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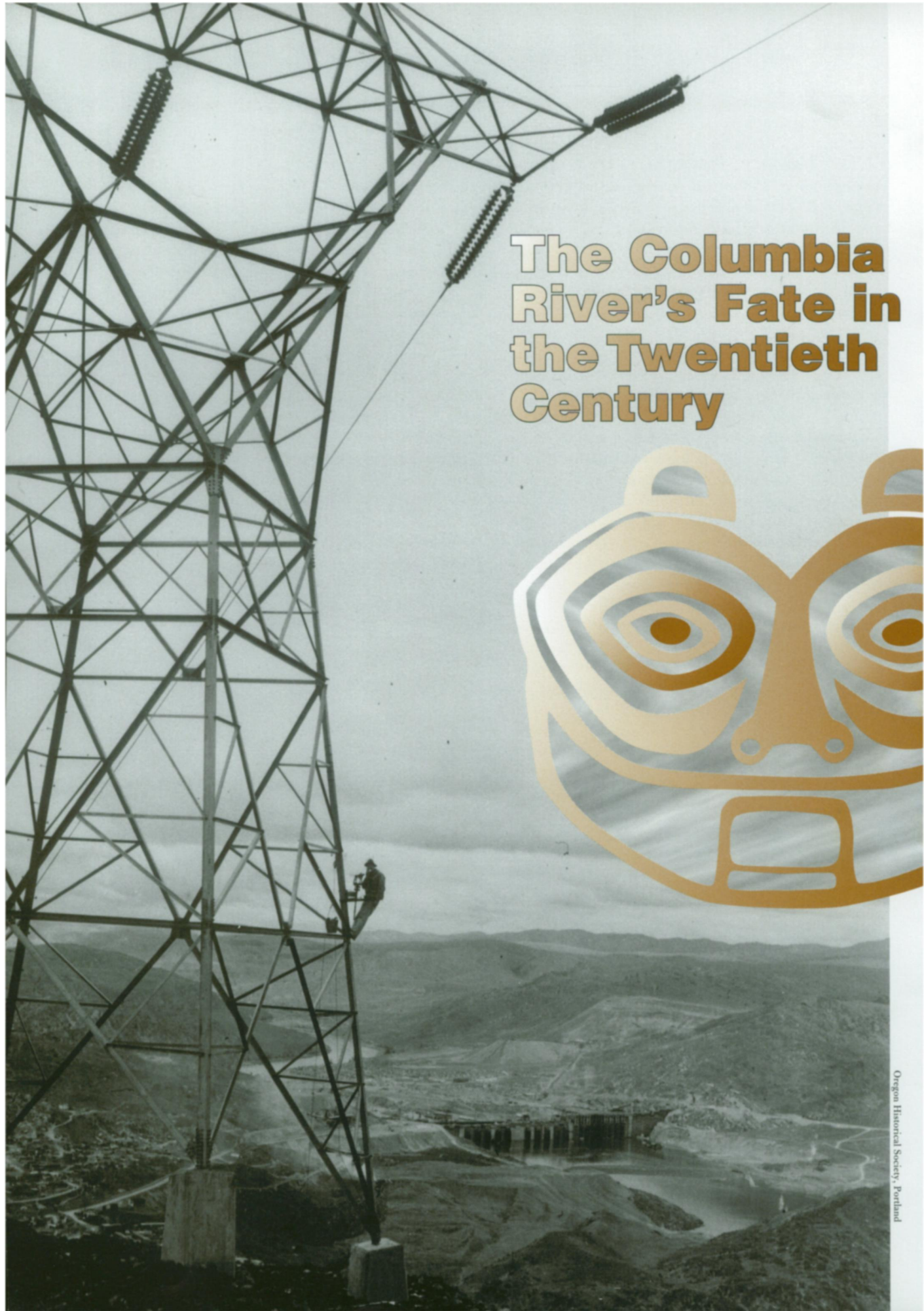
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The Columbia River's Fate in the Twentieth Century

Oregon Historical Society, Portland

Writing about another place and another era in America's past,

Robert Penn Warren put it exactly right when he characterized history as a relative of poetics, a way of understanding the world that engages our curiosity, challenges our intelligence, and invokes our imagination.

Historical sense and poetic sense should not, in the end, be contradictory, for if poetry is the little myth we make, history is the big myth we live, and in our living, constantly remake.¹

Although he wrote these lines in reflection on the Civil War, Warren could well have been writing about our historical relationship with the Columbia River. It is a re-

lationship that has been at the center of people's lives in the Pacific Northwest for thousands of years, from the earliest human groups who fished the Columbia to this generation whose assault on the river makes it a generator of kilowatts, a source of irrigation water, a commercial conduit, and a playground. Throughout the history of human engagement with the river, there has been no clear line between what we have extracted from the river in material things and what the Columbia has meant to the spirit of the people. Because this division between

by William L. Lang

the material and spiritual has been so difficult to draw, our relationship with the river has been enigmatic, often as instrumental as spiritual, as inspirational as remunerative. The Columbia is the Pacific Northwest's largest living myth and the progenitor of a thousand other myths, which we have constantly remade and have invited to remake us.

As a physical and environmental reality, the Columbia has been our life cord. The river's meaning to its human communities is embedded in the stories we have told about the river and especially in the images we have created to represent it. It has affected the human geography of our place more than any other force. We have settled by it, built towns along it, fished it, ridden it, siphoned it, bridged it, dammed it, and protected it.

The Columbia is nothing if it is not a river that turbulently blends the historic and poetic senses. If what Robert Penn Warren wrote is correct, how we have described, understood, and used the Columbia says as much about us as it does about the river. The corpus of stories we have created stand both as a catalog of our culture's mythic vision and as a measurement of the historically powerful effects of the Great River of the West.

