

TRIBAL LOSSES NOTED ON 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF BONNEVILLE DAM

Indians and their supporters held a 50 hour vigil in mournful observance of the 50th Anniversary of Bonneville Dam and the beginning of hydroelectric development on the Columbia River.

"For 50 hours, the drum will beat - reminding us of the terrible losses endured by Indian people so that this region could have electricity," said vigil coordinator Roy Samsel, an Indian and a long-time advocate for Native Americans. Bonneville Dam, the first of more than a dozen hydroelectric dams on the Columbia system, and the Bonneville Power Administration (BPA), the federal agency that markets the electricity, are 50 years old this year.

"The costs have been greatest to the Indian people: Their salmon and steelhead runs - for thousands of years, the spiritual, social, and economic basis of life - were nearly destroyed. Most of their traditional fishing sites were gone - flooded by dams and the reservoirs behind them," he said.

The vigil, took place on Bradford Island near the Visitors Center on the Oregon side of Bonneville Dam, concluded Saturday August 8 just as BPA's official 50th anniversary program began.

-from The Oregonian

THE FOLLOWING IS FROM THE COLUMBIA RIVER INTER-TRIBAL FISH COMMISSION, SPRING 1987, NEWSLETTER.

*It's there on your banks that we fought many a fight
Sheridan's boys in the blockhouse that night
They saw us in death but never in flight
Roll on, Columbia, roll on.*

*Our loved ones we lost in Coe's little store
By fireball and rifle, a dozen or more
We won by the Mary and soldiers she bore
Roll on, Columbia, roll on.*

*Remember the trial when the battle was won
The wild Indian warriors to the tall timber run
We hung every Indian with smoke in his gun
Roll on, Columbia, roll on.*

*Year after year we had tedious trials
Fightin' the rapids at Cascades and Dalles
Injuns rest peaceful on Memaloose Isle
Roll on, Columbia, roll on.*

These recently discovered missing verses to "Roll On, Columbia," a song Woody Guthrie wrote for the Bonneville Power Administration (BPA), tell more of the history of the development of the Columbia River than is being acknowledged in the hoopla surrounding the celebration of the 50th anniversary of Bonneville Dam and BPA. Ironically, BPA and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the agency that built Bonneville Dam, are using Guthrie's "Roll On, Columbia" as the theme for their anniversary events.

Fifty years ago this summer, the Columbia's days as a free-flowing river were already over. The construction of Bonneville Dam was nearing completion, and the main debate concerning the monumental project was

over public-versus-private marketing of the electricity that was about to be generated. There was virtually no discussion of the negative effects on the fish runs and the Indian peoples for whom the salmon were essential.

It was 1937, and the country's leaders had other things, especially the Great Depression and forthcoming World War II, on their minds. Unlike the Indians that fished at Celilo falls in the eastern end of the Columbia Gorge, the native residents downriver from the Bonneville site had been decimated by European diseases, such as measles and small pox, brought by the newcomers. Following the 1856 Fort Rains battle (near the Bonneville Dam site) described by Guthrie in the lost lyrics, most of the surviving Indians in the Columbia Gorge were cleared out of the key sites, such as the portages around the Cascades and the Long Narrows/ Celilo Falls, and sent to reservations away from the river, (including the Grand Ronde Reservation*) making way for Euro-American settlement - and dams.

The construction of Bonneville and the upriver dams forced many Indians, who had returned to the river, to move and inundated villages, petroglyphs, fishing platforms, and other important sites. Promises made in the process of dam construction were often not kept. For example, the Corps of Engineers promised the Indian tribes with reserved treaty rights to fish the area flooded by Bonneville Dam that the agency would purchase over 400 acres of "in-lieu sites" to help compensate for the traditional fishing sites being destroyed. Half a century later, only 42 acres of in-lieu sites have been acquired.

In addition to the diseases, the outright hostilities and forced relocations, and the loss of priceless places, Indians were - and still are - hurt by the destruction of the salmon and steelhead runs, which were - and still are - vital to Indian culture.

"The preservation of the Columbia's fish population was a high priority of the Corps when it designed and built Bonneville Dam," reads a sign in the dam's visitor

