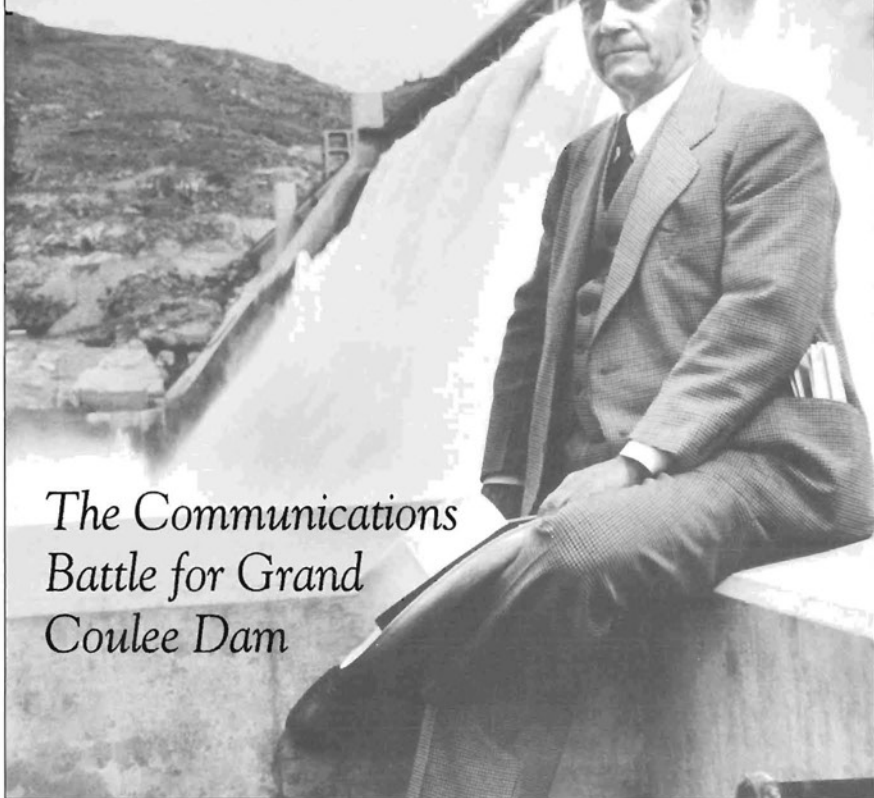


RUFUS WOODS



The Communications Battle for Grand Coulee Dam

BY REBECCA SMITH

THE BATTLE FOR GRAND COULEE is, I believe, one of the GREATEST DRAMAS OF THE WEST.

—Rufus Woods

The town of Wenatchee sits in the cradle of the Columbia River's Big Bend. Since the turn of the 20th century Wenatchee's economy had depended on its apple boom, but by the end of the 1920s the land was quickly drying up. At that time the town's political controversies revolved around moral issues such as

Prohibition, and Rufus Woods, editor of the town's leading newspaper, the *Wenatchee Daily World*, remained at the forefront of every local project. Through private letters, numerous organizations and, most importantly, the *Daily World*, Rufus Woods began to advocate the building of Grand Coulee Dam. His efforts eventually brought the people of Wenatchee, and ultimately the federal government, to understand his convictions about the project's importance, resulting in the completion of one of history's greatest feats of reclamation.

An ecstatic creativity had always characterized Rufus Woods's life, from childhood pranks with his twin brother to his self-admitted obsession with north

central Washington's development. Woods was enthusiastic and determined. These qualities helped make him a trusted community leader with extensive influence in promoting Grand Coulee Dam.

Born on a Nebraska homestead May 17, 1878, Woods moved with his family to Wenatchee in 1904, following what he called "The Westward Urgc." After working as editor of two local newspapers, he quit when his co-manager sold one of them to the rather unsuccessful *Wenatchee Daily World*. He dabbled in real estate before returning to the news business and assuming full management of the *Daily World* in 1907.

The *World* faced immediate problems as it struggled to survive financial hardships and attacks from competing newspapers. Woods persevered, however, expanding the *World's* coverage area and influence. As editor, he endeavored "to evaluate and see the great drama of life as it exists." His writing reflected his public speaking style and included frequent exclamations in capital letters. In his own words, Woods "played it big."

Through the *Daily World*, Woods promoted economic freedom from the Great Northern Railroad, better transportation via the Stevens Pass Highway, and several local irrigation and improvement projects. A local lawyer, Sam R. Summer, attested that Woods's "reputation for honesty and good citizenship was of the very highest." This growing leadership turned the *Daily World* into a great success, with Woods's editorials published in over 200 weeklies throughout Washington. He became a well-known figure statewide, which would prove key in helping the community understand the Grand Coulee Dam project.