Human ingenuity physically altered the Columbia River between the 1890s and 1990s in staggering ways. The economic benefits gained from dams, impoundments, locks, and canals have been counterbalanced by the loss of ecosystem integrity and spiritual values attached to the river and its basin. Portending developments that put native sustenance and scenic wonders at the mercy of industrial demands was the death cult guardian spirit Tsagiglalal, or "She Who Watches" (above left, 1700–1840). At left, a worker surveys construction of Grand Coulee Dam from the vantage of a rising Bonneville transmission tower in June 1940; at right Mount Hood rises above the Columbia River in a *Harper's Monthly* illustration (vol. 66, December 1882, p. 8).



The relationship between the Columbia and its people during this century has been more dynamic and divisive than at any time in the past. Between the 1890s and the 1990s, human ingenuity physically altered the Columbia in staggering ways. For millennia it was a river so powerful that only vulcanism and catastrophic Pleistocene floods changed its course, but applied engineering has made it a mutant. Today's Columbia is characterized by massive impoundments, control gates and locks, and altered ecosystems. The relationship between people and river during the twentieth century has been unequal, with the Columbia suffering for its sacrifice to human desires. In the most problematic chapter of the river's history, the Columbia's story is recounted in measurements of sustenance or gain, its benefits calculated in fish caught, hydropower generated, and commerce tallied.

In its complex history, we know the river had valuations other than its worth in the exchange of goods or as a provider of industrial energy. In other stories, the Columbia embodies the spiritual energy people desire from their environment—in Native American tales of coyote's distribution of salmon in the Columbia River Basin, descriptions by Euramerican explorers of it as a pastoral and dangerous place, and narratives about an idealized river landscape, protected by the 1986 Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area Act. Making sense of the Columbia's fate during the twentieth century requires an investigation of these often contradictory perspectives.²

Two images dominate our idea of the Columbia: the river as spiritual force that inspires and moves people, and the river as cornucopian provider that creates economic value. At the center of both images is the Columbia's existence as nature. The raw and often terrible force of its current, the volume of its flow, and its extensive geologic and biotic environment make the Columbia a domineering natural presence. Little that is natural or artificial within its 259,000-square-mile drainage area, from fish and wildlife to spinning turbines and barges transporting wheat, exists outside of

the river's influence. But what constitutes the natural and artificial on the Columbia, as historian Richard White recently argued, is a slippery conundrum, which raises additional questions about how we perceive the river as environment and human space.

For twelve thousand years, the Columbia's environment has been the product of human and nonhuman forces, but during the last four decades the mixture has become much more dynamic and confusing. Advocates of the new ecology such as Daniel Botkin argue that human-disturbed environments are little different in their components than their undisturbed counterparts. They are still places where natural processes and evolutionary dynamics operate and where flora and fauna exist in Darwinian niches and play out their lives. Our perceptions of the Columbia are no less contingent. From one angle, the river looks controlled and domesticated, prompting us to create bold engineering metaphors. From another angle, the river appears powerfully unpredictable, generative, and mesmerizing, which stimulates us to portray it in romantic, mystical, even utopian terms.³

Images of the river as an economic and Edenic place run through the earliest Euramerican descriptions of the Columbia. English navigator and explorer George Vancouver's men, in their fall 1792 survey of the river from the mouth to near modern-day Camas, Washington, wrote of the Columbia's pastoral beauty and commercial potential. Similarly, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark described the lower portion of the Columbia, from the mouth of the Snake River to present-day Astoria, Oregon, in terms that emphasized the fabulous wealth in anadromous fish and the opportunities for entrepreneurial investment. With the onset of "Oregon Fever" in the 1840s, the Columbia's wilderness beckoned as a place for settlement, where Americans could extract wealth and establish homes. But it was the British Hudson's Bay Company that rushed to exploit the region, especially its furbearing animals. During the 1830s and 1840s, its descriptions and activities augmented the image of the Columbia as a cornucopia, a place where economic gain ruled human action, where, as geographer Cole Harris has

1. Robert Penn Warren, "Brother to Dragons: A Tale in Verse and Voices," in *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture*, ed. Michael Kammen (New York, 1991), 29.

2. On the Native American landscape, see Eugene Hunn, *Nch'i-wàna, "The Big River": Mid-Columbia Indians and Their Land* (Seattle, 1990); and Jarold Ramsay, *Coyote Was Going There: Indian Literature of the Oregon Country* (Seattle, 1989). On the Columbia River Gorge, see Carl Abbott, Sy Adler, and Margery Post Abbott, *Planning a New West: The Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area* (Corvallis, Oreg., 1997).

3. Richard White, *The Organic Machine* (New York, 1995), esp. chap. 1. On the new ecology, see Daniel Botkin, *Discordant Harmonies: A New Ecology for the Twenty-First Century* (New York, 1990).

4. Cole Harris, *The Resettlement of British Columbia: Essays on Colonialism and Geographical Change* (Vancouver, B.C., 1997), 34. On Hudson's Bay Company and views of nature, see Elizabeth Vibert, *Traders' Tales: Narratives of Cultural Encounters in the Columbia Plateau, 1807-1846* (Norman, 1997), 19-21.

5. *Olympia Pioneer and Democrat*, May 23, 1860. On the Columbia and early historical descriptions, see William L. Lang, "Creating the Columbia: Historians and the Great River of the West, 1890-1935," *Oregon Historical Society Quarterly*, 93 (Fall 1992), 235-62. On American settlement and its effects on the lower Columbia River environment, see Robert Bunting, *The Pacific Raincoast: Environment and Culture in an American Eden, 1778-1900* (Lawrence, Kans., 1997), esp. chap. 7.

