

THE BATTLEGROUND OF NATIONAL IRRIGATION AND THE COLUMBIA BASIN PROJECT

Origin of the Columbia Basin Project was interwoven with the Victory of national irrigation and rootstocks were set deep in Northwest history. Decisive battles were fought and won in the Yakima Valley. The Columbia Basin Project was a major follow-through action. Combattants were newspaper editors, congressmen, senators, private capital advocates, state legislators and representatives of the United States Government.

This came about after periods in history of the area which Brewster Coulter of the University of Puget Sound, long diligent and well-researched in irrigation and reclamation matters has grouped generally. These include the early days of cooperative canals which expanded small patch irrigation for settlers; second, completion of the Northern Pacific Railway, and third, passage of the National Reclamation Act.

To begin with, original ditch companies in land settlement days in the agricultural destined Yakima Valley on the perimeter of what became the Columbia Basin Project were primarily real estate speculations.

Cattle, sheep and horses were Eastern Washington's industries, established a full Hundred years ago even before the original occupancy title to the land had been fully extinguished. Almost with the outbreak of the Civil War they rose to production with quantity increasing with the gold discoveries and attendant land settlement.

In one of these discoveries miners swarmed like locusts-10,000 to 15,000 onto the Nez Perce Indian Reservation, occupying the Indian Land where the city of Lewiston, Idaho is now located. And what troops there were lifted not a hand to prevent the pillaging of the treasure from the earth. Incidentally less than 2,000 Nez Perce are to be paid about \$1,700 each this year for that loss. The Frazier River discoveries and those of Easter and Central Oregon and shortly afterwards Montana, brought more waves of fortune searching emigrants.

The Northern Pacific entered the Yakima Valley in 1885 at a time cattle, sheep and horse herds had reached their greatest output. Railway engineers foresaw the great possibilities of planned, gigantic irrigation. The railway had land for sale; it provided transportation to far-off markets and it was extremely energetic in promotion, not only throughout the Middlewest and East but also in Europe.

The waves of emigrants sought gold but mostly found land to their liking. Those who settled required irrigation. Much later scientific engineering was necessary to reclaim land which had first been passed by because it lacked water.

Homesteading had absorbed the most desirable ready-to-produce land. Cattlemen hung on. Dryland farming, wheat mostly, stirred the soil and dried out the land. Production declined. Homesteads were abandoned. Irrigation became a necessity for survival and expansion.

Walter N. Granger, for whom the Yakima Valley town of Granger is named, came from Montana to the Yakima Valley. He surveyed the Lower Yakima Valley and found a big project practicable. He commenced development of the Big Ditch, the Sunnyside Canal, 60 miles in length, utilizing the Konnewock Canal which had originated in cattle herding days, and in 1889 united with the Northern Pacific. Paul Schulze, land agent for the Northern Pacific was interested in the canal financially. In subsequent managements and before eventual purchase by the government W.M. Ladd, Portland; R. H. Denny and D. P. Robinson, Seattle and George Donald of North Yakima were interested in the canal.

Stalled by financing, difficulties were overcome and work began in 1890 and 42 miles of main canal opened. Laterals were built and land was sold at \$10.00 to \$50.00 per acre. Water, first used from the main canal in 1892 reached Sunnyside in 1893 at a time of depressed conditions. Land Settlement was resumed slowly, again promoted by the Northern Pacific.

Then commenced a new period.

A newspaperman named Wilbur Wade Robertson sold his paper, the Chehalis Nugget, turned down opportunities to purchase newspapers at Seattle and Tacoma and came to North Yakima. He acquired the Yakima Republic, Jan. 8, 1899.

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The date was 10 years after Wesley L. Jones, an attorney, settled at North Yakima. Jones entered politics in 1898, defeating James Hamilton Lewis for Congress and began service in the House of Representatives the same year Robertson arrived in North Yakima. The town was the one founded by the Northern Pacific at the start of 1885.

Robertson was known for acid-tinged editorials, and he had a sense of humor, necessary to maintain a mental equilibrium when engaging in editorial encounters.

He was greeted by the following editorial in a rival paper, the Yakima Herald:

"Since we must have Republican editors, Yakima is entitled to the Best."

Robertson and Jones realized the future of the Yakima Valley was agrarian. Agriculture was dependant upon irrigation and they knew it, as dependant as a growing child for nourishment from its mother in tender years to the stability of maturity.

Small ditch companies, organized and built by individuals or small groups of neighbors or men with capital were appropriating all the water flow from the 175 mile long Yakima River, a tributary to the main artery, the Columbia. They were even appropriating most of the water from Ahtanum Creek along the Yakima Indian Reservation which the Yakima Indians regarded as their water by Treaty Right. Ditch companies were operating under a somewhat complex and crude system of state laws.

