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Historical Commentary

Saving the Yellowstone

by William L. Lang

The Yellowstone River is unequalled. It stands alone as the only major river in the lower forty-eight states that flows unimpeded, the last of the great free-flowing rivers. The Yellowstone has escaped the fate of the Columbia, the Colorado, and the Missouri, the other great rivers of the American West. Those rivers no longer look as they did when Native Americans camped along their banks, when emigrants attempted to cross them, and when settlers first coveted their waters. Concrete and steel block their courses, and huge impoundments of water bulge their mainstems like arterial constrictions. Their currents are abnormal; they are mutants.

That the Yellowstone remains free and nearly unaltered is a fact of some importance. It is important to those who value the aesthetics of wild and scenic rivers and treasure one of the world's greatest fisheries. It is also important to those who value the Yellowstone as a resource for the future, for the needs of agriculture and a growing population in the Yellowstone Valley. It is no accident of history that the Yellowstone remains free to flow in its natural channel. Each time the river has been threatened it has inspired defenders; and for some of them, preserving an unimpeded Yellowstone has taken on an almost patriotic aura.

The Yellowstone engenders such emotional attachment because of the beauty and history of the region it

drains. The river begins its nearly seven-hundred-mile course on the high Yellowstone Plateau and flows through Yellowstone National Park. From its natural impoundment in Yellowstone Lake, it glides through the beautiful Hayden Valley before roaring over two spectacular falls and finally rushing deep in the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone.

Miles downriver, the Yellowstone's major tributaries drop from the high mountains of Montana and Wyoming across a dramatic upland landscape to join the river and carve its valley through a region that has been the home of Native Americans for centuries and the scene of cataclysmic events in western military history. People associate



Boaters on the Yellowstone near Billings

MHS Photograph Archives

the Yellowstone with geysers, untrammled wilderness, bison herds, Crow Indian camps, and Custer's demise. It is a powerful set of images.

Images did not keep dams off the Yellowstone. The story behind the preservation of the river is not a tale illustrated with postcard views and stereotyped descriptions of the Indian wars. It is a drama of economics, political conflict, and bureaucratic decisions complete with a cast of individuals and organizations who argued about the disposition of the West's most important resource—water.

There is something to be learned in the history of the Yellowstone River's preservation that takes us beyond the specifics of the conflicts over an essential resource or the power of emotional attachment to the idea of a free-flowing river. What we discover is the power of history: the influence the past has on our perceptions, and how true the observation is that history is a living force.

The most recent challenge to the free-flowing Yellowstone ended in 1978 when Montana's Board of Natural Resources rendered a decision that virtually prevented dam-building on the river. The controversy began during the early 1970s and focused on two essential questions: How and to whom should the Yellowstone's water be allocated? These questions are as old as the history of the arid West; but unlike water disputes on the nineteenth century frontier that often pitted one user against another, the struggle for allocation of the Yellowstone affected dozens of groups with competing interests. An already difficult process suddenly became politically explosive.

In 1971, the Bureau of Reclamation published the "North Central Power Study," which began a series of events that set the stage for the Board of Natural Resources' decision in late 1978. The Bureau's report shocked Montanans with its projected exploitation of the coal reserves in Montana and Wyoming

and the construction of over forty steam-generated electricity plants on the northern plains. These plants would consume enormous quantities of water, water that could only come from the Yellowstone River Basin. Fearing the worst from energy companies, a coalition of ranchers, farmers, recreationists, and environmentalists formed the Northern Plains Resource Council to fight unrestrained coal mining on the plains and raids on the Yellowstone's water.

The debate over whether Montana's coal should be mined coincided with the national panic over America's dependence on foreign energy sources. National publications ran stories about Montana's coal, the strong disagreements among Montanans over coal mining, and the implications of industrial development on the state's arid plains. "Should we strip-mine Montana to air-condition midwestern homes?" one magazine asked. That was a fair question, and Montanans argued about the best response to it.

While arguments about coal mining heated the state's political atmosphere, Montana's legislature dramatically changed the scene, first in 1973 with the passage of the Water Use Act and then in 1974 when it enacted the Yellowstone Moratorium. The Water Use Act revolutionized the water allocation system in Montana by forcing major users to acquire a state permit. The Yellowstone Moratorium halted any significant allocation of the river's water for three years and asked public agencies to estimate how much of the Yellowstone's water should be reserved for their future use. Industrial applicants for Yellowstone water would have to wait their turn.

When the Board of Natural Resources began sorting through the public agencies' requests for reservations of the Yellowstone's water in 1978, one request dwarfed the others. After an exhaustive study of the Yellowstone's ecology, Montana's Fish and Game

Department concluded that at least 90 per cent of the river's annual average flow and one twenty-four-hour period each year of its peak flow had to be maintained to prevent irreparable harm to the Yellowstone's riparian wildlife and foliage.

There was a twist in the Fish and Game request. Unlike the requests submitted by irrigators and municipalities, Fish and Game required that the water remain in the river. This was a new approach to water rights that contradicted the traditional requirement that surface water be diverted from the stream and be put to a "beneficial use." Some asked how leaving water in the river could be considered a "beneficial use." The Fish and Game Department replied that it was more than beneficial, it was essential to the health of the river.