COLUMBIA ♦ RIVER ♦ BASIN



argued, everything “turned around management, order, and property.”⁴

By midcentury newly settled Americans in the Columbia River Valley, including the Oregon Steam Navigation Company with its nearly monopolistic control of river passage from Portland to the Snake River, had extended the fur traders’ reduction of the landscape to an ordered and commodified place. Through its expanding identification with commerce, the Columbia became a political place as well, prompting Washington Territorial Governor Isaac Stevens to remark in 1860:

It is a matter of national defense, the development of our interior, the availing ourselves of our geographical position. . . . It is not a fiction, the great vision of Columbus. . . . we will have the means of diverting a large portion of the trade of Asia, and causing it to flow through our own land.⁵

A strain of thought repeated throughout the twentieth century reiterates Stevens’s representation of the Columbia as economic destiny, the means for an enriching future. Beginning with navigation improvements in the river during the 1880s and 1890s, engineering work on the river increased in intensity and virtuosity



Twin images of control and efficiency guided engineers of the Columbia. Falling water meant hydroelectric power generation, and impoundment of that water provided transportation and storage for irrigation and flood control. Demonstrating the need for the latter, the Columbia River carried a record flow of 1,240,000 cubic feet per second in 1894, bringing unwelcome flooding to Portland streets (above).

throughout the twentieth century. As the work of building the first federal dams on the river got underway in 1933–1934, images of a controlled river defined the Columbia as economically important to the region and the nation. Damming the Columbia and controlling the riverine environment, Portland river transportation company owner Homer Shaver argued in 1934, “means the increasing of population here through the development of power and industries.” The great hydroelectric projects became the vehicle for modernity and for creating a new region in the basin.

The prospect was both dynamic and benign. The region would become dramatically energized, creating a new civilization that could avoid and correct the mistakes that already littered the nation’s industrial history. “We will have small cities with industries,” Shaver inaccurately prophesied, “rather than large cities as in the East.” A decade later, during World War II, the images of a region electrified by falling water merged with visions of the Columbia as an economic savior and bulwark for the nation. Speaking in late 1943, Bonneville Power Administration head Paul Raver pledged the river to a new future:

We are going to pay off our war debt. We are going to provide jobs for returning men and soldiers coming home and people displaced in their employment through this war. The harnessing of that resource—the river—is but a method, a device, if you please, for paying off the mortgage—the war debt.⁶

This portrait of the Columbia takes instrumentality beyond commerce or defending regional wealth. In this vision, the river became a national property that could increase American prosperity and repay Americans for sacrifices made during the war years. By the time the nation and region had adjusted to a post–World War II economy, river managers had revised their evaluations of the Army Corps of Engineers’ earlier studies of the Columbia’s potential as a controlled waterway—the famous 308 Reports. A predicted power shortage, continued agitation by the transportation lobby for an “improved river,” and the demand for more irrigation impoundments led to authorization for McNary Dam near the mouth of the Umatilla River. It was the beginning of a rationalized river, where water in all tributaries would funnel into the main stem to be used by a growing number of claimants. It was the beginning of the post–New Deal construction of big dams on the

6. Homer T. Shaver, Comments at Inland Empire Waterways Association Board Meeting, Wenatchee, Washington, October 20, 1934, Inland Empire Waterways Association Collection (hereafter IEWAC), Pacific Northwest and Whitman College Archives, Whitman College, Walla Walla, Washington; Paul Raver, Address to IEWA Convention, Lewiston, Idaho, October 9, 1943, IEWAC. On similar arguments, see White, *Organic Machine*, 64–70.

7. Quoted in Murray Morgan, *The Columbia: Powerhouse of the West* (Seattle, 1949), 283. Congress authorized the Army Corps of Engineers to study navigable waterways for hydroelectric dam sites in 1925. These reports became known as the “308” Reports from the number assigned to them in government documents. The report on the Columbia River was completed in 1938 and later revised after World War II.

Columbia that concluded in 1975, when the last of four dams on the lower Snake River went on-line. "It will be a rare drop of water," a government official remarked in 1949, "which reaches the Columbia's broad mouth without having done some useful work for the Northwest."⁷

Twin images of control and efficiency guided engineers on the Columbia. Falling water meant hydroelectric generation, while impounded water meant transportation and storage for irrigation and flood control. Dams could both drop water and impound it, and multipurpose dams after World War II seemed self-justifying. They transformed the Columbia into a willing servant of important economic constituencies and a friendlier river that would stay within its banks. As the engineers stated clearly in the revised 308 Report, the goal was a fully managed Columbia River Basin that included numerous storage dams on tributaries and "run of the river" dams on the Columbia and Snake. Engineers promised that the new dams would control or prevent the periodic and powerful flushings that had been part of the great river system for thousands of years. During the nineteenth century alone, floods drowned low areas in 1861, 1876, and 1894. The record 1894 flood pushed 1,240,000 cubic feet per second (cfs) past The Dalles. The river trickled by the same point in 1937 at only 36,000 cfs, the lowest documented flow on record. Constructing a regulated river included eliminating these enormous swings and the seasonally erratic flow, which annually ran more than three times larger from May to August than from September to April. The engineers wanted to flatten out the river to make it an equalized and regulated stream that could provide hydroelectricity on demand.⁸

Using the image of an engineered river had few limits. Referring to anticipated difficulties in creating an integrated power network on the river in 1936, one engineer flatly promised: "There are no problems that cannot be solved, and their solution depends so completely on demands for power and their location, that preliminary planning is of rather academic value."⁹ It was an optimism fueled by the seemingly limitless hydroelectric power the Columbia offered. The future beckoned to the developers and dreamers of an electrified river.

