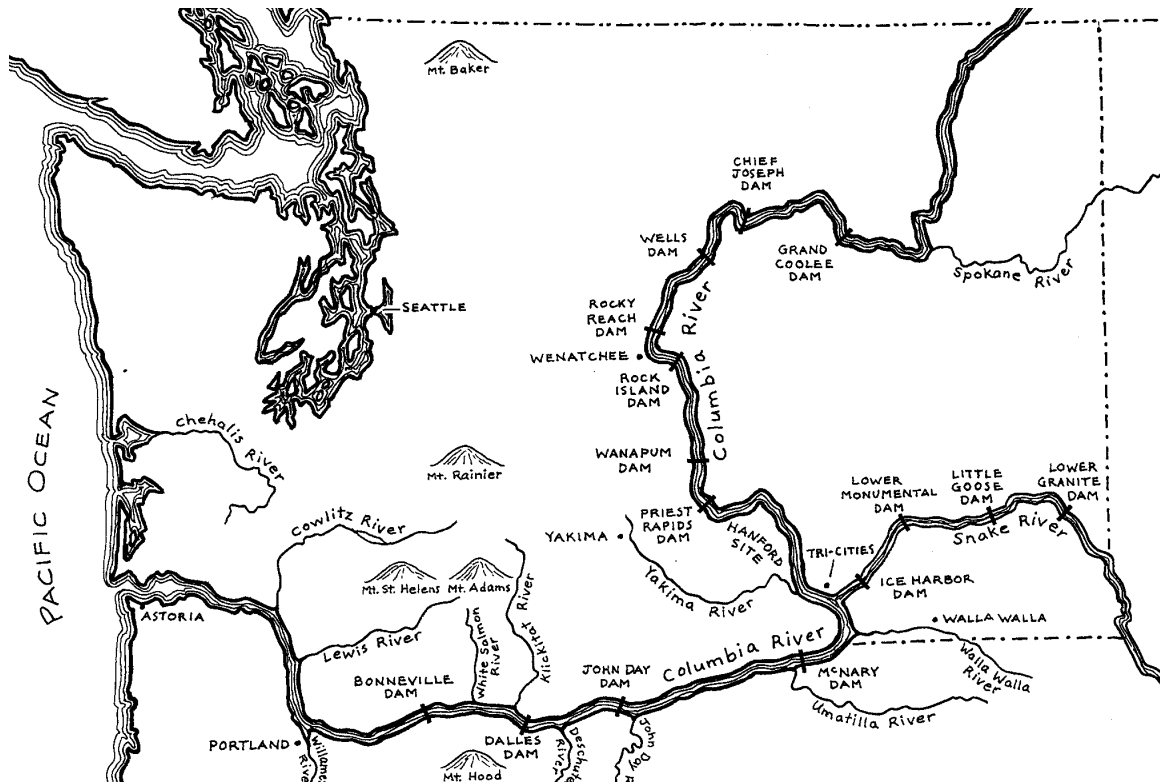
**Figure 1.6**



**Map of the Columbia River Drainage.**

Source: Terry Toedtemeier and John Laursen, *Wild Beauty, Photographs of the Columbia River Gorge, 1867-1957* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2008).

Figure 1.7



**Dams on the Columbia River.**

**Source:** *Great River of the West: Essays on the Columbia River*, ed. William Lang and Robert C. Carriker (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), 5.

**Figure 1.8**



**Celilo Village. 1935.** When the Columbia River Highway was built abreast of Celilo Village, more tourists came to see Indian peoples fish for salmon.

Source: Diana Fredlund. "The Corps of Engineers and Celilo Falls: Facing the Past, Looking to the Future." *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 108 (Winter 2007).

**Figure 1.9**



**Fishermen work Downes Channel at Celilo in the 1950s, as tourists watch from above.**

Source: *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 108 (Winter 2007): 714.

**Figure 1.10**



**The Dalles-Celilo Canal. 1920s.** In this photo one can see evidence of the various eras of river development. Next to the falls is the canal, the railroad, and then the highway.

Source: *The Northwest Salmon Crisis: A Documentary History*, eds. Joseph Cone and Sandy Ridlington (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1996), 354.

**Figure 1.11**



**The Dalles-Celilo Canal. 1951.**

Source: U. S. Army Corps of Engineers, in Terry Toedtmeier and John Laursen, *Wild Beauty, Photographs of the Columbia River Gorge, 1867-1957* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2008), 296.

**Figure 1.12**



**Maggie Jim and her daughters watch as the Columbia River flows back onto itself, inundating its falls and rapids on March 10, 1957.**

Source: *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 108 (Winter 2007): 676.

## Chapter 2

### Enduring Narratives: Landscape Art, Exploration Stories, and the Columbia River, 1853-1868

In 1853 the landscape artist John Mix Stanley set out across the American West, the official artist for a government expedition tasked with surveying the best route to put the transcontinental railroad. Assigned to the northern route, when Stanley's group arrived in the Pacific Northwest, they traveled down the Columbia River, where he sketched the landscapes of the Columbia's scenic river gorge. Less than ten years later, another famous artist, Albert Bierstadt, traveled through the very same area, in search of scenic vistas that he could later turn into one of his "great pictures," the mammoth canvases that established his fame in the 1860s and 1870s. When comparing two of the images these artists produced, Albert Bierstadt's *Mount Hood, Oregon* (1863) (figure 2.1) and John Mix Stanley's *Cape Horn* (1853) (figure 2.2), one is struck by both their similarities and their differences. In comparing the two, one's initial impression may be that neither image demands attention in comparison with the other. The images the two men created differ in aesthetic style, genre, and medium. But take a closer look and one can begin to see that within the images are outlines of a *narrative*—a visual story that the content suggests to the viewer. While both artists aspired to record accurate renderings of the landscapes of the Columbia River, the types of stories imbedded in the images are actually quite different.

In *Mount Hood, Oregon* the image Bierstadt painted is dominated by a towering,



bright, majestic mountain, with light casting shadows across the contours of its snowy flanks. The colors in the composition are bright: the whiteness of the snow is almost blinding, and the blue sky at the top of the composition is offset by the lush green at the bottom—each of the colors being brightest on the edges of the canvas. In the center of the painting, but below the mountain, is a great body of water (the Columbia!) nearly hidden by the steep incline of the cliffs, the towering fir trees, and rolling hills that line the river's banks. In this image the mountain is more than just a shape on the horizon; it towers over the rest of the landscape—creating an effect where the viewer feels close to the peak, like one was standing nearby. In the foreground is a meadow, with rocks, bushes, gangly tree branches, and a herd of deer—grazing on the lush, green grass—giving the entire image a sense of grand scale, and making the landscape look pristine, even pastoral. In the middle of the painting is a vast waterfall, one that flows over a steep cliff and falls hundreds of feet to the valley below. When viewing the image, one is struck by the grandeur of the scene depicted.

In *Cape Horn*, the colors are less saturated and the differences between the hues less pronounced—the color scheme likely constrained by the medium in which the artist was working. Here the image also features a river valley, but instead the focus is on the shapes of the river itself: the jagged escarpments of the surrounding rocks, the leafy trees that line its banks, and the undulating hillsides in the distance, steep cliffs that rise straight up from the river's banks. In this rendition the artist uses textures to distinguish the different parts of the landscape: horizontal lines that identify the surface of the water, round, repeating patterns for the leaves on the trees, and geometric shapes as shadows that show the terracing of the rock outcroppings. In the top right corner of the image are

circling, swirling clouds. Balancing the composition at the bottom left corner are two figures, one gesturing towards the river and a tent on its shore, the other lying in repose, perhaps enjoying a view of the pleasant scene in front. As before, the figures in the foreground give the image a sense of scale, but viewers of this image would be less awestruck by the grandeur of this scenery—perhaps noticing the steepness of the cliffs, or the curves of the river.

While it may not seem so at first, visual images like these tell stories: stories about nature, stories about history, and stories about the particular places they depicted—in this case the Columbia River and its immediate surroundings. Images of rivers and mountains are often filled with particular ideas about the meaning of “nature” and the proper place of humans within it. Images of particular places often function as ideological statements—revealing underlying ideas, attitudes, and assumptions of both artists and their audiences. Art historian Jules David Prown argues that every time a person crafts images in empty space, they do so in particular ways, to satisfy practical or aesthetic needs. In Prown’s view, the images always make “a type of statement, albeit a nonverbal statement that is considerably more difficult for most of us to comprehend than a written statement.”<sup>1</sup> Western historian William Truettner notes that visual representations deliver an ideological message so efficiently that “we grasp their import without even realizing it, making them devastating as hidden persuaders...”<sup>2</sup> An artifice of Euro-American culture in the 1850s and 1860s, the genre of landscape art itself is filled with such hidden meanings, discursive claims that helped shape the U. S. West’s

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<sup>1</sup> Jules David Prown, “Style as Evidence,” in *Art as Evidence: Writings on Art and Material Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 53.

<sup>2</sup> William Truettner in *Discovered Lands, Invented Pasts: Transforming Visions of the American West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 50.

most prominent historical narratives. Visual representations of the Columbia River are no exception, and a close examination can reveal several distinct patterns in how those traveling through understood the river.

When viewing *Mount Hood, Oregon* by Albert Bierstadt and *Cape Horn* by John Mix Stanley one can surmise that both images operate as “hidden persuaders”—offering complex and sometimes contradictory imaginings of the Columbia and the surrounding environments. In the nineteenth century those who encountered the Columbia River often understood its significance by telling stories—narratives that shaped the river’s meanings in specific ways. Some visitors looked at the size, scale, and natural beauty and saw a romantic, majestic landscape—one that evoked larger meanings or ideas. Others looked at the very same places and saw not grandeur but utility, a view that abstracted the landscape into component parts, cataloging the information so that the land and water could be prepared for future use. These two common ways of understanding the Columbia’s environment appear in many of the earliest impressions of the river. Both *Mount Hood, Oregon*, Bierstadt’s immense landscape painting, and *Cape Horn*, a lithograph that was included in the Pacific Railroad Reports, are images based off of sketches—sketches made as the two artists traveled over the same route, at roughly the same time, while looking at many of the same places.

In this chapter I examine these two excursions, and the images the artists created, as brief but revealing moments where Euro-American ideas about the meaning and purpose of the Columbia were taking shape. To investigate these ideas, I look into the experiences of each artist to see what frames were available for such storytelling. How did these ways of seeing the Columbia’s landscape relate to the political ambitions of the

federal government, or to the nation as a whole? How were these stories linked? And where did these ideas come from? To get a better sense of how the new residents on the river deployed both “romantic” and the “utilitarian” narratives, I look to written accounts and visual representations left by the two artists and their companions.<sup>3</sup> While there is more to be said about each of these tropes, their origins, and their relationship to one-another, I begin by going back to the beginning of the nineteenth century, when Euro-American explorers first encountered the Columbia River Gorge, and the peoples who lived there.

### **Origins: Lewis and Clark on the Columbia**

When Meriwether Lewis and William Clark first emerged from the Bitterroot Mountains in present day Montana and Idaho, they were relieved to have survived the passage, and they were happy to be traveling by canoe down the Clearwater River. On the Clearwater, the Corps of Discovery expected that this path would take them to larger rivers, as the waters drained west, toward the Pacific. Soon after the Corps left the Clearwater they encountered the Snake, and soon after that, the Columbia. Coming down out of the mountains, Lewis and Clark left behind the now familiar ecosystem of the Rockies and faced a different landscape, one distinct from what that they had seen before. Gone were the heavy stands of timber, tall peaks, and high-mountain passes. In their place were broad, rolling hills of sagebrush, deep and rocky canyons, and meandering rivers. The explorers had entered what would come to be known as the Great Columbia Plain, a large inland plateau known for its sparse vegetation and arid climate. Cutting through the middle of the region, and fed by a vast network of tributary streams, was the

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<sup>3</sup> I use the word “utilitarian” to refer to decisions that maximize the river’s many uses and *not* in reference to “utilitarianism,” the philosophical position that holds that the moral worth of an action is determined by its outcome.

Columbia River, which eventually emptied into the Pacific Ocean. Of particular importance to the Corps of Discovery, the Columbia River offered a much-improved means of travel to complete their journey. In stark contrast to their previous route across Lolo Pass and through the Bitterroot Mountains—a route that inflicted a steady dose of hunger and confusion upon those in the expedition—the river cut right through the center of the last mountain range between them and the coast, promising a passage with less physical exertion.

Where previously Lewis and Clark had taken great care to describe the geography of the land around them, in this portion of their journey descriptions of the land itself are mostly missing. Perhaps it was the relative barrenness of the landscape, or the lack of wildlife that failed to inspire.<sup>4</sup> Or perhaps their impressions of the land were overshadowed by their impressions of the waterway before them. Traveling down the Snake and Columbia by canoe, William Clark began mapping the river; calculating latitude at certain confluences, exploring smaller tributaries when prudent, and gathering information from the diverse and numerous native peoples the expedition encountered along the way. At important points along the route, Clark took special care to document the Columbia's system of channels and rapids—recording with exceptional detail the islands, rocks, and other peculiarities of the lower river's toughest portages (figures 2.3, 2.4). Approaching the short narrows near The Dalles, Clark commented on “some obstruction below” and then proceeded to run the rapids despite “the horrid appearance of

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<sup>4</sup> By the time they reached the interior of the Pacific Northwest, there were no longer easily located herds of elk, buffalo, or antelope to be hunted, and so the travelers adjusted to their surroundings and altered their diet, from venison to salmon—a food in abundance by early October. John Logan Allen documents this absence of landscape description in the explorer's journals in *Passage Through the Garden: Lewis and Clark and the Image of the American Northwest* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 307.

the agitated gut Swelling, boiling & whirling in every direction.”<sup>5</sup> The map Clark produced followed the Columbia’s every curve with surprising accuracy, from its confluence with the Snake down to its mouth at the Pacific Ocean.<sup>6</sup>

When Lewis and Clark traveled down the river, they inaugurated an era of Columbia River history defined by dramatic, human-caused change. While the Columbia had long been a river known and understood by the peoples who lived near it, never had it been measured and recorded in this particular way. Lewis and Clark measured the river’s fall, flood heights, lengths of the portages, and the various locations of Indian camps.<sup>7</sup> To men who had embraced the empiricism and scientific method of the Enlightenment, the Columbia River needed to be scouted, its banks needed to be measured, its tributaries mapped, and the details of its flora and fauna recorded. Lewis and Clark’s Columbia, as historian William Lang has described it, was “a place of utility”—where human action was seen as separate and distinct from the natural world around it.<sup>8</sup> When Euro-American explorers ventured out into western territories, they carried with them ideas about nature that were imported from afar, filled with their own

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<sup>5</sup> Clark, October 24, 1805, in Gary Moulton, ed., *The Definitive Journals of Lewis and Clark* (Lincoln: Nebraska University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 5:333, as quoted in Jim E. O’Conner, “The Evolving Landscape of the Columbia River Gorge: Lewis and Clark and Cataclysms on the Columbia,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 107 (Fall 2004), 395.

<sup>6</sup> Historical scholarship on Lewis and Clark is *expansive*. For specific studies that examine their time on the Columbia, see William L. Lang, “Lewis and Clark on the Columbia: The Power of Landscape in the Exploration Experience,” in *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 87 (Summer 1996): 141-148, and “Exploring a Foreign Place: The Lewis and Clark Expedition in Oregon Country,” in *Two Centuries of Lewis and Clark: Reflections on the Voyage of Discovery* (Portland: Oregon Historical Society Press, 2004), 9-59. See additional viewpoints see John Logan Allen, *Passage Through the Garden: Lewis and Clark and the Image of the American Northwest* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 306-41, Donald W. Meinig, *The Great Columbia Plain: A Historical Geography, 1805-1910* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968), 26-34, and James Ronda, *Lewis and Clark Among the Indians* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 163-180.

<sup>7</sup> Jim E. O’Conner, “The Evolving Landscape,” 394.

<sup>8</sup> William L. Lang, “Big Water, Great River: Two Ways of Seeing the Columbia,” in *Landscapes and Communities on the Pacific Rim: Cultural Perspectives from Asia to the Pacific Northwest*, ed. by Karen K. Gaul and Jackie Hiltz, (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 2000), 139-140.

expectations and desires.<sup>9</sup>

In seeking to measure, document, and map the Columbia River, Lewis and Clark began the process of investing the river with radically different cultural meanings—meanings imported from the intellectual traditions of the nascent United States and Europe. And when looking at the river through an Enlightenment lens, these early explorers crafted a common impulse, a practice of landscape analysis that abstracted the river into commodities, divided it into constituent parts, and even gave it commercial value in far-away markets.<sup>10</sup> To Lewis and Clark, Jefferson gave the instructions:

“The object of your mission is to explore the Missouri river, & such principal stream of it, as, by it's course & communication with the waters of the Pacific Ocean, whether the Columbia, Oregon, Colorado or and other river may offer the most direct & practicable water communication across this continent, for the purposes of commerce. Beginning at the mouth of the Missouri, you will take careful observations of latitude & longitude, at all remarkeable points on the river, & especially at the mouths of rivers, at rapids, at islands, & other places & objects distinguished by such natural marks & characters of a durable kind, as that they may with certainty be recognised hereafter. The courses of the river between these points of observation may be supplied by the compass the log-line & by time, corrected by the observations themselves. The variations of the compass too, in different places, should be noticed.”<sup>11</sup>

Seeing the river in such an instrumentalist fashion would prove to be one of the most enduring ways of knowing the Columbia River, a way of seeing the natural world that eventually led to attempts at altering the Columbia's very form and function.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> As noted by Richard White, who argued that no landscape was ever completely “*terra incognita*” but invested with imported meanings from other contexts. Richard White, “Discovering Nature in North America,” *Journal of American History* 79 (1992): 874.

<sup>10</sup> Yet, Lewis and Clark, with all of their instructions about Indian peoples, mapmaking, lunar calculations, medicine, anatomy, natural history, and preserving specimens, never were instructed to paint any pictures of what they saw. This omission would be remedied by the 1820s, beginning with Stephen Long's expedition on the Platte River.

<sup>11</sup> Jefferson's instructions to Lewis and Clark reprinted from *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition with Related Documents, 1783-1854*, Donald Jackson, ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1962).

<sup>12</sup> This trope has long been identified by historians of the Columbia, but was most recently explored by William L. Lang in “Big Water, Great River,” and “The Meaning of Falling Water: Celilo Falls and The Dalles in Historical Literature,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 108 (Winter 2007): 566-585.

In addition to seeing the river in instrumental terms, the Lewis and Clark expedition set the stage for another prominent pattern in knowing the Columbia. Scholars of western exploration have long associated romanticism with the amazement felt by the first Euro-American incursions into the region. It was not long after Lewis and Clark's return that Euro-Americans began to understand the landscapes of the broader U.S. West through a romantic lens. While the explorers themselves often spoke of the landscapes they encountered in language with some romantic sensibility, it was the general public who *really* celebrated their experiences as romantic. When the Corps of Discovery returned, the public responded by framing the experience in both romantic and national terms. One letter to Lewis and Clark declared:

“...you have navigated bold & unknown rivers, traversed Mountains, which had never before been impressed with the footsteps of civilized man, and surmounted every obstacle, which climate, Nature or ferocious Savages could throw in your way. You have the further satisfaction to reflect that, you have extended the knowledge of the Geography of your country; in other respects enriched Science; and opened to the United States a source of inexhaustible wealth.”<sup>13</sup>

Lewis and Clark had walked across the continent and returned to tell about it. Those who celebrated the endeavor gave it explicitly national meanings. By striking out into the unknown and planting the first “footsteps of civilized man” the Lewis and Clark expedition was understood to be of utmost geopolitical importance. Extending the knowledge of “the Geography of [the] country” was tantamount to claiming it, and the conflation of climate and nature with “ferocious Savages” was typical of the ways that the ideologies of national expansion obscured and erased Indian sovereignty. Native peoples were part of nature, and national greatness required that both be conquered.

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<sup>13</sup> From an address of the citizens of Fincastle, Virginia to Lewis and Clark, in Donald Jackson, ed., *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition with Related Documents*, 358-9, as quoted in John Logan Allen, 371.



Throughout the nineteenth century, naturalists, explorers, writers, and their audiences drew explicit connections between the natural world and the meaning of the nation.

When looking for meaning in the Lewis and Clark expedition, Americans filtered their observations (scientific or otherwise) through these interrelated ideas about nature and the nation. When Lewis and Clark traveled down the Columbia, their impressions of the landscape were directly tied to national aspirations.

When the invading Euro-Americans, first as explorers and later as emigrants, imported patterns of land-use completely new to the region, they engaged in the process of translation – organizing the newly “discovered” landscape into known entities. In the process the invaders effectively imposed a geographical understanding from another place entirely.<sup>14</sup> Historian William Lang called this process the Columbia’s own “topomorphic revolution,” where changing perceptions of the natural world altered “structures of spaces” and redefined the relations between peoples and their environments.<sup>15</sup> Lewis and Clark and other Euro-American explorers saw the Columbia differently than the native peoples who had heretofore dominated the social, economic, and political world of the river. While native peoples had always known the Columbia as a provider of resources—as a transportation route, as a locale for trade, as a provider of food—they didn’t conceive of the river in such instrumental terms. Umatilla, Yakama, Klickitat, and Wishram peoples conceived of the Columbia as simultaneously material and spiritual. In contrast, the earliest Euro-Americans on the river rarely, if ever, ascribed such a sacred role. Lewis and Clark and others viewed the Columbia in the only way they could, from a cultural perspective imported from afar—and hence they saw

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<sup>14</sup> Lang, “Big Water, Great River,” 142.

<sup>15</sup> The idea of a “topographic revolution” is from social geographer E.V. Walter’s *Placeways: A Theory of the Human Environment* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 23-5.

value in the river for its wealth to be extracted, for its utility in serving future trade centers, and for its geopolitical importance in laying claim to the region.

In the years after the Corps of Discovery left the area, several other Euro-American visitors recorded information about the river in a similar fashion. Fur trader and Northwest Company explorer David Thompson crafted richly detailed cartographic records of the lower Columbia when he scouted for fur-bearing tributaries and streams in 1811. Alexander Ross, a Pacific Fur Company employee traveling the Columbia in the same year, described both the river and the great trading rendezvous at The Dalles.<sup>16</sup> Others would travel throughout in the region, but the first widely-read account of the Columbia came when Nicholas Biddle published his two-volume version of the Lewis and Clark journals in 1814. Biddle's version of the journals included sections describing the explorers' accounts of paddling down the Columbia River Gorge and their descriptions of great danger in the Columbia's rapids.<sup>17</sup> It wasn't until the late 1830s that additional published accounts of the river appeared in nationally distributed novels and migrant booster literature. Washington Irving was one of the first to publish descriptions of the river in this era, drawing attention to the fur trade in *Astoria or Anecdotes of an Enterprise Beyond the Rocky Mountains* in 1836. Irving accurately described the Columbia's central importance to the region, especially in his comments regarding the Wishram people at Celilo Falls, who were "shrewder and more intelligent" because they controlled access to key fisheries and portages, and successfully extracted tolls and

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<sup>16</sup> Alexander Ross, *Adventures of the first Settlers on the Oregon or Columbia River, 1810-1813*, Bison Books (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986) 128-32, as cited in William Lang, "The Meaning of Falling Water," 568-569. See also Lang's n. 4, 583.

<sup>17</sup> Nicholas Biddle, *History of the Expedition under the Command of Captains Lewis and Clark, to the Sources of the Missouri, Across the Rocky Mountains and down the River Columbia to the Pacific Ocean* (Philadelphia: Bradford and Inskeep, 1814), as discussed in Lang, "The Meaning of Falling Water," 568-569.

tribute.<sup>18</sup> Other writers drew attention to the impressive physical features of the river itself. In 1839, John Kirk Townsend was taken aback by the danger inherent in navigating the river in his *Narrative of a Journey Across the Rocky Mountains to the Columbia River*, and a year later Samuel Parker was impressed with the grandeur of the Columbia when he enthusiastically alluded to the harnessing of its waters; "...The falls and La Dalles," he wrote, "furnish a situation for water-power equal to any in any part of the world."<sup>19</sup> By the late 1850s, waves of Euro-American settlers had made several permanent cities and towns along the Columbia, and the river supported such a bustling enterprise that historian William Lang characterized it as, "a wealth-producing highway."<sup>20</sup> All along the river, local populations made use of the river for transportation and commerce. By 1860 local investors formed the Oregon Steam Navigation Company (OSNC), and they quickly built roads and railroads around the river's transportation barriers—the rapids at the Cascades and The Dalles. It was the OSNC that first enjoyed monopolistic control over a regional shipping system that linked the Pacific Ocean to the Columbia's interior plain.<sup>21</sup> By the late 1860s, the Columbia was at the center of several settler-society economies, and the era of river exploration was had given way to an era of river settlement. But this settlement was really only beginning when the painter Albert Bierstadt traveled up and down the Columbia, sketching views of what he saw.

### **A River of Romance: Bierstadt and Ludlow Travel the Columbia**

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<sup>18</sup> Washington Irving, *Astoria or Anecdotes of an Enterprise Beyond the Rocky Mountains*, (Reprint: Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1961) as quoted in Lang, "The Meaning of Falling Water," 569.

<sup>19</sup> John Kirk Townsend, *Narrative of a Journey Across the Rocky Mountains, to the Columbia River, and a visit to the Sandwich Islands, Chili, & c., with a scientific appendix*, (Philadelphia, H. Perkins, 1839), Samuel Parker, *Journal of an Exploring Tour Beyond the Rocky Mountains* (Ithaca: The author, Mack, Andrus & Woodruff, printers, 1840), 130.

<sup>20</sup> Lang, "The Meaning of Falling Water," 571.

<sup>21</sup> See William Robbins, *Landscapes of Promise: The Oregon Story, 1800-1940* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 111.

On September 24, 1863, the painter Albert Bierstadt and the writer Fitz-Hugh Ludlow set out from San Francisco to travel north, headed for the Pacific Northwest. Already having traveled throughout the Rocky Mountains and the Sierra Madre, Bierstadt and Ludlow continued their search for scenic landscapes—places that Bierstadt could sketch, and then eventually paint. Bierstadt was looking for material that could be made into one of his “Great Pictures”—the large, oil on canvas landscape paintings that were gaining notoriety in East Coast cities. Bierstadt had invited a friend from home, the young but popular writer Fitz-Hugh Ludlow, to accompany him on the adventure. The plan was for Ludlow to write about their trip, which he would later seek to have published—a plan that came to fruition in 1864, when Ludlow contributed a ten-page article to *The Atlantic Monthly*.

Bierstadt and Ludlow ventured northward through the Klamath, Rogue, Umpqua, and Willamette Valleys. They sketched mountains and rivers, Indian peoples and settlers, before arriving in Portland, where they rested before heading up the Columbia. Having already traveled with a government survey expedition in 1859, Bierstadt was accustomed to many of the hardships associated with overland travel in remote areas. Hence, the two were pleasantly surprised when they discovered that they could move easily up and down the Columbia River by steamship.<sup>22</sup> In fact, the two were shocked when they learned that they would be able to complete their six-mile portage of the rivers’ Cascade Rapids entirely by train.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Bierstadt and Ludlow’s travel plans appear in the *San Francisco Alta*, September 25, 1863. See also Gordon Hendricks, *The Three Western Journeys of Albert Bierstadt* (College Art Association of America, 1964).

<sup>23</sup> In 1862 the Oregon Steam Navigation Company purchased the portage routes around the Cascades of the Columbia, on both the north and south sides of the river only six months before Bierstadt and Ludlow traveled on the river.

The Columbia in 1863 was less isolated than the travelers expected, yet Bierstadt and Ludlow were not disappointed by the quality of the scenery they witnessed.

Traveling on the comfort of a steamship operated by the Oregon Steam Navigation Company, Ludlow remarked:

“...we had from the upper deck a magnificent glimpse to the eastward of Hood’s spotless snow-cone rosied with the reflection of the dying sunset. Short and hurried as it was, this view of Mount Hood was unsurpassed for beauty by any which we got in its closer vicinity and afterward, though nearness added rugged grandeur to the sight.”<sup>24</sup>

On the steamship Ludlow remarked that they traveled “...in the pleasantest quarters and under the most favorable circumstances” and they both were impressed when they escaped from “rudimentary society to civilized surroundings and a cultivated interest in art and literature” as guests at nearby Fort Vancouver.<sup>25</sup> While traveling up the lower Columbia, Bierstadt and Ludlow chatted up the local commanders at Fort Vancouver, and watched the wildlife on the river with great interest. Ludlow was impressed with the vast numbers of the local waterfowl, and he wrote extensive descriptions of swans.

But more than the wildlife, Bierstadt and Ludlow appreciated the dramatic views afforded by the area’s mountains and rivers—scenes that Ludlow described as “the most magnificent views in all earthly scenery.”<sup>26</sup> Ludlow recounted being overwhelmed by the majesty of their surroundings, and he wrote of the river scenes in gushing, laudatory prose. Keen to impress their friends and possible patrons on the East Coast, Ludlow framed the natural beauty of the region as unparalleled. Upon seeing Mt. St. Helens from the river he remarked, “It was as if the sky had suddenly grown white-hot in patches,” and he likened the mountain’s snowy flanks to “an aurora, or purer kind of cloud.” “No

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<sup>24</sup> Fitz-Hugh Ludlow, “On the Columbia River,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 14 (1864): 705.

<sup>25</sup> Ludlow, 704.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

man of enthusiasm,” he remarked, “who reflects what this whole sight must have been, will wonder that my friend and I clasped each other’s hands before it, and thanked God we had lived to this day.”<sup>27</sup> Not just impressed with the mountains, Ludlow reserved his most effusive praise for the Columbia River itself: “Not even the rapids of Niagara can vie with these in their impression of power, and only the Columbia itself can describe the lines of grace made by its water, rasped to spray, churned to froth, tired into languid sheets that flow like sliding glass, or shot up in fountains frayed away to rainbows on their edges...”<sup>28</sup> Remarking on the many small islands that dotted the river near the Cascade rapids, Ludlow added: “Through these the water roars, boils, and striking projections, spouts upward in jets whose plummy top blows off in sheets of spray. It is tormented into whirlpools; it is combined into fine threads, and strays whitely over a rugged ledge like old men’s hair; it takes all curves of grace and arrow-flights of force; it is water doing all that water can do or be made to do.”<sup>29</sup>

In crafting this account of the Columbia and its surrounding environs, Ludlow offered his audience an extravagant description of the natural world he encountered. Filled with flowery adjectives and bombastic superlatives, his descriptions offer a poetic sensibility that was common to many nineteenth-century accounts of western places. Yet in soliloquizing the virtues of the Columbia, Ludlow’s account left out much of what didn’t fit within his chosen point of view. By emphasizing the scenic, spectacular nature of the river, Ludlow gave his readers a vision of the Columbia that corresponded with a much broader story, a story that must have resonated for readers of *The Atlantic Monthly*.

In narrating their experiences up and down the Columbia in romantic terms,

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 714.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 709.

Ludlow spoke in a language widely adopted by other writers and artists, one also widely consumed by eastern audiences. By the middle of the nineteenth century it was increasingly possible for some Americans to spend most of their lives in an entirely urban setting, rarely coming into contact with wilder, natural spaces. Urbanization and the social changes that came with it helped create an audience for writers and artists like Ludlow and Bierstadt. While it was not exclusively wealthy city-dwellers that were attracted to these ideas, urban sophisticates and nature-lovers were the primary consumers of a new genre of artistic and literary production defined by its sentiment. By the 1840s, Romanticism was a fully formed, popular, literary and artistic genre—one that attracted large audiences and promised fame for those who could appeal to middle-class patrons. Other artists adopted the same model as Bierstadt and Ludlow. Historian Roderick Nash noted how enterprising writers and painters living in Eastern cities went West, to gather impressions and sketches wherein they would “return to their desks to write essays which dripped love of descriptive scenery and solitude in the grand Romantic manner.”<sup>30</sup> Joel T. Headley, one of the most prominent writers (and also a *New York Tribune* reporter), wrote of travel to the Adirondacks, where he gushed that no “man of sensibility” could fail to enjoy “the sullen stillness of the wilderness, where nature, unmarred by the hand of man, dwells in her primeval glory—her music the pealing thunder—the eagle’s shrill voice—the wild notes of the loon—the sound of the gentle breeze as it ruffles the surface of the lake...”<sup>31</sup> This glowing, celebratory conception of romantic nature was in stark contrast to previous meanings that framed the natural world as dangerous and foreboding. In his classic work *Wilderness and the American Mind*,

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<sup>30</sup> Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 60.

<sup>31</sup> Joel T. Headley, *The Adirondack; or, Life in the Woods* (New York, Scribner, 1869), 217.

Roderick Nash argued that nature lost much of its repulsiveness when Romanticism reassigned positive connotations to the solitary, mysterious, and chaotic.<sup>32</sup> As natural landscapes became less foreboding, they also became more welcoming to men and women in search of spiritual refuge. Mountains, a topographic feature once thought of as ugly deformities on the earth's surface, began to be seen as the "handiwork of God if not His very image."<sup>33</sup> One of the most common themes in the Romantics' religion was the primacy of nature as a source for religious inspiration.<sup>34</sup>

While, on the surface, the subject of much romantic writing and painting was "nature," imbedding within it were specific ideas about religion and spirituality. By ascribing Godly qualities to the natural world, Romantics criticized mainstream Christianity for long fostering a rigid separation between the two. Romantics believed that access to nature brought with it access to the rest of creation. In their eyes a harmonious nature was the remedy for the spiritual ills that marked their times.<sup>35</sup> Historian Donald Worster wrote that the romantics thought that to lose touch with "nature's vital current" was to "invite disease of the body and disintegration of the soul."<sup>36</sup> Thus, Romantics sought to restore humans to nature, in the process encouraging a more godly person. As writers and artists re-invested nature with human and godly significance, they valued knowledge of nature acquired through sensory experience over that gained from objective science.<sup>37</sup> <sup>38</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Nash, 44.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>34</sup> Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 86.

<sup>35</sup> Worster, 83.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>38</sup> Not only was it common to see nature in explicitly religious terms, it was also common to engender nature as female—virgin, vixen, or mother. Carolyn Merchant, in her book *Reinventing Eden*, argued



Central to Romanticism's penchant for experience was the notion of *the sublime*, an idea that gained widespread usage throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In an American context, the sublime was a theory often associated with dramatic landscapes—beautiful mountains, powerful waterfalls, or serene rivers. These majestic environments inspired awe in their spectators, allowing viewers to *feel* the presence of a higher power. For its adherents, experiencing the sublime was often described as highly emotional, even terrifying—a feeling of astonishment or wonder that overtook the individual when in the presence of divine nature. Yet adherents of the sublime could deploy the idea quite selectively, as it was quite flexible. A dynamic (and changing) aesthetic, the sublime profoundly shaped nineteenth century American attitudes about the natural world.

Not surprisingly, when Albert Bierstadt moved up and down the Columbia River Gorge, the scenes that captured his imagination were similar to those that inspired Ludlow's prose. Bierstadt also embraced conceptions of romantic nature, putting the ideas into his "Great Paintings." Bierstadt's training as an artist had its roots in European traditions of landscape art. Born in Prussia in 1830, he arrived in New Bedford, Massachusetts when he was just two years old. An artist from an early age, Bierstadt combined business with his art when he apprenticed with George Harvey, an artist known for his ability to promote his own work. Harvey had put together a "Dissolving Views" tour, where he projected painted images of natural scenery onto a theater wall. A commercial success, this experience would help shape Bierstadt into the

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that Henry David Thoreau and John Muir both depicted romantic nature in "deeply personal terms as mother and virgin." Ralph Waldo Emerson even remarked, "the solitude of wilderness is a sublime mistress, but an intolerable wife." Ralph Waldo Emerson, as quoted in William Frederic Badé, *The Life and Letters of John Muir, I* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1924), 259-60. Carolyn Merchant, *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 134.

savvy self-promoter he would eventually become. In 1853, Bierstadt left his apprenticeship and traveled to Dusseldorf with the intent of mastering his craft. At that time, the art academy in Dusseldorf attracted an international following of painters who sought to master the technical aspects of realism. After studying for several years in this environment, Bierstadt returned to the U.S. and organized several exhibitions. While these were not commercially successful, they opened doors for him to travel. By 1859 he began traveling in the West, where he found the critical visual and emotional inspiration to launch his career. By enthusiastically embracing the role of artist-explorer, Bierstadt crafted his “Great Pictures,”—large panoramas that featured wispy clouds, imposing mountains, and pastoral valleys.

In fact, Bierstadt did not paint the subject matter in his “Great Pictures” until well after a number of writers and journalists had already described the alpine peaks, enormous trees, and sublime mountains of the region. Some years earlier, accomplished and popular writers like Washington Irving and Francis Parkman published narrative accounts of their travels that often described the very same landscapes Bierstadt would later paint.<sup>39</sup> Bierstadt’s challenge was to give pictorial life to something that was already textual. Likewise, a number of artists depicting western landscapes had earned both critical acclaim and commercial success well before Bierstadt made his first forays into the region. George Catlin’s “Indian Gallery” drew crowds as early as 1837, and other landscape painters including Karl Bodmer and Alfred Jacob Miller made their reputations

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<sup>39</sup> Washington Irving published both *A Tour on the Prairies* (1835) and *Astoria* (1837) and Francis Parkman’s *Oregon Trail* appeared in popular magazines before being published as a book in 1849. Nancy K. Anderson, “Wondrously Full of Invention: The Western Landscapes of Albert Bierstadt” in Anderson and Ferber, *Albert Bierstadt: Art & Enterprise* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1990), 70, 106.

based on paintings with a distinctively western subject matter.<sup>40</sup> Because Bierstadt painted subject matter already familiar to most, he built upon his audiences' (already active) imaginings of western places. Such over-the-top imagery depended upon both a realist aesthetic *and* iconic images tied to romantic nature and national expansion. Bierstadt's formula was a perfect balance between the two, one that resulted in commercial success, and he quickly made a reputation for himself. Painting big pictures, it turned out, attracted big patrons. Bierstadt's business acumen would serve him well, as many other artists attempted to make a living by painting the very same western scenes.<sup>41</sup>

By presenting both the river and its surrounding landscape in familiar aesthetic terms, Bierstadt structured his paintings according to recognized forms.<sup>42</sup> What resulted was a series of paintings that portrayed idealized, almost mythic landscapes. These images offered viewers an experience of nature that evoked sublimity. Like his precursors in the Hudson River School—artists like Thomas Cole and Frederick Edwin Church—Bierstadt used light in ways that emphasized the monumental aspects of the scenic places that he was traveling. Associated with the staged history painting of European artists like Claude Lorrain and J.M.W. Turner, Bierstadt's emphasis was on visual narrative.<sup>43</sup> Two of his most famous paintings, *Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak*, (1863) (figure 2.5), and *The Oregon Trail*, (1868) (figure 2.6) both employ themes that he would incorporate into many of his other compositions. Bierstadt went West in search of places that would fit his formula for commercial success. When he returned home and

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<sup>40</sup> Nancy K. Anderson, "Wondrously Full of Invention," 70.

<sup>41</sup> This account of Bierstadt's early life is from Linda Ferber, "Albert Bierstadt: The History of a Reputation" in *Albert Bierstadt: Art & Enterprise* (New York: Hudson Mills Press, 1990).

<sup>42</sup> Art Historian Angela Miller identified this pattern in much of Bierstadt's western art. See Angela Miller, "Albert Bierstadt, Landscape Aesthetics, and the Meaning of the West in the Civil War Era," in *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 27 (2001): 49.

<sup>43</sup> Miller, 44.

painted those places, he infused them with similar themes: romantic nature, sublime wilderness, and the spread of American civilization.

Traveling with Ludlow, Bierstadt was not disappointed in the inspiration he found on the Columbia. As Ludlow recorded romantic observations, Bierstadt sketched the scenery with similar ideas in mind. When he returned from his travels in 1864, Bierstadt painted a romantic Columbia—a celebration of the very same story that Ludlow described in his gushing account of their travels. His most famous image of the Columbia River Gorge, *Mount Hood, Oregon* (figure 1), featured a landscape that would have been familiar to those who appreciated any of his other “Great Paintings.” Just like the imagery in *Rocky Mountains, Lander’s Peak* (figure 2.5) and *Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California* (1868) (figure 2.7), his painting of Mount Hood with the Columbia below emphasized pastoral beauty and the natural sublime as instinctual, spiritual and experiential. Like so many of his other paintings, a small herd of deer frolicked in the open, park-like meadow—inviting the viewer to enter a pristine landscape. Here the Columbia River is practically missing. In the painting the river is placid, the water reflects the light peacefully, and the waters all have a serene appearance with no notion of speed or danger. Such a representation very well could be a river like the Columbia, but the focus was not on the river. The Columbia in this particular composition is just a backdrop, a prop used to frame the spectacular cliffs, verdant meadows, and picturesque mountain. In another of Bierstadt’s Columbia paintings, titled *The Columbia River, Oregon* (Date Unknown) (figure 2.8) the river is, ostensibly, more of the focus, it occupies the center of the composition, and it is evoked in the title. Yet, once again, the visual focus of the painting is really the sky, or more specifically, the

sunset. Like so many of his other works, the canvas is dominated by the light from the sky above, with wispy clouds, steep rock cliffs, and trees bathed in the sun's setting light. And, in true Bierstadt fashion, a herd of deer sits in the foreground, lending scale and evoking notions of abundance. (Bierstadt, apparently, loved to paint deer!) In the second Columbia River Gorge painting Bierstadt used similar aesthetic strategies, but this time he did so without featuring a mountain. Yet what is significant is not that he omitted the river from the landscape, but that his landscapes seemed to be more mythic than not. Both images of the Columbia River Gorge had more to do with what Bierstadt wanted to paint, than what he was seeing. By relying on romantic formulas and infusing the landscape with a descriptive realism, Bierstadt allowed the viewer to be drawn into an idealized pastoral scene, one where the viewer's imagination could be transported to another time and place altogether. But that place didn't seem to be the Columbia River Gorge.

Interestingly, as was common in many of Bierstadt's western landscape paintings, one cannot find any physical location where it would have been possible to see the actual view portrayed in *Mount Hood, Oregon*. Instead, it appears that Bierstadt "rearranged" a number of different landforms into one manufactured landscape, thus creating a unified composition that could only be achieved by moving hills, waterfalls, rocks, and cliffs into the spaces where he wanted them to be. For example, the large waterfall in the painting resembles a number of large waterfalls in the Gorge, most prominent being Multnomah Falls, but there is no viewpoint where one could see the falls with the mountain framed behind it. Likewise, the smaller secondary peak, on the left flank of Bierstadt's mountain looks very similar to Mt. Tahoma—a prominent crag on the side of Mount Rainier.

Hence, while the subject of *Mount Hood, Oregon* was ostensibly a painting about a large mountain and a big river, it actually suggests more about the way Bierstadt and Ludlow understood “nature” than it does about any particular landscape itself. Useful as an example of romantic trope imposed upon a particular landscape, *Mount Hood, Oregon* reveals the wishes of both artist and audience.

In balancing elements of realism and mythology, Bierstadt responded to the needs and wishes of his audiences. On one hand, people were intensely interested in what western landscapes actually looked like. On several occasions, Bierstadt sought to assuage any notion that his landscapes were not accurate. Hoping to establish credibility as an artist-explorer, he embellished the harsh conditions of his travels—noting that he lived for weeks on bread and water, undergoing “no ordinary privation and fatigue.”<sup>44</sup> Bierstadt even claimed that he did not alter the landscapes he encountered, noting, “The landscape thus achieved, amid the peril and isolation, is not a composition, but a genuine scene drawn from nature.”<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, Bierstadt’s audiences were drawn to an ideological conception of the natural world full of national, romantic, and religious meanings. Thus, the type of landscape scenes Bierstadt created were necessarily a combination of these two forces, a balancing act between an aesthetic of realism (and the appearance of verity) and the narrative requirements of an appealing story.

Perhaps the most potent story that Bierstadt told was about the nation. In framing the Columbia in romantic terms, both Bierstadt and Ludlow addressed their viewers with in allegories that reduced western expansion, with all its moral complexity and contradictions, into passages from darkness into light, from savagery into civilization.

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<sup>44</sup> Miller, 45.

<sup>45</sup> Miller, 45-6.

On his trip down the river Ludlow connected landscape and “national civilization” in the most explicit terms. In his account of traveling the Columbia he wrote:

“In a Swiss *chalet* you may escape from all memories of Geneva; among the Grampians you find an entirely different set of ideas from those of Edinburgh; but the same enterprise which makes itself felt in New York and Boston starts up for your astonishment out of all the fastnesses of the continent. Virgin nature woos our civilization to wed her, and no obstacles can conquer the American fascination.”<sup>46</sup>

To Ludlow (and others), nature was coded as female, and virginal. Moreover, she had been actively “wooing” the nation, and no obstacles could stand in the way of this romantic coupling. Such gendered language implied that a particular type of nature, one that was pristine, monumental, and safe was linked to (the now male) nation. This explicitly national orientation helped Ludlow’s readers imagine the Columbia as part of such a union. In this way, Ludlow’s framed the Columbia as the object of national desire. Importantly, this story implied that nature (and the Columbia) was empty, as Indian peoples were conveniently erased from this nature-nation story. This was the ideology of an expanding empire.<sup>47</sup>

This story appears in the grand scenes of Bierstadt’s “Great Pictures.” Art historian Angela Miller argued that Bierstadt’s preferred artistic conventions that were a way out of history, representations that were “purged of references to the present” and full of symbolic language that linked sublime nature to national expansion.<sup>48</sup> Miller wrote that such idealized images of nature served to draw viewers into those mythical

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<sup>46</sup> Ludlow, “On the Columbia River”, 709.

<sup>47</sup> For more about travel writing and romanticism, see Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>48</sup> Miller, 40.

landscapes—landscapes that were safe, timeless, and sealed off from history.<sup>49</sup> She continued:

“His West was not a story of moral complexity, development, and transformation, but a fable or allegory of contrasting elements visually (and by implication) politically balanced and resolved into unity. Such an allegory worked to contain the ideological challenges of postwar nationhood and citizenship. Aesthetic convention overrode the contradictions of history, and the productive tension between imaginative ideal and social fact gave way, finally, to fantasy.”<sup>50</sup>

Miller concludes that Bierstadt’s work was deeply informed by the culture in which he lived, by aesthetic traditions used in the service of moral and national meanings.<sup>51</sup>

In Bierstadt’s Columbia River paintings audiences never saw a more nuanced Columbia—or even one that acknowledged a native presence. Instead, native title to the land was ignored, obscured and replaced with a mythology that evoked nostalgia for Manifest Destiny and the heroic phase of Western settlement. By and large the audiences of these Western landscapes embraced a wilderness ideal that lacked a native presence altogether.<sup>52</sup> Where and when audiences did see Indian peoples they appeared as childlike and innocent, devoid of politics and unaffected by Western expansion. Angela Miller commented that Indians in other Bierstadt paintings were transformed into “docile inhabitants of a mythic wonderland, willingly yielding up their patrimony.”<sup>53</sup> Bierstadt, like others in the Hudson River School, placed tiny figures in the foreground, to give a sense of monumentalism (like the deer!) but also to give the sense that Indians were part of nature, and thus, not an obstacle to national desire.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>52</sup> For more on how the idea of wilderness required the removal and then erasure of Indian peoples from their lands, see Louis Warren, *The Hunters Game: Poachers and Conservationists in Twentieth Century America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), and Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>53</sup> Miller, 41.



Of course, Bierstadt and Ludlow encountered actual Native peoples at several locations during their trip up the river. In Ludlow and Bierstadt's minds, the native peoples of the Columbia were paradoxical, strange and exotic, yet simultaneously little more than relics of the past—fit to be included in the foreground of paintings, but not fit to challenge national aspirations toward empire. Ludlow noticed the occasional group of Indians in canoes, and remarked in detail about the native ways of catching and drying salmon. He was also intrigued by native bodies; yet quick to dismiss the subjectivity of the human beings he was seeing:

“There can scarcely be a more sculpturesque sight than that of a finely formed, well-grown young Indian struggling on his scaffold with an unusually powerful fish. Every muscle of his wiry frame stands out in its turn in unveiled relief, and you see in him attitudes of grace and power which will not let you regret the Apollo Belvedere or the Gladiator. The only pity is that this ideal Indian is a rare being,”<sup>54</sup>

Ludlow's ideal Indian was one existing in a state of nature, and he was fascinated with the “finely formed” bodies and native clothing: “...their serene nakedness draped with blankets of every variety of hue, from fresh flaming red to weather-beaten arumy-blue, and adorned as to their cheeks with smutches of the cinnabar-rouge...”<sup>55</sup> Ludlow's observations were filtered through a racial discourse that understood Native peoples as primitive, uncivilized, and exhibiting, what he called, “natural, ingrained laziness.”<sup>56</sup> This often meant that Indians were seen as close to, or part of, nature. Ludlow even offered his readers a rudimentary racial classification system. “Fish Indians,” he dismissed, while “Meat Indians,” he celebrated for exhibiting “savage beauty.”<sup>57</sup> Seen as consistently noble and savage, the native peoples that Ludlow and Bierstadt encountered

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<sup>54</sup> Ludlow, 708.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 710.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 707.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 708.

appeared only in generic form, and hence the romantic narratives that they offered obscured any essential human characteristics of these Indian subjects. Devoid of any historical or cultural context, the Indians that appear in these romantic tropes suggest nothing of the actual peoples that inhabited the Columbia's cultural universe. Instead these appearances give witness to the racial formations that helped justify conquest and appropriation of native landscapes.

While Bierstadt and Ludlow were not the only purveyors of a romantic story about the Columbia, they are important because they demonstrate how quickly and easily these narratives could be mapped onto a physical landscape like the Columbia's. While it may be problematic to assume that most Euro-Americans would accept a romantic Columbia as "true" solely on the basis of these literary and artistic accounts, it is not as difficult to conclude that viewers and readers fit the Columbia into their own pre-existing expectations of "nature" and the western United States. Thus, the relative popularity of Bierstadt's paintings and Ludlow's stories suggest the pervasiveness of this romantic, racist ideology. Romantic images shaped the cultural imaginations, but in doing so they relied on pre-existing stories or ideas. Images like these had power (and found audiences) because they offered cultural imaginaries that were already familiar. Here a narrative proliferated in its own image, only to bend and adapt in the process. In this way these stories were both inherently conservative *and* constantly evolving.

Bierstadt's "Great Pictures" inspired a broad and dedicated following. The writer Samuel Benjamin noted that *The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak* "threw the people into an ecstasy of delight." Others referred to a "great wave of popularity" that was at its crest

during the 1860s.<sup>58</sup> When Bierstadt exhibited that same painting in late 1866 at the Exposition Universelle in London, Frank Leslie wrote that the painting had been a favorite among the “mass of the lovers and appreciators of art who visited our gallery.”<sup>59</sup> Even fifteen years later, when two of his most famous early works returned to public view, the *Boston Transcript* observed the popular appeal of the Bierstadt paintings refused to wane, writing that “...the admiring crowds that linger in front of the great Bierstadts never grow small from the opening to the closing of the doors.”<sup>60</sup> A portion of this popularity can be attributed to self-promotion. Comfortable in New York’s art scene, Bierstadt rarely had difficulty organizing exhibitions for his work. He also employed the tactic of naming the actual mountains in his panoramas after patrons, politicians, and the purchasers of his paintings.<sup>61 62</sup>

Eventually tourists flocked to the areas where Bierstadt painted, prompting one local writer to state that Bierstadt’s popular painting of Yosemite “ha[d] incited more unpleasant people to visit California than all our conspiring hotel keepers could compel to return...”<sup>63</sup> Similarly, in the popular 1870 book *Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada*, Geologist Clarence King complained of the overarching popularity of the artist, which was by then waning: “Its all Bierstadt and Bierstadt and Bierstadt nowadays! What has he done but twist and skew and distort and discolor and belittle and be-pretty this whole

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<sup>58</sup> William Howe Downes, *Boston Transcript*, February 26, 1902, as quoted in Ferber, 64.

<sup>59</sup> Frank Leslie, “Report on the Fine Arts,” in *Reports of the United States Commissioners to the Paris Universal Exposition, 1867* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1870) vol 1, 12., as quoted in Ferber.

<sup>60</sup> *Boston Transcript*, March 10, 1882, as quoted in Ferber, 61.

<sup>61</sup> Bierstadt was even successful at securing a congressional commission for two large landscape paintings, though it took him nearly ten years to get it approved. Reportedly earning over \$120,000 in the late 1860s, Bierstadt’s commercial success gave him the means to purchase five acres near the Hudson River. There he built an elaborate studio and an expansive, sprawling house. See Ferber, 34, 55.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>63</sup> Ambrose Bierce in the *San Francisco New Letter and California Advertiser*, September 4, 1869, as quoted in Anderson and Ferber, 87.

doggonned country? Why, his mountains are too high and too slim; they'd blow over in one of our fall winds. I've herded colts two summers in Yosemite, and honest now, when I stood right up in front of his picture, I didn't know it."<sup>64</sup>

While Bierstadt's popularity with the masses peaked in the late 1860s and early 1870s, some art critics soured on his approach, abandoning their preference for the descriptive realism of the Dusseldorf school for a more "painterly" landscape vision influenced by French sources.<sup>65</sup><sup>66</sup> Linda Ferber argued that implicit in this stylistic shift was "a fundamental change in the meaning of American landscape painting from a vehicle for national and religious messages to a medium of private poetry and the subjective interpretation of nature."<sup>67</sup> As the popularity of 'Dusseldorfian' model in American landscapes gave way to other visions, critics who still wished to praise Bierstadt's work were careful to separate subject from style. George W. Sheldon, in a book published a decade later, attributed Bierstadt's international success to the subject matter featured in his paintings: "Especially in England [his western landscapes] have been praised and prized, and for the reason, perhaps, among others, that they described to a people, fonder than all others of travel and books of travel, the novel and majestic

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<sup>64</sup> Clarence King, *Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada* (Boston: J. R. Osgood and Co., 1870), 207, 210, as quoted in Ferber, 48.

<sup>65</sup> Ferber, 30.

<sup>66</sup> Other critics balked at his success itself. As early as 1864 the prominent art critic James Jarvis remarked that Bierstadt's success was due to "speculating blood" and "zest of gain." James Jackson Jarves, *The Art-Idea: Sculpture, Painting, and Architecture in America* (New York: Hurd & Houghton, 1864), 195, as quoted in Ferber, 22. Others criticized Bierstadt for "reducing art to the level of trade" and eventually the conventional wisdom held that Bierstadt's "Great Pictures" were merely, "bold and effective speculations in art on principles of trade, emotionless, and soulless." James Jackson Jarves, *Art Thoughts: The Experiences and Observations of an American Amateur in Europe* (New York: Hurd & Houghton, 1869), 299, as quoted in Ferber, 33. Some in the media defended Bierstadt, emphasizing his business acumen. In New York's *Independent* one critic wrote, "Mr. Bierstadt has done a great service to artists by teaching them how to get large prices for their pictures. He has an unusual share of common sense, business shrewdness, and practical tact—qualities as valuable and praiseworthy in a painter or a writer as in a broker..." *Independent*, May 23, 1867, as quoted in Ferber, 33.

<sup>67</sup> Ferber, 31.

beauty of our vast Territories.”<sup>68</sup> Likewise, upon the occasion of his death in 1902, literary scholar William Howe Downes noted how “the remarkable vogue of Bierstadt’s pictures which prevailed in the sixties and seventies [was]...to some degree due to his enterprise in tackling such immense themes...”<sup>69</sup>

In painting his vision of the Columbia, and by narrating their experiences on the river, Bierstadt and Ludlow invented a romantic landscape with characteristics common to other nineteenth century descriptions of scenic places. In the process, Bierstadt and Ludlow cast the river as an actor in their gendered, romantic, nationalist story, (albeit an actor with a small supporting role). By casting the landscape as romantic, these travelers emphasized certain aspects of the river’s importance that were often in opposition to the usual and accustomed ways of knowing and using the Columbia. Presented in such an ideologically explicit fashion, the ecological, social, and political worlds of the 1863 Columbia River were transformed and rearranged to meet the aesthetic and narrative expectations of these two travelers and their audiences. Divested of historical context, the Columbia of Bierstadt and Ludlow became a backdrop for heroic tales of exploration, migration, homesteading, and settlement. Such a conception of the river placed it firmly within an imperial project, appropriating the river as a national symbol and limiting the Columbia’s destiny to one increasingly seen as manifest, so to speak. The romantic Columbia that inspired Bierstadt and Ludlow would become more and more common in the years to come.

### **A River of Utility: John Mix Stanley and the Pacific Railroad Reports**

Ten years prior to Bierstadt and Ludlow’s travels, a different type of expedition

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<sup>68</sup> George William Sheldon, *American Painters, with eighty-three examples of their work engraved on wood* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1878), 147, as quoted in Ferber, 60.

<sup>69</sup> William Howe Downes, *Boston Transcript*, February 26, 1902, as quoted in Ferber, 64.

traveled over the Rocky Mountains and into the interior of the Pacific Northwest. Following a route roughly parallel to that which Lewis and Clark followed fifty years before, Isaac Stevens – the recently named Territorial Governor of Washington – led an official government expedition designed to find “the most practicable and economical route for a railroad from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean.”<sup>70</sup> Starting from St. Paul, Minnesota, the Stevens expedition traveled west to survey the land between the 47<sup>th</sup> and 49<sup>th</sup> parallels—the most northerly route of five options being considered for the rail route. Striking out from St. Paul, Stevens sent a young Captain George McClellan (who would later command the Union forces in the Civil War), out to search for a route from over the Cascade Range. The two planned to meet somewhere east of the mountains, where they would compare notes before continuing on to the Pacific Ocean. Months into the trip, Stevens’ Pacific Railroad Survey arrived on the Columbia plateau and learned of McClellan’s difficulties locating a snow-free route across the mountains. After spending nearly a month investigating the mountain passes from Lake Chelan south to Mount Adams, McClellan advised Stevens that a passable snow-free route was nowhere to be found. Taking his word for it, Stevens instead traveled further south—down through the southern part of the Columbian Plain, stopping near present day Walla Walla, where he would rest before finishing his journey on the Columbia River.

After resting for several days, the Survey departed Fort Walla-Walla and traveled down the Columbia by water, expecting to see a favorable rail route along the banks of the river. By November they arrived in the Gorge, only a few days later than they

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<sup>70</sup> This taken from the title of Isaac Steven’s report, *Reports of Explorations and Surveys to Ascertain the Most Practicable and Economical Route for a Railroad from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean*, hereafter referred to as the *Pacific Railroad Reports* (Washington: Beverley Tucker, printer, 1855-60) Volume XII.

expected “having been detained nearly two days in camp by a high wind which blew up the river...”<sup>71</sup> After battling the typically strong winds, the expedition stopped at The Dalles, where Isaac Stevens watched as several canoes descended the rapids. While viewing Celilo Falls, Stevens commented, “...from the best examination which I was able to make, I became at once convinced that the river was probably navigable for steamers; at all events, worthy of being experimentally tested.”<sup>72</sup> Steven’s language suggested a scientific approach to the landscape: he was making “examinations” and recommending the worthiness of “experimentally” testing the navigability of the waterway.

Stevens’ tendency to understand the Columbia in utilitarian terms, in this case by viewing the Columbia’s impressive rapids with an eye for future use by steamers, was common for government expeditions like the Pacific Railroad Survey. Moving in remote areas of the West, the Survey traveled across the region, collecting information about the landscape for inclusion in congressional reports. Historians looking at these governmental reports see these expeditions as important markers of a governmental presence in the Western United States, yet the reports remain important for another reason; the reports offer a glimpse at how explorers understood the natural world they encountered. These glimpses are seen in observations about the Columbia River that appear in the narrative, as well as in representations of the landforms sketched by John Mix Stanley, which appear as color lithographs.<sup>73 74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> *Pacific Railroad Reports*, 155.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> On the Pacific Railroad Surveys and the reports they produced, see William Goetzmann, *Army Exploration in the West, 1803-1863* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 262-304, Donald W. Meinig, “Isaac Stevens: Practical Geographer of the Early Northwest,” *Geographical Review* 45 (October, 1955), 542-558, Philip Henry Overmeyer, “George B. McClelland and the Pacific Northwest,” *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 32 (1941), 3-60, James P. Ronda, “The Exploration of the

Utilizing a vast sum of federal money and manpower, Congress commissioned six groups of explorers to investigate which route might be the best. Their task was to gather general topographical information about the landscapes surveyed, focusing on the relative advantages and disadvantages of each possible rail route. In the middle of the nineteenth century, a rail route running east and west across the country was a lucrative proposition, one that inspired great interest from those who hoped to benefit from the construction and location of the route. What began as civil public debate in the 1830s quickly evolved into congressional controversy, political deadlock, and North-South sectional rivalry by the 1850s. Because the federal government would only sanction one route, a number of cities (including St. Louis, Memphis, Cincinnati, and others) lobbied to be the eastern terminus for the rail line. Other west-coast interests sought to influence the selection of a western terminus. By 1853, the government turned to the surveys, in the hopes that the “gods of objective science” could help break the political deadlock and evaluate which route would be selected.<sup>75</sup> This volatile political context led Isaac Stevens to approach his mission posing as a detached collector of raw data. He characterized the expedition’s goals as the following:

“...[to] examine the passes of the several mountain ranges, the geography and meteorology of the whole intermediate region, the character, as avenues of trade and transportation, of the Missouri and Columbia rivers, the rains and snows of

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American West,” in *A Companion to the American West*, ed. William Devereell (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 70-1, and Ron Tyler, “Illustrated Government Publications Related to the American West,” in *Surveying the Record: North American Scientific Exploration to 1930*, ed. Edward C. Carter II (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1999), 147-72.

<sup>74</sup> A number of military sponsored exploratory expeditions predated the Stevens expedition, but they only occasionally employed artists to record the landscapes encountered. The so-called “Great Surveys” occurred after the American Civil War, and they were known individually by the names of their directors: King, Hayden, Powell, and Wheeler. See William Goetzmann, *Exploration and Empire: The Explorer and the Scientist in the Winning of the American West* (New York: Knopf, 1966), Richard A Bartlett, *Great Surveys of the American West* (Norman: Oklahoma University Press, 1962), and Debora Rindge, “Science and Art Meet in the Parlor: The Role of Popular Magazine Illustration in the Pictorial Record of the ‘Great Surveys’,” in *Surveying the Record*, 173-93.

<sup>75</sup> James P. Ronda, “The Exploration of the American West,” 70-1.



the route, especially in the mountain passes, and, in short to collect every species of information bearing upon the question of railroad practicability...”<sup>76</sup>

Not unlike Thomas Jefferson’s instructions to Lewis and Clark, Stevens’ mandate was to collect, organize, compile, and eventually publish a whole catalog of data about the landscape, its suitability for railroad development—with a particular eye for information that could be useful in developing the West’s vast natural resources. Ultimately, the leaders of the various surveys were unsuccessful in giving a decisive recommendation of one particular route over another (they all favored their own routes). Nonetheless, the vast amount of topographic, geologic, botanic, and ethnographic data instantly became the best source of information about the regions surveyed. Inside these reports were descriptions of the West that detailed not only “what was there” but “how it could be used.” The following passage typifies the landscape description present in the reports:

“The lands immediately along the Columbia itself, from just below the mouth of the Spokane to near the Dalles, and all the adjoining region below the elevation of about 2, 000 feet, seem available only for grazing without the assistance of irrigation. But it has, as well as the higher valleys, great advantages for effecting this object in the terraces which often partially form a dam, and, with the immense and inexhaustible timber on the mountains, can be made to retain a supply of water both for this purpose and to assist in navigation in the mode suggested by Mr. Ellet, in the Smithsonian Contributions, for improving the navigation of the Ohio. The natural accumulation of alluvial soil in the lowest places would, without doubt, make the banks of this river the most fertile instead of the most barren of all, were it not for the extreme dryness of the climate. Like the rich valley of the Nile, it may, by irrigation, hereafter support a population as great and flourishing as that of Egypt in her palmiest days. It has also the advantage that the worst land of the Great Plain is far superior to the deserts which border the Nile valley.”<sup>77</sup>

Imbedded in the report was a view of the landscape that stressed “advantages” like “inexhaustible timber” and the “natural accumulation of alluvial soil.” In recording such

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<sup>76</sup> Hazard Stevens, *The Life of Isaac Ingalls Stevens* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1900), 292, as quoted in Goetzmann, 279.

<sup>77</sup> J. G. Cooper, “Report upon the Botany of the Route,” in *Pacific Railroad Reports*, Vol. XII, Book 2, No. 1, 18-19.

data the government assumed that alterations of the landscape would bring these advantages to fruition. Over a period of five years the federal government collected narrative descriptions such as these, “scientific” measurements, and artistic sketches of areas the government hadn’t really seen before. Only rarely did the authors of the report acknowledge that there had been an extended human presence within these areas, as the Surveys primarily documented details about the flora, fauna, land, and water. Native peoples, when they were mentioned, were seen either as a military threat, or as a harmless distraction. This marked a change from the impressions of Lewis and Clark, who assumed the diplomacy, alliance, and perhaps warfare would all be part of western settlement. Implicit in their descriptions of people and places were assumptions about how a landscape ought to be understood, how it ought to be developed, and how it best be utilized for Euro-American settlement.

In nearly every section of Isaac Steven’s Pacific Railroad Report the Columbia River is described in utilitarian terms. From the outset the surveyors sought to observe, document, and appraise the land for a broad array of purposes, and thus much emphasis was put on how it might be changed or altered. But even in situations where they were not describing anything to do with the rail route, the authors of the report viewed the landscape with eye on *future* use. Hence, the document reads as a litany of predictions for developing the area—with some sections identifying possible locations for settlements and others extolling the advantages of certain valleys for housing roads and farms.<sup>78</sup> The following passage, written by Stevens himself, typifies this pattern in evaluating the landscape:

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<sup>78</sup> Brad Hume, “The Romantic and the Technical in Early Nineteenth Century American Exploration” in *Surveying the Record*, 309.

“Upon the immediate banks of the river and its branches, where there is sufficient moisture in the soil, the land produces very well. The potatoes raised by the Indians are very fine; but melons and squashes, which they also raise, do not succeed well, perhaps on account of the seed being poor; and corn does not thrive at all.”<sup>79</sup>

Stevens offered rich descriptions of the Columbia’s landscape in language that often emphasized its suitability for farming:

“The ridges between the different branches of the Yakima, and separating it from the Columbia north and south, are chiefly composed of basaltic rock, generally columnar, and more or less covered with gravelly and sandy detritus. On many parts of the highest ridges the basalt has been entirely denuded, leaving nothing but angular fragments of rock, and supporting no vegetation of any value. Wherever covered the earthy materials there is a good growth of grass, and probably the allied cereal grains might be produced, particularly the winter kind. Towards the base of the mountains the valleys, both of the main Yakima and of its branches, improve much in appearance and agricultural capacity.”<sup>80</sup>

As each expedition included a number of civilian scientists and specialists—including physicians, astronomers, meteorologists, botanists, geologists, naturalists, cartographers, military escorts, and artists—the narrative produced in the reports emphasized scientific observation and often featured charts and tables. Particular care was taken to measure precise details about the river, as evidenced in this passage that recorded the variance in water temperature in the Columbia itself:

“In June, 1853, I found the Willamette warm enough to bathe in at Portland, while the Columbia at Vancouver, then high from the summer floods, was entirely too cold. The published record of its temperature during the freshet of 1854 shows that at the commencement, on May 8, the temperature of the river at Vancouver was only 40°. It can scarcely be supposed to have been warmer previously, as the rains had not ended nor the weather become hot. From 40° it rose and fell alternately until July 20, when the record terminates, the highest temperature being, on June 30, 55°. It is somewhat singular that the *rise* in temperature corresponded with the rise of the water, and *vice versa* during June, which may have been due to warm rains. But as the water fell, during July, the warmth gradually increased from 47° to 53°.5, the points given for the first and twentieth of the month. It, doubtless, continued to increase afterwards during the lowest

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<sup>79</sup> Isaac Stevens, *Pacific Railroad Reports*, Vol. XII, 141.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

stage of the river, which is between July and December. It is, however, hardly probable that the warmest portions of the Columbia attain a warmth much above 60°, which is allowing an increase of eight during its course from the mouth of the Okanagan to Vancouver, while it is continually receiving branches from the mountain snows. The temperature of 52°, observed at the former point on September 27, is, doubtless, about the highest it reaches there, since that period was at the very middle of the dry season, and the snow-flood had long since ceased.”<sup>81</sup>

Descriptions of meteorological data, latitude and longitude charts, mileage estimates, statistical tables of Native American populations, fur company data, and cost analyses for settlement were all included in the story told by Stevens and other members of the expedition.<sup>82</sup>

To establish the credibility of these reports, a number of scientists were called upon to lend “objectivity” to the cause and to help gather the requisite information. In the 1850s, these scientists included geologists, astronomers, botanists, and, interestingly, artists. Accompanying expedition leader Isaac Stevens in surveying this northern route was the landscape artist John Mix Stanley. Stanley, who had already made his reputation as a painter of Western subjects (largely by emulating George Catlin’s “Indian Gallery”) came to the expedition with the intent of creating art for the purpose of scientific illustration. The reports, to which Stanley contributed numerous sketches, contain a significant number of artistic representations, ranging from individual portraits to landscapes, scientific drawings of flora and fauna to sketches of geological specimens.<sup>83</sup> As the expedition surveyed the landscape in search of a plausible rail route, Stanley produced drawings that appeared as lithographs in Steven’s official report. Among the lithographs included in the final report were Stanley’s sketches titled *Cape Horn* (figure

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<sup>81</sup> J. G. Cooper, “Report upon the Botany of the Route,” in *Pacific Railroad Reports* 35.

