

# COLUMBIA

THE MAGAZINE OF NORTHWEST HISTORY ■ SUMMER 1990 ■ \$5.00



## JACKHAMMER JOHN®

I hammered on Bonneville, Coulee, too,  
Always broke when my job was through;

Lord, Lord, well, I got them  
Jackhammer Blues;

I hammered on th' river from a sun to sun,  
Fifteen million salmons run;

Lord, Lord, well, I got them  
Jackhammer Blues.

I hammered in th' rain,  
I hammered in th' dust,  
I hammered in th' best,  
and I hammered in th' worst;  
Lord, Lord, well, I got them  
Jackhammer Blues;

I got a Jackhammer gal just sweet as pie,  
And I'm gonna hammer till th' day I die,  
Lord, Lord, well, I got them  
Jackhammer Blues!



# VANESSA HELDER

and  
*Grand Coulee Dam*

By Larry Schoonover

**Z** Vanessa Helder (1903-1968) was more interested in an "art challenge" than in chronicling the dramatic construction of Grand Coulee Dam and its environs. Fortunately, though, she maintained a folio collection of her 1940-1941 watercolors and, in 1954, sold a series of 20 illustrations to the Eastern Washington State Historical Society in Spokane.

At the time, a local newspaper columnist acknowledged Helder's aesthetic contribution by stating, "In her portrayal of the Coulee industrial scenes one can feel the vigor and immensity of the project. Her colors are consistently the tawny beige and brown tones of the familiar hills. In working with the stark masses of building and dam construc-



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tion she uses her medium in a forceful manner."

Vanessa Helder was born in Seattle and educated at the University of Washington. In 1934 she won a two-year scholarship to the Art Students League in New York. She returned to the Pacific Northwest, worked briefly as a commercial

artist designing candy box containers, and shortly thereafter had a showing at the Seattle Art Museum. Her artwork, "accurately realistic," was already recognized by several New York gallery dealers.

In 1939, Helder became an instructor at the Works Progress Administration's Art Center in Spokane. Helder taught watercolor and oil painting at the Art Center from 1939 until 1941 or 1942. According to an associate and friend, Mr. Robert Engard, she was a "good teacher, well liked by her students, and was able to interest many local residents in art."

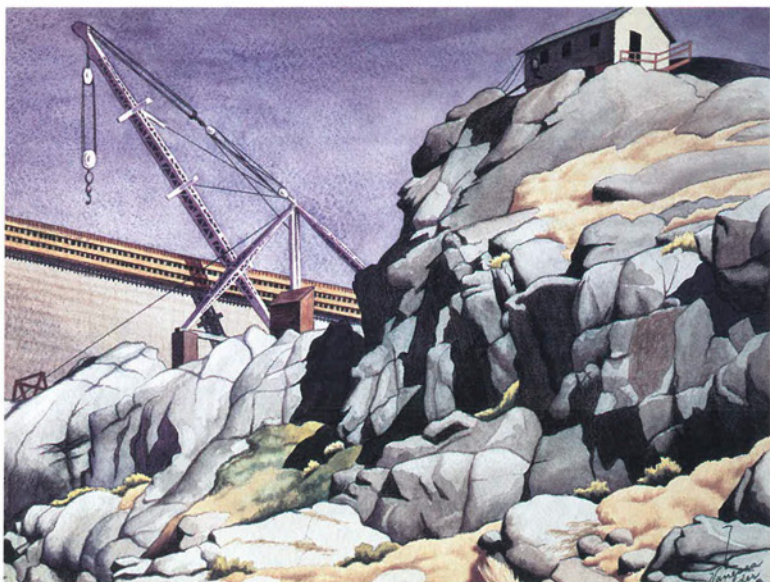
Helder and Engard were regional artists who found inspiration in the local countryside. Helder "preferred to work on site" and the two companions explored the region in search of artistic subject matter. Engard

"Stiff Legged Crane," watercolor, Vanessa Helder, 14.5" x 20.5".

recalls that Helder owned a 1935 Ford V8, and that the artists traveled with "watercolors and sketching materials, used dinner plates for palettes, and the steering wheel and a piece of plywood for easels."

**T**hey traveled south to Lewiston and the Snake River country, north to Kettle Falls, and virtually anywhere in the Palouse within a 50-mile radius of Spokane. According to Engard, Helder's "best work was of the Palouse country" and she continued to execute commissions of her watercolors for exhibition and sale at the Macbeth Galleries in New York.

To the best of Engard's recollection, he and Vanessa Helder only spent two or three weekends at Grand Coulee, but "she may have returned to the area later." Helder evidently knew one of the engineers associated with the Bureau of



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Reclamation, and the artistic travelers were granted permission to go on site in an effort “to get a feel for the project.” They had to wear hard hats, were under constant supervision, and were not allowed to make sketches while actually on the dam. They did, however, make numerous sketches from the vantage of Vista House and the nearby community of Electric City.

Helder probably completed her watercolors from her many field drawings. Engard is certain that he recognizes several completed watercolors that were only depicted in sketch form during their forays. Helder’s

redeeming talent was her adeptness at “coloring and lighting,” qualities that are quite evident in the Grand Coulee Dam watercolors.

Interestingly, there are reports that several national periodicals, *Life* and *Fortune* for example, were interested in utilizing Vanessa Helder’s watercolors as illustrations for articles on the completion of Grand Coulee project. The bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941 and America’s entry into World War II evidently prohibited the publication of her artwork for “national security” reasons.

Vanessa Helder married an architectural engineer in 1943 and the couple moved to Los Angeles. Helder remained active artistically and was well known in the southern California art community. Residents of the Inland Empire, however, remember Vanessa Helder for her visual portrayal of the construction of Grand Coulee Dam, harbinger of electrical power and economic prosperity.

*Larry Schoonover is curator of history for the Eastern Washington State Historical Society.*

“Coulee Dam, Looking West,” watercolor, Vanessa Helder, 18" x 22".

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Cover: "Jackhammer Crew," watercolor, Z. Vanessa Helder, 15" x 20.5" (ca. 1940-41). Courtesy of the Eastern Washington State Historical Society, Spokane. Lyrics from "Jackhammer John" (TRO © 1961 (renewed) and 1963 Ludlow Music, Inc., New York, New York), by celebrated American songwriter Woody Guthrie, printed with permission from The Richmond Organization.