2005

1949: Year of Decision on the Columbia River

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Citation Details
Lang, William. (2005). "1949: Year of the Decision on the Columbia River." Columbia Magazine. 19.1 (Spring 2005): 815.

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Columbia Magazine, Spring 2005: Vol. 19, No. 1

By William L. Lang

Someone new to the Pacific Northwest and seeing the Columbia River for the first time could have no idea what the Great River of the West looked like before the building of the big dams. The Columbia's character and its muscle are generally hidden from view, deep in the old river channel and in the guts of machines that span the river like stair steps, from Bonneville Dam near Portland to Mica Dam at the river's far northern turn in British Columbia.

People looking at the river for the first time probably would not think about the history swamped by the great dams, the towns that had to be relocated, the tribal lands and sacred sites covered by reservoirs, and the farms that became lake beds. They likely would hear about the Columbia's changed ecology, especially the listing of threatened salmon runs under the Endangered Species Act, and worries about pollution from industries, agricultural run-off, and radioactive nuclides from leaking waste drums at the old Hanford Engineering Works near the Tri-Cities. They could not miss the river system's monumental dimension and the iconic presence of the dams.

The Columbia, historian Richard White has argued, is an "organic machine," an apt metaphor for a fully controlled and managed system of hydroelectric turbines, massive irrigation pumps, and mechanical locks that transformed a part of nature into a power cornucopia and a series of flat-water reservoirs that link the Pacific Ocean with far interior river ports. It is an audacious construction, an ambition only the most hopeful and confident could accomplish.

Few residents, old or new, wonder when it happened and why. Fewer still consider that indigenous people began pulling salmon from the Columbia more than ten millennia ago, yet it took only four decades to create the Columbia River system, a slight wink in the river's history. Even fewer question whether its development was inevitable or probable. The curious find out that the history of the Columbia's systemic transformation during the 20th century is laden with complexity, is nondeterministic and unpredictable. What we see today on the river is powerfully organized, almost magical in its synchronization. How it became so rationalized is a messy history.

The most important decisions came in the years immediately following World War II. The year 1949 stands out as perhaps the most crucial, when policy decisions confirmed earlier plans and abandoned potential alternatives. It was just before the hyperventilated "red scare" gripped the country's politics and just after a stunning come-from-behind electoral victory by an underrated president. It was also smack in the middle of the Pacific Northwest's fervent crusade to become a major region in the nation. In 1949 several lines of political, economic, and cultural importance intersected in the discussions, debates, and decisions about the fate of the Columbia River.

The transformation of the Columbia River began years before 1949 and with some fanfare. In the spring of 1933 newly inaugurated President Franklin D. Roosevelt made good on his campaign promise uttered the preceding fall in Portland when he directed federal monies at two huge public works projects' Bonneville Dam near Portland and Grand Coulee Dam in north central Washington. Roosevelt used public works to address fundamental economic issues by creating employment and stimulating regional development in three of the nation's river basins, the Tennessee, the Missouri, and the Columbia. What the New Deal began on these rivers changed them dramatically and refashioned the regions they drained. Grand Coulee and Bonneville dams blockaded the Columbia, the second largest river by volume of flow in the United States and the river with the greatest hydroelectric potential on the face of the globe. Roosevelt's action put the river on a new course, literally and figuratively.

Despite the audacity and singularity of the Bonneville and Grand Coulee projects, the critics, and there were many raised legitimate questions from the outset. What could a destitute region do with all of the electrical power the dams would generate? Did people in the Northwest want to turn over the river landscape to industry and transform places like the Columbia River Gorge into gigantic mill sites? Could the fish and fishing industry survive the dams? What would be sacrificed by building the dams? Who would gain, and who would lose? Between 1945 and 1950, the answers to these and other questions became clear, as river planners constructed the modern system we see realized today.

The central document in the modern history of the Columbia River is called the "308 Report," a white paper of sorts that outlined where and at what cost hydroelectric projects could and might be developed on the river. The name of the report derived from the House of Representatives' document number applied to the report, which had been authorized in 1927 to study major rivers for potential hydroelectric and navigational improvements. The report on the Columbia landed on the President Herbert Hoover's desk in 1932, but it was his successor who had the good political luck to be the president who carried out two of the most promising projects.

