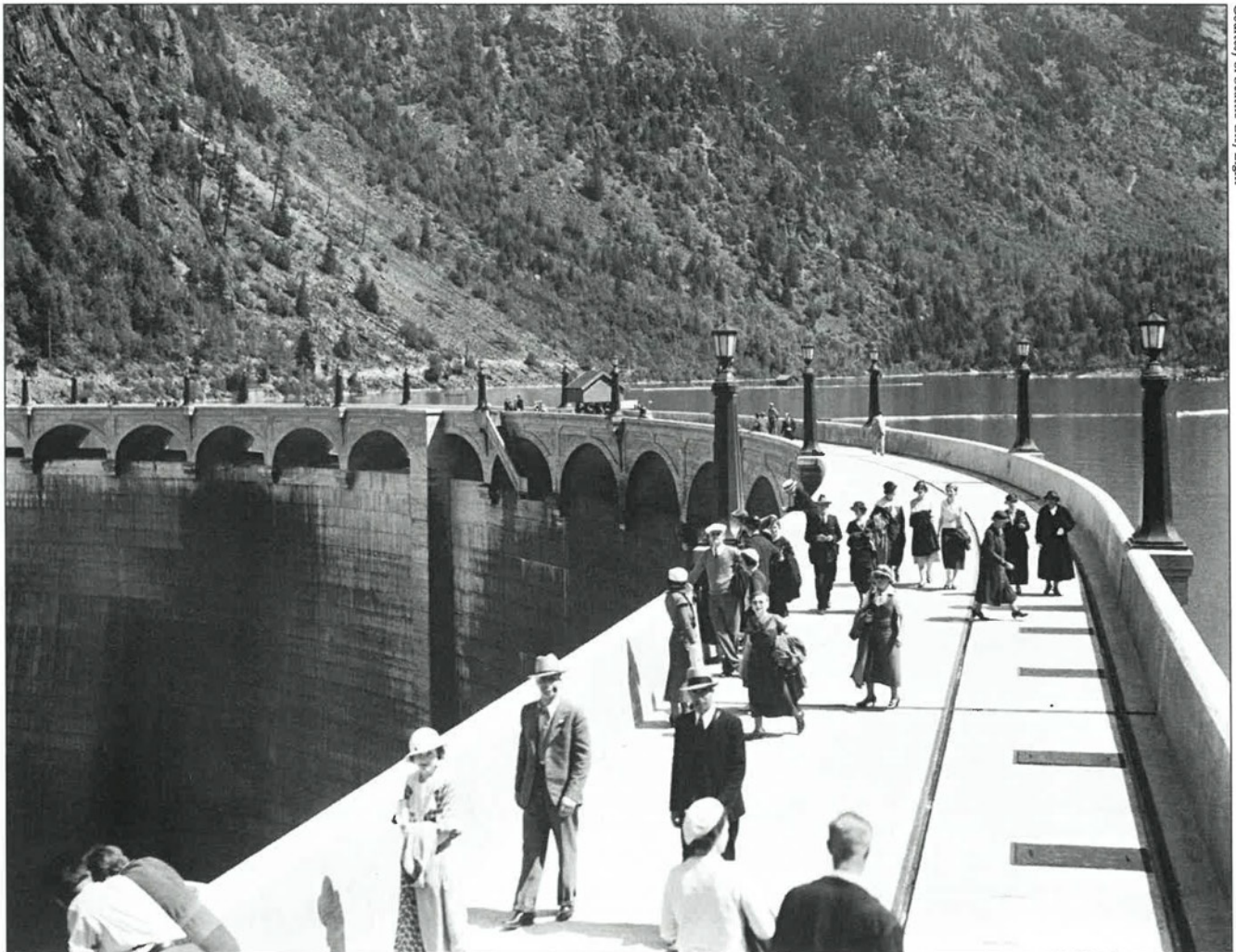

J. D. Ross Sells Public Power in the Pacific Northwest



The Old Skagit Tour

While some Skagit Tour-goers took the boat ride on Diablo Lake, others strolled on the top of Diablo Dam. This view looks north, toward Sourdough Mountain.

By Paul C. Pitzer



Courtesy of Seattle City Light

Late on a summer evening in 1939 a group of tourists wandered along a wooded path beside ponds stocked with colorful goldfish and trout. Here and there they passed flower gardens of exotic and even tropical plants seemingly out of place in Washington's North Cascades. As they climbed a steep hill, a beautiful stairstep waterfall illuminated by red and blue floodlights appeared before them. In the background melodies drifted through the tall Douglas firs. Charmed and entertained, most would remember the experience for a lifetime. And that short hike was only one small part of the old Skagit Tour orchestrated and planned by J. D. Ross, Superintendent of Seattle City Light.