In 1918 Ephrata lawyer William "Billy" Clapp read studies by Professor Henry Landes propounding that a great "ice dam" once diverted the course of the Columbia River. Clapp's reasoning was simple: if nature could do it, why couldn't we? After all, the United States Bureau of Reclamation was already exploring irrigation projects in the Western states. With little engineering knowledge, he proposed a huge dam on

the Columbia River at Grand Coulee, a 30-mile gorge carved near the ancient river. The main difficulties, he deemed, would involve gathering funds for such a massive project.

Woods heard of Clapp's proposal on a routine search for news. His reaction was simple: "Billy's got it!" He published the first article on the dam in the *Daily World* on July 18, 1918, under the headline "Formulate Brand New Idea for Irrigation Grant, Adams, Franklin Counties, Covering Million Acres or More." This short article, pushed to page seven by World War I updates, announced Clapp's idea as "the latest, the newest, the most ambitious idea in the way of reclamation and development of water power ever formulated...now in process of development." It promised a 700-foot-tall dam that would provide "practically unlimited" irrigation water. Rufus Woods thus entered into what he frequently called "the Battle for the Grand Coulee Dam," his greatest feat of communication.

Shortly after this first article on the dam, Elbert F. Blaine, Washington State Public Service Commission chairman, proposed a different reclamation project—a canal over 130 miles long that would carry water from the Pend Oreille River in Idaho to the barren scablands of the Columbia Basin without using a dam. Because the idea relied on the land's slope to deliver water, it became known as the "Gravity Plan." Clapp's idea used pumps to carry water from the dam to a reservoir nearby and was therefore dubbed the Pumping Plan. The Gravity Plan enraged Woods. He later called it "a Gigantic Hoax."

What further exasperated Woods was that several wealthy power companies backed the Gravity Plan, afraid of losing business to a dam's inexpensive electricity. "It's a great idea, boys," cautioned

contractor F. A. Keasal, "but you will find you are up against all the money in the world." However, Frank T. Post, president of the Washington Water Power Company in Spokane, denied in a letter to Woods that his company was trying to stop the Grand Coulee project. "Our company and the other companies out here are not doing a damn thing in relation to the Grand Coulee dam," he wrote. In October 1934, James D. Ross, superintendent of Seattle City Light, also wrote Woods saying Woods's claim that City Light had "attacked" the dam surprised him. Woods countered by saying, "The \$5 million which you got from the New York bankers tied you up to fight Grand Coulee Dam."

Woods was likely right: Gravity Plan proponents had extensive political and monetary influence. The Washington Water Power Company funded an early study on the two plans—and hired its own engineers. Not surprisingly, the study recommended the Gravity Plan. Next, Gravity Plan backers helped hire George Goethals, chief engineer of the Panama Canal. Though Goethals's name carried great influence, he knew nothing about irrigation. After six days of "work," he copied most of his report from information the Water Power Company provided and declared the Gravity Plan superior. Exasperated, Woods dismissed the report.

Woods published frequent articles about the dam in the *Daily World*. In them, he defied every criticism that arose. "First the story was that there was no bedrock for a dam.... This was proven false very easily." Next, newspapers like the *Yakima Republic* and *Bellingham Herald* questioned the need for power. "There has been a growing demand for power throughout the Northwest," countered Woods. From 1929 through the 1930s the Northwest, especially Seattle, faced acute power shortages. When opposition turned to questioning the need for agricultural land, their queries were literally blown away by massive dust storms in 1931. "The big dust storm of the last few days...calls attention in a graphic manner to the necessity of conserving this immense body of rich fertile soil," stated the *World*.

The opposition also made attempts to stop promotional meetings and even take over the Columbia Basin Commission, an organization in favor of the dam. Woods argued against all contradicting claims before the public in his trademark capital letters, describing opposition to the dam as "Politics – Intrigue – Misinformation – Threats – Deceit – Big Money – Ridicule – Intimidation." His head-on style held the public's attention.

Many interests, other than those of power companies, were at stake in the Grand Coulee Dam proposal. The dam



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OPPOSITE PAGE: Rufus Woods posed before the Grand Coulee spillway.

RIGHT: The Columbia Basin and Grand Coulee Dam.

would affect neighboring Indian tribes as well as area farmers and landowners, and even anthropologists. Rufus Woods addressed some of them in one *Daily World* article. He maintained, "Water users are virtually 100% for the Pumping Plan." He pointed out that with Blaine's Gravity plan, farmers would have to pay \$200 an acre to build the main canal of over 130 miles on their land. At a 1931 landowners' meeting in Ephrata, all but one person "favored [a] small district to be under [the] pumping plan." Most people who attended the meeting were local farmers.