Building big dams, as historian Paul Josephson has recently written, is an example of "brute force technology," the kind of action that is transformative and nature-changing, that generates consequences and contingencies never imagined by its designers. To some degree, the history of the Columbia River system is the story of the use of brute force technology and the dynamic repercussions river planners had to address. What they understood about their creation's consequences and the contingencies incurred is at the heart of the story. A classic example of the role of contingency on the Columbia is the Bonneville Project Act of 1937. Faced with the prospect of selling and distributing the abundant power that would be generated by Bonneville Dam, the federal government approved creation of a marketing agency that decided to offer power to customers in the Pacific Northwest at uniform rates throughout the region, specifying that public utilities always would have first dibs on available power for sale. This legislation set a standard and a tone for federally financed power projects in the region, while it also affected non-federal power producers and overall planning for development of the Columbia River. In short, building Bonneville Dam posed many more questions and created many more contingencies than the immediate problems it originally addressed unemployment and economic development.

This outcome is not unique to throwing dams across rivers. Major government initiatives often create more problems than they solve. The Columbia River experience, however, had a unique set of contingencies. First, not all groups and economic interests in the region gained from the dams, and many opposed them from the beginning. Second, the shape of the system precisely how Columbia River Basin development took place offered episode upon episode for the whole idea to be challenged, critiqued, and modified. Third, as economic and political conditions changed in the region, the general conception of the river's importance and the centrality of its development changed. Fourth, decisions about river development created a conversation about the Columbia River that engaged a broad cross-section of Pacific Northwesterners. Finally, the

necessity of political decisions cut that conversation short and left the region to experience the consequences.

In this context, the year 1949 begins on Memorial Day of 1948, when the Columbia and its tributaries raged out of their banks, paid no heed to flood-control structures, and left death and destruction from southeastern British Columbia to the lower Columbia, including the total destruction of Vanport, Oregon, the massive wartime housing project on the south bank of the river between Portland and Vancouver. President Harry S. Truman, then positioning himself for an uphill election campaign in the fall, declared the flood an emergency and ordered federal agencies to provide material, labor, and personnel to alleviate suffering in the flooded areas. Truman went further, as he wrote the head of the Federal Works Agency, by requesting the secretary of the army and the secretary of the interior to begin at once a review of the long-range plans of those agencies for Columbia Basin development, with a view to proposing such modifications as may be appropriate in light of the present disaster.

The Bureau of Reclamation in the Department of Interior had already completed a major study of the Columbia River Basin and its reclamation potential in 1947, and the United States Army Corps of Engineers was nearing completion of an important updating of its original "308 Report." Truman asked that the agencies confer on basin-wide planning with an eye toward flood control, but the larger political message was more important Truman reacted to the flood emergency by calling for reinvigorated planning.

In the summer of 1948 the prospect of basin-wide planning was a familiar and contested topic. Ever since the creation of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) in 1933, the idea of river basin authorities as an efficient means to plan coordinated development had been popular with some interest groups organized labor, the Grange, public power associations and highly unpopular with others chambers of commerce, private power companies, agribusinesses. Truman's call for a review of Columbia Basin plans, along with other actions, signaled Pacific Northwest politicians that he was considering a renewed and re-energized campaign for a Columbia Valley Authority (CVA). Congress had entertained and defeated several CVA bills by 1948, and the political battle lines had become well-established. The proponents argued that a CVA would eliminate the wasteful overlap, competition, and political sniping that characterized the competition for water development sites between the Army Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Reclamation. The corps had built Bonneville Dam, while the bureau had constructed the dam at Grand Coulee. In 1948, although the two agencies had been discussing an arrangement that would allow them to "pool" project funding dedicated to Columbia Basin work, their mutual suspicions had defeated completion of an agreement.