8. Gus Norwood, *Columbia River Power for the People: A History of Policies of the Bonneville Power Administration* (Washington, D.C., 1981), 180-81; J. A. Krug, *The Columbia: A Comprehensive Report on the Development of Water Resources of the Columbia River Basin* (Washington, D.C., 1947), 274-75; White, *Organic Machine*, 76-77.

9. H. V. Carpenter to Marshall N. Dana, January 6, 1936, box 41, Pacific Northwest River Basins Commission Papers (hereafter PNRBC Papers), RG 315, National Archives, Pacific Northwest Branch, Seattle, Washington.

Plans reified the dreams. Between 1931 and 1975, the Army Corps of Engineers conducted four major studies of the Columbia River Basin's navigable rivers and streams; other federal agencies completed another ten investigations that surveyed the region's riverine resources for development. Each plan concluded that its mounds of data and sophisticated analyses proved the viability and rewards of operating the Columbia as a system, perhaps best as an improved natural system, but nonetheless as a system. Increasingly the evaluative measurement became economic. The "Joint Policy Statement" issued in 1964 by the negotiators of the United States-Canada Columbia River Treaty stated that Columbia River facilities should be "designed to provide optimum benefits to each country . . . [and] added in order of the most favorable benefit-cost ratio." After more than three decades of refining the river system, the definition of the Columbia's value had edged toward a reality best expressed on graph paper, with lines of hydrological measurements intersecting those of kilowatt production and reservoir volumes.¹⁰

Despite the Columbia's redefinition by the actuaries of modern engineering and hydroelectric development, other images survived alongside these calculations and suggested a much different river. "Alone of all the rivers of the West," Samuel Bowles wrote in 1865,

the Columbia has broken these stern barriers [mountains] and the theatre of the conquering conflict offers, as might naturally be supposed, many an unusual feature of nature, river and rock have striven together, wrestling in close and doubtful embrace—sometimes one gaining ascendancy, again the other but finally the subtler and more seductive element worrying its rival out, and gaining the western sunshine, broken and scarred and foaming with hot sweat, but proudly victorious, and forcing the withdrawing arms of its opponent to hold up eternal moments of its triumph.

Bowles's image is romantic and animistic, a portrait of the Columbia wrestling with its confining earthen structure to make its way to the sea. It is a stereotypical image of exceptionalism that seems to emerge from the landscape.¹¹

This Columbia—the romantic river—attracted investment of a different kind. By the end of the nineteenth century, when railroad and steamboat travel

10. Ibid.; John V. Krutilla, *The Columbia River Treaty: The Economics of an International River Basin Development* (Baltimore, Md., 1967), 60. For a list of Columbia River Basin plans, see "A Briefing on Columbia River Tributaries," September 17, 1975, box 29, PNRBC Papers.

11. Samuel Bowles, *Across the Continent: A Summer's Journey to the Rocky Mountains, the Mormons, and the Pacific States* (New York, 1865), 185-86.



Alter ego to the industrialized Columbia is the basin's monumental landscape, which encouraged turn-of-the-century tourism served by steam and rail lines. The hundred-mile-long Columbia Gorge, especially, offered breathtaking scenery, including the "Palisades" (left), photographed by F. Jay Haynes in 1885. Two years earlier, Haynes recorded steamboats docked at The Dalles City Landing (below).



Both photographs Haynes Fred. Coll., MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

extended tourism to the Pacific Northwest, the Columbia became part of a monumental landscape that exuded physical and aesthetic power. The centerpiece was the hundred-mile-long gorge cut through the Cascade Mountains by the Columbia on its way to the Pacific. Towering cliffs, spectacular waterfalls, and dense forest cover prompted Scottish naturalist David Douglas in 1827 to call the gorge "wild and romantic," a place "grand beyond description." By 1891, when regional historian Francis Fuller Victor wrote of the Columbia Gorge as a place where "wonder, curiosity, and admiration combine to arouse sentiments of awe and delight," Portland-based steamboats regularly cruised upriver to the Cascades with tourists who marveled as "each moment affords a fresh delight to the wondering senses."¹²

Steaming upriver into the Columbia's great, verdant gorge, large sternwheelers brought passengers and profits to steamboat companies. The transportation companies mined the scenery as an economic resource, but they also engaged an increasingly urbanized population in an intimate romance with a geography of im-

mense scale. As the boats battled upstream against a strong current, they also tested motive technology against a stream that seemed to dwarf human agency with its physical power. Tourists always left the river impressed. The place was emotionally and psychologically overwhelming in its power. It compelled most commentators and publicists to plumb the mythic and mystic dimensions of human experience for descriptive analogs and language to convey the inner strength of the place. Writers often located the source of the river's magical power deep in the landscape itself. "Much has been written concerning the beauty of the Columbia," a 1924 guidebook informed, "but no word painting can adequately describe this masterpiece of nature's handiwork. There is a mystic beauty lurking in its vales and dells, which lifts the soul above the realms of time and space, and makes the beholder sense the presence of the divine."¹³

That sense of "the presence of the divine" on the Columbia coexisted with depictions of the river as mundane but cornucopian. Throughout the twentieth

12. David Douglas, *Memoir of the Late Mr. David Douglas* (London, 1901), 104; Frances Fuller Victor, *Atlantis Arisen, or Talks of a Tourist about Oregon and Washington* (Philadelphia, 1891), 54, 55, as quoted in Abbott et al., *Planning a New West*, 1, 5.

13. Henry T. Finck, *The Pacific Coast Tour* (New York, 1890), 189; J. H. Oppenlander and J. F. Oppenlander, *The Columbia River Guide and Panorama, From Portland to the Dalles* (Portland, 1924), 1.