Woods did not, however, publicize that the dam would flood traditional Indian ceremonial, burial, and fishing grounds as well as significantly deplete the salmon population. Many Colville Indians made a living off Columbia River salmon until Grand Coulee Dam forced them into poverty. Several towns were relocated and 21,000 acres were cleared and then flooded by the dam's reservoir. Besides this, anthropologists lost an important archaeological dig

to the dam's flooding. Perhaps Woods misunderstood this, but neither he nor the dam's builders fully addressed its negative impacts. In fact, they thought the salmon population could be fully replaced with a fishery in Leavenworth. Woods, along with the majority of Washingtonians, believed that the dam's benefits outweighed its drawbacks.

In 1929 the Great Depression struck, and Wenatchee was swept into the crisis when apple prices hit all-time lows. By 1932 President Franklin Delano Roosevelt promised to turn the economy around with a "New Deal." One of his most prominent strategies was the construction of public buildings and landmarks. In this way, the New Deal created an opportunity for Woods and the proposed Grand Coulee Dam. In 1931 the Army Corps of Engineers had recommended Grand Coulee Dam over Blaine's Gravity Plan, but Woods still had to pull every string he could to take advantage of FDR's program and gain funding for the dam.

Besides using the *World* as a mouthpiece for the dam, Woods also worked through letters and organizations to push Grand Coulee. He became an active leader in the Columbia Basin Irrigation League (CBIL), which put out a pamphlet for dam supporters in 1931. CBIL outlined an effort to gain the government's attention "through their own constituents," referring to local manufacturers and wholesalers. It encouraged consumers to write local businesses, arguing that irrigation with a dam at Grand Coulee was the only way to improve the economy. The dam, they promised, would generate \$600 million in taxable wealth and a \$180 million market for manufacturers per year. Woods was also president of the Columbia River Development League, which held numerous public meetings, including one that drew 5,000 people, 18 congressmen, and prompted the temporary closure of local schools.

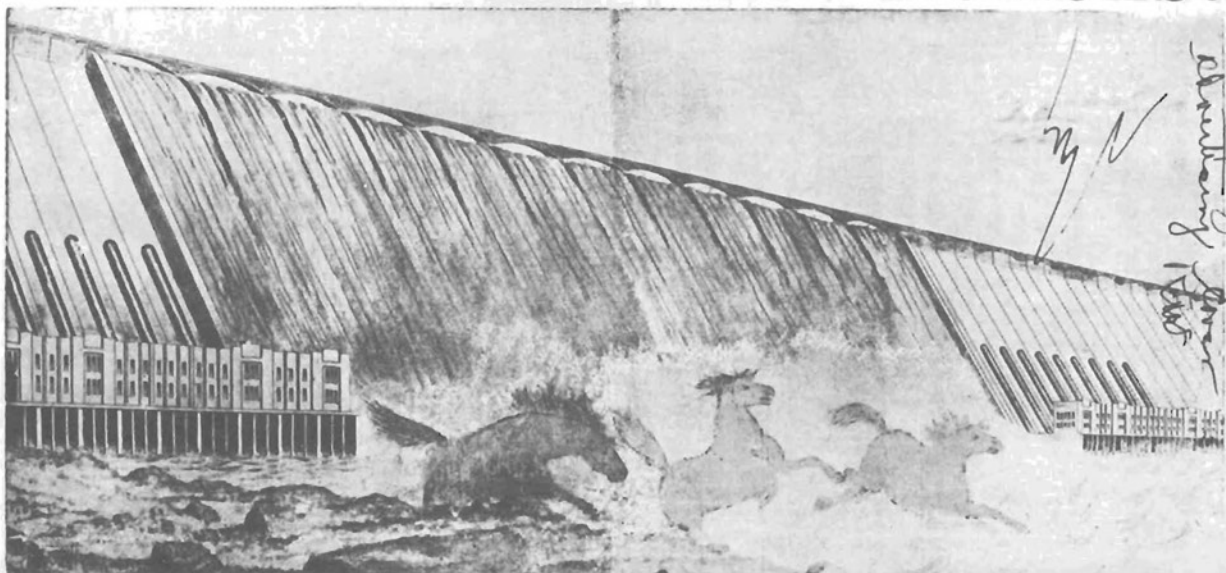
Rufus Woods's determination finally paid off when, in 1933, President Roosevelt included Grand Coulee Dam

COULEE DAM EDITION

THE WENATCHEE DAILY WORLD
PUBLISHED IN THE APPLE CAPITAL OF THE WORLD AND IN THE BUCKLE OF THE POWER BELT OF THE GREAT NORTHWEST

COULEE DAM EDITION

HOW AT GRAND COULEE DAM U. S. RECLAMATION ENGINEERS OVERSEE HARNESSING OF TWO MILLION WILD HORSES!