Speculation about the Truman administration's willingness to launch a new effort to pass a CVA bill created heated conversations in 1948 because of recent conflicts over Columbia River Basin development plans that had exposed rifts within the Department of the Interior, engaged regional interest groups in pitched battles, and stimulated substantial protest from Indians with treaty fishing rights on the river. The conflicts began in 1945, but they had come to a head in Walla Walla in June 1947 at a testy public meeting of the Columbia Basin Inter-Agency Committee, an unwieldy group that had been charged in 1946 with the impossible task of making everything in natural resource planning work smoothly in the basin. At issue in Walla Walla was a proposal by the Department of Interior that dam-building in the Columbia Basin be restricted to tributary streams off the main stem and that a 10-year moratorium be placed on building dams below the site of McNary Dam and on the lower Snake River. The opposition of commercial and sports fishing interests and the Indian treaty tribes was so great, one federal official admitted in 1947, that the region stood "at the crossroads":

We can either develop a friendly and advantageous long-range program, which will properly evaluate and take into consideration each and all of our resources, or we can pursue the policy of each interest going its

own way, which would result in loss of maximum benefits, unbalanced regional development, and antagonism between interests.

More than 200 people attended the Walla Walla meeting. Advocates for full and speedy development of the Columbia included Herbert West, former mayor of Walla Walla and president of the Walla Walla-based Inland Empire Waterways Association, who focused exclusively on building the four lower Snake River dams. Dissenters and supporters of the 10-year moratorium included Indian treaty fishermen, fisheries biologists, and commercial fishermen, who charged that the program of development, as the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) testimony at Walla Walla indicated, would "mean the extermination of the largest part of the [fish] populations which spawn above Bonneville dam." While some proponents of the moratorium agreed that there might be room for compromise, Indian representatives adamantly opposed any additional dams on the lower Snake and Columbia rivers, pointing out that damage to the fish runs would cripple them economically and violate fishing rights guaranteed in the 1855 treaties.

The committee rejected the moratorium, but they struck a deal with the opponents. In lieu of the potential damage to fish runs, the federal government would fund the Lower Columbia River Fisheries Plan, a mitigation strategy they had worked on since 1946 that would protect fisheries on the lower river. With promised funding of $20 million, the plan had three components: improvement of lower river fish habitat, increased investment in fish hatcheries, and identification of fish sanctuaries i.e., rivers that would remain free of fish-blocking dams.

Truman's stunning electoral victory in 1948 changed the political dynamics of the nation, especially in the Pacific Northwest. As Commonweal magazine put it in early 1949: "The West was enormously influential in putting Harry Truman back into the White House, and it is asking for, and going to get, its pound, not of meat, but of water."

Some Truman men in the Northwest were staunch advocates of a CVA. Former United States senator from Washington Hugh Mitchell, for example, had introduced one of the early CVA bills and then organized the League for CVA when he failed to win re-election in 1946. In 1948 he rode Truman's coattails back to Washington as a member of Congress and stood ready to go for a CVA again. Washington's United States senators, Henry M. "Scoop" Jackson and Warren Magnuson, also signed on to support another try at a CVA in the new Congress. By early January 1949 administration officials had begun fashioning a new CVA bill from pieces of earlier proposals. Democratic political groups in Washington, Oregon, and Idaho tentatively agreed to join the effort if the White House made it a priority.

Truman responded energetically by appointing one of his top political advisors, Charles Murphy, to head up the effort in the White House. In the Northwest, Truman assigned the task to Assistant Secretary of the Interior C. Girard "Jebby" Davidson, a lawyer who had worked at the TVA and Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) before being appointed Secretary Julius Krug's second at the Interior Department. A native of Louisiana, Davidson had a reputation as a keen political mind and a suave advocate for liberal Democratic goals. He also had a deep knowledge of the Northwest because of his years in Portland with the BPA.

The new bill looked a lot like earlier proposals. Truman's CVA included a reorganization of water-project-related bureaus in several departments into one semi-corporate administration with responsibility for planning and overseeing projects in the Columbia Basin. The plan specified governance by a three-man appointed board, with the requirement that at least one live in the region. The complicated legislation addressed a range of topics from electrical power distribution to acquisition and development of dam sites. Truman's bill, however, benefited from the lessons of earlier failures and, foremost, from the regional

demand for rapid and efficient Columbia River Basin development. Still, the fact that it looked like a TVA transplanted to the Northwest left it open to criticism.

Opponents, like newly elected Governor Douglas McKay of Oregon, asked:

What's the matter with the way we're doing it now? We don't need to delegate authority to a board or a commission to regulate the economy of the Northwest.