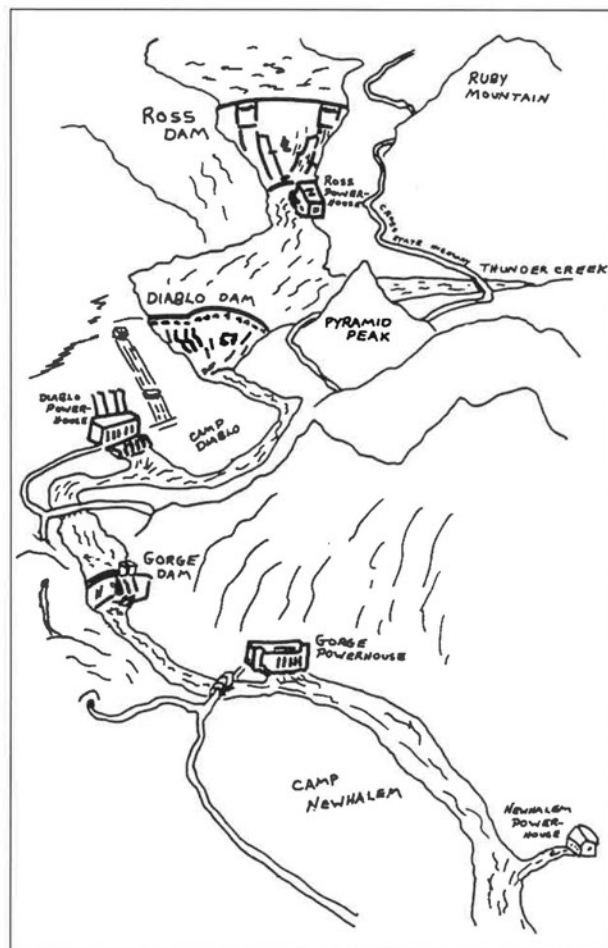
Ross actively promoted public power. He used every avenue available to him to convince residents of Seattle and the Pacific Northwest that they should establish their own hydroelectric projects and acquire the facilities of privately owned operations. Of all the devices Ross used to sell public ownership, the most unique, seductive, and effective was, without question, the old Skagit Tour.

James Delmage McKinzie Ross, known as J. D., was born in 1871 in Chatham on the Thames River on the lower peninsula of Ontario. He arrived in Seattle in 1901, having just completed a trek across Canada and into Alaska in search of gold. A self-taught electrical engineer with little experience, in 1902 he approached city engineer Reginald H. Thompson with plans for the construction of a transmission and distribution system for the municipal electric plant that Seattle voters had just approved. After the successful completion of this project, Ross continued to work as an electrical engineer with Seattle City Light, becoming its superintendent in 1911. He replaced Richard Arms, the first superintendent, who

lost his job when the voters recalled Mayor Hiram Gill that year.

Politically astute and increasingly powerful in Seattle, Ross soon gained a popularity there that rivaled that of the city's mayors. As a proponent of public power who advocated that cause with evangelical zeal, Ross made enemies throughout his career. He particularly angered private power supporters and backers of Puget Sound Power and Light Company,

with which City Light actively competed. This situation came to a head on March 9, 1931, when Mayor Frank Edwards accused Ross of misusing public funds, among



Courtesy of Paul C. Pizer

other things, and fired him. Edwards' backers went so far as to accuse Ross, a Republican and a Presbyterian, of being a communist. A recall election on July 13, led in part by political activist Marion A. Zioncheck, removed the mayor. The city council immediately reinstated Ross as superintendent. During the brief interim Ross went to New York and acted as consultant for that state's power authority. While there he became acquainted with Franklin D. Roosevelt, then governor of New York.

After Mayor Edwards' recall Ross's influence as a proponent of public power increased regionally and nationally. He remained Superintendent of Lighting for Seattle City Light until his death in 1939. He also served as consultant on the Federal Power Commission's national power survey in 1934 and 1935. President Franklin Roosevelt considered him as possible director of the Tennessee Valley Authority. In 1935 Ross worked as an engineer for the Power Division of the Public Works

OPPOSITE PAGE: The incline or funicular hoist, built in 1927, elevated railroad cars up the side of Sourdough Mountain to facilitate construction of Diablo and Ross dams. Through the 1930s it also carried tourists, something it continues to do today during the tour season.