Wenatchee World, #979-732 St.281, Special Collections, WSHS

OPPOSITE PAGE: This was the front page of the Wenatchee Daily World on January 19, 1937.

RIGHT: President Roosevelt inspecting the site of Grand Coulee Dam, 1934.

in his Public Works Administration (PWA) construction plan. The dam would provide jobs for the unemployed, allow barges to navigate the Columbia, and generate electricity to “operate railroads, factories, mines, irrigation pumps, [and] furnish heat and light.” However, the result was bittersweet. Woods and his fellow dam supporters had wanted government funding for a locally run project. Instead, the Bureau of Reclamation, under the PWA, would oversee the dam’s construction. Because of this, much of Grand Coulee’s electric wealth was distributed to Portland and Seattle, ending Woods’s dream of turning Wenatchee into the center of the “Inland Empire.” Nevertheless, Woods sent no mixed messages. He continued to support the dam as enthusiastically as ever, writing articles on its progress and traveling to Washington, D.C., to discuss its construction.

Grand Coulee Dam took eight years to complete. During that time the Roosevelt Administration and Congress created the Bonneville Power Administration to sell the electricity produced by the dam. In addition, local communities thrived as thousands of workers moved into new boomtowns. Grand Coulee Dam became a national obsession. “Every one in America has heard of Grand Coulee,” proclaimed the *New York Times*.

On December 12, 1941, workers poured the last concrete on the dam. “HOLD THAT RIVER!” wrote Woods. “HERE IT STANDS, AN ENDURING MONUMENT.”

Throughout Rufus Woods’s “23 Years’ Battle for Grand Coulee Dam” it was his diverse yet singularly consistent communication that enabled the public and ultimately the federal government to understand how important the dam would be. In the end, he succeeded. “I sincerely doubt whether we would have



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Grand Coulee today,” wrote Charles E. Cone, “if it had not been that your paper and your immense personal prestige were launched in the struggle for that ‘slab of concrete across the Columbia River.’”

Grand Coulee Dam is the largest concrete structure in North America, generating power used throughout the western United States and irrigating over 1 million acres. Wenatchee and all of the Inland Empire have comparatively inexpensive electricity and irrigation. During World War II, Grand Coulee demonstrated global significance by producing power for the Hanford Project as well as for production of the aluminum that constructed one-third of the American fighter planes. The dam also generated thousands of jobs, countering unemployment during the Great Depression. Had not Rufus Woods so vividly communicated his dream, it is possible that none of this would have come about. “Rufus Woods was a very important part of Wenatchee’s history,” stated former *Wenatchee World* employee Larry Chapman. “Anyone who has been [in Wenatchee] a long time will see his contributions.”

Rufus Woods’s position as the highly influential editor of the *Wenatchee Daily World* and his public reputation enabled him to effectively promote Grand Coulee Dam. Had he been unable to reach such a widespread audience, the “Pumping Plan” might not have garnered

so much regional support. His articles set in motion the countless meetings, organizations, and publicity efforts that led to success for the dam’s supporters. He overcame opposition and helped the community understand his convictions. Though he made no money from the dam, Rufus Woods poured himself into Wenatchee’s reclamation. His ardent communications improved eastern Washington, turning Wenatchee from a “rag-tag and bobtailed” town into a prosperous community. As Woods proclaimed in his dedication address, standing before the completed Grand Coulee Dam in 1942: “The magic spirit of willing men accomplishes more than the might of money or the marvels of machinery.”

Rebecca Smith is currently a junior at Bothell High School. She wrote this winning essay for the History Day competition when she was in eighth grade. She continues to participate in History Day. Her essays for 2006 and 2007 placed first at the regional and state levels, the latter also placing first at the national competition.

EDITOR’S NOTE

History Day started as a small contest in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1974. Members of the history department at Case Western Reserve University developed the initial idea for a history contest to make teaching and learning history a fun and exciting experience. Now students all over the country participate each year, including more than 4,000 Washington students. The Historical Society coordinates Washington History Day. For more information, visit WashingtonHistoryDay.org or contact Lauren Danner at 360/586-0165.

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FRONT COVER: Various modes of transportation are represented in this Northern Pacific art deco postcard image of Seattle, c. 1930. Conspicuously featured is King Street Station, with its clock tower modeled after the famous campanile in Venice's St. Mark's Square. (#2003.174.1, Special Collections, Washington State Historical Society) BACK COVER: The front of an 1884 promotional brochure put out by the Great Northern Pacific, touting its many development activities. (#2006.73.10, Special Collections, Washington State Historical Society)