*editor's note

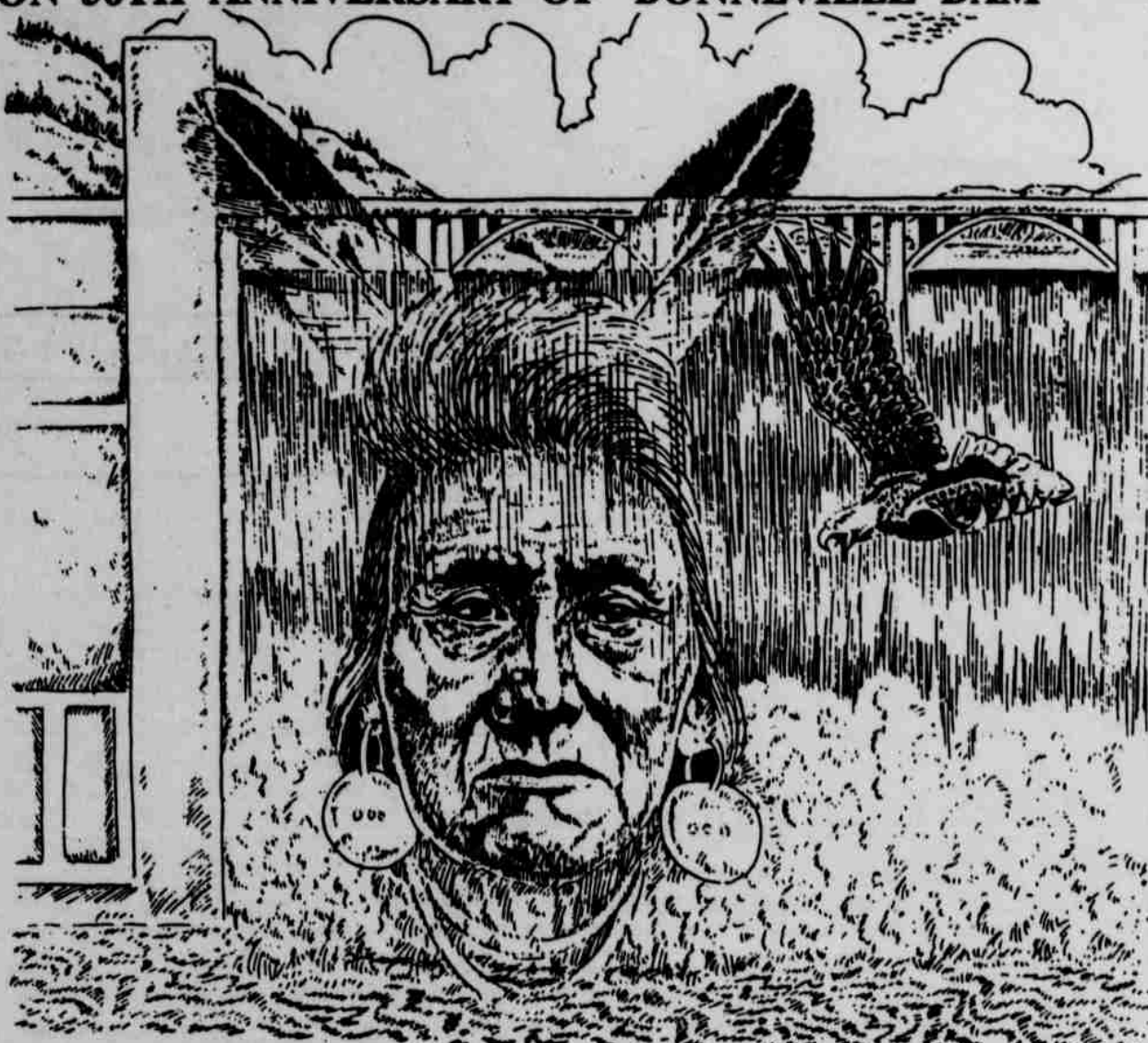


Illustration by Virgil Marchand

center. At the time, however, the Corps was not interested in being a "nursemaid" to fish. In fact, federal agencies claimed that the Dalles Dam would have a positive net effect on the fish runs by destroying the Indian fishery at Celilo Falls.

Regardless of motivation, the construction and operation of Columbia Basin hydroelectric dams have been responsible for three-fourths of the losses of the salmon and steelhead runs, which dropped from up to sixteen million fish annually to only two and a half million salmon and steelhead today.

While celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of Bonneville Dam, the Corps of Engineers and BPA are ignoring the harm done to fish runs by hydroelectric development. But more importantly, they are dragging their feet with restoration efforts to help correct their past mistakes. "If electrification has proceeded at the rate that fisheries restoration has," notes Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission (CRITFC) executive director Tim Wapato, "most of us would still be using candlelight."

These agencies could do much more to meet their legal (as well as moral) obligations to the Indians hurt by the almost one hundred dams on the Columbia and its tributaries. The Corps should purchase more of the long-awaited in-lieu fishing sites and should, as requested by the tribes and fishery agencies, spill more water over dams to increase the survival of salmon smolts migrating to the ocean. BPA should put its intertie expansion to sell more electricity to California on hold at least until fish passage around the dams has been greatly improved. Mitigation monies should be used to restore upriver runs, instead of (as in the past) just cranking out hatchery fish for non-Indian commercial fishing interests below Bonneville. Finally, federal water-management agencies, including BPA, need to view the Northwest Power Planning Council as a partner, not an adversary.