Of all the devices Ross used to sell public ownership, the most unique, seductive, and effective was . . . the old Skagit Tour.



Administration and later that year the president appointed him to the Securities and Exchange Commission. On October 9, 1937, Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes appointed Ross the first administrator of the newly formed Bonneville Power Administration (BPA).

Throughout his years of public service Ross worked to convince Seattle and Northwest residents that public power would directly reduce the cost of electricity in the areas it served. And, Ross argued, it would indirectly lower charges elsewhere by acting as a "yardstick" against which private utility rates could be measured. He hoped that cheap, abundant power, readily available, would attract industry and build Seattle into the premier city of the Pacific Northwest.



Courtesy of Mr. & Mrs. Paul Wilcox

J. D. and Alice Ross stand together at the base of the incline hoist in Diablo.

Despite Ross's influence, selling the concept of public power met strong resistance. The lower rates provided by City Light should have cheered Seattle voters, but detractors argued that City Light actually cheated them through clever bookkeeping and nonpayment of taxes. To counter this and sell the idea of public power, Ross willingly gave

talks throughout the Northwest. In an effort to build clientele and increase the demand for power, Ross arranged to have the city sell, on credit when necessary, electric heaters, ranges, refrigerators and other appliances. City crews installed, free of charge, whatever its outlets sold and maintained them in good working order for minimal repair fees.

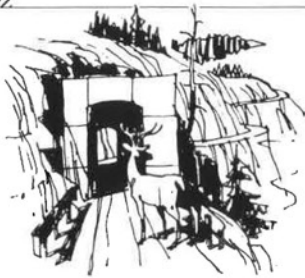
All of this enhanced City Light's image and bolstered its popularity. But equally significant

in helping to win the hearts of its customers and sell the concept of public power was the Skagit Tour. A master showman and promoter, Ross capitalized on the beauty of the North Cascades to woo supporters and leave them with warm feelings about City Light and its efforts on the Skagit and elsewhere. Fondly remembered today by those

who toured City Light's Skagit Project in the 1930s, the revised version in the 1950s and '60s, or the newer, truncated excursion of more recent times, the Skagit Tour stands as J. D. Ross's premier public relations achievement. Over the years thousands of people took the trip. The tour's influence in garnering support for Ross, City Light and public power was formidable.

During 1916 and 1917 Ross petitioned the federal government to grant Seattle the right to develop a hydroelectric project on the Skagit River in the North Cascades. To promote the idea locally he often led Seattle's city council members and Mayor Ole Hanson along the roads and trails of the upper Skagit where he mesmerized them with facts and figures touting the river's million horsepower potential. Intoxicated with fresh air and impressed by the rushing river, the tall stands of virgin timber and the rugged peaks capped with snow and glaciers, the city fathers swung their support to a proposed development that opponents deemed both chimerical and outrageously expensive. Despite technical problems and increased costs that delayed construction, City Light began operating the power plant at Gorge Creek in 1924. This was the first of the three dams (Gorge, Diablo, and Ross) that today send electricity 80 miles to Seattle.

Seattleites who wished to visit the new project found it isolated and remote. Since few could get to the Skagit to see it themselves, rumors about the undertaking proliferated. On June 13, 1922, the Seattle Municipal League advertised a public visit in *The Seattle Star*. The caravan that left Seattle at half past six on the morning of June 19 took three days to inspect construction of the weir at Gorge Creek and the still incomplete powerhouse two



Six-colored flood-lights illuminated the falls at night so that tourists could enjoy the area in the late evening.

miles downstream. They were among the first to marvel at Ladder Creek Falls just behind the powerhouse. They returned with first-hand impressions that countered rumors and helped promote the project. Several more groups followed later in the year and again in 1923.

Since the initial Skagit development eventually cost over twice the original estimates, some in Seattle grumbled about such an expensive undertaking in so distant a wilderness. Ross immediately saw the potential for an expanded tour that would generate much-needed goodwill for City Light and its project, as well as for public power. In 1924 City Light advertised six one-day excursions to the Skagit at a cost of \$7.50 per person. Each group could accommodate a maximum of 40 people.

The next year Ross ordered city crews to clean up the work camp at Newhalem in preparation for an enlarged and more elaborate tour. They painted the dormitory buildings used previously by construction crews and built trails around the Gorge Powerhouse (then called the Ross Powerhouse), through Ladder Creek Falls, and along the Skagit. The first regular two-day tour started in June 1926 with 27 members of a women's civic organization. They drove to Rockport in their own cars and from there traveled to Newhalem to spend the night. The next day they viewed Gorge Dam, ate in the camp cookhouse and wandered through Ladder Creek. In 1926 and 1927 about 800 people took the tour.