<sup>82</sup> Brad Hume, “The Romantic and the Technical,” 307.

<sup>83</sup> Only Stanley’s landscape sketches are analyzed in this study, for additional information see Ron Tyler, “Illustrated Government Publications,” 148.

2.2), *Cascades– Columbia River* (figure 2.3), and *Ft. Vancouver* (figure 2.9), depicting features of the Columbia River Gorge (figures 2.2, 2.9) and the nearby military fort in Vancouver, WA.<sup>84</sup>

In these lithographs, which are representative of many included in government surveys of the era, John Mix Stanley paid close attention to getting “accuracy” in his renditions of the landscape. As the expedition traveled over a vast amount of territory the explorers encountered diverse ecosystems with varying topographical features. Thus, the illustrations needed to exhibit a uniform sense of scale, making these sketches and lithographs into something of their own genre.<sup>85</sup> When analyzing these lithographs, historian William Goetzmann identified a standardizing “sense of form” that gave a spatial organization of the land’s topography. “Space was all important,” he wrote, “but so was accuracy, and in the expression of the former only the props afforded by nature could be used, plus points of view from the tops of mountain eminences, and the use of figures and buildings to give a sense of scale.”<sup>86</sup> Stanley sketched the cliffs and valleys he encountered by duplicating horizontal and vertical lines. Mountain ridges, steep cliffs, rock escarpments, and valley floors formed complimentary layers that helped him indicate the spatial organization of what he was viewing. While the sketches weren’t always exacting in their detail, they gave a very tangible sense of distance and scale.<sup>87</sup>

In Stanley’s *Cape Horn*, viewers are offered a glimpse of the Columbia River with details that were plausibly observable in the actual river landscape. In contrast to the landscape paintings created by Albert Bierstadt, the Stanley lithographs offer details

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<sup>84</sup> These sketches are reproduced as lithographs in *Pacific Railroad Reports*, Vol. XII, Part I, 155.

<sup>85</sup> As described by Goetzmann, *Army Exploration in the West*, 334.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

most useful to viewers who sought to understand the geography of that particular place. For example, in this lithograph one can see evidence of basaltic crags—the type of rock that lines the sides of the river. At the center of the composition are willow trees that hug the river’s banks, and viewers get an indication of the extent to which the river curves and meanders through that part of the Gorge. The actual width and size of the Columbia could be estimated from this drawing as well, with the knowledge that the sketch was made in October when the river’s water flow dropped and exposed more of the river’s hidden rapids. In the foreground of the scene, several figures gesture across a tributary towards their small tent—figures that give scale to the size of the landscape being represented.<sup>88</sup>

As is clear in *Cape Horn*, the images that Stanley produced met the aesthetic needs of a federal project interested in surveying the land for future development. Whether it was for the railroad, for agriculture, or for homesteading, a utilitarian impulse appears in both the narrative descriptions and illustrative representations created by the members of the expedition. But more than reflecting the expeditions’ aims, the sketches are useful because they suggest a second fundamental way of understanding and defining the Columbia, a story about the landscape that was also prevalent during the period of exploration and settlement. The Columbia River in Stanley’s lithographs was not a mythic or romantic landscape or one that beckoned the viewer on a journey of self-discovery. Instead Stanley and Stevens framed the river as an important resource, a river readied to be altered and improved. This conception of the Columbia’s use and purpose always had an eye on future development. It promised utility to those who could capture

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<sup>88</sup> These figures were drawn in an attempt at “actual scale”, while Bierstadt’s deer evoked a sense of ‘monumental’ scale.

it, and wealth to those who would claim it. In this way the Columbia River was imagined not as heroic or romantic, but as territorial—property that could soon be put to work in a number of different ways.

When John Mix Stanley and Isaac Stevens traveled through the Columbia River Gorge they envisioned themselves as explorers, documenting aspects of the landscape unknown to the government in Washington, D.C. Yet because the Columbia River Gorge was well documented in previous accounts by other explorers, the Survey framed their task as improving upon what they already knew. Stevens wrote:

“The Columbia valley itself was the valley of a great stream, and the reports which we had of it from previous explorers—from Fremont, Captain Wilkes, and the many narratives both of American and British traders and employees—left it certain, in the minds of all reflecting and investigating gentlemen, that the route was practicable. I conceived it to be my duty so to manage the exploration as to develop unknown facts and extend existing knowledge.”<sup>89</sup>

Stevens, content that others had sufficiently found a route “practicable,” contented himself with discovering “unknown facts” that presumably would lead to the construction of a railroad, a highly precise type of knowledge that would involve a form of utilitarianism focused on grades, curves, wood, and other resources. In describing other government-sponsored surveys of the West, Richard White noted how it happened that explorers could “discover” a landscape again and again:

“Discovery became less a final achievement and more obviously a constantly repeated process. The range of possible discoveries broadened. Even geographical discovery was no longer accomplished by a single passage. It became refined as, for example, explorers surveyed and measured the same land again and again to find first where boats, then wagons, then trains could or could not go in the American West.”<sup>90</sup>

Hence, Isaac Stevens, in his governmental report, and John Mix Stanley, in his sketches,

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<sup>89</sup> *Pacific Railroad Reports*, Volume XII, 154.

<sup>90</sup> Richard White, “Discovering Nature in North America,” 885.

recorded details about the Columbia River in a way similar to that of Lewis and Clark fifty years before. Yet because they “discovered” information about the Columbia some half-decade later, Stevens and Stanley could not self-consciously offer a traditional “first encounter” narrative that extolled the grandeur and vast power of the Columbia River. Instead they offered their own version—a “first appraisal of the railroad route” narrative that abstracted the landscape into component parts. They did this by documenting the geography of the possible rail route in exacting detail, “discovering” precise elevations, gradients of mountain passes, climatic data, the presence of rocks and minerals, and other aspects of geography that might be relevant to building the railroad.<sup>91</sup> They also estimated potential engineering difficulties, the costs for construction of the route, and the availability of raw materials like timber and water. In doing so they sought a “practicable” rail route and discovered the Columbia they expected to find.

When John Mix Stanley and Isaac Stevens documented the spatial organization of the Columbia River Gorge, they extended the reach of the federal government onto the land itself. By describing the landscape in detail, the Pacific Railroad Survey encouraged (even facilitated) Euro-American settlement in the region, preparing the landscape for incorporation into an expanding nation. By including lithographs of Stanley’s sketches into the official report, his utilitarian view of the land was present for all to see. The widespread distribution of the reports, combined with the narrative accounts that emphasized the availability of resources and possibilities for future use, encouraged settlement and accelerated the spread of Euro-American cultural and political power throughout the region.

Returning to a comparison of Stanley and Bierstadt’s renditions of the Columbia

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<sup>91</sup> Goetzmann, 275.



River Gorge, one can see similarities in how both of the images operated within a discourse of national expansion. While Albert Bierstadt's romantic view of the Columbia is seemingly at odds with Stanley's utilitarian view, the two ways of knowing the river have more in common than one initially expects. Both modes of understanding reflect complicated methods of making meaning of the natural world, and both reflect different power relationships that structured their ways of seeing. Both conceptions of the river facilitated the divestment of Indians from their homelands, and both did so in subtle ways, without explicitly acknowledging a native presence in the region. Erasing Indian title was easy for Bierstadt and Ludlow, as they described a mythic landscape that had little to do with the complex patterns of social negotiation and changing political arrangements on the river. Likewise, Stanley and Stevens never incorporated native contexts into their descriptions of landscape development (save for the occasional mention of what they could or couldn't grow). In both contexts, different that they were, the prevailing ideologies that suggested Indians were "a vanishing race" structured peoples' expectations about Indian futures and the sweep of history. John Mix Stanley, who was *both* a government illustrator and a landscape artist, reflected the ubiquity of this narrative in his famous paintings, *Last of their Race* (1857) (figure 2.11) and *Osage Scalp Dance* (1845) (Figure 2.12). Later in life, Stanley painted a romantic image of Mt. Hood that was very similar to Bierstadt's (figure 2.13).

The contrasting river stories that appear in Lewis and Clark's journals, Bierstadt and Stanley's paintings, and in the narrative accounts of mid-nineteenth century exploration and travel mark the onset of a different way of knowing the Columbia. By translating their experiences on the river according to their own particular needs and

expectations, be they romantic or utilitarian, these Euro-Americans crafted two modes of seeing that prefigured the twentieth century future for the Columbia River. Just as a romantic Columbia was the precursor to later trends that cast the river as a tourist space, a utilitarian Columbia would ultimately manifest itself in the building of the hydroelectric dams. By giving the Columbia national meaning, both utilitarian and romantic modes of interpretation became part of the same process, a process by which foreign territories were envisioned as empty, organized according to imported cultural norms and values, and eventually incorporated into familiar categories. This imagining of the landscape readied the river for incorporation into the nation and obscured the cultural universe that previously existed on the river. The predominance of this new way of knowing silenced older Columbia River stories and replaced them with narratives that trumpeted the ideology of manifest destiny.

In this way landscape representations were more than visual manifestations of river stories; they were actual agents of change that helped re-arrange the Columbia's river imaginary. The stories told about the river in the middle of the nineteenth century were flexible and pragmatic, but always in relation to these paradigmatic limits. While contradictions between the two most common ways of seeing the river certainly existed, these rarely posed much of a problem for those who wanted (or needed) to see the river in multiple ways. Thinking of the Columbia in romantic terms would turn out to be one of the most common ways of understanding the river in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Viewing the Columbia in utilitarian terms would be equally as enduring.

**Figure 2.1**



**Mount Hood, Oregon. Albert Bierstadt. 1863.**

**Figure 2.2**



**Cape Horn. By John Mix Stanley. 1853. Lithograph based on sketch.**

Source: *Reports of Explorations and Surveys, to Ascertain the Most Practicable and Economical Route for a Railroad from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean: Made under the direction of the secretary of war, in 1853-6* (Washington: Beverley Tucker, printer, 1855-60), Volume XII, William L. Clements Library, The University of Michigan.

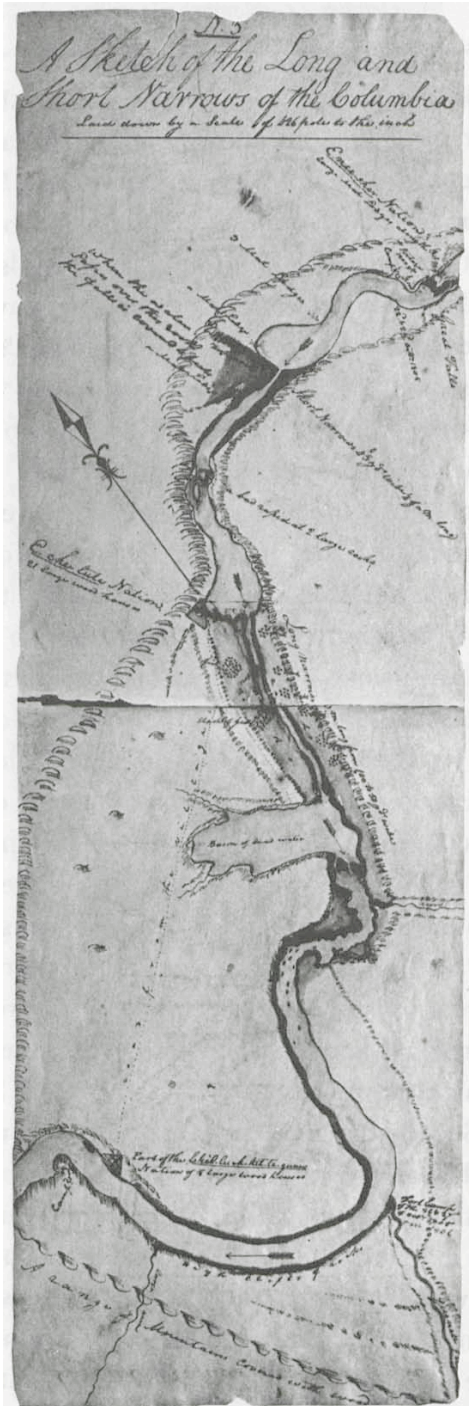
**Figure 2.3**



**Great (Celilo) Falls of the Columbia River, Washington and Oregon. By William Clark. 1805.**

Source: Jim O'Connor, "The Evolving Landscape of the Columbia River Gorge: Lewis and Clark and Cataclysms on the Columbia," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 105 (2004): 390-421.

**Figure 2.4**



**Long and Short Narrows (The Dalles) of the Columbia River, Washington and Oregon. By William Clark. 1805.**

Source: Jim E. O'Conner, "The Evolving Landscape of the Columbia River Gorge: Lewis and Clark and Cataclysms on the Columbia," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 107 (Fall 2004), 394.

**Figure 2.5**



**Rocky Mountains, Landers Peak. By Albert Bierstadt. 1863.**

**Figure 2.6**



**The Oregon Trail. By Albert Bierstadt. 1868.**



**Figure 2.7**



**Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California. By Albert Bierstadt. 1868.**

**Figure 2.8**



**The Columbia River, Oregon. By Albert Bierstadt. Date Unknown.**

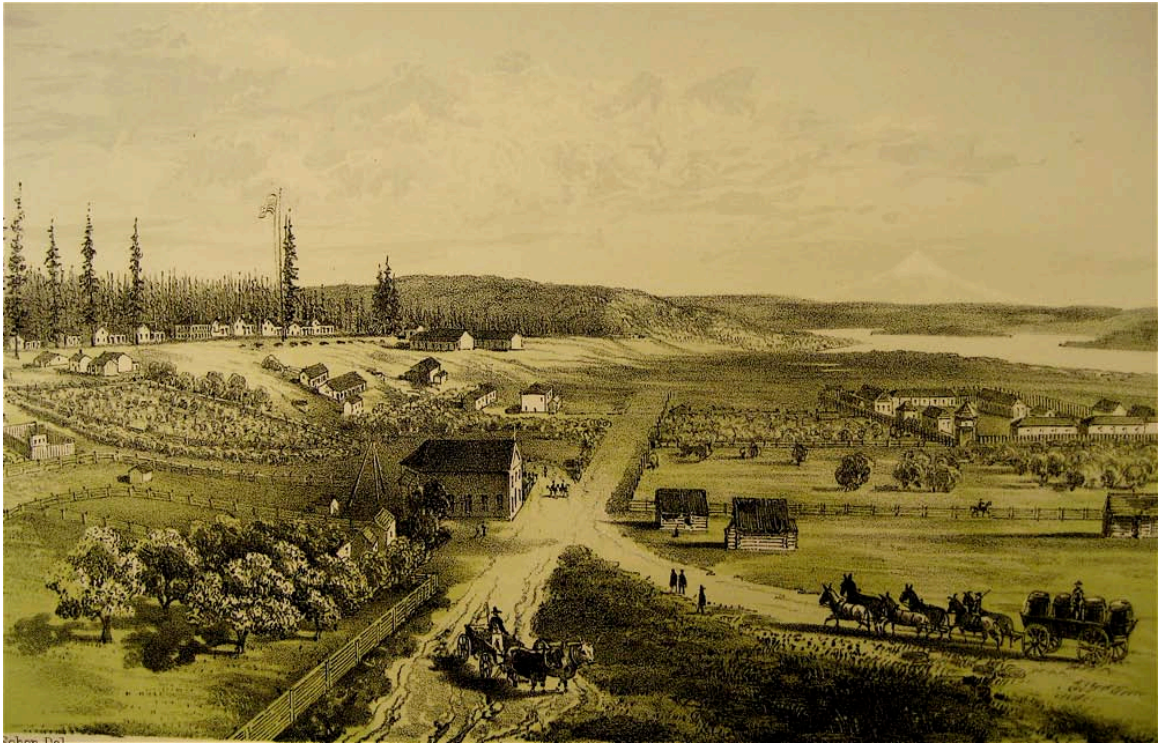
**Figure 2.9**



**Cascades, Columbia River. By John Mix Stanley. 1853. Lithograph based on sketch.**

Source: *Reports of Explorations and Surveys, to Ascertain the Most Practicable and Economical Route for a Railroad from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean: Made under the direction of the secretary of war, in 1853-6* (Washington: Beverley Tucker, printer, 1855-60), Volume XII, William L. Clements Library, The University of Michigan.

**Figure 2.10**



**Fort Vancouver. By John Mix Stanley. 1853. Lithograph based on sketch.**

Source: *Reports of Explorations and Surveys, to Ascertain the Most Practicable and Economical Route for a Railroad from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean: Made under the direction of the secretary of war, in 1853-6* (Washington: Beverley Tucker, printer, 1855-60), Volume XII, William L. Clements Library, The University of Michigan.

**Figure 2.11**



**Last of Their Race. By John Mix Stanley. 1857.**

**Figure 2.12**



**Detail of Osage Scalp Dance. By John Mix Stanley. 1845.**

**Figure 2.13**



**John Mix Stanley painted this romantic scene of the Columbia Gorge and Mt. Hood in 1871.**

Source: University of Michigan Museum of Art, as printed in Chuck Williams, *Bridge of the Gods, Mountains of Fire: A Return to the Columbia Gorge* (New York: Friends of the Earth, 1980).

## Chapter 3

### **Building a Scenic River: Nature and History on the Columbia River Highway, 1913-1920**

On one early morning in February of 1913, a crowd of well-dressed men gathered at the office of the Home Telegraph Company in downtown Portland, Oregon. Invited by a wealthy railroad entrepreneur named Samuel Hill, those who braved the rain that day were treated to an all-expenses paid train trip from Portland to Maryhill, Washington—a small “planned” community located just over the Cascade Mountains. Maryhill was only seventy miles from Portland, but was perched precariously on an arid hillside, one desolate of trees but full of rocks and sage. On the easternmost end of the Columbia River Gorge, Maryhill felt like it was miles from nowhere. Despite an earnest effort by Sam Hill, the town’s founder and foremost advocate, Maryhill was not much to look at. In Portland that day, the itinerary called for this fairly large-sized group to depart the city and travel through the scenic Columbia River Gorge by train. After disembarking on the banks of the Columbia, they would cross the river by ferry, before making their way to Sam Hill’s newly completed estate—a sprawling, castle-like structure that shared its name with Hill’s nascent town. But on this day, the trip was no ordinary sightseeing tour, and the men who joined Sam Hill that day were not ordinary Portlanders.

Traveling by train that day were the political elite of Oregon—a group that included wealthy lumber-barons and newspaper editors, Oregon’s governor, and every



member of the Oregon legislature. Sam Hill spared no expense in entertaining his powerful guests. Care was taken so that every passenger traveled in comfort—dining on gourmet food and drink prepared in a dining car by a famous chef. In total, more than eighty men joined Hill’s foray into the hills overlooking the Columbia. By the time they reached Maryhill the group was ready to view that which they had traveled so far to see.

Roads! A series of paved roads, in fact, built to demonstrate how a newly developed pavement system might suit Oregon’s often muddy and rutted roadways. As the group disembarked on the Washington side of the Columbia, they boarded Hill’s automobiles and began their journey up the river’s banks. It was Sam Hill himself, with the help of an experienced road construction engineer named Samuel Lancaster, who had planned and built the paved road upon which they now traveled. Made with seven different mixtures of “bituminous macadam,” these paths were experimental, designed to find a formula that might best stand up to the wear and tear of Pacific Northwest weather. While macadam roads had been used in other parts of the country, the technology was still relatively new, and the roads that Hill built were the first of their kind in the region. In all, the “Maryhill Loops,” as they came to be called, were ten miles long and built wide, with a gentle grade.<sup>1</sup> (figure 3.1)

The auto caravan arrived at his estate, and Hill settled the group down to business. The real purpose for undertaking such an expensive junket to the east side of the mountains? A proposal for a highway. But not just any highway, Sam Hill hoped to build “The Columbia Highway,” a road that would wind along the banks of the Columbia River. This highway would be modern and comfortable—the first paved road in the

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<sup>1</sup> “An Asphalt Macadam Road at Maryhill, Washington,” *Good Roads*, November 4, 1911, 245-7.

region—and it would run right through an area that many believed utterly impractical for road construction. “The Columbia Highway,” which would later be named “The Columbia River Highway,” was planned to attract automobile tourists from all over the country to view the river’s scenic gorge. The highway would promote both tourism and commerce, Hill insisted, and it would connect Portland to a number of small communities on the other side of the Cascade Range.

In the 1910s, the building of a highway along steep cliffs made of loose rock next to oft-flooded waterways was no easy task. The geography of the Columbia River Gorge limited the number of routes where a route could reasonably be located. Most of the feasible parts of the narrow passageway had already been claimed and developed by railroads, thirty years earlier. Several seemingly unsurpassable barriers along the route had stymied previous attempts to build a road through the Gorge, and conflicts with the Union Pacific Railroad over the right-of-way had further limited where and how the project could be completed. Moreover, persuading elected leaders to back such risky and expensive plans presented an obstacle that many thought couldn’t be overcome.

But Samuel Hill was prepared to pull out all of the tricks. To make his pitch to the governor and legislature, Hill presented a series of “Stereoptican” slides—an early slide-show technology that projected hand-colored images with a large lantern. Featured in his presentation were views of the Columbia River Gorge, beautiful images of steep cliffs, far-off sunsets, and the flowing Columbia River, all taken by Hill and his associates as they surveyed sites for their proposed road. The personal charms of Sam Hill were on full display that day, and he demonstrated no shortage of enthusiasm for his proposal—enthusiasm that had been brewing since his interest in good roads began a

decade before. In addition, the use of what was, at the time, technologically advanced visual prompts seemed to impress his guests, as did the presence of noted road engineer Samuel Lancaster.

As the day wore to an end, and the governor and the legislators prepared to return to Portland, Sam Hill had reason to be optimistic. By all indications the lawmakers had been impressed with Hill's presentation, and they weren't shy in showing it. One celebratory account of the afternoon described the entire entourage singing "For He's A Jolly Good Fellow" as Hill's "eyes twinkled and his jolly face lit up with genuine happiness."<sup>2</sup> Several weeks after the stunt, Hill was the guest of honor at a banquet where some of Portland's most prominent businessmen toasted him from "a massive loving cup filled with champagne." After the party, C. S. Jackson, owner of the *Oregon Journal*, one of Portland's two daily newspapers, declared Hill was "more generous with his money than any man I ever knew who had earned it."<sup>3</sup> Sam Hill's generosity was soon rewarded. Not long after that, the state legislature voted to create the Oregon State Highway Commission, and Portland's Multnomah County created their own advisory board to investigate new roads and recommend improvements. Moreover, two of Hill's closest advisors, men he had personally selected for their expertise in highway construction, received important posts: Henry L. Bowlby was appointed as the first state highway engineer, and Samuel Lancaster became his assistant.<sup>4</sup> Also appointed to the

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<sup>2</sup> For information about the trip to Maryhill see C. E. Fisher, "A National Road-Builder," *Sunset Magazine*, September 1913, 542, M. Evers, "John Yeon and the Construction of the Columbia River Highway" (Ph.D. dissertation, San Diego State University, 1992), 38, John E. Tuhy, *The Prince of Castle Nowhere* (Portland, Timber Press, 1983), 140, and Ronald J. Fahl, "S.C. Lancaster and the Columbia River Highway: Engineer as Conservationist," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 74 (June 1973): 108-10, 135-6.

<sup>3</sup> Tuhy, 140.

<sup>4</sup> For accounts of the meeting where construction of the highway was approved, see Dwight A. Smith,

county advisory board was none other than Samuel Hill himself. As one of their first priorities, the board promptly recommended that funds be allocated towards the construction of the scenic highway.<sup>5</sup> Sam Hill's ostentatious junket had paid off.

Today, the "Historic Columbia River Highway" still winds its way through parts of the Columbia River Gorge, though much of the old road has been decommissioned or destroyed. In its place runs the four-lane Interstate 84, and the cars speeding by at seventy miles per hour hardly resemble those that made the journey back in 1913. Yet, the enthusiasm for scenic river vistas shown by Sam Hill, Samuel Lancaster, and a host of other Portlanders persisted through the years, and remains alive and well—now codified into federal law as part of the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Act of 1986. Built between 1913 and 1916, the Columbia River Highway was widely known as an engineering wonder—a winding, scenic road like no other in the country, one modeled on the world famous roads in Switzerland, and one eventually emulated by road engineers for highways in several National Parks, including Glacier, Rocky Mountain, and Yosemite. As the highway snaked along steep cliffs, climbed high on top of mountains, and traveled from waterfall to waterfall, it offered both panoramic views of the Columbia River from above and neck-craning views of the region's towering

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*Columbia River Highway Historic District: Nomination of the Old Columbia River Highway in the Columbia Gorge to the National Register of Historic Places* (Salem: Oregon Department of Transportation, 1984), 60, and Ralph Watson, *Casual and Factual Glimpses at the Beginning and Development of Oregon's Roads and Highways* (Salem: State Highway Commission, 1951), 22-23.

<sup>5</sup> Only a year or so earlier, Hill failed to get the Washington State Legislature to approve a road on the Washington side of the Columbia River Gorge—one that would have connected Washougal and Goldendale, WA. When Washington's Governor, Marion Hay, failed to approve expenditures for the highway (and withdrew a group of state prisoners that he had previously authorized to labor on the road) Hill even went as far as to organize a coalition of newspaper editors and railroad officials to actively campaign against the incumbent. When Hay was beaten by Ernest Lister, Hill's plans were thwarted again when Lister discovered that the highway was costing nearly \$30,000 per mile, and refused to approve the expenditure. For more information on why Hill was unsuccessful in Washington, see John Bergman, "Progressive on the Right: Marion E. Hay, Governor of Washington 1909-1913" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Washington State University, 1967), 52-59.

Douglas-firs from below. Designed exclusively for automobiles, the road was the first paved highway in the region, and the first easily navigable overland road through the Columbia's steep river gorge. Built with funds from the state of Oregon and Portland's Multnomah County, the highway attracted automobile tourists from all over the world. Its nineteen bridges and four tunnels impressed nearly all who traveled to see it, and it drew national coverage in popular newspapers and magazines such as *Sunset*, *Scientific American*, and the *New York Times*, as well as trade publications including, *Good Roads*, *Engineering News*, *American Forestry*, and *Contracting*.<sup>6</sup> Samuel Lancaster, the road's primary architect, designed the highway to be "one with the landscape" and he laid out its route with a number of scenic points in mind.<sup>7</sup> More than just connecting the dots, the highway's primary purpose was to highlight beautiful landscapes around it, framing the Columbia River in a way that emphasized its romantic qualities. (figures 3.2, 3.3, 3.4)

The planning and construction of the Columbia River Highway was an important turning point in the history of the river. While previously, the river's great vistas were accessible to only those who traveled by water, the highway allowed for more and diverse types of visitors, and these visitors began to see the landscape from different vantage points—from high above the river, from deep within its canyons, and

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<sup>6</sup> For a sampling of national press coverage see Henry L. Bowlby, "The Columbia Highway in Oregon" *Engineering News* (1915): 62-64, Walter Prichard Eaton, "Through Oregon on High" *New York Times*, September 4, 1921, 31, Randal R. Howard, "Through the Columbia River Gorge by Auto," *Sunset Magazine*, August 1915, 303-6, Joe D. Thomison, "The Columbia River Road," *Sunset Magazine*, September 4, 1921, George C. Warren, "The Columbia River Highway," *Contracting*, May 1916, 1-43, 86-8, "A Beautiful Link in Our Highway System," *Scientific American* 114 (1916): 1, "The Columbia River Highway: A State Road that is a Model of Artistic Engineering," in *Scientific American Supplement*, July 1, 1916, "The Columbia Highway in Oregon," *American Forestry* 22 (1916): 12-19, "The Columbia River Highway in Oregon," *Good Roads*, January 1, 1916, 3-8.

<sup>7</sup> Lancaster's desire for the highway to be "part of nature" is evidenced in virtually every article covering the highway, as well as in his own self-published book about the road, Samuel C. Lancaster, *The Columbia, America's Great Highway through the Cascade Mountains to the Sea* (Portland: Samuel Lancaster, 1916).

importantly, from the constructed artifice of a roadway. This new roadway promoted a highly structured way of seeing—offering proscribed “viewpoints,” spaces where visitors could watch the sunset, ponder the beauty of old-growth forests, or gaze down upon the Columbia’s fierce rapids. Visitors to the Columbia River Gorge viewed these landscapes at specifically designated spots, each of which produced a cultural narrative about the value of having such an experience. As visitors gazed through their windshields, the Gorge’s great waterfalls—previously only glimpsed in passing (or hidden altogether)—became points of interest, destinations along a specific route, attractions that could be named, photographed, and then marketed. In this way the Columbia River Highway became *culturally* instructive, suggesting “what to see and how to see it.”<sup>8</sup>

In this chapter I explore how people came to understand the meaning of a river by driving down a highway. To begin I turn first to the road’s origins, and I focus on how ideas about nature and technology influenced the meanings that people gave to it. Here both the highway and automobile were useful in juxtaposition, as markers of the primitive and the modern that quickly and easily revealed how “civilization” was different from a timeless, natural world. This definition of nature allowed middle-class Portlanders to see the river as a therapeutic natural space, a pattern already established but not yet dominant in the early 1900s. I then focus on how those meanings were shaped by the experience of traveling over the highway, moving through the Columbia’s physical landscapes in a different way, for a different purpose. As the highway shortened the physical distance between the city and the country, highway boosters shortened the cultural distance, re-scripting how most middle-class urbanites envisioned their

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<sup>8</sup> This phrase is borrowed from Marguerite Shaffer, *See America First: Tourism and National Identity, 1880-1940* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 4.

relationship to the surrounding hinterlands. The less-defined spaces, soon gave way to specific places—places that were created by new people moving through the new roadway. I then ask, how did the creation of a tourist infrastructure influence the types of stories told about the river? And what were the consequences of these stories, for the people who lived nearby, and for the river itself?

Just as the highway expanded the region’s transportation infrastructure, it also laid the foundation for a consolidation within the river’s ideological infrastructure. As the road climbed steep cliffs and traversed the banks of the Columbia, its narrow ribbon of rock moved more and more people into the river’s cultural orbit, and the physical transformation of the Gorge’s landscape altered the human geography of the river. In organizing the way that humans viewed the Columbia, the highway didn’t create a river, and it didn’t create a river full of beautiful views, but it did, in a way, create the object widely known as “a scenic river.” As an emerging tourist industry created a market for visiting natural places, nature (and the experience of nature) became yet another commodity to be marketed in a mass-consumer society. The emergence of the highway as a tourist attraction quickly tapped into (and then significantly expanded) the market for Columbia River tourist memorabilia: postcards, guidebooks, and roadside souvenirs. This proliferation of visual images put a lot of focus on the act of seeing. But just as important as seeing the landscape was the experience of moving through it.

### **Nature in the Northwest: The Gorge Before the Highway**

During the years when Albert Bierstadt and John Mix Stanley traveled on the Columbia, most who traveled through the Columbia River Gorge did so by water—first by small boat and later by steamship. In 1850, only one steamboat operated on the lower

Columbia River, but by 1853, that number had increased to fourteen.<sup>9</sup> Despite the influx of boats and people, transportation on the river remained an onerous (and often dangerous) endeavor through the 1850s. At that time several entrepreneurial residents completed rail portages around the Columbia's most problematic natural barriers—the two major rapids that blocked its path through the mountains, at Celilo and the Cascades. Rail portages around these falls improved transportation on the river considerably, made river travel on the Columbia a more palatable investment, but mostly hinted that an overland route through the Gorge was highly desirable. By 1862 the Oregon Steam Navigation Company realized the profit to be had at the portages and consolidated control over both routes. Soon after that residents started complaining about exorbitant costs and monopolistic practices.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, violent clashes between Indians and invading settlers escalated to the point that the government saw need for an alternative to the water route. From 1872 to 1876 the government built the first wagon road to run through the Gorge. Winding its way from the Sandy River to The Dalles, the road traversed mountainous and often muddy terrain. Impractically steep in good weather conditions, this road was a nightmare when it rained—which was all the time. Few complained when the Oregon Railway and Navigation Company destroyed parts of the road when building a continuous railroad route through the corridor in 1882.<sup>11</sup> By the turn of the century there were railroad routes on both sides of the river, as the Columbia Gorge began to gain fame for its beauty—even as it remained the primary artery by

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<sup>9</sup> This figure comes from the *Oregonian*, October 8, 1853. See also William Robbins, *Landscapes of Promise: The Oregon Story, 1800-1940* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 102.

<sup>10</sup> Dorothy O. Johansen and Charles M. Gates, *Empire of the Columbia: A History of the Pacific Northwest* (2d ed., 1967), 279-83, Donald Meinig, *The Great Columbia Plain: A Historical Geography, 1805-1910* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968), 217-19, 270-272, and Robbins, *Landscapes of Promise*, 111, 118-20.

<sup>11</sup> Smith, 55-56, and Fahl, 107-8.



which people and goods moved east and west through the region.

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, emigrants endlessly praised the beauty of the world around them. Overlooking the disadvantages of a climate either overly wet or overly dry, new arrivals to the Pacific Northwest boasted of its unrivaled natural beauty. While conceptually, the word “nature” carried with it a variety of meanings, in practice the first Euro-Americans to try and permanently *reside* in the Northwest cast the natural environment of the Pacific Northwest in a familiar role—a foe to be vanquished. Throughout the region there was wide agreement that transforming the natural world would bring prosperity and security to those who cultivated it.<sup>12</sup>

Environmental historian Robert Bunting argued that this was rooted in an ideology that trumpeted both civic virtue and independence. Bunting explained how Oregon’s image in the popular imagination was Edenic, and its settlers came with the expectations of creating a society that would avoid the mistakes of the past. To instill republican values, society required a stable economic order based on a “familial republican sociopolitical

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<sup>12</sup> The ideology associated with “improving” the land connected the development of natural resources to the health of the nation. A desire for “republican virtue” resulted in a broad consensus around the exploitation of nature. As the ideology of republicanism gave way to the hegemonic logic of the market, a ‘culture of capitalism’ emerged that united both urban and rural citizens of the region. Most agreed that the proper use of nature was productive, and hence changing understandings of nature were necessarily mediated through these constraints. Writing in 1917, amateur historian Harvey Scott remarked on the persistence of this “pioneer spirit:” “Habits planted at the beginning still rule the land. A thousand influences have intruded themselves, but they have bent to the conditions which existed before them...The Oregon of today is the true child of the earlier Oregon, with the family likeness strong, with the family traits predominating... This is the pioneer’s land and his spirit rules it.” In the Pacific Northwest, *who* benefited from the bounty of nature was the important question, and the region’s longstanding reverence for independence and republican virtue meant that early conservationists would have to frame their arguments with this form of ‘pioneer ideology’ in mind. See Robert Bunting, *The Pacific Raincoast: Environment and Culture in an American Eden, 1778-1900* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 96, quotation from Harvey W. Scott, “The Pioneer Character of Oregon Progress,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 18 (December 1917): 261-2, as quoted in Bunting, 102.

structure that welcomed industrious producers but excluded speculators.”<sup>13</sup> Settlers shared an understanding of nature that coincided with their basic economic needs.<sup>14</sup> During the early years of settlement in the Pacific Northwest, virtue resided in improving the land—an action also necessary for economic survival. Only later, when residents became more comfortable, did their surroundings become romantic and pristine.

It was in this context that emigrants told themselves a story in which real acts of conquest and dispossession were seen as simple improvements to the nature of the region. In 1852, one local newspaper editor reminded his community that he and his neighbors’ hands were “not tarnished with blood, or stained by conquest” and that the community’s “greatest conquests and noblest victories have been achieved with the ax and the plow. With these we have changed the forest into fruitful fields—with these we have made happy homes for freemen, and extended the blessings of civilization across a continent.” “Freedom,” he concluded, “stimulates enterprise and discovery. These have pushed our people westward...checked only by the Pacific’s wave.”<sup>15</sup> Not only was the natural world central to the ideology of manifest destiny, it was also key to understandings of a regional self. Upon his return to New York, John Ball, one of the earliest Euro-American settlers to arrive in the Portland area in 1832, lectured that it was the “character of the country, that usually gives character to its inhabitants...” Ball continued, “The Britons are Meritiure, the Swiss agricultural—where the climate is warm and means of subsistence easy indolent—Our varied climate Ocean and extended rivers give to us that

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<sup>13</sup> Bunting, 93. See also William L. Lang, “An Eden of Expectations: Oregon Settlers and the Environment They Created,” *Oregon Humanities* (Winter 1992): 25-29.

<sup>14</sup> In effect, these were nutritional needs.

<sup>15</sup> *Columbian*, September 11, 1852, p. 4, sec. 3.

energy & enterprise of which we are so vain.”<sup>16</sup> Another Oregon booster wrote, “For it is doubtless...the character of a country...usually gives character to its inhabitants...”<sup>17</sup> For boastful residents of the region, American character was distinct from European character precisely because of its geographical riches, and the Pacific Northwest was its foremost example of this environmentally determined superiority.

As ideas about nature were malleable enough to help justify nationalism and conquest, so to they could help define regional identity.<sup>18</sup> Even the earliest exploration accounts of the area emphasized both romantic beauty and the area’s suitability for farming, which is not surprising given the celebratory nature of early reports about the Oregon Territories. Historian William Lang explained how many of the early settlers came to the Northwest with preconceived notions about what they might find. He wrote that a collective image of pastoral beauty (and wealth) “...gestated for nearly two decades before the throng of migrants crowded the trail during the 1840s and 1850s. It had begun in the 1820s with John Floyd’s call for colonization, then picked up momentum in the 1830s with ballyhooing reports on Oregon in the popular press and the hyperbolic justifying of an imperial vision of the West. By the 1840s the name Oregon had become a shorthand for an enormous and alluring region that begged for occupation.”<sup>19</sup> One common practice was to boast of the local natural resources by comparing them with the “cultured” or “ancient” attractions of Europe. As early as the 1850s one newspaper wrote, “...we have larger ranges, greater plains and valleys, and far

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<sup>16</sup> John Ball, “Oregon Trip—Troy Lectures, Second Lecture Given, 1835,” Typescript, John Ball Papers, Oregon Historical Society, Portland, Mss 195, as quoted in Bunting, 39, 44.

<sup>17</sup> Quotation attributed to “an early proponent of Oregon settlement” in Lang, “An Eden of Expectations,” 29.

<sup>18</sup> This discussions of identity and environment in the early settlement period is from Lang, “An Eden of Expectations,” Bunting, *The Pacific Raincoast*, and William Robbins, *Landscapes of Promise*.

<sup>19</sup> Lang, “An Eden of Expectations,” 25-29.

mightier rivers than the land of the Swis, or than all Europe itself. The enormous forests which clothe the rugged flanks of our great range would cover the whole country of William Tell, and spread over a good part of the fair land of France besides. The Columbia is larger than any European River.”<sup>20</sup> An exceptional view of the region’s nature led to boastful proclamations of “simple scenes” that “purify the mind and elevate the soul...”<sup>21</sup>

But by the middle of the nineteenth century, most newly arriving emigrants went to already-established cities and towns, and they too envisioned the Northwest’s natural spaces in similar ways—appreciating its aesthetic attributes while simultaneously working to “improve” the land so that it could be put to productive uses.<sup>22</sup> In addition, Euro-American emigrants exhibited the very same exceptional confluences of “nature” with “nation” that typified the national expansion in the nineteenth century. For invading Euro-Americans, both national expansion and dominance over the natural world were seen as divine right—a maxim that suggested the landscape needed to be tamed and subdued, its abundance extracted, to create the nation as a vision of the city upon the hill.<sup>23</sup> Viewing themselves as a chosen people and the United States as a chosen nation, early settlers understood nature to be the medium through which God’s glory could be revealed. Visions of sublime, godly waterfalls were especially common in the Columbia River Gorge.

By the mid 1880s the Union Pacific Railroad began promoted the Gorge as a

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<sup>20</sup> *Washington Standard*, January 8, 1888, p. 1, c. 5, as quoted in Bunting, 42-3.

<sup>21</sup> *West Shore* 3 (May 1878), 129, c.1, as quoted in Bunting, 42.

<sup>22</sup> Bunting, 93.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 36.

scenic destination.<sup>24</sup> To tap the appeal of the river scenery, steamboat entrepreneurs planned cruises from Portland, with trips ranging from one day to two, depending on how far upriver visitors wanted to travel. Part of the larger “tourist circuit” that operated throughout the West, and steamboat rides on the Columbia became popular highlights of these trips.<sup>25</sup> Just as Bierstadt and Ludlow were struck by the experience thirty years before, historian Francis Fuller Victor wrote glowingly in her trip up the Columbia in her history of the region: “We have enjoyed river, forest, mountains, and snowpeaks, with little intervals of human interest, all along; and enjoyed these in absolute comfort, for the steamboat service on the Columbia is excellent...” She continued, “Sitting out upon the steamer’s deck, of a summer morning, we are not much troubled with visions of storms: the scene is as peaceful as it is magnificent. Steaming ahead, straight into the heart of the mountains, where they rise to a height of four thousand feet, each moment affords a fresh delight to the wondering senses. The panorama of grandeur and beauty seems endless.”<sup>26</sup> Victor’s appreciation of the landscape was as romantic as Bierstadt and Ludlow’s had been, decades before. By the mid-1890s the area was popular enough that the local president of the Mazamas, a mountaineering group, complained that the Gorge unjustly overshadowed other equally beautiful places in the region, “Many tourists have gazed on the grandeur and beauty of the scenery of the Columbia river,” he wrote, “...and [they]

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<sup>24</sup> For an example see *Wealth and Resources of Oregon and Washington, The Pacific Northwest, A Complete Guide over the Local Lines of the Union Pacific Railway* (Portland: Passenger Department of the Oregon Railway and Navigation Company, 1889).

<sup>25</sup> Steamboat tourism on the Columbia was part of the larger development of a middle-class tourist industry, one that was fully formed by the end of the nineteenth century. As early as the 1860s, a bevy of tourism promoters, guidebook writers, and railroad companies began promoting the scenery of the U.S. West. See John F. Sears, *Sacred Places: American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

<sup>26</sup> Francis Fuller Victor, *Atlantis Arisen, or Talks of a Tourist about Oregon and Washington* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1891), 54-55.

have marveled at the scene; its praises have been sung by poets and its beauties painted by artists; yet within the limits of Oregon I have seen twenty miles of unbroken scenery, the poorest portion of which is equal to the best of the Columbia River.”<sup>27</sup> The Columbia River Gorge was growing in fame and importance, but the ability to appreciate it was limited to the few with time and money to pursue such endeavors. These early tourist practices were precursors of more widespread patterns to come, when appreciations of nature became essential to how most envisioned the river and the region.

The increase of tourism in the Gorge, like the increase of tourism nationally, was tied to broad social and economic changes that occurred throughout the nineteenth century. As more middle-class Americans gained disposable income, they spent it on goods and services less essential to everyday life. The emergence of a commercial mass media coupled with the maturation of the advertising industry created the foundations for a nascent mass-consumer culture, and advances in production allowed entrepreneurs to meet the growing demand for material goods. When middle-class Americans began to see *things* in more material and possessive ways, they did the same with *experiences*. The commodification of nature-experience fit well within the logic of tourism; the search for natural experiences encouraged a market for scenic places, and this increasingly meant going to see these places by train or automobile.<sup>28</sup> As consumerism prompted a shift away from the values of work, thrift, and delayed gratification, Americans found solace in the sanctioned consumption of the outdoors, where they could pursue

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<sup>27</sup> William Gladstone Steel, *Mazama* 1 (1896): 21-22, as quoted in Thomas R. Cox, *The Park Builders: A History of State Parks in the Pacific Northwest* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988), n. 180.

<sup>28</sup> Yet nature was also sought as refuge from commodity culture, an irony considering how many people were applying a similar practice to nature-experiences. In nineteenth-century contexts, both “nature” and “nature-experience” were commodities.

relaxation, therapeutic recreation, and moral regeneration.<sup>29</sup>

As more and more Americans began to travel frequently, they also began to travel greater distances. Railroad tourism, once limited to the elite because of its prohibitive costs, became increasingly available to the middle classes, and soon Americans adopted automobiles, a new form of recreational travel that increased competition and lowered the cost of travel. From 1900 to 1906 the number of automobiles in the United States went from 8,000 to 100,000, and almost overnight a new form of tourism was born.<sup>30</sup> Yet despite the rapid increase in automobile ownership, most middle-class Americans could not afford cars until after 1908, when Henry Ford's assembly line changed the mode of production. When Ford introduced the Model T, substantial numbers of people took to the roads—many of which were willing to become tourists.

As automobile tourism gained in popularity, a number of groups formed to promote auto travel to Western U. S. landscapes. In 1906, a national campaign called “See America First” sought to broaden the appeal of Western tourism by encouraging

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<sup>29</sup> Paul Sutter, *Driven Wild: How the Fight Against Automobiles Launched the Modern Wilderness Movement*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), 21, 27. The virtues of nature were also called upon to address concerns about changing notions of masculinity. Throughout the nineteenth century, middle-class notions of “manliness” required men to work hard and become economically independent. But as small-scale capitalism increasingly gave way to mass-consumer culture, the type of work available to most middle class men changed. As a result, men increasingly looked to leisure pursuits in crafting their gendered identities. As consumer culture made earlier ideologies of manhood less plausible, many turned to nature as a way to protect normative gender relations. Wild, open, primitive nature offered a way to protect one's masculinity threatened by a new and different understanding of one's self. Teddy Roosevelt's notion of “a strenuous life” merged anxieties about masculinity, race, and national expansion in a discourse that warned of the dangers of “over-civilization.” He told *Harper's Weekly* in 1893, “In a perfectly peaceful and commercial civilizations such as ours there is always a danger of laying too little stress upon the more virile virtues—upon the virtues which go to make up a race of statesmen and soldiers, of pioneers and explorers... These are the very qualities which are fostered by vigorous, manly out-of-door sports, such as mountaineering, big-game hunting, riding, shooting, rowing, football, and kindred games.” Looking to the natural world to alleviate these types of concerns was a central appeal of visiting natural places. Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 12-13, Theodore Roosevelt, “Value of an Athletic Training,” *Harper's Weekly* 37 (December 23, 1893): 1236.

<sup>30</sup> Sutter, 24.

wealthy Americans to forego a European sojourn in favor of a national driving tour of America's great scenic places. Traveling the West was an activity rife with national meaning, and often it was presented in explicitly symbolic terms. Marguerite Shaffer, in her book *See America First: Tourism and National Identity, 1880-1940*, tracked how proponents of a national driving tour often returned to an overarching theme of the value of Western scenery. Western landscapes connected ideas about natural abundance to the promise and potential of the nation.<sup>31</sup> Boosters saw the West as brimming with marketable potential, as "a treasure house filled to overflowing with the rarest gems of towering snow-capped mountains; noble rivers, bearing in their broad bosoms the commerce of a nation; blue lakes smiling in the face of unclouded skies, gorgeous sunsets, whose ravishing beauty fills the soul with reverential awe, while over all and around all there is an atmosphere so pure that simply breathing it brings life to the lifeless, hope to the hopeless, and happiness to the miserable."<sup>32</sup> Such over-the-top booster rhetoric contrasted the West with the East in absolute and oppositional terms. As the East was industrial, urban, modern, and possibly corrupt (certainly not worth seeing!), the West was virtuous, natural, free, and therapeutic. It was also ready to be visually and physically experienced, for which tourists would pay. In this way, Shaffer argues, entrepreneurs could sell an idea that promised the best of both worlds, "the virtues of nature combined with the benefits of commerce."<sup>33</sup>

Despite the national trends, in the first decade of the twentieth century there were

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<sup>31</sup> Marguerite Shaffer, *See America First*, 38.

<sup>32</sup> Fisher Harris, "Europe v. America," *Western Monthly* (December 1908): 15, as quoted in Shaffer, 38.

<sup>33</sup> Shaffer, 39. On efforts promoting scenic automobile tourism see also Warren James Belasco, *Americans on the Road: From Autocamp to Motel, 1910-1945* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1979), David Louter, *Windshield Wilderness: Cars, Roads, and Nature in Washington's National Parks* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), and Paul Sutter, *Driven Wild*.



relatively few automobiles in Portland, likely because there were even fewer roads to accommodate them. By 1915 there were 12,000 automobiles in the state of Oregon, but the overall road conditions remained primitive at best, and roads in rural areas of Oregon were really no more than “dilapidated wagon paths.”<sup>34</sup> Filled with ruts in the summer, and clogged with mud in the winter, almost none of these roads were designed with automobile travel in mind. Roads in urban areas were only slightly more suitable, having sufficient width and a surface more sufficient to recommend automobile use—but still, really only functioning in good weather. Often buried in snow or mud, the Pacific Northwest climate generally limited automobile travel to the drier months, and even then automobile owners could usually only operate their vehicles at slow speeds.<sup>35</sup> Frequent bridge washouts were an additional problem to be overcome.<sup>36</sup> C. Lester Horn, who worked on the construction of the Columbia River Highway, recalled the difficulties of automobile travel in Portland during the time period:

“Though the automobile had become a common sight on the streets of the cities, highways beyond the city limits were limited and poor. From Portland, for instance, one could travel on paved highways hardly twenty-five miles in any direction; dirt roads suitable for auto use did not connect those cities with other important areas; during much of the year the motorist had to go well provided with towing equipment, and frequently call farmers from their fields or homes (sometimes a long distance from the spot in the forest where his car was mired).”<sup>37</sup>

Horn’s description of automobile travel hints at a number of the ways automobiles were

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<sup>34</sup> Smith, 56.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Similar problems frustrated automobile enthusiasts around the country, and in response some formed interest groups to advocate for the creation of an automobile-friendly infrastructure. The Good Roads movement came relatively later to Oregon than it did to other parts of the country, but supporters adopted a number of arguments in their efforts to create the Columbia River Highway. See Hugh Myron Hoyt, “The Good Roads Movement in Oregon, 1900-1920” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Oregon, 1966).

<sup>37</sup> C. Lester Horn, “Oregon’s Columbia River Highway,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 74 (June 1973): 255.

different in this early context. Spatially, automobiles did not serve to connect things—at least not on the geographic scale one might expect. Automobiles operated in smaller geographies, in relatively, tiny, self-contained islands called cities, where they could drive around in small areas. It was a rare automobile owner that broke out of these confined geographies, mostly because it took so much work to do so. Temporally, early automobiles were seasonal objects (especially in the Northwest!), and despite the claims of the automobile industry (go anywhere, anytime!), the situation in Oregon was constrained by the practicalities of traveling through the region’s physical environment.

It was within this thoroughly permeating understanding of the region’s “exceptional nature” that boosters of the Columbia River Highway began to advocate for creating a scenic wonder. When Sam Hill brought his crew of politicians and opinion-makers to view his macadam roads, they understood all these things: the national quality of “nature’s nation,” which had taken on historic shape in the Columbia River Gorge, the regional identity that had long been part of Pacific Northwesterners’ sense of themselves, the modern importance of scenic tourism as both restorative experience and valuable commodity, and the centrality of the river to the experience of purifying scenic nature. The Columbia River Highway shared these qualities with many similar roads across the nation, of course. But it was built a decade before most of these other scenic highways, at a time when the National Park Service was only beginning to invest in paved roads.<sup>38</sup> Unlike some of these other famous roads, the Columbia River Highway was built with money raised locally, with a combination of state and county funds and an ethos of

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<sup>38</sup> By the early 1920s, increasingly mobile automobile tourists traveled to a number of scenic highways including the “Going to the Sun Highway” in Glacier National Park, “Trail Ridge Road” in Rocky Mountain National Park, and the “All Year Highway” in Yosemite.

entrepreneurialism. This fundraising proved controversial, as convincing the public that such a route was necessary was no easy task.

### **Making Meanings for a Highway**

The idea to build a road had trickled around the region at the turn of the century, but the momentum that culminated in its construction originated with one man—the ubiquitous Sam Hill. An accomplished if idiosyncratic man, Sam Hill first gained fame as a Harvard-educated attorney who worked for James J. Hill’s railroad interests, eventually marrying into the elder Hill’s family in 1888. Even before his Northern Pacific Railroad came to the Pacific Northwest, Sam Hill was interested in the region, and he moved his family to Seattle in 1902. Prone to undertaking ambitious projects, Hill was known at the time for his business acumen, his skill in promotion, and his interest in public works. Described as charismatic and personable, Hill impressed others as hard working and humble, and that is how he is portrayed in the newspaper stories of the era.<sup>39</sup> Journalist Fred Lockley, the author of many of the articles on the Columbia River Highway (as well as an early history of the Columbia River) and a friend and admirer of Sam Hill, described him as follows:

“If you saw him in his broad-brimmed gray hat with a red bandanna around his neck, wearing his well-worn corduroys, stopping his auto to shovel a sharp-cornered rock out of the road, you would think he was a road supervisor. He works on the roads as if he were on salary and afraid he would lose his job if he didn’t put in full-time at hard work. I have ridden a good many thousand miles with him over the highways, over mountain trails and through the sagebrush and desert and he is always the same—start at from 4:00 to 5:00 a.m., stop somewhere

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<sup>39</sup> Despite this reputation for humility, Sam Hill was not beyond the occasional boast; once stating, “Did you ever stop to think how large a debt of gratitude Henry Ford and John D. Rockefeller owe me? I have had a great deal to do with making them two of the richest men in the United States. Unless we had good roads, Henry Ford wouldn’t have been able to sell millions of his cars. Without Henry Ford’s cars, John D. Rockefeller wouldn’t sell quite so much gasoline.” Tuhy, 129.

for breakfast at about 7:00 o'clock, eat some doughnuts and raisins for lunch, stop for supper, and travel a couple of hours after supper. If he doesn't work or travel sixteen hours a day, he feels he has wasted the day."<sup>40</sup>

Active in the community and in a number of fraternal organizations, Hill was a founding member of the Washington State Good Roads Association.<sup>41</sup>

A longtime advocate for the construction of better roads, Hill once remarked, "Good roads are more than my hobby; they are my religion."<sup>42</sup> Drawn to roads because of his fascination with automobiles and his expertise in transportation networks, Hill also believed that improvements in the region's infrastructure were essential to helping lower transportation costs for rural farmers. Professing an antipathy towards urban life, and all its perceived vices, Hill saw the construction of good roads as a way to slow migration to urban areas and shifting social relations. Hill wrote, "I believe in man on the land. We cannot afford to have our producers leave the land and come to the city and become parasites. We want our girls to stay on the farm and become mothers of a virile race of men and not just go to the city and become manicurists, stenographers, and variety actresses. We want our boys to stay on the farm and not succumb to the lure of the Great White Way or become chauffeurs and clerks...we cannot keep the ambitious boy or girl on the farm unless we make life attractive and comfortable."<sup>43</sup> In this way Hill's support of roads corresponded with other widely held anxieties of the era, in particular changing gender roles and racial mixing—which were frequently (and correctly) figured in terms

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<sup>40</sup> Fred Lockley, as quoted in Tuhy, 144.

<sup>41</sup> For information on Samuel Hill's life and career in the Pacific Northwest, see Thelma Kimmel, *Who the Sam Hill Was Sam Hill?* (The Dalles, OR: Optimist Printers, 1972), Lois Davis Plotts, *Maryhill, Sam Hill and Me* (Camas, WA: Post Publications, 1979), and Tuhy. For information on his career promoting good roads see *Brief History of the Washington State Good Roads Association* (Seattle: Washington State Good Roads Association, 1939) and Paul Dorpat and Genevieve McCoy, *Building Washington: A History of Washington State Public Works* (Seattle: Tartu Publications, 1998), 63-88.

<sup>42</sup> Tuhy, 129.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

of the cities. His planned community at Maryhill was one such manifestation of this anxiety—an attempt to create an ideal rural settlement that would be insulated from the dangers of the city. Of course, there was an irony built into Hill’s desires. Better roads for markets also meant better roads for farm kids to escape upon, and the connectivity wrought by better transportation did more than alleviate rural isolation. As more people, goods, and information moved between the city and the country, comparisons between the two came to the forefront—something of a losing proposition for boring farm communities, at least in the minds of the young and mobile. While Maryhill itself never proved successful at attracting much of anybody, many of Hill’s projects did have lasting influence. Moreover, in proposing such projects, Hill wasn’t afraid of investing large sums of money in his own ideas, occasionally financing projects entirely himself (for example, he paid for his experimental roads at Maryhill, a road that led to The Dalles from Goldendale, Washington, as well as the ferry to cross the Columbia River).<sup>44</sup>

When Hill met Samuel Lancaster in 1906, he sensed an opportunity to secure an established road engineer who could help him further his favorite cause. Born in Magnolia, Mississippi in 1864, Samuel Lancaster had worked as railroad construction engineer until 1886, when he contracted typhoid and became paralyzed from the waist down. After a long eighteen-month recovery, in which he taught himself to walk again by using a crude wooden frame, Lancaster worked as a city engineer of Jackson, Tennessee. By 1904 he had overseen the implementation of a system of hard-surfaced “macadam” roads that brought him national recognition and an appointment as consulting engineer for the Bureau of Public Roads. It was in this capacity that Lancaster traveled to

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<sup>44</sup> Smith, 57.

Los Angeles, where in 1906 he met Samuel Hill. Hill asked Lancaster to spend six months assisting him in a roads program for Washington State, and arranged for his family to accompany him to Washington.<sup>45</sup>

After helping Seattle complete a series of scenic boulevards for the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition of 1909, Lancaster accepted Hill's offer to travel to Europe for the First International Road Congress, where they studied various highways and observed road building techniques. One particular highway along the Rhine River caused Hill to envision a similar highway through the Columbia River Gorge. On this trip Hill purportedly told Lancaster, "I want you to notice those walls closely, for some day we are going to have similar walls along the banks of the Columbia River. We will build a great highway so that the world can realize the magnificence and grandeur of the Columbia River Gorge."<sup>46</sup> Taken by the landscape of the Gorge, Hill and Lancaster turned to the State of Washington with his plan, and when that eventually proved unsuccessful, they appealed to Oregon.

In July of 1915 there were fewer than 8,000 cars in the Portland area, and around 12,000 in the entire state—a ratio of roughly one car to 18 residents.<sup>47</sup> Henry Ford's assembly line would soon make automobiles accessible to many more Americans, included working-class urbanites and rural farmers. By 1922, there would be 37,717 cars registered in Portland's Multnomah county alone, which amounted to a ratio of one car to every 6.3 persons, a ratio that decreased to 3.44 by 1928.<sup>48</sup> Despite this relatively rapid

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<sup>45</sup> Tuhy, 132-133 and Fahl, 105.

<sup>46</sup> Tuhy, 134.

<sup>47</sup> E. Kimbark MacColl, *The Growth of a City: Power and Politics in Portland, Oregon, 1915-1950* (Portland: Georgian Press, 1979), 26.

<sup>48</sup> Oregon State Highway Commission, *Fifth Biennial Report of the State highway commission of the State*

increase in car ownership, when Hill and Lancaster first set out to advocate for a paved highway, most citizens of Oregon and Washington did not share their enthusiasm. Early opposition to the plan centered on concerns about its cost. Many residents doubted that such a large sum of money should be spent on subsidizing automobile touring, which was largely seen as the province of wealthy elites.

At the time of the highway's construction, access to remote forests and scenic waterfalls was beyond the reach of most of the urban working-class in Portland, and this fact alone structured their impressions of nature-based tourism. Historian Lawrence Lipin, in his book *Workers and the Wild: Conservation, Consumerism, and Labor in Oregon, 1910-1930*, argues that working-class Portlanders were, at first, ambivalent about developing the region's scenic resources. While the early days of settlement and appropriation of Indian land was long over, in many parts of the West there remained large tracts yet to be developed. Instead of focusing on how that land should be used, labor leaders focused on who would benefit from its development. Most citizens associated conservation with elite members of society. Opposition to protecting nature was as much about challenging the moral authority of those who advocated for it, as it was about putting natural resources into production. This pattern of prioritizing production over conservation was found throughout the West, and often it forced conservationists to argue that many of these public lands had little or no "productive potential."<sup>49</sup>

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*of Oregon, 1921-22* (1923), 113; *Eighth Biennial Report of the State Highway Commission* (Salem: State Printing Department, 1929), 147.

<sup>49</sup> Lawrence M. Lipin, *Workers and the Wild: Conservation, Consumerism, and Labor in Oregon, 1910-1930* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 11, 39, 44-45. See also Lawrence M. Lipin, "Cast Aside the Automobile Enthusiast: Class Conflict, Tax Policy, and the Preservation of

Sam Hill's efforts to create a tourist economy contradicted with working-class ideas about production and the proper use of natural resources. Workers didn't oppose road construction as a general principle. In somewhat of a blunt fashion, local labor leader Eugene Smith stated that, "...every adult in Multnomah County, excepting imbeciles and pessimists, is a good road enthusiast."<sup>50</sup> For Smith, it was just a matter of where and how roads ought to be built, and whose interests the roads might serve. Instead of a scenic highway, labor organizations favored construction of roads that would "bring the producer, working in the soil, nearer to the producer working in the factory store, shop and mill."<sup>51</sup> Labor saw road construction as an important step by which they could increase production, and hence, employment and wealth.<sup>52</sup> A better option they thought, would be to keep natural resources in the public domain, to be developed and integrated into the economy, where the increased wages and employment could benefit all the people, not just wealthy road enthusiasts.<sup>53</sup> One labor paper pointed out that "very little of the land adjoining the highway can ever be tilled. It is a scenic road pure and simple and should the abutting land ever be cleared and tilled, the scenery would be spoiled and the object in building the road defeated."<sup>54</sup> In a similar vein, leaders of the Oregon Grange denounced the plan, ridiculing the "leisure class who wish to 'See America First' ...who are carried away with the idea of a pleasure road...these people are

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Nature in Progressive-Era Oregon," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 107 (Summer 2006): 176. Lipin's work serves as the basis for my discussion of working-class opposition to the highway, and I am indebted to him for pointing the way toward many of these primary sources.

<sup>50</sup> "Central Labor Council Is Good Roads Booster," *Portland Labor Press*, April 12, 1915, p. 1.

<sup>51</sup> Lipin, *Workers in the Wild*, 40.

<sup>52</sup> This "producerist" definition was hostile towards any public expenditure that might benefit the "idle rich." Lipin wrote, "This militant attack on the rich, which had its origins in urban inequality and bouts with high unemployment, was readily marshaled for the battle against elite advocates of refined tourism." Lipin, *Workers in the Wild*, 3.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>54</sup> "Wonderful Road, But," *Portland Labor Press*, May 3, 1915, p. 2.



willing to bond the present and the future; in other words, place a mortgage on the homes of all the people to gratify a desire for joy riding.”<sup>55</sup> Rural opponents framed the issue as one that benefited “joy riders” over farming interests. As early as 1912, A. I. Mason, an executive board member of the Oregon Grange, implored his counterparts to support roads that would primarily benefit farmers:

“...we feel confident that you do not want to mortgage yourselves and posterity in order to build Pacific highways and boulevards paralleling our railroads in order that a few pleasure seekers may enjoy themselves while we farmers are compelled to haul our produce over rough roads leading in to the market centers upon the various railroads of the state, and you should bear in mind that the cheapness of hauling our produce to market should cheapen it to the consumer.”<sup>56</sup>

Rural leaders dismissed Hill’s rhetoric about the economic benefits of the project, but in doing so they articulated an understanding of the Columbia that was linked to the natural world. By objecting to “joy riders” and the “leisure class” who wanted to spend public monies for their own pleasure, opponents imagined the Columbia River Highway as almost exclusively a scenic space, which carried the implication that the river itself was as an object for elite consumption. The highway was viewed as something that would not produce value for them. By dismissing the plan to build the highway as the whim of a “few pleasure seekers,” they coded the Columbia River Gorge as a scenic space and the act of looking at it as the purview of the elites. “The fight is between the farmer and the auto people,” one Grange official stated, “The former wants roads so they can get their produce to market, while the latter wants one road across the state so they can ride fast in

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<sup>55</sup> Patrons of Husbandry, *Proceedings of the Forty-First Annual Session of the Oregon State Grange* (Oregon City, Oregon, 1914), 21, as quoted in Lipin, 40.

<sup>56</sup> State of Oregon, *A Pamphlet Containing a Copy of All Measures...to Be Submitted to the Legal Voters of the State of Oregon* (Salem, 1912), 101; *Oregon Labor Press*, May 23, 1912, p. 2.

an automobile.”<sup>57</sup> By 1915 both the Grange and the Oregon State Federation of Labor supported the abolition of the Oregon Highway Commission that had “refused to aid any roads but the Pacific Highway and the Columbia River road.”<sup>58</sup> Later, when the initial funding to build the road expired and scenic highway boosters put a bond measure on the ballot to pave the road, The *Labor Press* denounced the measure as an attempt to have “men and women who are too poor to own an automobile” pay the costs.<sup>59</sup>

In response to this opposition, and in an effort to shape public opinion, Hill mobilized a coalition within Portland’s business community. While it was not unusual for business leaders to coalesce and organize around a local development project, the tenacity with which a small group of elite Portlanders pushed this particular endeavor is striking. Particularly notable was the support of millionaire lumber baron, Simon Benson, whose early donation of \$10,000 dollars helped revive interest in the highway when the initial proposal looked to be stalled.<sup>60</sup> Julius Meier, heir to the Meier and Frank department store and later governor of Oregon, helped gather the backing of other influential Portlanders, and served as president of the Columbia Highway Association. John Yeon, yet another millionaire businessman, acted as an unpaid “roadmaster,” applying his expertise as an experienced manager of logging camps to oversee the day-to-

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<sup>57</sup> Oregon State Federation of Labor, *Proceedings of the Ninth Convention* (The Dalles, Oregon, 1912), 13, as quoted in Lipin, 41.

<sup>58</sup> Patrons of Husbandry, *Proceedings of the Forty-First Annual Session*, 21-24, as quoted in Lipin, 42.

<sup>59</sup> “No Bonds for Scenic Highways,” *Portland Labor Press*, March 15, 1915, p.2, as quoted in Lipin, *Workers and the Wild*, 39.

<sup>60</sup> Tuhy, 148, and Fahl, 109. Benson later built one mile of the highway at his own expense, underwrote a \$75,000 county bond measure for the highway construction, and personally paid excess construction costs to the city of Hood River. In addition, Benson donated Multnomah Falls to the State of Oregon, built the Columbia Gorge Hotel in 1921, and when the State Highway Commission was organized in 1917, Benson became its first chairman. Smith, 59.

day activities of the highway's construction.<sup>61</sup> Also notable was the support of Rufus Holman, later a U.S. Senator for Oregon, who chaired the Multnomah County Road Commission.