How can one hold to worship if research is done in a humble way? How can one escape the conviction that the number of men made famous in their way is less than the number of men made famous by the very land of the new country in which they decided to settle? The country was there. It took men of dreams and ideas to captivate it.

If adulations are necessary it would seem proper they should be heaped at the foot of the national shrine of government before they are placed on colloquial corners about the land, cornerstones so to speak, small monuments of kindness to the memories of individual men.

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In this matter of land development the greatest heritage bequeathed to the American people in Eastern Washington is the Reclamation Act of June 17, 1902. It was not easily gained.

The Yakima Valley became not only the battleground for the Columbia Basin Project but also the proving ground.

Robertson and Jones seized onto waiting opportunity with hands accustomed to work and hearts which knew disappointments. And at the time large interests, hopeful of state expansion and development of storage facilities, vigorously opposed federal reclamation. Small landowners feared private monopoly.

Jones was appointed by President Theodore Roosevelt to a committee of 17 instructed to draw up a reclamation bill. This bill stipulated the government should build irrigation works and reserve reclaimed lands for settlers. The construction would be repaid by the lands reclaimed and distribution of water would be left to water users, formed into associations.

The Reclamation Act designated the Secretary of the interior to execute its purpose. He in turn organized the Reclamation Service, July 8, 1902, under the Director of the Geological Survey. It became an independent organization in 1907.

Jones was unable to interest the government in the Yakima Valley at first because of the many small companies and private capital operations, a timidity of government that later vanished. He united with Sen Levi Ankeny to insist the government undertake some project. And at the same time he barraged the Secretary of Interior for an irrigation project on the Yakima Indian Reservation.

Dozens of small scale, large dream plans for pumping or diverting water from the Columbia River and it's tributaries were born and died; some survived.

On Dec. 6, 1902, David Longmire and others from North Yakima incorporated the Moses Lake Irrigation Co., for \$15,000 with headquarters at North Yakima, acquired a township of land in Douglas County and planned to irrigate it by canal fed from Moses Lake.

Jones' intercession for action resulted in the survey of the Big Bend project. This proposed taking water from the Spokane River conveying it by flume along the Columbia to the Grand Coulee and thence through the Coulee to the great expense of irrigable land between Moses Lake and Pasco. This is the same area the Grand Coulee Project is now reclaiming. The cost, however, was prohibitive.

A plan to tunnel through the basaltic ridge through which the Grand Coulee cuts was investigated. But by the end of 1903 both were abandoned because of cost.

The Palouse River was then looked to as a source. Hopes for it were high until 1904. An editorial by Robertson indicates it was also too costly. He wrote that Frederick Newell, in making his report, "stroked his blond beard..." and suggested the project be left for the present and a reconnaissance be made of the entire Yakima Valley and the Okanogan Project. There had been previous preliminary surveys.

Now the Government had not been unaware of land development and irrigation. The Senate had appointed a special committee on irrigation and reclamation of arid lands as early as 1889. Even earlier the storage system of the Columbia had been envisioned in Congress.

The emergence of patch-scale irrigation to developed projects; from locally organized districts under state approval to the gigantic governmental projects was not easily come about.

There is no need to delineate the immense complications of the times which confronted irrigations upon implementation of the irrigation act.

In August of 1903, when canals were proposed like one from Priest Rapids on the Columbia to White Bluffs, 20 miles to irrigate 5,000 acres and the town of White Bluffs was born, the Yakima Development Company was working for reservoir storage at Lake Kaches, Kichless and Cle Elum on the Yakima and Bumping Lake at the headwaters of the Naches. These were for reclamation of 450,000 acres in the Yakima Valley.

Jones persuaded the government to begin development of irrigation on the Yakima Indian Reservation, covering 50,000 acres but since expanded to 78,000. His object was to open the reservation to White farmers through leasing. Authorizing from the Secretary of the Interior came in March 1903. That would be the date which the Treaty with the Yakima Indian Nation, originating in 1855, was broken.

In the same year four-fifths of the irrigated acreage on the state of Washington and one-half of the irrigated farms were in the Yakima Valley. These were kept alive by 255 irrigation systems which cost \$1,968,555 or \$16.17 per acre. The ditch systems amounted to 618 miles. There was little irrigation from the Columbia above the mouth of the Okanogan, some 126 farms and 78 systems.

The Year 1903 was historic.

Theodore Roosevelt visited North Yakima on May 30 that year. He pointed to the Irrigation Act of 1902 marking the beginning of "a policy more important to this country's internal development than any since the Homestead Law of Lincoln's time." He said:

"By aid of the National government cooperating with the State Governments, with individuals and associations of individuals, we shall see the so-called arid and semi-arid regions in development during the next 50 years literally unparalleled.