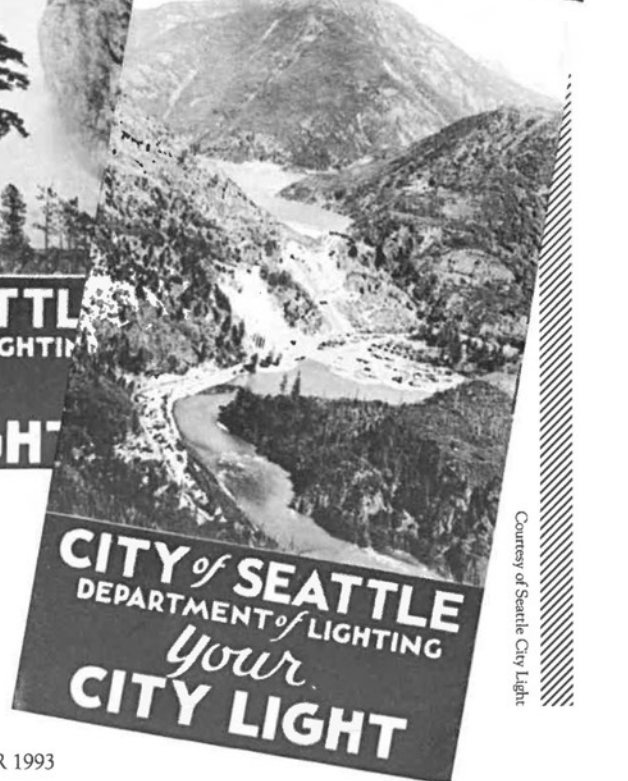
Ross had acquired a love of plants and an interest in horticulture from his father who raised fruits and vegetables on the family's 15-acre farm in Ontario. He decided to indulge his hobby by enhancing the Skagit project with colorful and even exotic plantings. In 1928 Ross wrote to Theodore F. Kane, supervisor of the powerhouse, instructing him to have the women of Newhalem plant flower gardens around the powerhouse and along the trails to the falls. He allocated \$1,000 for seeds and shrubs. "Later we can get interest there and the Skagit admits of being a Fairyland, though it would cost money," concluded Ross. He imported a dozen orchids and had them positioned along the trails that led to Ladder Creek. Six-colored floodlights illuminated the falls

at night so that tourists could enjoy the area in the late evening.

In 1929 over 2,000 people visited the Skagit for five dollars per person. Beginning in 1930, from April through November, weekend tours for 150 people not only included the train ride, meals, and Ladder Creek, but also an extended trip along the river for seven miles to see the newly completed Diablo Dam. A highlight of the adventure was a spectacular ride 300 feet up the side of Sourdough Mountain on a cable-railway incline lift—the size of two railroad cars—that had facilitated construction of the new dam.

In 1931 each tour group could accommodate 260 people. By 1935 the number had risen to 500. City Light then charged just over three dollars per person and scheduled

Through the 1930s Seattle City Light provided tourists with elaborate brochures that discussed the project and the benefits of public power. A new version appeared annually from about 1928 through 1941.



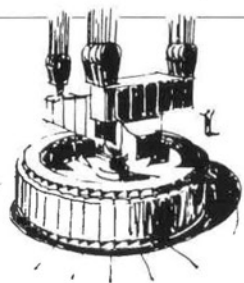
Courtesy of Seattle City Light

three trips each week. Such large numbers outgrew the limited dormitory accommodations, prompting Ross to have work crews erect temporary platform tents each summer for the overflow.

Ross continued to expand the scope of the tour. He had the city use its small tugboats to ferry people on Diablo Lake to the site of the proposed Ruby Dam (which became Ross Dam). He increased the capacity of each trip with additional barges and later with the construction of an excursion boat he named the *Alice Ross* after his wife. The federal government rejected his proposal to turn the Skagit River into a National Park centering around the tour and Ladder Creek Falls.

Ross expanded the lighting yearly in Ladder Creek. By the mid 1930s it presented a spectacular display of alternating colored lights playing in the stair-step falls. Along the trails tropical and domestic plants fascinated visitors. Pools beside the pathways held trout and goldfish. Loudspeakers hidden in the trees broadcast music throughout the gardens in the evenings—Ross himself selected the recordings.