In addition, a number of civic organizations lent their support to building the highway. This included the Portland Chamber of Commerce, the Press Club, and the Rosarians—a group associated with Portland's Rose Festival. Boosters were so successful at branding the Columbia River Highway as “a regional treasure” they convinced groups of men from Portland to participate in volunteer “work parties,” wherein the men volunteered a days labor so that that they could be involved with a “historic” project. The Portland Realty Board and the Ad Club organized one such inspection and were taken by railroad from Portland to the Columbia River Gorge, where they were escorted to a section of the highway. (figure 3.5) C. Lester Horn recalled how the men would be taken on a hike over a few miles of road, eat in some beautiful spot, and engage in “a roundtable discussion of the project,” and then return to Portland by train.<sup>62</sup> In addition, Portland's Advertising Club even created a number of advertisements, special reports, pamphlets, and newspaper features that promoted the Highway to out-of-town tourists. They even sent speakers out of state to gush about the roadside scenery.<sup>63</sup>

To build support for the project, boosters often appealed to a local sense of civic pride, especially with regard to Portland's regional competition with the city of Seattle. Located immediately to the north, Seattle and Tacoma actively sought to improve access

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<sup>61</sup> For a discussion of the power of Portland's business elite, see E. Kimbark MacColl, *The Growth of a City*, 24-28, Smith, 59-60, Fahl, 109, 120 and Tuhy 148.

<sup>62</sup> Horn, 269.

<sup>63</sup> Fahl, 120.

to Mt. Rainier National Park and the surrounding areas, both for productive resource-extraction industries and for tourist potential. A similar pattern existed for Denver, a city attempting to boost tourism in Rocky Mountain National Park, and by Los Angeles and San Francisco, whose tourist boosters promoted auto-tourism in Yosemite. With Seattle having recently surpassed Portland's population in the 1910 census, many in Portland's entrepreneurial class were well aware of their northern neighbor's efforts at regional supremacy.<sup>64</sup> Historian Ronald Fahl noted that Portland's business elite jealously watched as a newly completed road linked the Puget Sound region to Mt. Rainier.<sup>65</sup> This regional competition framed how elite Portlanders viewed the highway, the gorge, and indeed the river. Portland's elite wanted the Columbia River Gorge to be a distinguishing feature of the area, a civic resource for the city, an opportunity to expand their own influence at the expense of their rivals.

To build support, highway proponents quoted prominent Seattle politicians who offered up envious praise for the project. One famous Seattle city engineer, R. H. Thompson, stated publicly that the citizens of Portland didn't realize the opportunity they had, and John P. Hartman, the president of the State Highway Association of Washington, opined that Lancaster had already completed work that "surpassed any of the Washington Roads."<sup>66</sup> Other newspaper accounts placed the Columbia alongside other national tourist destinations. Journalist Fred Lockley wrote,

"I have taken the Hudson river trip and seen the far-famed Palisades of the Hudson; I

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<sup>64</sup> For additional information on regional competition between Portland and Seattle, see Dorothy O. Johansen, *Empire of the Columbia*, 415-21.

<sup>65</sup> Fahl added "Backers of the Columbia River Highway frequently cited the success of the newly opened road to Mt. Rainier national park and implored Portlanders to equal or surpass this feat. Oregon Highway Engineer Henry L. Bowlby likewise injected this competitive tone into his account (First Annual Report, 8) of preliminary efforts to build a "Mount Hood Loop" highway. Fahl, 112, 136, n. 34.

<sup>66</sup> *Oregonian*, June 15, 1914, p.4, as quoted in Fahl, 117.

have taken the trip on the St. Lawrence through the Thousand Isles; I have made the inland passage to Juneau along the Alaskan coast; I have been down the Mississippi and made numerous trips on the Great Lakes as well as trips along the Atlantic coast out of Portland, Me., Boston, New York, Norfolk, Baltimore, and other Atlantic ports and, because I am a lover of nature and have seen some of our country's famous waterways, I believe I can compare our own scenic assets with others and show wherein our own scenery exceeds in beauty or falls short of that of other places..."<sup>67</sup>

To Lockley, as was true of many other local journalists, the Columbia River Gorge stood out as "the choicest gem in America's chain of beauty."<sup>68</sup> Another common booster tactic was to compare the beauty of Washington and Oregon with that of the Old World. Sam Hill said, "Switzerland is a joke when compared with our great country. Nowhere in the world is there such magnificent scenery as can be found along the Columbia River. I have...yet to find anything more impressive than what lies at my front door."<sup>69</sup> Just as traveling to America's national parks was becoming a patriotic, national act, proponents wanted tourism in the Columbia River Gorge to be an act of regional pride.

In the story the boosters were telling, the Columbia River, its gorge, and the scenic highway were all three lumped together, packaged and presented like a gift to the city of Portland. This convenient packaging allowed Boosters to frame their project in competition to other places and encouraging residents to see themselves as fortunate, rather than oppressed by the project. But Progressive-era Portland was suspicious of large public expenditures, especially those that might benefit the wealthy few. And thus, highway boosters resorted to an aggressive marketing campaign to build support for the project. Most often this entailed trying to place celebratory articles in the local newspapers, but it also meant reaching out to Portland's elites and involving numerous

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<sup>67</sup> Fred Lockley, "Travel Stories of the Northwest," (Publication Unknown) November 12, 1917, Oregon Historical Society, Vertical File, Roads—Columbia River Highway, Folder 2.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Sam Hill to an audience in Minneapolis. Tuhy, 139.

community organizations. A steady stream of newspaper articles in the *Oregonian* and the *Oregon Daily Journal* extolled the virtues of the project, and they frequently featured bombastic quotes and dramatic pictures.

Betting that the highway would appeal to automobile tourists, boosters argued that local businesses would make millions in increased revenue from those who stopped. California's Panama-Pacific Exposition, planned for 1915, gave planners a motivation for completing the project in a timely fashion, and Sam Hill himself boasted of the great numbers of auto-tourists who would come and visit the region (and spend twenty dollars per day). Hill frequently predicted that 150,000 cars would come for the exposition, and of these 30,000 would travel through the Columbia River Gorge, bringing the region nearly six million dollars in revenue in just a few days.<sup>70</sup> He even wrote a newspaper article where he advised tourists to skip the Willamette Valley, because the road was insufficient suggesting the Columbia River Highway as a pleasant alternative.<sup>71</sup>

Such optimistic predictions ultimately proved to be just that, but that mattered little to reporters who repeated the claims without reservation. "In a little while there will be passing over this great and broad highway trucks and drays of commerce, bringing foodstuffs of the upper counties of the Columbia to the metropolis," wrote the *Oregonian*.<sup>72</sup> Newspapers also frequently assured readers that the public money allotted was well spent. The *Oregon Journal* explicitly stated, "The taxpayers are receiving a dollar's worth of road for every dollar expended,"<sup>73</sup> and reporter Addison Bennett noted

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<sup>70</sup> *Oregon Journal*, Sept. 23, 1913, pp.1, 5.

<sup>71</sup> Tuhy, 143-144.

<sup>72</sup> *Oregonian*, March 1, 1914, sec. 4, p.6, as quoted in Fahl, n.35, 136-7.

<sup>73</sup> Addison Bennett, "Columbia Highway Progress is Rapid," *Oregonian*, Feb. 22, 1914, sec.1, p. 12, and editorials, *Oregon Journal*, May 15, 1914, p. 8, July 19, 1914, sec. 2, p. 4, as quoted by Fahl, 116.

that men were “building a road that will be a marvel of beauty as well as a magnificent highway...they are conducting the work in a businesslike and economical matter. Go out, Mr. and Mrs. Taxpayer, and check them up.”<sup>74</sup> In one gushing article, *Oregon Daily Journal* reporter Marshall N. Dana described a conversation he had with George Coleman, a “star advertising man” who came to see the Columbia River Highway:

“Coleman had been talking in explosions, epigrams, exclamations in endeavor to convey his appreciation. On the summit of Crown point he stood silent. ‘Tell me what you think of the Columbia river highway as an advertising asset to Portland,’ I asked. ‘Its value is incalculable,’ he answered, ‘It will make Portland as famous as Niagara Falls has made America. Thousands of people will come here year after year with no other motive than to see the Columbia river highway. It will not be possible for anyone to see this great road and not go away talking about it. And what is said will be praise and the terms will be superlatives. It will not be possible for anyone to see this highway and not want his friends to see it. Your first visitors will go away urging their friends to come and see what is as far beyond description as heaven is above earth.’”<sup>75</sup>

In Marshall Dana’s article, George Coleman seemed convinced that Portland was on the cusp of cashing in on the Gorge’s natural beauty. Even the famous Western historian Frederick Jackson Turner got into the act. Visiting from Harvard University he praised the highway in the newspapers. “It is wonderful,” he remarked, “You have set a standard in highway construction that will be hard to follow. I have traveled over Europe but have seen nothing to compare with it.”<sup>76</sup> Samuel Lancaster later bragged that they received nearly “unanimous support” in newspaper coverage.<sup>77</sup> That the newspapers were so

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<sup>74</sup> Addison Bennett, “Columbia Highway Progress is Rapid,” *Oregonian*, Feb. 22, 1914, sec.1, p. 12.

<sup>75</sup> Marshall N. Dana, “Beautiful Columbia River Highway Invaluable Advertising Asset to City,” (Date, Publication unknown – but probably written in late 1914, around the time the highway was nearing completion) Oregon Historical Society, Vertical File, Roads—Columbia River Highway, Folder 2.

<sup>76</sup> *Oregon Journal*, Aug. 23, 1914, sec. 4, p. 8, as quoted in Fahl, 117. Ronald Fahl also mentions a number of other famous visitors included Theodore Roosevelt, General George W. Goethals – the builder of the Panama Canal, Vice President Thomas R. Marshall, and Presidential aspirant William G. McAdoo, who remarked, “I am quite a crank on scenery, but this is more magnificent than I had ever imagined.” Writing in the *New York Times*, Cornelius Vanderbilt Jr. wrote that the Columbia River Highway was “America’s most noted example of man’s intelligent development of nature’s creation.” April 15, 1919, Scrapbook 45, p. 70, Oregon Historical Society Library, and *New York Times*, Sept. 5, 1920, sec. 1, p. 13.

<sup>77</sup> Samuel C. Lancaster, *The Columbia: American's Great Highway through the Cascade Mountains to the*

enthusiastic was not surprising, given the financial support of Henry L. Pittock, publisher of the *Oregonian*, and C. S. Jackson, publisher of the *Oregon Daily Journal*.<sup>78</sup> Pittock and Jackson were just two of a number of local businessmen that supported the cause, both publicly and financially.

To its advocates, the benefits of the highway were obvious—it would stimulate commerce *and* provide recreation in the form of scenic vistas. Yet, even after funds had been allocated and construction had started, and despite the full-court-push from members of Portland’s Business Elite, the *idea* of a highway still did not inspire. To remedy the situation, Sam Hill and Samuel Lancaster took their show on the road—literally. Convinced that if people could only see the places where the highway would go, they began presenting a slideshow of images depicting views of the river and the highway. They presented the slideshows to influential members of the community, civic groups, and in local schools.

Lancaster, a technocrat with an over-developed romantic appreciation for scenic beauty, saw the road as *both* a practical transportation artery, and as a recreational, therapeutic, resource. Much like the nature-worship that characterized middle-class attitudes prior to the invention of the automobile, Lancaster’s love of nature stemmed from a deeply felt anxiety about increased urbanization and industrialization in American life. Lancaster, like other progressive conservationists, thought increased contact with beauty and wildness could bring physical and spiritual health to both the individual and the nation. He himself a devout evangelical Christian, Lancaster viewed nature as God’s spiritual remedy for the ills of urban life. And, with the help of Sam Hill, Lancaster’s

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*Sea*, 114.

<sup>78</sup> Smith, 59.



affinity for scenic vistas was perfectly conveyed in the slideshow that featured the highway.

Recalling a moment where he gazed out from on top of one of the local peaks, Lancaster wrote:

“Larch Mountain has been called Nature’s Grandstand, for such it appears to be in all reality. There is no better viewpoint from which to look on Nature’s wondrous beauties as revealed in the rugged, tree-clad Cascade Range. From the summit of Larch Mountain the whole creation round about for many miles, is seen in all directions. Crest above crest, the dark green mountains rise to the north, to the south, and to the east, as if they were the bulking waves of a tremendous ocean driven by some titanic gale.”<sup>79</sup>

Lancaster’s words had the romantic sensibilities of John Muir, but also the practicality of Frederick Law Olmstead. Lancaster wrote that the road would be something that could help “tired men and women...enjoy the wild beauty of nature’s art gallery and recreate themselves.”<sup>80</sup> In true progressive spirit, he believed his road-building efforts would ameliorate the social problems of the city. By harnessing the power of scenic nature, he and others might improve the lives of their fellow citizens.

Lancaster’s casual reference to the Columbia River as “nature’s art gallery” is another indication of how thoroughly romanticism permeated his conception of the Columbia’s landscape. His evocation of nature as the “artist” and the environment of the Columbia as an “art gallery” was more than a coincidental phrase or slip of the tongue. Just as Albert Bierstadt and Fitz-Hugh Ludlow had done fifty years before, Lancaster and Hill spent considerable time in preparing visual images for the slideshow that would highlight the Columbia River Gorge and its new highway. The story they planned to tell was not visceral or productive, but instead visual—one based in aesthetics. In their

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<sup>79</sup> Samuel C, Lancaster, *The Columbia*, 127.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

efforts to promote the project, Hill and Lancaster prepared a number of “stereoptican” slides—photographs on glass that could be projected by a large lantern. Images of the Columbia were projected onto giant screens, and the use of the slide technology gave a thoroughly modern sensibility to their “technologically advanced” proposal.

By all accounts, the experience of seeing Hill and Lancaster’s slideshow delighted local audiences. It was not everyday that one could enjoy the spectacle of a slideshow, let alone one that promoted a project that recast the local landmark in such a brilliant fashion. Hill paid artists to hand-color the glass-plated slides, which often meant that bright green trees and blue rivers contrasted with the grey hues of the rock. (figures 3.6, 3.7)

In the slides the colors of the landscape jump out at the viewer. Overly saturated hues of green and yellow accentuated the pristine qualities of the landscape around the roadway. Dark-green Douglas fir trees received one hue, while deciduous trees like willow and poplar received another. Shadows stretched across the greenery, giving contrast to its colors and putting focus upon the light in the sky. In the slides, the colors of natural world are too bold to evoke realism, too saturated to see in everyday life—but they are aesthetically beautiful, and must have been striking when shown with an impressive new technology. In the slide depicting the view of Crown Point, a wide, majestic Columbia River flows into the distance, and the beauty is pastoral, picturesque, and romantic. In the slide depicting the highway, the camera angle frames the shapes of Sheppard’s Dell bridge; its clear sharp lines, the square and sharp corners of its pedestals, and the perfect arc of its foundation stand like a Greek temple in the wilderness, its perfection only accentuated by the purity of the trees and shrubs nearby. Light flows

down on top of the structure, giving it a silvery hue.<sup>81</sup> Like Thomas Cole's famous paintings *The Course of Empire* (1833-6), the nods to classical architecture in the bridge's form get new meanings when juxtaposed with the natural beauty around it. Similar to the ways that Albert Bierstadt had constructed an idealized version of the Gorge in his famous painting *Mount Hood*, Hill and Lancaster's slides created an image of the Columbia River Gorge that provoked certain types of reactions from their audiences.

For audiences unaccustomed to seeing the scenery of the Columbia from these particular vantage points, the combination of new vistas, presented in bright colors, displayed in such an impressive fashion was compelling. Lancaster and Hill used the slideshow to attract crowds and gain support for their project. John Tuhy, in his biography of Sam Hill, noted that Hill presented the show often, and took great pride in showing slides to audiences. In Corvallis, Oregon the slides brought out "frequent cheers" from audience members and news accounts reported that audiences appreciated both the pictures and the promises.<sup>82</sup> Lancaster even exhibited these slides at the Panama-Pacific Exposition in 1914. Traveling with a group of Rosarians from Portland, he made a strong impression on exposition officials. His views of the Columbia River Gorge (shown intermittently with slides of the partially finished highway) made such an impression that the organizers offered space for them to exhibit specially made posters and photographs.<sup>83</sup> By 1915, a reporter exaggerated that Hill and Lancaster must have

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<sup>81</sup> Of course, it very easily could have been wet when they took the picture from which the slide was based, causing a glare not unlike driving on one of the Northwest's roads in the sun after a rain storm, yet, regardless, they made conscious decisions to illustrate the slide in that way.

<sup>82</sup> Tuhy, 131.

<sup>83</sup> *Oregon Journal*, Jan. 10, 1915, sec. 1, p. 5, as cited in Fahl, 119.

presented the lecture and slideshow to “20,000 Portland school children, taking them in classes of twenty at a time.”<sup>84</sup>

The intensity to which Hill and Lancaster took to their project is alone noteworthy, as was the sheer number of times the slideshow presentation was seen. Even more interesting is the way they chose to present it. While the building of the Columbia River Highway was certainly an impressive technological feat, what is striking is the extent to which it was self-consciously *presented* as such in the slideshows. Particularly notable was the idea that modern construction methods, and modern representational strategies, could provide access to pre-modern natural settings. In this way, those taken with the appeal of the road’s engineering could simultaneously appreciate both the aesthetics of modernity and the aesthetics of romantic, almost timeless nature. Importantly, the juxtaposition of the technologically-advanced highway in the middle of a natural landscape like the Columbia River Gorge encouraged this type of interpretation, just as a primitive, romantic nature put emphasis on the modern qualities of the highway. The interplay between the two impulses, technological and romantic, was not insignificant.

In presenting such images, Hill and Lancaster encouraged two separate, but

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<sup>84</sup> Quotation is from Tuhy, 140. Following the completion of the highway, Samuel Lancaster himself traveled to the eastern U.S. to speak with civic groups, present his slides to various organizations, and promote the road to newspaper editors and publishers. He gave the slideshow to 1,800 people at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce alone, and similar presentations to the national Rotary Club, Commercial Club, National Press Club, and others. The next year he visited the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society, the National Geographic Society, and the National Good Roads Association. His national promotional tour visited Philadelphia, New York, Boston, Toledo, Detroit, Chicago, and St. Paul. The *Oregonian* covered his publicity tour with great aplomb, and reported that his efforts would “spread the facts regarding the highway’s attractions before millions of people wherever English is spoken,” adding, “descriptive stories of the highway are now in the course of preparation for... *World’s Work*, *National Geographic Magazine*, *Ford Times*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Country Gentleman*, and a number of others.” *Oregonian*, March 21, 1916, p. 13, and Fahl, 124.

related narratives by which audiences could craft meanings about the landscape. One story saw the Gorge as spectacularly scenic and romantic, primitive and pure in its natural splendor. The other narrative saw the highway in similarly evocative ways, but garnished its meaning as a mark of technological wonder that could improve or control nature. On the highway, the two impulses were linked—a dominating modernity was balanced by a harmonious pastoral, each getting their meaning from the other. The presence of the highway suggested that humans could control and master nature, and the presence of the scenery gave them a reason for doing so.

In pitching their project, Hill and Lancaster promoted both the splendor of the views, and the splendor of getting to the viewpoints. David Nye, in his book *American Technological Sublime*, argued that in the nineteenth century, a different type of sublimity reinforced Americans' enthusiasm for particular 'technologically advanced' objects—objects that including the train and eventually the automobile. Nye identified a 'technological sublime' similar to the romantic sublime, an awestruck, almost religious feeling, inspired by impressive objects.<sup>85</sup> More than a philosophical idea, the technological sublime was a practical, national, religious tradition. He wrote, "In a physical world that [was] increasingly de-sacralized, the sublime represent[ed] a way to reinvest the landscape and the works of men with transcendent significance."<sup>86</sup> Men and

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<sup>85</sup> David Nye wrote that Perry Miller first coined the term 'technological sublime' and that Leo Marx was the first to pick it up and elaborate upon it. David Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), xv. For examples of scholars applying the idea, see Perry Miller, *The Life of the Mind in America from the Revolution to the Civil War* (New York: Halcourt, Brace and World, 1965) 295-306, Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), 195-207, 230-31; John Kasson, *Civilizing the Machine: Technology and Republican Values in America, 1776-1900* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 162-172, Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825-1875* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 166-167, John F. Sears, *Sacred Places*, 182, 192, 201.

<sup>86</sup> Nye, xiii.

women who viewed technologically sublime objects were made to feel powerful, as if nature itself could be controlled by humanity's scientific acumen (as demonstrated by the mere existence of the technological object). Nye argued that the juxtaposition of a technologically advanced object (like a train or an automobile) within a romanticized, pre-modern landscape exhorted the observer to dominate and control nature.<sup>87</sup> A celebration of modernity, the technological sublime focused on the triumph of machines over nature, but on the Columbia River Highway, the technological object (the roadway) enabled the landscape that surrounded it to be romantic, pure, and pristine.<sup>88</sup>

In the latter half of the nineteenth century few saw the mere presence of mechanic technology as invasive. When first introduced, neither railroads nor automobiles were understood to be capable of spoiling a pristine landscape. John Stilgoe wrote that the train "struck few observers as a monstrous machine soiling a virginal garden. Instead it seemed a powerful romantic creature inhabiting an environment especially created for it."<sup>89</sup> Both the natural and technological sublime became intertwined with one-another, each gaining meaning from the juxtaposition with the other. David Nye writes, "For nineteenth-century Americans these were not iconic contradictions but dramatic contrasts; the rugged western landscape and the transcontinental railroad were complementary forms of the sublime that dramatized an unfolding national destiny."<sup>90</sup> In a study of railroad photographs, Susan Danly noted how the symbols seemed to intertwine, as each gained meaning from one-another. She wrote, "...the vastness of the

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 295.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 57,.

<sup>89</sup> John Stilgoe, *Metropolitan Corridor: Railroads and the American Scene* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 3, as quoted in Nye, 71.

<sup>90</sup> Nye, 76.

American West literally put into perspective with the railroad track; the geometry of new cities juxtaposed with the panoramic vista of mountains; man dwarfed by the monuments of nature, while technology stands triumphant in the wilderness.”<sup>91</sup> Automobiles (and their roads) elicited a similar response.

An additional appeal of the technological sublime in the United States was that it conflated the preservation and transformation of the natural world.<sup>92</sup> Hence, a paved road that wended its way along steep cliffs, hugged the bank of a great river, and revealed previously undiscovered waterfalls, and was *not* seen as destructive or intrusive. On the contrary, the Columbia River Highway was seen in much the same way that the Transcontinental Railroad was seen decades before, as fitting well within the natural landscape.<sup>93</sup> As the workers carved out the proposed road route with picks, axes, shovels, and sweat, they prepared the highway (and the ‘nature’ around it) for tourists to come. The result was a winding ribbon of concrete that stamped the landscape with a symbol of man’s technological mastery, while simultaneously reifying the surrounding area as primeval and wild. In this way the technological sublime rationalized

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<sup>91</sup> Susan Danly, “Andrew Joseph Russell’s *The Great West Illustrated*,” in *The Railroad in American Art: Representations of Technological Change*, ed. S. Danly and L. Marx, (Boston: MIT Press, 1988), 100, as quoted in Nye, 76.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 37. Yet David Nye suggested that the technological ‘things’ themselves did not always evoke a sublime response. He noted that the object’s power was fleeting, and it often decayed. He wrote, “Ultimately, the constant is not the technological object *per se*, it is the continual redeployment of the sublime itself, as a preferred American trope.” Hence, according to Nye, a number of inter-related, historically situated ‘technological sublimes’ have emerged, at least since the 1820s, which he further delineated into the sub-categories: dynamic, geometrical, industrial, and electric. These different forms of the technological sublime each have a “distinct political and social relation to technology” and they often coexist, sometimes in tension with one another. These tensions exist under the surface, Nye argues, because the emotional response to the technological sublime often leaves observers too entranced to acknowledge the historical context that helped produce the sublime feeling. “Sublimity seems not a social construction,” Nye wrote, “but a unique and precious encounter with reality.” For those who traveled via train or automobile to nature’s ‘sacred’ places, what awaited was an experience that all could share without discussing or acknowledging precisely what the encounter meant—a shared emotion that was beyond words. Nye, xiv.

<sup>93</sup> This is not to suggest that the experience of the natural world remained the same on train and by auto, just that both were viewed in less obtrusive terms than one might expect.

development as preservation, and seemingly “rational” road-planners and engineers embraced transcendental ideas.<sup>94 95</sup>

By emphasizing the river as wild and romantic, Lancaster placed the landscape into a script familiar to the region’s first Euro-American explorers, second-generation settlers, and even its newest arrivals. For the people who wrote glowingly of romantic nature, who appreciated and consumed landscape art, and who associated the beauty of nature with the divine hand of God, a scenic highway encouraged appreciation of that natural beauty. It even demanded it. That they could do so by automobile was just further evidence of the benefits that modern technology could offer. Ridiculing opponents of the highway as “mossbacks,” supporters defined scenic tourism as progressive development—a symbol of Portland’s embrace of the future. Designed to convince Portlanders that a scenic highway was in their interests, Hill and Lancaster’s slideshow ended up creating a market for tourism on the Columbia. By depicting beautiful vistas and technologically impressive bridges, the slideshow revealed how ways of knowing the Columbia’s landscape were changing. Since Euro-Americans first traveled down the Columbia they had marveled at its natural beauty, but the construction of the highway (and the representational strategies used to sell it) marked the place as

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<sup>94</sup> Another indication that Samuel Lancaster had thoroughly accepted a ‘conservation through development’ approach was his opposition to advertising along the highway. As early as 1914 Lancaster urged the Oregon chapter of the American Institute of Architects to look for legislation that would stop or limit outdoor billboards. He argued that such signs would “mar the beauty” of the scenery and that they were a “glaring nuisance.” *Oregonian*, Aug. 25, 1914, p. 16, *Oregon Journal*, Aug. 28, 1914, p. 6, as quoted in Fahl, 119.

<sup>95</sup> To be sure, it wouldn’t be long before emblems of mechanized technology began to be seen as more problematic. Early conservationist battles over Hetch-Hetchy and Niagara Falls showed the limits to which the ‘natural’ could co-exist with the ‘technological.’ But in the early decades of the twentieth century, Lancaster, Hill and others viewed the road as a device to facilitate appreciation for the natural world, which would then lead to preservation. Any inconsistencies between roads and wild nature would not arise for a decade or so after the highway’s construction. See Paul Sutter, *Driven Wild*, and David Louter, *Windshield Wilderness*.



*primarily* scenic. As the road dipped and curved and blended “nature” with “technology,” the two patterns of knowing the landscape merged together as one. On the highway the Columbia River was romantically scenic, and the experience of looking at it was technologically sublime.

### **Constructing a New Space and Place**

The physical act of constructing the highway was a remarkable engineering accomplishment. In October 1913, a hundred men moved out to a temporary labor camp built near Multnomah Falls. The following spring, five to six hundred more workers joined them, and the construction of the highway picked up speed.<sup>96</sup> Workers used shovels and picks, axes and saws to clear a path through dense forest and over steep slopes. Horses and mules hauled rock and gravel, and a special wagon mixed the bituminous macadam mixture used in paving the surface of the roadway. Much of the paving technology used on the Columbia River Highway had been tested on Hill’s Maryhill Loop road, several years earlier. To pave the road Hill and Lancaster brought in rock crushers, rollers, and screens for the crushed rock. Hill shipped in heavy oil and heated the oil-based asphalt before spraying it onto the road’s surface. This type of construction required the macadam to be layered six inches thick, rolled down to four inches as it cooled, and then layered once again.<sup>97</sup> (figure 3.8)

When surveying to determine the best route, Lancaster began by noting the most pleasant locations—often views of the river from above and below. He told a newspaper, “On starting the surveys our first business was to find the beauty spots, or those points

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<sup>96</sup> *First Annual Report*, 46-47; *Oregonian*, Feb 20, 1914, p.9, July 10, 1914, pp.1-2; *Oregon Journal*, Jan. 3, 1915, pict. supp., p. 1, as quoted in Fahl, 115.

<sup>97</sup> Tuhy, 136.

where the most beautiful things along the line might be seen to the best advantage, and if possible to locate the road in such a way as to reach them.”<sup>98</sup> For several weeks, Lancaster, Hill and a host of other engineers traveled throughout the area, photographing and mapping where the highway might fit on the rocky slopes and wooded terrain. Particular care was given to “frame” the natural scenes they encountered, and Lancaster focused on how visitors would see the river. “When fixing the location of the Columbia River Highway we tried to preserve the great natural beauty,” he wrote, “...and insofar as possible, to have the road form the frame connecting humanity with the Divinely beautiful pictures which everywhere abound.”<sup>99</sup> K. P. Billner, one of the engineers that oversaw construction of bridges, told a trade journal that there was “a constant aim toward the artistic and an effort to reach a state of harmony with the surroundings.”<sup>100</sup> Lancaster was acting, as one historian has argued, as both an engineer and a conservationist.<sup>101</sup>

A number of design features reflected Lancaster’s desire to make “road” and “nature” blend seamlessly together. Notably, Lancaster specified that local rock be used in an attempt to make the built structures match the basalt and granite found in the gorge. Stylistic features that adorned stone bridges, masonry walls, and windowed tunnels reflected a desire to beautify rather than distract. Impressed with Italian “dry masonry”

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<sup>98</sup> *Oregon Journal*, Jan, 3, 1915, p. 2.

<sup>99</sup> Lancaster, “The Columbia River Highway in the Oregon Country,” (unpublished manuscript, Portland, 1918), 50, as quoted in Fahl, 125-126.

<sup>100</sup> K. P. Billner, “Design Features of the Various Types of Reinforced Concrete Bridges Along the Columbia River Highway in Oregon,” *Engineering and Contracting* 10 (February 1915), 121, as quoted in Robert W. Hadlow, *Historic Columbia River Highway Recording Project*. (Washington D. C.: Historic American Engineering Record, HABS/HAER Division, National Park Service, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1994), sec. 1, 4.

<sup>101</sup> Note the title of Fahl’s article, “S.C. Lancaster and the Columbia River Highway: Engineer as Conservationist.”

he had seen in his earlier trip to Europe, Lancaster hired Italian-Americans familiar with the technique to craft walls and railings that took on patterns traceable to the trained eye.<sup>102</sup> The construction of the Mitchell Point tunnel featured “natural basalt” columns, in contrast to the masonry columns found on the Axenstrasse in Switzerland. (figure 3.9). Lancaster and company saw fit to publicize such features, and on more than one occasion Lancaster cast himself as an appreciator of romantic nature. “My love for the beautiful is inherited from my mother,” he told a reporter, “When I made a preliminary survey here and found myself standing waist-deep in the ferns, I remembered my mother’s long ago warning, ‘Oh Samuel, do be careful of my Boston fern!’ And I then pledged myself that none of this wild beauty should be marred where it could be prevented. The highway was so built that not one tree was felled, not one fern was crushed, unnecessarily.”<sup>103</sup> East of Multnomah Falls, where there was little room for railroad tracks let alone highway, Lancaster designed an 860-foot concrete viaduct to skirt along the slope, “in order not to disturb the mountain, and ruin the trees and flowering shrubs, which are so beautiful,” he wrote.<sup>104</sup>

Because the road was built solely for automobiles traveling at speeds from 10 to 12 miles per hour, Lancaster allowed for many curves in the highway’s path.<sup>105</sup> Strict attention was given to maintaining a minimal grade, as the slope of the road was always to be equal or less than five percent. On more than one occasion Lancaster or Hill bragged of the standardized dimensions of the road—twenty-four feet in width, with no

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<sup>102</sup> Hadlow, sec. 1, 22-23, and Fahl, 125.

<sup>103</sup> Samuel Lancaster as told to Margurite Norris Davis, *St. Nicholas Magazine*, March, 1924, as quoted in Lancaster, *The Columbia, America’s Great Highway through the Cascade Mountains to the Sea*, Appendix A.

<sup>104</sup> Lancaster, “The Columbia River Highway in the Oregon Country,” 7, as quoted in Ronald J. Fahl, 126.

<sup>105</sup> The speed limits come from Edward M. Miller, “That was an Eventful Day in Portland,” Undated, Oregon Historical Society, Vertical File, Roads—Columbia River Highway, Folder 2.

grade heavier than five percent.<sup>106</sup> The physical dimensions of the road were dictated both by the nature of the landscape, and by the nature of the automobile—because they traveled so slowly. In several portions of the highway, curves with small radii alternated back and forth, making nearly complete figure eight patterns in an effort to keep the mild grade intact.<sup>107</sup> In other places the road’s path curved to move closer to trees (as opposed to moving farther away!) and workers took care not to disturb vegetation that might have been cleared in other locales. One particular section of the highway attracted great attention for its snakelike path; the “Rowena Loops” were often featured in photographs and postcards, as travelers were given the opportunity to view the highway’s path from a viewpoint above. (figure 3.10) The result of all these design features was an intimacy with the landscape that was more immediate than one might get from roads constructed today.

As the route became increasingly popular, the *human* world of the Gorge underwent a transformation. More than just ushering in an era of tourism, the highway brought with it a sea change in how people interacted with the natural landscape. Although the scenic qualities of the Columbia River had always been appreciated, its status as *primarily* scenic gave the landscape an entirely new constituency. Portland and the Gorge moved closer together, both in terms of the time it took to travel from one place to another, and culturally, in the human beings that now moved through the landscape with increased regularity. Portlanders, with their varied and multiple interests, took a greater interest in what type of space the Gorge would be. In this way the

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<sup>106</sup> Lancaster, 106.

<sup>107</sup> The small radii of these curves eventually made the highway obsolete, as cars traveling at faster speeds had a difficult time just staying on the road, and the level of gradient tended not to matter so much.

reduction of physical and temporal distance that accompanied highway construction remade the human geography of the river. Technological change brought new and different forms of social and political power to the hinterland. Just as the arrival of a steamboat had done in 1850s, and the completion of a railroad route had done in 1880s, the onset of a new form of motive power transformed how most people knew the Columbia. Portland, as a social and cultural entity, seemed to occupy more of the Columbia's space than it had before.

The switch to automotive power had profound implications for the people who traveled the Gorge. Wolfgang Schivelbusch, in his study of railroads, noted how changes in motive power altered human interactions with the landscape. The earliest descriptions of mechanized travel emphasized disconnection with the landscape. As machines began to mediate the connection between humans and nature, passengers experienced alienation, as if the two were in separate worlds.<sup>108</sup> Schivelbusch emphasized how changes in motive technology effected the temporal organization of a landscape: "A given spatial distance, traditionally covered in a fixed amount of travel time, could suddenly be dealt with in a fraction of that time; to put it another way, the same amount of time permitted one to cover the old spatial distance many times over."<sup>109</sup> This reorientation of time and space meant that railroad travelers formed different relationships with the landscape they traveled within. Visual perception was diminished by velocity, as railroad passengers missed details in the foreground and saw landscapes through the technologies that moved them. What resulted was a "panoramization" of the

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<sup>108</sup> Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 23.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

landscape, which required the “de-concentration or dispersal of attention” to adapt to the conditions of rail travel.<sup>110 111</sup>

Early automobile travel provoked a different set of interactions between humans and landscapes, yet similar patterns emerge. As automobiles distanced passengers from the immediacy of nature, the amount of time it took them to get from natural site to natural site was dramatically reduced. On one hand the passengers wouldn't be experiencing their surroundings in such an immediate way, on the other hand, they were getting to experience natural spaces with less effort. On a scenic highway located a fixed distance away from Portland, this remade the temporal perception of the Gorge's geography. A tourist circuit, or fixed route, emerged—one dictated by the distance a person could reasonably travel in a day's time. Portlanders traveling the highway began to experience the Gorge as a series of stops—each one corresponding to a particular scenic vista, picturesque waterfall, roadhouse, gas station, or hotel. Guidebooks, postcards, and other tourist memorabilia adopted the new spatial organization of the landscape, and natural features that had previously been “undiscovered” gained fame as they were featured as one in a series of attractions. (figures 3.11, 3.12)

For many residents of the Pacific Northwest, the construction of the highway

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 67-9.

<sup>111</sup> But unlike trains, automobiles conferred upon their users a degree of freedom, especially in choosing when and where to stop (and not to mention for how long). Paul Sutter, in his book *Driven Wild*, wrote that early automobilists praised their vehicles as liberators and levelers. “It is difficult for people today, conditioned by the circumscribed nature of roads as public space, to appreciate how open and liberating roads seemed to the first generation of autocampers and motor tourists,” he wrote. Automobiles allowed tourists to decide itineraries for themselves. Sutter argued that this focus on individual autonomy appealed to middle-class men, who consciously and subconsciously desired autonomy to assuage anxiety about changing gender roles. He also noted that undertaking an individualized outing was ultimately a rejection of the canonical tourist sites that had shaped nature travel in the days before the automobile.<sup>111</sup> The freedom to choose one's route was not the only freedom celebrated, as the new market for outdoor recreational gear made clear, one could travel with more *things* when heading into the wild by car. Paul Sutter, *Driven Wild*, 31, see also Belasco, 74-76.

from 1913-1916 marked the moment when visiting the river became a much more convenient prospect. After the highway, far more tourists experienced the Columbia Gorge by road rather than water, and there were more of them. When traveling over the roadway, the highway became suggestive; it helped instruct visitors on how and what to see, as it set physically in stone the places where drivers could (and should) stop, look, and appreciate—guiding tourists to landmarks familiar as well as to those newly labeled as tourist attractions. Certain viewpoints became the “famous views of the Columbia,” vistas that were reproduced in newspapers, on postcards, and by aspiring photographers (both professional and amateur) who visited the region. In this way the highway helped create a market for “views”—and then for memorabilia celebrating those views. Nature, views of nature, and the experience of viewing nature, were all commodities that could be packaged, advertised, and sold. Visitors consumed the Columbia by visiting viewpoints along the route, and the highway collapsed the natural landscape into “a manageable canon of sites” to which tourists could travel.<sup>112</sup> Such an experience produced a common story—a story that emphasized the river’s scenic qualities over its other qualities.<sup>113 114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> I borrow this phrasing from Paul Sutter, 27.

<sup>113</sup> Here, it is important to note that the tourists who traveled the Columbia River Highway didn’t necessarily think of the river in one, unified way. Individual reactions to the landscape were structured by the subjectivities of any given person. As other scholars have noted, tourists are rarely “mindless vessels” who thoughtlessly soak up messages in any type of predictable, uniform fashion. Historian Paul Sutter commented on the power of tourists to form their own opinions, and shape their own ideas about a landscape: “As important as pre-packaged information is to shaping the tourist experience, tourist motivations and reactions constantly spill beyond the prescriptive bounds of guidebooks, maps, and even word of mouth. Indeed, tourist behavior reshapes the cultural production upon which tourism rests, and tourists themselves are important cultural producers, as they relay their itineraries and experiences, in words and images, to other potential tourists.”<sup>113</sup> Tourists who visited the highway gave meaning to the experience through their own filters, on their own terms. That said, one physical route constrained and channeled most tourists down a single path—one that conferred individual freedom within a certain set of constraints. To *drive* into scenic nature, one had to use an access road. That this access road moved people through a fixed route suggests that tourists shared a standardized

## Imagining History through Tourism – The Dedication of the Highway

The completion of the scenic highway gave Lancaster and others the cause for both celebration and reflection. They had succeeded in building a road that was a testament to human progress—a symbol of how Americans could enjoy the redemptive qualities of scenic nature *and* the comforts of modern day life. To commemorate the occasion, the builders, boosters, and local politicians organized a formal ceremony to dedicate the highway. It was to be held during Portland’s Rose Festival, in the center of the Gorge at spectacular Multnomah Falls. In the process of surveying for his highway, Samuel Lancaster was struck by the practical difficulties of overland travel through dense forests. Like so many other visitors to the Columbia, Lancaster reflected on the physical challenge of traversing the gorge by looking backwards—imagining both the survey and construction of the highway in historical terms. In the preface of his book, Lancaster framed the road’s significance through a lens of exploration: “As I climbed about the steep slopes of the mountains, where in places it was necessary to use ropes for safety, I thought of the many hardships endured by the early explorers when they came into the Oregon country.”<sup>115</sup> Just as Euro-American settlers had overcome the forces of nature, Lancaster too had vanquished the same formidable foe. Out of all the possible, multiple

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experience—a notion of the landscape that was as solid as the rock and tar over which they traveled. Sutter, 28.

<sup>114</sup> While ideally one could focus on many individualized tourist accounts of Columbia River Highway travel, such observations are difficult to locate. Personal accounts in local newspapers are uniformly celebratory. Trying to ascertain a multiplicity of experiences from ordinary Portlanders is more difficult, as sources are few and far between. The vast majority of accounts range from polite words of praise to gushing, exhilarating prose. Nearly all accounts seem to be positive. For a sampling of how some might have remembered the experience, see Clifford D. Nelson, *The Guestbooks of Crown Point Chalet 1915-1927* (Published by the author, 2001). Guestbooks from the Crown Point Chalet, a hotel and eatery located high on a bluff near the site of the Vista House (see photo), have accounts of highway travel dating from 1915 to 1927. Entries range from simple signatures (like that of Henry Ford) to those with several sentences describing the experience.

<sup>115</sup> Lancaster, 7.



ways to celebrate the highway (the scenery of the Columbia, the modernity of the highway, the harmony between the two), the narrative that they chose was a progressive taming of the wild, a universal narrative that was infused with nationalist meanings (and regionalist meanings too).

In referencing the Columbia's era of exploration, the Columbia River Highway was cast into a storyline familiar to all who came to see its dedication. A modern highway set amongst ancient forests became the truest testament to mankind's long march from savagery to civilization. Lancaster gave voice to this narrative in his book about the highway:

“The changes which have come within a life time, in methods of transportation along this great river are amazing. The high beaked Indian canoes, manned by naked savages; the rafts of logs on which the pioneers placed their “prairie schooners,” to effect the passage of the gorge when their oxen could draw them no further over impossible Indian trails, are now but a remembrance of former days.”<sup>116</sup>

By leaving Portland and traveling through the Gorge, Lancaster hoped visitors would gain a more intimate engagement with the river's landscapes, enlightening those who were previously blind to the Columbia's romantic appeal. “Until now, these beautiful things had been partially hidden,” Lancaster told a newspaper, “and as far as the general public was concerned they might almost as well have been on the dark continent.”<sup>117</sup> But the *place* Lancaster envisioned was relatively new to the *space* on the Columbia River. Lancaster's Columbia River Gorge was another manifestation of the Columbia's shifting river imaginary, yet another story that positioned the Columbia for human use of a different kind. While the emphasis on the river as a tourist destination never

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<sup>116</sup> Lancaster, 89.

<sup>117</sup> *Oregon Journal*, Jan. 3, 1915, p. 2, as quoted in Fahl, 113-114.

completely subsumed other ways of seeing the river, the completion of the Columbia River Highway marked the onset of a different era in its human history. A closer look at the dedication ceremony reveals how the emphasis on a “scenic” river would help its Euro-American residents re-imagine its past, present, and future.

In late 1915, a number of prominent Oregonians planned a dedication ceremony that would generate a rush of publicity for the nearly completed roadway. The committee in charge of planning this ceremony included the Governor of Oregon, the mayor of Portland, and a number of other local leaders. To promote the highway these people were prepared to pull out all the stops. They sent copies of Lancaster’s book to every state governor and arranged for articles to appear in major newspapers throughout the country. Lancaster got into the spirit himself, urging the city to take steps to “beautify the already nationally-famed road with flowers and flowering shrubs,” and asking the federal government to provide “Japanese cherry of varieties that would easily acclimate themselves in the Columbia River Valley.”<sup>118</sup> When all the beautification plans were finalized, the committee sent invitations to key Congressmen and to several foreign nations. The coup de grace was a big get—the committee secured the participation of U. S. President Woodrow Wilson, who agreed to dedicate the highway, but only by pushing

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<sup>118</sup> Concerned with the appearance of the roads that led to the scenic highway, the public was encouraged to participate in a “roadside beautification” program. The chamber of commerce even sponsored a contest with cash prizes for those who made the best landscaping improvements. Multnomah County planted various grasses and bushes, to beautify the uninhabited parts of the route. *Oregonian*, May 14, 1916, p. 16; *Oregon Journal*, May 28, 1916, sec. 3, p. 5. Throughout his career Lancaster undertook a series of efforts to plant flowers and trees where drivers could see them. He preferred that shrubs and trees be planted to obscure unsightly elements of the highway’s infrastructure (like concrete columns and supports), so as to “harmonize with the landscape.” *Oregonian*, October 31, 1915, sec. 1, p. 15, Fahl, 121-22. Of course, all his efforts to preserve native vegetation were compromised by his preference for Japanese cherry trees.

a button from afar.<sup>119</sup> Lancaster explained the plan:

“In the White House, at exactly 8 p.m., President Wilson will press an electric button which will close a circuit reaching across the Continent. This will operate an electric magnet on Crown Point at 5 p.m., Pacific Coast time, and cause a weight to drop which will unfurl our flag to the breezes of the Pacific Ocean. By this means the President will extend his hand across the Continent, thus reaching into the future and unfurling the flag of freedom three hours ahead of Washington time.”<sup>120</sup>

Having scored a major publicity coup with the participation of the President, ceremony boosters made sure that those who attended would not be disappointed. Large cannons were placed high upon the river bluffs, and organizers prepared to shoot off 48 rounds in celebration, one for each state in the union.

Accounts of June 7, 1916 described a hectic day in the Gorge! Portland citizen Edward M. Miller recalled automobiles driving over the road from morning until night, as Portlanders made the most of the Labor Day holiday. He was particularly taken with the many types of cars that made the trip: “There were big, powerful cars, medium-priced cars and tiny little cars; brand-new, glittering cars of the 1916 model; middle-aged cars and spavined old wrecks that coughed heavily at every grade; and there were truck loads of pretty girls from Portland business houses blowing holiday horns at those who sought to pass them.”<sup>121</sup> Multnomah Falls, the very same waterfall that Albert Bierstadt placed at the center of his “great picture” fifty years earlier, was the chosen site for the highway’s dedication. (figure 3.13) Hundreds of cars arrived from Portland, The Dalles, and Hood River. A special train from Portland brought additional visitors to the event, and by mid-day the dedication ceremony was set to begin. Rose petals were scattered

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<sup>119</sup> *Oregonian*, Nov. 21, 1915, sec. 1, p. 6, Nov. 28, 1915, p. 16, May 28, 1916, sec. 5, p. 2, *Oregon Journal*, May 28, 1916, sec. 3, p. 5.

<sup>120</sup> Lancaster, 128.

<sup>121</sup> Miller, “That was an Eventful Day in Portland.”

throughout the grounds, and loganberry juice, which one historian labeled “Oregon’s temperance beverage” was distributed to the crowd.<sup>122</sup> As the ceremony began, the Rose Queen, Muriel Saling of Pendleton, appeared, accompanied by a host of attendants, including King Joy, Miss Columbia, a throng of maids in waiting, crown bearers, trumpeters, fairy dancers, and bearers of the winged “Wheel of Progress”—a richly decorated automobile. In the midst of the ceremony the crowd gasped when a group of men dressed in generic native attire interrupted the proceedings. The *Oregonian* described the scene wherein a fictional “Chief Multnomah” emerged:

“About the time that everyone thought the dedication was proceeding famously a wild war whoop was heard from the woods above the falls. Presently an Indian appeared on the bridge. He took in the sight below, then rushed madly down the trail and dashed onto the platform. He confronted the Queen. By eloquent gesture he proclaimed his ownership of the great falls and the country surrounding. “What right have you here?” he demanded in the sign language of the Indian, taking in the Queen and all of her attendants with a majestic sweep of his arm. The Queen stepped from her throne and approached the old Indian. She extended her hand in friendship. The warrior dramatically refused. He threw his blanket over his shoulder, and, turning, for the first time saw the great number of white people present. With the painful knowledge that his days as ruler were over he threw down his bow and arrows and sulked away...”<sup>123</sup>

And the drama was not done. Capping the entire spectacle was the queen’s dedication of the highway. As a royal vehicle escorted whisked the queen down the highway, as the “wheel of progress” helped her sprinkle water from the falls upon the roadway. If that wasn’t enough, carrier pigeons were then released bearing invitations to the residents of Los Angeles, Pasadena, San Francisco, Sacramento, Seattle, Vancouver, and Victoria.<sup>124</sup> The dedication concluded with a singing of the national anthem, followed by a rendition of “America.” (figure 3.14)

By engaging in such an over-the-top, dramatic pageantry, Portlanders invented the

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<sup>122</sup> Fahl, 123.

<sup>123</sup> “Highway is Dedicated,” *Oregonian*, June 8, 1916, p. 1, 16.

<sup>124</sup> Fahl, p. 140-141, n. 81.

stories they wanted to tell about their city, about the natural spaces in the Gorge, and about the newly completed roadway. In doing so they also connected an imagined pioneer history to the modern era. The stark contrasts between past and present, savagery and civilization, “Indian chief” and Rose Queen helped the pageant participants imagine the past and future in relation to these powerful stories.

Celebrations of a regional “pioneer spirit” appear in many of the materials associated with the Columbia River Highway, but they were especially prevalent in coverage of its dedication. Lancaster’s comments typified this attention paid to the past: “Those who braved the terrors of the great river and overcame the rugged mountain barriers are entitled to all honor and praise from this generation which now enjoys the fruits of their labors.”<sup>125</sup> Evocations of pioneer hardships helped middle-class Portlanders understand what made their region unique, even as a very real native presence was first ignored, and then mocked, by a man dressed up in feathers and buckskin.

Like other racialized representations of native peoples, the invention of a “Chief Multnomah” helped the participants see an imagined past that had meaning in the present.<sup>126</sup> In playing Indian those who dedicated the highway did more than just position themselves as the benefactors of an epic conflict between savagery and civilization. They understood *nature* as evidence of a manifest destiny already come to

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<sup>125</sup> Lancaster, 46.

<sup>126</sup> Playing the part of Chief Multnomah was Marshall N. Dana, the editor of the *Oregon Journal*. Only a year earlier, Dana spoke at the opening of The Dalles-Celilo Canal, where he declared that the future of the Columbia River Gorge was “almost beyond computation.” “Civilization,” he said, “may well make here its most splendid achievements.” Quotation from William G. Robbins, “The World of Columbia River Salmon: Nature, Culture, and the Great River of the West,” in *The Northwest Salmon Crisis: A Documentary History*, eds. Joseph Cone and Sandy Ridlington (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1996), 14-15.

pass. The unveiling of the Columbia's scenic potential was the endpoint, the culmination of that larger story that ended with the technological mastery of the machine in the garden. Fictionalized, generic Indian people, people who remained part of nature, who retreated back to the forest after refusing the seemingly obvious benefits of modernity, helped Portlanders understand the significance of their new technological accomplishment. That engineers had built a scenic highway was evidence that the newest people of the river could get the best of all worlds. It was modernity that promised to deliver the moral power of pristine nature, a power that promised to redeem and renew. In this way the landscape of the Columbia functioned as an ideological marker of Euro-American superiority, the backdrop for an epic march of history now made visible in the landscape. The river's scenic qualities—the lush vegetation, cascading waterfalls, large Douglas fir trees, and dramatic vistas—came to be understood in relation to these larger narratives, and Portlanders who were keen to forget a history of dispossession could look at the Columbia River and infuse it with these new meanings.

In this way the dedication of the Columbia River Highway allowed Portlanders an opportunity to celebrate more than the completion of a roadway. The ceremony united Portland's business elite with a growing middle-class eager to craft identity through consumption. It connected a thoroughly "modern" piece of infrastructure to a timeless and romantic past, and it celebrated an idealized history that was democratic and free of violence and dispossession. It positioned nature as redemptive, and the Columbia as the fealty of Portland's kingdom. In this way the social meanings given to the Columbia River Highway reinforced and legitimized a mythologized history of the Columbia River itself, constructing a landscape defined by its contrasts between the modern and the

ancient, between the technologically advanced and the timeless. By leaving their urban neighborhoods and driving to the Columbia River, tourists experienced the landscape of the Columbia much in the same way that Bierstadt and Ludlow had fifty years earlier. Yet after construction of the road they didn't have to charter a trip on a steamboat or undertake a tour of the nation's most inspiring natural places to get access to romantic nature. Highway tours on the river were closer, quicker, and cheaper to undertake, as most people visited by automobile. Instead of gazing upon Bierstadt's vision of a romanticized river, Portlanders could experience a different type of composition. This time the medium was the meandering path of the highway, and the canvas looked like an automobile's windshield.

Years after the completion of the highway, Samuel Hill was still actively trying to promote Maryhill and the eastern side of the Columbia River Gorge. Hoping to build interest in a hydroelectric project, Hill invited the Oregon Legislature out to his castle one more time, this time inviting the Washington State Legislature to accompany them. But perhaps as a reflection of his older age or fading reputation, this time it didn't go as he planned and both groups failed to make the trip.<sup>127</sup> Samuel Lancaster spent a considerable amount of time promoting the highway and the larger project of road appreciation and beautification, even giving a personal tour to fellow preservationist Steven Mather—who would go on to mimic Lancaster's highway design in a number of parks as head of the National Park Service.<sup>128</sup> The Columbia continued to hold special significance for Lancaster. This remained true even after he visited Europe, after he constructed highways around Mt. Rainier and the North Rim of the Grand Canyon, and after he

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<sup>127</sup> Tuhy, 266.

<sup>128</sup> *Oregonian*, August 16, 1919, p. 11, as cited in Fahl, 139, n. 65.

retired and no longer gave lectures and slideshows highlighting his accomplishment. The expansive views from high on top of the highway evoked a sense of humility and awe in Lancaster—a reaction he shared with the many visitors who reveled in the romantic and technological sublime. Eventually the Columbia River Highway would become insufficient for the region’s commercial traffic, a development Lancaster anticipated in 1932 when he proposed a more practical, river-level highway through the Columbia River Gorge.<sup>129</sup> Staying true to his original vision, Lancaster emphasized that the old Columbia River Highway, soon to be called the “Historic Columbia River Highway” ought to be managed with beauty as its primary feature, still referring to his highway as “a poem in stone.”<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Fahl, 103, 131.

<sup>130</sup> Samuel Lancaster, *Oregon Journal* (Portland), May 8, 1932, mag, sec., p. 3; *Oregonian* (Portland), January 11, 1935, p. 5. Lancaster’s reference to the highway as poetry from a personal inscription of the first page of his book, Oregon Historical Society, Vertical File, Biography—Samuel Christopher Lancaster, Folder 1.



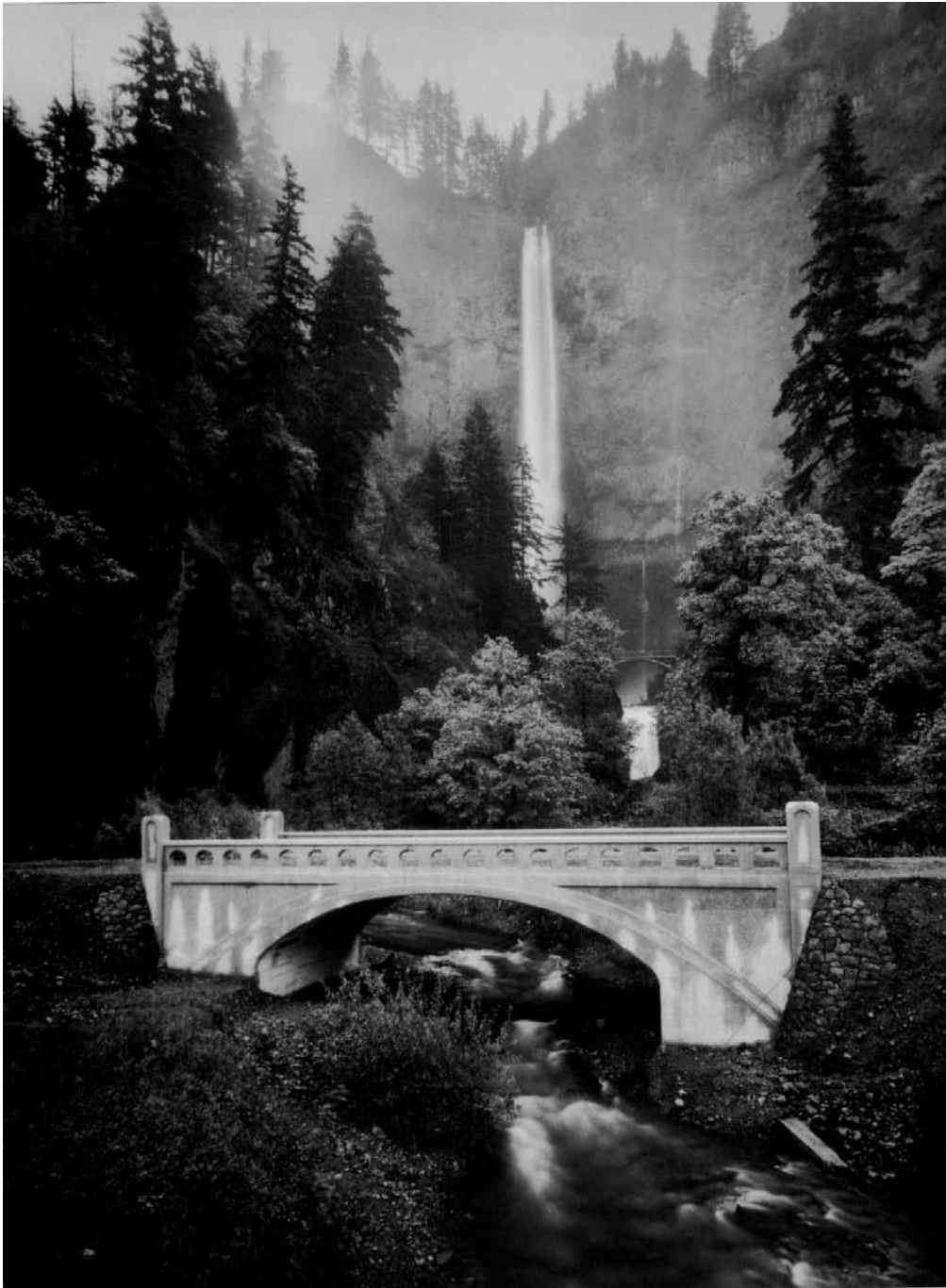
**Figure 3.1**



**Thinking of Italy. Samuel C. Lancaster. 1911.**

Source: Oregon Historical Society, as reprinted in Terry Toedtmeier and John Laursen, *Wild Beauty, Photographs of the Columbia River Gorge, 1867-1957* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2008), 203.

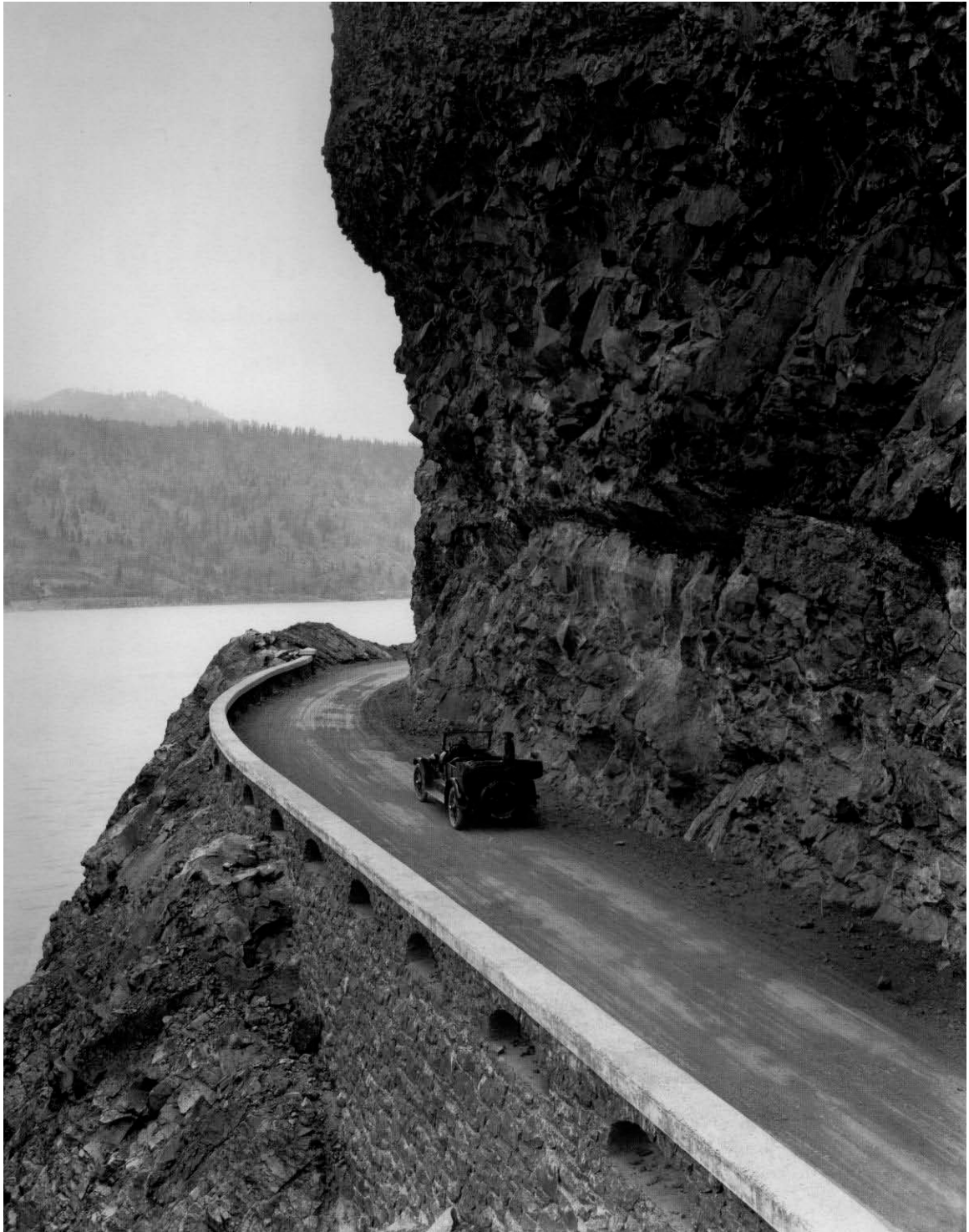
**Figure 3.2**



**Highway and Benson Bridge at Multnomah Falls. Geroge Weister. 1916.** Samuel Lancaster surveyed the location of the highway with visual strategies in mind, framing particular views and placing the road near waterfalls and scenic vistas.

Source: Oregon Historical Society, as reprinted in Terry Toedtemeier and John Laursen, *Wild Beauty, Photographs of the Columbia River Gorge, 1867-1957* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2008), 225.

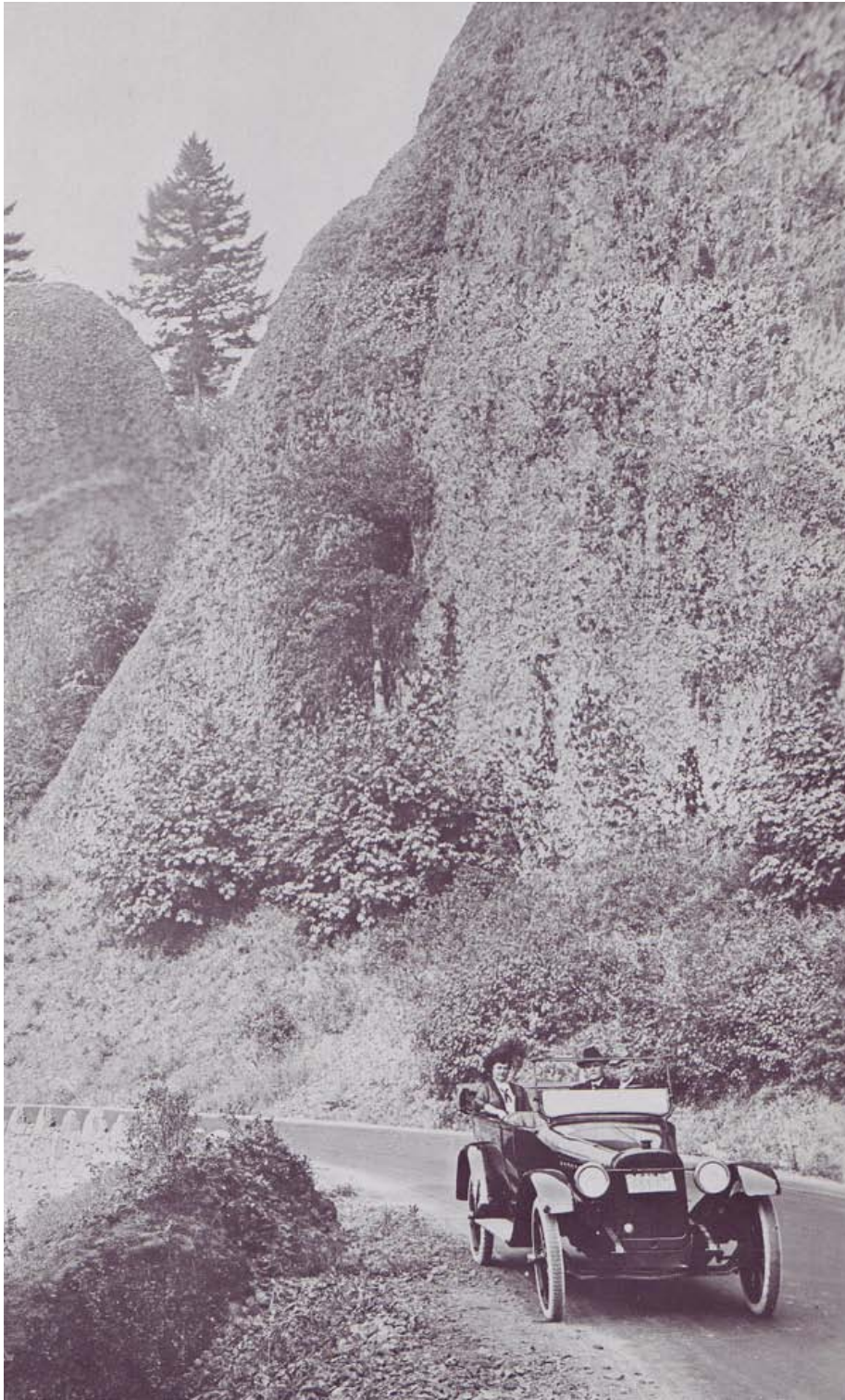
**Figure 3.3**



**Highway's Approach to Mitchell Point. Arthur M. Prentiss. 1916.**

Source: Oregon Historical Society.

**Figure 3.4**



**Samuel Lancaster (and an unnamed companion) travel the highway.**

Source: Oregon Historical Society.

**Figure 3.5**



**Volunteer Road Workers From Portland.** Supporters of the scenic highway organized volunteer “work” parties where interested Portlanders could travel to the construction site by train, work for a few hours, enjoy a boxed lunch, and then return to Portland.

Source: Oregon Historical Society, 38744.

**Figure 3.6**



**Stereoptican Slides. Crown Point (above) and Sheppard's Dell Bridge.**

Source: Mike Midlo and Charlotte Becker, *Sam Hill. The Oregon Experience* (Portland, OR: Oregon Public Broadcasting, 2006) episode 101.

**Figure 3.7**



**Shepperd's Dell Bridge. By Clarence L. Winter. 1916.** Illustrated in the same manner as Hill and Lancaster's glass slides, this print of Shepperd's Dell Bridge reveals the way the highway's built structures "fit within" the landscape, demonstrating how the meanings of both the 'technologically impressive' road and 'pure and natural' landscape were linked to one another.

Source: Oregon Historical Society, as reprinted in Terry Toedtmeier and John Laursen, *Wild Beauty, Photographs of the Columbia River Gorge, 1867-1957* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2008), 219.

**Figure 3.8**



**Construction of the Columbia River Highway, Oneonta Tunnel.**

Source: Oregon Historical Society, 57753.



**Figure 3.9**



**Tunnel at Mitchell Point.** John Arthur Elliott modeled the 390-foot Mitchell Point Tunnel on the tunnel overlooking Lake Uri (Lake Lucerne) on the Auxeustrasse, in Switzerland. While the Swiss tunnel's window openings were constructed with masonry columns, Elliot hoped to best that design with natural basalt supports and window alignments designed to accentuate natural light—another example of how planners sought to produce features that would fit within the natural landscape. By the early 1940s Elliott's pilasters between the tunnel's windows were disintegrating and rock was falling onto the railroad tracks below, and in 1954 the Oregon State Highway Department rerouted the highway around the Mitchell Point Tunnel. In 1966, during construction of the widened, four-lane highway, the tunnel was destroyed.

