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THE BATTLEGROUND OF NATIONAL IRRIGATION AND

THE COLUMBIA BASIN PROJECT

Origin of the Columbia Basin Project was interwoven with the victory of national irrigation. Therefore its rootstocks were set deep in the history of the Northwest.

After decisive battles were fought and won in the Yakima Valley, major actions of greater significance followed in the Columbia Basin.

Combattants were newspaper editors, congressmen, senators, private capital advocates, state legislators and representatives of the United States government.

The battle for national irrigation came about after various periods when Brewster Coulter of the University of Puget Sound, long diligent and well researched in irrigation and reclamation matters, has grouped generally. Adaptations have been added.

One grouping embraces the early days of cooperative canals which expanded small patch irrigation for settlers; another completion of the Northern Pacific Railway, and the third, passage of the National Reclamation Act.

The beginning was at the time of land settlement days when ditch companies in the agriculturally destined Yakima Valley, on the perimeter of what later became the Columbia Basin Project, were primarily real estate speculations.

Cattle, sheep and horse herds were Eastern Washington's industries. They were established an over-flowing hundred years ago even before the original occupancy title of the Indians to the land had been satisfactorily extinguished and certainly with no permanency. At the outbreak of the Civil War the original industries rose to production in quantity, increasing sharply 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 is now located. That troops were available lifted not a hand to prevent the pillaging of the treasure from the earth. They were more concerned with traders and whiskey smugglers and if military records can be believed, did their share of drinking.

The Fraser River excitement, finds in Eastern and Central Oregon, Boise Basin and Montana brought more tidal waves of fortune searching emigrants.

The Northern Pacific Railway entered the Yakima Valley in 1885 at a time cattle, sheep and horses had reached their greatest output. The pioneer northern transcontinental spread a seedbed of settlements and towns from Minnesota to the Pacific and early the same year founded North Yakima, four miles north of Yakima City, the pioneer settlement. The migration of a village, with some of the buildings moved by rollers and teams to in-lieu sites, was but a sidelight of the developing story.

Railway engineers foresaw great possibilities of planned, gigantic scale irrigation. The railway had land for sale, its land grants. It provided transportation to far-off markets. It was extremely energetic in promotion, on such a large scale it was carried into Europe.

Emigrants sought gold and the many who remained mostly found land to their liking. The land required irrigation. Much later, scientific engineering was necessary to reclaim land which had first been bypassed because it lacked water.

Homesteading absorbed the most desirable ready-to-produce land. Desert entries and timber culture claims made it possible for homesteaders to increase the size of their holdings and obtain marginal land. Cattlemen hung on fighting for ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ ranges and against fences. Dryland farming, wheat mostly, stirred the soil, drying out the land. Production declined. Homesteads on the marginal lands were abandoned. Irrigation became a necessity for survival, and essential for expansion.

Walter W. Granger, for whom the Yakima Valley town of Granger is named came to the Yakima country. He surveyed the Lower Yakima Valley

and found irrigation on large scale 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 by 1889 united with the Northern Pacific. Paul Schulze, land agent for the Northern Pacific, was interested in the canal financially. In ensuing managements, complicated by various periods of depression and eventual purchase by the government W.M. Ladd, Portland; R.H. Denny and D.P. Robinson, Seattle; and George Donald, North Yakima, were financially interested in the canal.

When financial difficulties were overcome work began in 1890. Forty-two miles of main canal were opened. Laterals were constructed and land sold at \$40 to \$60 an acre. Water, first used from the main canal in 1892, reached Sunnyside in 1893 at another 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. This was one of the papers that had picked up and moved to North Yakima from Yakima City, the present Union Gap, when the Northern Pacific came along and selected a new townsite.

Ten years earlier Wesley L. Jones, an attorney, had settled at North Yakima. Jones entered politics in 1898, defeating James Hamilton Lewis, a bewhiskered gentleman, for Congress, and began service in the House of Representatives the same year Robertson arrived in North Yakima.

Robertson was already 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 quip in a rival newspaper, the Yakima Herald:

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

Robertson and Jones were logic men. They realized the future of the Yakima Valley in which their own futures were enwrapped was agrarian. So did men like Levi Ankeny of Walla Walla, the birthplace of irrigation in Washington Territory.