At the Diablo Camp, in the area near the base of the incline lift, Ross had his crews build a zoo of sorts. His menagerie of domestic and imported animals grew to include black squirrels from Mexico, pheasants, mountain sheep, an albino deer, nine cockatiels, six African lovebirds and, at its peak, more than 150 other birds and animals. The United States Department of Agriculture supplied 200 Chinese chestnut trees for the project on an experimental basis. Most died. A banana tree amazed visitors for a few seasons. Despite the efforts of City Light workers to transplant the more delicate plants into



The old Skagit Tour always lost money. Ross deliberately kept the cost low so that more people in Seattle could afford the outing.

greenhouses or inside the warm powerhouse during the winter, few survived more than three or four seasons. Friends and acquaintances from all around the country provided Ross with animals for the zoo and cuttings or seeds for the gardens. Ross himself paid for much of the work out of his own pocket.

Ross envisioned a development along the Skagit that would make today's environmentalists shudder. On the

hillsides above the lake that Ruby Dam would someday form Ross wanted a resort area for Seattle citizens. To



enhance the natural beauty he thought of planting 5,000 rhododendrons and 5,000 pink dogwood trees around the powerhouses and along the lakes. He suggested 10,000 ornamental flowering cherry trees scattered among the cliffs overlooking the project, with an assortment of lilacs, clematis, wisteria and azaleas for good measure. None of this ever materialized, but the tour, as it developed, became an ongoing success.

The old Skagit Tour always lost money. Ross deliberately kept the cost low so that more people in Seattle could afford the outing. The trip seldom lacked for customers although during the 1930s City Light never advertised it. Word of mouth by satisfied participants carried its praises throughout Seattle and, despite the economic problems brought on by the Depression, people filled almost every excursion to capacity. That is strong testimony to the tour's popularity and impact.

No road extended into Newhalem until after Ross's death. He insisted on that in order to keep out "spies" from rival private power agencies. Once a group boarded City Light's train at Rockport it became a captive audience ready to experience a "soft-sell" on public power that was sugarcoated with the area's charm and beauty.



The old Skagit Tour changed and grew, seldom remaining exactly the same from one year to the next. In 1940 the trek reached its fullest development. It emerged as an elaborate production carefully orchestrated to enthrall customers and send them home as advocates of public power with happy thoughts about its potential blessings sandwiched among pleasant scenic memories of the trip.

During this latter period the tour occasionally started at King Street Station in Seattle. From there a special train took patrons to Rockport where they changed to City Light's railroad for the ride 25 miles upriver to Newhalem. More often people drove themselves to Rockport and walked through the floral gardens around the station while they waited for the train to Newhalem. The ride up the river took just over an hour. City Light crews put the tourists in open gondolas, weather permitting, so that they could experience the full impact of the scenery in the narrow Skagit Canyon.

Once in Newhalem guides assigned the visitors to dormitories or tents. The men roomed together in one area,

The Skagit tour began in Rockport where tourists parked their cars and boarded the train for Newhalem, 15 miles upstream. In good weather the open gondola was popular.

the women in another. Complications occasionally arose when mischievous Seattleites, familiar with the tour routine, encouraged newlyweds to use the tour as an inexpensive honeymoon. A man retaking the tour in the 1960s said that had happened to him and his bride. "There were ways around [the standard sleeping arrangements]," he said with a smile, "if you were clever enough."

Their baggage settled, the tourists assembled for an afternoon walk over a suspension bridge crossing the Skagit and through the forest to the small Newhalem power plant that had supplied electricity during early construction. On their return they ate dinner in the Gorge cookhouse. Served family style, the meal usually included two kinds of meat, an assortment of vegetables, rolls, pies and ice cream. Of all the memories people took away with them from the old tour, they most fondly recalled the food. Nobody left the cookhouse hungry.

After dinner and a short rest City Light guides showed



This decal became the emblem of the rejuvenated though truncated 1960s Skagit Tour.

The Alice Ross traveling east across Diablo Lake toward the future site of Ross Dam, what then was the anticipated Ruby Project.

slides (during later years they used motion pictures) in the camp's meeting hall (a converted barn). The message they delivered, accompanied by scenic views of the area, praised public power and outlined a future when City Light might supply all of Seattle's electricity. Then the tourists walked to the Gorge Powerhouse where the guides showed off the three generators that could each run "176,000 washing machines or 33,000 electric ranges." The advertising was all very subtle. Then they climbed into the gardens where "The Waters of the Minnetonka," or "Hark! Hark! My Soul," two of Ross's favorite tunes, drifted through the trees.