Source: Oregon Historical Society.

**Figure 3.10**



**The Rowena Loops.** The snaking, curving figure-eight pattern that came to be called “The Rowena Loops” is an example of how the Columbia River Highway was built to accommodate early automobiles that traveled at slower speeds. The curves’ tight radii and the highway’s meandering path strive to maintain a gentle five percent grade.

Source: Oregon Historical Society.

**Figure 3.11**



**Tourists at Crown Point. By George Weister. 1918.**

Source: Oregon Historical Society, as reprinted in Terry Toedtmeier and John Laursen, *Wild Beauty, Photographs of the Columbia River Gorge, 1867-1957* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2008).

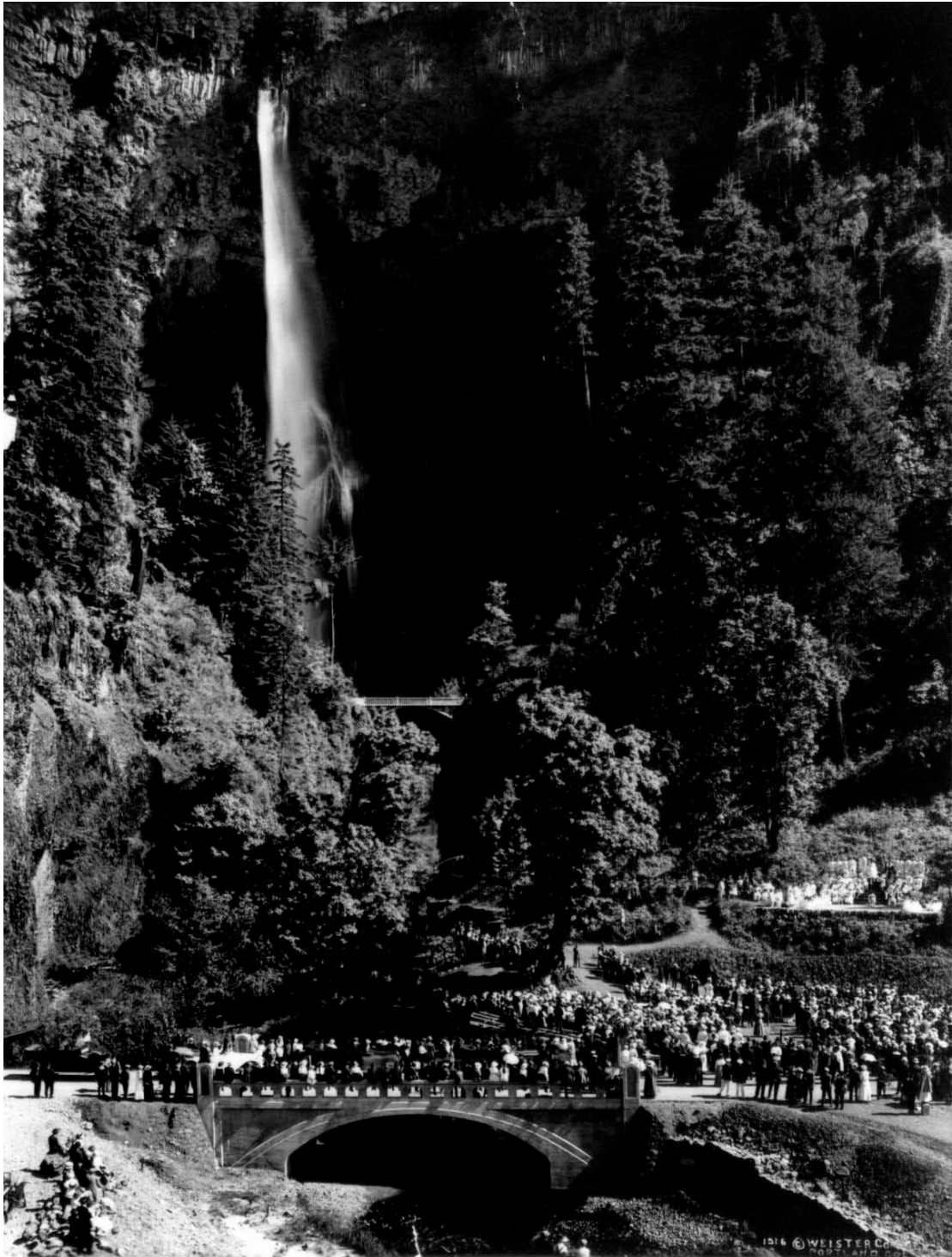
**Figure 3.12**



**Postcard of the view from Crown Point. Rooster Rock. By Benjamin Gifford.**

Source: Oregon Historical Society.

**Figure 3.13**



**Dedication of Columbia Highway. Benson Bridges at Multnomah Falls.**

Source: Oregon Historical Society, 11730.

**Figure 3.14**



**Royal Rosarians at the Columbia River Highway Dedication.**

Source: Oregon Historical Society, 106233.

## Chapter 4

### ***Hydro!*, Bonneville Dam, and the Making of a Modern Columbia River**

On May 12, 1941, the famous American folksinger Woody Guthrie walked into the offices of the Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) in northeast Portland, Oregon. Having just arrived from California, Guthrie came to the BPA in search of Stephen Kahn, an ambitious young public relations officer who had recently offered him a job making a film. After several weeks of silence, Kahn had all but given up on the folksinger, and so he was more than a little surprised when Guthrie appeared in his office, unannounced, with wife and three kids in tow. Dressed in a sweat-stained khaki shirt and pants, with a guitar slung over his back, un-showered and unshaven, Guthrie showed up with a mattress thrown onto the top of his Pontiac, with nowhere to live and only the car to his name. Two weeks later, creditors would catch wind that Guthrie was in Portland, and repossess the Pontiac.

Perhaps taking pity on Woody Guthrie or perhaps trying to get some momentum behind his filmmaking project, Stephen Kahn decided to do what he could to help out. After talking for several hours, Kahn realized that Woody was, “pretty deep into the class struggle,” and that the singer’s leftist politics would likely prevent his appointment through the usual government channels. In a clever bureaucratic move, Kahn thought he might avoid such oversight if he could get his boss to approve a temporary appointment, which would give the singer thirty days to do the work. Kahn sent Guthrie in to see his

boss, BPA administrator Paul Raver, with the clear instructions to sing, play his guitar, and “don’t talk.” It took Guthrie only a few songs before Raver approved a position as an “informational consultant.” At the end of the first night on the job, Guthrie sat down and wrote the first draft of “Roll On, Columbia,” a song that would eventually be labeled the official folk song of the state of Washington. Guthrie wrote:

*Roll on, Columbia, roll on,  
Roll on, Columbia, roll on.  
Your power is turning our darkness to dawn  
So roll on, Columbia, roll on.*<sup>1</sup>

For the following month Woody Guthrie traveled up and down the Columbia River, wrote over twenty songs about the region, and provided what Kahn described as “the common touch” to the BPA’s fledgling filmmaking efforts. For his work writing songs about the Columbia River, Woody Guthrie would be paid a total of \$266.66, a modest wage for a month’s worth of work.<sup>2</sup>

So goes the story of Woody Guthrie in the Pacific Northwest, a story that has attracted much attention in recent years, inspiring a number of popular magazine articles, academic papers, musical tributes, and even a documentary film. Guthrie sang of “green Douglas Fir trees” and “snow-capped mountain breezes,” “royal Chinook salmon” and

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<sup>1</sup> For lyrics and music to “Roll On Columbia,” see Woody Guthrie and Bill Murlin, *Roll On Columbia: The Columbia River Songs* (Portland, Oregon: Bonneville Power Administration, 1987), 2-3.

<sup>2</sup> Kahn’s comments appear in *Roll on Columbia, Woody Guthrie & the Bonneville Power Administration*, videocassette, produced by Michael Majdic, Denise Matthews, Lynette Boone, Andy Kirkpatrick, and Dan Miller (Eugene, OR: Knight Library Media Services, University of Oregon, 2000). For information about Woody Guthrie’s time in the Pacific Northwest, see Robert Carriker, “Ten Dollars a Song: Woody Guthrie Sells His Talent to the Bonneville Power Administration,” *Columbia* 15 (2001): 32-36, Robert Clark, *River of the West: Stories from the Columbia* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins West, 1995), 250-307, Ed Cray, *Ramblin Man: The Life and Times of Woody Guthrie* (New York: Norton 2004), 207-214, John R. Gold, “Roll On Columbia: Woody Guthrie, Migrants’ Tales, and Regional Transformation in the Pacific Northwest,” *Journal of Cultural Geography* 18 (1998): 83-98, Bill Murlin, *Roll On Columbia, The Columbia River Songs, Woody Guthrie, “My Life,”* in *Pastures of Plenty: A Self Portrait*, ed. Dave Marsh and Harold Leventhal (New York: Harpercollins, 1990), 9-10, and Mark Allan Jackson, *Prophet Singer: The Voice and Vision of Woody Guthrie* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 100-105.



“the big Celilo Falls.” He praised the dams as “the biggest thing man has ever done,” saw “electricity” as capable of helping out the little guy, and described how the development of the Columbia meant jobs for those who needed them most.<sup>3</sup> The Columbia River songs that Woody Guthrie wrote during that one month in 1941 are known as some of his best; catchy, evocative, thoughtful compositions that one historian called, “the century’s most lasting images of the river.”<sup>4</sup> Performed by local artists and taught to children in local elementary schools, the songs are notable both for Guthrie’s lyrical appreciation of the region’s beauty and for his enthusiastic embrace of the large hydroelectric dams along the river.

Beginning in 1933, the federal government built a number of massive concrete dams on the main stem of the river. Gone would be the free-flowing Columbia of centuries past. In its place came a new kind of river—one harnessed to provide cheap energy for industrial development, an abundance of water for arid farmlands, and transportation routes for ocean-going ships and barges. At the time of Woody Guthrie’s visit to Portland in 1941, the Army Corps of Engineers had just completed the first of the large dams at Bonneville, and was well into the construction of the second dam, at Grand Coulee. In the years that followed came more dams: McNary, Chief Joseph, The Dalles, Priest Rapids, and then others. In addition to those dams built directly on the Columbia itself, thirty more were built on its tributaries. In total, the federal government built the large dams at an astounding rate, averaging nearly a dam per year, for over forty years.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> All of Woody Guthrie’s Columbia River songs are available in Bill Murlin, *Roll On Columbia, The Columbia River Songs*.

<sup>4</sup> Richard White, *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), 62.

<sup>5</sup> There are fourteen main stem dams, eleven in the United States, and nearly 40 dams total on the Columbia and its tributaries. Mark Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and its Disappearing*

(figures 1.7, 4.1, 4.2)

This explosion of federal dam construction was, at least at the time, exceedingly popular within the region. In 1933, in the midst of the Great Depression, the decision to build the first of the large federal dams was made in haste. When the news broke during a meeting of the Willamette Democratic Society, Julius Meier, the governor of Oregon, hailed the moment as “the greatest impetus to development since Oregon became a state,” and the audience broke into spontaneous applause.<sup>6</sup> In Portland, one citizen recalled an impromptu parade in the streets, where businessmen yelled and shouted to others that the river was getting a dam.<sup>7</sup> Another resident told a local newspaper that Bonneville Dam would help make Portland “the Chicago of the west,”<sup>8</sup> and the *Oregon Journal* ran an editorial that noted that Bonneville was “the biggest thing that has happened to Portland in years.” The paper continued: “It [Bonneville Dam] means increased values of all property in Portland...Electric power development from the dam will mean an industrial empire in the West, an empire that a great geographic engineer in the East predicted would outstrip New York in industry, wealth, the arts, and probably literature...for Portland, what a time, what a day, what tidings!”<sup>9</sup> Less than a month after getting the go ahead, contractors began putting people to work surveying and planning for Bonneville Dam. Contracts were signed and planners were hired, as the Bonneville project brought employment to many in need of work. Pacific Northwesterners, for years concerned that their region would never be more than an economic backwater to the nation, saw the

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*Water* (New York: Viking, 1986), 164-5.

<sup>6</sup> “Protests Give Way to Cheers for Dam,” *Oregonian*, September 26, 1933, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Wesley Arden Dick, “When Dams Weren’t Damned: The Public Power Crusade and Visions of the Good Life in the Pacific Northwest in the 1930s,” *Environmental Review* 13 (1989), 122.

<sup>8</sup> “Chamber Plans Dam Celebration,” *Oregonian*, September 27, 1933, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> “What A Day,” *Oregon Journal*, July 23, 1933, sec. 1, p. 6.

commissioning of Bonneville as the dawn of a new era. Members of the Portland Chamber of Commerce were ecstatic, viewing the dam as the best chance to boost local production and spur economic growth. Labor leaders praised the project for the skilled jobs it would create, and the resources it would bring into production. Instantly, locals looking for work began asking how to sign up.

Less enthusiastic about the Dam were the private power utilities, railroads (who had an interest in maintaining a transportation monopoly), and conservatives who worried about government involvement in the marketing and distribution of Columbia River energy. Yet even most skeptics of government intervention were amenable to the *construction* of the dam itself, viewing the prospects of cheap hydroelectricity as a boon to private industry. In fact the only outright criticism of the Bonneville project came from those who argued that it would produce *too much* energy – that there wouldn't be a market to consume the vast amount of power that would be created, and that such a meager benefit wouldn't justify the costs.<sup>10</sup> Naysayers claimed that “generators surely would rust, spillways would crumble, [and] wires never would be energized.” Journalist Richard Neuberger later recalled that opponents of the dams compared them with the Pyramids of Egypt, massive structures that weren't worth the effort it took to build them.<sup>11</sup> Yet when President Roosevelt approved the construction of Bonneville in 1933, proponents and opponents of river development alike believed that the Pacific Northwest would soon attract industries capable of developing their foremost asset – the abundant natural resources located throughout the region.<sup>12</sup> Bonneville Dam, they imagined,

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<sup>10</sup> See Jim Marshall, “Dam of Doubt,” *Colliers* 99 (June 19, 1937): 19, 82-4.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Neuberger, as quoted in E. Kimbark MacColl, *The Growth of a City: Power and Politics in Portland, Oregon, 1915-1950*. (Portland, Oregon: Georgian Press, 1979), 447.

<sup>12</sup> The name “Bonneville” was originally the name of the local stop on the Union Pacific Railroad. The

would transform the region into what they always hoped it could become, something akin to an industrial Eden, a ‘promised land’ that would be the final chapter in the nation’s heroic march West, from sea to shining sea.

Today the legacy of Bonneville, Grand Coulee, and other major dams on the Columbia River is decidedly mixed. On one hand, the Pacific Northwest—indeed the entire nation—benefited from the cheap hydroelectricity that the dams delivered. The dams turned the river into an international shipping artery, attracted manufacturing industries to Portland and Seattle, provided enough aluminum, steel, and enriched plutonium to win the Second World War, and created an agricultural boom by irrigating the vast inland deserts of Oregon and Washington.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, Bonneville and the other big dams soon became synonymous with environmental decline, as they irreparably altered the Columbia’s ecosystem, transformed a free-flowing river into a series of wide reservoirs, disrupted the traditional fishing grounds of native peoples, and contributed to the overall population decline of the Columbia River salmon—an iconic fish of economic, political, and cultural importance to many in the region.

Before the dam's consequences for the salmon prompted a reevaluation of its advantages and disadvantages, Bonneville was hailed as a “pinnacle of progress,” a symbolic marker of modernity, and evidence of American technological superiority. Richly imbued with cultural, political, and social meanings, the dam (and the act of building it) marks an important moment of physical transformation on the Columbia,

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railroad stop was named after Benjamin Louis Eulalie de Bonneville, a fur trader, soldier, and explorer for the U.S. Army. Later in life Bonneville was briefly given the command post at nearby Fort Vancouver, but his real fame came when Washington Irving wrote about his exploits in 1836 in *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville* (New York: J.B. Alden, 1886).

<sup>13</sup> Scientists working in the Manhattan Project used Columbia River hydroelectricity to power the “B Reactor” at Hanford, Washington—the plutonium production facility that made nearly all of the U.S.’s nuclear weapons.

most importantly for what it reveals about shifting cultural *perceptions* of the river.<sup>14</sup> In the late 1930s, residents of the Pacific Northwest understood the Columbia through a discourse of modernity, and they explained the changes to the river with familiar stories about national greatness. The dam, they thought, was evidence of social, economic, and technological progress, the latest crowning achievement for the region and the nation, and a testament to the ingenuity of the laborers, engineers, and bureaucrats who built it. Most who looked upon the structure were awestruck by what modern engineering could accomplish. Visitors gazed in wonder upon its snaking, crackling power lines, mammoth concrete piers, and wide steel gates and were amazed by the audacity and scale of the undertaking. They marveled that the mighty Columbia River had been tamed, and they understood Bonneville Dam as an indication of human mastery over the natural world.

The Columbia, like so many other rivers during the first half of the twentieth century, had begun its transformation into an “engineered river” – or, what one scholar has famously termed, an “organic machine.”<sup>15</sup> Designed to provide the greatest public good for the largest number of people over the longest period of time, the dam soon provided wealth to the region and the nation.<sup>16</sup> In the years both before and after the construction of Bonneville Dam, a discursive pattern focusing on its “utility” became the dominant way of understanding the river. This utilitarian narrative measured the Columbia’s value in the goods and services it provided – for navigation, for flood control, for irrigation, for fish, for hydroelectricity – but found its most perfect expression in

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<sup>14</sup> Bonneville might not have had the same ecological, or political effect as the much bigger, Grand Coulee, but because Bonneville was built *first*, it marks changes in the cultural beliefs about the river.

<sup>15</sup> The famous moniker is from Richard White, *The Organic Machine*.

<sup>16</sup> The “greatest good...” tenant of utilitarian conservation is well articulated by historian Dan Flores, in his short essay “Societies to Match the Scenery: Twentieth-Century Environmental History in the American West,” in *A Companion to the American West*, ed. William Devereaux, Blackwell Companions to American History (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2004), 260.

kilowatts, a unit of abstraction that allowed the energy of the river to be bought and sold, transported, consumed, and managed in an entirely different fashion, on an entirely different scale. Kilowatts were not tangible in the way that boats and fish were. One could not look out on the river and see a kilowatt. Instead, kilowatts expressed power just as money expressed value, and with a transformed, harnessed Columbia River, both money and kilowatts held the promise of being interchangeable. Transformed into hydroelectricity, the water that flowed through the dam flowed like cash into the government's coffers. Human intervention was required to make this machine work, to turn on the spigot, to “improve” the river. With the building of Bonneville Dam, the Columbia River became what it is today—a hybridized river tangled up in complex, sometimes contradictory meanings. The planning and construction of Bonneville Dam marked the beginning of a new era on the river, a watershed moment that ushered in today’s common-sense understandings of the *modern* Columbia.

Yet to fully understand the attitudes and beliefs that prompted these vast changes, one must look past Woody Guthrie’s Columbia River Songs to the organization that hired him, to a young Information Officer named Stephen Kahn and a documentary film he created about the Columbia River. In 1939 Kahn, working with director Gunther Fritsch, completed work on *Hydro!* – a thirty-three minute documentary film that detailed the construction of Bonneville Dam. Commissioned as an effort to promote the BPA and its policies, *Hydro!* recounted the river's recent history from the agency's perspective. “*Hydro!*, the Story of Columbia River Power,” relied heavily upon voice-over narration to get its points across. Part newsreel “fact film” and part New Deal agitprop, *Hydro!* sought to balance the dual goals of objective reportage and emotive persuasion – with the

result being a film that was equal parts instructive and bombastic in its praise for the development of the river. Although favorably received by agency officials and generally liked by the popular press, *Hydro!* failed to inspire much of a following from the public at large. In 1941, facing public opposition to their public power policies, BPA officials asked Kahn to make a second film, this time focusing on making it more audience friendly. It was then that Kahn sought out the songwriting talents of Woody Guthrie. Though Guthrie was successful in writing songs that the public found compelling, his efforts were confounded by the Second World War, for in the midst of that effort the film was not completed. After the war, Kahn returned to the project and finished the film, titled it *The Columbia*, but was not able to release it until 1949—long after public opinion about the agency, the dam, and the engineered river had already taken shape. While *The Columbia* promoted the goals of the BPA and incorporated information about its wartime activities, *Hydro!* focused exclusively on arguments for a multi-use development that were prevalent in the 1930s. Though the film has never attracted substantial attention from historians or film scholars, *Hydro!* is a quintessentially revealing document of the 1930s, making clear a number of patterns in how both local residents and government officials first understood the meaning, purpose, and value of Bonneville and the newly engineered river.<sup>17</sup>

### ***Hydro!* and the Construction of Bonneville Dam**

The film began with splashy images of lightness and darkness. As the Department of Interior's official seal gave way to the film's title sequence, the letters H – Y – D – R – O – ! flash across the screen. (figure 4.3) Bright, bold, and *electrified*, the

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<sup>17</sup> While there are several references to the film *Hydro!* In the secondary literature, there is only one sustained analysis of the film. See Harry Menig, "Woody Guthrie: *The Columbia* and the B.P.A. Documentary: *Hydro*," *Film & History* 5 (May 1975): 1-10.

letters appear like bolts of lightning in the night sky. In contrast to the darkness of the landscape behind it, the title saturates the screen with the brightest of hues, creating an overexposed luminescence that surely must have forced viewers to shade their eyes while watching. As silhouettes of electrical towers loomed overhead, a dark web of power lines spread out across the sky. On the screen appears the icons of the electric age—the wires, towers, and transistors that moved electricity across the landscape.

By including these symbols in the opening scenes, the makers of *Hydro!* inspired a sense of mystery, even danger. Lending emphasis to this feeling of danger was the Los Angeles Symphony Orchestra, who performed a score that loomed large in the film, giving audiences a tangible sense of movement that varied with the material on screen, rising and falling to accentuate the ominous and celebrate the grandiose. As the title sequence passed, the music transitioned from mysterious to triumphant and the scene shifted to a slow, panning, wide-angle shot of the Columbia River Gorge, where an authoritative male voice invited audiences to understand the Columbia River in very particular terms:

Since the days of Lewis and Clark, America has looked westward to the Columbia River. An endless caravan has followed the Oregon Trail to the broad Columbia, whose waters drain an empire as large as England and France. To countless Americans, the Columbia has been a river of hope, a shining symbol of plenty, with its water and woods, its wheat lands, pastures, and power. And men have followed the great river of the West down to the Pacific, on foot, and wagon, and raft, later by highway, rail, and steamer. Ceaselessly they came, to sow their crops and cut their timber, to ship them down the Columbia to the markets of the world. To build the empire Thomas Jefferson envisioned when America was young.

Crafted for wide appeal, the film began by looking backward, framing the history of the Columbia as exemplary—yet another example of the familiar frontier story that was a sanitized (and often fictionalized) account of the region’s past.<sup>18</sup> Edited into discrete

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<sup>18</sup> The founding premise of this particular frontier mythology was that the areas around the Columbia



segments, each lasting four to six seconds, *Hydro!* moved with the familiar cadence of a government-sponsored newsreel.<sup>19</sup> But by far the most salient feature of the film was the voice-over narration, wherein the omnipotent, baritone voice of narrator Phil Irwin gave meaning to the images on the screen. Irwin's voice was the embodiment of confidence and authority, it *itself* was progress, and it demanded belief from its audiences. It was the iconic voice, one might argue, of the 1930s government documentary—close kin to the narrator of Pare Lorentz's *The Plow That Broke The Plains* (1936) and *The River* (1938). The “Story of Columbia River Power” was a tale of transformation, and in the film the Columbia became “America’s greatest power stream.” References to Lewis, Clark, and Thomas Jefferson transported viewers back to 1804, and change on the river was explained as part of a national struggle between humans and nature, with the damming of the river being the culmination of the nation’s Manifest Destiny.<sup>20</sup> In this film, river development was part of a long-standing battle—a battle between humans and the natural world. And the creators of *Hydro!* were out to convince audiences that the humans were winning.

Scenes of a violent and raging Columbia focused audience attention on the size and power of the river. Close-up shots of the fast-moving current cut to the water boiling and crashing over the river’s rapids. Salmon battled their way upstream through the whitewater, and Indian peoples dipped their nets at Celilo Falls. Seamlessly, the film shifted from its conception of the river’s past to the river’s present, as the film knitted the

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River (like all the land in the Western United States) were empty, and hence ready to be settled. In reality, invading Euro-Americans went to great lengths to obscure, usurp, purchase, or simply appropriate Native title to the land.

<sup>19</sup> This rhythm, while common among the documentaries of the time, could also be contributed to the auteur, as director Gunther Fritsch would later go on to direct and produce the famous *March of Time* newsreels.

<sup>20</sup> And, not incidentally, acts of conquest appeared as part of this human-nature struggle, instead of a human-human struggle.

construction of Bonneville Dam into the fabric of the historical narrative:

An Army of skilled men, many of them jobless for years, work at top-speed to outwit the rising water. Out of steel and concrete, they weld their answer to the river's fury. Like a gothic cathedral, Bonneville rises block on block, an enduring monument to the men who are building the West. Together they scoop four million yards out of the rock-studded depths of Cascade rapids. At its foot, they threw up a million yard barrier of concrete. Mix and pour. Mix and pour. Day and night, sand and gravel and cement were merged in the massive structure rising in the river chasm.

Gushing praise on the endeavor, *Hydro!* argued that with Bonneville, the human conquest of nature was complete. The dam was indisputable evidence of progress, a marker of national success in the long struggle against the frontier. Having established that the development of the Columbia (and, by extension, the presence of the BPA) was the best thing to come to the region in decades, the second half of *Hydro!* featured a number of examples of what Bonneville power could offer. Cascade Locks, Forest Grove, and several other communities exemplified towns already enjoying the benefits of Columbia River power. Designed to make Bonneville's many benefits relevant to average viewers, the narrator explained, point by point, how the Columbia now provided for all the people, while the images on the screen depicted white, middle-class children playing under electric lights, farmers using electric equipment to milk their cows, and women cooking on electric stoves. Issue by issue, the film then proceeded to list the many ways the Columbia had been improved. The filmmakers were particularly fond of rhetorical flourish, and, like many of the federally-produced documentaries of the 1930s and 1940s, *Hydro!* often overstated its case: "The back of the American way of life is hydro, the controlled power of the river, the thrust of the turbine, the crescendo of the generator, humming a saga of man's triumph over a continent...In the chaos of a troubled world, while other nations struggle for land and markets, America builds her own, her power and

her glory, she takes up the challenge of the Columbia.”

In crafting the message of *Hydro!* Stephen Kahn balanced his desire to persuade with the need to appear “fact-based” or objective, and the film blurred the boundaries between the two. In the early 1930s, the conventions of the documentary film genre were in flux, with little consensus as to the form’s primary social and artistic functions. Seen simultaneously as objective reportage, propaganda, and artistic enterprise, government-sponsored films attracted a lot of attention from the media, politicians, and the public at large. In this period documentaries were seen as having more artistic merit and formal composition than simple newsreels, yet the form remained firmly distinguished from the fictional cinematic apparatus defined by Hollywood. This middle space allowed the films to speak to contemporary social and political issues, and the genre became a popular tool that New Deal policymakers used to promote federal policies.<sup>21</sup>

Not surprisingly, *Hydro!* drew extensively from several other documentary films that preceded it—most notably the two most famous films made by Pare Lorentz: *The Plow That Broke The Plains* and *The River*. Perhaps the foremost examples of Depression-era documentary filmmaking, Lorentz’s documentaries drew attention to the human role in creating environmental problems. Lauded as effective instruments for publicizing New Deal policy, both *The Plow* and *The River* were widely distributed and

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<sup>21</sup> Film scholar Bill Nichols argued that in the 1930s the defining conventions of the American documentary were dialogic, continuously negotiated by both practitioners and audiences, as each subsequent text helped define the form. See Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 12-31. For information on Pare Lorentz and his documentaries see Finis Dunaway, “New Deal Jeremiads,” *Environmental History* 12 (April 2007): 308-12, *Natural Visions: The Power of Images in American Environmental Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 33-116, Charlie Keil, “American Documentary Finds Its Voice: Persuasion and Expression in *The Plow That Broke the Plains* and *The City*,” in *Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video*, ed. Barry Keith Grant and Jeannette Sloniowski (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), Robert L. Snyder, *Pare Lorentz and the Documentary Film* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1994), and Charles Wolfe, “The Poetics and Politics of Nonfiction: Documentary Film,” in *Grand Design: Hollywood as Modern Business Enterprise*, ed. Tino Balio (New York: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1993), 352.

earned substantial critical acclaim. Entertaining and controversial, the films were also subjected to angry partisan attacks made by those who disagreed with the films' conclusions. In this sense, they were obviously pushing a message, even as they operated under the banner of "objective" documentary. Opponents of the New Deal were particularly angry that public monies had funded the films, and several loudly claimed that the Roosevelt Administration was making nothing more than "propaganda." Newspapers focused on Pare Lorentz's directorial style—which mixed powerful imagery, cadenced voice-over narration, and the somewhat novel message that humans were guilty of exasperating environmental problems.<sup>22</sup> The public found Lorentz's tragic plots compelling, and the films gained notoriety for both their style and their controversial arguments.<sup>23</sup>

By the end of the 1930s a surprising number of government agencies were busy trying to replicate Lorentz's model, and by the end of the decade, both the Work Progress Administration and the Resettlement Administration consciously used motion pictures as a major component of their public relations strategies. In November 1939, the *Motion Picture Herald* reported that the Departments of Agriculture, Interior, Treasury, were all making films in support of New Deal programs, as was the Federal Housing Administration, National Youth Administration, U.S. Public Health Service, U. S. Housing Authority, Tennessee Valley Authority, U. S. Maritime Commission, and the Veterans Administration. Even the U. S. Post Office was getting into the act.<sup>24</sup> By the

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<sup>22</sup> See Dunaway, Keil, Miller, Snyder, and Wolfe. In fact it was the widespread notoriety of both *The Plow* and *The River* that introduced the term "documentary" into public consciousness in the late 1930s. Wolfe, 364-5.

<sup>23</sup> By the early 1940s, government-sponsored documentaries sustained so many attacks from hostile factions in the Congress that it became too difficult to secure support (and sustain funding) for that type of filmmaking as a non-partisan political activity. Wolfe, 372.

<sup>24</sup> Francis L. Burt, "New Deal Held 'No. 1' Producer and Exhibitor of All Administrations," *Motion*

time BPA officials sought to emulate the form, these new films were popularly referred to as “documentaries” and the defining characteristics of that genre were familiar to filmmakers, cultural critics, and government officials interested in promoting New Deal policies.

Compared to its other, more notable, precursors, *Hydro!* never attracted a comparable amount of national attention or critical acclaim. Where Lorentz’s films were distinguished by both their compelling plots (both were powerful tragedies) and their innovative use of music and editing, *Hydro!* suffered from an obvious lack of both. Hence, when viewed in comparison to the visual and aural strategies employed in *The Plow* and *The River*, *Hydro!*’s aesthetic merits appear simplistic (if not outright neglected). Moving between discrete organizational segments, *Hydro!* relied heavily on voice-over narration to give a thematic logic to these otherwise unconnected images. Like other documentaries of the period, the visual images, devoid of narration, would have seemed scattered and without coherence. But the sound of the narrator’s voice gave dramatic movement to the images on the screen. Occasionally this voice would inflect to prompt a particular response in the viewer, lowering its tone to signify the ominous and rising to exalt the audience into profound admiration. This up and down nature of the voice-over narration gave a particular instructional power to its message, one that emphasized authority in the speaker and verity in his interpretation of the river. This aspect of the film’s production served to reinforce the authority of the BPA, and by extension, the federal government.<sup>25</sup>

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*Picture Herald* 25 (November 1939): 27-8, as cited in Wolfe, 435-6, n.26.

<sup>25</sup> My reading of the film’s narration was informed by Paul Arthur, “Jargons of Authenticity (Three American Moments),” in *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. Michael Renov (New York: Routledge, 1993) 108-34, Pascal Bonitzer, “The Silences of the Voice,” trans. Philip Rosen and Marcia Butzel, in

In a similar way, sound in *Hydro!* accentuated the basic plot of the narration, as the Los Angeles Symphony Orchestra performed a musical score that moved up and down to lend meaning to the images. Often, seemingly innocuous images were made scary or sinister by the darkening of the musical tone. Film historian Charlie Keil, commenting on other documentary films of the time period, argued that when the music and narration align with one another, “music both expresses and ‘possesses’ the same degree of knowledge as the narrator, one which extends beyond the temporally limited information exhibited within the images themselves.”<sup>26</sup> In *Hydro!* the aural and the visual were closely linked, but the images were almost completely dependent upon the narration and the music for their intended meanings.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the film probably did appear heavy-handed and overly pedantic, as the literal voice of the narrator overwhelmed the more subtle documentary voice created by the other components of the production.

Despite these artistic flaws, the BPA gave the film a widespread distribution. Beginning in 1939, the BPA screened *Hydro!* for over five hundred audiences in Oregon, Washington, and Western Idaho. The film also appeared outside of the Pacific Northwest

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*Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 319-34, Mary Ann Doane, “The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space,” *Yale French Studies* 60 (1980): 33-50, Charlie Keil, “American Documentary Finds Its Voice,” and Bill Nichols, “The Voice of Documentary,” *Film Quarterly* 36 (1983): 17-30.

<sup>26</sup> Charlie Keil, “American Documentary Finds Its Voice,” 127.

<sup>27</sup> Other filmmakers were much more hesitant about deploying voice-over narration to the extent that it was used in *Hydro!*. While narration could help the film be more persuasive, it also drew attention to the act of its creation, whereas if the narration was more limited, the ideological message could be delivered more experientially, within the film’s other components. The famous cinematographer Willard Van Dyke once commented that Pare Lorentz’s film *The River* exhibited the perfect amount of voice-over narration: “It was poetic. It fitted the film perfectly. It didn’t insult your intelligence by telling you what you were seeing on the screen, and it extended the dimensions of the visual images and the music.” Willard Van Dyke, “Documentaries of the 1930s” in *Journal of the University Film Association* 25 (1973): 45, as quoted in Keil, 123.

and was selected for national distribution by Fox MovieTone in the early 1940s.<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, it appears that the Roosevelt Administration was particularly fond of using the Columbia River development as an example of good government, and Vice President Henry Wallace had the film dubbed into half a dozen languages so he could use it to “promote democracy” on a tour of Asia.<sup>29</sup> In sum, the film left much to be desired aesthetically, but it is clear that the project was part of a successful public relations strategy.

From the outset, newspapers reported largely what the Army Corps of Engineers and BPA officials wanted, flocking to write weekly updates on the construction of the dam. Laudatory accounts of the size and scale of the project captivated the public, and popular press coverage quoted impressive statistics supplied by the official information offices. Curious members of the general public arrived at the construction site on a daily basis, and by some accounts numbered in the hundreds of thousands. In fact, Bonneville Dam attracted so many visitors that by the end of 1935 it was the largest tourist attraction in the Portland area.<sup>30</sup> By the time the dam neared completion, the construction site was the most popular tourist attraction in the entire state.<sup>31</sup>

Below Bonneville, the new, improved “multi-use” Columbia River existed much

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<sup>28</sup> Harry Menig, “Woody Guthrie: *The Columbia* and the B.P.A. Documentary: Hydro,” *Film & History* 5 (May 1975): n.27, 10, and “Hydro Miracle Wins Acclaim,” *Oregonian*, June 5, 1941, p. 9, 13.

<sup>29</sup> This according to Stephen Kahn, as quoted in *Roll on Columbia, Woody Guthrie & the Bonneville Power Administration*. The filmmakers also edited a shorter version of the film for more general audiences.

<sup>30</sup> The Portland Chamber of Commerce estimated that over 318,493 persons visited the location during 1935, and noted that their estimate only included those who entered the grounds (and not those who viewed the public works from the highway above). Perhaps the verity of this estimate could be in question, as both the Portland Chamber of Commerce and the *Oregonian* had long boosted the dam's benefits for the local economy. “Bonneville Dam Draws Multitude,” *Oregonian*, December 15, 1935, p. 20.

<sup>31</sup> Over a million persons visited the dam during 1937, according to the Portland Chamber of Commerce. The Oregon State Highway Commission spent over \$150,000 advertising the dam, and the Evergreen Playground Association spent \$35,000. See “Million Persons View Bonneville,” *Oregonian*, October 3, 1937, sec 1, p. 17.

as it had before the coming of the dam. Ocean tides continued to flow hundreds of miles up the river and seasonal runoff still clogged tributaries every spring.<sup>32</sup> But upstream, as the river's waters pooled and the reservoir slowly rose, a new and different type of Columbia began to take shape. The new waterscape was first visible in the area surrounding the dam. After the spillway gates closed for the first time, the ponds, marshes, fields and floodplains that for centuries had been shaped by the Columbia's spring floods, disappeared under the placid waters of the newly formed lake. Salmon, who for centuries had navigated the cataracts, pools, and eddies at the Cascade Rapids, now faced a new and different type of barrier—that of the fish ladder. While mature adult salmon were mostly able to pass the dam upstream to spawn, the juvenile fish (called smolts) had more trouble returning to the ocean, as they were confused by the dam's spillway and turbines, or lost in the placid waters of the reservoir upstream.

Visitors noticed changes to the landscape immediately around the dam, but those transformations were insignificant compared to those upriver.<sup>33</sup> The higher water level of the reservoir behind the dam meant that a number of human structures would need to be moved, rebuilt, or simply abandoned. Transportation routes received the bulk of the attention, as The Bridge of the Gods was raised 44 feet at its center, and the Hood River Bridge required the construction of a new lift span to get the 135-foot clearance required

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<sup>32</sup> The most prominent change to the Columbia below Bonneville would be new and different rates of flow – as the dam stored water in some months and flushed it out in others. Ecological changes were subtle, yet substantial – as plants and animals adjusted to changes in habitat wrought by the changing conditions on the river.

<sup>33</sup> Local visitors recognized the “before and after” scenes that tracked the physical transformation in the Columbia River Gorge. Adjacent to the dam, the Corps developed nearly eight hundred acres of buildings, construction areas, barracks for the workers, and outlet areas for excess reservoir flows. They created housing for the officers and put in permanent buildings that were designed to match the beauty of the surroundings. Lee Bostwick, “Bonneville Ideal Site for Big Dam,” *Oregonian*, October 8, 1933, sec. 5, p. 1, and William F. Willingham, *Water Power in the Wilderness: The History of Bonneville Lock and Dam* (Portland: U. S. Army Corps of Engineers, 1987), 9, 13.



for ship traffic on the river.<sup>34</sup> In addition, the Union Pacific Railroad was affected by the change in the water level. The track had to be rebuilt, raised 35 feet in elevation for a distance of almost four miles. Likewise, a section of the Columbia River Highway had to be moved to higher ground. Nearly 52,000 acres along the banks of the river would be covered by the reservoir, much of that land in private hands. The Corps even went as far as to remove a number of large rocks in the riverbed behind the dam, thereby increasing the total volume of water that could be contained in the newly formed reservoir, and making navigation above the dam a much safer enterprise. The removal of nearly 118,600 cubic yards of material increased the channel capacity and helped regulate the amount of water that could be passed over the dam's spillway when the water was high.<sup>35</sup>

In the 1930s, nobody in the world had ever dammed a river as big as the Columbia.<sup>36</sup> In fact, they hadn't even gotten close. Unlike the other large dam projects to date (including the largest dam built at the time, Hoover Dam on the Colorado) the Columbia at Bonneville was not conducive to existing techniques, as it had banks that were both full of sediment and spaced relatively far apart. At the Bonneville site there was a canyon, but its walls were several miles wide, with no bottleneck that could easily be blocked. Moreover, the flow of the river itself posed other problems that no government engineer initially knew how to solve. The most pressing challenge was the immense volume of water that gushed through every spring, when snow in the mountains melted and ran to the ocean – creating an average flow that some estimated to be over

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 12, 19.

<sup>36</sup> The first dam to span the main stem of the Columbia was Rock Island Dam, a smaller project begun in 1928 and finished in 1932. This dam was located much farther upstream, where the size of the river was less formidable, and did not capture the public's imagination like Bonneville or Grand Coulee. The very first hydroelectric dam in the Pacific Northwest was constructed at Minidoka, in Idaho, from 1907 to 1910. Gene Tollefson, *BPA and the Struggle for Power at Cost* (Portland, OR: Bonneville Power Administration, 1987), 54, 83.

200,000 cubic feet per second. This meant that even at normal flow, the Columbia possessed a larger volume of water than the Colorado during its peak flood, a volume that could have generated enough electricity to meet the needs of everyone living west of the Mississippi River.<sup>37</sup>

To dam a river with such a voluminous flow, the Army Corps of Engineers broke the task into separate parts. First, they constructed a giant cofferdam—a temporary but functional structure that funneled the river’s flow entirely to one side, to get at the exposed river bottom. (figures 4.4, 4.5, 4.6, 4.7, 4.8) Next they made the spillway, then the powerhouse, the locks, and the fishways. To make Bonneville’s cofferdam, the Corps harvested large timbers, bolted the 12 inch by 12 inch logs into giant “cribs,” affixed steel plates facing the water, and sunk the structures by filling them with rocks and dirt.<sup>38</sup> One by one, the cribs of the cofferdam were put into place, until pumps could empty its interior, which took over a week because of all the “gushers” that shot water from the river bottom. The entire process was fraught with peril, as the cribs washed out several times before workers could enter the exposed pit. The Columbia was pushing and pushing, forcing the Corps engineers to search for a sufficient foundation that could support the water pressure created by the dam’s 75 feet in height. There was a very real worry that the Columbia at full flood might push the entire dam off its bearings and flush the entire structure downstream.<sup>39</sup>

Digging into the river bottom, construction crews scraped away the soft material

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<sup>37</sup> Tollefson, 112, and Reisner, 155.

<sup>38</sup> Willingham, 16-17.

<sup>39</sup> In response to this worry the Army Corps of Engineers widened the base of the dam to 185 feet, and created a series of deep notches within the foundations to ensure that the Columbia wouldn’t slide the concrete structure completely off its foundations. For more information see David Billington and Donald Jackson, *Big Dams of the New Deal Era: A Confluence of Engineering and Politics* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006), 157.

and searched for bedrock. When they found it, they drilled deep, driving in steel rods and pouring voluminous amounts of concrete into the earth. This process was then repeated with more and more concrete; more concrete for the other side of the spillway, more for the giant piers that would hold the dam's gates in place, and more for the powerhouse and the locks. From 1934 to 1937, workers moved the river's flow from one side of its banks to the other, while crews of men worked double shifts to finish each section of the dam. On top of the concrete foundation they built the bulk of the spillway, with large piers interspersed every fifty feet—a design that allowed the water to flow through nearly unimpeded—at least until the massive gates were lowered. The final phase of construction could be completed while the river flowed underneath, and the BPA took photographs of workers suspended by rope over the boiling, frothing torrent of water passing below. The pace of this construction was so fast that the dam's designers could barely keep up with the work done on the river.

The hiring of thousands of workers provided relief to out-of-work men and women in Oregon and Washington. Before construction began in 1934, local journalists estimated that the Dam would create between 2,000 to 2,500 jobs, and the prospect of getting one of these jobs caused a small town called North Bonneville to appear almost overnight, “as if by magic.”<sup>40</sup> At the time, unemployment in the Pacific Northwest was just as high as it was in other parts of the country. Officials, beset by job-seekers at the dam site, publicly urged those interested to apply at the official employment agency in Portland, but frequently men would simply appear, hoping that something might come their way.<sup>41</sup> In the context of the Great Depression, people turned towards government

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<sup>40</sup> Marshall N. Dana and Fred Lockley, “*More Power to You*” (Portland: Oregon Journal, 1934), 51.

<sup>41</sup> The federal government stipulated that the vast majority of the jobs be given to those in the two

projects like Bonneville for answers, and in the process they imbued the dam and the river with new meanings.

### **Imagining a Supremely Useful River**

The construction of Bonneville Dam had profound effects upon the Pacific Northwest. It created new industry, raised new social questions about the distribution of power (electric and otherwise), and refigured political agendas on both local and regional levels. Bonneville was the first large federal dam built on the Columbia, and the project represented the biggest infusion of federal relief funds into the region. As a result, Bonneville attracted a lot of attention, and the public began to see the dam in symbolic terms. It became not simply a site for cultural meaning making, but an engine that drove the creation of such meanings.

Roosevelt's support for public power, announced at the dam site in 1934, structured the ways that the public first understood the meanings and purpose of the dam. Just a year or two earlier, a number of Portlanders had lost their savings through financial manipulations within the Central Public Service Company, a private utility in the region. This scandal, along with frustration over high electricity prices and the lack of service in rural areas, made power production one of the most contentious issues in the region. Bonneville Dam, by executive order of the new president, was a response to the needs of the people, a way to ameliorate the suffering brought on by such financial grievances. When on the campaign trail in 1932, Franklin Roosevelt publicly denounced "power

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counties where the dam was located. Skilled laborers would be compensated at a minimum of \$1.20 per hour, with unskilled laborers earning only a guaranteed 50 cents per hour. The Corps applied a formula to decide who would be hired, adding one Washington employee for every five Oregonians, a ratio dictated by the fact that the state of Washington would soon be getting federal dollars to build Grand Coulee Dam farther upriver. See Willingham, 26, and "New Towns to Rise on Columbia Soon," *Oregonian*, October 1, 1933, sec. 5, p. 2.

trusts” and their monopolistic business practices. “Never shall the Federal Government part with its sovereignty and control over its power resources while I am President of the United States,” he told a cheering crowd in Portland.<sup>42</sup> Later, after his election, Roosevelt made good on his pledge in support of public power. Standing at the Bonneville site in the Gorge, Roosevelt stated, “I always believe in the old saying, ‘more power to you’...and the power that we are developing here is going to be power which for all time is going to be controlled by government.”<sup>43</sup> (figure 4.10) To supporters of public power, the river now worked against the forces that had brought about economic collapse. Imbued with the political spirit of the New Deal, many in the region embraced the dam (and by extension, the dammed river) as symbols of a populist democracy.<sup>44</sup> Bonneville Dam was making the Columbia into *the people’s river*, and the engineered Columbia would provide jobs to those most in need.

In retrospect, one might think that President Franklin Roosevelt’s decision to build Bonneville, a decision that touched nearly every resident of the Pacific Northwest,

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<sup>42</sup> James A. Hagerty, “Portland Cheers Speech,” *New York Times*, September 22, 1932, p. 1.

<sup>43</sup> FDR’s comments recounted in “To Those Who Claim Bonneville,” *Oregonian*, August 6, 1934, p. 4. Public power would remain controversial and the federal government’s decision to give it preference was not a complete victory for its advocates. Years later, opponents of public power defeated proposals to create a larger regional development agency, something akin to the Tennessee Valley Authority (appropriately named the Columbia Valley Authority, or CVA), largely by a lobbying campaign financed by the private power industry. *Hydro!*, for its part, avoided any polemical position on the question of public power, but nevertheless appealed to the same populist sentiment, the narrator noting that, “not a kilowatt of electricity will be retailed from these lines...” and that the power question was “up to the people to decide how they will get this power, through their publicly owned systems or through private power companies.” For background on the proposed CVA, see William L. Lang, “Failed Federalism: The Columbia Valley Authority and Regionalism,” in William G. Robbins, ed., *The Great Northwest: The Search for Regional Identity* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2001), 66-79.

<sup>44</sup> There was substantial debate as to how Bonneville power might be marketed, whether preference should be given to industries nearby, or whether there should be the same rate given to the entire region, the so-called “postage stamp” rate that would encourage development both near and far from the dam. Roosevelt eventually lent his support to the latter, as city planners like Lewis Mumford recommended that the area adjacent to the dam be reserved for “the great scenic assets of the Columbia River Gorge.” See Lewis Mumford, *Regional Planning in the Pacific Northwest: A Memorandum* (Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Council, 1939), 10-13.

would have demanded extensive discussion and debate, political compromise and negotiation. Yet this was not the case. In the midst of the Great Depression, under the auspices of the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933, it was the president alone who decided to build Bonneville Dam.<sup>45</sup> In one stroke of the pen, Franklin Roosevelt signed an order that physically re-made one of the biggest rivers in the nation, spurred the economic transformation of the entire region, and provided for the development of the aluminum, shipbuilding, and chemical industries essential to winning the Second World War. While Roosevelt's final decision came suddenly, serious federal proposals to dam the river had been circulating since 1926, when Congress commissioned a report that recommended not one but a total of ten hydroelectric dams on the Columbia.

The "308 Report," as the study came to be called, numbered 1,845 pages long and was the culmination of years of extensive fieldwork by a number of different government agencies – including the Army Corps of Engineers, the United States Geological Survey, and the Bureau of Reclamation. Named after the number of the House Bill that commissioned it, the 308 Report consisted of a comprehensive river use plan that outlined four major uses for the Columbia's dams: power generation, flood control, river navigation, and large-scale irrigation. In the end, not all of the dams the report proposed would be built, but the picture it painted described the Columbia River as the engine of economic growth in the region—a utilitarian resource ready to be developed and a new set of meanings to be negotiated in relation to the river.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> While a number of people lobbied extensively to build the dam, for all practical purposes the decision was made by Roosevelt and his Secretary of the Interior, Harold Ickes. Roosevelt's decision would eventually require approval by Congress, but this did not occur until 1935, several years after construction on the Dam began.

<sup>46</sup> Notable for its finesse in avoiding the major political divisions of the day, the 308 Report foreswore any policy that might fan the flames of the long-brewing disputes over the development of the river. Delicate issues included competition between the states of Oregon and Washington, dueling

When the federal government announced that it would develop the Columbia River, a key question emerged: what would be done with all that power? The ensuing controversy consumed the region, and nearly everyone had an opinion on how the system could be structured. Richard Neuberger, a journalist who wrote for the *Oregonian*, described the debate:

“Farm or factory? That problem is as present at Bonneville as the grim cliffs of the Columbia gorge. One representative group of citizens insists that the dam will collapse miserably unless it primarily results in new industrial development in a region sorely in need of such stimulus. Another group contends that unless the bulk of the power is used for farms and homes, the dam will be a gift to Wall Street. And there are all sorts of other in-between theories.”<sup>47</sup>

There were many competing understandings of what should be done with the Columbia's power. Would it be directed to industry, or would it be multi-use? Should it be privately sold, or should it be public? The Roosevelt administration, who had gone out on a limb and approved the construction of the dam, was initially silent on the issue. Many local Republicans thought that the Columbia's hydroelectricity should be sold to private utilities. Other supporters of industrial development claimed that Bonneville power was “not intended for curling irons and toasters, but to develop great natural resources for creating an extensive manufacturing center.”<sup>48</sup> George H. Wisting, former manager at the Portland Chamber of Commerce and President of its Advertising Club gave a speech titled “What Shall We Do With Bonneville Power?” where he advocated a vision of the

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development strategies between the upriver cities of Wenatchee and Spokane, and internecine battles within the leadership of the Army Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Reclamation. For information on the reports see William F. Willingham, *Water Power in the “Wilderness,”* 1, and *Army Engineers and the Development of Oregon* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1983). The Pacific Northwest is unique in that the Army Corps of Engineers, the Bonneville Power Administration, and a number of public utilities all played a role in damming the rivers. In other areas, the Bureau of Reclamation was the primary developer of dams in the West. See Reisner, 165.

<sup>47</sup> Richard Neuberger, “More Power to Whom?,” *Oregonian*, September 26, 1937, magazine section, p. 13.

<sup>48</sup> “President Gives High Dam Order,” *Oregonian*, September 27, 1933, p. 1.

river dedicated primarily to industrial growth: “Industry will not [be] located at Bonneville for sentimental reasons, nor will industry come here to glorify the Columbia basin,” he asserted. “We must go before the potential users of this cheap electric power at tide water and be able to say, ‘Here is where raw materials are located and here is what you can do with them.’”<sup>49</sup> Other business interests echoed Wisting’s argument and even started an advertising campaign to “present the story of the Bonneville opportunity to industrialists in other parts of the nation.”<sup>50</sup> Local Democrats split on the issue. Some, like House Representative Charles Martin, thought that the hydroelectricity should be allocated to specific industries, to create jobs. Speaking in 1933 to the Portland Realty Board, Martin stated that Bonneville power “is not intended to force down the rates of existing power companies. This power is intended for the great chemical and metallurgical reduction plants...”<sup>51</sup> Other Democrats espoused a more populist position; Representative Willis Mahoney of Klamath Falls noted, “Bonneville power is public property, national wealth that belongs to all the people, and should be used for their benefit for generations to come. Whoever controls the water power resources of Bonneville controls the future destiny of Oregon,” adding, “...if we lose it now it is gone forever.”<sup>52</sup>

In the end, FDR’s vision for Columbia River power included industrial, residential, and agricultural uses, and he himself thought that the power from the river should be public, and it should form the basis of a planned society.<sup>53</sup> When President

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<sup>49</sup> “Bonneville Project Declared Asset If Raw Materials Well Exploited,” *Oregonian*, December 6, 1934, p. 1.

<sup>50</sup> “Drive to Boost Dam’s Value Set,” *Oregonian*, September 26, 1935, p. 1.

<sup>51</sup> Charles Martin, as quoted in the *Oregon Journal*, October 15, 1933.

<sup>52</sup> “Mahoney Scores Bonneville Mess,” *Oregonian*, August 9, 1937, p. 2.

<sup>53</sup> Clayton R. Koppes, “Efficiency, Equity, Esthetics: Shifting Themes in American Conservation,” in *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History*, ed. Donald Worster (Cambridge:



Roosevelt announced his support for public power, one reporter stated that “a cheer reverberated through the Columbia Gorge,” while a spectator uttered, “See, I told you he’d help the little fellow. No grafting company’s going to get this dam.”<sup>54</sup> Senator Dill told Roosevelt, “If you carry forward this fight on power it will stand in history to your credit as the greatest achievement of your administration. In fact, I think it is the greatest movement since the abolition of slavery...because cheap electricity will free millions of people, both black and white, from the slavery of daily toil and bring...comfort, recreation, and happiness to generations yet unborn.”<sup>55</sup> This populist-democratic vision, which sometimes bordered on utopic, was most perfectly expressed in *Hydro!*.

In the late 1930s, when Stephen Kahn and his director, Gunther Fritsch, first began imagining what the Columbia River would be in their film, they conceived of a very *useful* river—one that promised to deliver great wealth to everyone. *Hydro!* was organized around this key premise, offering the federal vision of the river in the first few seconds of the film, stating “the story of the Northwest is a saga of commerce...” After establishing the difference between the river’s untamed pioneer past and its promising future, *Hydro!* addressed the different uses of the new Columbia—making the case that all the people in the region would benefit from a harnessed river. As a triumphant musical theme announced these improvements, audiences viewed images of how the Columbia would provide: Ocean-going ships motored upstream to unload their cargo as tugboats pushed barges of goods down through the dam’s locks. Hundred-foot tall trees fell to the ground and were immediately lashed together into massive log rafts, floating

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Cambridge University Press, 1988), 242.

<sup>54</sup> As recounted in Wesley Arden Dick, “When Dams Weren’t Damned,” 134.

<sup>55</sup> Clarence Dill To Roosevelt, December 19, 1934, PPF 243, Franklin Roosevelt Papers, Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, NY, as quoted in Dick, 147.

down the main stem of the Columbia. Scenes of water flowing over the dam's spillway were interspersed with those depicting water running through irrigation ditches and down crop rows. Even commercial fisherman appeared, hoisting bountiful salmon from their nets as the narrator assured viewers that the dam would not harm the salmon runs. White, middle-aged men appeared as farmers, clad in overalls, planting seeds by hand and harvesting melons into wooden crates. Men operated welders and electric saws, while at home they used electric shavers and radios. Women, confined to the home, nonetheless enjoyed the fruits of Columbia River power—changing light bulbs, cooking on electric stoves, and using new kitchen appliances like toasters, waffles irons, and mixers. Even dairy cows, attached to futuristic looking electric-milking machines, stared at the camera while dairy farmers attended to refrigerators that cooled the milk. “Why milk old Bossie by hand when Bonneville power will do it for one cent a month?” the narrator asked.

*Hydro!* asserted that the Columbia would provide needed jobs and diversify the economy by significantly lowering existing electricity rates. It would allow ocean-going vessels to navigate over and around troublesome rapids, creating an inland seaway that would put “idle resources to work.” Upland farmers would enjoy lower freight costs for every bushel of wheat. With great aplomb, the narrator announced, “No longer will man ignore the treasures underfoot, metallic wealth buried through the sprawling Northwest, untouched deposits of nickel, the rich red cinnabar ore of mercury, and chromite and manganese, metals essential to our national security. Zinc and copper and iron, waiting in abundance, and silver and gold, buried in nearly every county.” With the possibility of war looming across the Atlantic, the narrator pointed out that Columbia River energy would produce “Zinc for brass, and paint, and casting. Chromium, for steel and armor

plates, phosphates for fertilizer and chemicals, manganese, and aluminum, and magnesium, all basic to Western civilization.” The Columbia was “an ageless servant” that would be harnessed for “all its values – for navigation, for protection of fish life, for hydroelectric energy, and, in its upper reaches, for flood control and reclamation.”

In Kahn's story about the Columbia, everyone used the river. There was no task the river couldn't accomplish, no need it couldn't provide. It was as if Kahn had designed the film to address each and every apprehension about the need for developing the river, a somewhat crude (almost paranoid) effort to overcome opponents' objections and forge a broad constituency among those who would use the river (and among those who would become the BPA's constituents). In Kahn's story, the utilized Columbia would form the backbone of the region—and if the river was the backbone, then the BPA was its brain, or heart. Kahn's tale of an engineered river had the federal government in the driver's seat—the primary actor in developing the contours of a new economy. It was a startling vision of change for the region—a snapshot of the moment wherein new constituencies entered into new social, economic, and ecological relationships with the Columbia—a relationship mediated by the state. And *Hydro!* was the cultural roadmap for this consolidation of state power—a discourse that emphasized the use value of the new river.

*Hydro!* first presented Bonneville Dam from afar, with scenes that emphasized its size and location on the river, as in aerial photographs from above. Cutting to shots of the dam's partially completed steel skeleton, viewers were drawn towards movement within the structure: Men, climbing in and out of a jungle of rebar, mixed and poured concrete into immense wooden forms. Slow, panning camera shots followed trucks driving in and out of the cofferdam and cranes moving overhead, while other shots placed

the camera directly above the spillway, looking down at workers who dangled above the raging river. In these depictions, workers were nameless and faceless, small props that emphasized the largeness of the dam and the smallness of the humans that were making it. Depictions of the Army Corps of Engineers differed from those of everyday workers, reflecting hierarchy and chain of command. White, middle-aged men wore glasses, pocket protectors, and held clipboards as they stood behind the surveying tripods and gestured directions to assistants. These staged ‘surveying’ scenes accompanied depictions of Bonneville's construction that could not have been faked—including some that featured exploding rocks. “America’s conquest of the Columbia has begun,” the narrator intoned, as huge mounds of earth dislodged into the water.<sup>56</sup>

Audiences who watched the images on the screen may not have accepted the BPA’s over-the-top rhetoric, and some were surely skeptical of Kahn’s claims about the future. But it is clear that many of the engineers, workers, and visitors saw permanence in the dam, and understood the object to be, both literally and figuratively, as solid as the concrete used to create it. Those who had suffered financial losses at the onset of the Great Depression welcomed government projects that wouldn't disappear like their money. Stuart Chase, a nationally-known journalist, visited the unfinished Grand Coulee Dam on the upper Columbia and remarked, “We Americans may be poor hands at shuffling stocks and bonds and credit instruments in a manner to keep the economic structure from collapsing, but, by the eternal, we can build dams.” He continued, “Concrete dams in granite cradles are solid. They are not like debentures and mortgages,

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<sup>56</sup> These explosions surely brought to mind the sights and sounds of war, especially for audiences eager for film footage of the conflict in Europe.

which go up in smoke, but the steel and concrete never quiver...”<sup>57</sup> (figure 4.11) Others saw the big federal dams as the primary symbols of rational efficiency—“economic liberators” that could address both environmental and social problems associated with the Great Depression.<sup>58</sup> But as symbols of democracy or economic liberation, the meanings given to large dams like Bonneville underscored the centrality of a utilitarian vision.

The Columbia River had long been seen in utilitarian terms. Historian William Lang argued that almost from the moment they encountered the river, invading Euro-Americans conceived of its meaning and significance based on what it might provide.<sup>59</sup> Lewis and Clark, who took the time to map and measure the river’s rapids, saw the Columbia primarily as a transportation route, reporting back to Thomas Jefferson that it probably wasn’t the elusive Northwest Passage. Other early accounts of the river, including two of the most famous written accounts by Washington Irving and Alexander Ross focused on natural resources in general, and the fur trade in particular.<sup>60</sup> Whether it was John Mix Stanley illustrating the Pacific Railroad Reports in 1853, or Stephen Kahn making the film *Hydro!* in 1933, the Columbia had long been understood in terms of what it might provide. What was different and unique about the river in the mid-twentieth century (and what is useful for us to see in *Hydro!*) was the degree to which this vision *dominated* other ways of knowing the river. Conceptions of the river as fundamentally spiritual, romantic, scenic, or pre-modern, faded from public discourse,

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<sup>57</sup> Stuart Chase, “Great Dam,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, October, 1938, 596-9.

<sup>58</sup> Historian Clayton Koppes noted that in the aftermath of the Great Depression, the U.S. Government consciously promoted the dams as evidence of successful federal intervention. Koppes noted how “Armies of foreign visitors, trooping through the turbine rooms and gazing down spillways, absorbed the vision of concrete harnessing natural resources for social progress,” and that such projects “became the staple of foreign aid after WWII as it technical advisers carried the gospel of hydroelectric efficiency to the third world.” Koppes, 241-2.

<sup>59</sup> William L. Lang, “Creating the Columbia: Historians and the Great River of the West, 1890-1935,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 93 (Fall 1992): 243.

<sup>60</sup> Lang, “Creating the Columbia,” 243.

and the utilitarian narrative became so dominant that it both encompassed and suppressed other ways of knowing the river.

In some ways, the utilitarian Columbia was a creation of federal policy, and in particular, of the turn-of-the-century conservationists who emphasized use value. Throughout most of the nineteenth century, the federal government's approach to managing national resources was best described as "laissez-faire." Expansion-minded migrants headed West believing that the nation's natural resources were abundant, unclaimed, and free for the taking. Not only were natural resources seen as inexhaustible, they were seen as in need of immediate "improvement." By the close of the nineteenth century, the costs of unfettered resource use and a lack of a national policy to address such practices had become readily apparent. At the dawn of the Progressive Era, both politicians and bureaucrats in Washington sensed that a cohesive plan for managing the nation's resources was a necessity.<sup>61</sup>

The first widespread action to incorporate the new philosophy into policy came in response to the over-logging of forests. Over the course of a century, Americans converted millions of acres of woodlands into farmlands. By the time Theodore Roosevelt took office in 1901, a number of federal agencies began to favor regulatory schemes to mitigate the damage of the over-harvest. Scientific study and government regulation became the linchpins of this new, rationalist, planned approach.<sup>62</sup> Natural resources could be both utilized and conserved by taking an objective approach to

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<sup>61</sup> Koppes, 230-51.

<sup>62</sup> In fact, Roosevelt brought together a number of disparate policies by commissioning a large-scale government survey that took inventory of the nation's "waters, forests, lands, and minerals." The National Conservation Commission reported on supply, rate of use, and when such resources might be exhausted. Samuel P. Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: the Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890-1920* (New York: Atheneum, 1975), 131-2.

management decisions, thus resulting in “the greatest good for the greatest number over the longest period of time.”<sup>63</sup> This approach focused on both protecting the resource from overuse and preventing waste, and had the goal of extending the period under which a resource could be in production. Supporters asserted that this made management of the resource in question more sustainable and more democratic.<sup>64</sup> (BEGIN HERE)

In his famous historical study of Progressivism, Samuel Hays described a “gospel of efficiency,” which held that the best policy was one that achieved the maximum level of production without exhausting a resource. Believers in the gospel of efficiency claimed that bureaucrats, not politicians, ought to make key management decisions about a resource, that “foresters should determine the desirable annual timber cut; hydraulic engineers should establish the feasible extent of multiple purpose river development and the specific location of reservoirs; agronomists should decide which forage areas could remain open for grazing without undue damage to water supplies.”<sup>65</sup> Experts would use their scientific training to make rational, objective decisions that were in the public’s best interest. While objectivity was the desired goal, in practice most decisions were made by compromise, with those experts in the executive branch often having to incorporate the concerns of the legislative branch, be they purely political or otherwise. Hays himself

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<sup>63</sup> This tenant of utilitarian conservation is articulated in Dan Flores, “Societies to Match the Scenery,” 260.

<sup>64</sup> Perhaps no one person embodied this philosophy more than Teddy Roosevelt’s chief forester, Gifford Pinchot. In 1905 Pinchot advised Roosevelt to transfer protected lands from the Department of Interior into the Department of Agriculture, thus forming the U.S. Forest Service. Under this new department Pinchot opened up the forests to “multiple use”—which included logging, grazing, mining, watershed and wildlife protection, and recreation. By 1907 Roosevelt and Pinchot had put over 151 million acres into 159 national forests, transforming the Western United States into a region that would be dominated by federal lands. Flores, 260. For more on Pinchot’s conservationist thinking, see Char Miller, *Gifford Pinchot and the Making of Modern Environmentalism* (Washington D.C.: Island Press, 2001), 138-44, Donald Worster, *Nature’s Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (New York: Sierra Club Books, 1977), 266, Hays, 28-30, Stephen Fox, *The American Conservation Movement: John Muir and His Legacy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981), 111, and Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 134-38.

<sup>65</sup> Hays, 3.

noted that the federal government rarely controlled any particular natural resource industry outright, preferring to let private companies do the actual work, as long as the ability to do so wasn't concentrated in the hands of the few.

Conservationists were particularly interested in developing water resources, where they could maximize efficiency by satisfying multiple interests in a single project. The complexity, high costs of investment, and interstate nature of water meant that the federal government would take the lead in river development, and many were eager to take up the challenge. William John McGee, a prominent geologist and anthropologist, articulated the Progressive-era view of rivers as interrelated systems. McGee advised Teddy Roosevelt that that “no section [of a waterway] can be brought under control without at least partial control of all other portions...” He argued that “the views of the engineer and the geologist must meet and merge...” and that the “conquest of water” was the “single step remaining to be taken before Man becomes master of nature.”<sup>66</sup> George Norris, who would eventually become known as the father of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), thought of developing water resources along similar lines, arguing that this was “the dawning of that day when every rippling stream that flows down the mountain side and winds its way through the meadows to the sea shall be harnessed and made to work for the welfare and comfort of man.”<sup>67</sup> Despite such enthusiasm for developing water projects outright, the actual catalyst for federal river development was born out of frustration with the railroads. Throughout the 1890s shippers faced steady increases in the costs to move freight. In an effort to lower prices, national politicians and local civic groups began to press for improvements in river navigation, to break the

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<sup>66</sup> W. J. McGee, “Our Great River,” *The World's Work* (February, 1907), 8576-8584, as quoted in Hays, 104.

<sup>67</sup> George Norris, as quoted in Frank E. Smith, *The Politics of Conservation* (New York, 1966), 207.



railroads' monopoly and bring down prices. During Teddy Roosevelt's tenure, organizations like the National Rivers and Harbors Congress and the Lakes-to-the-Gulf Deep Waterway Association pressed for increases in the overall expenditures as well as for specific projects.<sup>68</sup>

In 1902 Progressives passed the Newlands Reclamation Act, creating the Bureau of Reclamation that would develop water resources for western cities. The Bureau of Reclamation proceeded to plan developments on virtually every major river and tributary in the U. S. West. By the time of the New Deal, the Bureau had grown from 2,000 to 20,000 employees, and had plans to develop an additional eighty dams. Seeing rivers in terms of use-value was firmly entrenched among bureaucrats by World War I, when the bureau, with other government agencies like the Forest Service and National Park Service, succeeded in remaking the country's approach to resource management.<sup>69</sup> By the early 1930s, much of the development had given the western economy its contemporary look. Mining, logging, and agribusiness sectors had become concentrated in the hands of larger and larger companies, and the wealth derived from natural resources in the West often went elsewhere. But change came with Franklin Delano Roosevelt. After the election, the Roosevelt administration voiced its belief that a little government planning would bring prosperity and abundance, and that abundance would be better suited in public not private hands. It rejected the previous development

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<sup>68</sup> Hays, 91-4.