A Seattle Times editorial complained:

There is no need for establishment of a "province of the Columbia" with almost unlimited powers over the industrial and agricultural development of the region. All groups and varied interests believing in continued economic growth of the Pacific Northwest along democratic lines should become vocal to prevent CVA measures before Congress from becoming the law over the Columbia.

The Portland Oregon Journal called it an "authoritarian type of development."

Other critics used stronger language. The National Association of Electric Companies charged that the CVA was a "move toward a 'superstate.'" Intemperate sorts called the CVA nothing less than socialism, perhaps even communism. In Column Right, a conservative political newsletter, a fearful writer warned that a CVA would threaten the region:

Let no propaganda deceive you. It is your liberty that is being fished for. Do not rise to the bait of this New Deal dream without recalling the cost of that liberty and the fact that once it is gone, it can only be regained by the force of arms…. CVA is not merely a question of the price of electric power, coordination of industry, or any other similarly smoked sausage. It is a question of whether a nation so regimented can long endure.

The League for CVA and pro-CVA organizations faced stiff, organized opposition, but they succeeded in introducing the issue through local Grange chapters in the region and through pro-labor and public power newspapers. Jebby Davidson and other proponents debated the merits of a CVA with opponents in semi-public venues such as the City Club of Portland and in public halls in Seattle, Spokane, Tacoma, Boise, Eugene, and other cities and towns. The opponents, principally private utilities, chambers of commerce, reclamationists, and industries, funded the Pacific Northwest Development Association and churned out anti-CVA propaganda throughout the spring and summer of 1949.

In Portland the debate included dueling feature articles on the successes and failures of the TVA published in the Oregon Journal and the Oregonian. As a Democratic newspaper, the Journal's anti-CVA stand seemed out of step, but Democrats did not despair because the Republican Oregonian was strongly pro-CVA. Major daily newspapers in the region tended to criticize the CVA proposal, and papers in smaller regional centers largely turned thumbs down to it. Besides Jackson, Magnuson, and Mitchell of Washington, Senator Harry Cain and Congressman Walt Horan (both also from Washington) initially supported a CVA as well. In Oregon, United States Senator Wayne Morse and State Senator Richard L. Neuberger lined up in favor of a CVA. The governors of the four Northwest states, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and Montana however, rejected the idea, fearing a loss of state prerogatives ranging from infringements on their own water projects to loss of control over water rights. The governors were so forceful, one political commentator noted, that they seemed to react to a CVA "with the alacrity of fire horses answer[ing] a four-bell blaze."

Nonetheless, the CVA boosters engaged their opponents optimistically. As Davidson wrote to Charles Murphy in the White House: "So far the Republicans and power companies are against [the CVA], and the

Democrats, labor and farmers are for it. What more could we ask?" In truth, though, politics in 1949 did not favor a CVA. Even the Socialist Party in Seattle issued a press release in May, criticizing the CVA proposal as authoritarian and dangerous. By early autumn the attacks had worn down the advocates, who were outspent in the propaganda war more than 100 to 1. Some politicians who had privately and publicly favored a CVA backed away. In August, Oregon's Wayne Morse, who had been threatened by conservative Republicans with a primary opponent in his re-election bid, suddenly came out against the bill. By year's end, Truman had become convinced that he could not get the CVA bill approved in the 81st Congress.

As the CVA battle raged in the region and politicians continually waved their wetted fingers into the wind, federal and state fish managers worked at the Lower Columbia River Fisheries Plan, and interest groups like Herbert West's Inland Empire Waterways Association kept prodding the Army Corps of Engineers to go for appropriations to start the new dam projects, especially The Dalles and the lower Snake River dams. At the same time and for reasons quite apart from the "308 Report" or other federal plans, Tacoma City Light the city's public utility decided to apply for federal and state hydroelectric licenses for two high dams on the Cowlitz River. Alarmed at the possibility that the free-flowing and salmon-rich river would be blocked to fish, commercial and sports fishing interests and state fish managers organized to protest approval of the Mayfield and Mossyrock dam projects.

