



Clarence Dill's West: Building Dams and Dreams

By Kerry E. Irish

CLARENCE C. DILL was one of Washington's more important, albeit largely forgotten politicians. He served the state and the nation as a United States congressman from 1915 to 1919, and as a United States senator from 1923 to 1935. The following essay summarizes Dill's career and attempts to answer some questions concerning his place in Washington state history, the history of the West, and the nation. In so doing, it assesses Dill's contributions to the modern West and takes a moment to address the ideas of some of the region's critics.

Clarence Dill retired too early from the Senate and lived too long afterward for his death to receive a great amount of attention. However, extended obituaries did appear in the state's major papers mentioning his work on radio legislation and Columbia Basin development. By the time of his death most Washingtonians were probably not impressed that he had been the Senate's driving force behind radio legislation in the 1920s and early 1930s. They simply could not relate to what radio had meant to the people of that era. The idea that listening to radio helped bring the nation closer together and began to unify East and West in a cultural and psychological manner would never have occurred to most of those who read his obituary in 1978. The vast majority of us live in the modern world without possessing an understanding of how that world was made possible. Dill played a significant role in shaping our reality.

Clarence Dill was one of the first modern senators. He understood the necessary course of the federal government's relationship to commerce, especially commerce based on new technology, in a way that few of his peers did. Indeed, the Supreme Court demonstrated the gulf between future and past, between Dill and his learned contemporaries on the bench, when it adopted an interpretation of interstate commerce in the Schechter case of 1935, which FDR caustically described as a "horse and buggy" definition. Dill's colleagues, even those who supported his radio legislation, admitted they knew little concerning the ramifications of radio technology or radio law. They simply supported Dill because public clamor for the legislation was so great.



Kerry E. Irish

Most Washingtonians reading Dill's obituary were probably surprised to learn of his role in bringing about Grand Coulee Dam's construction and Columbia River development. Many have seen the dam, and all of us benefit from the power and irrigation water it delivers. Nevertheless, we all more or less take for granted the benefits the Columbia River dams provide. Some of us do this even to the extent of arguing that they be dismantled. But for the vast majority of Pacific Northwesterners the benefits the dams provide—flood control, water storage and irrigation, electric power, soil erosion prevention, extended transportation, recreation, and market development—far outweigh their negative aspects, which, I hope, we will continue to work to mitigate. But we do see the dams differently from Dill's generation. Murray Morgan wrote of Grand Coulee in 1954:

There are parts of our culture that stink with phoniness. But we can do some wonderful things, too. That dam is one of them. If our generation has anything good to offer history, it is that dam. Why, the thing is going to be completely useful. It is going to be a working pyramid.

We no longer think of the dams in those terms. For us they are tools, not wonders—tools that require constant adjustments and maintenance. We do not share our forebears' enthusiasm because we are desensitized to amazing things in our culture due to their abundance; from medicine to entertainment, we are constantly confronted with the near miraculous. Another reason for our lack of amazement at the Columbia's dams is that they are not visually inspiring, not even Grand Coulee. Stewart Holbrook wrote of this paradox in *The Columbia*: "It is big, all right, but it has to contend with too much space to look big. Set in the midst of appalling distances, it appears like a play dam of children, lost in the terrifying wastes."

Just as the vast landscape diminishes our appreciation for Grand Coulee, the passage of time diminishes our appreciation for Dill and other Columbia River developers. I suppose this is as it should be; we need to make room to honor those who make new contributions to life in this region. But why did Dill's contemporaries deny him, except for a brief period in 1934, the credit due him for his work in bringing Grand Coulee to reality? One reason is that he occupied a unique and pioneering niche in state politics. As far as the western part of the state was concerned, he was an

Easterner—not one of them—thus he did not receive generous coverage from the large western papers. Moreover, he was something of an outcast in Spokane as well. As a Democrat he was not particularly welcome among the Republican powerbrokers of that city. William H. Cowles, publisher of the Inland Empire's dominant newspaper, was particularly venomous toward Dill. Finally, the grass-roots group centered in Ephrata and Wenatchee that had agitated for the dam since 1918 was leery of anything and anyone coming from Spokane—and with good reason, usually—so that even when the whole project rested on Dill's relationship with FDR, they were suspicious that he would betray the dam. One of the leaders of this group, Rufus Woods, was a diehard Republican and publisher of central Washington's most important newspaper, the *Wenatchee Daily World*. All things considered, it is remarkable that Dill's importance in relation to Grand Coulee can be discerned from extant sources.