<sup>69</sup> In the years that followed some politicians questioned the bureaucratic view that utilitarian conservation was the best policy. As the Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover administrations put their faith in doctrines of capitalist expansion, government measures protecting natural resources (and abating the power of industry) were never given teeth. Large land holdings, expensive equipment, and outside capital became increasingly important for entrepreneurs to succeed in extractive resource industries. But when the Great Depression discredited the reigning economic philosophy, advocates of ambitious federal conservation policy once again sought to mitigate the effects of the market with planning that emphasized both social and ecological harmony. Koppes, 238-40, and Flores, 262-3.

strategies for producing waste, exploitation, and unproductive rivalries, and turned to large-scale public-works projects that balanced resource management and job creation.<sup>70</sup> Roosevelt believed that natural resources in the countryside were best handled by scientific management strategies, and that unemployed men from cities would also benefit from jobs in the country. Nature was being seen both as a redemptive force that would help the unemployed, and as a wasteful and inefficient system that could be improved with efficient management. To get value from the landscape, nature needed to be improved upon, and rivers were no exception. Bonneville Dam was just one example where social and ecological engineering could overlap – an idea not lost on the creators of *Hydro!*.

By the time that the Roosevelt administration approved Bonneville Dam, a utilitarian orientation towards the natural world was dominant among government officials and citizens alike. This viewpoint was evident in the public opinion about the project, as seen in newspaper articles about the dam. In a typical article, *Oregon Journal* reporter Marshall M. Dana noted how the Columbia was becoming the centerpiece of the region's economy. In a promotional book published by the paper in 1934 (when construction of the dam was well underway) Dana reflected on the ways the river had always surrendered to human use. He wrote that the Columbia, "...had given a channel for water carriage. It had given a wide highway. For the railroads it had given the splendor of a scenic thoroughfare, and the principal artery of commerce between tidewater and the interior. It had given the principal route of the air in the great Pacific Northwest, and as part of a new transcontinental travel." Dana then noted how Bonneville Dam would increase the importance of the river, that it would attract great

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<sup>70</sup> Flores, 266.

industries to “convert the minerals of the earth, the nitrates of the air, the forests of mountain slopes, and the varied yields of the land in to the products of manufacture and the goods of the world’s utilization.”<sup>71</sup> Dana concluded that Bonneville would be the “...greatest and most stimulative contribution to the progress of the last West.”<sup>72</sup> Others bragged that the Bonneville project would be “the most efficient power development in the United States...”<sup>73</sup>

For Marshall Dana, Stephen Kahn, and many others who interacted with the Columbia, a multi-use river now seemed natural and self-evident. That the Columbia would be seen this way was obvious, a common sense interpretation of how best to use a river. To them, an engineered Columbia would help solve the region’s problems—both immediate, by providing jobs to the unemployed, and long-term, by providing a new basis for industrial growth. Utilizing the Columbia’s natural features for the benefit of all was desirable for both dam-builder and resident alike—a conservation philosophy now so well established that few would question the desirability of such an approach. This utilitarian story now triumphed over all others. Residents of the region soon knew the river as the source of energy that lit their homes, its water as irrigation for their crops, and as a transportation artery that would fuel a new economy. As more and more people gained a material stake in the river, they focused on the material benefits that the river provided. The utilitarian narrative had become hegemonic—the normative way of interpreting the river.

After Bonneville went into operation money flowed in every drop of Columbia River water. (figures 4.12, 4.13, 4.14) Local citizens, bureaucrats, and visitors re-

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<sup>71</sup> Marshall N. Dana and Fred Lockley, “*More Power to You*,” 55.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> “Vast Power Hidden in Great Columbia,” *Oregonian*, October 1, 1933, sec. 5, p. 4.

imagined its form and function by abstracting its utility into dollars and kilowatts. As more and more Bonneville power came to market, the entire Pacific Northwest region increasingly depended on the Columbia's hydroelectricity—cheap energy that would be the foundation of prosperity. The newly engineered Columbia possessed enormous value, and locals who depended on the Columbia for fishing or tourism now shared the river with a much larger pool of interested parties. The Columbia River now worked for the entire region, and in a few years it would work for the whole nation.

### **The Making of a Modern Columbia**

The utilitarian messages on display in *Hydro!* suggested to audiences that the new Columbia would be fundamentally different than it was before. But how did the filmmakers explain these changes to the people of the region? To get a sense of how both Stephen Kahn and his audiences interpreted the meaning of the engineered river, it is useful to briefly return to the opening sequences of the documentary. *Hydro!* began with familiar images of the Columbia River Gorge, yet this time audiences saw something new: electrical towers and power lines, symbols of the electric age that evoked particular ideas about technology, progress, and the future of the region. Viewed from below, the images in *Hydro!* were no more than silhouettes of the electrical towers, looming dark against the clouds. As the camera angle drew attention to the massive size of the installations, the visual composition of the scene emphasized the contrasts between the lightness of the sky and the darkness of the land. With power lines bisecting the screen, snaking to and fro in front of the Columbia River, *Hydro!* framed its subject matter by drawing attention to the new and old, to the river's past and its future. Suspicious music signaled to audiences that there was something different about the

electrical towers on the Columbia's riverbanks, something powerful, something new and unanticipated, something *modern*. (figure 4.16)

These images of a modern Columbia evoked yet another type of river story, one focused not on utility but on temporality. It posited a rigid break from the past and considered elements of the present that were simultaneously celebratory and unsettling. This new story, a “narrative of technological progress” permeated the film, and structured how audiences made sense of the newly engineered river. This story went something like this: technological innovation, in this case, the Dam, enabled humans to do things they had never done before. Science and engineering would be used to make the world a better place, to improve human lives, to avoid the problems of the past. Ubiquitous among progressive conservationists and New Deal planners, this narrative of technological progress was an essential component of a broader cultural current referred to as “modernity.”

In *Hydro!* audiences encountered a story about a modern dam, and by extension, a modern Columbia. But before returning to the film, it will be useful to clarify the meaning of the word “modern”, and what it means in reference to a river. More than just an adjective for “new,” the word “modern” relates to an era of human history commonly referred to as modernity. As a historical period, or the *project* of modernity, has been notoriously slippery to describe, and scholars have often struggled to agree on its contours. Geographer David Harvey noted that modernity had its origins in the seventeenth century, but really took hold during the Enlightenment when philosophers and scientists accumulated knowledge about the world around them and developed a number of ideas that form the basis for much of what we know today. These ideas

included the notions of objective science, universal morality and law, and universal human freedom. But modernity also featured a unified, totalizing vision of the world, one that incorporated other ways of knowing into a single, purportedly universal theory. This was the meta-narrative of progress, and it was totalizing in its capacity to explain (and therefore legitimize) change in the name of universal human history.<sup>74</sup> Cultural historian T. J. Jackson Lears, one of the foremost experts on anti-modern cultural expression in the modern era, argued that that within modernity this enthusiasm for progress was “omnipresent and often implicit,” and noted how even those who challenged the distribution of wealth or power accepted modernity's conventional wisdom that technological progress would bring national greatness.<sup>75</sup> This belief in progress became one of modernity's most salient features—a powerful ideology that could disavow the past, explain the present, and prescribe an agreeable future. Human civilization, now freed from the ignorance of its past, could improve and make great strides forward toward Enlightenment values.

While linear, this notion of progress was nonetheless flexible, capable of explaining both rapid and slow social change. Eighteen century Enlightenment thinkers embraced the idea of progress, thereby rejecting that which was ‘historical’ and ‘traditional’ in favor of that which was new. Customary ways of living gave way to new forms that were more complex and dynamic, cultural practices that were adaptable,

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<sup>74</sup> The idea of progress itself dates back long before the Enlightenment to Greek and Roman times, but was dominant during the Enlightenment. For a longer history of the idea of progress see Robert A. Nisbet, *A History of the Idea of Progress* (New York: Basic Books, 1980).

<sup>75</sup> Lears wrote that the “chief engine” of progress was industrial technology, and that “upper-class Americans grew increasingly enthusiastic about the possibilities of applying technology to the practical concerns of making a living. Entrepreneurs, engineers, and economists hailed the whole industrial apparatus of advancing capitalism, from factory town to gritty city.” T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place Of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1981), 8.

bendable, and increasingly portable over time (by drawing on traditions new and old) and space (by drawing on traditions from near and far).<sup>76</sup> This acceptance of the meta-narrative of progress meant that there would be a significant break with the past, and a distancing away from other epistemological systems labeled as myth, superstition, or religion.<sup>77</sup>

In the early twentieth-century Pacific Northwest, these cultural currents resulted in a prescription for river development that embraced both the institutional expertise of the Army Corps of Engineers *and* the utopian social visions of New Deal planners (including those in the BPA). The Columbia came to signify the apparent truths of the modern era, and the dams became physical evidence of this truth; a demonstration of scientific achievement, competent institutions, and the mastery of nature. Bonneville, in its planning, construction, design, and management, was a perfect expression of these values. To understand how this discourse of modernity and technological progress

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<sup>76</sup> Yet because this transition from the pre-modern to the modern discarded that which was established or traditional, what replaced it was never seen as sacrosanct, or incapable of being replaced by something else. David Harvey explained that this grand meta-narrative had no respect even for its own past, let alone any pre-modern alternatives. He argued that, within modernity, meanings had to be discovered and defined from within a “maelstrom of change” that created a “never-ending process of internal ruptures and fragmentations.” Harvey, 11-12. This didn’t mean that the modern world was a world without tradition, just that social relationships became post-traditional—they transcended any one tradition and interacted with many. This process, which he termed “creative destruction,” was an unsettling but necessary condition for twentieth-century progress, and an essential condition of modernity. David Harvey, *The Conditions of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990), 11-16. See also Martin O’Brien, paraphrasing the argument of Anthony Giddens in “The Sociology of Anthony Giddens: An Introduction,” in *Conversations with Anthony Giddens: Making Sense of Modernity*, ed. Anthony Giddens and Christopher Pierson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 15.

<sup>77</sup> Lears noted how this “decline of religion into sentimental religiosity” was concurrent with an increased emphasis on individual autonomy. Lears, 32. With changing social relations came an emphasis on an ethic of self-control and autonomous achievement. Individuals had to look within for meaning. He argued that because modernity was secular and overly bureaucratic, modernity led to a crisis of cultural authority when it failed to live up to its claims of perpetual progress and perfect autonomy. In his view, modernity was full of people awash in change and uncertainty. These people recognized that modern culture had not produced greater autonomy, but had promoted a “spreading sense of moral impotence and spiritual sterility.” Lears, 4-5. To remedy this condition, people searched for authenticity but ultimately ended up reinforcing the hegemony of the modern ruling elite, in the process facilitating the transition from a producer-oriented capitalist economy to a consumer-oriented corporate one.

affected understandings of the river, let's return to *Hydro!* and its depiction of Bonneville Dam.

In *Hydro!*, when audiences first gaze upon the dam, they see the structure from a distance, where it was part of the landscape of the river. But several minutes later, the film returns to the Dam to explain hydroelectricity in the simplest of terms: “hydro” was the “eternal power of the river” and the “keystone of the entire Columbia development.” The scene began with the musical score shifting away from triumphant melodies into a different orchestral leitmotif, one with a more sinister tone. The camera makes a slow pan from the bottom to the top of one of the dam's large spinning turbines. As the orchestra transitions into a dark and foreboding theme, the camera moves the audience closer and closer to the machine. Watching, you may feel a bit small, and perhaps a bit uncomfortable. The steel gray of the spinning shaft fills the screen as the turbine spins faster than the eye could see. The music is almost Wagnerian, with the brass section blasting long bass notes and the wind ensemble rising up to a crescendo, falling, and then rising up again seconds later. Sound effects feature prominently in the background, as the whirl of electric power hums a steady tone. As the scene shifts to other parts of the powerhouse, uniformed men walked through the belly of the dam, over the top of large, circular, house-sized generators—their bodies slight in comparison to the girth of the machinery surrounding them. Inside a sparsely decorated control room are machines with illuminated buttons, levers, and dials. Nearby sit capable engineers (all white men, of course) who dutifully take notes on their clipboards.<sup>78</sup> Like a scene out of Fritz Lang's

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<sup>78</sup> The film presented these workers as dedicated and devoted, the embodiment of a competent, rational ideal—an early “organizational man” capable of mastering the river's power. Conveniently, BPA engineers, by virtue of their scientific expertise, were at the forefront of this technological breakthrough, and it was their work on the Columbia that promised a departure from the old way of



1927 science fiction film *Metropolis*, the black and white images present sharp contrasts, and the hydroelectric infrastructure of the dam is mysterious, even dangerous.

Seamlessly, *Hydro!* then portrays a “labyrinth” of transformers that look striking against the brightness of the sky behind. As “slender threads of silver” snake out over the land, “hydro”—the now the invisible, powerful abstraction of electricity itself—moves energy away from the river and into the grid. (figure 4.10)

Lightness and darkness were the essence of this imagery. The dark, steel tones of the grey machinery cast shadows that contrasted with the light letters of the title sequence, the white men in lab coats, and the brightness of the illuminated buttons on the control panels.<sup>79</sup> In this sequence hydroelectricity was an uncanny force to be reckoned with, one pregnant with capability even as it was difficult to fully comprehend. In this imagery light was enabled by the purity of hydroelectric power—all of which were evocative gestures of modernity.

Moving back to wide-angle shots of the river, the narrator celebrated the promise of this technology with great hyperbole:

Stripping the Columbia of its energy, Bonneville is an oil well that never will run dry. An ageless servant that will toil as long as the rain comes down and water seeks its birthplace in the sea. Here ten mammoth generators will capture half a million kilowatts from a shackled giant...A labyrinth of transformers steps up the voltage ten times, power for a million people...Above the roar of the river and the whirr of the turbine, slender threads of silver swing over the land, carrying the surge of hydro to a waiting people.

The Columbia, transformed by the dam, promised nothing but great things! It was an “oil

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doing things in favor of the new. The electricity that they managed promised wholesale transformation—physical and social, all in the name of technological progress.

<sup>79</sup> All the light and dark imagery carried racial meanings as well, as discourses of modernity tended to ignore non-white people, often framing them as being temporally outside the modern. While non-white aesthetics could be evocative for modernist artists, the people themselves could not be part of the imagery, and had to struggle to be recognized as part of the modernist *zeitgeist*.

well that never will run dry” that would bring prosperity and material affluence to the region. The “burdens of an outworn era” were replaced with the “whirr of the turbine,” a new power that would reshape human lives. At the center of all this was the word “hydro,” which became a term that could stand-in for electricity itself—perhaps as a way for Stephen Kahn and the BPA to prompt an awareness that the electricity used in one’s home was, in fact, connected to the dam. The narrator left no room for ambiguity on what “hydro” could do for the region:

Power to make a million and a quarter acres to bloom again. Power to push the city to the farthest county line. To bring better crops and better living to the farmers of the region. Power for the home, good light for Billy’s eyes, electric cooking for mother, the comfort of electric heat and electric coal. Leisure, to replace the burdens of an outworn era. Power to uncover a treasure trove of idle resources, to turn them into useful goods for which a nation waits. Power for millions of Americans who look westward hopefully, for land and jobs, for security and happiness. Power to make the American dream come true.

The Columbia, capable of anything and everything, promised a bright (ha!) future for all, but especially for young Billy. Hydroelectricity, while mysterious, held great promise for the future—and Bonneville Dam enabled that future through the abundance of power it would create. The rising reservoir behind the dam would lift all boats. Everyone would get something from the developed river—there was more than enough power to go around, power for industry and for young Billy in his home. But also political power, as the river’s abundance would end contests over limited resources. The hydroelectricity in the Columbia promised to remake society in a utopian, modern mold. For audiences that faced such images on the screen and listened to the cadenced, masculine voice of the narrator, electricity seemed to pulse through the water in the river.

It’s likely that the people who viewed *Hydro!* were familiar with utopian implications of electricity, its vested meanings, and even the practical difficulties of

obtaining access to it. Power politics had long been controversial in the region, and were especially contentious during the 1930s. Electrification in the Pacific Northwest began from the bottom up. Initially, individual companies purchased small electricity-generating systems for their own uses. Soon after that, municipalities began to purchase generating systems for electric lights and streetcars. As consumer demand for electricity increased, more and more generating stations were required to meet the demand, and as more users and more producers were connected, a 'grid' emerged. By 1912, utility companies (both public and private) had convinced a number of producers to join together, and the grid became more efficient. By taking advantage of this economy of scale, utilities were able to provide cheap and reliable electricity to both cities and productive industries alike.<sup>80</sup> This allowed for large increases in production (the United States would soon lead the world in kilowatts of electricity produced) but came with some significant drawbacks.<sup>81</sup> As improvements in the generating plants and transmission lines made it possible to transfer power over greater distances, wealthy and politically powerful investors quickly consolidated control over the industry. In some ways the electric industry favored large-scale owners; as the size of the 'grid' increased, the cost of production dropped. Large producers also had an easier time securing capital to finance expansion.<sup>82</sup> But by the end of World War I, famous businessmen like J. P. Morgan and Samuel Insull consolidated once again, forming large holding companies to absorb many small utilities. As more and more small producers were pushed out of the marketplace, a few large companies exerted nearly monopolistic control over the

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<sup>80</sup> Tollefson, 47.

<sup>81</sup> David Nye, *Electrifying America: Social Meanings of a New Technology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 387.

<sup>82</sup> W. J. Hausman and J. L. Neufeld, "Falling Water: The Origins of Direct Federal Participation in the U. S. Electric Utility Industry, 1902-1933," *Annals of Public and Cooperative Economics* 70 (1999): 54.

network.<sup>83</sup> This dramatic consolidation of power (both electric and economic) caused concern among citizens and public officials alike. In 1925, Gifford Pinchot, then Governor of Pennsylvania, noted that a monopoly was inevitable and that “the question before us is not whether there shall be such a monopoly...that we cannot prevent. The question is whether we shall regulate it or whether it shall regulate us.”<sup>84</sup> It was within this context that calls for public power first resonated in the region.

It was in the early 1920s that demand for electricity finally caught up to the generating capacity of the Pacific Northwest. As the private utility prices climbed, exorbitant local rates allowed promoters of public power to gain a foothold of support.<sup>85</sup> The farmer-led revolt began as a fight to lower costs, but ended up as a decade-long turf battle over something larger. Farmers and other rural residents were outraged when private utilities refused to extend service into the hinterlands, and by the end of the decade the Washington State Grange sponsored measures designed to take the electric grid out of private hands. Rural residents viewed their situation as dire, and C. C. Dill, the senator from Washington, remarked, “If the Power Trust beats this bill, it will have the country people by the throat...”<sup>86</sup> Opponents of public power decried it as un-American, undemocratic, and “the most dangerous tax measure ever submitted to the

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<sup>83</sup> By 1929 the consolidation within the electric industry meant that the ten largest systems produced nearly seventy-five percent of the national total. U. S. Federal Trade Commission, 1935, 38-9, as quoted in Hausman, et al., 52. See also Tollefson, 59.

<sup>84</sup> *Report of the Giant Power Survey Board to the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (Harrisburg, PA: Telegraph Printing Co., 1925), xi, as quoted in Hausman, et al., 52-3.

<sup>85</sup> Gene Tollefson noted that in the Northwest, public power became identified with municipal systems and private power with giant holding companies. Public utility districts (PUDs), still prominent in the region, and rural electric cooperatives (REAs) appeared in response to the power of the holding companies. Privately held, investor-owned utilities did not “shake their holding company shackles” until the 1940’s. Gene Tollefson, 47. For more on the social meanings of rural electrification, see David Nye, *Electrifying America*, Thomas Hughes, *Networks of Power: Electrification in Western Society 1880-1930* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), and Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Disenchanted Night: The Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Berg, 1988).

<sup>86</sup> F. T. Post, “Two Views of the Power Bill,” *Okanagan Independent*, October 30, 1930, as quoted in Tollefson, 103.

voters of the State.”<sup>87</sup> Supporters of public power noted that, in 1930, sixteen dollars of publicly owned electricity in Tacoma would cost over sixty-eight dollars in the private market in Spokane. While the larger measures never garnished enough public support to pass state-wide, the market crash and ensuing depression allowed the Grange organizations of Washington and Oregon to push for publicly-controlled utilities in rural areas, and county governments soon gained the same right to own and operate electric utilities, an advantage already enjoyed by municipalities.<sup>88</sup>

By the end of the 1930s, most people in the region were already familiar with electricity, and its presence or absence delineated the “developed” areas from those that were not. Access to electricity had created another geography of modernity, a spatial marker that consigned the rural and the poor to non-modern backwaters. For years electrical wires had slowly but surely snaked their way across the region’s built environment, becoming an essential feature of what people understood to be the modern city, factory, home, and farm. Among residents of the Pacific Northwest, electricity was synonymous with wealth and power, a symbolic marker of transformation that sorted those living in the past from those ready for the future.<sup>89</sup> The power industry, with the help of the popular press, promoted the idea that electricity would free people from toil, and Americans were bombarded with the message that this technology would help to improve nearly every facet of their lives. Electricity could “abolish sleep, cure disease, lose weight, quicken intelligence, eliminate pollution, banish housework, and much

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Tollefson, 59.

<sup>89</sup> This point was driven home by businesses that were constantly calling attention to how electricity could improve lives. Advertisers of electrical products often referred to how the ‘electric present’ differed from the ‘pre-electric past’, and predicted even greater transformations to come. See David Nye, *Electrifying America*, 339-40.

more.”<sup>90</sup> It could help reduce the amount of work on the farm by doing the washing, the pumping and heating of water, the refrigeration, and by replacing kerosene lamps with electric lights. David Nye, in his book *Electrifying America*, argued that utopian predictions about an electrified future were essential to the technology’s larger meanings. Nye suggests that there was never a time when ordinary Americans understood electricity entirely in functional terms, instead viewing it symbolically, “with a touch of wonder.”<sup>91</sup> On a metaphorical level, electricity signified novelty and excitement; it became the wonder of the age, the hallmark of civilization, the sign of the modern.<sup>92</sup> As another historian put it, “the march of pylons across the terrain symbolized the march of progress,”<sup>93</sup> as the electrical tower became one of the most powerful symbols of modernity. In 1941, Woody Guthrie would capture the general public's feeling toward electricity and its capacity for social transformation when he sang:

I don't like dictators much myself,  
but this whole Pacific Northwest Country up in here  
ought to be run,  
the way I see it,  
by E-Leka-Tris-I-Tee!<sup>94</sup>

*Hydro!* portrayed the social effects of electricity in individualized and gendered terms—often focusing on what it could do for women in the home. In one scene, the narrator explained, “for the women of one nearby town, the Columbia River took on new meaning. It became part of their daily lives. Electrically-heated homes made their appearance, and men who had worked on Bonneville Dam saw their children reap the

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 386.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 382.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., x, 1.

<sup>93</sup> See David Nye, *Electrifying America* and John R. Gold, “Roll On Columbia: Woody Guthrie, Migrants’ Tales, and Regional Transformation in the Pacific Northwest,” 84.

<sup>94</sup> Woody Guthrie, “Columbia Talkin Blues” in Bill Murlin, *Woody Guthrie, Roll on Columbia*, 46-8.

harvest of their labor.” Images on the screen depicted white, middle-class children playing under electric lights, and an attractive, slim white woman cooking on an electric stove. The narrator continued:

To the smaller home, these rates mean more than twice as much electricity for two dollars a month. Formerly this sum covered only lighting and use of a radio and toaster. Now, for the same bill, Forest Grove homes get enough extra Bonneville power to wash and iron all the family clothes, keep the rugs and drapes spic and span, ease the homemaking job, cook the breakfast waffles, run another radio in the den or kitchen, and operate small appliances, such as shaver, clock, and sewing machine. Out goes the old stove. Now a housewife can use a modern electric range without paying a penny more.

Electrical appliances, manufactured and marketed by private utilities to boost consumption, became markers of material affluence and they sent a clear message about what a modern river could offer its people—wealth, comfort, progress. The message on the screen was alluring: First, the river would create a glut of cheap power. That cheap power would then lower electricity rates. The money consumers saved could then be used to consume electric machines that would save them additional time and labor. And those machines would save time and labor by consuming the river's electricity. Toasters, electric irons, waffle-makers, and washing machines were all designed to consume excess electrical capacity in the home.

*Hydro!* coded the Columbia as modern in other ways. One prominent theme was its emphasis on the conflict between mankind (the modern) and the natural world (the primitive). Here the narrator described the Columbia was a “wild and uncontrolled giant” that “hammers and roars” as “ten million horses plunge relentlessly downward toward the sea.” Descriptions of the river celebrated its massive power, and by extension, celebrated those who had the ability to use science and technology to extract the power and put it to use for mankind. Kahn’s script focused audience attention on the sheer scale

of the undertaking. He emphasized how the Army Corps of Engineers “surveyed and charted,” asserting that the government possessed the scientific acumen to objectively comprehend the river. Just as explorers in the Pacific Railroad Reports had measured the river in the 1850s, Kahn quantified the Columbia in the 1930s: “Four million yards” of rock were removed from the rapids and “a million yard concrete barrier” appeared at the dam’s foot. “Five hundred feet long and seventy-six feet wide, Bonneville’s lock opens the Columbia seaway to the commerce of the world.” Change to the river was immense, and the rational, bureaucrats in the BPA were in control, always taking measurements, always keeping track.

In fact, the film asserted that science and technology were capable of solving even the most intractable problems. Perhaps prophetically, *Hydro!* addressed how salmon might traverse the dam:

But all along the river, thousands of anxious fishermen ask one question, could the Salmon get over the dam? The royal Chinook can leap a twenty-foot falls, but it cannot hurdle the sheer ramparts of Bonneville, and it must get upstream to spawn. So a mile-long fish way was built around the dam, the strangest channel ever made by man.

Slowing down and lowering his voice to add emphasis, the narrator asserted that Bonneville would create the wonder of wonders – the fish ladder. The primitive, natural, older world of the Cascade Falls gave way to a technologically novel, useful, fish superhighway! The “strangest channel ever made by man” was the embodiment of the river’s modern utility. Anthropomorphizing the fish, *Hydro!* argued that salmon, too, would benefit from this useful, modern, river. The narrator continued:

Instinctively, unerringly, Salmon head upstream. And they find the new passage much easier than the boiling Cascade rapids of yesterday. To forecast future salmon runs, every one of the migrating fish is counted. A thirty-pound salmon thrashing and plunging at the end of a line, is a thrill never to be forgotten. But to



thousands of families along the Columbia, the king salmon means their very existence. Chief Tommy can go on spearing the royal Chinook in the tumultuous roar of Celilo Falls. The salmon are going through.

Bonneville would improve the river so much, that even salmon could enjoy the modern amenities offered, with the fish ladder being “much easier than the boiling Cascade rapids of yesterday.” Moreover, any concern that development on the river might harm the salmon runs was easily dismissed by the confident voice of the narrator, imbued with the technological expertise of the Army Corps of Engineers. The narrator opined, “Chief Tommy can go on spearing the royal Chinook in the tumultuous roar of Celilo Falls. The salmon are going through,” as triumphant music followed. Interestingly, shots of the salmon traversing the ladders (and being counted by people with pad and paper!) were juxtaposed with shots of Celilo Falls, where Indian fishermen stood on platforms in the midst of the water, capturing salmon with dip nets. The contrast between the two scenes was stark: Salmon, happy to enjoy an easy trip up the Gorge, used the tools that the Corps provided (the fish ladder). Indians, however, were depicted in the midst of the falls, literally *inside* the very part of the natural, primitive, rapids that the dams were replacing. Juxtaposed, the message was implicit: to be modern was to embrace a changed river. To oppose the engineered river, was primitive. While the salmon were brought into modernity, poor Chief Tommy was left behind, “spearing” a royal Chinook while looking like the stoic figure in John Mix Stanley's *The Last of Their Race*.

To the Army Corp of Engineers, the local businessmen who awaited its power, and the workers who labored on it, Bonneville was the culmination of an epic struggle, one where humans were pitted against nature in an unyielding battle, and an indication of the greatness of the nation. Newspaper reporters were happy to tell an uplifting story,

and their coverage often echoed a similar theme, wherein humanity finally mastered the world around it and that the “march of progress ha[d] last overtaken Old Man River.”<sup>95</sup>

One article by *Oregonian* reporter Edward Miller was typical of the coverage. Leading with the headline, “Columbia River-Cascade Mountain Feud Doomed by Bonneville Dam,” Miller wrote that Bonneville marked the “last phase of a titanic battle”:

“To date the Columbia river has won every bit of the battle save the final mopping-up process. And now mere man, with a dam, steps into this fight of giants and announces his intention of aiding and abetting the mountains...Strange, is it not that mankind finds himself able to effect a truce between such mighty forces.”<sup>96</sup>

The Columbia River would be “tamed” and the Dam would “bring peace” to the geological processes at war for centuries. Among reporters, workers, and visitors alike, there was a sense that the coming of the Dam marked an important moment. Human beings could now do things that they hadn’t done before, they could create “a truce between such mighty forces” as rivers and mountains—evidence of technological mastery, the forward march of progress, and the greatness of the nation.

In this way, *Hydro!* drew attention to the old to contrast it with the new. Bonneville Dam would be “a far cry from the old mule portage that carried goods around Cascade rapids.” The “ups and downs of the lumber trade,” would be replaced with a metallurgical industry. The region would see not another saw mill but “a new day dawning” as Columbia River power was “breaking the trail.” The Columbia had become a river of the future. *Hydro!* oriented its viewers to the new Columbia with an explicitly temporal argument. Before Bonneville the river was primitive and terrifying, “a wild and

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<sup>95</sup> For an example see Lee Bostwick, “Bonneville Dam Calls for Impressive Changes in Columbia Gorge,” *Oregonian*, October 1, 1933, sec. 5, p. 1.

<sup>96</sup> Edward M. Miller, “Columbia River-Cascade Mountain Feud Doomed by Bonneville Dam,” *Oregonian*, October 8, 1933, sec. 5, p. 6.

uncontrolled giant” with “untamed” waters that “roared unharnessed to the Pacific.”

After the coming of the dam, the Columbia was rationalized and modernized, utilized as a means to an end, a tool that “opens wide the gates of opportunity for the people of a nation” or “the key to a promised land.”

The Columbia River on display in *Hydro!* bore the weight of the New Deal's utopian vision for the region. It encompassed the dreams and aspirations of planners and bureaucrats like Stephen Kahn, and folk singers like Woody Guthrie. The Columbia was forward looking. It became a river that mimicked the linear progress of modernity, with waters that rushed not only from the mountains to the sea, but from the past into the future. The newly engineered Columbia would not be bound by its “usual or accustomed” purposes, but by new uses and new constituencies.<sup>97</sup> Modernity on the Columbia River meant that the present had super-ceded the past. The film concluded where it started, by connecting this picture of development to a mythic sense of Pacific Northwest History:

Today the Argonaut spirit of Lewis and Clark is pushing the frontier forward, Thomas Jefferson's vision of a great, free, and independent empire is unfolding in dramatic realization, on the banks of the Columbia. In the chaos of a troubled world, while other nations struggle for land and markets, America builds her own, her power and her glory, she takes up the challenge of the Columbia.

Others who pondered the significance of the dam were moved to comment on the great sweep of history. Samuel Lancaster, now somewhat of a local celebrity, wrote, “Not since President Thomas Jefferson sent Lewis and Clark to explore the original Oregon Country have such momentous events transpired in the Pacific Northwest as at

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<sup>97</sup> Here I refer to the “usual and accustomed” places where Indian peoples have treaty rights to fish “in common” with the peoples of Oregon and Washington—an important legal distinction that would have consequences for the social landscapes of the Columbia in the years to come.

present.”<sup>98</sup> Charles H. Carey, then president of the Oregon Historical Society, described the confluence of the past and the future: “The locality selected for the great Bonneville dam in the Columbia river gorge is picturesque, but it is not for this that the dam is to be built there. The region has a background of romantic history, but the engineers have not been influenced by that fact.”<sup>99</sup> In a telling moment, one can hear a hint of melancholy in Carey's description of the physical changes enacted upon the river. He continued:

“When the great structure is completed, and the waters behind the dam are raised sufficiently to satisfy the ideals and aspirations of engineering, many picturesque and historic features of the site will be submerged, perhaps forgotten by all but a few dry-as-dust antiquarians. Time makes changes but engineers have a way of hurrying old man Time, and enterprise transforms as if by magic. There will be no Cascades when the contractors have finished the job.”<sup>100</sup>

The “magic” that Carey identified was the impulse of modernity, and as it created vast sums of electricity, vast sums of money, and new constituencies for the Columbia, it excluded others—but especially those outside of modernity's discursive reach. There were losers in the epic battle to master the Columbia: Indian peoples, commercial fishermen, recreational fishermen, and...perhaps...the ecology of the Columbia itself, as the health of the Columbia's river environs would soon decline. Moreover, those who valued the Cascade Rapids, (and later Celilo Falls—where Chief Tommy Thompson was supposedly free to spearfish) were on the outside looking in. And perhaps, in more

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<sup>98</sup> Samuel Lancaster, “Great River Put to Work: Bonneville and Grand Coulee Developments Epoch Making,” *Oregon Journal*, October 1, 1933, magazine section, p. 5.

<sup>99</sup> Charles H. Carey, “Bonneville of 100 Years Ago Envisioned,” *Oregonian*, October 8, 1933, sec. 5, p. 1.

<sup>100</sup> A topic usually ignored in the newspapers, Charles Carey's article addressed conflicts between native peoples and invading Euro-Americans in the social spaces of the river. He wrote, “In general, conflicts [at the Bonneville site] were largely due to the failure of the white men to understand the Indian point of view, which was that a reasonable toll in the shape of tobacco, ammunition, utensils, or supplies should be paid for the use of the portage.” This somewhat fair assessment was not consistent with cruder perceptions of racial difference that proliferated in historical accounts of the region. But lest modern readers conclude that Carey was progressive, he added, “But there is no doubt that these natives were a particularly thieving lot, and were hard to deal with.” Charles H. Carey, “Bonneville of 100 Years Ago Envisioned,” *Oregonian*, October 8, 1933, sec. 5, p. 1.

nostalgic moments, Carey regarded himself in that category as well, a dusty antiquarian who recognized the losses as well as the gains.

Carey, who began as a prominent railroad attorney, was later a Republican judge, and eventually published a two-volume history of Oregon in the 1920s, might have been slightly unsettled by the change coming to the Columbia River Gorge. Carey described how the dam site had a “background in romantic history,” but he noted that the Army Corps of Engineers had “not been influenced by that fact.” Carey's comments hinted at a historian's sensitivity to the pace by which the region was changing, and he commented that “time makes change,” but that engineers had a way of hurrying it.

In Carey's voice we can identify a hint of nostalgia, a slight indication that perhaps *Hydro!*'s story of technological progress was not entirely complete. The seeds of another Columbia River story were planted, but had not yet begun to sprout—an inkling of a different vision that was at root in the nostalgic longing for things displaced. But this story would need time to flower, and in the meantime, the BPA, the Army Corps of Engineers, and those who came to rely on the modernized Columbia had additional plans for the river: more dams, more development, and more money—flowing down, from the clouds to the mountains to the sea.

After the construction of the dam, economic power of the federal government flowed with the Columbia's water itself, moving over the dam and through its turbines, flowing over power lines and into businesses and homes—and into the hearts and minds of those who interacted with the river. As the Army Corps of Engineers re-made the form and function of the river, the communities served by its power interacted with the federal government in a deeper and more sustained fashion. Just as Albert Beirstadt's

paintings imbued the landscape with romanticized national meanings and Samuel Lancaster's highway transformed it into redemptive space for leisure and tourism, Bonneville Dam re-scripted the relationship between the river, its constituents, and the state—transforming the landscape into a modern one, and in the process, expanding the number of people with a vested interest in how the Columbia could and should be managed.

When Bonneville lowered its gates, and the reservoir began to rise, the Columbia instantly gained a number of new constituencies, and the federal government became the dominant player in its management. Hence, the construction of Bonneville Dam marked a pivotal moment, when the Columbia River, its peoples, and its surrounding ecosystem became tangibly *legible* to the state.<sup>101</sup> The utilitarian narrative and the narrative of technological progress were lens that enabled the federal government to read the Columbia River in a modern fashion. As the Army Corps of Engineers transformed the river into a hydroelectric system, other ways of experiencing the river became less important. While these conceptions of the river as spiritual, romantic, primarily scenic, or pre-modern never fully disappeared, in the first half of the twentieth century a modern, utilitarian vision became so dominant that it both encompassed and suppressed other ways of knowing the river. Conversely, the newly transformed Columbia made the state legible to those who interacted with the river, and, as will be discussed in the next chapter, Bonneville Dam made the natural world, in the form of the salmon runs, legible to citizens and state in unexpected ways. New stories were coming, but not just yet.

As an expression of modernity, *Hydro!* served as a cultural vehicle for enacting

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<sup>101</sup> James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

such changes. The narrator in *Hydro!* was the voice of the federal government, the central component of the entire ideological production. With a steady, masculine tone, the narrator was coded as male and authoritative, but yet disembodied and separated from any physical or temporal frame. The narrator was off-screen, not connected to any particular person who could be interpreting the significance of the Columbia from his or her particular viewpoint, but instead speaking for Stephen Kahn, the Bonneville Power Administration, and the federal government. This was the real power of the BPA's documentary film—to produce an understanding of the Columbia that was experiential for audiences—visually obvious and convincingly normative—as the guiding hand of the federal government produced seemingly indisputable truth claims about the images on-screen.<sup>102</sup> As Bonneville Dam displaced water that covered the land, *Hydro!* helped displace river stories that had come before—demonstrating how a cultural text both reflected and shaped the political (and ecological) components of a river. But in another sense, *Hydro!* became the terrain upon which the federal government consolidated control of the river. In this way, the film itself *was* the modern Columbia. The power that flowed from its generators—the “hydro” of both the film's script and in the river's kilowatts—*was* the power of the federal government. And the stories that people told about the Columbia *were* the foundation of this state power. People—from inside and outside the region—told those stories in films and newspaper commentaries. Readers and viewers then told and retold similar stories in political meetings, in social gatherings, in family discussions. These stories about the river were passed around the region, quickly becoming the frames through which Bonneville Dam itself became visible and understandable; A modern, utilitarian emblem of technological progress, social

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<sup>102</sup> This interpretation relies on Keil, Bonitzer, and Doane.

opportunity, and equality. The stories made these meanings natural—and it would take time and new stories to put even the smallest dent in their power.



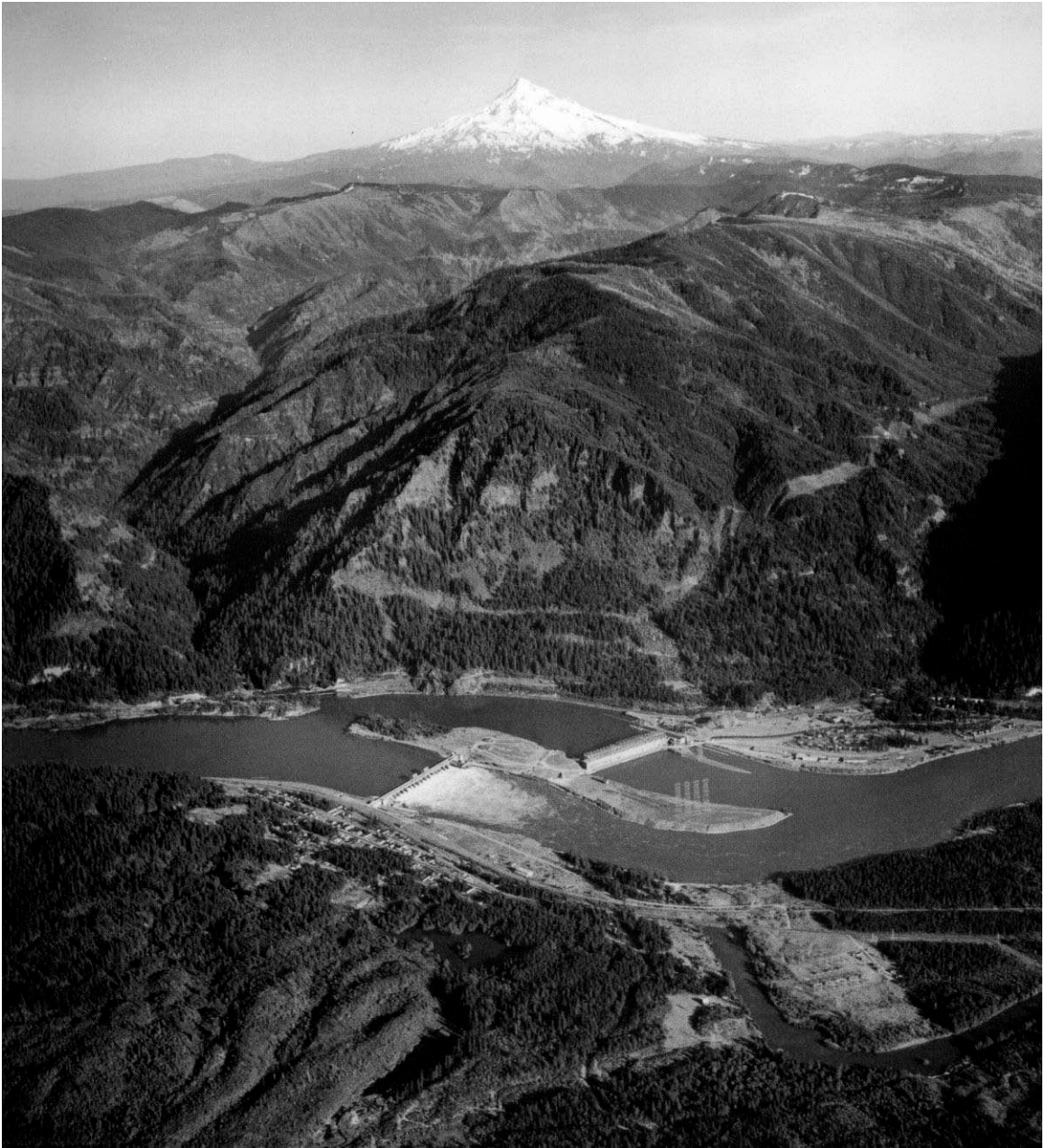
**Figure 4.1**



**The Cascades of the Columbia. View from the East.** This view looking downstream depicts the Cascades, Cascade Locks (left), and the Bridge of the Gods (center). Just downstream of the bridge, on the other side of the bend is the location where the Army Corps of Engineers would build Bonneville Dam.

Source: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, as printed in *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 105 (Spring 2004): 407.

**Figure 4.2**



**Bonneville Dam and Mount Hood. By Ray Atkeson. 1946.**

Source: Ray Atkeson Image Archive, in Terry Toedtemeier and John Laursen, *Wild Beauty: Photographs of the Columbia River Gorge, 1867-1957* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2008).

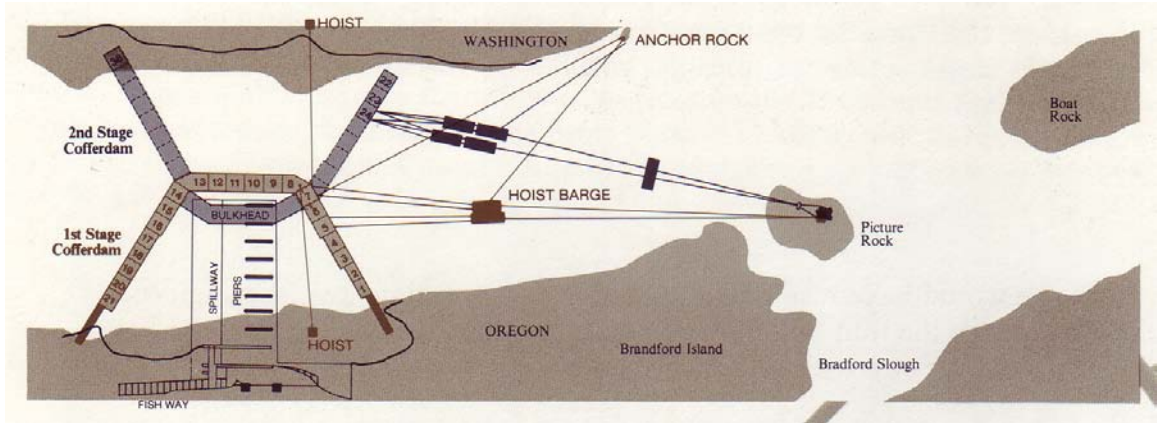
**Figure 4.3**



**Hydro's Title Sequence. 1939.**

Source: Gunther V. Fritsch, *Hydro!, the Story of Columbia River Power* (Portland, OR: Bonneville Power Administration, 1939), videocassette.

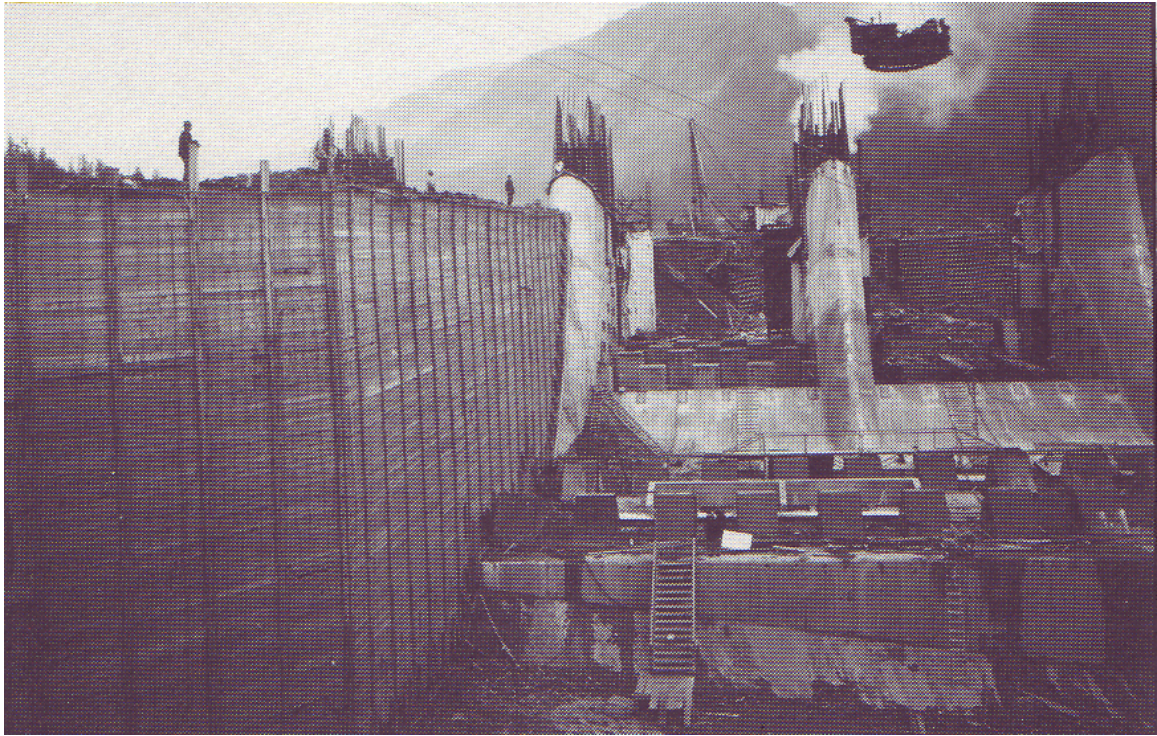
**Figure 4.4**



**Diagram of the Cofferdam.**

Source: William F. Willingham, *Water Power in the Wilderness: The History of Bonneville Lock and Dam* (Portland: U. S. Army Corps of Engineers, 1987).

**Figure 4.5**



**Work continues in the Cofferdam.**

Source: William F. Willingham, *Water Power in the Wilderness: The History of Bonneville Lock and Dam* (Portland: U. S. Army Corps of Engineers, 1987).

**Figure 4.6**



**Inside the Cofferdam.**

Source: United States Army Corps of Engineers, "Bonneville Dam, Portland, Oregon" Folder, Water Resource Center Archives, University of California, Berkeley.

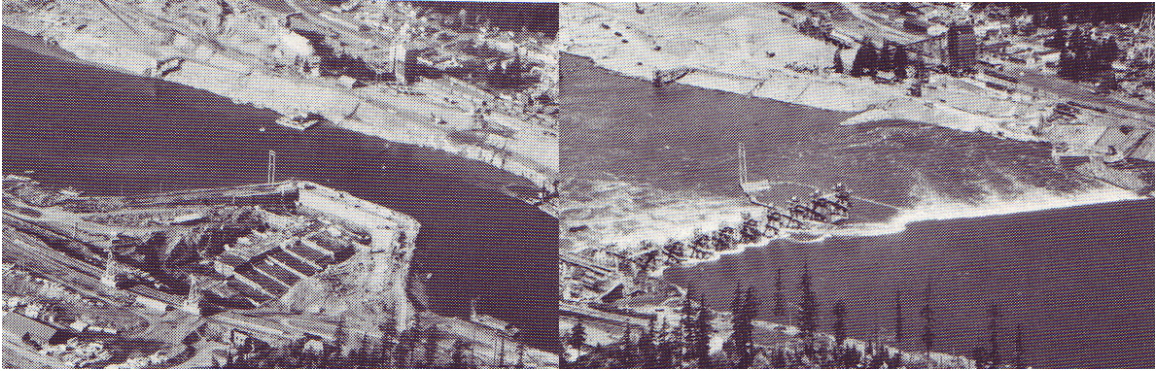
**Figure 4.7**



**Inside the Cofferdam, Wide View.**

Source: United States Army Corps of Engineers, "Bonneville Dam, Portland, Oregon" Folder, Water Resource Center Archives, University of California, Berkeley.

**Figure 4.8**

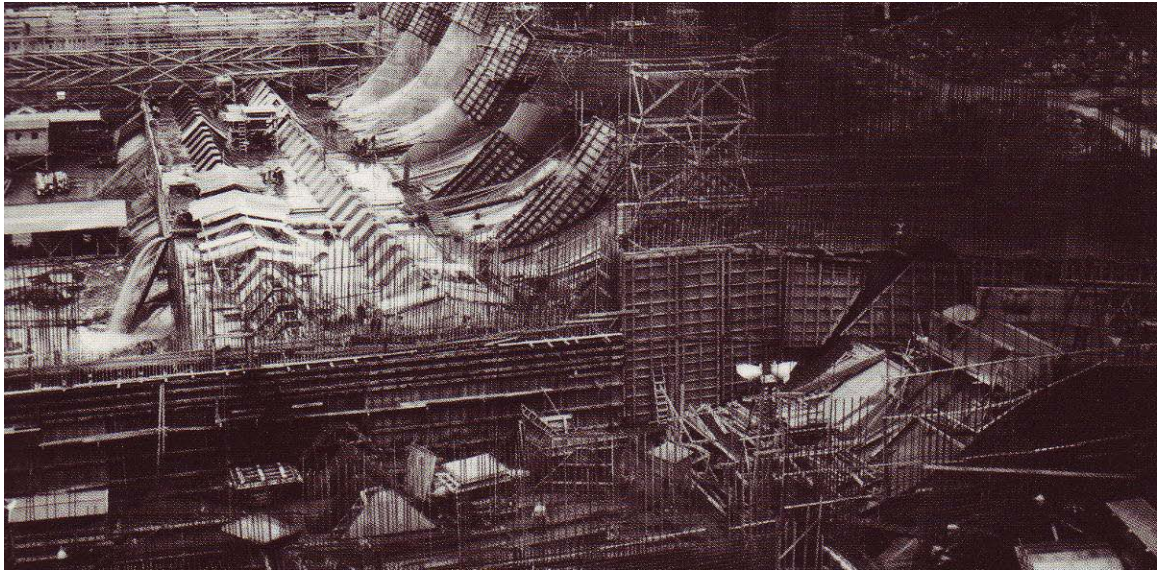


**Photos of First Cofferdam (left), and when it was removed (right).**

Source: William F. Willingham, *Water Power in the Wilderness: The History of Bonneville Lock and Dam* (Portland: U. S. Army Corps of Engineers, 1987).



**Figure 4.9**



**Detailed view of spillway construction.**

Source: William F. Willingham, *Water Power in the Wilderness: The History of Bonneville Lock and Dam* (Portland: U. S. Army Corps of Engineers, 1987).

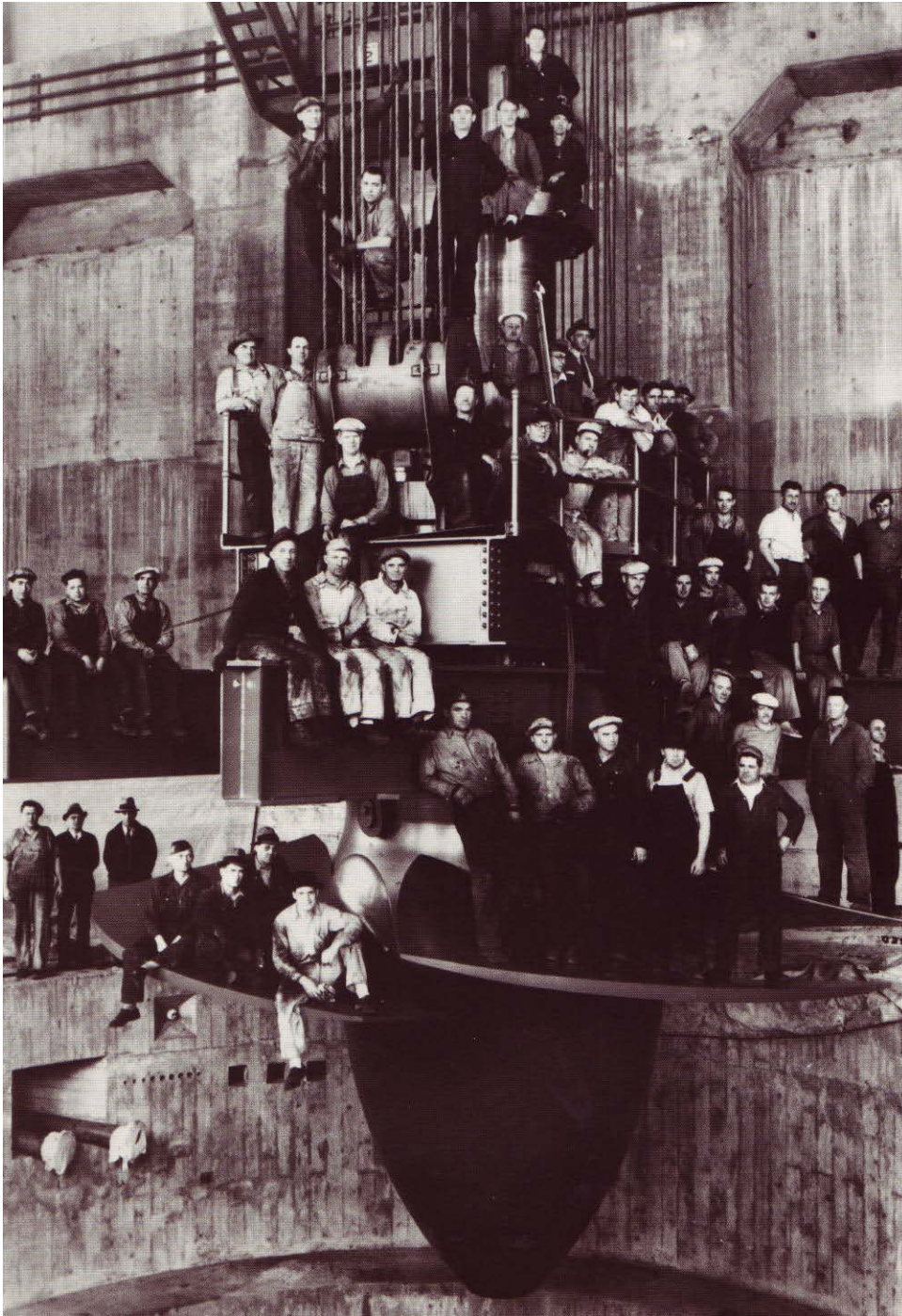
Figure 4.10



**Merry Christmas.** Cartoon by Howard Fisher, *Bonneville Dam Record*, December 23, 1933.

Source: William F. Willingham, *Water Power in the Wilderness: The History of Bonneville Lock and Dam* (Portland: U. S. Army Corps of Engineers, 1987), 5.

**Figure 4.11**



**Standing on Bonneville's Turbine.**

Source: William F. Willingham, *Water Power in the Wilderness: The History of Bonneville Lock and Dam* (Portland: U. S. Army Corps of Engineers, 1987).

**Figure 4.12**



**The Partially Finished Spillway.**

Source: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, as published on the Center for Columbia River History's website. <http://www.ccrh.org/comm/river/dams.htm>. Accessed June 10, 2010.

**Figure 4.13**



**The spillway with the river flowing underneath.**

Source: United States Army Corps of Engineers, "Bonneville Dam, Portland, Oregon" Folder, Water Resource Center Archives, University of California, Berkeley.

**Figure 4.14**



**Detail of the Spillway Piers During Construction.**

Source: William F. Willingham, *Water Power in the Wilderness: The History of Bonneville Lock and Dam* (Portland: U. S. Army Corps of Engineers, 1987).

**Figure 4.15**



**The Finished Dam.**

Source: United States Army Corps of Engineers.

Figure 4.16



Electricity sequence from *Hydro!*. 1939.



## Chapter 5

### Of Floods and Fishes: New Narratives of the Columbia River

In the years that followed the construction of Bonneville Dam, bureaucrats like Stephen Kahn embraced the task of moving the Columbia River's hydroelectric energy into the Northwest economy. As consumers began to enjoy the lowest power rates in the country, supporters of the New Deal hailed the development of the Columbia as an unmitigated success. Private industry, quick to realize the advantage of cheap and abundant power, soon built factories in the region, and by 1941 four different companies operated facilities designed to manufacture aluminum—what one local journalist now called the “miracle metal.”<sup>1</sup> When the United States entered the Second World War, previous concerns about an energy surplus were all but forgotten. Power from the Columbia soon fueled the Allies' war-production efforts, and the BPA wasted no time in pointing it out to the citizens of the region, even hiring the famed graphic artist, Lloyd Hoff, to design promotional posters. (figures 5.1, 5.2) During the war, hydroelectricity from the Columbia was put to use in crafting the Liberty ships in Portland, OR, refining the magnesium used for incendiary bombs in Spokane, and in producing the aluminum panels used to make B-17 bombers at Boeing Field in Seattle. In addition, the Columbia provided energy to “the mystery load”—the top-secret government project that eventually

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<sup>1</sup> Rex Eastman, “Oregon Beckons New Industries,” *The Spectator* 65 (January, 1940), 10, and for a discussion of the first few aluminum plants to agree to purchase Bonneville Power, see Gene Tollefson, *BPA and The Struggle for Power at Cost* (Portland, OR: Bonneville Power Administration, 1987), 161-8.

revealed itself as the Hanford nuclear facilities, where scientists produced the plutonium used to make the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The hydrologic cycle, a seemingly innocuous movement of air and water—from cloud to mountain, mountain to river, and then from river to ocean—now delivered unmistakable power to those who had harnessed it. In effect, the ubiquitous Northwest rain had been monetized, and the peculiarities of the Columbia River's geography – its steep drops and immense flows—now created a *substantial* amount of wealth for those who controlled it. How that wealth would be distributed became the central question that defined the Columbia's twentieth century history. If the Columbia River had become an “organic machine,” the looming question then became, how would this machine be managed, and who would operate it? With the BPA in charge of marketing and distributing the river's power, the Army Corps of Engineers assumed the task of managing Bonneville Dam's day-to-day operations.

While the film *Hydro!*, in all its hyperbole, may not have convinced every skeptical viewer as to the merits of the BPA, the filmmakers made it abundantly clear that the Columbia was now a different sort of river. The changes that Bonneville and Grand Coulee brought to the river were not controversial. Almost all residents embraced the projects and local civic organizations celebrated the big federal dams both for the jobs they created and, eventually, for their contribution to the region's war efforts.<sup>2</sup> More than anything else, both Bonneville and Grand Coulee dams became potent symbols of technological progress, and they lent support to the notion that the federal government

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<sup>2</sup> While the dams were almost universally celebrated, many mid-river Native peoples, whose “usual and accustomed” fishing sites were inundated behind Bonneville's pool were less than enthused. See Roberta Ulrich, *Empty Nets: Indians, Dams, and the Columbia River* (Portland, Oregon: Oregon State University Press, 1999).

could address the region's Depression-era challenges. Perhaps the best-known example of this pro-dam, pro-development sentiment appeared in the lyrics of Woody Guthrie's iconic song, *Roll On, Columbia*. To the tune of the folk standard, *Good Night, Irene*, Guthrie composed lyrics that would define the big dam era on the Columbia:

*Roll on, Columbia, roll on,  
Roll on, Columbia, roll on.  
Your power is turning our darkness to dawn  
So roll on, Columbia, roll on.*<sup>3</sup>

Guthrie's simple but catchy evocation of 'light emerging from dark' reflected the dominant pro-development discourse of his day—the story of progress—a narrative marked by an unerring faith in science, technology, institutions, and mankind's capacity to master the natural world. In addition, the 'dawn of civilization' theme found in the song's lyrics converged with existing notions of Manifest Destiny, and river-development projects came to be understood as yet another stage in the national march across an empty continent. These agents of empire—ships, dams, farms, and the workers who manned them—figured prominently in the lyrics of Guthrie's famous song. He continued:

*At Bonneville now there are ships in the locks  
The waters have risen and cleared all the rocks  
Shiploads of plenty will steam past the docks  
So, roll on, Columbia, roll on!*

*And on up the river is Grand Coulee Dam  
The mightiest thing ever built by a man  
To run the great factories for old Uncle Sam  
It's roll on, Columbia, roll on!*

*Roll on, Columbia, roll on,  
Roll on, Columbia, roll on.  
Your power is turning our darkness to dawn  
So roll on, Columbia, roll on.*

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<sup>3</sup> For lyrics and music to *Roll On Columbia*, see Woody Guthrie and Bill Murlin, *Roll On Columbia: The Columbia River Songs* (Portland, Oregon: Bonneville Power Administration, 1987), 2-3.

Some seventy years later, *Roll On, Columbia* remains as ubiquitous as ever—appearing in countless historical accounts of the Columbia's history, performed in schools by local folk musicians, still enshrined as the official “folk song” of the state of Washington.<sup>4</sup>

Yet in the decades that followed, public esteem for the engineered river and its mammoth federal dams slowly but surely began to change. Where the Columbia's dams were once seen as the most useful of government works, over time the numerous problems, sacrifices, and trade-offs complicated public attitudes. While there had always been a critical few that opposed the dams, by the early 1990s a significant percentage of the population began questioning the wisdom of transforming the river. This widespread change in public opinion was first inspired by advocacy from environmental groups, who were small in number, but vocal and savvy to the ways of the modern media. These organizations no longer agreed with Woody Guthrie that the dams were the “mightiest thing[s] ever built by man.”<sup>5</sup> In fact, they didn't care much for the dams at all. By 2001, the popular and outspoken Northwest writer, David James Duncan, captured the tenor of their criticism in, *My Story As Told By Water*. In his book Duncan lashed out at the Army Corps of Engineers, at the Bonneville Power Administration, and at the environmental sins of the modern era by “repairing” the lyrics to Woody Guthrie's famous song:

*I had just drifted off when my spirit awoke*

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<sup>4</sup> For examples of attention paid to the song see *Roll on Columbia, Woody Guthrie & the Bonneville Power Administration*, videocassette, produced by Michael Majdic, Denise Matthews, Lynette Boone, Andy Kirkpatrick, and Dan Miller (Eugene, OR: Knight Library Media Services, University of Oregon, 2000), Robert Carriker, “Ten Dollars a Song: Woody Guthrie Sells His Talent to the Bonneville Power Administration,” *Columbia* 15 (2001): 32–36, Robert Clark, *River of the West: Stories from the Columbia* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins West, 1995), 250–307, John R. Gold, “Roll On Columbia: Woody Guthrie, Migrants’ Tales, and Regional Transformation in the Pacific Northwest,” *Journal of Cultural Geography* 18 (1998): 83–98, and Bill Murlin, *Roll On Columbia, The Columbia River Songs* (Portland, OR: Bonneville Power Administration, 1987).

<sup>5</sup> This phrase was the title of another of Guthrie's Columbia River songs. See Bill Murlin, *Roll On Columbia, The Columbia River Songs* (Portland, OR: Bonneville Power Administration, 1987).

*To the sound of a git-tar an' a sad voice that spoke  
In a sweet Okie twang tailor-made to sing folk  
While outside the Columbia rolled on.*

*“Dave,” the voice said, “this idn't no joke.  
I been shanghaied to Limbo for a song I once wrote.  
The BPA paid for it. Shit. I was broke.  
It's called 'Roll On, Columbia, Roll On.'*

*The song brags up the river an' that part deserves fame.  
It's the braggin' 'bout factories an' dams that was lame.  
Can you take down dictation so I can salvage my name?”  
I said, “You betcha, Woody. Go on.”*

*When I fled from the Dust Bowl an' first saw your dams  
I was stunned by the power an' blind to the scams  
That'd steal the life pulse from an entire land,  
But roll on, Columbia, roll on*

*Roll on, Columbia, roll on.  
Roll on, Columbia, roll on,  
Once a free-flowin' river now a big poison pond,  
But roll on, Columbia, roll on.<sup>6</sup>*

Duncan's parody was a lamentation of sorts—a humorous, but sorrowful cry for a lost, lifeless river that had been engineered, harnessed, and controlled into something that, in his opinion, no longer even resembled a real river. In Duncan's formulation, the utilitarian Columbia celebrated by Woody Guthrie and Stephen Kahn was not an improvement upon nature, but an abomination of it—a “big poison pond” that had been choked of its “life pulse” by those who wanted to extract every last dime from its waters. In an effort to reclaim Guthrie as a hero-of-the-people, Duncan dismissed the song *Roll on, Columbia* as an “evil spirit” that Guthrie wrote on “a Judas of an off day.”<sup>7</sup> One additional verse of Duncan's parody deserves further examination:

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<sup>6</sup> The complete lyrics to Duncan's song can be found in *My Story As Told By Water: confessions, Druidic rants, reflections, bird-watchings, fish-stalkings, visions, songs and prayers refracting light, from living rivers, in the age of the industrial dark* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2001), 109-11.

<sup>7</sup> Duncan, 108.

*Those same mighty dams killed the great salmon runs  
Turned the planet's best fishery into barge routes an' lawns.  
Now your June hogs 'n' sockeyes 'n' coho are gone.  
But roll on, Columbia, roll on.*

At the heart of Duncan's dissatisfaction with the engineered river was the decline of the salmon—an iconic symbol of natural abundance, a celebrated regional icon, and the cultural and economic mainstay for most of the region's indigenous communities. In the postwar years, the Columbia River salmon runs experienced a long and steady decline. To Duncan, exchanging “great salmon runs” for “barge routes an' lawns” was more than a sad, but unintended, policy outcome; it was a moral and spiritual tragedy, a total failure of government and an indication of widespread social decline. More than any other river-use controversy, the decline of the Columbia River salmon runs attracted widespread attention, galvanized environmental groups into action, and changed the way that the general public understood dams, river-management questions, and ultimately, the significance of the Columbia River itself. By the closing of the twentieth century, many residents of the Pacific Northwest no longer saw dams as symbols of progress, but as symbols of decline. No matter how one felt about the politics of salmon and hydropower, it had become clear that the dams were no longer sacred, no longer the region's “entrance to a promised land.” In just a generation, children whose parents loved dams, now seemed to despise them.