"What is necessary", he said, to distribute the water is to get it out of the irrigation ditches, ultimately to have great storage reservoirs which will enable us to take the waters that go to waste at seasons we do not need them. We are now entered upon this policy and a very great good will come of it."

Before 1906 the absolute limit of private irrigation had been reached, the entire unregulated water flow was utilized. The state was rejecting private corporation plans for dam building.

The Yakima Project came into being, including the Sunnyside and Tieton components. The Reclamation Service approved an allotment of funds to both the Tieton and Sunnyside, March 27, 1906. National irrigation was winning out and greater projects were envisioned.

It is understandable that the name, Wilbur Wade Robertson and others from Yakima and the Yakima Valley should appear as active participants in the Washington Irrigation Institute which originated in 1932 at Portland to support the National Reclamation Association. The Roza Division of the Yakima Project and the Columbia Basin were listed as two unfinished projects. The Roza was a part of the Yakima Project Robertson and Jones had worked for.

Promotion of the Columbia Basin and consideration of problems of water settlements were paramount of the institute. An aim was in keeping with the thinking of the Yakima publisher.

"In the past we have thought of engineering, of promotion and of settling. In the future we must think more of producing, of markets and of human values. We have looked upon development of irrigation projects as a matter of a few years. We have regarded them as completed when the works are constructed and lands partially settled. We must realize they are not completed until each farm unit is successfully supporting a family and contributing to the prosperity of the community," were views expressed by Thomas B. Hill and Robertson's paper.

It is not difficult to see that Robertson could not resist pen jabs and stabs on such occasions as the visit of Secretary Albert Fall to Yakima late in 1921, remembering the yet unfinished proving gourd projects, he wrote:

"Secretary Fall has gone back to Washington. He did not get to see the Columbia Basin Project but promised to come back next spring and go over it. He did have time to go over the Yakima Project which required two days. The city of Yakima has been built up by money invested by the U.S. Government in reclamation projects. Millions of dollars have been expended there and millions more are going into further development. In fact there is developing a strong feeling in some parts of the state that so far as federal irrigation is concerned in this state, Yakima has been the whole thing with the exception of the Okanogan project which is a minor one compared with the big projects in the Yakima Valley. You would naturally expect Senator Jones to favor his old home town but you could not expect that Yakima should carry off practically the whole cheese.

"But then maybe the people in other parts of the state are to blame for not getting their projects into shape to ask for federal aid. But then again, when they do get their projects into shape to ask for federal aid, they will be met by the edict that the projects that have been started must be completed before any new ones are started. And as all of the projects that have been started are in the Yakima Country, we fail to see where there is much hope for Ellensburg, Brewster, Wenatchee or the Columbia Basin. If they want any consideration each one had better go out and get a senator of its own."

The editorial pages of a paper are the expressed views of the editor. The news columns reflect the factual happenings of the day, the period and the occasion.

Before Robertson's death the news columns of his papers contained many accounts of potentialities of the Basin as well as depressing reports. For instance, from the Yakima Daily Republic of August 26, 1925, under a Washington dateline.

The special commission on the proposed Columbia River Basin reclamation project reported to Secretary Work today that the time had not arrived when local and national interests are required for the proposed construction.

The report pointed out that the cost of the project had been fixed at \$193,260,000 which is \$158 an acre and declared the Bureau of Reclamation has not the information needed to formulate a development plan as costly and complex as the one outlined.

"Your commission has not doubt found that the time will come when local and national interests will require the construction of these works and the utilization of these immeasurably valuable resources," said the report. "It does not believe, however, that this time has arrived,"

"...Past experience in this and other irrigated countries is conclusive that solvent reclamation requires a program of settlement and farm development..."

And there were other stories such as the following in one of the Yakima papers, January 26, 1913, the Herald:

"Washington Reclamation projects in the arid west upon which the government

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has spent millions of dollars ultimately must fail according to Dr. R. T. Galloway, chief of the department of agriculture's bureau of plant industry.

Reports made public in the house agricultural department of expenditures committee shows that Dr. Galloway testified before the committee that large areas reclaimed in the west being lost to agriculture as the result of "saturation wearing out."

"So far as I know," Dr. Galloway said, "there never has been any long continued irrigation in a semi-arid climate anywhere in the world." That was five years before the idea for the Columbia Basin project blossomed, matured and dropped off the limb without bearing fruit.