Just as some denied Dill recognition for his work in developing the Columbia River, there are some today who criticize Dill and his generation for building dams in the first place. Donald Worster, one of these critics, advocates small community living, doing nothing more than the basics for survival. He writes:

Relieved of some of its [the West's] burdens of growing crops, earning foreign exchange, and supporting immense cities, it might encourage a new sequence of history, an incipient America of simplicity, discipline, and spiritual exploration, an America in which people are wont to sit long hours doing nothing, earning nothing, going nowhere, on the banks of some river running through a spare, lean land.

For Worster, the dams and the reclamation they made possible epitomize the evils of the capitalist system in the West. His solution requires nothing less than the complete transformation of human nature. When water is scarce, human beings as we know them, as history reveals them, respond quite differently from Worster's idyllic man. Stewart Holbrook described that response when he wrote, "Men fought, sued, and shot each other because of water. Communities warred and split because of water."

Contrary to Worster's ideal, in the real West, populated with real people, irrigation was a prerequisite for survival. One either irrigated land in the arid regions or moved away. The very first white settler in the arid region of eastern Washington, Marcus Whitman, possessed his share of idealism but was practical enough to see the necessity of irrigation. There was no other way the land could support significant numbers of people. The West's aridity, then, was a significant factor in molding the lives of Westerners and their society. Wallace Stegner wrote of the West's pioneers, "Most of the changes in people's lives—which I am quite sure in most of their lives were unintended—were forced upon them by the condition of aridity." In short, Worster and those who believe as he does have little concept of what life would really be like if they were to implement their philosophy and even less understanding of the

human suffering that implementation would engender.

Aridity, then, dictated the nature of life in much of the West in Dill's early days and is even more powerful today given the scarcity of good farmland. The need for irrigation in the West, in Dill's Inland Empire, is a constant that ties the past to the present and makes us very much like our forebears. So too our dependence on electrical power. There are other continuities as well.

Despite assertions to the contrary, the West is still a place of open spaces and extended distances. The task of those who came here before us was to conquer that wilderness and overcome the distance to make a non-nomadic civilization possible. Our task may well be to preserve what wilderness remains to make temporary escape from the pressures of modern life possible. Thus, the problem before us concerning the wilderness is very different than the one our forebears faced. Let us not criticize our ancestors because they faced a different challenge.

The answer to our dilemma does not lie in disavowing the progress of the past, as Donald Worster would have us do. He argues that the West is trapped by its past. Because of its reliance on irrigation it is ruled by a concentrated power hierarchy based on the command of scarce water. The great evil for Worster—after the capitalist economy—is irrigation and how it is used to allow a small group to dominate others and the land. Surely, though, it was not the dams and irrigation canals that were the basis for this alleged power structure but the reality that water was scarce. Even without dams and irrigation, the fact would remain that whoever controlled the water possessed great power. It would only have meant concentrating a more limited resource in fewer hands, with the result of even fewer people living in arid areas. The problem is aridity, not man's ancient solution to it. Worster continues in error when he writes that the basic problem is "the apparatus and ideology of unrestrained environmental conquest which lies at the root of the Joads' affliction."

The people of Dill's generation, including the Joads of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, would not have understood Worster's solution to their problem. In fact, they would have thought him crazy, for Worster has their affliction exactly backwards. Isn't the cause of the Joads' desperation the failure to control the Dust Bowl environment of Oklahoma? And didn't irrigation, far from being their nemesis in the West, offer them some hope that they might find a new home? Hasn't the West offered that new home to millions? And without irrigation where might those millions have gone? What would have become of them? Though it is true that only a small percentage of those who came west now live on an irrigated farm, all Westerners benefit from the cornucopia irrigation makes possible and from the power the Columbia River's dams generate. Stegner analyzed correctly the role of irrigation and the federal government in the West when he said, "I think the West would have been impossible without federal intervention [which brought vast irrigation projects]. What might have happened to the country had not the West absorbed so many displaced persons in the thirties?" Worster's "solutions" to society's problems do not address those problems: they eliminate the society. Though

Stegner was no admirer of the modern West—he identified too closely with the West of his youth for that—he understood what irrigation meant to the region. And in that recognition he leads us to another interesting question: How did the West come to be a region built, to a large extent, on irrigation?