Year after year, as the salmon runs declined, the dams—once universally celebrated as symbols of scientific ingenuity and progress—became symbols of the opposite, of government ineptitude and environmental decline. This change in public opinion arrived much like the running waters of the Pacific Northwest itself; first

appearing as a trickle, gathering and channeling into a stream, before consolidating into something more significant—a freshwater torrent of advocacy, media relations, and legal action that would have lasting effects on how Pacific Northwesterners understood the river and the region. As environmental groups organized, they battled entrenched river interests not accustomed to sharing the Columbia's vast wealth. These interests included manufacturing and aluminum industries, public utilities, shipping and transportation companies, irrigators, and government agencies that had grown cozy with the private industries they now served. In challenging the accepted and normative management patterns on the Columbia River system, these environmental organizations took their fight to the federal courts, and, significantly, to the court of public opinion. In fighting for the survival of the salmon, these groups would offer a new type of Columbia River story—one that cut against older understandings of the river that had been dominant for decades.

This new Columbia River story was a tragedy, a tale of decline. It was a story of pollution and ecological collapse, of misused public subsidies and mismanagement of resources, and of scientific hubris on the part of those who claimed to know and master nature. The victims in this story were salmon, and those who relied upon the fish for sustenance—including Indian peoples who had a sacred affinity for the fish, the declining commercial fishing industry, and those sports fisherman who caught the salmon for recreation. Those guilty of perpetrating this decline were the Army Corps of Engineers, the Bonneville Power Administration, and the industrial and agricultural interests who had long benefited from arrangements made at the salmon's expense. More generally, this story of the salmon's demise directed criticism inwardly—towards all the residents of

the Pacific Northwest who had tolerated mismanagement of the Columbia in exchange for cheap and abundant hydropower. In the late 1980s, conservation groups launched save-the-salmon campaigns that quickly evolved into a critique of a deeper, more fundamental type of ecological crisis. In the closing decades of the twentieth century, the story that conservations told was *compelling*. The Pacific salmon, long part of the region's cultural and environmental heritage, were disappearing fast. The problem was urgent, the message resonate. To understand how many residents of the Pacific Northwest moved from worshipping dams to worshipping salmon, it is useful to look more closely at the types of river stories that were being told. And to do that, one must look back to the immediate postwar era and the origins of what would become to be known as the Columbia's "salmon crisis."

### **The Biology of Fishes**

Understanding the crisis begins by understanding something of the biology of the salmon itself. For the amount of time and energy spent studying these slippery creatures, much remains a mystery. In the Pacific Northwest, the word "salmon" generally refers to seven different species of fish, five of which are classified as salmon and two of which are actually trout. Confusingly, each of the fish has multiple names: there are the Chinook (also known as the King), the Coho (Silver), the Chum (Dog), the Red (Humpback), and the Sockeye (Pink). Each ranges in size and appearance, as do their two cousins, the Steelhead and the Cutthroat Trout. All of these fish are anadromous, meaning that they are hatched in freshwater, and stay in a river or stream until they migrate to the ocean.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> This discussion of salmon biology relies on Joseph Cone, *A Common Fate: Endangered Salmon and the People of the Pacific Northwest* (New York: H. Holt, 1995), 8, 10, 36, 96-8, but also was informed by



Upon hatching, the young salmon live in the stream they were spawned in, growing until they reach the size of four or five inches, which usually takes about a year, maybe two. Prior to making the journey to the ocean, the juvenile fish, now called “fingerlings” or “smolts,” experience hormonal changes that make them less territorial, less resistant to the torrent of water that will flush them downstream. This transformation changes the salmon's color, the shape of their fins, their teeth, and their kidneys and gills—enabling them to adapt to the soon-to-be transition to saltwater. Chinook fingerlings make the whole journey with their head facing into the current, thus swimming most of the way backwards. Anadromous fish, like all of those described here, depend on a specific volume, current, and temperature of water to make it from their spawning grounds to the ocean, where they will spend the majority of their lives.<sup>9</sup>

Where the Columbia River salmon go upon reaching the ocean is largely unknown, though there is some evidence that they follow predominant ocean currents North, to Alaska. At sea the salmon feed for four to six years before they begin their migration back to the very same stream that they were spawned in, a mystery that still baffles those biologists who study it. This pilgrimage to the site of their birth can take weeks, and can involve traveling hundreds of miles. Much to the upriver fisherman's chagrin, they usually make the entire trip without eating.<sup>10</sup> Upon arrival in the stream or

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William Dietrich, *Northwest Passage: The Great Columbia River* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996), David James Duncan, *My Story As Told By Water*, Jim Lichatowich, *Salmon Without Rivers: A History of the Pacific Northwest Salmon Crisis* (Washington D. C.: Island Press, 1999), David R. Montgomery, *King of Fish: The Thousand-Year Run of Salmon* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2003), and Richard White, *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> The moniker “salmon” comes from the latin, *salire*, to leap. The English first coined the term, and it has been used in reference to fish since the 13<sup>th</sup> Century. The term anadromous, pronounced with the accent on the second syllable, is a Greek word that means “running up.” Cone, 7-8.

<sup>10</sup> As many anglers in the Pacific Northwest know too well, catching a migrating salmon with hook and lure can be extremely difficult. Successful sports fisheries rely on vast numbers to make salmon fishing

river where they began, the females thrash their tails about, digging a 'redd' where they deposit their eggs in the gravel of a streambed. The males then release 'milt' into the water, and the eggs are fertilized as the mixture settles into the gravel below. After the male finishes fertilizing the eggs, the female returns and, with a thrust of her tail, covers the eggs with gravel. Biologists estimate that gravel ranging from the size of a pea to the size of a grapefruit is best, and if the conditions are not right, the salmon will not spawn, or the fertilized eggs will be washed away or eaten by predators. Having put all of their energy into the journey home, the adult salmon's life is then over, and the fish dies—its body, and all the nutrients contained there within, returned to the river.

To make such a long and arduous journey, the salmon rely on the fact that each spawning adult produces hundreds of eggs. This evolutionary strategy ensures that a few will manage to make it down and out to the ocean, thus passing their genetic material on to future offspring. “Stocks” of salmon, which are populations that generally don't interbreed with others, have undergone adaptations over thousands of years, perfecting certain traits necessary to survive in any particular stream that they inhabit. This means that fish of one stock rarely do well when transplanted somewhere else, making the existing wild stocks essential to ensuring there is enough genetic diversity to sustain a salmon run on any particular river, especially in the face of disturbances (manmade or otherwise) which can disrupt normative reproductive patterns.<sup>11</sup> Salmon are also tetraploids, meaning they have double the number of chromosomes than their ancestors had. With double the number, they have two copies of every gene, thus enabling a higher number of variations in the genes, some of which may be useful for adapting to changing

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on rivers a successful endeavor.

<sup>11</sup> Salmon biologist Willa Nehlsen estimated that most salmon stocks needed the genetic variance of four hundred to one thousand breeding individuals to ensure its survival. Cone, *A Common Fate*, 37.

ecosystems.

Fish scientists estimate that, prior to the dams, a typical juvenile salmon in the mountains of Idaho could traverse the entire length of the Snake and Columbia rivers in under two weeks. Today, with as many as eight different reservoirs holding back the rivers' spring flows, the estimate is eight weeks—an increase in time that has been particularly deadly for the fish. In the main stem of the Columbia the young salmon face miles and miles of slackwater, where many get lost or use valuable energy searching for the way downstream. In addition, as the slow-moving water warms in the sun, the resulting change in water temperature altered other aspects of the river's ecology, prompting changes in the number of predators—including bass, walleye, and the salmon-munching pikeminnow (formerly known as the “squawfish”)—who all feed on the small salmon. When the smolts reach the dams, those fish traveling deep get funneled into bypass facilities, or go through the dam's turbines themselves—causing an estimated 5-15% mortality rate. Smolts traveling shallower might get pushed over the spillway of the dam, where they face the prospect of nitrogen super-saturation, and an additional estimated 2-5% mortality rate. Every dam the fish encounter means a preponderance of obstacles, a danger that is multiplied by each dam on the river. Every year, countless young salmonids are killed as they are lost or eaten in reservoirs, funneled through bypass facilities, dumped over spillways, or passed through the belly of the dams. Such a gauntlet of obstacles makes it more and more difficult for Pacific salmon to sustain their numbers. This combined with the other major factors of the salmon's decline—the destruction of habitat by development and logging, the overfishing, the problems

associated with hatcheries—has meant a litany of problems for the fish.<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, biologists have known of most of these problems for over sixty years—prior to the construction of most of the Columbia system's dams. Yet, information about what made a healthy salmon run did not always mix with those narratives that shaped the Columbia. In fact, the decisions to build the dams were usually made despite knowledge of the risks they posed to the fish. Knowledge, or “facts” about salmon, didn't seem to matter as much as the story being told about them.

### **A Post-War Boom**

To understand the genesis of this new Columbia story, one must look back to the years immediately following the construction of Bonneville Dam and to the role played by the Army Corps of Engineers in managing changes to the river. If the 1930s were the era of big plans, when competent engineers could promise improvements to the natural world, than the 1940 and 1950s were the era when these plans came to fruition. In planning additional dams on the Columbia, the Corps drew on the original study, the infamous “308” report that envisioned ten large dams on the Columbia and Snake. The report, ambitious in its desire to remake the entire watershed, would act like a roadmap for post-war development on the river. With victory in Europe and the Pacific, the

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<sup>12</sup> To ascertain the age of a salmon (and to see if the fish came from a hatchery) biologists look closely at the fish's scales. The scales of a salmon grow like tree rings—they encircle a starting point, and close examination of the ring pattern reveals the rate in which the fish grew during its first year. With a controlled environment and regular feedings, hatchery fish grow much more rapidly during the first year of their life cycle. Thus, a wild fish will have much tighter rings, indicating the slower rate of growth in the wild. Hatchery fish, which begin as eggs taken from only a few adults, have much less genetic diversity than the wild populations, and this influences the ability of the wild runs to sustain healthy populations. Hatchery fish often compete with wild fish for food, prey upon young migrants, and introduce hatchery-borne diseases into the greater fish populations. Moreover, large numbers of hatchery fish only serve to increase the harvest by commercial, recreational, and tribal fishermen, putting the wild populations in peril. Complicating matters is the fact that hatchery fish interbreed with wild populations, meaning that the overall pool of genetic diversity within runs continues to decline, diminishing the usefulness of categorical descriptions that distinguish between a “man-made” and a “wild” salmon.

federal government had the time and the inclination to make the Corps' multiple-purpose vision into a reality.

At the end of the war an atmosphere of optimism and “faith in the future” spread throughout the nation. In Oregon and Washington, pent-up demand for both consumer goods and raw materials promised an escape from the usual boom and bust economic cycle. For the Pacific Northwest these were years of unprecedented prosperity. With the help of cheap and abundant hydropower, recently established aerospace, chemical, and aluminum industries helped to transition the Northwest economy away from wartime production. In the process, they diversified the regional economy—pushing the region's economy away from its sole dependence upon resource-extraction industries like logging and fishing.<sup>13</sup> Accompanying this post-war economic expansion was a surge in population growth. During the war, over 250,000 people migrated to Portland and its surrounding communities, an increase of more than 37 percent, while the population of the Pacific Northwest increased by over 25 percent. By the end of the decade, Oregon had grown by 432,000 residents—a 40 percent increase, with over half living in the greater Portland metropolitan area.<sup>14</sup> Up and down the Columbia Basin, most residents experienced a rise in overall wealth.<sup>15</sup> With population increases came the need for more food, more housing, and more consumer goods. Not surprisingly, this growth in population, agricultural production, and manufacturing output prompted a consortium of public and private business interests to push for additional river-development on the

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<sup>13</sup> Though, resource-extraction industries remained a dominant part of the Northwest economy. See William Robbins, *Landscapes of Conflict: The Oregon Story 1940-2000* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), 45.

<sup>14</sup> Figures from Carlos Schwantes, *The Pacific Northwest: An Interpretive History*, rev. ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 413, and Robbins, *Landscapes of Conflict*, 11.

<sup>15</sup> Once again the exception to this may be the mid-Columbia River Indian peoples, whose cultural and economic systems had been undermined by the inundation of their fishing sites behind the dams.

Columbia.

Back in 1943, the head of the Corps' Portland District, Ralph Tudor, had addressed members of the Portland Rotary about a comprehensive engineering plan for the entire Columbia Basin. If Congress avoided “the fallacy of piecemeal development,” Tudor argued, the Columbia River could become “the greatest national asset of this or any other nation.”<sup>16</sup> To Tudor and other Corps officials, the large federal dams had worked even better than expected—they had supplied the region with a glut of cheap, clean energy and harnessed enough hydroelectric capacity to produce thousands of aircraft, ships, and even atomic weapons.<sup>17</sup> It was the heyday of “scientific expertise” and the dams on the Columbia were evidence of the federal government's technological acumen. Both the technocrats in the BPA and in the Army Corps of Engineers were feeling especially ebullient about the prospects of improving and expanding the hydroelectric system. By 1945 the (next) head engineer for the Portland District, Ben Torpen, boasted of the Corps' post-war plans for the river: “Storage is the key to complete development of the Columbia River...without storage only about twenty percent of a hydroelectric power site's potential firm capability can be realized...eighty percent of the potential power depends on storage...The fundamental basis for the application of the multiple use principle is STORAGE.”<sup>18</sup> Buoyed by the success of Bonneville and Grand Coulee, proud of the dams' contribution to the war effort, and always looking for ways to expand and increase their budget, the Army Corps of Engineers pushed forward in their

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<sup>16</sup> *Oregonian*, August 14, 1943, as quoted in William Robbins, *Landscapes of Conflict*, 49.

<sup>17</sup> Marc Riesner wrote of the Columbia's contribution to the war: “In the end, the Axis powers were no match for two things: the Russian winters, and an American hydroelectric capacity that could turn out sixty thousand aircraft in four years. We didn't so much outmaneuver, outman, or outfight the Axis as simply outproduce it.” Marc Riesner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and its Disappearing Water* (New York: Viking, 1986), 164.

<sup>18</sup> As quoted by Gus Norwood, “River of Many Uses,” in *Conflicts Over the Columbia River: Seminar Conducted by Water Resources Research Institute* (Corvallis: Oregon State University, 1980), 8.

efforts to plan and build more dams, including three on the Columbia's main stem and more on the Columbia's largest tributary, the Snake River.

Other interests in the region shared the Corps' vision of additional development. Within Portland there were a number of business leaders who sought to take advantage of the post-war economic expansion, and groups like the Portland Chamber of Commerce advocated aggressively for more dams. In the *Oregonian*, reporter Paul Hauser wrote of the “vast promise of the Columbia.” Of hydropower, Hauser gushed:

“It is the golden asset of the Pacific northwest. It is its hope and promise for the future...It will be energy that is always there—small snow or big snow, little flood or big—for the storage features of the dams on the main river and on the tributaries will enable the engineers to keep the river at a fairly constant flow. There will be little water flowing to waste over the spillways of Bonneville, the last chance to convert the force of its falling to the sea into power.”<sup>19</sup>

Hauser envisioned a *complete* transformation of the river. Not a drop of the Columbia's water would be wasted; its energy would be fully tapped, its utility fully extracted.

Others joined Hauser's clarion call for full development. In June 1946, Ivan Bloch, head administrator of the BPA, wrote in the *Oregon Business Review*, “What a magnificent challenge to all—those of us already here and those who are yet to come! This challenge must cause us to resolve that the development of the western country must hew closely to all known and yet-to-be-developed precepts of the proper and wise use of the riches that nature has given to this West Coast. Our streams must continue to flow pure and undefiled; our forests must become an everlasting crop; our new industries must develop harmoniously with the countryside and the people who work in them.”<sup>20</sup> Other calls for development were less concerned about the environment. The Pacific Northwest

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<sup>19</sup> *Oregonian*, May 5, 1945, as cited in William Robbins, *Landscapes of Conflict*, 50.

<sup>20</sup> Ivan Bloch, “Pacific Northwest Horizons in the Postwar World,” *Oregon Business Review* 5 (June 1946), 2.

Development Association (PNDA) actively promoted resource development through “private enterprise, group initiative, and established government agencies.”<sup>21</sup> The PNDA were especially critical of any development on the Columbia that would be similar to the Tennessee Valley Authority, now generally referred to as a Columbia Valley Authority (CVA). The PNDA even sponsored a public relations campaign that demonized the proposed CVA as “un-American.” Yet despite its anti-government rhetoric, the PNDA firmly supported both the BPA and the Army Corps of Engineers throughout the postwar era. (figures 5.3, 5.4, 5.5, 5.6, 5.7) In the context of the Cold War, Portland business interests called for more power, while east-side agricultural producers clamored for more water for irrigation. In addition, transportation interests lobbied for a slackwater corridor that would stretch from the Pacific to the interior, all the way up the Snake River to Lewiston, Idaho. “This program will practically canalize the Columbia River above Umatilla,” wrote one Columbia River barge operator, who voiced the sentiment of most of Portland's business class when he argued that the dams would give Portland “a decided rate advantage” in getting access to the “heavy tonnages originating in central and eastern Washington and western Idaho.”<sup>22</sup>

Faced with these calls for more hydropower, more water for irrigation, and an expansion of the inland water-transportation system, the Army Corps of Engineers pushed ahead with plans to increase the river's storage and hydroelectric capacity. In 1946, the federal government created the Columbia Basin Inter-Agency Committee to coordinate the effort. While this committee included both federal and state representatives, the driving force behind this push for more dams was federal, and the

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<sup>21</sup> *Pacific Northwest Development Association: By-laws and Articles of Incorporation* (Portland, 1945), as quoted in William Robbins, *Landscapes of Conflict*, 38.

<sup>22</sup> H. T. Shaver, “Upper Columbia River Traffic,” *Oregon Business Review* 4 (September 1945), 4.



major players were the Army Corps of Engineers and the Bonneville Power Administration. A powerful coalition was forming behind these government agencies. Business interests represented by the PNDA, local chambers of commerce, and the pro-development *Oregonian* newspaper all lobbied on behalf of river improvements. Together they would drive public opinion in favor of a complete transformation of the Columbia, a policy that would have important and far-reaching effects for the health of the Columbia's salmon runs, and important social, cultural, and economic consequences for the region.

In their proposals to build more dams, the Army Corps of Engineers engaged in a full-blown marketing campaign, preparing stacks upon stacks of documents that, according to the historian William Robbins, "...perfected the art of cost-benefit analyses to justify construction projects."<sup>23</sup> Hundreds of pages long, these plans were full of estimates and figures that sang the praises of multiple-purpose river developments. With all their numbers, charts, and figures, the Corps' development plans didn't look like stories, but that is exactly what they were. Implicit in the Corps official preparations were claims of expertise, assertions that rivers could be known and understood through the tools that they were wielding. By claiming credibility and asserting that they had proper knowledge of the task, the Corps assured Congress that the rivers would be under expert management, that nature could serve human economic needs without any discernible consequences.

Yet when it came to the salmon fishery, the written plans were somewhat thin. While the Corps gave lip service to protecting the salmon fishery, there is little doubt that the fish were not a high priority. Perhaps it was apathy towards the science of biology, or

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<sup>23</sup> This quotation and general argument is from William Robbins, *Landscapes of Conflict*, 46.

an unassailable belief in their own capacity to solve any problem, but the Corps exhibited an outright lack of concern for the fish, and made no plans to help juvenile salmon traverse the dams on their way down to the ocean.<sup>24</sup> This fact was not lost on the opponents of the river projects, who smelled something downright piscatorial (ha!) and were correct about the Corps being disingenuous in claiming that the fish were well accounted for in their official plans.

While there were powerful interests behind building additional dams, there also was a passionate few who opposed the projects. Early opposition was voiced by regional commercial and recreational fishing interests, Indian peoples, and a smattering of conservationists and other concerned citizens who were worried about the salmon runs. Back in the 1930s, a number of concerned citizens had initially raised concern over Bonneville Dam's effect on the fisheries. Significantly, their narratives focused not on the fish themselves, but on the economic costs that might come if they fish went missing. One letter to the *Oregonian* raised the question of financial damage to the commercial fishery:

“We Oregonians have been so busy in the past few years counting our unhatched Bonneville chickens that those us who have made bold to mention the Columbia river fishing industry have been shushed as spoil-sports, pessimists and pests...I had intended to keep still, but I cannot refrain from pointing out once again that the value of the canned salmon pack in the past 25 years has been \$125,265,998 by actual figures...I sincerely hope Bonneville will produce as much new wealth in the next 25.”<sup>25</sup>

The well-known naturalist, William L. Finley, also framed his criticism of Bonneville as

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<sup>24</sup> Historian Keith Petersen, in his study of river development on the upper Snake River, argues that the Army Corps of Engineers did, in fact, understand the importance of getting juvenile salmon back through the system, but simply made no provision to do so because it was difficult and costly. *River of Life, Channel of Death: Fish and Dams on the Lower Snake* (Portland, Oregon: Oregon State University Press, 2001), 113.

<sup>25</sup> David Eccles, Letter to the Editor, “Fish and Dams,” *Oregonian*, July 27, 1936, p. 6.

endangering the twelve million per year salmon *industry*. Finley stated, “And we are building tall dams across the Columbia River to produce power. How are we going to get adult salmon across those dams and more important still, how are we going to get the fingerling fish across them on the way back to their sea?” He continued, “We’ve got to advertise Oregon as a recreational state, instead of getting people to come out here to farm sage brush country.”<sup>26</sup> Commercial fisherman worried that even a short period during which the river was blocked (before the fish ladders were complete) would harm the salmon runs—even to the point where they organized protests to draw attention to the issue.<sup>27</sup> Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, concerns over the salmon fishery were predominantly expressed in economic terms, usually in estimates of the financial loss borne by the commercial or recreation fishing industries. The exception to this pattern was the concerns raised by Native peoples—despite the fact that they experienced a financial loss as much as anyone. Indians told all who would listen about their treaty-protected right to fish, but the pro-development *Oregonian* decided that Indian opposition to Bonneville dam wasn't particularly newsworthy, mentioning their opposition in only one small article, tellingly titled, “Reds Want Open River,” that featured the byline, “Indians Not So Enthusiastic About Bonneville Dam.” The short article dismissed the opposition in only two or three sentences: “Bonneville dam, hailed by the Pacific northwest as a great advance in power and navigation facilities on the Columbia river, will not be so welcomed by the Indians.” The article continued, “Chief Thompson of Celilo called upon United States Attorney Donough asking what would happen to the salmon run when the great dam is built. Indians who depend for much of their food

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<sup>26</sup> “Naturalist Raps Bonneville Dam,” *Oregonian*, March 25, 1936, p. 5.

<sup>27</sup> “Columbia Salmon Packers Will Protest Closing of Gap,” *Oregonian*, July 10, 1936, p. 24.

supply on the annual trek of salmon up the river fear the run will be stopped, the chief said.”<sup>28</sup> Through all the dam building proposals, the vast majority of Indian peoples were steadfast in their opposition to river development projects, always out of concern for the salmon runs.

In the haste to build Bonneville, nearly all concerns about dams killing fish were brushed aside as reporters repeated the Corps' talking points. Even more often reporters did features on new “salmon-friendly” improvements (like fish ladders and bigger hatcheries) that promised to mitigate damages to the salmon runs. “Salmon will be provided for, naturally, with a fish ladder at the dam,” crowed Lee Bostwick, a staff reporter at the *Oregonian*, “...and these turbines are radically different from the old-time waterwheel and a six inch cobble can pass through the wheel without causing damage. A large fish can go through one of these turbines and emerge alive, as there is no shearing action as existed in the old type wheel.”<sup>29</sup> Bostwick's faith that the Corps could engineer their way around any problems was typical for the era. The Corps encouraged such optimistic attitudes by bragging about the ease by which salmon could traverse the fish ladders. In a Commissioner of Fisheries Report the government noted how salmon could get upriver with “far less effort than their forbearers that fought upstream through the swirling rapids that are now buried beneath fifty feet of water.”<sup>30</sup> Similarly, in the BPA's promotional documentary film *Hydro!* Stephen Kahn of the BPA described the fish ladders as a type of highway, the “strangest channel ever made by man.” Kahn's narrator

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<sup>28</sup> *Oregonian*, January 7, 1934, sec. 1, p. 4.

<sup>29</sup> Lee Bostwick, “Bonneville Dam Calls for Impressive Changes in Columbia Gorge,” *Oregonian*, October 1, 1933, sec. 5, p. 1, and “Bonneville Ideal Site for Big Dam,” *Oregonian*, October 8, 1933, sec. 5, p. 1.

<sup>30</sup> U.S. Congress, Commissioner of Fisheries Report on Bonneville Dam and Protection of the Columbia River Fisheries, 75<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, 1937, Senate Document 87, and Keith Petersen, *River of Life, Channel of Death*, 109.

continued: “Instinctively, unerringly, salmon head upstream. And they find the new passage much easier than the boiling Cascade rapids of yesterday...the Salmon are going through.”<sup>31</sup> Several years later, one assistant engineer would publicly state that dam turbines were “absolutely incapable of hurting the fish. If you could put a mule through there, and keep him from drowning he would go through without being hurt.” Of course, the turbines did kill fish, and, more significantly, it turned out they were only one of the many ways that dams harmed fish.<sup>32</sup> In the pre-war years of Columbia development, however, a few fish advocates proved to be no match for the rhetoric or political power in the pro-dam coalition.

Yet, by the time the Corps sought additional dams in the mid-1940s, dissenters did have enough standing to force a series of public hearings, where they cast doubt on the worthiness of the plans.<sup>33</sup> The Columbia River Fisheries Development Association, which was made up sports and commercial fishing interests, argued that the Corps failed to understand the science of fish diversion, because they had never made a proper investigation of the fishery. One young biologist warned that the dams and healthy salmon populations were likely incompatible. Paul Needham, who worked for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, expressed skepticism of Corps claims that they had adequately planned for the mortality rate of juvenile salmon returning to the sea: “Maybe the salmon will follow the dodo and the passenger pigeon into the limbo of forgotten and neglected

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<sup>31</sup> Gunther V. Fritsch, *Hydro, the Story of Columbia River Power* (Portland, OR: Bonneville Power Administration, 1939), video recording.

<sup>32</sup> According to Keith Petersen, this account of “a mule passing through a dam” was repeated so often by pro-dam advocates that it became part and parcel of the region's folklore, and it caused many people to associate turbine safety with overall dam safety—a costly mistake for the health of the salmon runs. *River of Life, Channel of Death*, 110.

<sup>33</sup> For a discussion of the hearings, see William Robbins, *Landscapes of Conflict*, 51-76.

assets,” he wrote.<sup>34</sup> Somewhat prophetically, Needham later added:

“Another point to consider on the dam question is this: We have seen the 'eager beavers' bent on changing the face of America, regardless of the true economic or aesthetic values concerned; frankly, the outlook for finding an unspoiled stream over fifty feet wide after another fifty years will be pretty slim. In an earlier era we watched a series of wild-eyed schemes that drained most of our lower marshes and spoiled hundreds of thousands of acres of waterfowl resting and feeding areas. Later, thousands of more dollars were spent to re-flood some of those that were mistakenly drained to bring them back as refugees. Other areas have been set aside for various species of wildlife from time to time. If refugees can be created for birds and mammals, why not for fish?”<sup>35</sup>

Needham's plea for a fish refuge was notable for its articulation of conservation values.

Yet Needham was an outlier. Most other dissenters focused primarily on the economics of the fishery, a tactic opponents easily countered with charges of overfishing. Faced with declining catches, the commercial fishing industry did their best to protect their access to the resource. In a June 1947 hearing, T. F. Sandoz of the Columbia River Packers summed up their general argument: the region was sacrificing “the wealth of the sea” for electricity.<sup>36</sup> On those terms, much of the general public would have opted for dams.

Other naysayers were less forgiving of the federal government's intentions. At one congressional hearing, Kenneth Reid of the Izaak Walton league lambasted the Corps' for a proposal that he saw as nothing more than “a sales piece” that “...by its technicality and voluminous content assures itself a sanctuary from the prying eyes of public-minded Congressman...” Reid asked, “Why the great haste to dam or divert every river in the

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<sup>34</sup> Paul R. Needham, “Plans for Protection of Salmon Runs That Will Be Blocked by Shasta Dam,” Box 39, E. E. Wilson Papers, Oregon State University Archives, Corvallis, as cited in William Robbins, *Landscapes of Conflict*, 51.

<sup>35</sup> Paul Needham, “Dam's Threaten West Coast Fisheries Industry,” *Oregon Business Review* 6 (June 1947), 6.

<sup>36</sup> Columbia Basin Inter-Agency Committee, *Minutes of the Tenth Meeting*, Walla Walla, Washington, June 25-26, 1947, p. 65-68, Anthony Netboy, *Salmon of the Pacific Northwest: Fish vs. Dams* (Portland: Binford & Mort, 1958), 56, and William Robbins, *Landscapes of Conflict*, 62.

country?” He then criticized the Corps for the reckless speed in which they planned and authorized dam projects:

“Like a horde of locusts, the engineers of the great dam building agencies have descended upon our rivers, mapping every possible dam site with bland unconcern for national need, sound economics, or effect on public aquatic resources. And, when these job hungry engineers connive with selfish local promoters and vote seeking politicians, all afflicted with the dangerous water-borne diseases of 'hydro-mania,' ‘reclmania,’ and ‘navigamania,’ which blind them to all values in water except kilowatt hours, acre-feet for irrigation, or avenues for boats, the triumvirate is a tough combination to beat.”<sup>37</sup>

Sounding the alarm, Reid's diagnosis of the Army Corps of Engineers' penchant for overbuilding corresponded with other national efforts to put a brake on such ambitious dam-building plans. In fact, several prominent conservation organizations had awoken to the dangers posed by dams, and by the early 1950s, David Brower and the Sierra Club began a very public crusade to block one such project in the Grand Canyon. In that particular case, the conservationists placed advertisements in national newspapers, and Brower had toured the nation to build support against the Bureau of Reclamation's plans. For the Sierra Club, the national push was successful, and public opinion swayed in favor of blocking the development. With a place like the Grand Canyon, one could see why a national public relations campaign could work. Marc Reisner, in his still definitive book *Cadillac Desert: The American West and its Disappearing Water*, offers an example of one speech wherein Brower said that he “wouldn't mind dams in the Grand Canyon as long as the Bureau built a comparable canyon somewhere else.”<sup>38</sup> The crowd responded with a standing ovation. But in the post-war Northwest, Reid's skepticism, if not outright antipathy, for Corps' expertise was not shared by the general public, and there existed no

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<sup>37</sup> As cited in William Robbins, *Landscapes of Conflict*, 58.

<sup>38</sup> Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*, 288.

national constituency to lobby that might save the free-flowing Columbia. Backed by Portland's business elite, buoyed by a growing market for hydroelectricity, and supported by the popular belief that science could solve any problem, the Army Corps of Engineers pressed ahead with their plans to add more dams to the river.<sup>39</sup>

While the Corps found success in planning, funding, and building more dams, they soon discovered that the ecological health of the river was not managed as easily. There would be unintended consequences of re-engineering such a complex ecosystem; as more and more dams came on-line, and salmon numbers continued to fall, the Engineers would not find any quick fix to address the fundamental problems with the fishery. Dams, logging, loss of habitat, over-fishing, and problems with the hatcheries would continue compromising the health of the salmon, and the health of the river. Neither the BPA, the Corps of Engineers, nor anybody else could account for all the variables that made up a healthy river system. Of course, the notion that it was even *possible* for a competent, technologically savvy government agency to completely control a river like the Columbia did not take into account the many variables that shaped the ecology of the river environment itself. And in 1948, the BPA, the Army Corps of Engineers, and the general public all learned, despite claims to the contrary, that the Columbia River was still as unpredictable as ever.

### **Vanport City and a Quiet Crisis in Confidence**

In March of 1948, the weather in the Pacific Northwest was mild—not particularly warm, but not particularly wet—uncharacteristically dry, and pleasant. Up and down the coast, the spring rains that typically drenched the western portions of

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<sup>39</sup> There were several instances of opponents successfully blocking the Corps and their plans to dam rivers, but these cases usually involved situations where opponents had a substantial amount of political power, and were the exception, not the rule. See Robbins, *Landscapes of Conflict*, 56-57.



Washington and Oregon had not appeared, and the winter snows that blanketed both the mountains and the region's dry interior persisted longer than usual. In April, the rain finally came. For much of the next two months, rainstorms saturated the west coast of Oregon and Washington before dumping even more moisture in the mountains, where rain fell on melting snow and flushed a torrent of water into the rivers, streams, and wetlands that lined the region's broad, wide valleys. By mid-May, warm air arrived on the Eastern side of the Columbia Basin, and settled in over the interior's snow covered mountains. For several days, high temperatures melted the previous winter's above-average snow-pack, swelling the interior's lakes and streams, filling its rivers, and causing extensive flooding. Far inland from the damp, waterlogged coast, the Columbia's tributaries also flooded, spilling out over their riverbanks and covering fields and farmland. On the Salmon and Grand Ronde rivers, high stream velocities washed out bridges and roadways. On the Clearwater, the small towns of Kooskia and Stites were nearly wiped away by floodwaters, and residents of the small town of Orofino went up and down its main street by rowboat.<sup>40</sup> Downriver, on the main stem of the Columbia, the river soon topped the Dalles-Celilo canal, and it flooded the cofferdam at McNary Dam, then under construction. As the run-off made its way west it pooled behind Bonneville Dam, which halted some of the deluge behind its big steel gates, but ultimately could do nothing to hinder the massive flooding farther downriver. In a few short days, the entire region was warm, damp and waterlogged, as snow from the entire winter melted, trickled, pooled, and swirled its way back to the Pacific. In the process, every tributary delivered its water into the main stem of the Columbia, and the river's

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<sup>40</sup> *Columbia River and Tributaries below Yakima River: Report on Flood of May-June 1948.* (Portland, Ore: Portland District, Corps of Engineers, 1949), 75.

usual floodplain quickly filled beyond its capacity, widening the already broad river and causing a massive, month-long, “hundred-year” flood.<sup>41</sup>

The residents who lived near the Columbia certainly were aware that the river had flooded before. In fact, the river had overrun its banks several times—in 1862, 1876, and 1880. But the biggest flood that Euro-Americans observed came in 1898, when the river level was recorded at 36 feet above normal, and it had been some time since the region had experienced a truly *large* Columbia flood.<sup>42</sup> Unfortunately, many of the region's residents had either forgotten or were not around long enough to remember such events. Moreover, in the years since the last epic flood, significantly more people had moved into the vicinity of the river, and land susceptible to the largest of the Columbia's floods had been filled with farms, factories, and residential streets lined with homes.

In Portland, news of the immense flooding upstream arrived ahead of the water, and newspaper reporters wrote stories warning of the impending onslaught, complete with predictions of how high the Columbia might rise. Particularly interested in the flood level was the community of Vanport, Oregon—a newly constructed, publicly owned wartime housing project that served Portland's shipyards.<sup>43</sup> In search of cheap land near

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<sup>41</sup> The term “hundred-year flood,” when used to refer to large-scale flood events in the Pacific Northwest, appears far more often than the nomenclature would suggest—especially in the latter half of the twentieth century, when the consequences of flooding became more damaging due to numerous dikes, disappearing wetlands, and the loss of other water-absorbing elements of riverine environments.

<sup>42</sup> Richard White, *The Organic Machine*, 74, and Gay Monteverde, “Some History About the Portland Area Levees (Dikes): Holding Back the Waters -- The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers & Flood Control Along the Lower Columbia,” *Freshwater News* 15 (1997).

<sup>43</sup> The most comprehensive account of Vanport and the great flood of 1948 is in Manly Maben, *Vanport* (Portland, OR: Oregon Historical Society, 1987). Additional information can be found in E. Kimbark MacColl, *The Growth of a City: Power and Politics in Portland, OR, 1915-1950* (Portland: The Georgian Press, 1979), 593-601, Gay Monteverde, “Some History About the Portland Area Levees (Dikes),” Judy Walters, “The Vanport Flood,” *Clark County History* 31 (1990): 71-77, William Robbins, *Landscapes of Conflict*, 67-70, and Ellen Stroud, “Troubled Waters in Ecotopia: Environmental Racism in Portland, Oregon,” *Radical History Review* 74 (Spring, 1999): 65-95. For a chronology of the flood throughout the entire region, see the Army Corps of Engineers official report, *Columbia River and Tributaries below Yakima River: Report on Flood of May-June 1948*, 72-116. For an interesting

to his company's shipyards, industrial magnate Henry Kaiser built “Kaiserville” (later the name was changed to Vanport City) on pastureland that was located right in the middle of the Columbia's floodplain, immediately adjacent to Portland, and directly across the river from Vancouver, Washington.<sup>44</sup> (figures 5.8, 5.9) The 648-acre complex was surrounded on all sides by giant dikes—large earthen structures built decades earlier by either the railroads or the Army Corps of Engineers. In 1944, at the height of the war, over 40,000 people resided within the Vanport perimeter—including a majority of the region's African-Americans, who were among the many workers who migrated to Portland to work in the area's shipyards. At its peak, Vanport was the second largest city in the state of Oregon, but by 1948, following the end of the war and an accompanying decline in the number of available jobs, Vanport's population stabilized at around 18,000.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, the thousands of residents that remained in Vanport were particularly interested in the rising Columbia, as the whole city sat on ground not that much higher than the river under normal conditions.

By the end of May, the Columbia had risen past its official flood stage, and was

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account of the flood's effect on race relations in Portland see Stuart McElderry, “Vanport Conspiracy Rumors and Social Relations in Portland, 1940-1950,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 99 (1998): 134-163. For information on the construction of Vanport in response to a lack of housing in wartime Portland, see Carl Abbott, *Portland: Planning, Politics, and Growth in a Twentieth-Century City* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 125-45.

<sup>44</sup> Vanport began as the private housing project of Henry Kaiser, the shipbuilder who needed thousands of workers to labor in his factories near Vancouver and Portland. In 1942, Kaiser ramped up production at his shipyards to build the infamous “Liberty Ships”—completing their first ship by September 1941, and another seventy-five in the following year. In all, the Kaiser facilities employed nearly 75,000 workers. When workers arrived to begin work at the shipyards, many found no place to sleep, and newspapers reported that some had slept in their cars, in temporary tents, or in trailer parks. When not working these newly arrived workers walked the streets of Portland, inundated local restaurants, and packed local movie theaters. To resolve the housing shortage, Kaiser purchased land centrally located near all three of his production facilities. The marshy, but cheap, land was surrounded by high river dikes, with the waters of the Columbia abutting the development on three different sides. Built with federal funds, the Kaiser Company received 26 million dollars to build the housing project, its day-care centers, grocery stores, schools, fire halls, and hospital. The project had 16 playgrounds, and 19 miles of surfaced streets, sewage and water systems, administration buildings, a college, and a library. See the *Oregonian*, September 25, 26, and October 5, 1942, and Manly Maben, *Vanport*, 1, 4-5, 11.

<sup>45</sup> *Oregonian*, May 31, 1948, and Manly Maben, *Vanport*, 19.

rising faster every day. Those accustomed to seeing high water soon began to notice that this flood was *particularly* high, and public officials, including those of the Army Corp of Engineers, began to issue public statements assuring anxious residents that the dikes would not give out. Downriver from Portland, the incoming tide backed up the river and caused its water level to rise even higher, spilling over the dike at Clatskanie. On nearby Sauvie's Island, sand boils appeared *inside* the levees, and at Deer Island, water backed up drainage pipes into the houses of nearby homes, flooding basements. Across the river in Camas, WA, local residents piled several hundred tons of rock onto the port dock, in the hopes of keeping it and the entire port building from washing away.<sup>46</sup>

At Vanport, officials from the Housing Authority of Portland, who ran the project on behalf of the federal government, began paying closer attention when the waters reached up towards the top of the dikes. On Tuesday, May 25, the Housing Authority initiated what they called a routine 24-hour patrol (consisting of men with flashlights) who searched over the dikes for seeps, boils, or blisters.<sup>47</sup> When the slack-water lake immediately to the west of Vanport began to flood out nearby buildings, the Sheriff sent another patrol to watch that area for seepage.<sup>48</sup> Two days later, when the Columbia still continued its rise, officials privately began to worry. Outwardly, both the Housing Authority and the Army Corps of Engineers projected a calm confidence, but behind the scenes authorities began to doubt the ability of the dikes to withstand such high waters. The sheriff's office began to work twelve-hour shifts, and telephone operators remained on duty twenty-four hours a day to assure worried residents that the situation was being

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<sup>46</sup> *Columbia River and Tributaries below Yakima River: Report on Flood of May-June 1948*, 77-79.

<sup>47</sup> Housing Authority of Portland Meeting Minutes, May 20, 1948, as cited in Maben, 104-5.

<sup>48</sup> Harry D. Freeman, Harry D. Jaeger, and Roy W. Taylor, "Housing Authority of Portland Report on Vanport City Flooding Disaster," June 1, 1948, Martin Taylor Pratt Manuscript Collection, MSS 698, Oregon Historical Society Research Library (OHS), Portland, OR.

monitored. By the end of the day on Saturday, May 29, the Columbia had risen to a full fifteen feet above flood stage, which was over thirty-feet above what was considered normal for the river. The entire town of Vanport now sat over fifteen feet below the Columbia's current water level.

Late that Saturday evening, the Housing Authority called an emergency meeting to discuss the situation. Attending were representatives from the Health Department, the Sheriff's office, the Governor's office, and the local chapter of the Red Cross. An evacuation order was considered, but all who were present decided that the best thing they could do was defer to the experts, the Army Corps of Engineers, who continued to insist that there was no need for alarm. Ominously, the Housing Authority decided to take no action, and they left with nothing more than a plan to call a meeting for the next day where they could re-assess the situation. They did, however, prepare a handbill to distribute to anxious residents who worried more and more about the rising river.<sup>49</sup> At four a.m. the next morning employees from the Housing Authority stuffed a sheet of paper under every door in Vanport. The handbill stated, "The flood situation has not changed, barring unforeseen circumstances, Vanport is safe," concluding, in all caps:

REMEMBER:  
DIKES ARE SAFE AT PRESENT  
YOU WILL BE WARNED IF NECESSARY  
YOU WILL HAVE TIME TO LEAVE  
DON'T GET EXCITED.<sup>50</sup>

Less than twelve hours later, the railroad dike on Vanport's western edge collapsed, and a surging ten-foot high wall of water smashed through the housing

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<sup>49</sup> Freeman, et al., "Report on Flood Disaster," 1, and Maben, 105.

<sup>50</sup> Freeman, et al., "Report on Flood Disaster," 1, Maben, 106, and Dale Skovgaard, "Memories of the 1948 Vanport Flood," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 108, No. 1 (2007): par. 27, <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ohq/108.1/skovgaard.html>.

complex, destroying nearly everything in its path. In just a matter of seconds, the water tore a hole in the dike that was ten feet wide, then fifty, then five hundred. (figure 5.10, 5.11) Witnesses described a surge of water that slammed into buildings and knocked down walls.<sup>51</sup> Forty-five minutes later, the water level on both sides of the dike was at roughly the same level, and Vanport, once the second largest city in Oregon, was no more. (figures 5.12, 5.13, 5.14)

One young resident, fifteen-year-old Dale Skovgaard, was walking right by the western railroad dike at the very moment it collapsed. He later recalled the beginnings of the tragedy:

“I walked over the tracks and started down the narrow path that led through a patch of young trees that had been planted on the hillside to help prevent erosion. As I walked, I noticed streamlets of water trickling out of the hillside and running down the hill. It didn't make me nervous, but I did think it was strange to see all that water coming out of the side of the hill. The hill was made of old timbers, rocks, and fill dirt that had been dumped high enough for the trains to travel on a level track...As I got near the sub-station I got the feeling that something or someone was coming up behind me. It was a strange feeling, and it made me stop suddenly and turn around to see who or what was there. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. The hillside was moving forward. I stood there, mesmerized...”

“...as the hillside moved closer to the parking area, the small trees I had just passed were moving down the hill as if they were descending on an escalator. The mass moved forward onto the edge of the parking lot, swallowed up a lone car that had been left there, and moved ever so slowly toward me. It was very weird and scary. The trees started to fall down and became part of the blob coming toward me...”

“Then a massive wall of water burst through the northern part of the railroad fill and began to spread out across the cleared land. Because of the openness of the area, the water seemed to spread quickly and flatten out as if it was filling up a bathtub. As a result, I couldn't see how deep it was becoming or where it was flowing. I could still see water raging through the side of the railroad fill, but I couldn't see the enormity of that wall of water as it broke through the crumbling opening in the railroad fill. After the initial burst, the water seemed to level out into a mass of water that nothing could stop. The initial break in the dike was about thirty feet wide, and in minutes it expanded to a gap of between three

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<sup>51</sup> Maben, 106.

hundred to four hundred feet, with the water from the lake and the water from the Columbia rushing into Vanport.”<sup>52</sup>

Skovgaard then ran for it, in the process shouting warnings to all who could hear. Within minutes of the dike's collapse, one of the local policemen hopped into his car, retreated back off of the collapsing dike, and phoned the administrative offices of the Housing Authority. At approximately 4:17 pm, on Memorial Day, 1948, officials sounded the alarm. As residents scrambled to evacuate, water poured into the low-lying parks and sloughs inside of Vanport. For nearly half an hour, the lowest areas of Vanport absorbed the brunt of the rising water, and, at the beginning, the overall inundation was measured in inches, not feet.<sup>53</sup> By the time Skovgaard got to his own home, he had outrun the spreading water, at least for the moment. Like most of the other residents that were home that Sunday, Skovgaard and his parents grabbed a few of their belongings, hopped into their car, and headed for high ground. But the Skovgaard family was one of the lucky few that escaped Vanport with a car full of valued possessions. Others had no time to grab a single thing, and many others frantically packed their cars, only to get them stuck in a massive traffic jam that formed near Vanport's only exit. In the confusion, the roads quickly became blocked in an enormous traffic jam, and soon panicked residents abandoned their automobiles on the roadways.

After the low areas filled, the water rose with much more urgency. Large waves spread through Vanport's streets, smashing buildings, overturning cars, and prompting terrified residents to *literally* run for the hills. As the waves rolled in, some of the giant

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<sup>52</sup> Dale Skovgaard, “Memories of the 1948 Vanport Flood,” par. 35.

<sup>53</sup> This would prove to be particularly fortuitous, as it meant that many residents had a brief, ten to fifteen minute window whereby they could escape with little or no water in their way. Sheriff Pratt, who later oversaw the rescue effort, estimated that on the northern side of Vanport, the area farthest from the break, residents had nearly ten minutes to get their things before any water became visible.

apartment buildings broke into pieces, cars overturned, and residents abandoned their possessions in a mad rush for higher ground. Forty minutes after the dike broke, the remaining evacuees fought for their lives—climbing the dikes, crawling onto roofs, and clinging to the branches of the tall cottonwood trees that lined Vanport's main thoroughfare. Some flood victims floated with the currents, as onlookers threw garden hoses to fish them out.<sup>54</sup> So much water inundated Vanport that the nearby Willamette River flood gauge actually dropped three inches between 5:00 and 6:45 pm. But by 8:00 the river was already running another eight inches higher.<sup>55</sup> By the following morning, another dike had collapsed and a few more of the apartment buildings had completely broken up. A vast sea of debris floated up against the inside edges of the dikes. Brick chimneys poked out from under fifteen feet of water, marking the locations where buildings used to stand.<sup>56</sup>

In the days that followed the flood, fantastic and terrible rumors spread throughout Portland. Angry residents and onlookers spoke of scores of dead corpses, littering the Columbia's beaches and floating down the Columbia to the ocean. Yet in the immediate aftermath of the deluge, little could be known about the number of people who might have perished. Given the size and scale of the flood, it certainly seemed possible that hundreds could have drowned. Moreover, many people were separated in the chaos

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<sup>54</sup> As the flood waters continued to rise, officials scrambled to locate boats to continue the rescue. The few unlucky and panicked residents who remained in the city climbed up on top of apartment buildings, even as the buildings came loose from their cheap wooden foundations and floated around the development. Children were loaded from rooftops or tossed into boats from second story windows. Some of the cars with the windows rolled up floated, at least for a while, and newspapers later published accounts of men paddling around on floating mattresses. The city lost power at 4:45, and by 5:20 an apartment building crashed into the radio tower, knocking the radio station off the air, silencing the warning sirens. Jack Pement, "33 Year-Old Memos Recreated," *Oregon Journal*, May 29, 1981, and Maben, 107-11.

<sup>55</sup> Maben, 107-8.

<sup>56</sup> Maben, 113.



of the sudden evacuation. Late into the evening, the lists of missing persons numbered in the thousands. The most pernicious rumors involved a submerged school bus, where limbs of drowned children protruded out of the windows. Another rumor that spread claimed that hundreds of children died when they couldn't escape the movie theater. Yet another asserted that the bodies of the dead had been taken out to a ship at sea, to be returned disguised as dead soldiers in order for the government to shirk responsibility for the tragedy.<sup>57</sup> Many involved in spreading the terrible and fantastic tales believed that authorities were concealing the death toll, secretly storing bodies in downtown Portland at the Terminal Ice & Cold Storage facility. In the excitement of the initial deluge, city and county officials fanned the flames of such rumors when they publicly speculated that the lower floors of the Vanport apartments were “clogged with hundreds of bodies” and that so many others had been swept into the main stem of the Columbia that “the number of dead will never be known.”<sup>58 59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> For accounts of the rumors surrounding the Vanport flood, see McElderry, 134-62, Maben, 118-20, Stewart Holbrook, “The Mythmakers,” *The New Yorker*, July 31, 1948, 38.

<sup>58</sup> Stewart Holbrook, “The Mythmakers,” 38.

<sup>59</sup> Many of the Vanport flood rumors arose in a context of uneasy race relations. In the late 1930s and early 1940s most African-Americans found Portland anything but welcoming. With increasing numbers of African-American workers migrating to the region to work in the shipyards, Vanport had become the new center of Portland's African-American community. In Portland, strict residential segregation was the norm, and before the shipyards black migrants to Portland could only find employment in railroad and hotel service jobs. In 1940, only 1,800 black men and women made their home in the state of Oregon. This was soon to change, however, as wartime labor shortages opened up new sectors of the labor market to black workers. By 1946 the Housing Authority of Portland estimated the black population to be 15,000, and the largest percentage of these workers lived in Vanport. At the conclusion of the war, as white families left, African-Americans families largely took their place. Like residential segregation elsewhere, the change happened extremely fast. In January 1945 African-American families constituted only 18 percent of occupancies, but by October 1945 that number had risen to 35 percent. Concurrently, as the wartime shipyard jobs declined, the African-American workers absorbed the brunt of the layoffs. From July to November 1945 alone, non-white workers employed at the yards dropped from 7,000 to 1,500, with little opportunity available to obtain other types of employment. Compounding the segregation problem, the Housing Authority of Portland consciously placed African-American residents exclusively into “colored” sections of the development, yet denied doing so publicly. In fact, two lengthy meetings on the “Negro problem” were downplayed and omitted entirely from official meeting minutes. HAP Executive Director Harry Freeman tried to bypass the issue, insisting that “in all honesty” there were no racial issues at Vanport. Yet, evidence suggests that in the

The following morning, as officials went building to building, they discovered very few bodies. In the end, only fifteen people were confirmed to have died in the accident. Luckily, the flood had come in the middle of the day, on a holiday weekend, when many Vanport residents were away from home. Moreover, the low areas in and around Vanport had given residents precious time to escape, if not with their possessions, at least with their lives. Even luckier still, the Vanport hospital was in the process of being phased out, and many of the bedridden patients had been moved a month earlier. Newspaper accounts of the flood quoted several people who claimed to have seen numerous bodies floating around in the debris, but day by day, the list of missing persons shrank and no more bodies were found. In all, at least fifteen people perished at Vanport, while over twenty others died in flooding throughout the region.<sup>60</sup>

In the aftermath angry residents demanded answers. While some of the anger focused on the Housing Authority (and especially on the “Dikes are Safe” flyer distributed just twelve hours before the break), much of the criticism was laid directly upon the shoulders of the Army Corps of Engineers. In the days that followed, victims and other members of the community criticized the lack of warning on behalf of the agency and called for reparations to be paid by the federal government. One typical letter to the editor questioned why the Army Corps of Engineers had not been aware of possible weaknesses in the dike: “Can someone enlighten me on this?” asked one citizen, “The welfare, possessions and very lives of 18,000 people were behind a dike that was not a

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early years of the project, the Housing Authority kept two separate waiting lists, and that the “colored” list had 267 families waiting even when there were vacancies. Throughout this time, African-American leaders pressed government officials to address the discrimination in jobs and housing. See Housing Authority of Portland File, General Administration Prior to 1949, Racial Relations Folder, Maben, 92-93, and McElderry, “Vanport Conspiracy Rumors and Social Relations in Portland,” 134-163.

<sup>60</sup> Maben, 122, and White, 74.

dike at all. I am not an engineer, but a grammar school truism said, 'that a chain was as strong its weakest link'... this could easily have happened in the dead of night—how many lives then? What say the Engineers?”<sup>61</sup> Another person told the *Oregonian*, “The engineers ought to consult some of the old-timers, who witnessed earlier floods, before they undertake to restrain our river by makeshift dikes...”<sup>62</sup>

In addition to citizens, a number of organizations were happy to level criticism at the Corps. The Oregon State Grange demanded a congressional investigation, loudly arguing that the Engineers were unfit to hold their post if they did not know that an embankment protecting 18,000 people was capable of collapsing. For its part, the Housing Authority publicly adopted the position that it had done all it could, and officials issued press releases with details that essentially shifted the blame to the Corps. One lawyer even went as far as to tell the *Oregonian*, “The housing authority feels terribly, terribly bad that lives were possibly lost...but all you can do is depend on the advice of *competent engineers*.”<sup>63</sup> (emphasis added) Other officials stated that they certainly would have pushed for evacuation if the Engineers hadn't repeatedly assured them that any breakthrough would come over a period of hours, not minutes. They claimed that those who had assured them of the dike's safety had described it as tight, “like a barrel,” just a day earlier.<sup>64</sup> One fireman remembered that, although he felt nervous doing the tasks in his regular routine that morning, he wasn't alarmed “because of the assurance given by the engineers.”<sup>65</sup>

In their own defense, Corps officials described how the major Vanport dikes had

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<sup>61</sup> Edward J. Collins, “Not a Dike,” *Oregonian*, June 6, 1948.

<sup>62</sup> “The Vanport Disaster,” *Oregonian*, June 1, 1948.

<sup>63</sup> *Oregonian*, June 1, 1948, as quoted in Maben, 125.

<sup>64</sup> Maben, 125.

<sup>65</sup> Jack Pement, “33 Year-Old Memos Recreated,” *Oregon Journal*, May 29, 1981.

survived a similar flood in 1933, and that they had used sandbags to reinforce areas that had shown signs of seepage. The railroad dike, which formed the western boundary of the development (and was where the break occurred), never displayed any of the usual signs of weakness—though the public later learned that officials had seen cracks running across the dike a day or two earlier. The Corps eventually concluded that the western railroad dike had failed because of poor construction techniques, which conveniently, were not of their own making. Corps officials explained the collapse by noting that when first built the dike had absorbed the existing wooden timbers of the old railroad trestle—rock was simply dumped all around it. Over time these buried timbers rotted, thereby weakening the dike to the point where, faced with the intense pressure of the rising water, the river just eventually pushed through.<sup>66</sup> In their official report on the incident, filed months later, the Corps even sought to downplay the long-term significance of the collapse, somewhat caustically pointing out that the death toll was found to be only “1 tenth of 1 percent of the resident population.”<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, displaced residents mostly blamed the Engineers for the disaster, a pattern that only increased over time as the victims sought financial redress in the courts.<sup>68</sup> Homeless flood victims picketed in downtown Portland, and called on the federal government to reimburse them for lost property. Signs appeared around town that lambasted the Corps for its “stupidity.”

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<sup>66</sup> Maben, 125-6.

<sup>67</sup> *Columbia River and Tributaries below Yakima River: Report on Flood of May-June 1948*, 91.

<sup>68</sup> For an example of this sentiment, see a letter to the editor by Robert H. Sikele, “Vanport Reparations,” *Oregonian*, June 8, 1948. Sikele lamented, “What was the reason for such consistent assurance of the safety of the dikes surrounding the Vanport project? ...we now learn that the dikes were leaking four days before the fateful Sunday. Why did the officials inform us of that fact at the time and that we were remaining at great risk to life and limb? ...Thus, our conclusion that the U. S. government, through selection of incapable officials to whom the safety of 18,000 humans and their possessions were entrusted, is liable to the fullest and can take no other course than payment of the tenants for every loss, from automobiles to baby bonnets. The blame is fixed without question. All we have to do is band together and hold forth a united front. We don't need contributions from individuals nor from organizations, we need only just reparations from the government which caused us to lose all of the necessities that make life livable.”

(figures 5.15, 5.16)

In the immediate aftermath of the flood, newspaper reporters were hesitant to lay blame on any one organization. A day later the *Oregon Journal* asked: “Why did it happen? It is useless and avails nothing at present to argue and discuss that point—there is too much work to be done...an investigation, of course, should be made, but mass armchair engineering after event is no help now. Work, planning, generosity, helpfulness are the need of the day.”<sup>69</sup> Instead of joining angry residents in lambasting the Corps, reporters wrote articles that emphasized the sheer power of the flooding river. In the *Oregonian*, one reporter wrote that the Columbia River “was on a rampage,” while the *Oregon Journal* described the Columbia as a “river gone mad with power,” and Vanport as “A City Drowned!” They continued, “Now, we, who never before realized it, know the power of the Columbia. The river turned destroyer has created this community's greatest disaster.” Headlines expressed revulsion at the widespread destruction; the *Oregon Journal's* headlines read, “Its An Ugly River Now,” and “Columbia Impressive, Repulsively So, When Viewed From Air During Floods.”<sup>70</sup> On an aerial flight over the flooded area, one reporter even wrote, “I was attracted by the rugged walls of the gorge, the clear peaks of Mount Hood, St. Helens, and Rainier. Sometimes it was almost an effort to look down again at the ugly river.”<sup>71</sup> Others in town drove out to see the debris where the city once stood. One citizen was forced to reconcile the scene before him with his romantic notion of what the Columbia usually was. In a letter to the editor he wrote:

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<sup>69</sup> “Let Refugees of Ruined Vanport Learn Real Meaning of Word 'Neighbor',” *Oregon Journal*, June 1, 1948.

<sup>70</sup> E. G. Kingwell, “No Flood to South,” *Oregonian*, June 5, 1948, “Let Refugees of Ruined Vanport Learn Real Meaning of Word 'Neighbor',” *Oregon Journal*, June 1, 1948. Headlines from the *Oregon Journal*, June 2, 1948.

<sup>71</sup> “Columbia Impressive, Repulsively So, When Viewed From Air During Floods,” *Oregon Journal*, June 2, 1948, 12.

“The Columbia is normally a noble river—superbly majestic, awe inspiring. But how appallingly different it appears when it gnaws at seawalls, bursts through dikes, races across streets, playgrounds, gardens, fertile fields and snatches ferociously at men, women, children, farm animals and homes! But a great river that has overflowed its banks to the proportions of a raging, devastating flood, is not a thing of beauty. It is hideous, repulsive, terrifying! A river temporarily afflicted with elephantiasis is not a thing of beauty. It is a monstrosity just as is a human being so afflicted.”<sup>72</sup>

This description of the Columbia was particularly notable. The Columbia, long revered as “superbly majestic, awe inspiring,” was the opposite: “hideous, repulsive, terrifying,” a monster that was gnawing, snatching, and bursting its way through peoples homes. This description was a complete reversal of the dominant stories told about the river, an inversion of how the river was normally understood. In a similar way, the Corps—normally the experts—were said to be incompetent, even stupid. In the context of the great Vanport flood, some stories were being reevaluated, and the seeds of new stories were being born. These new stories might have appeared only for a few brief moments, but they did appear, hinting at the ways that dominant stories were not absolute. The Columbia might return to being majestic and romantic, and the Corps might reclaim their authority as experts, but a small break, a cleavage, in the power of the older story had occurred, just like a crack in a dike. New stories would have some effect on the commonsense surrounding the river going forward. Yet in the immediate aftermath of one of the most destructive floods in the river's history, and in the face of a direct and serious challenge to the competence of the experts, the dominant narratives did not let go, but instead dug in. Other citizens saw the immensity of the flood and *absolved* the Corps of Engineers from any culpability. In response to the glut of angry denunciations in the newspapers, letters appeared in their defense, stating that criticism levied against them

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<sup>72</sup> H. Guy Goodsell, “Not Always Beautiful,” *Oregonian*, June 14, 1948.

was “unfair.” One woman wrote, “Decisions can be, and are, made only on the facts available. Engineering is a science, engineers are not occult...The engineers are allotted a certain amount of money for each project. They have never, and do not now, perform miracles with this money.”<sup>73</sup> Whether the citizens of Portland and Vanport were blaming or defending the Corps, what was abundantly clear was that they had overestimated their own ability to manage and control the natural world. Nature, as seen in the waters of the flood, had prompted a new set of circumstances, a new set of facts on the ground, and the stories that purported to describe the meaning of the river would have to adjust.

As the Vanport flood prompted government officials, journalists, and flood victims to re-assess what they thought they knew about flooding on the Columbia, they entertained questions about the federal government's ability to successfully control the river. Some in Portland, shaken by the Corps inability to prevent or even predict the disaster, openly worried about the sturdiness of Bonneville Dam itself. Reuters, the British news agency, even went as far as to wire the *Oregonian* asking if the dams would hold, a question the newspaper dismissed as “a reflection of widespread lack of knowledge of the substantiality of these great barriers in a mighty river.”<sup>74</sup> In response to the anxiety, the *Oregonian* adopted the government's stated position, reassuring its readers that “only defects in construction design could conceivably create a hazard from any flood of record. No such defects have been reported. The dams are safe.”<sup>75</sup> One of the Corps own designing engineers, R. R. Clark, responded to public anxiety over the safety of the dams in an op-ed piece. Clark wrote, “After listening for more than ten years to rumors about the failure of the Bonneville dam, I am prompted to write

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<sup>73</sup> Amber Rutherford, “Engineers not Occult,” *Oregonian*, June 8, 1948.

<sup>74</sup> “Why the Dams Are Safe,” *Oregonian*, June 5, 1948.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

you...Bonneville dam is safer during flood conditions than at any other time from the standpoint of possible failure.” The dam, Clark insisted, was most vulnerable when there was a great disparity on either side. During the flood, the water was uncommonly high on the downriver side of the dam, thereby reducing the amount of force pushing against it.<sup>76</sup> J. C. Stevens, a self-professed engineer of forty-two years, responded to those who worried about the dam in a manner that was typical for other public officials at the time.

He wrote:

“There is absolutely nothing man can do to prevent such floods. All he can do is to construct works that will control them. Forestry, cultivation and other forms of land management on the watershed have but negligible effect compared with the all-powerful forces of nature as evidenced in the changeable weather...Normally the Snake spring floods have passed by the time the Columbia river floods arrive at the mouth of the Snake and the unusual flood does not occur. It has been 54 years since the weather conspired against us in this manner. It might not occur again for 100 years. It could happen next spring...In the aboriginal state there were no damages from these floods. When man began encroaching on “Ole Man River,” only then did damages result. We have now encroached on his preserves to such an extent that he has had to slap back at us to awaken us to the necessity of building higher and stronger. It can and must be done. A combination of storage reservoirs in the headwaters operated primarily for flood control, and higher and better protective works in the lower reaches constitute the only rational answer.”<sup>77</sup>

Stevens' call for building “higher and stronger” as the only “rational answer” for addressing such problems underlies the extent to which the public's faith in science and technology penetrated understandings of the Columbia, and mankind's ability to control it. Rational thinking had led to changes that resulted in a rational river—one marked by the presence of these large dams.<sup>78</sup> Narratives of technology and progress, embodied both in the physicality of the dam and in the Engineers' faith in a managerial state,

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<sup>76</sup> R. R. Clark, “Safety of Dams,” *Oregonian*, June 5, 1948.

<sup>77</sup> J. C. Stevens, “Answer to Floods,” *Oregonian*, June 14, 1948.

<sup>78</sup> Richard White argued that the Columbia was thoroughly rationalized. See White, *The Organic Machine*.



posited that sound scientific practice could create a solution to any problem, even one as vexing as a “one-hundred year” flood event. As a result, most who were humbled by the sheer power and terror of a flooding Columbia never saw the flood as a reason to lose faith in the expertise of the Engineers, or the bureaucrats in the BPA. Instead, they renewed their calls for more development on the Columbia, this time under the banner of flood control and increased storage capacity for the hydroelectric system. Even those who criticized the Engineers, did so by arguing that the agency had *not done enough* to develop the river.

One prominent journalist (and later a U.S. Senator from Oregon) Richard Neuberger, used the Vanport flood and the ensuing public criticism of the Corps to argue for an additional government agency. Neuberger wrote, “Apart from the immediate bureaucratic bungling, the catastrophe was a fearful lesson on the need for a Columbia Valley Authority.” He thought that a new TVA type agency would provide “sovereignty over the river from its sources to the sea.” In *The Nation*, Neuberger made the case for additional dams: “Hell’s Canyon Dam on the champing Snake, where much of the Columbia’s turbulent overflow originates, would materially have reduced the flood crest. The *Oregonian* calculates that Hell’s Canyon as a series of smaller headwater dams would have lowered it at least three feet. This three feet might have saved many lives, the property and topsoil spared would have paid a substantial portion of the cost of the dams.”<sup>79</sup> Other proponents of a CVA advocated the agency as an answer to the problem of flooding, even if they were more forgiving of the Engineers. Marquis Childs, a prominent journalist who advocated for New Deal social programs wrote, “The army engineers have spent hundreds of millions of dollars on flood control over many, many

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<sup>79</sup> Richard L. Neuberger, “One of Our Cities is Missing,” *The Nation* 166, June 12, 1948, 652-3.

years, and yet year after year the headlines tell of mounting flood damage. The army engineers are an efficient corps, but no amount of efficiency can compensate for the pick-and-choose tactics that result from the grab-bag of flood control held out by congress.”<sup>80</sup> To Neuberger, Childs and other New Deal democrats, a CVA was the policy answer to the environmental problem. Childs wrote, “It is fairly clear that only through such an overall coordinated approach as TVA can the hob on our river valleys be done. Only through such an all-out attack can the evils of erosion be checked and the damage done by man be overcome.”<sup>81</sup> Yet to others like the pro-business editors of the *Oregonian*, the CVA was an overreach: “The truth is that flood control in the Tennessee Valley is one thing, and in the Columbia valley another. Many years and many millions will be spent before enough dams will be built, under any system, to make an appreciable difference in Columbia flooding.”<sup>82</sup>

The failure of the railroad dike prompted more calls for development, the only argument was over just what type of development that would be—and the consensus was for more, not less. After the immediate flood had subsided, the *Oregon Journal* opined, “Flood control is a must. Until we get flood control we pay for it in floods and their irretrievable loss.”<sup>83</sup> In the midst of the flood the assistant commissioner of the Bureau of Reclamation testified that additional dams would have helped considerably to take the crest off the flood, had it been in operation that year.<sup>84</sup> The *Oregonian* reported on the

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<sup>80</sup> Marquis Childs, “CVA Represented as Solution to Floods in Columbia Basin,” *Oregonian*, June 3, 1948.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> “On Shaky Ground,” *Oregonian*, June 13, 1948. For an extended discussion of the proposed CVA, see William L. Lang, “Failed Federalism: The Columbia Valley Authority and Regionalism,” in *The Great Northwest: The Search for Regional Identity*, ed. William G. Robbins (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2001), 66-79.

<sup>83</sup> “Flood Lessons,” *Oregon Journal*, June 15, 1948.

<sup>84</sup> “New Dams to Aid in Curbing River,” *Oregonian*, June 4, 1948.

Corps official position: “The United States army engineers, scanning records of the 1894 flood and reports on the comparable flood now raging, have estimated that the present crest would have been lowered at least three feet had four multiple-purpose upstream dams been constructed and in full use.”<sup>85</sup> Unofficially, the Army Corp of Engineers' office intimated to reporters in Portland that it would take seven more Grand Coulee dams to protect the Columbia River basin from another flood like that of 1948.<sup>86</sup> In the wake of the flood, the Corps was successful in advocating for its preferred policies. Both the BPA and the Army Corps of Engineers were in a position to capitalize on the disaster. In 1952, Congress appropriated funds to build several more dams, including The Dalles Dam that would inundate Celilo Falls.