Robertson and Jones knew agriculture was dependant upon irrigation, as dependant as a growing child for nourishment from its mother through 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 the water flow from the 175 mile long ~~Yakima~~ Yakima River, a tributary to the main artery, the mother Columbia. They were even appropriating most of the water from Abatanum Creek along the Yakima Indian Reservation which the Yakima Indians regarded as theirs by treaty right. The Indians were mildly complaining that small dams were preventing migration of salmon in the small streams. Throughout the whole area, ditch companies were operating under a complex and crude system.

If adulations are necessary for those who brought progress from chaos it would seem proper they should be heaped at the foot of the national shrine of government before they are placed tenderly on cornerstones about the land, small monuments so to speak, of kindness to the memories of individual men.

In this matter of land development, the greatest heritage bequeathed to the American people in Eastern Washington was 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 for the government in the field of irrigation, although irrigation was already well advanced in California, Colorado, Montana and Idaho.

Robertson, the editor; and Jones, the politician, seized upon waiting opportunity with hands accustomed to work and hearts which knew and were to know disappointments. At the time, large interests, hopeful of state assistance in expansion and development of storage facilities vigorously opposed federal reclamation. Small landowners feared private monopoly. And it might be surmized that the perpetual private vs public power fight was even then beginning.

Jones was appointed by President Theodore Roosevelt to a committee of 17 instructed to draw up a reclamation bill. His 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.

Once the Act was in effect Jones was unable to interest the government in the Yakima Valley because of the numerous operations of small companies and private capital, the government revealing a timidity that later vanished. He then united with Senator Levi Ankeny, insisting the government undertake some project. At the same time he barraged the Secretary of the Interior for an irrigation project on the Yakima Indian Reservation.

Dzens of small scale, large dream plans for pumping or diverting water from the Columbia River and its tributaries were born and died in the early years of endeavor. Some survived by desperate persistence.

Typical was one of December 6, 1902 when 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.

After a time Jones' intercession helped achieve the survey of the Big Bend project, the first of the major gravity plans. This proposed taking water from the Spokane River, conveying it by flume along the Columbia contour to the Grand Coulee and thence through the coulee to the expanse 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 earlier preliminary surveys because the government was not unaware of land development through irrigation.

The Senate had appointed a special committee on irrigation and reclamation of arid lands as early as 1899. In fact the storage system of the Columbia had been envisioned in Congress as early as 1881.

The emergence of patch-scale irrigation to developed projects; from locally organized districts under state approval to the gigantic governmental underwritten ones, was not easily come about. Complications of implementing the Irrigation Act were too immense to be delineated in this paper.

At a time when canals were proposed like one from Priest Rapids on the Columbia to White Bluffs, 20 miles long to irrigate ~~4~~ 5,000 acres, and the town of White Bluffs was born, the Washington Irrigation

7. The company passed a \$500,000 bond issue for development of storage facilities. One hundred thousand acres of land were under irrigation in the Yakima country, distressed because of finances and an inadequacy of natural water flow. The Reclamation Act made possible that the government take over the 450,000 acre Yakima Project subsisting later on the government developed reservoirs of Pumping Lake, Clear Lake, Tieton, Cle Elum, Kachess and the Kachelus reservoirs, having a total storage of 1,063,800 acre feet.

Jones persuaded the government to begin development of irrigation on the Yakima Indian Reservation, covering approximately 50,000 acres but since expanded to 79,000. His object was to open the reservation to white farmers through leasing, because the Indians were not agriculturally minded and only a small percentage of them had taken to farming. Authorization 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, because the Treaty set aside the 1,200,000 acre Yakima Reservation for the exclusive use of the Indians.

In the same year---1903---the chaotic condition is shown by statistics: 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 an 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 memorable to the reclamation scene.

Theodore Roosevelt visited North Yakima that May 30. He pointed to the Irrigation Act of 1902 as 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 ~~xxxxxx~~ 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 waterflow was utilized. The state was rejecting private corporation plans for dam building yet retaining irrigation law authority.