Guides carried anyone who could not manage the climb. Colored lights lit the dark paths, and more lights illuminated the falls in delightful displays of red and blue that turned the setting into the fairyland that Ross had envisioned. Next the tourists returned to the camp and attended a dance held in the meeting hall. When they finally went off to bed, soft music drifted through the night to lull them to sleep.

At six the next morning the same loud-speakers blared "Lazy Mary, Won't You Get Up?" The cooks prepared breakfast at 7:30. Then everyone boarded the electric



train that took them along the river, past Gorge Dam, to Diablo. There they visited the zoo and rode up the side of the mountain on the incline lift. As they walked about three-quarters of a mile to Diablo Dam, out onto it and then to the boat dock on the lake behind it, workers opened the spillway gates and let water cascade over the concrete and rock ramparts. This provided an impressive view of what then was the highest spillway dam in the world—a title Diablo held briefly during the early 1930s.

In groups of 250 at a time, the *Alice Ross* ferried the tourists up the lake to the Ruby/Ross site. As they returned the pilot cut the engine, letting the boat drift for a few minutes as more hidden speakers played music that wafted across the lake while the visitors took in the majestic sight of Thunder Mountain, Pyramid Peak, Colonial Peak, and Sourdough Mountain. It was the romanticized stuff of picture postcards.

They arrived back in Newhalem in time for lunch. Often the cooks gave them extra pies to take home. Then they packed and took the train to Rockport. While they had been sightseeing upstream the crew at the railroad station washed their cars, serviced them, and had them ready for the drive to Seattle.

In 1941, the last year of the original tour, 15,877 people visited the Skagit. Well over 100,000 people saw the project during the 14-year period that the old tour officially operated. And that does not include the earlier trips and all of the groups that made special arrangements.

When Ross died in 1939 the driving force behind the tour expired. World War II brought the excursions to a halt. The government's desire to secure the project against possible espionage, plus the need to conserve rubber, which prompted gasoline rationing, ended the trip for the duration. Construction of the Ruby Project, by then renamed Ross Dam, made tours impossible for a few years after the war ended. People who remembered the tour, however, pressured City Light to resume the excursions. In 1953 City Light announced a series of one-day trips with 90 people in each group. From mid-July through Labor Day City Light conducted the tours on an experimental basis. They were a

shadow of the old production. No zoo remained at Diablo, and lack of maintenance since 1942 had left the Ladder Creek area dilapidated and overgrown. Barges replaced the *Alice Ross*, which City Light had junked in 1948.

Road construction and removal of the railroad from Newhalem to Diablo disrupted the tours in 1954 and precluded them in 1955. In 1956 City Light resumed limited tours with 50 people on each trip. In 1958 two tours daily, Wednesday through Sunday, took 65 people each through the project. A small used Navy landing craft replaced the barges that had ferried people to the then complete Ross Dam and Powerhouse. After 1959 the capacity of each tour rose to 100.

In the 1970s, with the construction of the North Cross-State Highway (State Route 20), and the formation of North Cascades National Park and Ross Lake Recreational Area, people at last acquired easy access to the Upper Skagit. City Light abbreviated the trip that now starts in Diablo, includes a ride up the incline lift and around Diablo Lake, a tour of the Ross Powerhouse, and a meal. Even this truncated version of the Skagit Tour is still popular and requires reservations well in advance.

But the old Skagit Tour that J. D. Ross orchestrated and used so well to generate good relations with Seattle's citizens is long gone. Few remember it anymore. In the 1930s, however, it successfully filled a public relations role that helped bring about the success of City Light in Seattle and public power in the Pacific Northwest.

On March 5, 1951, 400 employees of the Puget Sound Power and Light Company changed employers and started working for Seattle City Light. The transfer was part of City Light's acquisition of Puget Power's holdings inside Seattle's city limits, which for the first time gave the municipally-owned utility a monopoly on power distribution rights throughout all of Seattle. That achievement completed a process that J. D. Ross had urged and strived to accomplish since the early 1930s.

Paul C. Pitzer teaches American History at Aloha High School in Beaverton, Oregon. He worked from 1961 to 1965 as a Skagit Tour Guide. He is currently anticipating publication of his history of Grand Coulee Dam and the Columbia Basin Irrigation Project.



In all, well over 100,000 people saw the project during the 14-year period that the old tour officially operated.

Courtesy of Seattle City Light



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