Everyone realized that if the board approved this instream reservation, there would be strict limits on how much water could be removed from the river. There would be enough water for irrigation and municipalities, but siphoning the river's water for use in power plants was another matter. Industry howled in protest at Fish and Game's instream water reservation, because it would effectively forbid damming the Yellowstone. The annual average flow and the twenty-four-hour peak flow requirements could not be met if a dam blocked the Yellowstone and impounded its water; and without a dam, energy companies had little hope of satisfying the thirst of future steam-generation electricity plants on Montana's eastern plains.

On December 15, 1978, the board brought down its decision. It granted a portion of the Fish and Game request, allowing the agency an instream reservation of 62 per cent of the average annual flow at Sidney and 76 per cent on the upper river. The board had devised a complicated allocation of the Yellowstone's water that stood squarely on the shoulders of the board members' acceptance of the



Allenspur Gap on the Yellowstone

instream reservation concept. It was a historic decision: The board had approved the instream reservation idea—the first time it had been applied to a major river. It was also a courageous decision: Board members had voted in favor of a free-flowing river and had radically circumscribed the future use of the Yellowstone.

The Yellowstone had been saved. But why? Although the controversy over coal mining during the 1970s and the strength of a growing environmental movement played significant roles in the drama, history played the most powerful part. The river's history hung as a backdrop to the debate over the allocation of the Yellowstone's water, a constant reminder for the board and the general public that the Yellowstone had beaten the odds and had remained free-flowing.

Time and again, the schemes of railroad corporations, reclamationists, and engineers had threatened the Yellowstone's sanctity; and each time the river had escaped serious damage, sometimes because defenders threw up the barricades and other times because economics and the river despoilers' failure of will defeated the schemes.

The first challenge to the Yellowstone came a few years after the creation of Yellowstone National Park, when the Northern Pacific Railroad proposed throwing one of its tentacles across the park's northern quadrant. Outraged defenders of the park, mostly easterners, beat back the plan and served the first notice that the nation's wilderness preserve was not open to corporate speculation.

During the early 1920s, an even more alarming proposal threatened the Yellowstone. A clarion call by naturalist George Bird Grinnell alerted nature-lovers that irrigationists intended to dam Yellowstone Lake. "Night schools of oratory," Grinnell claimed, had "spellbinders" trying to convince Montanans to support a dam at Fishing Bridge in Yellowstone National Park. Although Montana's Senator Thomas J. Walsh introduced a bill to approve the scheme and Montana's legislature passed a resolution supporting it, the Yellowstone's defenders in and out of Congress prevailed and the plan failed.

In their defense of the river, Grinnell and his legion pointed to recent history, reminding Congress that there had been earlier attempts to tamper with one of nature's

unique wonders, attempts that had deserved to fail. The Yellowstone River escaped the reclamationists' clutches because it threatened Yellowstone National Park and because history was on its side: The exploiters had been foiled before.

The story of the Allenspur Gap dam is another illustration of the role of history in the protection of the Yellowstone. Allenspur Gap, a narrow slot cut through huge limestone cliffs a few miles upstream from Livingston, is the premier location for a dam on the upper Yellowstone. For over seventy years, dam-builders had eyed the gap, dreaming of a high dam that would impound the Yellowstone's waters and create a lake over thirty miles long. First proposed in 1902 by a group of Montanans, the Allenspur dam project reared its head several times during the next four decades. But for reasons ranging from economics to bureaucratic decisions made by competitive government agencies, the Allenspur proposals all failed.

During the 1970s, when industrialists looked covetously at Yellowstone water for coal-related projects in eastern Montana, the Allenspur dam proposal came back to life. But this time, the mood had changed. Very much aware of the



Herman Schultzmeyer, photographer. MHS Photograph Archives

Absaroka Range and Paradise Valley

earlier proposals and why they had failed, a citizens' committee formed to fight any new dam proposal. It sounded the warning and asked pertinent questions: Was it the same attempt to raid the Yellowstone that reclamationists had tried during the 1920s? Who would benefit from damming the river? What would it cost?

The history of the Allenspur proposals furnished many answers. Earlier arguments for the dam that had already been defeated were raised again, from irrigationists' claims for an Eden in the Yellowstone Valley to the need for flood control. And there was still

the matter of high construction costs, which had derailed the project before.

During the 1970s, however, Montanans listened less and less to the "spellbinders" who spoke of the benefits of blocking the river. They listened more and more to new questions that could be posed only because the river remained free-flowing, questions that the Yellowstone's history allowed to be asked: Why dam the Yellowstone and lose one of the world's greatest trout fisheries? Why inundate thousands of acres of land in the beautiful Paradise Valley? Why leave the Yellowstone River

vulnerable to the designs of tomorrow's schemers?

In each generation, the Yellowstone has attracted new defenders with their own reasons for wanting the river to remain as it always has. There is a cumulative weight to the historical arguments in favor of a free-flowing Yellowstone. Those arguments made a difference in 1978 when the Board of Natural Resources made its decision, and their weight will play a significant role in saving the Yellowstone in the future.

WILLIAM LANG has written several articles on Yellowstone National Park and has taught courses on Yellowstone history at the Yellowstone Institute.