14. J. B. Tyrell, ed., *David Thompson: Narrative of his Explorations in Western America, 1784-1812* (Toronto, 1916), 496-97; "Address of Joseph Nathan Teal, The Dalles-Celilo Celebration, Big Eddy, Oregon [May 5, 1915]," *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, 16 (Fall 1916), 107-8.

century, these two distinctive images of the river engaged in a contingent relationship that defies easy characterization. It was not so much a tussle of contending visions as a dance of suitors; both desired a cultural claim on the river's future. It was in the projections of imagined futures that the distinctions became sharpest—the instrumentalist exploitation of the Columbia's power and riches diverged sharply from the idealist preservation of the river's aesthetics and spirituality. There were times, however, when the two views overlapped and lines blurred, when development of the river merged human purpose with providence.

Speaking at the dedication of The Dalles–Celilo Canal in 1915, Portland civic leader and investor Joseph Nathan Teal pressed both touchstones in his accolade to the creation of an artificial waterway around the great obstruction Lewis and Clark had called the “Long Narrows” and David Thompson had described as “this immense body of water under such compression, raging and hissing, as if alive.” On May 5, 1915, Teal told the largest crowd assembled in The Dalles since Oregon Trail days that the canal “symbolizes the stern, unfaltering determination of the people that our waters shall be free—free to serve the uses and purposes of their creation by a Divine Providence.”¹⁴

Mingled in the portrait Teal drew of the new canal, the powerful Columbia, and the future of the region were images of organic unity, the work of human ingenuity, divine purpose, and the merged fates of a river and its people. There is great cultural power in Teal's portrait, a communication that historian William Robbins labeled a “celebratory breast beating” that became emblematic of the “instrumentalist designs of the dominant culture.” It was that, but it was more. For the power in Teal's imagery weds the organic and the economic in the minds of his audience. No one could deny how the Columbia dominated in relationships between the river and its people, how the river's geography provided opportunity for human activity and created obstacles to navigation. That was Teal's point when he proclaimed “that our waters shall be free—free to serve the uses and purposes of their creation by a Divine Providence.” It was science and engineering, in other words, that allowed the Columbia to do what it could and what it should for humanity.¹⁵

The Columbia's instrumentalist future expanded well beyond Teal's imagination and even the utility of

the canal he helped dedicate in 1915. By the early 1920s, The Dalles–Celilo Canal had proved an economic failure. Nonetheless, for river developers like Teal and Nelson Blalock—who had told the “Open Rivers Congress” in 1908 that creating an open river to Wenatchee could be “quickly and easily done” with a “few blasts”—the image of the Columbia as a thriving artery of commerce was a siren song that culminated in construction of dams on the lower Snake River more than fifty years later.¹⁶

As engineering changed the Columbia, however, images of a natural environment continued to inform discussions and often provided countervailing to the drive to extract economic value from the river. During the first decade of big dam building, for example, regional planners approached development on the Columbia as something of a trade-off between economic benefits and aesthetics. Locating Bonneville Dam provoked the issue because the dam would straddle the Columbia at the western end of the scenic Columbia Gorge and planners knew that low-cost electrical power could attract major industries to the site. The image of the great gorge forested with smokestacks rather than Douglas firs seemed appalling. B. H. Kizer, chairman of the Washington State Planning Commission in 1937, feared that once the dam began delivering low-cost power the gorge would be “doomed and not all society's feeble contrivances can save it.”¹⁷

Although one of the seven commission members, highway builder Samuel C. Lancaster, had written a panegyric to the river in 1926, which included the passage: “The Columbia is peerless. Its grandeur speaks to men, and tells of Him who gathered the waters together into one place, and lifted up the mountains,” the planners considered both utilitarian use and aesthetics. The likelihood of industrial developments in one of the most scenic portions of the river's main stem forced them to ask difficult questions. Just what makes the Columbia special? What are the limits of development? What should be preserved or protected? The planning commission's Columbia Gorge Committee answered that their planning effort was not meant

to restrict the play of the physical and economic forces released by the Bonneville project . . . but

15. 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*, ed. Joseph Cone and Sandy Ridlington (Corvallis, Oreg., 1996), 14.

16. Nelson Gates Blalock, “Address to Open Rivers Congress,” 1908, Nelson Gates Blalock Papers, cage 1644, Special Collections, Washington State University Library, Pullman (hereafter WSU Library). On continuing desire for navigation improvements, see Wil-

liam Lang, “River of Change,” in Cone and Ridlington, eds., *Northwest Salmon Crisis*, 354–57.

17. B. H. Kizer to Washington State Planning Board, January 1937, in Gorge Committee of the Pacific Northwest Regional Planning Commission, *Report on the Problem of Conservation and Development of Scenic and Recreational Resources of the Columbia Gorge in Washington and Oregon* (Portland, 1937), 17–18. For additional context and discussion, see Abbott et al., *Planning the New West*, 34–37.

to urge the parallel consideration of all of the social and economic forces and developments, and to protect real economic values involved in recreational facilities and scenery.¹⁸

The committee's report reflected a measured evaluation of Bonneville Dam's potential to change the area and elevate the economic over the aesthetic. "If the unique scenic values of the Columbia Gorge are to survive," the planners concluded, "natural conditions and appearances must be largely retained." But they knew full well that preservation could go no further than protecting the landscape not affected by the dam itself. "The dam is calculated to serve future as well as present generations," their report stated, "likewise, the Gorge [,] if preserved, would be of continuing value." Their rationalizing planning process forced them to equate the "peerless" qualities of the river with economic valuations, suggesting that the gorge was "a major asset to the surrounding territory" and "of such importance that it may fairly be considered a national treasure for which the Federal government should manifest a protective concern." The benefits for people were manifold, but they had to be evaluated as economic assets, the "demonstrated power of attracting tourist travel . . . a large-scale income-bearing property," rather than as a contribution to public pleasure or a valued spiritual resource. The gorge escaped high-density industrialization, while the perceived economic value of the natural landscape shielded the region from unfettered development.¹⁹