The water would cover Vanport for nearly two months, and when the river did recede, it took most of Vanport with it. Of the large apartment buildings that survived, a few sold for whatever they would bring, while a few locals scavenged for reclaimed wood to build new homes.<sup>87</sup> Many of the residents of Vanport simply walked away—unable to salvage any of their belongings until months afterward. Those that stayed were initially housed in public schools, churches, union halls, and red cross shelters, and then later moved into temporary trailers, which, due to their poor condition, prompted even more ire towards the federal government and the housing authority, an outcome striking for its similarity to the federal government's response to Hurricane Katrina over sixty years later. Eventually a number of flood victims sought financial redress in the courts, and in total over 650 cases were brought against the federal government for losses

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<sup>85</sup> “Flood Control by Dams,” *Oregonian*, June 2, 1948.

<sup>86</sup> Al McReady, “Columbia River Dikes Prove of Little Value, Series of Storage Dams Only Flood Solution,” *Oregonian*, June 3, 1948, 6-7.

<sup>87</sup> Maben, 128-9.

incurred during the flood. To prove negligence on the part of both the Army Engineers and the Housing Authority, plaintiffs established that a crack in the railroad dike had appeared three days prior to the disaster, yet authorities did nothing. The government countered that such a crack did not necessarily mean anything, and eventually the judge involved ruled that existing statutes protected the government. By this time it was 1952, and the refugees had mostly dispersed and moved on. Despite repeated attempts, no Vanport residents ever saw any compensation for their property loss.<sup>88</sup>

Yet, the legacy of the flood persisted even when Vanport did not. Those who exerted control over the river—the BPA, the Corps, the chambers of commerce, the *Oregonian*, and the industries that relied on the cheap power—used the tragedy to argue for additional projects, this time under the banner of flood control. And while the immediate political outcome was for more development, confidence in the managerial capacity of the government to completely control the Columbia had been seriously questioned. Cracks, like those in the railroad dike, had formed in the dominant narratives that enabled the engineered river—seeds of doubt, planted in the minds of those who questioned Corps expertise. But, curiously, if these were cracks in the dominant narrative, why did they not have the kind of power that one might expect? Perhaps it was the peculiar history of Vanport itself: its poorly situated location, its unpopularity with the established business elite in Portland, or its precarious history of racial politics that marginalized the concerns of its largely African-American, working-class residents. Or perhaps it was that the flood could be attributed to bad luck, dismissed as a one-time fluke event that nobody could have done anything about. Perhaps it was all of these reasons. But it was also that the Army Corps of Engineers shifted its own story

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<sup>88</sup> Maben, 129-31.

immediately—arguing that *they* had not built the dike that had failed, that Bonneville Dam was strongest and safest at time of high water, that flood control required more development, not less. It was not that their capacity to understand the ecology of the River was lacking, it was that they had not been allowed to do enough, to complete all of which they were capable. By pivoting in their account of the Vanport flood, the Corps re-asserted their claims of expertise and augmented the appeal of their own river story.

Yet even as the Vanport disaster did little to shake the public's faith in an engineered Columbia, other forces were quietly at work on the river. Slowly and gradually, the Columbia underwent ecological changes that made it less hospitable to the organisms that lived within it. This was particularly troublesome for the river's salmon populations, who had evolved to live in a free-flowing river that flooded in the spring. Over the next two decades, the decline of the salmon runs created a space for this new Columbia River story to grow. A small but growing number of people began to question the wisdom of such a dramatic transformation to the Columbia's ecosystem, and from that moment on, there would be challenges to the way the Columbia's navigation, irrigation, and hydroelectric systems would be managed.

### **The Salmon Crisis**

In the years following the floods at Vanport, the Army Corps of Engineers proceeded virtually unimpeded, completing a number of dams on both the Columbia and the Snake. When The Dalles Dam inundated the historic fishery of Celilo, there was little anybody could do to stop the development, despite the repeated attempts by the area's indigenous residents. Decades later, the event would be remembered with great anguish on the part of mid-Columbia river Indian peoples, conservationists, and by those inclined

to favor a free-flowing river. As the rise of the environmental movement focused public attention away from development and towards protecting the nation's natural resources, the passage of landmark environmental legislation—including the Endangered Species Act in 1973—made it possible for salmon advocates to seek redress in the federal courts. But as time went on, the only groups advocating for the conservation of the fish were Indian peoples, sports-fishermen, and a rapidly-declining commercial fishing industry, and all three could not yet muster the power to challenge the existing pro-development interests, now enriched and entrenched. When Judge Robert Boldt interpreted the right to fish “in usual and accustomed places” to mean half the total salmon harvest, non-native commercial and recreational fishing interests erupted, lashing out at Indian peoples in hateful and racist overtones. Those with interests in the well-being of the salmon were busy blaming Indians and fighting amongst themselves.

By 1975 the Columbia River must have seemed to be a very inhospitable place for salmon *and* for Indians. The ecology of the river was now very different. Historian Richard White observed that the engineered Columbia was more adept at supporting carp and shad than migratory fish. White wrote, “What was once cool water has become warm; what was fast water has become stilled; what was clean has become fouled; what was reasonably free from predators of young salmon has become full of them. The list could go on and on. Fewer and fewer salmon pass up the river; the vast majority of smolts never reach the sea. The end result, as far as wild salmon are concerned, is that what was once abundant has become scarce.”<sup>89</sup> In the Pacific Northwest, it would not be until the late 1980s and early 1990s that the public took a more active interest in the scarcity of the salmon and the looming ecological problems on the river.

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<sup>89</sup> White, *The Organic Machine*, 90.

By the end of the 1980s many salmon stocks were nearing collapse, and a growing number of conservationists and fishery biologists were finally alarmed. In the spring of 1990 an amalgam of conservation groups, the professional organization for fishery scientists - the American Fishery Society (AFS), and the Shoshone-Bannock tribe of Idaho petitioned the National Marine Fisheries Service for an Endangered Species Act (ESA) listing. Reeling from the ESA spotted owl controversies of the 1980s, the entire region immediately took notice. What followed was yet another epic struggle over what to do with the Columbia's water. Yet, in several important respects, the 1990s' salmon crisis was different than the contests that had come before. For one, this conflict pitted established river interests against non-native activists who advocated for the *fish* rather than the right to catch the fish. In this fight protectors of the salmon attracted a significant amount of public support for their cause, and they did so by telling a new type of Columbia River story—one that turned the tables on the Bonneville Power Administration and the Army Corps of Engineers by casting them as villains instead of heroes. By taking a closer look at the Pacific salmon crisis, one can see the genesis of a different type of Columbia River narrative—a story marked by the struggle, decline, and near-disappearance of the river's iconic fish.

In 1975 the Army Corps of Engineers completed the final dam on the Columbia River system, finalizing its transformation from a free-flowing river into a series of placid lakes. Eighteen giant dams now spanned the main stem of the Columbia and the Snake, and each one made it harder and harder for adult salmon to migrate up and down the river. Both Grand Coulee Dam on the Columbia, and Hells Canyon Dam on the Snake, were built without any bypass facilities for the fish, eliminating over one-third of the all

the salmon habitat in the Columbia River watershed in two broad strokes.<sup>90</sup> Those two losses, combined with countless other smaller developments, choked off much of the region's salmon streams, so by the late 1970s over seventy percent of the original spawning grounds had disappeared.<sup>91</sup> Just two years after the last Snake River dam was finished, a severe drought hit the upper Columbia Basin that threatened to kill off migrating juveniles. That spring and summer, the Governor of Idaho pleaded with the Army Corps of Engineers to spill water, in an effort to get any surviving young salmon on their way back to the ocean. As the drought worsened and salmon stocks continued their decline, the usual downriver interests fought over who would get access to the shrinking catch.

As the fishing communities fought, biologists in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife service were slowly but surely waking up to the fact that something was very wrong with the salmon runs. In the late 1960s, the emerging field of ecology began to emphasize the interconnections between animal species and their respective ecosystems. But it wasn't until the late 1980s that federal inspectors began to rigorously inspect the health of Northwest Rivers. For decades the biologists who studied fisheries understood their role as managers, ensuring a steady supply of fish and game that could be hunted and harvested by commercial and recreational fishing industries. Utilitarian conservationists at heart, these men (they were overwhelmingly men) focused on managing stable populations, while maximizing the amount of fish and game that could be taken out of the system. By the mid 1980s a new generation of scholars began to question old assumptions about salmon and ecosystem management. As the scientists learned more

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<sup>90</sup> Cone, *A Common Fate*, 32-33.

<sup>91</sup> Richard White, *The Organic Machine*, .



about healthy aquatic ecosystems, it became clear that river “improvements” had done much to damage the native fishery. Big, dead, rotting trees were not only essential to crafting old-growth forests, they had done much to create optimum salmon habitat, which meant substantially more fish.<sup>92</sup> This connection between healthy forests and healthy rivers caused many scientists to see previous river development policies in a different light.

By 1978 declining salmon numbers could no longer be ignored, and federal fishery scientists were legally forced into studying the Columbia River salmon for a possible endangered species listing. As the agency studied, Congress acted, and in 1980 passed the Northwest Power Act in an attempt to start a new era of “energy independence” in the Pacific Northwest, wherein conservation would be considered a resource akin to gas, coal, or hydropower. While never ostensibly about salmon, the Northwest Power Act included a stipulation that salmon and hydropower be treated as “coequals.”<sup>93</sup> The act also created an advisory council to help implement energy policy, including a salmon plan. According to the statute, the council was directed to “protect, mitigate, and enhance the fish and wildlife, including related spawning grounds and

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<sup>92</sup> For example, one of the Columbia's larger tributaries, the Willamette, had been so clogged with trees that in many areas there existed no main stem of the river. Instead, five different streams wove their way in and out of each other, their paths often braided together. To make the Willamette more easily navigable, enterprising Oregonians cleared the way for boats and logs to be more easily moved up and down the river. Over a period of fifty years, residents pulled more than five-thousand trees from one fifty mile stretch of the Willamette. This practice was repeated on many of the Columbia's primary tributaries, damaging much of the region's salmon habitat. Once local rivers were cleared, they often became highways for transporting timber to nearby sawmills, destroying more habitat in the process. Compounding the problem were generations of well-meaning, but poorly informed fishery agencies, who spent considerable time and resources removing “obstructions” to fish migration. Unwittingly, these officials were contributing to the fish's decline. See William Robbins, “The Willamette Valley Project of Oregon: A Study in the Political Economy of Water Resource Development,” *Pacific Historical Review* 47 (1978): 585-605, and Cone, *A Common Fate*, 17-18.

<sup>93</sup> During Congressional debate on the bill, it was Congressman John Dingell of Michigan, an avid fisherman, who fought for provisions in the law that would help balance the equation between salmon and hydropower, stating, “No longer will fish and wildlife be given a secondary status.” Cone, *A Common Fate*, 33.

habitat, of the Columbia River and its tributaries,” with particular attention to anadromous fish, which, according to the act, held “significant importance to the social and economic well being of the Pacific Northwest and the Nation.”<sup>94</sup> Designed to take into account the social costs of energy production, salmon advocates hoped that language mandating equitable treatment would mean that years of neglect could finally be corrected. Joseph Cone, in his popular history of Northwest salmon issues, wrote, “The law seemed as responsive to the needs of public for its time as the construction of the hydropower system itself had seemed during the New Deal, two generations before.”<sup>95</sup> In 1982, when fish biologists noticed a precipitous decline in both Chinook and Coho stocks, the Northwest Power Planning Council was called into action to adjust the Columbia's hydroelectric management and jump-start the salmon restoration efforts.

This new Columbia River salmon policy would have been a significant departure from the past, except that it wasn't. Conservation organizations, some of which had been working on salmon issues for decades, hoped that the Northwest Power Planning Council would “unravel the snared nets of competing bureaucracies,” and put the salmon's interest above its own.<sup>96 97</sup> Pat Ford, a longtime salmon advocate and former director of the

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<sup>94</sup> Northwest Power Planning and Conservation Act, as reprinted in *The Northwest Salmon Crisis: A Documentary History*, ed. By Joseph Cone and Sandy Ridlington (Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University Press, 1996), 255-59.

<sup>95</sup> Cone, *A Common Fate*, 30.

<sup>96</sup> This anecdote from Joseph Cone, *A Common Fate*, 29.

<sup>97</sup> A number of conservation organizations full of dedicated activists worked to protect the salmon fishery during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Ed Chaney was one such advocate, dedicating nearly thirty years of his life to saving the Idaho fishery, and chairing numerous organizations including Idaho Salmon, Steelhead Unlimited, and eventually the Save Our Wild Salmon Coalition. Pat Ford and Wendy Wilson of the Idaho Conservation League led early fights to save the Snake River runs. Andy Kerr and the Oregon Natural Resources Council was an outspoken proponent for salmon throughout the region. Oregon Trout, led by Bill Bakke, advocated for wild runs and helped convince U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to move away from artificial propagation. Important legal advocacy was done by Northwest Environmental Defense Center by Dan Rohlf, Lori Bodi, and others. Other organization involved in salmon advocacy included Friends of the Earth, American Rivers, and the National Wildlife Federation. Robert Tuck and Gordon Reeves both worked as biologists and were involved with efforts to protect the

Idaho Conservation League stated, “There was a feeling in the conservation and fishing community that once that law had passed...that that was going to restore these fish.”<sup>98</sup>

But Ford and others would be profoundly disappointed. Terry Thatcher, a lawyer for the World Wildlife Federation, described the situation: “We all had great hope that the Northwest Power Planning Council would change things and radically alter things, [because] the Act told it to change things.” Thatcher recalled how the council gave credence to some viewpoints but not others, “...on fish it was the agencies and the tribes, and a few of the old-time anglers showed up at the hearings, but they didn't have any of the firepower. They just said, we want our fish back, and they were sort of dismissed.” He continued, “Frankly, I think the Power Planning Council dismissed the biologists; they were dismissed them because they didn't have firm answers. They had squishy answers, and you were asking for things that were hard.”<sup>99</sup>

In the end, most of the conservation interests came to view the council as a failed institution. Despite changes to the law, administrators in the BPA and dam managers in the Army Corps of Engineers installed members on the council who resisted efforts to put real resources into fish. One fish and wildlife biologist, Bob Tuck, later insisted that the message that the BPA sent was very clear - “they viewed the river as their domain and they [weren't] going to change it.” He noted that much of the content of what was

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fish for decades. In aggregate the men and women who first fought for the salmon fit somewhat with casual descriptions of post-1960s environmentalists—they were relatively young, fairly well-off, and highly educated. And while they came from different geographic areas and different walks of life, they shared a set of assumptions that distinguished them from their forebearers—a deep and abiding concern for the well being of the salmon, for the fish's sake—independent of human uses. Most, but not all, of these conservation organizations were located in and around Portland, Oregon—prompting Joseph Cone to remark, “On a per capita basis, western Oregon had probably as many environmental organizations as any place in the world.” *A Common Fate*, 46.

<sup>98</sup> Pat Ford, Center for Columbia River History Oral History Collection, 2700.1, Columbia River Dissenters, 2701, Tape 1, Side 2, Transcript p. 6, Oregon Historical Society Research Library.

<sup>99</sup> Terry Thatcher, Center for Columbia River History Oral History Collection, 2700.1, Columbia River Dissenters, 2735, Tape 2, Side 2, Transcript p. 38, Oregon Historical Society Research Library.

proposed “was vigorously challenged by the hydro system operators and utilities.”<sup>100</sup> In particular, the hydroelectric and irrigation interests fought against spills and flows. Pat Ford recalled how “the status quo” captured the Northwest Power Planning Council's position on the fisheries: “The Power Council became in too many respects a political sinecure; old pols were appointed to it by the governors more than real good people...on fish it did very little, and it basically decided to reach an accommodation where it did not challenge the hydro system's status quo: Bonneville Power Administration and the Army Corps of Engineers won the internal struggle with the Power Council, and the Power Council said, 'Okay, you guys are too powerful, we're not going to challenge you on fish,' and indeed never did.”<sup>101</sup> Thatcher, Ford, and others soon believed that both the council and the act itself was a flawed product. They noted that the Northwest Power Act granted discretion to the council, but also left many things undefined, resulting in “all this mooshy discretion to the other agencies to do things.”<sup>102</sup> Lawyers from both the BPA and the Army Corps of Engineers claimed they did not have the authority to make the sweeping changes that conservationists sought, and either stalled or called for additional studies.<sup>103</sup> When the council did act, agency administrators disregarded its most

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<sup>100</sup> Robert Tuck, Center for Columbia River History Oral History Collection, 2700.1, Columbia River Dissenters, 2749, Tape 2, Side 1, Transcript p. 36, Oregon Historical Society Research Library.

<sup>101</sup> Pat Ford, 6-7.

<sup>102</sup> Terry Thatcher, 38.

<sup>103</sup> Responding to the BPA's claim that they had no authority to make changes, Idaho conservationist Wendy Wilson sarcastically stated: “Oh, the poor things. They've been given the powers to build them, they've been given the powers to evacuate all the fish out of the system, and they aren't given the powers to turn the switch off? The Army Corps is even worse. The Army Corps will tell you, of course, that the Power Act is not obligatory to them, that they don't have to even do what the Power Council says, should the Power Council ever decide what to tell them to do, and that the Endangered Species Act stuff that [the] BPA has to live by is also advisory to the Corps. So you know, it's just fascinating, their lack of authority, and here they have this system that's built to the tune of two billion dollars' worth of federal tax dollars, and federal infrastructure that they just can't possibly control anymore.” Wendy Wilson, Center for Columbia River History Oral History Collection, 2700.1, Columbia River Dissenters, 2702, Tape 1, Side 2, Transcript p. 17, Oregon Historical Society Research Library.

important flow recommendations, reducing them to the point that the directives' goals were no longer being adequately addressed. In effect the Corps and the BPA were able to water down most of the acts' provisions that favored the fish. Attempts to alter the distribution of the Columbia's vast wealth had run into an economic and political bloc that would not budge. With these government agencies stating that they had no authority to change water policy, and with no enforcement mechanism built into the act, salmon advocates turned to the courts for legal redress.<sup>104</sup>

Outraged by the reluctance of the federal agencies to address the declining salmon numbers, and stung by the lost time they put into lobbying the council, a number of environmental organizations prepared petitions to list salmon under the Endangered Species Act. The origins of this new strategy, born in the environmental movement of the 1960s and 1970s, was twofold: educate the general public on the issues while pushing for legal relief in the courts. Andy Kerr of the Oregon Natural Resources Council, himself a veteran of clashes between environmental groups and timber advocates in the 1980s, articulated how conservationists would use conflict to generate publicity and cultivate controversy. He stated, "Our job as environmentalists is to make the political crisis commensurate with the biological crisis. It's not like we're making things up or blowing things out of proportion. Our job is to add the *true* proportion to the political debate."<sup>105</sup> Idaho conservationist Wendy Wilson later described the public relations strategy, "This is a struggle between the technocrats and the biologists, and the biologists

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<sup>104</sup> Exhausted with a decade of lost time working with the council, Pat Ford later stated, "I wish it would go away. I wish it weren't there anymore because it's more in the way than it is anything else...It pretended to help fish, but it never really did. And those who were working with it and pushing it, in retrospect, spent too much time, in my view, on the energy side of its work and not enough time on the fish side." Pat Ford, 6.

<sup>105</sup> Cone, *A Common Fate*, 61.

are very weak, and the technocrats are very strong, and what's going to tip the balance is public opinion. Politicians aren't going to just do the right thing..."<sup>106</sup> By 1991 salmon numbers continued their decline and it was clear to both biologists and conservations that if nothing was done, Columbia River salmon faced extirpation.<sup>107</sup> Conservation groups prepared to rock the boat.

### **Pacific Salmon at a Crossroads**

It was an academic paper that first drew the general public's attention to the plight of the salmon. That, and some timely ESA listings. In February 1990 three young but respected fishery biologists, Willa Nehlsen, Jack Williams, and Jim Lichatowich, prepared a scientific paper titled, "Pacific Salmon at a Crossroads."<sup>108</sup> Known thereafter as the "crossroads paper," the biologists argued that government fishery managers could no longer put their faith in hatcheries and propagation technologies to solve the salmon problem. The paper demonstrated that declining stocks were not an isolated "endangered species" issue, but instead were indicative of a general decline in the health of streams and watersheds. The authors argued that salmon was an indicator species, and the indication was that the Columbia's aquatic ecosystem was in bad shape. At the American Fisheries Society's local conference, the authors introduced the paper and called for, "a new paradigm that advances habitat restoration and ecosystem function rather than hatchery production" so that salmon stocks could "survive and prosper into the next century."<sup>109</sup> Implicit in the new approach was a respect for the Columbia as a whole and

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<sup>106</sup> Wendy Wilson, 21.

<sup>107</sup> Extirpation, in an ecological sense, is the loss of a distinct local population while that species survives elsewhere. Extinction is the death of a species throughout its entire range.

<sup>108</sup> Willa Nehlsen, Jack E. Williams, and James A. Lichatowich, "Pacific Salmon at the Crossroads: Stocks at Risk from California, Oregon, Idaho, and Washington," *Fisheries* 16 (1991), 4-21.

<sup>109</sup> Nehlsen, et al., "Pacific Salmon at the Crossroads," 4.

discrete entity, as a river ecosystem. The authors continued, “We believe that this report is a necessary first step in addressing the deteriorating status of native anadromous fish stocks...Broad concern for the anadromous fish resource now must be translated into on-the-ground actions.”<sup>110</sup> Published by the American Fisheries Society in the field's leading scientific journal, the article quickly became one of its most heavily cited fishery publications of all time.<sup>111</sup>

The crossroads paper was a dramatic turning point. Three young but respected biologists had confronted an entire community of government experts, most of whom had long been asleep on the job when it came to salmon. Faced with incontrovertible evidence that the salmon runs were rapidly disappearing, many government biologists accepted that the change the paper proscribed was both necessary and desirable. Moreover, the authors had been savvy to the institutions they wished to change. Prior to publication, over sixty different fishery experts had exhaustively reviewed the paper. The scientists spoke with a credible voice, and they pulled no punches. As a result, most people agreed that the crossroads paper represented the best science available. After years of managing salmon as a harvestable commodity, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service did an abrupt about-face, and instead began to focus on the ecological health of aquatic environments. The call to action within the crossroads paper reverberated through a number of government bureaucracies. Jack E Williams, science advisor at the Bureau of Land Management, later said that the paper was “a wake-up call” that changed

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>111</sup> This according to its editor. See Joseph Cone, “Commentary,” in *The Northwest Salmon Crisis: A Documentary History*, ed. By Joseph Cone and Sandy Ridlington (Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University Press, 1996), 299.

the government's approach to aquatic and riparian management.<sup>112</sup> Dan Rohlf, a lawyer who advocated for salmon recalled that the crossroads paper was “very influential... in waking up not only the scientific community and agencies, but [it] also really galvanized public opinion as well, and captured the public's imagination...”<sup>113</sup> Pat Ford noted that the paper put the salmon issue on the “front burner to the region.” She continued, “...it was a very sobering paper because it concluded that, literally, that probably about a hundred stocks were already extinct...but also that...salmon and steelhead were endangered or threatened or at risk of extinction. And it really spotlighted to the conservation community, to the fishing community, to some extent to the public political community, the extent of this crisis, region-wide.”<sup>114</sup>

After the publication of the crossroads paper government fishery agencies began to talk more and more about Columbia River salmon. Conservationists had been preparing legal action for some time, and they were now encouraged by the momentum the paper had garnered. In April 1990, twenty-five concerned environmental activists, lawyers, and fishery scientists prepared to meet to plan strategy for their ESA petitions. Gathered together were representatives from Oregon Trout, the Oregon and Idaho chapters of the American Fisheries Society, the Oregon Natural Resources Council, the Northwest Environmental Defense Center, and American Rivers. On paper the groups had a strong case. The Endangered Species Act stated that petitions were to be judged based on scientific merit before social and economic factors could be considered.<sup>115</sup> But

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<sup>112</sup> Jack E. Williams, personal communication to Joseph Cone, in “Commentary,” in *The Northwest Salmon Crisis*, 299-300.

<sup>113</sup> Dan Rohlf, Center for Columbia River History Oral History Collection, 2700.1, Columbia River Dissenters, 2725, Tape 2, Side 1, Transcript p. 30, Oregon Historical Society Research Library.

<sup>114</sup> Pat Ford, 8-10.

<sup>115</sup> Cone, *A Common Fate*, 47.



in early April, 1991, the Shoshone-Bannock tribe of Idaho filed the first ESA petition for the Snake River Sockeye, beating the conservationists to the punch. Two months later, Bill Bakke of Oregon Trout followed their lead, filing petitions for Chinook and Coho runs on the Columbia. Bakke selected the first two petitions somewhat strategically, choosing the spring, summer and fall Snake Chinook runs, because they traversed the entire hydroelectric system, and petitioning for some lower Columbia Coho, whose population was dwindling not because of the dams but because of habitat loss and hatchery problems.<sup>116</sup> After reviewing the petitions the AFS decided to be a cosigner. By the end of May, the group was ready to make its case to the general public. On May 30, 1991, in a hastily arranged press conference, Bill Bakke, Gordon Reeves, Steve Kerr, and Dan Rohlf presented the conservationists' case to a room full of reporters. They used graphs and charts, and played to the television cameras. The message was startling: the populations were collapsing, and if something wasn't done, the region was in danger of losing its iconic fish. Bakke took his message directly to television viewers, "It is clear that dramatic action is required to save these fish from the plunge towards extinction." Andy Kerr added, "Saving the salmon will not be cheap, but we have no choice. For if we don't save the salmon, I think we have less chance to save ourselves as a species."<sup>117</sup>

The onset of a "salmon crisis" set the stage for dramatic shift in public opinion. It re-shaped the stories that people told about the river, and, in turn, reshaped the political calculus of who controlled what on the Columbia. As the public's attention focused on the plight of the fish, and the press delved deeper into the conflict, it became clear that the BPA, the Army Corp of Engineers, and the established irrigation and power interests

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<sup>116</sup> Pat Ford, 8-9.

<sup>117</sup> Cone, *A Common Fate*, 64.

would fight the ESA listings in an effort to maintain their stranglehold on the Columbia River. In the weeks that followed, national conservation magazines wrote articles that adopted similar tones of concern, and criticism of both the Corps and the BPA began appeared in local and national newspapers. Influential conservation magazines such as *Wilderness*, *Audubon*, and *Defenders* all carried stories reporting on the state of the salmon crisis.<sup>118</sup> Criticism of the dams, and the agencies that controlled them, began to intensify. In *The Nation* one writer stated that if the Northwest had a soul, it was the salmon, and they had sold it for cheap power.<sup>119</sup> Bill Bakke's organization, Trout Unlimited, republished the crossroads paper in its entirety, the first time the organization included a professional paper in its popular magazine.<sup>120</sup> Salmon issues had been elevated to the limelight, and the question of how to manage the Columbia River once again became a central question for the region. But the ESA listings and the crossroads paper did more than shift the political debate, they helped to create a new type of Columbia River narrative—one that posited a new meaning for the river.

As the salmon issue attracted more and more media attention, conservation organizations sought to forge broad coalitions on behalf of the fish. Ed Chaney, himself a fishery biologist who had advocated for salmon for decades, went to work creating a coalition that would put its shared goal of conservation ahead of allocation issues, all

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<sup>118</sup> Thomas J. Eley and T. H. Watkins, "The Uncertain Fate of the Pacific Salmon: In a Sea of Trouble," *Wilderness* 55 (Fall 1991): 18, Bob Devine, "The Salmon Dammed," *Audubon* 94 (1992): 83-89, D. H. Chadwick, "Can the Salmon Culture Be Saved? Some Northwesterners hope to make a famed icon the emblem of a higher quality of life," *Defenders* 74 (Spring 1999): 6-15. For additional examples see Terry L. Anderson, "Water Enough for Farmer and Fish," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 16, 1991, p. A16, Timothy Egan, "Fight to Save Salmon Starts Fight Over Water," *New York Times*, April 1, 1991, p. A1, Douglas Gantenbein, "Salmon on the Spot," *Sierra* 76 (January 1991): 31-35, and Jim Simon and Marla Williams, "Last Chance for Salmon," *Seattle Times*, March 31, 1991, p. A1.

<sup>119</sup> Clay Haythorn, "Save Our Salmon, Save Our Soul," *The Nation* 254 (January 6, 1992): 14.

<sup>120</sup> Joseph Cone, "Commentary," in *The Northwest Salmon Crisis: A Documentary History*, ed. By Joseph Cone and Sandy Ridlington (Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University Press, 1996), 299.

while supporting sustainable, biologically sound harvest strategies.<sup>121</sup> In 1991 the Save Our Wild Salmon (SOWS) coalition garnered support from a wide variety of interests, including conservation groups, commercial and sportsfishing associations, river groups, and private businesses. Led by Ed Chaney and Pat Ford, the coalition grew to nearly fifty member organizations and acted as a coordinator for regional efforts at salmon advocacy, even issuing publications in support of the salmon.<sup>122</sup> (figures 5.17, 5.18) The purpose of the SOWS Coalition was to find common ground among the various groups, and focus attention on the big issue that still posed a problem for all of them—the dams.<sup>123</sup>

### **The Emergence of a New Story**

Within the conservationists' public relations campaign was a new Columbia River story. The narrative conservationists were pushing was predictable, yet powerful. It was a tragedy in the finest sense, one that scripted the decline of the salmon fishery as a sad, but suggestive lesson about the pitfalls of industrial man. By the 1990s, narratives of environmental decline were so ubiquitous that the basic plot was familiar to most citizens of the region; liberal or conservative, young or old, environmentalist or not, the story was simple and compelling. The salmon—majestic, beautiful, powerful yet innocent

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<sup>121</sup> In the 1980s many environmental groups engaged in long, painful, drawn-out battles over timber-management practices and the conservation of the Northern Spotted Owl. As out-of-work loggers blamed both the federal government and environmentalists for the timber industry's decline, these groups lamented the polarized political climate that distracted the public from what they considered the real culprit—years of over-production and other structural changes to the timber industry. Partly as a result of this conflict, the word “environmentalist” became an epithet (especially in rural communities) and a number of organizations took care to refer to themselves as “conservation” groups. Vowing to avoid another “jobs v. environment” type of media narrative, these groups went to great lengths to broaden their coalition to include commercial and recreational fishermen, and they complicated arguments that framed river policy as a choice between fish or dams.

<sup>122</sup> Wendy Wilson attributed the success of the SOWS coalition to a better gender balance: “...with the addition of some women into the Save Our Wild Salmon Coalition family, we have, I think, had a much more optimistic attitude about getting over our differences and working on the things that we can work on...[women] been very instrumental in bringing the conservation community together and saying, “Okay, you know, let's quit fighting over whose hatcheries are killing whose fishing opportunities.” Wendy Wilson, 25.

<sup>123</sup> Pat Ford, 20.

creatures—were slowly and systematically being destroyed by the evils of the modern world—pollution, over-development, technological hubris, greed, and corruption. Prevented from doing that which they had always done, migrating up and down the region's rivers and streams, the salmon's decline was evidence of how industrial society had faltered, sullyng the proverbial garden. In this tragedy, salmon were associated with “the way life used to be,”—a romantic reminder of simpler times when the region was less developed, and its ecosystems less degraded. The decline of the salmon suggested that the Northwest environment, long celebrated for its natural abundance, was no longer the place it purported to be. The region was in decline, on the path to becoming just like everywhere else.<sup>124</sup> As salmon became victims, the dams became powerful villains—as did the BPA, the Army Corps of Engineers, and all the special interests that refused to share the Columbia's vast wealth. Importantly, the dams were no longer symbols of technological progress but symbols of the opposite—of overconfidence and environmental decline, of society's mistakes and its unwillingness (or inability) to atone for them. In this story the Columbia River became both a setting for the tragedy and another victim in the drama. Its water's sickened, its historic fishery failing, its natural flows to the sea blocked, and its meaning to the people of the region perverted.

In lamenting the decline of the river, some conservationists asserted that the Columbia was no longer a “real” river at all. In passing some environmentalists would occasionally refer to it as “this so-called river,” and in 1995 it would earn the famous moniker, “the organic machine”—a reference to the Frankensteinian nature of a river that was controlled by computers.<sup>125</sup> Idaho conservationist Wendy Wilson explained the

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<sup>124</sup> Joseph Cone makes a similar point in *A Common Fate*, 65.

<sup>125</sup> Richard White, *The Organic Machine*.

reasoning. She stated, “Rivers aren't just plumbing to convey water from one point to the next. It's not like you had some one place where there's all the spawning areas and then you have the ocean and the big pipe runs between them. The rivers are actually part of the life cycle of the fish, and there are spawning beds along the way for certain stocks, and there's feeding areas along the way that need to be restored.”<sup>126</sup> Bob Tuck saw this distinction between the old and new Columbia as, “a fundamental, profound, ecological change. You no longer have a river. You have an impoundment and there have been many volumes written on the differences ecologically between the two.”<sup>127</sup> In this new Columbia narrative, a river was not something to be exploited, rationalized, or harnessed—it was a living entity, an ecosystem that not only supported fish and wildlife, but the people who lived all around it. Robert Tuck, himself a wildlife biologist, explained how biology and ecology had changed the prevailing notions of how to manage natural resources: “It goes back to, again, to this philosophy, in the eighteen-hundreds and early nineteen-hundreds, we can conquer nature, we can bend it to our will, we can make it do anything we want. No we can't. You know, the fish have taught us a valuable lesson. We have got to remember that we cannot – we do not have the understanding of a fraction of how that ecosystem works. There are subtleties out there that we haven't even tumbled to.”<sup>128</sup> In casting aside the old in favor of the new, Bob Tuck challenged the idea that the Columbia's current hydroelectric system was being run by competent experts. The conservationists' message was simple; if we wanted salmon in our rivers, than we would have to abandon older philosophies that saw nature as something to be exploited. Such an approach would only lead to problems—and the salmon controversy

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<sup>126</sup> Wendy Wilson, 21.

<sup>127</sup> Robert Tuck, 42.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 64.

was the foremost evidence of this. Jim Lichatowich stated that existing river statutes often operated as if they weren't connected to anything else. If policymakers were to solve these more complex problems, he stated, then they would “have to start thinking like a river.”<sup>129</sup> In their critiques of existing policy, these advocates for the salmon implied that neither the Corps nor the BPA had the expertise needed to rescue the Columbia from its crisis. The new narrative suggested that it was *salmon*, not dams, which would make the river whole again.

Salmon, as protagonists in these stories, were extremely popular and sympathetic creatures, and conservation advocates were acutely aware of the strategic benefits that such a popular symbol could bring to their wider environmental efforts. Pat Ford later noted that salmon had such value because they connected with the people of the region. She articulated the affinity that so many felt for the fish: “[Salmon] are incredibly compelling creatures, and if you spend any time watching them or fishing for them or in their presence, you get hooked. The more you learn about them and the communities that they once supported, the economies they once supported, the cultural value they have, to tribes but also to the white settlers, us, they are an animal species of centrality to humans in a way that other animal species are not. And they're a sort of symbol, by virtue of this huge circle of their lives...”<sup>130</sup> Ed Chaney was more blunt when he stated that with the salmon came “an enormous potential political constituency” that “was totally untapped.”<sup>131</sup> Discussing his time as a lawyer for the National Wildlife Federation in Eugene, Terry Thatcher recalled a similar motivation. His organization chose salmon

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<sup>129</sup> As quoted in Jim Simon and Marla Williams, “Last Chance for Salmon,” *Seattle Times*, March 31, 1991, p. A1.

<sup>130</sup> Pat Ford, 11-12.

<sup>131</sup> Ed Chaney, 40.

advocacy because the decline of the fishery was part of a larger phenomena of environmental decline. Picking the salmon as the focus of the office wasn't hard because they were "so clearly, almost without thinking" an issue for the region.<sup>132</sup>

Other conservationists looked at the salmon and saw value in *avoiding* the problems suffered by the region's other famous endangered species, the spotted owl. Most residents had never heard of a spotted owl until they became associated with the timber problem. This was not true of salmon. Dan Rohlf of the Northwest Environmental Defense Center noted, "...right off the bat, I think the salmon issue was different than spotted owls because people could run down spotted owls and say who cares about spotted owls. Those darn environmentalists are just using it as a surrogate for their own crazy ideas. But just right off the bat, you could not say that about salmon. Mark Hatfield [the U.S. Senator from Oregon] certainly could not say that about salmon. It's this Northwest icon. So everybody had to say of course we want to save the salmon."<sup>133</sup> John Gordon, former dean of the Yale University of Forestry and Environmental Studies added, "Few people know what an old growth ecosystem is...but tell Joe Blow on the street that he's losing his fish, and Congress will pay attention."<sup>134 135</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Terry Thatcher, 35. For a discussion of salmon and their importance to the Pacific Northwest see John M. Findlay, "A Fishy Proposition: Regional Identity in the Pacific Northwest," in *Many Wests: Place, Culture, and Regional Identity*, ed. By David M. Wrobel and Michael C. Steiner (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 37-70, William Lang, "Beavers, Fir, Salmon, and Falling Water: Pacific Northwest Regionalism and the Environment," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 104 (Summer 2003): 151- 65, William Robbins, "Nature's Northwest: In Search of a Pacific Region," in *The Great Northwest*, 158-82, Oregon Trout (organization), *Oregon Salmon: Essays on the State of the Fish at the Turn of the Millenium* (Portland, Oregon: Oregon Trout, 2001), and Elizabeth Woody, Edward C. Wolf, and Seth Zuckerman, *Salmon Nation: People, Fish, and Our Common Home* (Portland, Oregon: Ecotrust, 2003).

<sup>133</sup> Dan Rohlf, 36.

<sup>134</sup> Cone, *A Common Fate*, 175.

<sup>135</sup> Commercial fisherman and salmon activist Kent Martin, a witness to the decline of the salmon fishery and the economic hardships the decline caused in his community, was less enthused about the growing popularity of the fish. Martin dismissed the salmon's popularity as the hypocrisy of a culture that doesn't practice what it preaches. Of the salmon worship, he stated: "It's all a big PR stunt. And I guess

On top of all those other reasons, the salmon enjoyed another advantage that the spotted owl did not—they were *food*—a staple that some residents still depended on, and that many others enjoyed catching on weekends.

As concern for the salmon increased, legends about epic Columbia River salmon runs and huge summer Chinook took on increased importance. Run-of-the-mill fish tales—stories that traditionally exaggerated just the size of the fish—now took on a whole new dimension, morphing into declension narratives that lamented the *permanent* decline of June hogs, sea-run cutthroat, summer sockeye and hard-fighting steelhead. Such stories figured prominently in the ways that conservationists imagined the Columbia. What emerged in their stories was a new, updated version of the fish tale—a story that emphasized not the size of the catch but the abundance of the fishery. Operating as instructional fables with lessons for those who listened, these fish tales of abundance figured prominently in the minds of many conservationists. Ed Chaney recalled images of the native fishery prior to the arrival of Euro-Americans. He spoke with passion about how that salmon were the “backbone” of one of the richest, most-intensively occupied cultures “on the face of the planet.” Chaney continued:

“I mean, here was this basically inexhaustible source of protein delivering itself to your doorstep with regularity basically throughout the year. I mean this is nirvana, what more could you ask? What could any culture ask to have wealth

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the acme of that is that Salmon Festival that the town of Wenatchee has every year. They have some kind of a big paper-mache salmon they put out, and I don't know if they have their local virgin prance around it or whatever, but it's essentially a mercantile thing to get a bunch of merchants in for yet another festival. I mean, and these are the major people that played a major the - It's the apple orchard industry - These are people that played a major hand in exterminating salmon and now they have a salmon festival. They don't have any live salmon to speak of left so they have to make a one up out of some paper-mache or something and play like they've had a salmon festival. It's the most obscene kind of - What would I call it? - Well, it's a kind of totemism reduced to its most horrible form, because for the most part the real totem doesn't exist any more.” Martin's pessimism mirrors a class-based complaint lodged against conservation organizations in the 1980s and early 1990s. Kent Martin, 7. See also, Richard White, “Are You An Environmentalist or Do You Work For a Living?": Work and Nature,” in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. by William Cronon (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 171-85.



just keep showing up at your doorstep day after day after day after day and it just goes on forever. Inexhaustible, you don't have to do anything, nothing. Just go pick them up.”<sup>136</sup>

Visions of salmon seemed to swim in Chaney's head, and the thought of an indigenous culture that valued what the modern, industrial world did not appealed to Chaney. In his vision the salmon were markers of paradise, a “nirvana” that would go on forever. He then contrasted that description with another type of fishery on the Columbia:

“Then when the white guys showed up, recognized that wealth and built the big fishery down at the mouth of the Columbia River, [that stretched] clear up to The Dalles, basically. Twenty, thirty million pounds a year of salmon, and that was mainly summer Chinook...the rest of the fish were trash fish. Year after year after year after year, so just looking at this from a very practical human point of view, its an enormous source of protein that's free...we should think about wanton destruction of such a resource.”<sup>137</sup>

The lesson in Chaney's mind was abundantly clear: the white guys messed up the most abundant salmon run in recorded history—a conclusion impossible to refute. Historical accounts of rivers that were teeming with fish and old photos of massive salmon supported the power of this narrative—especially when contrasted with the poor runs of the present. Other conservationists envisioned the “good old days” on a much shorter scale, and didn't need to go back so far in time to see abundance. In 1999, Dan Rohlf recalled that he and his wife served home-caught salmon to over 200 guests at their wedding, only ten years earlier. Rohlf reminisced:

“...I would go out there fishing with him [his father-in-law], and it was phenomenal. The buoy ten fishery was amazing. It would just be this entire river from one end to the other of the Columbia River at buoy ten—which is miles wide—you'd have virtually an entire line of boats that would go across that entire river and then boats behind and boats strung out everywhere. You were right on top of another boat, which aesthetically isn't your vision of a relaxing fishing trip

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<sup>136</sup> Ed Chaney, 50.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

or going back to nature. But economically, it's an incredible engine. The Port of Ilwaco...the entire port was choked with boats. There was not one place, there was not one slip that was empty, not one. And there were charter boats, you'd see charter boat operators everywhere. And if you do down there now, two-thirds of the port is probably empty. And I'm sure two-thirds of the charter boat operators are gone..."<sup>138</sup>

In Rohlf's story the trajectory of decline is much shorter, but the fish-tale is operating in a similar way. Like Chaney's story of pre-contact abundance, Rohlf's account draws a sharp distinction between past and present, and offered a lesson as to why saving the salmon was desirable. Visions of abundance, from pre-contact to the present, structured the ways that conservationists understood the meaning of the fish as well as the significance of their work in saving the river. One especially poignant tale of loss illustrates the power of such romantic imagery. Terry Thatcher, a lawyer and longtime advocate for the fish, told a Columbia River fish-tale to best all others:

"...the Chinook that spawned above Grand Coulee were absolutely immense fish, known as 'June hogs.' They reached the Columbia after their feeding on the ocean, they could be anywhere from sixty to one hundred pounds, returning salmon. They went above Grand Coulee, and they were obviously famous because of their size and strength. There were, I assume, about five years of runs after the dam was closed...but there are stories of sixty to one hundred pound fish...one of the first things I heard when the old-timers were testifying before the Planning Power Council in the early eighties in support of fish and wildlife protection on the Columbia [were] the stories of the June hogs returning, sixty to one-hundred pound fish, killing themselves by leaping into the concrete at the base of Grand Coulee, either during or after construction. The carnage must have been horrifying for those who witnessed it. The fish were so immense, it's hard to think of one hundred pound salmon. I understand that some of the fish, maybe some of the fish that spawned in some other places were almost as big, but these were the biggest known. As I say, they were called the June hogs because they were as big as a small pig. This was just one of those stories that I remember hearing when folks that had been around then were still here and testifying."<sup>139</sup> (figures 5.19, 5.20)

Thatcher's tale of fish that were the "biggest known" salmon (the size of pigs!) throwing

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<sup>138</sup> Dan Rohlf, 22.

<sup>139</sup> Terry Thatcher, 24-25.

themselves into the concrete face of Grand Coulee Dam—a massive structure that Woody Guthrie once called, “the biggest thing that man has ever done”—is story as romantic as it is inaccurate.<sup>140</sup> In 1939, officials from the Fish and Wildlife Service put giant screens into Rock Island Dam, one hundred and fifty miles below Grand Coulee. For four and a half years, those screens directed the “June hogs,” “bluebacks,” and migrating steelhead into holding pools, where the fish were transported via special tank trucks called “fish pullmans,” to the Wenatchee, Entiat, Methow or Okanagan Rivers, where they were planted in the hope they would spawn. This propagation plan was only partially successful, but the fact remains that the screens stayed in place throughout the biological cycle of the runs involved, and the “June hogs” that were forever eliminated from the habitat above Grand Coulee, never got anywhere near the face of the giant dam.<sup>141</sup> But the emotional appeal of that particular story is extraordinary. For Thatcher and others there was something about an impassible dam that was thoroughly captivating. Another advocate for the salmon, Mark Ufkes, offered a similar story; reflecting on the time when he discovered that Grand Coulee Dam was built without any fish ladders, Ufkes recalled, “...I went back. I just went back to just stand up there and just look down and imagine what it was like to have literally probably millions of salmon getting to the base of that dam and dying there. Some of them might have tried to spawn there, but for the most party they just died off. That whole segment of the fishery just died off.”<sup>142</sup>

Both Ufkes' imaginary die-off and Thatcher's 'fish-tale to beat all others' are

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<sup>140</sup> Woody Guthrie compared the Grand Coulee Dam to the pyramids in his song, *The Biggest Thing That Man Has Ever Done*. See Guthrie and Murlin, 28-29.

<sup>141</sup> The details of the Fish and Wildlife Service's “Grand Coulee Salvage Operation” are recounted in Anthony Netboy, *Salmon of the Pacific Northwest: Fish vs. Dams*, 46-49.

<sup>142</sup> Mark Ufkes, Center for Columbia River History Oral History Collection, 2700.1, Columbia River Dissenters, 27, Tape 1, Side 1, Transcript p. 28, Oregon Historical Society Research Library.

particularly useful in demonstrating the power of this new Columbia River narrative. While the gruesome image of a giant Chinook salmon, relentlessly throwing itself into the massive, concrete, modern, dam is surely not true, it is a powerful image, a snippet of narrative that opens up a larger web of stories. The revulsion that conservationists like Thatcher felt about the destruction of such a fish was decidedly real. In Thatcher's tale the physical body of the "June hog" is crushed against the physical structure of Grand Coulee, a dam that was, at the time of its construction, the largest of its kind. In Thatcher's story, a fictional collision between giant fish and giant dam stands in for the *actual* collision between the real fish and the federal government, a collision that Ufkes was also imagining. As in the larger Columbia River narrative, the salmon of Thatcher's and Ufkes's stories are tragic yet innocent figures, knowing nothing of what stands in their way. As they commit suicide against a dam, they convert its concrete into a fish-club of sorts, a *literal* salmon killing machine that recasts the government as the perpetrator wielding the murder weapon. The lessons that these stories offered were the same as the others: losing the June hogs was a terrible tragedy, and the only way to achieve redemption was to ameliorate the conditions that caused the decline. The true measurement of progress on the Columbia was the salmon. Save the salmon and you would save the society. Save the salmon and you would save yourself. Whether or not these fish-tales were actually true? It mattered very little.<sup>143</sup>

The power of this new Columbia story was also temporal—it described the river's present, re-interpreted the river's past, and it offered lesson for restoring the river's future. Such an instructive tale held great appeal for many in the region. Since the end of the

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<sup>143</sup> For the record, after recounting his story to the interviewer, Terry Thatcher questioned its veracity—perhaps suspecting that it might have been a fish-tale. Yet there was no hearing where "old-timers" recalled any actual fish-dam collisions.

Second World War the Northwest was becoming more and more economically sophisticated, especially as it diversified away from resource-extraction industries towards an economy centered on manufacturing, technology, recreation, and tourism. With economic change came shifting demographics, and those changes meant that fewer and fewer residents were engaged in agriculture, logging, river-navigation, or other status-quo uses of the river.<sup>144</sup> In addition, these newly arrived residents often had different values, and many thought that their 'quality of life' was related to healthy, even pristine environments. Salmon, much like “wilderness areas,” had become important markers of urban and suburban escapism; desires that were rooted in dissatisfaction with modernity and a desire to re-create the natural world as the antithesis to the industrial one.<sup>145</sup> Decades earlier, urbanites had envisioned a therapeutic natural space along the Columbia River Highway. Now, salmon-loving environmentalists embraced a narrative that celebrated what the salmon could offer as a recuperative agent, as a tonic for the river and the region. Urbanization and other demographic changes suggested that the relative appeal of this new river story was on an upward trajectory.

A month after the initial ESA petition announcements, the conservationists would have an opportunity to hone their message. At a hearing in Astoria, OR, representatives from several different conservation organizations found themselves in front of some now-very-concerned politicians, who demanded the reasoning behind their petitions. In terms that reflected this new Columbia River narrative, American Fisheries Society scientist

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<sup>144</sup> These urban populations depended on Columbia River hydroelectricity just like everyone else. This fact was not lost upon conservationists as they attempted to craft a message with wide appeal. Organizations were often careful to frame their demands as modest concessions (at least at first) and they avoided oversimplifications that reduced their argument to simple binaries (like fish vs. jobs, or fish vs. cheap power).

<sup>145</sup> See William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, 69-90.

Gordon Reeves told Oregon Senator Bob Packwood that “the decline is an indicator of a general decline in the health and integrity of the Columbia River System” that was part of a broader phenomena, a “local manifestation of what scientists have termed a planetary environmental crisis.” Andy Kerr, the outspoken, media-savvy, and more politically adventurous activist, added, “The salmon runs are a critical indicator of the quality of life in the Pacific Northwest.” He went on:

“...at the top of the aquatic food chain, the salmon reflects the condition of our streams, which reflect the conditions of our environment, which reflects our own condition. We can learn much from the spotted owl experience...let us avoid denial that the salmon are in trouble and get on to reversing that fact. Let us not misread or mischaracterize economic change for economic decline or disaster. Let us avoid the one-sided economics which recognizes only the cost of species protection, ignoring both the benefits of conservation and the costs of extinction...the wild salmon runs are sacred to most Northwesterners, even if their ancestors were born on other continents. They are a legacy that we must pass on to our children.”<sup>146</sup>

Quickly and succinctly, the conservationists described their story to both public officials and reporters alike. The conservationists weren't demanding a trade between jobs and fish. They came with a much broader agenda, an effort to save “our own condition.” In this particular hearing, like many others, the proponents of the ESA listings were vastly outnumbered by those who worried about the economic and social costs, and who would bear them. In the public debate that followed the ESA petitions, conservationists quickly moved to repeat, and to consolidate, the outlines of their basic story. They were fighting for the fish—powerless victims of a wider “planetary environmental crisis.” But importantly, they were doing so for *future generations*, so that the children could enjoy the taste of salmon, as Kerr put it, “even if their ancestors were born on other continents.”

Kerr's invocation of native peoples, and their important connection to salmon, was

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<sup>146</sup> This exchange is described in Cone, 69-70.

not insignificant. Like the salmon, the native peoples of the region had suffered through a litany of river-use decisions that almost always favored non-native interests over their own, and this despite treaties that supposedly protected their access to the fishery. (The Boldt decision was largely the exception, not the rule.) This particular history notwithstanding, romanticized notions of pre-modern native peoples occasionally appeared in the comments of those who embraced declension narratives about the river. For the urban, educated, mostly non-native residents of the Northwest, a story of Indian dispossession of land and resources at the hands of colonial invaders fit perfectly into the declension narrative that conservationists were peddling (and environmentalists always did have a penchant for Indianness).<sup>147</sup> In addition, some reporters couldn't resist descriptions of the Columbia that juxtaposed a simplified, abundant, *Indian* past, with the complex, problematic, *non-native* present. While this interpretation was appealing for its simplicity, it often ignored the many Native voices active in the present (not to mention the legal realities of their treaty-rights). In this new Columbia story, indigeneity had become sympathetic, at least when deployed to signify problems with the status quo.<sup>148</sup> Romantic images of mid-River Indians at the now-drowned Celilo Falls resonated with those who longed for a return to the natural river. (figure 1.1, 1.8) Yet, while a romanticized "Indianness" was often used to diagnose the sins of the engineered Columbia, on the whole, most conservationists respected the sovereignty of Northwest Indian nations and the various groups often had overlapping goals (as well as common

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<sup>147</sup> See "Counterculture Indians and the New Age" in Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 154-80.

<sup>148</sup> At times the environmentalist affinity for all things Indian has collapsed, as in recently, when the Warm Springs Tribe proposed a casino in the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area, drawing criticism from some conservation groups. Other conservation groups supported their effort, or purposefully remained quiet on the issue.

members) in addressing salmon problems.

By the 1990's many of the conservationists viewed the long history of Indian dispossession from land and resources as a moral tragedy, and salmon restoration would mark a welcome departure from the racism of the region's past. Identifying with the Euro-American invaders, Terry Thatcher reflected on the decline of the native fishery, which he saw as outright theft: "We destroyed their livelihood and ripped from them a fundamental part of their culture. I think it's absolutely horrible. I think it is immoral." He continued, "For the tribes this was their fundamental property. They didn't think of it as property the way we do, but it was communal property and was individual property. It was their livelihood and it was their culture, and we, the Anglos, decided that the benefit to us outweighed the burdens to them. I think that is fundamentally unfair."<sup>149</sup> Many conservationists saw the reduction of the native fishery as an extension of the colonialism of the past, yet one more indication that power relations on the Columbia were not very progressive. Wildlife biologist Bob Tuck spoke of powerful connections between salmon and native cultures:

"I've given many presentations and I've tried over the years to think of a object or group of objects that would be analogous to basically white middle-class American culture as a salmon is to Native Americans and I have yet to come up with a good analogy because the salmon represents so much more, I think, than even the most ardent supporter of a dam thinks of a dam. The salmon is part of their religion and it's part of their culture, it's a center of many of their cultural activities for salmon ceremony, all the different kinds of ceremony that are built around salmon. And I'm always reminded of the quote...'how can I explain to you what a salmon means to me, the salmon and I are one.' And I don't think anybody's going to say the dam and I are one, even if they think the dams are very important. So I think there's a different level between this inanimate object out here that represents progress, it represents cheap electricity, it represents the good

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<sup>149</sup> Terry Thatcher, 26-27. In one particularly reflexive moment, Thatcher added, "Our society, I think, has never come to terms with that horrible dark underside of our culture. So much of my life, I guess, I've been motivated by guilt. I wish that our country was motivated by guilt for what it has done." Terry Thatcher, 28.



life, whatever the case may be, and what the salmon means over thousands of years to the native American people. I think there is two different levels there.”<sup>150</sup>

Tuck's thoughtful, eloquent grasp of the sacred status given to salmon by Northwest Indian peoples reveals how conservationists fit both salmon and native peoples into the new story. Redeeming the salmon had the concurrent benefit of redeeming past acts of imperial conquest—at least symbolically. This was yet another way that the new Columbia narrative redefined what was progressive and what was not. In arguing on behalf of the river, the salmon, Indian peoples, and *future generations* of Northwesterners, conservationists shifted the boundaries of who was benefiting, and who was harmed. Doing so deflected blame to those they now considered the biggest perpetrators of crimes against the fish: the dams and the interests that supported them.<sup>151</sup>

By the 1990s, most conservation groups were in agreement that the primary barrier to restoring healthy fish populations were dams, and they specifically targeted the Snake River dams that caused such excessive mortalities among migrating juvenile salmon. Chaney recalled that in the beginning, most people within the conservation community thought that breaching the dams was “too crazy to even talk about,” so the groups began by pushing a basic draw-down that came to be called “the Idaho plan.” Chaney described it as “a synthesis of the best thinking that's available in the whole region...a comprehensive look at all of the things that are impacting fish: habitat

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<sup>150</sup> Robert Tuck, 55.

<sup>151</sup> Within the conservation movement there were numerous factions that hoped to remedy the different factors that led to the fish's decline. Bill Bakke and Oregon Trout had long focused on “wild” fish, habitat protection, and preserving genetic diversity by reforming the hatcheries. Ed Chaney, Pat Ford, and other Idaho activists were much more focused on drawing down the dams, to allow smolts an easier (and quicker) time to traverse the dams and reservoirs on their way to the sea. Still others, like Dan Rohlf, Terry Thatcher, Kent Martin, Wendy Wilson, Lori Bodi, and countless others focused on those who had a strangle-hold on the hydroelectric system—namely the government agencies, the direct service industries, irrigators, and countless others who had grown accustomed to the lucrative subsidies that the Columbia River hydroelectric system offered.

problems, hatchery-wild fish interactions, harvest management problems, and the dams.”<sup>152</sup> While careful to make their case in a way that didn't alienate the mainstream public, most of the conservation organizations agreed that pressuring both the BPA and the Army Corps of Engineers was the appropriate action. In some sense, having a common enemy allowed diverse groups with sometimes opposing interests to coalesce around a common enemy—the Save Our Wild Salmon coalition being the foremost example of such an alliance. Pat Ford recalled that she and other advocates had grown tired of listening to the Corps' disingenuous arguments and calls for additional study, “...we weren't going to save these fish through the existing institutional channels. Additional pressure had to be applied. The bad guys - you know, Bonneville and the Corps - had to get more heat because they simply weren't going to change things without heat.”<sup>153</sup> Ed Chaney was especially focused on exposing hypocrisy in both the BPA and the Corps. At various times, Chaney castigated one or both organizations for: creating a fish-killing machine, promoting a monopoly, obscuring the role of federal subsidies, feeding at the public trough, putting a happy face on a disaster, and for engineering the fish into extinction.<sup>154</sup> (figure 5.21) But he saved his most critical assessments for

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<sup>152</sup> Foreshadowing later developments, Chaney later stated that the plan “showed how you can deal with all these other problems, you could solve them, [and] the fish are still going to go extinct...there's only one of these things that if you fix it, the problem will be solved, and that's the dams.” Ed Chaney, 162-3.

<sup>153</sup> Pat Ford, 9.

<sup>154</sup> For examples of some of Ed Chaney's public comments, see Paul Koberstein, “Acerbic Power Council Leader Girds For Salmon Fight,” *Oregonian*, November 10, 1991, p. C1, “The Agency and the BPA Are Doing Their First Study on the Columbia River Dams,” *Oregonian*, June 4, 1991, p. B1, “People who make a difference,” *National Wildlife* 30 (1992): 34-6, Clay Haythorn, “Save Our Salmon, Save Our Soul,” *The Nation* 254 (January 6, 1992): 14-17, Bob Devine, “The Salmon Dammed,” *Audubon* 94 (1992): 82-89. For examples of his more recent criticisms, see Ed Chaney, *25 Years of Failure, Threatened Extinction, and A cascade of economic and social disasters. Time to Resurrect the Unfulfilled Salmon Restoration Promise of the Northwest Power Act of 1980*, Speech presented to Columbia Basin Fish and Wildlife Authority, Portland, Oregon, February 23, 2005 (Northwest Resource Information Center, <http://www.nwric.org/reports.html>, accessed June 10, 2010), *Bearing Witness: Duping the Northwest and the Nation, The US Army Corps of Engineers Economics and Restoring the Endangered Snake River Salmon*, December 2000 (Northwest Resource Information Center,

posterity; in an 1998 interview conducted by Clark Hansen of the Oregon Historical Society, Chaney referred to BPA and Corps officials as those who had “slipped their ethical moorings” and were “bitter, angry, hostile, ready to attack at the slightest criticism.”<sup>155</sup> Chaney added, “...these were people [who] were just feeding from a trough that is so deep and so wide and that [they] created a pork-barrel constituency that is ravenous, and the sums of money are so enormous and there are no losers...there are no consequences...you don't mess with a pork barrel when it's on a role.”<sup>156</sup> Chaney even remarked that the Corps of Engineers “treated the salmon just like this country's treated the Indians. Yeah, we'll promise this, we'll promise that, but this will all go away, in time this will pass and we will be where we are today.”<sup>157</sup>

Others saw the Corps in less demonic terms, but nevertheless criticized the agency for subverting the will of the people. Bob Tuck insisted that both the BPA and the Corps didn't own the river, and that “Society has a right to look at these things...society is not just all farmers and barge people.”<sup>158</sup> He continued, “...we tend to have a very provincial view in the Northwest and forget that we're part of a country that poured billions and billions of tax dollars into this area and continues to, and that these federal

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<http://www.nwric.org/reports.html>, accessed June 10, 2010), and *Army Corps of Engineers Surrenders to Columbia River Pork Alliance* (Northwest Resource Information Center, <http://www.nwric.org/reports.html>, accessed June 10, 2010).

<sup>155</sup> Ed Chaney, 65. At the same time, Chaney also recognized that problems with the BPA and the Corps were classic cases of public agencies being captured by the interests they weren't necessarily intended to serve: “...so they're buddies with their customers and so they belong to the same club...they hang out together, so it's if your aluminum industry or you're a big pulp, paper mill, [you] use a lot of energy and you want to be on buddy-buddy terms with the guy down at Portland General Electric or over at Pacific Power...and you basically become, in my view, the agent for your customer. And it's easy to understand, you're looking out for their interest because they buy your power. They are your defenders in front of the public utilities commission if you're a private power company, they become your defenders if you've got a problem with Congress, you feed off of them if Bonneville's in trouble, you run in there and you protect Bonneville and it's all a nice little club, all being paid for with public money and nobody's responsible for anything...” Ed Chaney, 68.

<sup>156</sup> Ed Chaney, 59-60.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>158</sup> Robert Tuck, 56.

facilities that belong to the people in Maine and Florida and Chicago and Texas just as much as they belong to us... there's an unwillingness in some corners to say, okay, maybe it's time to review the operation of these facilities...”<sup>159</sup> Dan Rohlf put it as diplomatically as anybody, “...the Corps is an agency that loves to spend money for engineering things but has not been as excited to spend money for environmental reasons...”<sup>160</sup> In response to the ESA listings and the ensuing media attention, Oregon Senator Mark Hatfield proposed a “regional salmon management planning meeting,” that the press quickly termed, “the salmon summit,” where both sides could sit down and negotiate a settlement.

### **Showdown at the 'Salmon Summit'**

At the beginning of the meeting, Oregon Senator Mark Hatfield addressed the government officials, heads of industry, conservationists, and tribal representatives who had gathered:

“I see many familiar faces representing environmental groups, energy interests, the federal agencies, and others with whom I have worked closely over the years. I am sure each of you realized that we are embarking today upon an historic mission which will define the very direction upon which this region will proceed for years to come. The future of the salmon runs, the ability to plan for future growth will hinge on the outcome of this process and the ongoing endangered species listing process. Whether you have realized it or not, you are being entrusted with the preservation of our unique way of life in the Pacific Northwest for generations to come. Unlike decisions which are made often by bureaucrats in Washington D.C., I have great confidence in this 'pre-decisional' process. Why? Because it provides a forum whereby management decisions can be made *for* the Northwest *in* the Northwest *by* people who live in the Northwest. This is our opportunity to shape and define our own destiny—not abrogate that responsibility to individuals outside our region who do not understand the importance of the Columbia River and its resources to all our lives. If you fail in this endeavor, this problem is likely to end up in our nation's capital. That is the worst place to look for a solution. No less than six cabinet-level agencies would be involved and over twenty committees and subcommittees of the House and Senate would claim

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Dan Rohlf, 31.

some jurisdiction over the issue. We must not let this happen.”<sup>161</sup>

In Hatfield's opening comments it was clear that the ESA petitions had sent an “economic and social tidal wave” through the region.<sup>162</sup> The salmon crisis had focused everyone's attention on the issue, perhaps in fear that the controversy would be as exhausting and divisive as the timber crisis the decade before. Mark Hatfield's earnest, but ultimately, feeble attempt at forging a compromise, “*for the Northwest in the Northwest by people who live in the Northwest*” was a last-ditch effort to head them off. Later, in an editorial in the *Oregonian*, Michael Blumm, a professor of law at Lewis and Clark College, would publicly question Hatfield's idea that local control was useful for saving the salmon. Blumm wrote that water flows essential to the survival of the salmon were “under the control of federal agencies like BPA and the Army Corps of Engineers,” and that, “the region has no more or less control over those federal agencies than it does over the National Marine Fisheries Service...this alleged concern over the loss of regional control masks the real reason for the opposition to a listing: Fear that an agency with some biological expertise would obtain some control over Columbia Basin stream flows.”<sup>163</sup>

Gathered at the meeting that day were representatives from the Army Corps of Engineers, the Bonneville Power Administration, the Direct Service Industries, the U.S. Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and Senators, Congressmen, and Representatives from the Governor's office for all of the Northwest states. Also attending was Ted Strong of the Columbia River Inter-tribal Fish Commission, Bill Bakke of Trout Unlimited, and Andy Kerr of Friends of the Earth, and a gaggle of reporters and

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<sup>161</sup> Joseph Cone, *A Common Fate*, 81.

<sup>162</sup> This according to Mark Hatfield himself, as cited by Cone, *A Common Fate*, 78.

<sup>163</sup> Michael C. Blumm, “Higher BPA Fish Flow Insufficient for Salmon In My Opinion,” *Oregonian*, March 14, 1991, p. B7, and Cone, *A Common Fate*, 128-9.

television cameras.

At the first of the three meetings that would be the salmon summit, the BPA presented a plan that called for mitigation of what they termed the four H's: Harvest, habitat, hydropower, and the hatcheries. They proposed forging a compromise that would avoid an ESA listing. In response, conservationists pushed the "Idaho Plan," a draw-down plan that didn't call for the all-out elimination of the four lower Snake River dams, but put the onus for conservation firmly upon the shoulders of those who had been negligent for so long. By "seasonally drawing down the reservoirs behind the dams" the Idaho plan aimed to "lower the cross section of the reservoir and increase the velocity and speed of juvenile salmon through that area."<sup>164</sup> Yet while offering this proposal, conservationists, wise to fifteen years of stalling, refused to take the ESA petitions off the table.<sup>165</sup> In several meetings the various interests talked around each other. In the end, despite the press coverage and the political pressure, nothing much happened.

Most conservationists eventually concluded that the salmon summit was a bust, a big to-do about nothing. No major agreement came about from the various parties, no shouting matches or loud fights erupted that the media might focus upon, the summit "just kind of fell apart of its own weight," Dan Rohlf recalled. "Nobody could agree, everybody wanted their piece of the pie, and clearly nothing was getting done, and so it kind of fell apart."<sup>166</sup> As Joseph Cone described it, "Everyone had a stack of chips, large or small, which they hoped no one else would see, except when they wanted them to.

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<sup>164</sup> Dan Rohlf, 42.

<sup>165</sup> In the end it would take fifteen years (and ESA listings) to get to the point where Corps officials would adopt any type of salmon recovery plan, and when it finally did it adopted remedies that were first proposed in 1981 and 1982.

<sup>166</sup> Dan Rohlf, 42.