Although Tacoma City Light's plans had no connection to the development of the Columbia main stem, the Cowlitz River's attributes as a salmon stream made it one of the "backbone" rivers in the federal government's Lower Columbia River Fisheries Plan. With this in mind and defending the state's interest in fish management, the Washington State Legislature waded into the controversy in early 1949 by passing legislation declaring the Cowlitz a "salmon sanctuary," a river dedicated to spawning salmon and therefore closed to dam construction. Public hearings on the issue drew large crowds to meetings in Olympia, Toledo, and Longview. Tacoma City Light officials promised to pay attention to fish ecology, but the opponents listened skeptically. As one defender of the Cowlitz stated:

The people should have a right to vote "Yes" or "No" on the dam question. If Tacoma needs power, let 'em put in more dams where they already have power sites. The Cowlitz River is one of the finest fishing streams in the Northwest. Let's raise enough hell so that the monopolies will know we are alive.

Using terminology usually applied to the private power industry, the speaker clearly objected to loss of local control as well as the destruction of the Cowlitz fishery, which all agreed was the most productive salmon stream (aside from the Snake River) in the Columbia Basin. Other Cowlitz defenders took the issue to a higher forum. One Lewis County resident testified:

This is not a question of kilowatts, jobs, dollars, [or] votes. It is a question of RIGHT and WRONG…. This action we are now contemplating is not a 50-50 crime of man against man, it is a crime of man against his Creator…. If we commit this crime against our Creator, we will be punished accordingly, both individually and collectively.

In ways parallel to the CVA discussion that hummed throughout the Columbia Basin, the Cowlitz question crowded other stories off newspaper pages, as unlikely political allies joined hands some labor unions and local chambers of commerce against the dams; public utilities and private utility interests in favor of the dams; sports fishermen and state fish managers against; industry and other labor unions in favor. It took nine years and four major court cases before Tacoma City Light prevailed in the United States Supreme Court in 1958, but the promise of the Lower Columbia River Fisheries Plan received a major blow in 1949 when a major public utility challenged a congressionally authorized program and a Washington state statute.

At the same time that residents in Lewis and Cowlitz counties argued about Mayfield and Mossyrock dams, a private consortium made application in Oregon to build dams on the Deschutes River. Like the Cowlitz, the Deschutes nurtured important fish runs and had been identified in the Lower Columbia River Fisheries Plan as a sanctuary river. Although the objections raised to building dams on the Deschutes rested on different legal issues, the State of Oregon fish managers acted as outraged as their counterparts in Washington had in the Cowlitz controversy. In both instances, the USFWS officially objected to the planned river developments. As Albert M. Day, director of USFWS, testified about the Cowlitz: "The service has urged that this river be declared a sanctuary for the preservation of runs of anadromous fishes which are presently threatened with extinction in the upper Columbia and Snake rivers."

The resolution of the controversy over damming the Deschutes, like the Cowlitz case, ended up in the United States Supreme Court in 1955, where the decision approved building Pelton Dam on the river.

By the end of 1949 the regional discussion about the fate of fish and dams on the Columbia had tilted decidedly toward the dam-builders' ambitions. Officials in the Army Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Reclamation had responded to political conditions and contrived a joint working agreement in the Columbia River Basin that promised better efficiency. Meanwhile, the disputations over the Cowlitz and Deschutes rivers made clear that the river developers were getting the upper hand. The Lower Columbia River Fisheries Plan that offsetting strategy agreed to by the corps had been forced on the defensive, and it seemed likely that fish sanctuaries could not withstand political assault. Despite valiant efforts by Jebby Davidson and others, the Truman administration could not find the votes for their version of a CVA. Major economic interests in the region reclamationists, navigation companies, private utilities, chambers of commerce had demonized the CVA plan sufficiently to make it politically unattractive.

Looking back more than half a century, we are struck by the missed opportunities to wrestle contingencies to the ground and possibly relieve us of our problems on the river today. Could the CVA have rationalized Columbia River development well enough to avoid creating lopsided victories for the "winners" and such thin protections for the "losers"? Could an extension and continuance of the conversations initiated after World War II which buzzed so intensely in 1949 have offered the region and its politicians ideas and workable solutions? It is tempting to say "yes," but that is not how it happened. What we can say, though, is that people in the Pacific Northwest had their opportunities in 1949, and what happened that year made a great difference.

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MLA Citation:

Lang, William. "1949: Year of the Decision on the Columbia River." Columbia Magazine. 19.1 (Spring 2005): 8-15. Date accessed http://columbia.washingtonhistory.org/anthology/maturingstate/1949.aspx.