Damming the Columbia increasingly compelled the river managers, especially the Army Corps of Engineers and the Bonneville Power Administration, to view the river as one vast plumbing system. The first run-of-the-river dams blocked the main stem at the river's annual limits of flow within the United States at Bonneville and Grand Coulee. Additional dams, built by the federal government and public utility districts by the late 1960s, strung out between Bonneville and Grand Coulee, making the engineered Columbia the most productive hydroelectric river in the world and among the most controlled. Approval of the Columbia River Treaty between Canada and the United States in 1964 brought three additional main stem dams on line by the mid-1970s. Completion of the lower Snake River dams and major storage dams on tributaries, such as Libby and Dworshak on the Kootenai and Clearwater rivers, filled out a system that required the daily regu-

lation of water flows from more than two hundred dams in the Columbia's drainage basin.

In the plans of the river manipulators, the purpose of the river could not be more obvious: "Every day this great river runs to the sea with any stretch of it unharnessed constitutes another day of wasted resources."²⁰ By the mid-1970s, engineers had "tamed" the Columbia by transmogrifying it from a predictably fluctuating river that flooded unpredictably and allowed water to flow "wasted" to the Pacific into a regulated stream understood best in acre-feet volumes in storage pools, feet of "head" behind dams, and millions of peak and "firm" kilowatts. It became what Richard White has called a "virtual river," a river represented in computer models created to predict salmon behavior in a Columbia littered with impediments and dangers for anadromous fish. In ways barely dreamed of by planners during the 1930s, the refashioned Columbia had become the leading edge of the Pacific Northwest, the harbinger and vehicle for a braver new world. "The Columbia River of the future," an engineer prophesied in 1969, would be "a model of resources development which will be the envy of the entire world. By then [the 1980s] sufficient new knowledge concerning migratory fish will exist to permit adjustment of the now rigid water quality standards. . . . for a revitalized salmon industry, and for a high quality municipal supply."²¹

As magnificent as that imagined future might have seemed in 1969, there was a downside in his vision of the new river that the engineer acknowledged—the critical decline in anadromous fish runs in the main stem and tributaries. No image of the manipulated river is bleaker or more disheartening than a Columbia without salmon fighting their way upstream to spawning beds, some swimming more than nine hundred miles and climbing more than 6,500 feet from the ocean. That picture is the verso of the brilliant image of spinning turbines and high-voltage transmission of low-cost electricity throughout the Pacific Northwest and as far south as southern California. This Janus-faced image of the Columbia represents both a vexing conundrum for Pacific Northwesterners and a battleground over what the river means to the human community.

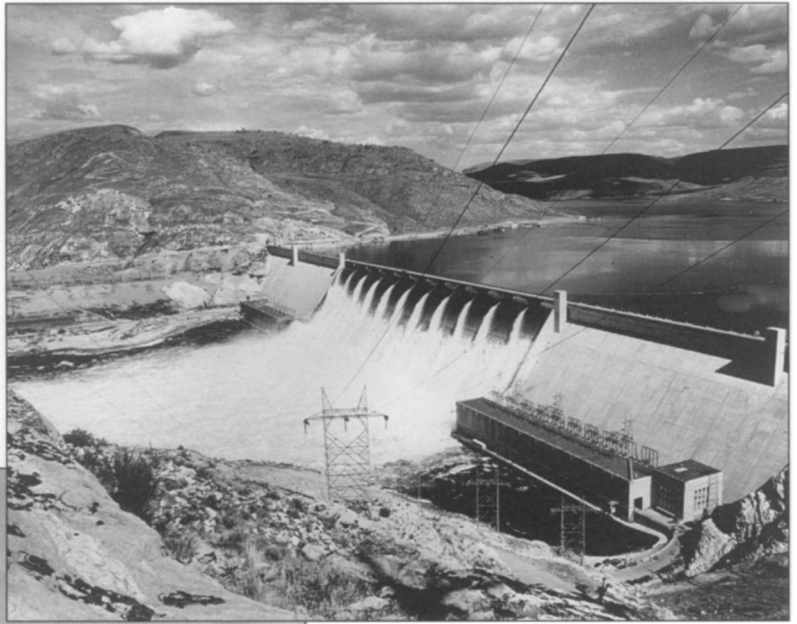
From the earliest descriptions of the great river, the symbol of riverine fecundity had been the teeming millions of salmon swimming upriver in seasonal runs. Lewis and Clark described a river "Crouded with Salmon in maney places" and reported sightings of "emence quantities of fish" near the mouth of the Snake River during their 1805 descent of the Columbia. The

18. Samuel C. Lancaster, *The Columbia: America's Great Highway* (Portland, 1926), 1; Gorge Committee, *Report on the Problem of Conservation*, ix.

19. Gorge Committee, *Report on the Problem of Conservation*, 20-21, 28, 32.

20. Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, *Upper Columbia River Development*, 84th Cong., 2d sess., 1956, S. Rept. 2831, pp. 1-2. The statement quoted is from comments by Montana Senator James Murray.