The Reclamation Service approved an allotment of funds to both theleton and Sunnyside divisions of the Yakima Project, March 27, 1906. National irrigation was winning and greater projects were envisioned.

It is understandable that the name, "Elbur Wade Robertson and others should appear as active participants in the "Washington Irrigation Institute which originated in 1932 at Portland to support the National Reclamation Association. The Hoza Division of the Yakima Project, and the Columbia Basin were listed as two unfinished projects. Promotion of the Columbia Basin and consideration of problems of water settlements were paramount with the institute. An aim was in keeping with the thinking of the Yakima publisher, expressed in his ~~xxxxxx~~ newspaper:

"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."

It is also not difficult to see why Robertson could not resist pen jabs and stabs on such occasions as the visit of Secretary of the Interior Albert Fall to Yakima, late in 1921, remembering the yet unfinished proving ground projects and the need for further governmental assistance. 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 ~~xxx~~ 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 sections of his papers (by then he had acquired the Yakima Herald) contained many accounts of potentialities of the Columbia 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~~ 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 no 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. 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 others. This from the January 26, 1913 issue of the Herald:

"Washington Reclamation projects in the arid west upon which the government 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 were 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 one of several ideas for the Columbia Basin Project blossomed, matured and dropped off the limb without bearing ripe 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.

General George W. Goethals, who built the Panama Canal, was employed and declared it feasible. Mass meetings were held in 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 and undoubtedly the sight impressed him ^{into} later actions.

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; Rufus Wood, publisher of the "Wenatchee World"; Gail Mathews of Ephrata and James O'Sullivan had implanted the idea of using the Grand Coulee, of harnessing the river and creating equalizing reservoirs. They had worked toward that since 1918, and Woods especially had campaigned like a camp meeting evangelist.

One of Woods' eye-catching ideas had been a front page drawing on his newspaper showing wild horses straining in the froth of a proposed dam.

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

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 comment, even news from Robertson's newspapers, is significant. It is not that he opposed progress in any form, but a reflection of the economics of the times. These were tight-money times. The cost of government was rising. The soldiers' bonus was being pushed. Robertson saw the pitfalls of encroaching taxation more clearly than senators and congressmen and pressure groups.

Robertson editorialized on the overproduction of oranges in California; senators and congressmen with relatives on payrolls, and the overproduction of asparagus. He reported fully the organization of the "alla 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 did not choose to consistently editorialize for economy and in the same breath of printer's ink expound controversial expenditures then requiring \$260 million for a project estimated to cost \$394 million. 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, December 31, 1941, the keystone of the Basin, an area shaped not unlike Africa, sixty to seventh miles wide and eighty miles long. It extended from Soap Lake on the north to Pasco on the south. Upstream from the dam was the storage lake, 151 miles long. At dedication the cost was figured at ~~xxx~~ \$773 million with \$87,500,000 additional to be repaid by irrigated lands as construction costs, 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 are estimated to go even higher, perhaps to \$700.

Neither Jones nor Robertson lived to see fulfillment of the results.

Jones died, November 19, 1932, Robertson, March 29, 1938.

The Tieton Division of the Yakima Project 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 told the people of Yakima. There were 2,500 members irrigating 27,000 acres.

The Sunnyside Division paid its final check, \$21,128 in construction cost repayment to the government in 1952, representing 3,204 farms and 27,000 persons, producing crops more than 100 times the cost of the facilities. Crop production alone since the beginning has now exceeded one billion dollars and 50,000 acres are under irrigation which do not receive water through Bureau of Reclamation facilities.

Dill, at the time of 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 state during the times Jones was in office. At the same time \$20 million had been spent in Oregon. Jones was chairman of the powerful appropriations committee a part of the time he was in office and was 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 a reservation for production of atomic energy, commercially, would be set up in the Columbia River Basin, because production of atomic energy requires water and may become a reality when pilot stages of testing are completed.

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, navigation and flood control. It is no secret that power companies, already joined in financing the atomic pilot programs have acquired all the strip coal areas possible---not the more costly shaft coal---but surface deposits. And from this source of fuel may come the steam to turn the turbines for electricity in the future, augmented by some 11 dams on the Columbia River within the boundaries of the United States, and others on the Snake and Clearwater rivers.

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