Everyone showed a poker face.”<sup>167</sup>

Yet on display at the Salmon Summit was a more fundamental struggle over how to understand the meaning and purpose of a modern Columbia River. On one side, those who defended the hydropower system adhered to an older idea, that the system reflected a notion of progress. When it was his turn to speak, Republican Senator from Washington, Slade Gorton stood up and stated, “For those of you who feel as I do about these issues, it is not enough to nod in agreement and grumble about the excesses of the Endangered Species Act. You must share your views with your neighbors, you must talk with your local newspaper, television station, and radio station. You must let your local, state, and national political representatives know how you feel. You must let those people know what the specific impacts of endangered species listings will be, and express to them how you weigh the trade-offs between human *progress* and the preservation of the state of nature.”<sup>168</sup> (Italics added) On the other side were those who called for change, who argued that the river ought to be managed by those with a direct knowledge of what makes a healthy ecosystem. Ted Strong, the chairman of the Inter-Tribal Fish Commission stated, “Before the coming of the white man to this land, the Indian people were a ceremonial people. We were endowed with a feeling that kept us close to all that was created, including the salmon and the waters...Today, with the development of the Columbia River, the salmon do not enjoy their life.”<sup>169</sup>

At the salmon summit both sides would “stick to their guns.” While the summit never resulted in an acceptable policy compromise, the event itself did highlight a collision between the two different river stories. In front of reporters and television

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<sup>167</sup> Cone, *A Common Fate*, 83.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 139-41.

cameras, the various groups offered two conflicting narratives—two visions of the Columbia River that did battle for the hearts and minds of the general public. Just as there was never any substantive policy agreement, no narrative was so dominant that it vanquished the other. Instead, both visions of the Columbia rang true in the minds of their adherents. Slade Gorton left the salmon summit just as entrenched in his story of technological progress as when he came in. Likewise, Ted Strong and the others who had come to see tragedy on the Columbia remained steadfast in their version of reality. With the Columbia River awash in multiple stories, each competed on the virtues of their explanatory power, by their adherence to political ideology, by their capacity to fit with other dominant narratives that gave meaning to the region's social and cultural world. Columbia River stories had become a key site of contestation, a canvas upon which the future of the river would be painted. What was notable at the salmon summit was not that one story was able to dominate the other; what was distinct was that the dominance of the previous narrative, the narrative of technological progress, had been broken. No longer would that particular story constrain the ways that residents of the region could imagine the river, its proper uses, its past, and its future. The declining salmon runs, and the organized campaign that was waged by conservationists to save them, had offered up a story compelling enough that it appealed to a significant number of people. The ecology of the Columbia (as seen in the decline of the fish) had altered the dominant cultural narrative associated with the river, and it was this narrative that altered the political calculus of river policy.

Later, upon reflecting on the process, most of the salmon advocates expressed disappointment, but not surprise. The salmon runs remained in peril, and the powers that



be seemed as reluctant to change as ever. Chaney later recalled that when he put forward the plan for draw-downs, opponents reacted like it was “...heresy, radical, I mean – and this was tinkering with marginal changes in the system, and people went nuts. Bonneville, the Corps, and the pork barellers [sic] just went crazy.”<sup>170</sup> But after the fact, Dan Rohlf recalled that the Idaho plan was “...really the only thing that came out of the Salmon Summit was that people took the idea of some potentially major modifications to the lower four Snake River dams seriously, and that became a serious idea...I think that was perhaps the value and utility of the Salmon Summit.”<sup>171</sup> While Chaney's “Idaho Plan” had called for a seventeen foot drawdown at all four Snake River dams, at the end of the summit the proposal agreed upon was watered down to a single three foot drawdown, on only one dam. To make matters worse, weeks later, the Army Corps of Engineers announced that it was postponing that drawdown, so it could develop the plan further and conduct public hearings. At this affront, even Republican Senator Mark Hatfield was livid, and he lit into the Corps on the floor of the U.S. Senate:

“Over the last five months thousands of hours have been expended in this summit process by private citizens, environmental groups, electric utilities, Indian tribes, navigational interests, and four governors, the federal agencies, and others as we've tried to develop an acceptable salmon management plan. Imagine how these people feel when the key federal agency—the Corps of Engineers—continues to hide behind a bureaucratic curtain and pretend that it has no responsibility to change the very operations which are killing the fish? They feel outraged and so do I.”<sup>172</sup>

In September of 1992, the Northwest Power Planning Council finally issued their salmon report. “We can rebuild salmon populations in the Columbia Basin if we act quickly, carefully, and cooperatively... and we can accomplish this goal without eliminating other

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<sup>170</sup> Ed Chaney, 163.

<sup>171</sup> Dan Rohlf, 43.

<sup>172</sup> Cone, *A Common Fate*, 123.

uses of the river, or jeopardizing our efficient and economical supply of electricity,” the report optimistically concluded.<sup>173</sup> But when conservationists examined the details, it became clear yet again the approved plan failed to get adequate spring flows into the hydro system. Dan Rohlf, then speaking on behalf of the Northwest Environmental Defense Center, criticized the council for putting its expertise above the biologists. “Politics cannot save a single smolt...Fish simply need humans to operate rivers in the Columbia Basin so that they behave more like rivers.”<sup>174</sup> When the National Marine Fisheries Service finally announced their decision on the ESA petitions, they approved only two of the proposed species for endangered status. Conservationists were encouraged by the listing, but remained frustrated that the other stocks had been denied. Bill Bakke levied sharp criticism upon the decisions. Bakke told a meeting of Oregon chapter of the American Fisheries Society, “There is no policy for the conservation of native salmon stocks or the genetic resources they represent. Today's salmon managers are commodity brokers consumed by the authority to allocate access of special interests to the resource...lets stop the charade that everything is okay, which is what we've been hearing for years from the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.”<sup>175</sup> Bakke lamented how the NMFS didn't list the Coho salmon, but did list the Chinook, shifting virtually all of the public attention onto the hydropower system, and not on habitat loss, hatchery issues, or the problems associated with over-fishing.<sup>176</sup>

The future of the Columbia River salmon runs would be determined in the courts, as conservation groups petitioned for ESA listings and federal agencies resisted

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>174</sup> Cone, 161.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

compliance. And while wild salmon stocks continued to be threatened, in making their case the conservationists had won some important battles. In offering their critique of river-policy they had swung public opinion in their favor, in the process penetrating the air of veneration around the dams. They had avoided the pitfalls of other high-profile conservation fights, and had created a wide-ranging coalition that included commercial fishing interests and tribal governments. And they had helped re-write the significance of the river developments, claiming that the true measure of progress was not the conquering of nature but the preservation of it. Salmon had been elevated to the status of regional icon, simultaneously a symbol and a living barometer of the Columbia's ecological health.

When the Power Planning Council finally got around to meeting again in 1992, they funded a series of projects that were less controversial than the draw-down plans that had been decided on at the salmon summit. Feeling beaten yet again, Ed Chaney saw an opportunity. Since 1981 the Army Corp of Engineers had removed juvenile salmon from the Snake River, loaded them onto trucks and barges, and transported them down the Columbia before dumping them below Bonneville Dam, where they would ostensibly continue their voyage to the sea. In 1992 alone, the Corps spent over \$31 million on the transportation program. Ed Chaney thought that this solution distracted from other more important solutions, and because some of the fish that the Corps transported were now listed under the ESA, he filed a lawsuit, in an effort to keep the Corps from getting their barging permit.

At a hearing the tables were turned. The Corps, befuddled by the tactic, were forced to argue that barging was effective, and to prove their point they had to present

information arguing that that the Columbia River dams, which they operated, killed 50 to 80 percent of the juvenile fish. The Corps argued that “if transportation is not allowed, Columbia River salmon and steelhead populations would be diminished severely by dam and reservoir mortality, and segments of wild populations could become extinct.”<sup>177</sup>

After years of arguing that dams didn't kill fish, the Corps were now arguing that dams *did* kill fish, and that the only way to save them was to truck them or ship them, in containers, down the river. The conservationists watched with amusement, and then argued that the Corps was not limited to two choices: barging or watching them die. At the hearings, conservation organizations used the opportunity to score points with the public, highlighting the many ways that the Columbia was *still* insufficient for the iconic fish. Andy Kerr stated at the hearing:

“When I was a boy, the fish were in the river. Commodity traffic went by rail or truck. Then the Army decided it was a great idea to start trucking fish, and the fish went up and down river by truck on the roadside. I'm glad that they've finally gotten to the point that the fish are back on the river. Now we have to go the next step, and put them back in the river. It's not hard...they're used to it. Call me a radical, but that's the way it's always been done. Opponents say the experiment is in running the river, like a river. The fish have thousands of years of experience, and did just fine. Now the fish have continued to decline as we have made the river into a series of slackwater ponds. It's logical and obvious that if we went back more to the way the river was, it would be beneficial to the fish.”<sup>178</sup>

Kerr's playful yet politically effective argument suggested that a narrative of decline had gained some traction among the residents of the Pacific Northwest. The Corps, in an effort to engineer itself out of the fish problem, had transcended the bounds of 'common sense.' Kerr's claims seemed the more reasonable: “Now we have to go the next step, and put them back in the river,” and, “The fish have thousands of years of experience, and did just fine.” Implicit at the hearing that day was the recognition that the salmon

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<sup>177</sup> Cone, *A Common Fate*, 273.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 273-4.

issue wasn't going away. A new Columbia River narrative—the narrative of environmental decline—helped make that possible. David James Duncan could sing on:

*Big Douglas fir stumps where you channel cuts through  
Remind us of forests our grandfolks once knew,  
But if you want to find wildlife, better look in a zoo  
Roll on, Columbia, roll on.*

*Your water-use laws are a huge public con  
So in summer you become a huge public john  
Windsurfers grow tumors while trash fish grow brawn,  
But roll on, Columbia, roll on.*

*The Yakima, Snake an' the Willamette too  
Add toxins, dioxins, an' cowshit to you,  
E. coli an' pesticides, human doo-doo,  
But roll on, Columbia, roll on.*

*Meanwhile upriver on the great Hanford Reach,  
They're growin' the brains to plug nuclear leaks  
By mutatin' kids into three-headed freaks,  
But roll on, Columbia, roll on.*

*When Jefferson sent Lewis 'n' Clark to the West  
An empire of small farmers was the dream he loved best,  
Not a plague of industrialists shittin' our nest,  
But roll on, Columbia, roll on.*

*Your factories grind Mama Earth into hash  
Creatin' extinctions to line pockets with cash  
An' if we shout, "It's a crime!" they say, "Lets not be rash.  
Let's sing, 'Roll on, Columbia, Roll On.'*

*Rain on Mountain makes River—that's the Law on this Earth.  
The wild waters'll keep comin' till that law is reversed,  
An' dams can be unbuilt to show folks the worth  
Of a land where free rivers flow on.*

*The sunlight, the winds, the great waters shall last.  
It's Industrial madness that one day shall pass.  
Sweet Columbia's just waitn' for the day we all ask  
Where our beautiful river has gone.*

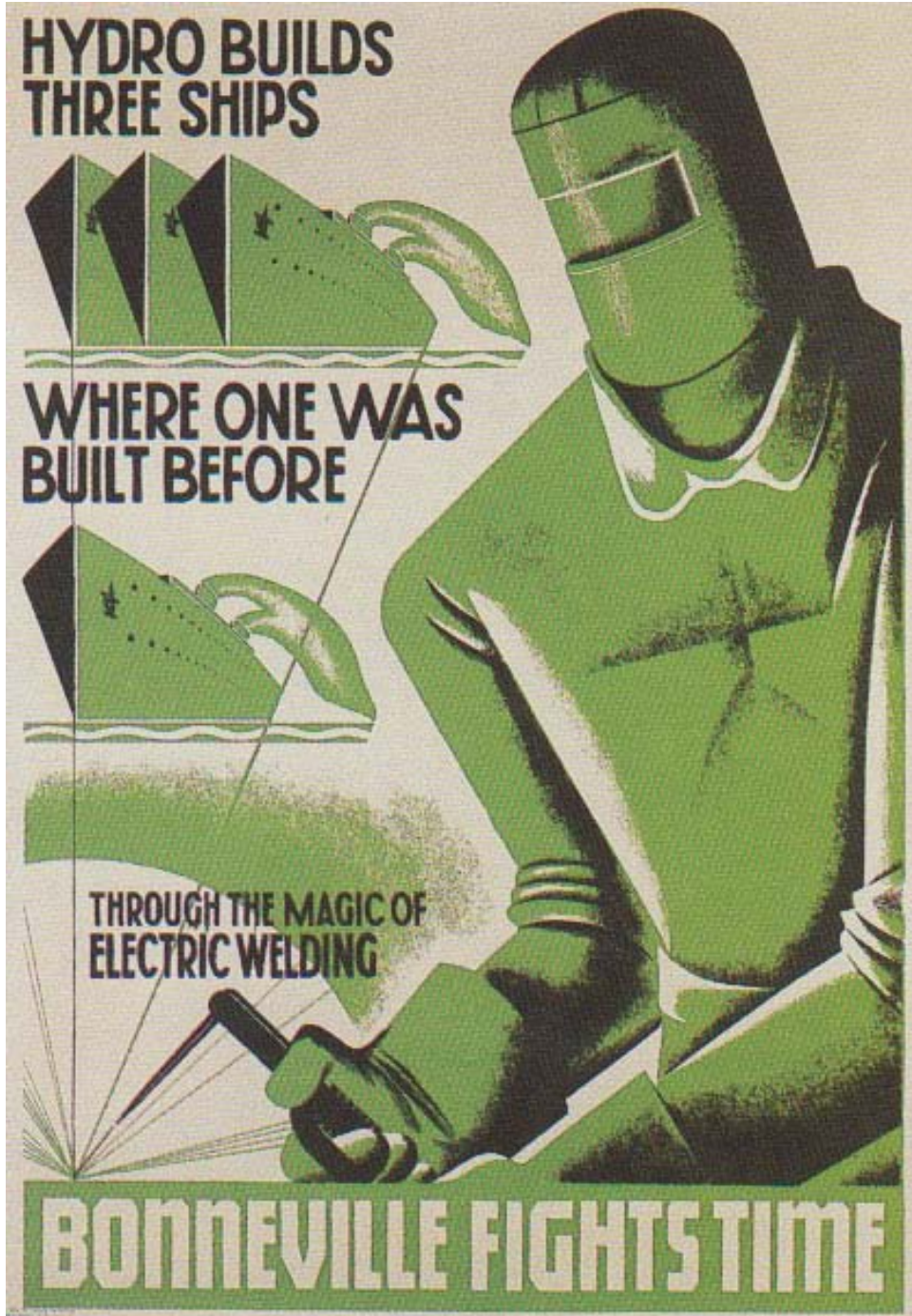
*Roll on, Columbia, roll on.  
Roll on, Columbia, roll on,*

*Once a free-flowin' river, now a big poison pond,  
But roll on, Columbia, roll on.*<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Duncan, 109-111.

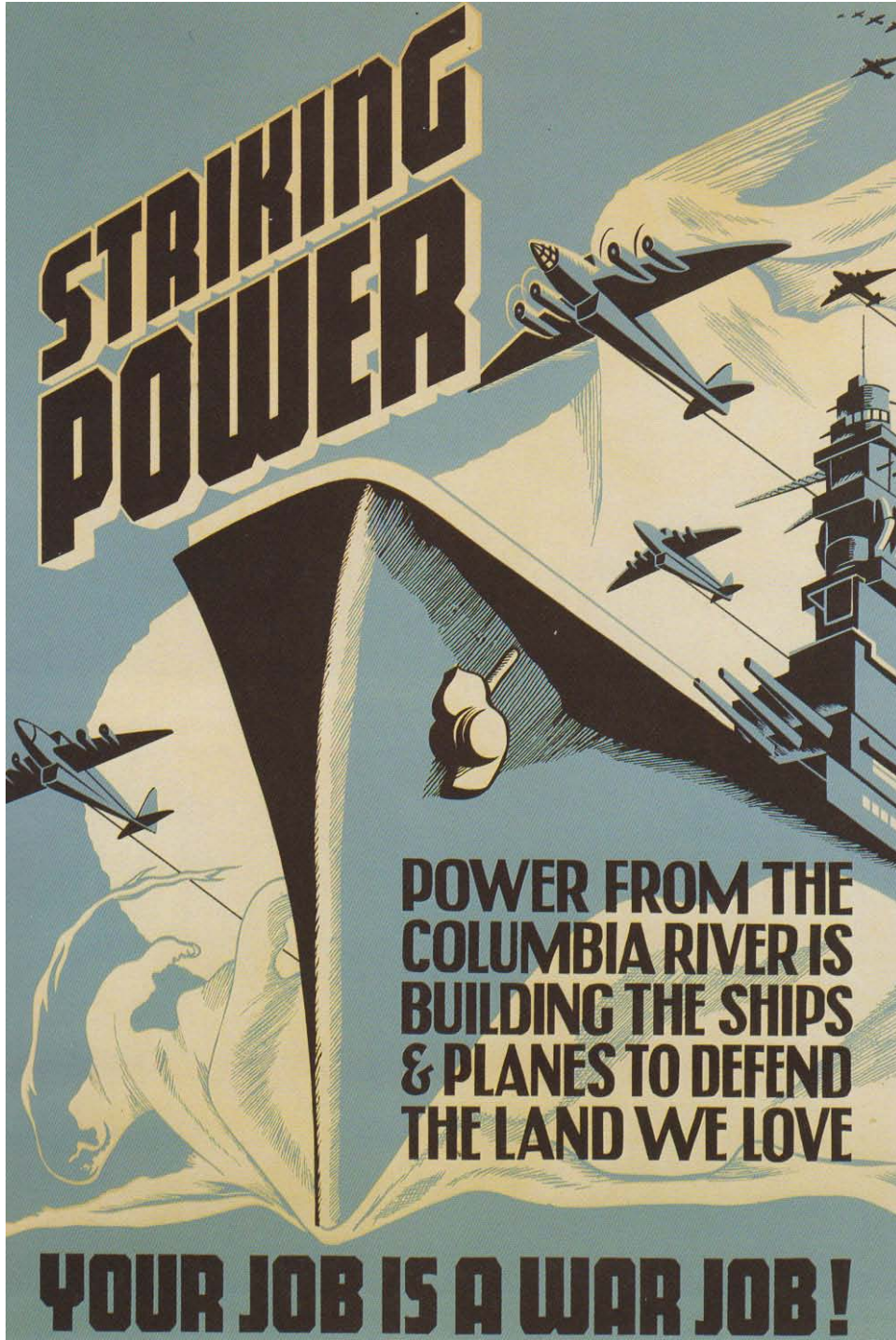
Figure 5.1



**Bonneville Fights Time.** One of the many posters created by famed artist Lloyd Hoff, whom the Bonneville Power Administration hired to promote their efforts during the war.

Source: Gene Tollefson, *BPA & the Struggle for Power at Cost* (Portland: Bonneville Power Administration, 1987), 216.

Figure 5.2



**Striking Power: Your Job is a War Job!**

Source: Gene Tollefson, *BPA & the Struggle for Power at Cost* (Portland: Bonneville Power Administration, 1987), 224.



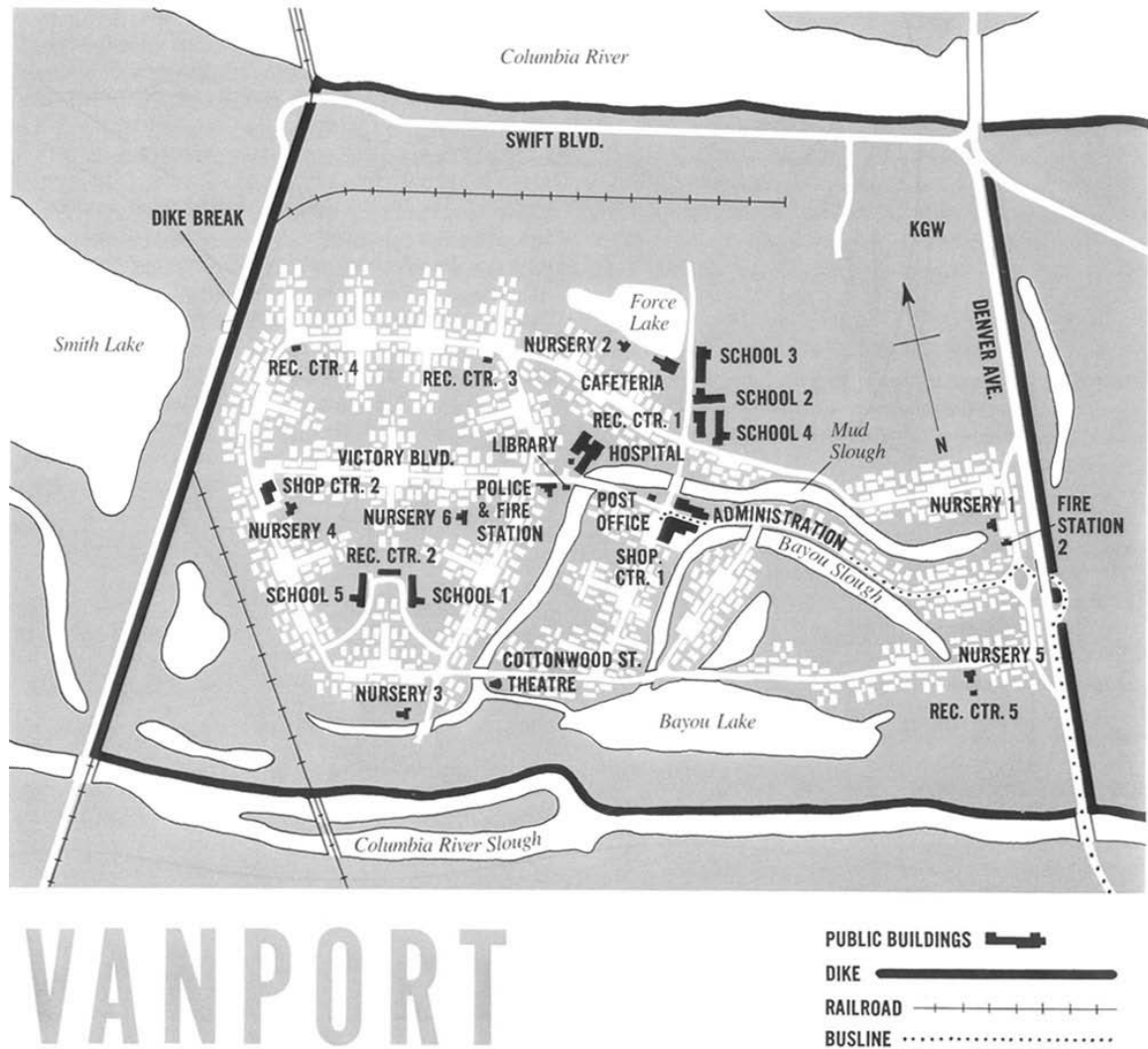
**Figure 5.3**



**Vanport Before the Flood.** Oregon State Archives.

Source: Oregon State Archives Website. <http://www.sos.state.or.us/archives/exhibits/ww2/life/race3.htm>  
Accessed June 27, 2010.

Figure 5.4



Map of the Vanport Community.

Source: Oregon Historical Society, as displayed on the Center for Columbia River History's Website. <http://www.ccrh.org/comm/slough/images/vportmap.jpg> Accessed June 27, 2010.

**Figure 5.5**



**Breach in the Railroad Dike. 1948.** The source of the inundation, the failed railroad dike was 125 feet wide at its base and 75 wide at its top.

Source: Oregon Historical Society, 68784.

**Figure 5.6**



**The Lucky Few Who Escaped Dry. 1948.** This photo must have been taken in the earliest moments after the dike failed, before the water rose to the point where residents swam to escape.

Source: Oregon Historical Society, 84953.

**Figure 5.7**



**Vanport After the Flood. 1948.**

Source: United States Army Corps of Engineers.

**Figure 5.8**



**Floating Apartment Buildings, After the Flood. 1948.**

Source: United State Army Corps of Engineers.

**Figure 5.9**



**A Fight for Their Lives. 1948.**

Source: Oregon Historical Society, 3625, as printed in *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 99 (Spring 1998): 139.

**Figure 5.10**



**Anger at the Army Corps of Engineers.**

Source: Center for Columbia River History website. <http://www.ccrh.org>. Accessed June 10, 2010.



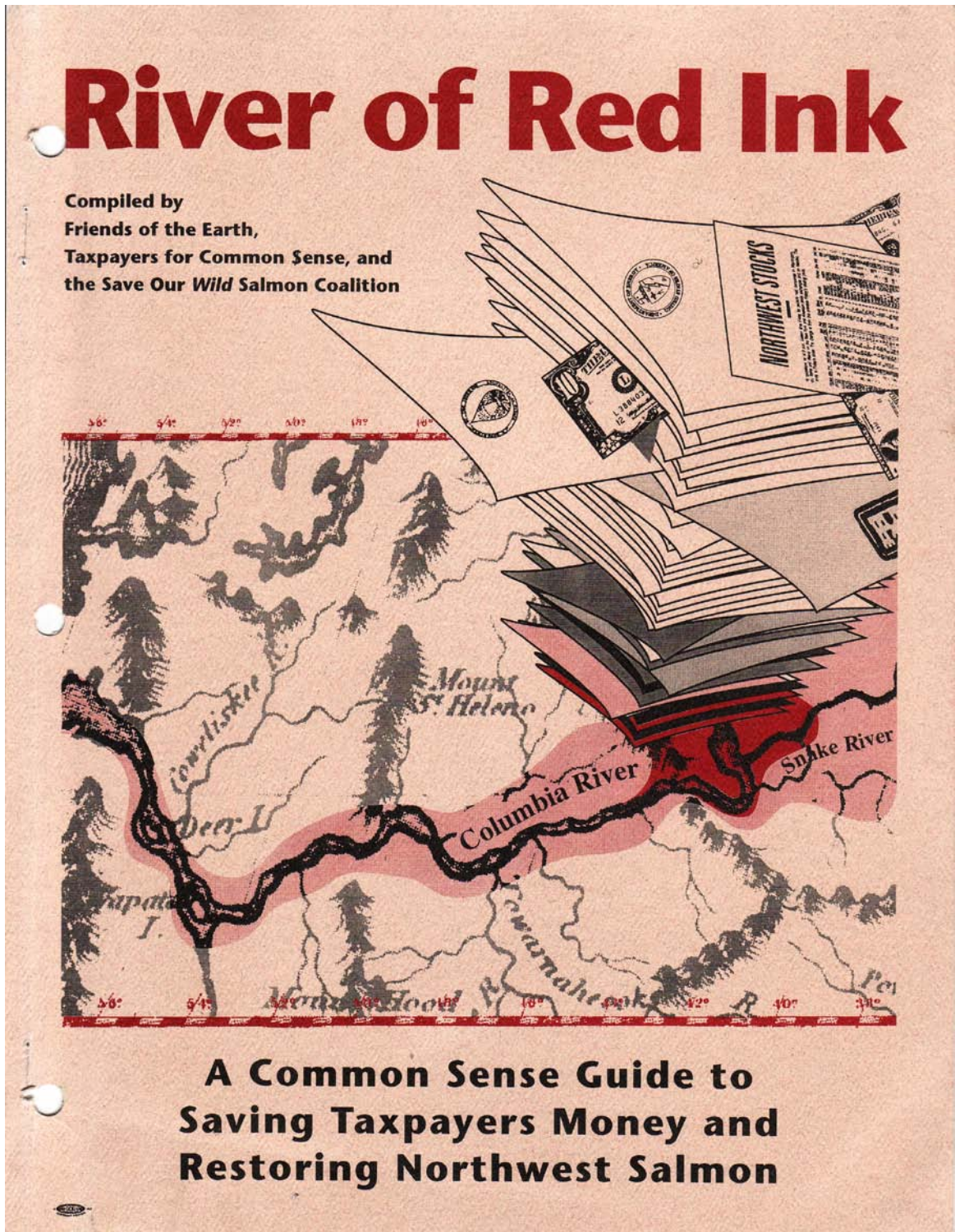
Figure 5.11



**Angry Flood Victims.**

Source: Oregon Historical Society, 6198, as printed in *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 99 (Spring 1998): 153.








Figure 5.12



**River of Red Ink.** 1996. Publication from Save Our Wild Salmon.

Source: Friends of the Earth, *River of Red Ink* (Seattle, WA: Friends of the Earth, Northwest Office, 1996).

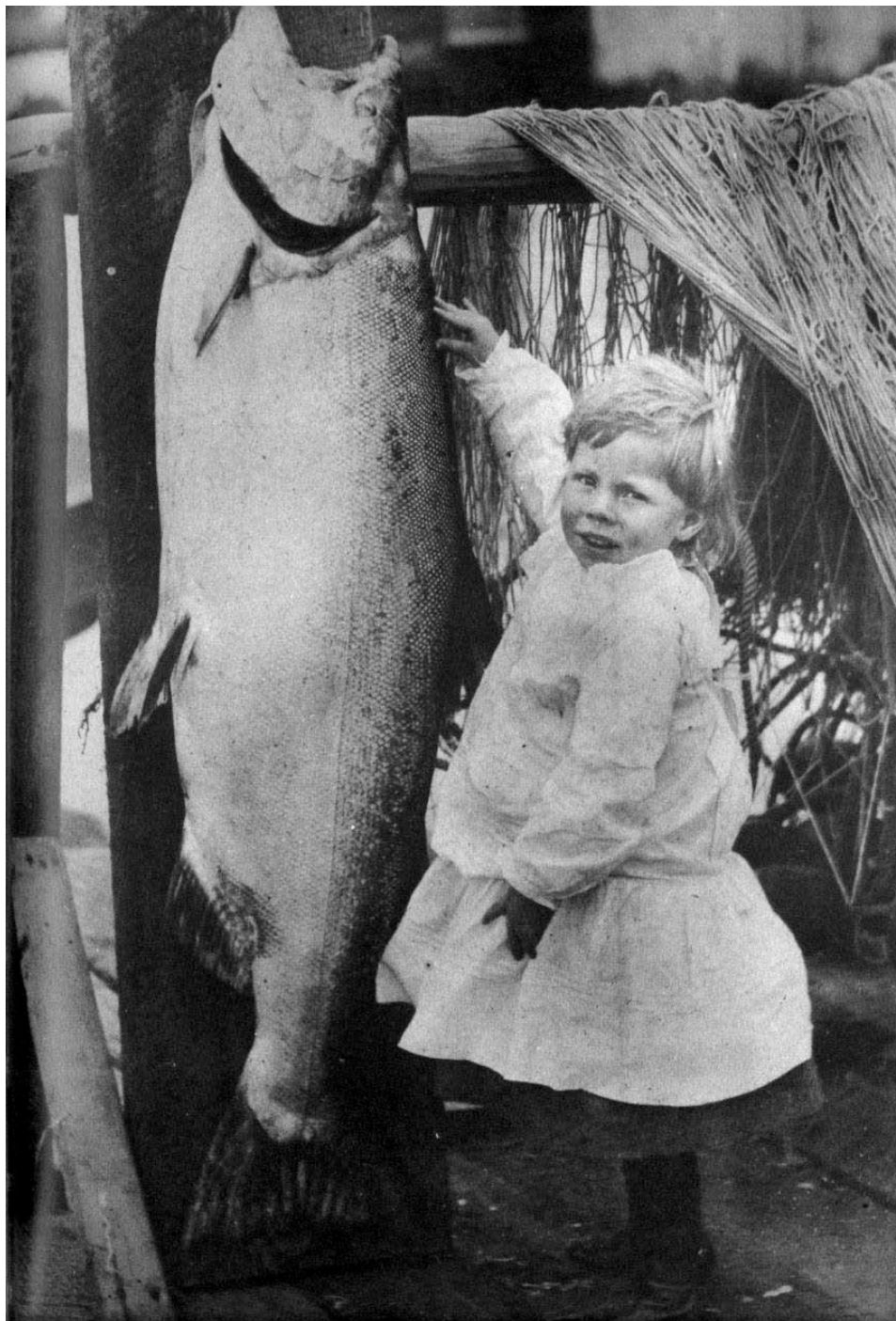
Figure 5.13

 <h1>Salmon Plan Report Card <sup>2001</sup></h1>		
	<p><b>Clean Water Improvements</b></p> <p>Salmon and steelhead need clean, cool water to survive. The federal government completed less than 25% of the clean water measures required by the Salmon Plan. Federal dams continue to violate the Clean Water Act by creating increased dissolved gas levels and hot pools of water that are deadly to salmon and steelhead.</p>	<b>F</b>
	<p><b>Surviving the Dams</b></p> <p>Most salmon and steelhead in the Columbia and Snake River Basin must pass through a series of dams. In 2001, the federal government completed less than 30% of the actions in the Salmon Plan to improve dam passage. Salmon and steelhead experienced the worst in-river survival rate since they were listed under the Endangered Species Act.</p>	<b>F</b>
	<p><b>Tributary &amp; Estuary Habitat Improvements</b></p> <p>Instead of partially removing the four federal dams on the lower Snake River, the Salmon Plan relies heavily on improvements in the tributary and estuary habitats of the Columbia and Snake rivers. The federal government completed less than 20% of the actions related to habitat improvements required by the Salmon Plan, but it has made some important progress.</p>	<b>D</b>
	<p><b>Hatcheries &amp; Harvest</b></p> <p>The federal government failed to complete any of the hatchery and harvest actions called for in the Salmon Plan.</p>	<b>F</b>
	<p><b>Studies &amp; Reporting</b></p> <p>Instead of proposing aggressive, new recovery actions, the Salmon Plan relies on studies and plans for possible future actions. Yet, the federal government was unable to complete even 25% of these studies and plans.</p>	<b>F</b>
	<p><b>Funding</b></p> <p>Adequate funding is necessary to implement the measures proposed in the Salmon Plan. In 2001, the Administration failed to ask for even 50% of the \$900 million/year needed to implement the plan.</p>	<b>F</b>
<p><b>Overall Grade</b></p> <p>After failing 5 of 6 subjects, the federal government is far behind schedule after the first year of the new Salmon Plan.</p>		<b>F</b>

Salmon Report Card. 2001. Publication by Save Our Wild Salmon.

Source: Save Our Wild Salmon. *Salmon plan report card: the federal plan to restore salmon and steelhead in the Columbia & Snake River Basin : year one of implementation* (Portland, OR: Save Our Wild Salmon, 2001).

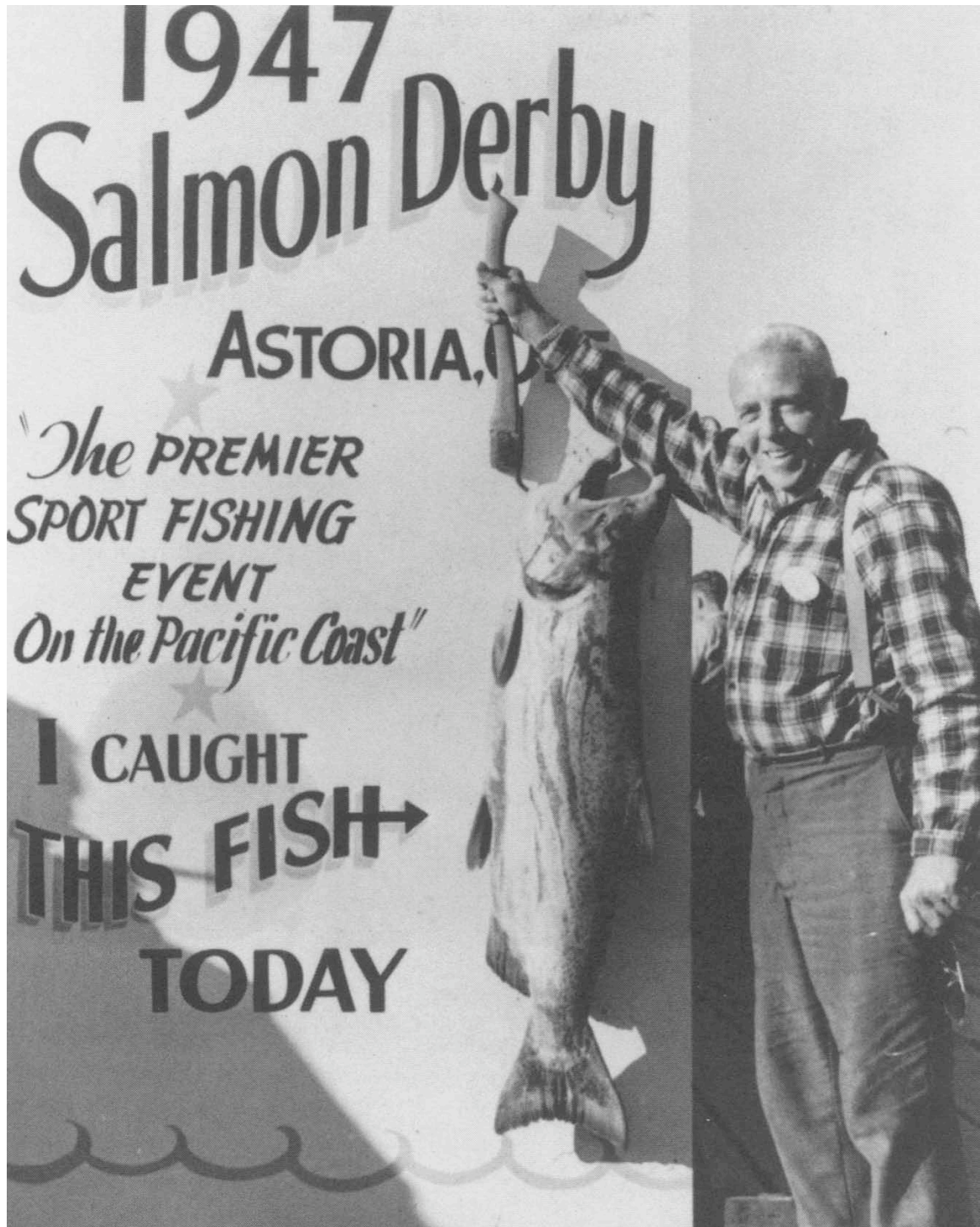
**Figure 5.14**



**One of the Columbia River's "June Hogs."**

Source: Liisa Penner, *Salmon Fever: River's End. Tragedies on the Lower Columbia River in the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s* (Frank Amato Publications, 2006), 65.

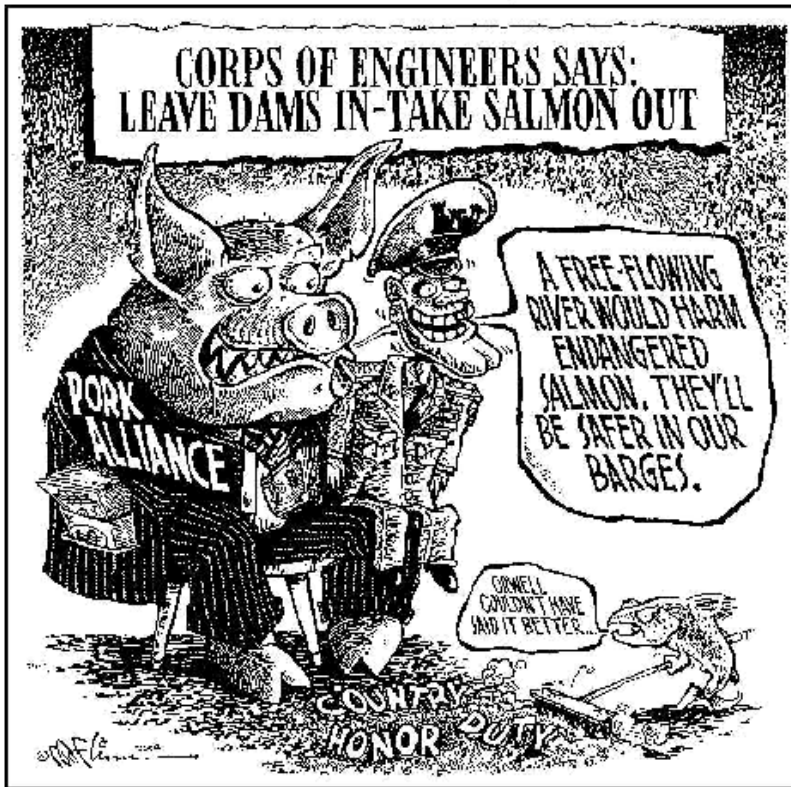
Figure 5.15



**Sports fisherman with a King Salmon.**

Source: Lisa Mighetto, "Salmon, Science, and Politics: Writing History for the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers," *The Public Historian* 17 (Autumn , 1995).

Figure 5.16



**Pork Alliance. 2002.**

Source: Ed Chaney, *Army Corps of Engineers Surrenders to Pork Alliance*. Northwest Resource Information Center, 2002. <http://www.nwric.org/CoeCartoon/Coecolumn.pdf>.

## Chapter 6

### Epilogue: Windsurfing on a New Columbia

For as long as people crafted them, Columbia River stories revealed the nuances of power relations on the river. But more than mere reflections, cultural representations of the river became actual sites of political struggle—where ideas and attitudes about the Columbia were crafted into widespread assumptions and common-sense understandings. On the Columbia, the stories people told about the river had very real consequences. When Lewis and Clark, Bierstadt and Ludlow, and Stanley and Stevens first traveled through the Columbia River Gorge in the nineteenth century, they described the landscape around them using patterns that would persist into the present. When Ludlow gushed in laudatory prose or Bierstadt painted the river and mountains as grandiose, they shaped a vision of a romantic landscape that evoked notions of continental expansion and national greatness. Audiences were drawn to the idea of the Columbia River as romantic and national because it corresponded with stories in which they were already familiar. When John Mix Stanley crafted images of the same places, he did so for vastly different purposes. Stanley's lithographs focused on a uniform sense of scale, and in documenting a vision of the land's topography his imagery met the aesthetic needs of a government project that surveyed the landscape for future development. The Columbia in Stanley's lithographs was a useful river, one that needed to be altered and improved. In searching

for a practicable rail route, they discovered the utilitarian river they expected to find. These two modes of imagining the meaning and purpose of the Columbia would have multiple effects on the river itself—ebbing, flowing, and rearranging the Columbia's river imaginary throughout the twentieth century and beyond.

When Sam Hill and Samuel Lancaster built a highway through the Gorge in 1916, early automobile tourists traveled along the river in a different way, along a proscribed route that suggested what to see and how to see it. In this way, the new road encouraged visitors to understand the Columbia as a scenic landscape, where nature (and the experience of being in nature) became linked to the modern, engineered, paved highway. In promoting the Columbia River Highway, boosters presented it as an example of how technology could give access to romantic, even primitive, natural settings. Here two ways of experiencing the Columbia River Gorge were linked—as the modern qualities of the highway drew their meanings from the pastoral qualities of the scenic vistas, and vice versa. This interdependence rationalized development as an act of preservation, and coded auto-tourism as a progressive, sometimes therapeutic act. On the Columbia River Highway the river was romantically scenic, and the act of looking at it was enabled by the technological sublimity of the impressive new road. By shortening the physical distance between the Gorge and Portland, the road also shortened the cultural distance between the city and the country, and a circuit began to take shape that was organized around the needs of the automobile tourist. When Portlanders went to dedicate the roadway, they enacted an elaborate pageant that linked the new artery to the history of the river and the region. Stark oppositions between the past and the present, savagery and civilization, and man and nature helped give meaning to the road and the world around it.



By re-inventing the stories they wanted to tell about the highway, the river, and themselves, Portlanders crafted a mythologized history free of violence and dispossession, and they lent new meanings to the Columbia's river imaginary.

Over time, these ways of knowing the Columbia River merged with larger stories, national narratives about technology, civilization and progress. By the time of the Great Depression, both local citizens and national politicians looked at the Columbia and saw the potential for widespread development, an untapped opportunity to extract value from its waters. Large dams, the markers of modern civilization, promised to alleviate economic suffering and turn the region's "darkness to dawn." The government documentary *Hydro!* revealed a number of patterns in how people understood the utility of the river at the moment when that particular vision became the dominant one. In the BPA's documentary, the Columbia was depicted as comprehensively useful and the federal government was the entity responsible for both deriving and distributing the river's value—be it in hydropower, irrigation, navigation, or recreation. By describing how *everyone* would benefit from such developments, federal agencies became the central player in managing the engineered river, a move that consolidated federal control over the river. At this moment state power flowed in the physical entity of the river itself, as the value extracted from the simple movement of water running downhill remade the ecological, political, and cultural worlds of the Columbia—a startling vision of change for the region. The utilitarian narrative, backed by the power of the federal government, had become dominant—encompassing and suppressing other ways of knowing the landscape. A narrative of technological progress structured how the people of the region understood the new Columbia, and the dams became evidence of scientific achievement,

institutional competence, and humanity's mastery of nature. The engineered Columbia was the embodiment of the region's future—and the film *Hydro!* was a cultural vehicle for disseminating such ideas, a site where a dominant bloc shaped public opinion according to its own needs. The modern, utilitarian understanding had become hegemonic, the dominant frame in which the new river was made visible and understandable. Other ways of knowing the Columbia faded, but they did not disappear.

The conception of the Columbia as modern and utilitarian really took hold in the postwar era. When the Columbia flooded in 1948, it washed away the city of Vanport, but it couldn't wash away the public's faith in the government's ability to control the river. While the disaster led some to question the wisdom of large development projects, the Army Corps of Engineers and the BPA used the disaster to argue that *more* dams were needed, and two years later Congress approved more dams, including one at The Dalles, which flooded Celilo. In 1957, as the historic native fishery disappeared under the waters of the rising reservoir, heartsick native peoples watched the most salient symbol of the river's past disappear before their eyes. The new Columbia was seen through the lens of technological progress, a narrative with immense cultural power. Yet that power would not be absolute, as unintended consequences of altering a complex river ecosystem soon created the conditions for a new Columbia River story to emerge.

Over time, the salmon began to suffer from the cumulative effects of overfishing, the loss of habitat, poor logging practices, and the presence of more and more dams. While the fish numbers had steadily declined for most of the century, by the 1980s several salmon runs had collapsed. When conservation organizations organized a public relations campaign to match their legal crusade, their efforts to save the salmon were

magnified into a full-blown “salmon crisis.” As conservation groups and federal agencies clashed over control of the river, the environmental costs of damming the Columbia were increasingly evident. As the salmon crisis reshaped the politics of river policy, it also reshaped the Columbia's river imaginary. With salmon populations dwindling, and concern for the environmental health of the river increasing, the story of Columbia River power went from being a celebration to being a tragedy. By the 1990s, this narrative of environmental decline was familiar to many: salmon—the iconic symbol of the region—were being systematically destroyed by the pitfalls of industrial society. Salmon became reminders of “the way the river used to be,” before the federal agencies had dirtied the proverbial waters. Activists denounced the Columbia as a sullied, perverted river, one that was no longer “real” but a Frankensteinian creation of those who purported to have knowledge of the river yet actually were ignorant of the complexities of its ecosystem. The salmon became sympathetic protagonists in this new story, and it was the fish (not the dams) that became celebrated, the symbol of progress that would make the river whole again. The plight of the Columbia River Salmon became one the most salient ways of knowing the river, a narrative that redefined what policies were progressive and offered redemption if the salmon could be saved. This tragic tale of decline appealed to the hearts and the minds of an increasingly urban region. And while this new narrative never displaced the older one, it framed the issue in ways that ensured Columbia River salmon could no longer be ignored. A cache of Columbia River narratives existed along side of one another, overlapping and abutting, swirling in the currents of the river imaginary.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, some of the Columbia's salmon began passing

through Bonneville Dam in larger numbers. This recovery was not sudden or complete, but it *was* steady. Biologists attributed the increased fish count to better hatchery practices, improved ocean conditions, and court-mandated spills during the Columbia's freshet in the spring. Today, the fish numbers continue to improve but several wild stocks remain in danger of extirpation, with some listed on the endangered species list and others threatening to be added. Federal agencies, always trying to balance multiple interests, continue to struggle to adequately address the salmon problem. Yet, significantly, the fish are no longer ignored, as money and time are spent trying to help the fishery—by both those in favor of restoring the runs *and* those who would probably prefer to put the Columbia's water to different uses. The net result of the salmon crisis was not the wholesale reversal of existing river management policy, but the awakening of a salmon constituency, and a recalibration of the political calculus that determined who did what with the Columbia's waters. A new Columbia story now existed alongside the others.

Not surprisingly, endangered salmon runs continue to pose political problems as vexing as they were during the early 1990s. Preserving and maintaining the genetic diversity of the wild salmon stocks continues to be the primary focus for those working to save the fish. Conservation groups remain vigilant and organized, well funded by both national organizations and local citizens, and the salmon are as popular as ever. Dams are much less popular, at least among the urban populations that drink microbrews. (Figure 6.1) Public attention remains focused on what to do about their decline, and the breaching of four dams on the lower snake is now under serious consideration. (Figure 6.2) While giving a fair amount of lip service to salmon mitigation, the BPA and the

Army Corps of Engineers are largely recalcitrant, fighting most court efforts to allocate water for the fish, as agribusiness and direct-service industries denounce policies that favor “fish over people.” Perhaps most importantly, Columbia River salmon policy remains a province of the courts. Just as was the case in the 1980s and 1990s, federal judges evaluate the adequacy of the government’s plans, and the courts remain the most important battleground for river management struggles. Differing visions of the Columbia still clash, collide and compete for the hearts and minds of those with a stake in how it is managed, and different Columbia River narratives appear and reappear in the multiplicity of opinions about salmon, dams, and other river issues.

Looking at the Columbia River Gorge today, one can see evidence of all of these narratives washing up on its shores—layers of stories piling up on top of each other, like layers of sediment. But there are new developments abreast on the Columbia. If you were to stand at Lake Celilo today, and gaze out upon the waters where the falls are buried, you would probably see the brightly colored sails of windsurfers darting up and over the whitecaps. Today, the Gorge’s winds still whip through The Dalles, and the same breezes that native peoples once used to dry rack upon rack of harvested salmon are put to a different use. In the summer months, the warm, hot air on the east side of the Cascade Mountains rises and draws the cooler, wetter air from the Pacific Ocean. The result is a steady, strong wind that escapes the west side of the region through the canyon walls of the Gorge, whipping the surface of the water as it pools behind the big dams. Here the Columbia's current moves west while the predominant winds move east, and the two forces collide on the surface of the river. The result is one of the more curious features of the contemporary Columbia River; the presence of large, predictable, uniform

waves—waves that are practically perfect for launching experienced windsurfers high up into the air.<sup>1</sup>

It was the summer of 1979 when a few enterprising souls “discovered” the river once again. Just as before, the peculiars of the river’s landscape became a resource for those who would tap into it. In a most utilitarian fashion, the new arrivals to the Gorge harnessed its winds and used the wide flat surface of the reservoirs for tourism and recreation. Just as the Columbia River Highway moved new people into the Gorge in the 1910’s, the invention of windsurfing brought new people into the area in the 1980s. As windsurfing grew in popularity, brightly colored sails became a regular fixture in and alongside the river. Soon a whole new group of people, sometimes referred to as “boardheads,” came to know the Columbia River Gorge for its “nuclear” winds and “epic” green swells.<sup>2</sup> In 1984, the inaugural “Columbia Gorge Pro-Am” sailboard race attracted ten times the number of spectators than organizers anticipated, and the Columbia earned a permanent place on the international windsurfing map. From that point on, the area was known as one of the premier windsurfing sites in the world, and the new arrivals transformed the social landscape of the towns around them.<sup>3</sup>

Hood River, once a sleepy backwater of a town known for its fruit farms, was the first to be transformed by this growth in wind-recreation. Today, Hood River is a bustling town full of restaurants, boutique stores, and microbreweries—a vacation destination with strong connections to nearby Portland. And like so many other cities that mark the

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<sup>1</sup> See Jason Pierce, “The Winds of Change: The Decline of Extractive Industries and the Rise of Tourism in Hood River County, Oregon,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 108 (2007): 410-31.

<sup>2</sup> Lars Bergstrom, “Windsurfing in the Gorge and Urban Myth?,” in *1999 Gorge Guide: The Official Columbia River Gorge Visitor and Recreation Guide*, ed. Carol York (Hood River: Gorge Publishing, 1999), 68-70. With the Hanford facilities located upstream, perhaps these sailors used the word “nuclear” both literally and figuratively.

<sup>3</sup> Pierce, 418-20.

economic landscape of the “New West,” Hood River has struggled to adjust to the glut of tourism money that blew in with the windsurfers.<sup>4</sup> Today, recreation interests are yet another interested party that seeks to influence how the river is managed, and shadows of Columbia River narratives appear in the ways that windsurfers understand the river. For windsurfers, kiteboarders, and other recreation-minded residents of Hood River, the Columbia’s many stories are not contradictory; the river is romantically beautiful, recreationally useful, and tragically polluted.<sup>5</sup> Recreational-minded residents have a similarly complex relationship with the Columbia’s dams—having to reconcile their penchant for salmon with their dependence upon the reservoirs for windsurfing (and the money that recreation brings to the local economy). The Columbia, as seen through the eyes of a “boardhead,” is simultaneously romantic and natural, tragic and altered, and supremely useful. Just as these disparate visions of the river structured its past, they manifest in the present, and shape its future.

If you return back to Celilo, you can see evidence of other changes. Near to where the falls once stood, the technology giant Google recently built a series of “server farms,” large stacks of inexpensive processors and hard disks that sit inside three massive 68,680 square foot buildings. In 2005, Google purchased 30 acres of industrial land from the Port at The Dalles, reserving the option to purchase 80 more.<sup>6</sup> The company then built the expansive, four-story buildings to house the hardware necessary for their search and computing businesses to function. Locating their facility near The Dalles allowed

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<sup>4</sup> In 2006, the median home price in Hood River was over \$320,000, an amount that even eclipsed that of nearby Portland. As the housing prices increased, average wages did not keep pace. See Pierce, 423-4.

<sup>5</sup> Just ask any windsurfer about “river nose” – a nasty nasal irritation that comes from spending too much time in the polluted waters of the Columbia River.

<sup>6</sup> Laura Oppenheimer, “Faster Than They Can Google It, Newcomers Find The Dalles,” *Knight Ridder Tribune Business News*, August 20, 2006, 1.

Google to take advantage of the some of the cheapest electricity around. And the arrival of the internet giant instantly attracted a whole lot of attention.<sup>7</sup> Upstream from The Dalles, other technology companies soon located facilities near the Columbia's dams. Upstream in Washington State, both Microsoft and Yahoo built data centers near the river.<sup>8</sup> Following Google's lead, a number of other electronics, aerospace, and alternative energy firms located along the river. For them, the Columbia's utility was in both its cheap electricity and its recreational value.

The first few companies that spawned the Gorge "tech cluster" came with the windsurfers, as entrepreneurs wanted to work where they played. Included in this group was a company named Insitu, whose 240 employees now make the unmanned drone aircrafts that wage war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Now over fifty different high tech companies are located in the area, with a number of alternative energy firms making plans to move nearby. For many of the area's residents, this economic growth has been a success story. In December 2002, the unemployment rate for the Gorge region averaged around 11.2%, but by August 2007 it had dropped to 5.1%—though this increase was surely tempered by the latest economic downturn. In addition, Google's presence in The

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<sup>7</sup> Attempting to adhere to its company motto, "do no evil," Google gave The Dalles \$100,000 to building a city-wide free wifi network, and the company helps provide IT support to local fire and emergency departments. Michelle V. Rafter, "The Gorge Effect," *Oregon Business* 31 (January 2008): 20. In making the donation, Google stipulated that the city could not filter content, and that Google had the sole right to craft the content and design of the splash page, the first screen users see when connecting to the free wifi network that blankets the city. Alex Williams, "First a Data Center, Now Free Wifi: Google, The Cloud and the Significance of a Small Oregon Town," <http://www.readwriteweb.com/cloud/2010/02/google-and-a-small-town-in-ore.php>, accessed April 11, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> The industry's desire for Columbia River hydropower is notable in comparison with where they often put their other large facilities—in locations where electricity is produced by burning fossil fuels. As journalist Ginger Strand noted in *Harper's Magazine*, in 2006 American data centers consumed more power than American televisions. Strand wrote, "Based on a projected industry standard of 500 watts per square foot in 2011, the Dalles plant can be expected to demand about 103 megawatts of electricity—enough to power 82,000 homes, or a city the size of Tacoma, Washington." This led her to characterize the company as "an energy glutton that is only growing hungrier." Ginger Strand, "Keyword: Evil, Google's Addiction to Cheap Electricity," *Harper's Magazine*, March, 2008, 64-5.

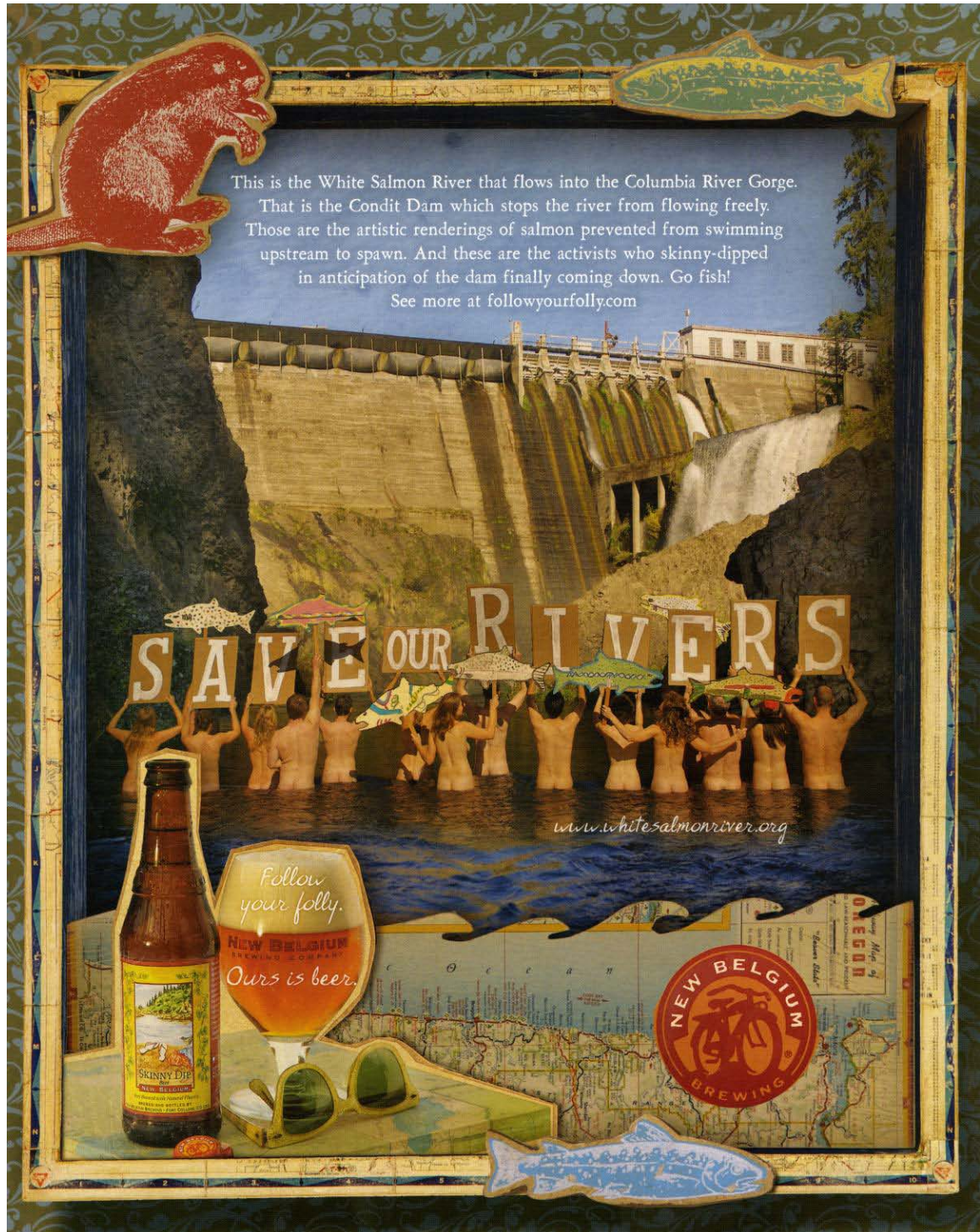


Dalles also set off a real-estate boom. Some estimate that from 2005 to 2006 alone, home prices in The Dalles rose by more than 40 percent. During the 1990s and early 2000s, the city approved permits for only one or two subdivisions, but after Google came to town, the local building industry awoke from its slumber. Next to the Google server farm will be several hundred “eco-friendly” waterfront homes, properties designed to appeal to new arrivals drawn to both tech industries and the recreational attributes of the area. For those drawn to the landscapes of the Gorge, the location couldn't be much better.

The physical space of Celilo Falls is now occupied by a reservoir used by windsurfing urbanites and power-hungry technology firms, both eager to cash in on the Columbia's falling waters. If one “googles” the search terms “Celilo Falls”—an action that I myself did more than one time during the writing of this dissertation—one gets images of Indian fishermen pulling salmon from the river's thundering waters—powerful, evocative images that now can move all over the world, in an instant. These visions of the Columbia's past are communicated electronically via electricity that is (at least partially) drawn from the Columbia of the present, with kilowatts that were enabled by Celilo's demise. This irony is perhaps fitting for a study that traces cultural representations of a changing river. The notion that the production of this dissertation, itself a narrative describing the Columbia's river imaginary, can't be separated from the material effects of the water is suggestive of just how thoroughly “culture” and “nature” intertwine to shape the river's past, present, and future.

Roll on, Columbia, roll on.

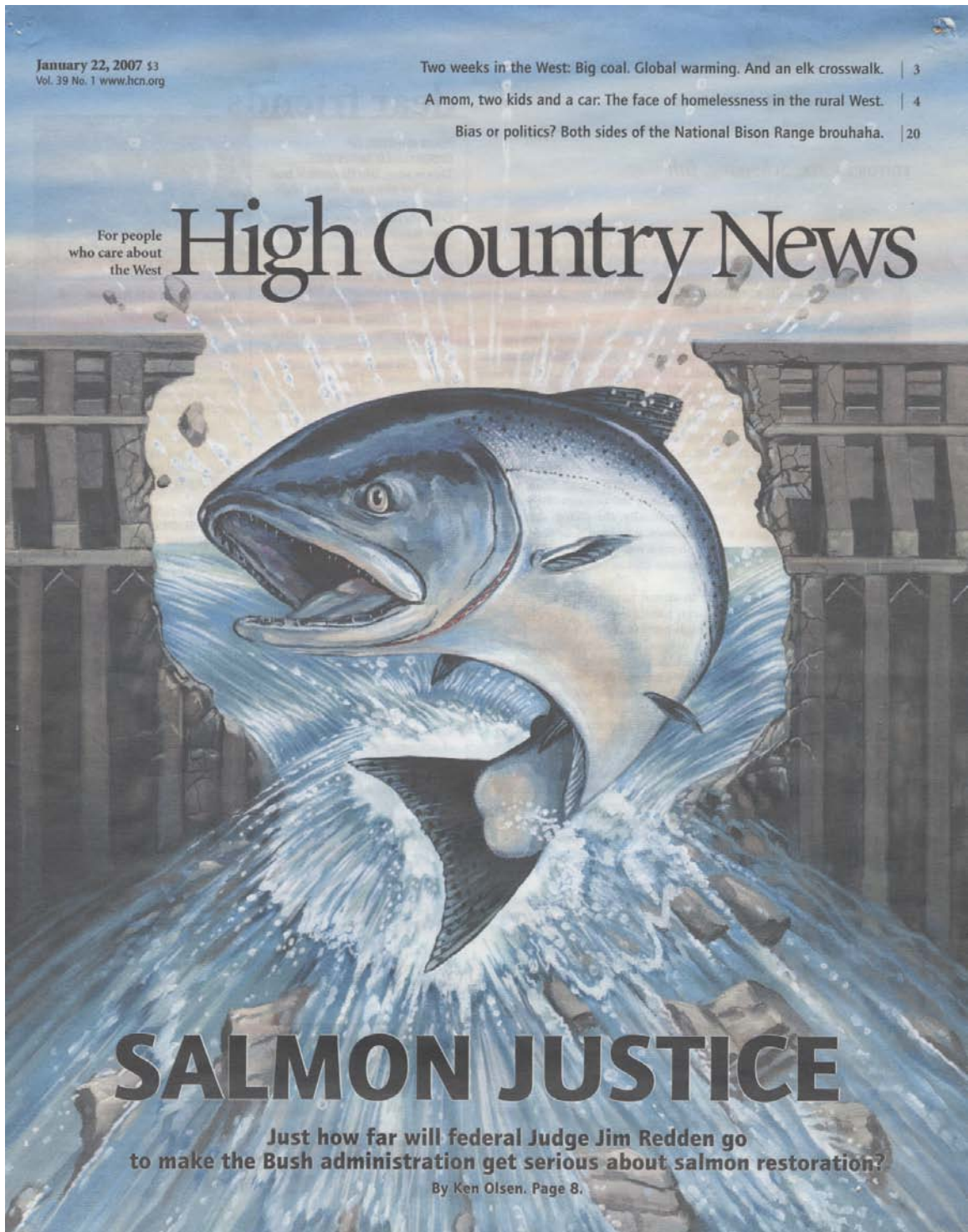
Figure 6.1



**Save Our Rivers.** In the postwar era, dams went from being “part of the solution,” to being “part of the problem,” as reflected in this beer advertisement.

Source: Unknown, *Copy in the Author's Possession*.

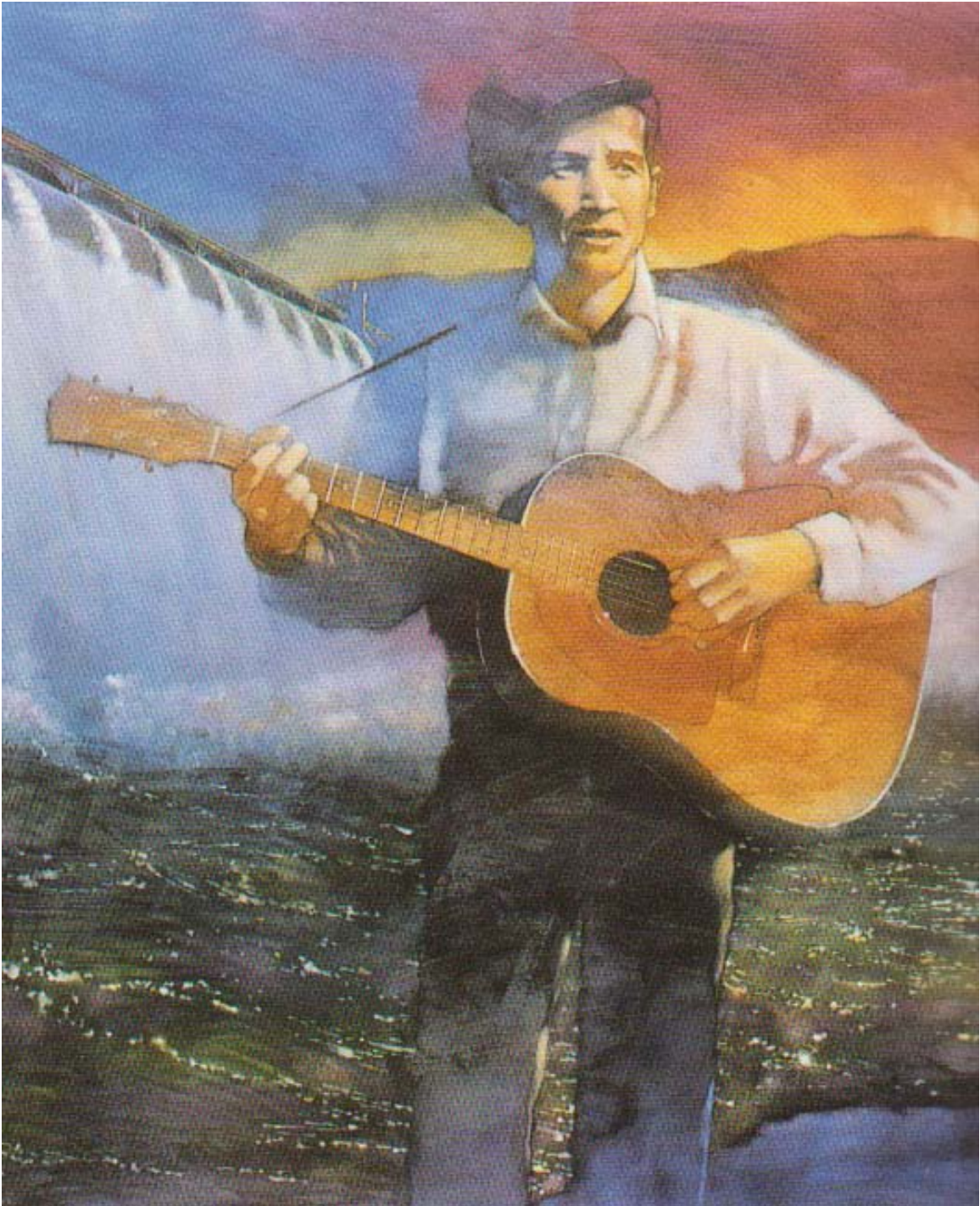
**Figure 6.2**



**Salmon Justice.**

Source: *High Country News*, January 22, 2007.

**Figure 6.3**



**Artist's Rendition of Woody Guthrie in Front of Grand Coulee Dam.**

Source: Gene Tollefson, *BPA & the Struggle for Power at Cost* (Portland: Bonneville Power Administration, 1987), 196.

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