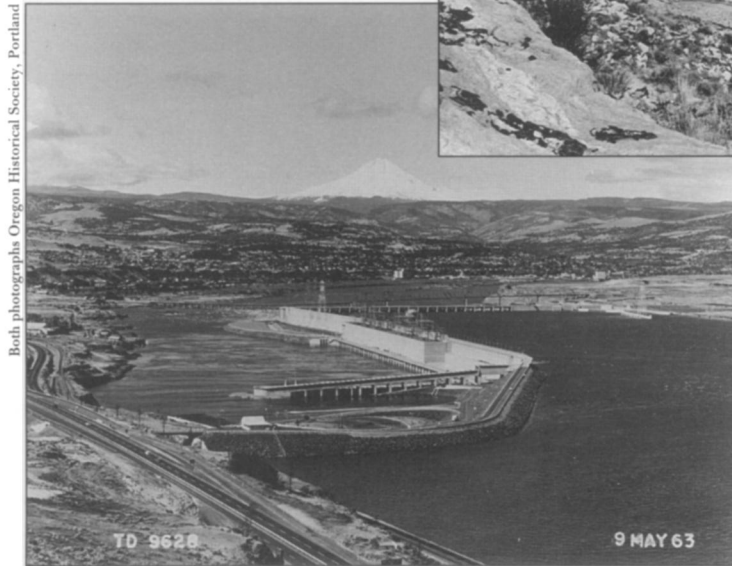
Behemoth dams that brake the tremendous downstream flow of the Columbia also block upstream migration of salmon. At right are Grand Coulee Dam and Bonneville transmission lines (no date). Below, in a May 9, 1963 view, The Dalles Dam stretches across the river below Mount Hood.



Salmon migrating up the Columbia became vulnerable to nets and spears at Celilo Falls, where Native American fishers had garnered one-third of their annual caloric needs from the Columbia for thousands of years. They caught perhaps as much as eighteen million pounds each year from six seasonal runs. Among precontact fisheries in North America none was more productive than the series of rapids, basalt cliffs, and falls that curved across the river at Celilo. And at no place did salmon so dominate the lives of native peoples. Because of

the singular importance of salmon, Indian fishers honored the captured fish through elaborate ceremonies. Each year, Yakama fishers deposited the bones of the first salmon caught on the river bottom as a beckoning to the millions of salmon to follow. The ceremony recognized the ecological character of salmon behavior and signified the people's gratitude for the salmon's sacrifice. "They came to provide us an example of sacrifice," Yakama leader Ted Strong has reminded, "and we thank the creator that gave the salmon the feeling of servitude."²³

In the late twentieth century, the fate of the salmon has become a litmus test of the river's ecological health, and salmon an icon for all that is natural and spiritual in the Columbia. The picture of salmon swimming against strong current or leaping waterfalls confirms the specialness of this animal, while it also characterizes the



estimates of migrating salmon invited exaggeration and fantastic stories, but the exceptional harvests by commercial fishers using seines, traps, and fish wheels seemed to justify the tales. A fish wheel at Cascade Locks scooped up 54,000 pounds of salmon in one day in 1894, and fifty years later a seine operated at The Dalles caught 70,000 pounds in a single day. The image of fecundity beyond belief had its penultimate expression in one of the great stories often repeated on the river and recorded by Patrick Donan in 1898:

Citizen George Francis Train, many years ago, left this statement—that would be remarkable anywhere else: "This is to certify, that I have today, with my slippers on, walked across the Columbia River, at The Dalles of Oregon, on the backs of the salmon, without getting my feet wet;—Colonel N. B. Sinott was a witness of the feat."²²

21. White, *Organic Machine*, 106; Robert T. Jaske, "Columbia River of the Future [April 15, 1969]," pp. 5-6, vertical file 2233, WSU Library.

22. Gary Moulton, ed., *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, vol. 5 (Lincoln, 1988), 286, 298; William Ashley to President Andrew Jackson, in *Message from the President . . . Relative to the Columbia*, 21st Cong., 2d. sess., 1831, H. Exec. Doc. 1, serial 203,

p. 18; Patrick Donan, *The Columbia River Empire* (Portland, 1898), 59. For Columbia River fisheries statistics, see Courtland Smith, *Salmon Fishers of the Columbia* (Corvallis, Oreg., 1979).

23. Los Angeles *Times*, February 23, 1997, sec. 1, p. 5. On importance of salmon and the first salmon ceremony, see Hunn, *Nch'i-wàna, "The Big River,"* 148-54; Robert T. Boyd, *People of The Dalles: The Indians of Wascopam Mission* (Lincoln, 1996), 127-29.

river's power in a way quite different from the image of a revolving turbine. Although Indian people have always revered salmon, it was not until the numbers of migrating fish went into a steep decline after the main stem dams were built that non-Indians made salmon iconographic. The closing off of fish habitat by the dams—especially in the streams made inaccessible to fish by the fish-ladderless Grand Coulee—combined with increasing numbers of commercial fisheries in the rivers and the ocean, and the spoliating consequences of agriculture, timber, and industry pushed salmon stocks to the edge of extinction. Fisheries biologists such as Joseph Craig had warned about these consequences as early as 1935, but the river managers made their choices regardless of the caveats.

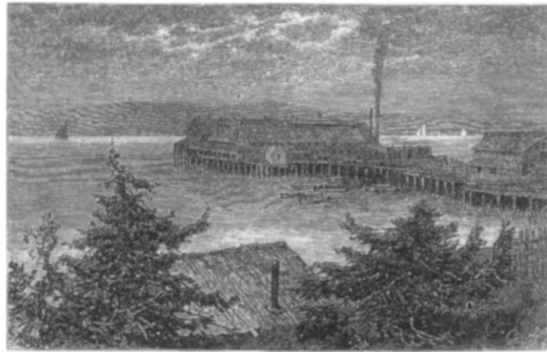
By 1947, with Bonneville and Grand Coulee in place and plans for three additional dams on the drawing boards, one official wrote: "It is, therefore, the conclusion of all concerned that the overall benefits to the Pacific Northwest from a thoroughgoing development of the Snake and Columbia are such that the present salmon run must be sacrificed." The trade-off could not be more simply stated. Dams and development—the economic river—triumphing over salmon—the natural and spiritual river. Dams became the contrary icon to salmon, the personification of a damaged environment and altered relationships with the river. There was enthusiasm for dams as symbols of progress and improved living conditions, but there was also anger at what the dams killed in the river and how they inundated the past. Yakama leader Bill Yallup remembered tribal members standing on a hill above Celilo watching the river cover the falls. "Some of them sang songs like a funeral. They were very sacred songs. Three days and nights with no sleep. It was a sad day for them." Others acted out their concern. When the Army Corps of Engineers began pre-

paring for The Dalles Dam, a young Ed Edmo remembered joining with other Indian boys to register an objection. "When the workmen finished surveying at the end of the day, some of us would pull out the stakes from the ground, fill the holes, and make a small fire out of the stakes. . . . In our own small way, we tried to stop the dam." Edmo and his friends knew they could not win. Nothing could stop the dams.²⁴