The effort to irrigate extensive sections of western land was largely unsuccessful until the federal government passed the Newlands Act in 1902. Under this act money derived from selling public lands in the West was to be used to construct irrigation projects. Land reclaimed through these projects was then to be sold in 160-acre parcels or less, depending on the needs of family farmers. The Newlands Act was a significant milestone in the region's history in that it marked the intrusion of the federal government into two of the defining elements of western life: water supply and agriculture.


Out of the Newlands Act came the Bureau of Reclamation, which held the power to pass judgment on the hopes and dreams of Westerners. But even the federal government found conquering the vastness of the West a challenge. The Newlands Act failed to reclaim lands to the degree its proponents had envisioned. As a result, intense development of the West's reclaimable lands did not begin until Franklin Roosevelt became president. When FDR spoke to the 20,000 people assembled at Grand Coulee on August 4, 1934, he looked forward to vast development of the region, fully aware that New Deal dollars were coming west in disproportionate amounts. He pointed out to his Grand Coulee audience that he had allocated to the three states, Washington, Oregon, and Idaho, a "much larger share of the public works than the population justifies." There were many reasons for this, but surely one of them was reclamation's ability to provide homes and jobs for thousands of the nation's unemployed once agricultural commodities returned a fair profit. FDR shared Thomas Jefferson's romantic notions concerning farm life. If he could put people on farms as part of the solution to the Great Depression, he would do it.

Other reasons the West received New Deal dollars in disproportionate amounts were the extent of poverty and suffering in the region and many federal aid programs' favoritism for large, sparsely populated areas. Donald Reading has made a fascinating study of this issue in which he argues that the federal government tended to spend money in states where it owned a higher percentage of land and where real per capita personal income had declined the sharpest. Reading further argues that an important

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BROADCASTING SYSTEM AND KJR

Dill not only used radio in his 1940 gubernatorial campaign—as evidenced by this flyer—he had also been the Senate's leader in creating legislation that provided radio with its legal structure.

factor in determining whether New Deal funds would be spent in a state was the willingness of state and local units to set up machinery for disbursing such funds. Moreover, the vigor with which state officials lobbied for programs seems to have had a significant effect on the flow of funds. Reading is correct—funds for Grand Coulee came to the Pacific Northwest because the region, led by Clarence Dill, lobbied so effectively for them and because Dill had placed himself in a persuasive position with the president.

ONE QUESTION REMAINS: Why were Westerners so determined to secure New Deal dollars? The answer has to do with the builder mentality so typical of the West in the first half of the 20th century. Recognizing that their region possessed vast resources but was underdeveloped, western congressman and senators—Dill chief among them—went after New Deal dollars like Sooners after new land. The Washingtonian brought to his quest for Grand Coulee a long-term plan and a refusal to take no for an answer, plus an army of like-minded Westerners. There was little of the squabbling that beset other regions over whether the West wanted federal help. The peculiar western mind, then,

had much to do with securing New Deal dollars, which in turn helped create the modern dam-based West.

Though the reclamation aspect of Grand Coulee did not become a reality until the 1950s, the Pacific Northwest benefited enormously from the other aspect of the project: cheap electricity. In the 1920s the Pacific Northwest was an economic and social hinterland, a colony. The region's failure to gain a significant tariff on wood products in the late 1920s suggests that it was a political colony as well. Dill understood how the rest of the country was using the Pacific Northwest and how the immense Grand Coulee project could help develop the region. He saw clearly that cheap power and reclamation could help bring prosperity to the region and that prosperity would help make Washington more powerful politically. Indeed, he fought for the project on the grounds that other parts of the nation were benefiting from large federal projects (Muscle Shoals on the Tennessee River and Boulder Dam on the Colorado River) while the Pacific Northwest was being rebuffed with regard to Grand Coulee. Thus it was no surprise to Clarence Dill when the development of the Columbia River, especially Grand Coulee Dam, began to change Washington's relationship to the rest of the country. The cheap and abundant electricity Grand Coulee provided made possible vast increases in manufacturing during World War II. Shipbuilding, aircraft

construction, and aluminum production increased dramatically in the region as a result of the war. The latter two remain important aspects of the region's economy.

Then there is Hanford. Because of the vast open spaces and the existence of cheap electricity, southeastern Washington was a logical site for nuclear experimentation. One might argue that Hanford was the price the Pacific Northwest paid to become an equal member of the Union. However we view Hanford, the nation's defense needs and the region's electrical power, combined with Boeing's commercial aircraft industry, have formed the backbone of the Pacific Northwest postwar economy. It was no accident that in the third quarter of the 20th century another senator from Washington, Henry Jackson, rose to the top echelons of the Senate as an expert on defense.