E. F. Blaine of Yakima was chairman of the state railway commission. He inspected the Basin and later went to Washington asking the Reclamation Bureau to assist in bringing the waters of the Pend d'Oreille River onto the sagebrush lands. In January, 1919 Gov. Lister recommended that the merit should be determined and a bill was passed creating the Columbia Basin Survey. Gen. George W. Goethals, who built the Panama Canal was employed and declared it feasible. Mass meetings were held at Pasco marked by display of banners, "we want water," and "Keep your eye on Pasco," but nothing followed.

In 1920 the country was beset by drought and depression. Franklin D. Roosevelt, while campaigning for the vice presidency, saw the area needing only water. A meeting for Basin development was called at Lind in 1931 and Grand Coulee Dam was supported as a project to provide work instead of dole.

But before then Billy Clapp, an attorney, and Rufus Wood, publisher of the Wenatchee World had well implanted the idea of using the Grand Coulee, of damming the river and creating equalizing reservoirs. They had worked toward that since 1918, campaigning like camp meeting evangelists. One of Wood's eye-catching ideas had been a front page drawing on his paper showing wild horses straining in the froth of a proposed dam.

And December, 1927, in the 70th Congress, Wesley L. Jones, by then a Senator and Clarence C. Dill introduced a bill--a duplicate was introduced by Congressman John W. Summer asking adoption of the Columbia Basin as a federal project.

Hearings on the Columbia Basin Project Bill, HR 7446 were held May 25, 27 and June 1, 2, 3 and 13, 1932/ Absence of editorial comments, even news from Robertson's newspapers---by then he owned both the Republic and Herald, is significant.

In normal times it would have been different. But these were tight-money times. The cost of government was rising. The soldier's bonus was being pushed.

Robertson editorialized on the overproduction of oranges in California; senators and congressmen with relations on payrolls, and the overproduction of asparagus. He reported fully the organization of the Walla Walla Taxpayers Association and demands for economy.

On June 21, a few days after the hearing, he commented editorially:

It is the beginning of a new era in which the American people will pay dearly for the extravagance and waste they have allowed to creep into the operation of their federal government.

The only way to beat the new tax schedule is to die a bankrupt and sleep for eternity in potter's field.

Robertson was in no position to consistently clamor for economy and expose controversial expenditures then requiring \$260 millions for a project estimated to cost \$394 millions. In normal times he would have spoken out strongly. He was content to wait. On September 9, 1933, Frank A. Banks, project director, drove the stakes for the axis of Grand Coulee Dam. It was dedicated May 11, 1950 by President Truman after construction was started in 1933 and completed Dec. 31, 1941, the keystone of the basin, an area shaped not unlike Africa, sixty to seventy miles wide and eighty miles long and extending from Soap Lake on the north to Pasco on the south. Upstream was the storage lake, 151 miles long. At dedication the cost

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was figured at \$773 million with \$87,500,000 additional to be repaid by irrigated lands as construction cost figured to average \$85 an acre.

The potential of the Columbia River was figured to comprise 40 per cent of the potential capacity in the United States for water and power. Development costs rose to \$550 by 1951 and they are estimated to go even higher, perhaps to \$700.

Neither Jones nor Robertson lived to see fulfillment of the results. Jones died Nov. 19, 1932, Robertson March 29, 1938.

The Tieton division became the first government project in the country to pay itself out of debt, that was in 1947, and operation and maintenance passed into the hands of a water users association as Theodore Roosevelt had said, some 2,500 members, irrigating 27,000 acres.

The Sunnyside division paid its final check, \$21,128 to the government in 1952, representing 3,204 farms and 27,000 people producing 301 million worth of crops since its inception, more than 100 times the cost of the facilities. The crop production alone since the beginning has now exceeded a billion dollars.

Rep. Clarence Dill, upon Jones death, extolled him as an advocate of government reclamation and pointed out that the government had expended more than \$30 million in irrigation projects in Washington (\$20 million was spent in Oregon during the same time) Jones was in office. Part of the time he was chairman of the powerful appropriations committee. He was also noteworthy for being a champion for Alaska when Alaska was without representation.

But all the determination, the persistence would have gone for little had there not been the pattern of which Theodore Roosevelt spoke.

Even he did not know of the later years into which we have now entered, the atomic age. He did not know that reservations for atomic energy production are even now set up in the Columbia River Basin, because production of atomic energy, for peace time purposes, when the pilot stages are completed, requires

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water and until the full resources of the Columbia are capitalized on, much water still wastes out into the Pacific. Even now the trend in the thermal-nuclear field is wavering; even now are evidences that production of electricity will revert to an older era, because of cost, and the river will be left mainly for irrigation. It is no secret that power companies, already joined in financing the atomic pilot testing programs have acquired all the strip coal areas possible--not mine shaft coal bu surface deposits, form which they expect to draw steam to turn turbines for electricity in the future.