By the 1980s, when the clarion call sounded to stem the decline of salmon runs, the dams became the focus of harsh criticism from nearly everyone who wanted the Columbia full of salmon again. Each group contending for control of the river's future reaches back for historical justification of its wishes. Fishers bemoan the changes that have diminished salmon, and they long for a return to a river more congenial to their pursuits. Tribal governments, using the power inherent in their treaties and confirmed in recent court decisions, remind government agencies and private concerns that all changes that deprive them of access to salmon in the river and

diminish salmon violate their heritage and religion. The dams, by casting themselves as "the future river," abruptly abandon history and seem to stand outside of the river's historical narrative. Their existence literally swamps the past and verges on desecrating what remains. To embrace the river's past, in some sense, is to challenge the dams and to question the Columbia's future. And it is anything but a romantic past, as lower Columbia fisherman Kent Martin's comments make clear: "Everything people said in the 1940s is coming true like a curse."²⁵

Indeed, the Columbia's story invites historicizing and polemics. Nonetheless, the most powerful narrative is found in representations of how the river has shaped the human condition and how human actions have shaped the modern river. The public seems to



Once prolific salmon runs supported Indian and non-Indian fishers and such factories as the "salmon-canning establishment," pictured above in *Harper's Monthly* (vol. 66, December 1882, p. 12). With burgeoning industrial development of the Columbia, economic priorities overwhelmed natural and spiritual values signified by salmon.

24. Memorandum by Julius Krug, acting chairman of Interior Department's Pacific Northwest Coordination Committee, March 6, 1947, entry 887, box 19, RG 48, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; Los Angeles *Times*, February 3, 1997, sec. 1, p. 5; Ed Edmo, "After Celilo," in *Talking Leaves: Contemporary Native American Short Stories*, ed. Craig Lesley (New York, 1991), 71-72.

25. *Mother Earth News*, August 1, 1994.

26. Oregon League of Women Voters, "Our Columbia River," pamphlet (Portland, 1959).

27. Portland *Oregonian*, March 23, 1993.

28. *Ibid.*, July 27, 1997. For recent estimates of investments on the Columbia River to save salmon, see Jonathan Brinckman, "\$3 Billion Later, Columbia Basin Salmon Dwindle," *ibid.*, July 27, 28, 1997.

identify with both, the economic and the spiritual Columbia. Opinion polls consistently reflect popular support for “saving the salmon,” but they also indicate that people hesitate to change the management of the river without guaranteed results. At the end of the twentieth century, the story of the Columbia has become an inescapable conundrum.

The compelling mythic story is a miraculous blend of both views of the river. In 1959, for example, the Oregon League of Women Voters addressed the threats to the Columbia by challenging the view that the region decided between “fish or power,” and claiming:

We can still have water for humans and fish, water for crops and forests, unspoiled streams for esthetic appreciation and water for fun IF, through comprehensive planning, the right choices and compromises are made in time.²⁶

The “fish or power” choice became common vernacular for management strategies on the river, and promises of sufficient water for both fish and power have been constants. Neither view has been abandoned. In 1993, then Representative Ron Wyden claimed that the Columbia could provide everything its people desired but it meant costly investments. “We can either make some targeted investments right now” Wyden warned, “or pay more in the long run.”²⁷

The investments have been incredible, yet the solution that preserves the spiritual and historic river continues to elude us. The previously unimaginable strategy of removing dams has emerged from planning meetings into the full light of day. Tribal representatives want fish in the Columbia, while power and wa-

ter users hope they can retain their claims on the river. The discussion, the story, and the expensive remediations roll on like the river itself, with no one quite sure how to stop the flow and decide which river to enshrine. “Either we ought to make enough changes to give the salmon a chance of coming back,” former Northwest Power Planning Council Chairman Angus Duncan concluded, “or we shouldn’t be spending any of this money at all.” Yet the will to have both salmon and power drives the story line. In the political arena, the two goals remain joined, the two rivers still flow together. Oregon Governor John Kitzhaber put it bluntly: “You can’t solve power issues without solving the fish issues, and you can’t solve the fish issues without solving the power issues.”²⁸

This conundrum is part of the myth that pervades the Pacific Northwest, a part that runs rich in Robert Penn Warren’s historic and poetic senses. For the Columbia, the myth is a mixed blessing at best, while for the people of the Columbia it is simply how the river is understood. There are few children of the region who do not have both rivers flowing through them; there are few who are entirely immersed in the economic or the spiritual river. This is what makes the questions about the Columbia’s future so intractable. *M*

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Throughout the twentieth century, public sentiment seemed to identify with both the economic and spiritual Columbia. Still, power generation took precedent, and when The Dalles Dam inundated Celilo Falls (shown at right, circa 1954, before the dam was completed), it destroyed a salmon fishery that had supplied one-third of the annual caloric needs of local Indians for thousands of years. Efforts to restore the salmon runs have proved unsuccessful thus far.

Clady Seufert, photographer, Oregon Historical Society, Portland