Clarence Dill was extremely proud of his region's importance during the war, due largely to Grand Coulee. He smiled when he heard people say the great dam may have won World War II because it supplied the energy that produced the aluminum for 60 percent of America's planes. He was prouder still of the region's increasing prosperity, made more evident with each passing decade. He accepted completely the idea that development was good, that prosperity defined as a rising standard of living was a worthy goal. He would have shaken his head in dismay at the trend in western literature that sees the present West as unworthy of the past, that the West of today has lost its allure, its romance.

We come, then, to Clarence Dill the man and his contribution to Pacific Northwest history. In his prime Dill was an accomplished politician, adept at presenting a carefully crafted image to the public. A historian, however, must not allow a politician's image to obscure the man. As John Clive has written, history is "to a great extent a process of penetrating disguises and uncovering what is hidden."

Clarence Dill believed firmly in what Stegner calls "three of the American gospels: work, progress, and the inviolability of contract," though perhaps it is fair to say he believed in them in inverse order. Dill was a lawyer and a politician; on more than one occasion he sued for failure to fulfill a contract. Moreover, the work of lawyers and politicians rests on the strength of the contracts they make. Nor did work scare the Methodist-raised Dill, though he learned early on that one hour with his nose behind the rear end of a mule was less enjoyable than two with his nose in a book.

Then there is progress; Dill believed in three kinds of progress and came to believe that they might be mutually exclusive. First, he believed in progressive political principles: the idea that government could and should make society better for the majority of people. Second, he believed in progress for individuals, the people of his district and state. He wanted to see those people do better for themselves and the government do better by them. Finally, he believed in progress for Clarence Dill; he did not want to spend his life in public service and have little to show for it. Wesley Jones's defeat in 1932 and quick subsequent death profoundly affected Dill. From the time Dill chose to retire in 1934 (and probably

much earlier) to the end of his lawsuit against Grant County PUD over his Canadian storage work, Dill wrestled with the conflict between making money and serving the public interest.

There are other aspects of Dill's personality worth remembering, especially his attachment to the Pacific Northwest, his chosen home. He loved eastern Washington, with its azure sky, sparkling waters, and majestic landscape. Reminiscent of the first President Roosevelt, he loved to hunt and fish; the outdoors was his sanctuary from politics.

Dill was also a student of history, and though he studied it without great depth, he learned that change was a given in human society. Thus

there was no sense in looking back to some mythical Golden Age as many of his progressive brethren did. He believed in taking from the past what was useful—the solid principles and wisdom of men like Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln—and moving forward, progressing. In that adaptability, Dill was unlike many people both past and present who, partly as a result of their lack of historical perspective, are reluctant or unable to adapt to new realities. Without a knowledge of history many people know only their own lives, thus they are prisoners of the present and afraid of what lies ahead. Dill was never afraid of the future.

Dill used history to provide a philosophical base for his politics and material for his oratorical performances. The spoken word was his lifelong love, but it was a blind romance. He did not notice when the oratorical style that had made William Jennings Bryan so popular, the style he had adopted as his own, lost its ability to impress most Americans. Dill's persistence in speaking in the oratorical style that had helped send him to the Senate in 1922 caused many later observers to esteem him lightly and believe he had significantly exaggerated his accomplishments. Indeed, for many he became the living stereotype of the old-time machine politician: tainted with graft, a blowhard, and a has-been—not the complicated political maverick that he has been portrayed in my book. Those who remembered him as he had truly been regarded him differently from those who knew him only in his later years. The correspondence between Dill and Warren Magnuson is full of the latter's respect for the old senator.



Franklin D. Roosevelt (behind the microphone), who visited the Grand Coulee Dam site in 1934, was an avid supporter of the dam project, public power, and irrigation of arid lands.

Nevertheless, Dill did feel the need to tell people of his accomplishments. Part of this need was rooted in his political personality: successful politicians must find a way to make their constituents aware of their accomplishments; but the greater cause of this self-promotion was his unique position in the history of Washington state politics. Dill was nothing less than a pioneer in his own right: a progressive Democrat in a state full of progressive Republicans and conservative Democrats. This circumstance forced him to distance himself from the state's Democratic party so that he could appeal to enough progressive Republicans to get elected. The result was a state Democratic party that was always suspicious of its most prominent member in the 1920s and early 1930s. Seldom did the party credit Dill for his accomplishments.

Dill's east side origins only added to his isolation. Washington's major newspapers—along with most of the population—were situated in the Puget Sound region. These newspapers, almost always Republican in sympathy, tended to ignore the rest of the state. They especially ignored successful Democrats whenever possible. Nor were the two primary papers on the east side of the mountains, the *Wenatchee Daily World* and the *Spokesman-Review*, any more forthcoming in praise.

Dill's unique political position in the state thus contributed to his propensity for self-promotion. If he hadn't promoted himself through his vast letter-writing and public appearances, his constituents would seldom have heard about his efforts on their behalf.

when his own enrichment became more important to him, moments when he violated the public trust.

Nevertheless, there was much good in Clarence Dill. His life is one of those that substantially contributed to the molding of the United States into one nation. Inasmuch as our national identity consists of both East and West—is a mingling of the two—Dill helped establish the mix. Dill's life and work can be seen as strengthening the ties that bound the nation together, ties that have held in tough times. Energized by a dream of cheap power and reclaiming otherwise marginal frontier land, Dill sought and secured the aid of the federal government in developing the Columbia Basin. As a result, Westerners grew to look more often to Washington, D.C., for solutions to their problems than in the past.

Dill embodied the more robust western version of the American spirit of his time in another way as well: he rose from being dirt poor to entering the upper middle class by his own exertions. At the same time, he avoided developing contempt for those who failed to follow his example. He was always sympathetic to the less fortunate among his constituents, as his voting record on farm and labor issues attests. In his efforts on behalf of the less prosperous members of society, Dill was an advocate of change. He understood the changes that were coming and wanted to be a part of the inevitable transformation they would bring. Indeed, he wanted to lead in that transformation.

Dill's life links East and West and demonstrates the mutability of American social classes. It also serves as a bridge between past and present. The West of today, in many ways, is still very much like the West of Clarence Dill's youth: vast open spaces, wilderness, populations centered in cities, and, of course, the condition of aridity in most of the region. Consequently, life in the modern Pacific Northwest depends to a great extent on irrigation and hydroelectric power, two developments in which Dill played a leading role. Few of us would be willing to renounce these developments, which brings us to the question posed much earlier: Is it more instructive for Pacific Northwesterners of today to view themselves as essentially similar to their antecedents of the first half of the 20th century or have we become so different that those differences define who we are? There can be no question that there are differences. But the overwhelming fact remains that we share an abiding faith in progress with those who came before us in this region; we still believe government can be a tool in that progress, and we feel that building and development are good if carefully managed. Careful management implies cooperation and compromise among competing interests; it has always been so. In the best western tradition, the tradition Clarence Dill embodied, cooperation will remain the path to progress.

Kerry E. Irish is a professor at George Fox University. This essay is the epilogue from his book, Clarence C. Dill, The Life of a Western Politician (Washington State University Press, 2000), excerpted here with permission of the publisher.

Part of the Kittitas Irrigation Canal, this is the junction of two different types of irrigation flumes in Kittitas County, and just one facet of the Columbia Reclamation project.

As his life continued into its post-political period this self-promotion, once so politically necessary, became a habit that resulted in some unfavorable impressions.

The epic length of Clarence Dill's life presents other problems. He lived so long and was involved in so many different events that it is difficult to bring structure and balance to his biography. In that sense, he is very much like the region he made home—the West. In truth, Dill was the archetypal Westerner: he never stopped building, never questioned whether or not building was progress.

We might excuse this optimistic boosterism if we could say that Dill was an honest man, always guarding the public interest. But evidence suggests that he had moments of weakness, moments

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COVER: Although this c. 1845 drawing by frontier artist Paul Kane is labeled "Clackamus Indians," it actually appears to be a composite of four different native groups from the lower Columbia region. For example, the "Nez Perce" (French for pierced nose) is depicted in the upper right. The Lewis and Clark journals refer to a "handsome people" in the Columbia River Gorge region with features that looked very European; the image on the bottom right reflects this description. Paul Kane also described in great detail how the Cowlitz Indians flattened the heads of their young, a practice that left a permanent facial feature; this can be seen in the bottom left image. Finally, William Clark described coming across natives from the Willamette River region with white paint across their foreheads, as seen in the figure in the drawing's upper left. The drawings clearly represent facial characteristics of Native American groups the Corps of Discovery encountered as they traveled through Oregon and Washington. See related article beginning on page 22. (Courtesy Stark Museum of Art, Orange, Texas.)