

Introduction

The Great Pyramid of the Boise River—the tallest dam on the face of the Earth, staggering and monumental—overshadowed even the feats of the Pharaohs as an icon of human triumph. So said a man named Moses at the 1915 dedication of Arrowrock Dam. Governor Moses Alexander, Bavarian born, tipped his hat to “the strength of the people” and led the faithful in song. “My Country ’tis of thee,” sang the Bavarian Jew in tune with Idaho farmers. Before them the arching Goliath shot streams of water through cast iron valves. One million tons of concrete. Two hundred sixty rail car loads of sand and Portland cement. Plugging and pooling the granite canyon for 18 slackwater miles, Arrowrock held enough water for 200,000 settlers on 240,000 acres, enough water, said Moses, to redeem the Garden lost to the Fall.

This book is about those expectations—about the pyramids we Boiseans build on the Nile of our sagebrush Sahara, about cities and suburbs and other unmovable objects in the path of an invincible force.

Our study is also a centennial tribute. Sunday, October 4, 2015, marks 100 years to the day since the epoch of Big Reclamation dawned on Arrowrock Canyon. Plenty in that time has been said about dams as bulwarks of progress; much less about how Idahoans have coped. The time is nigh for a Boise Valley assessment. Why and for whom have we Boiseans crowded the floodplain, and what yet might we do when tested by the climate-change forecast of more extreme droughts and floods?

Historically, through a valley of Starbucks and Simplots, the river the French called Bois e has braided with polemical streams. The most familiar is an epic of muscular masculine prowess. “It was a man’s task,” said Boise’s *Capitol News* of the 5-year plugging of Arrowrock Canyon. Blasted deep and bolted 90 feet below the surface to a bed of batholith granite, the colossus, added the *Idaho Statesman*, was “strong,” “firm,” and “robust.” The Boise Project Division of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation boasted, in a 1965 pamphlet, a total cumulative yield of \$929 million, mostly alfalfa, beets, and apples. Today, with Anderson Ranch and Lucky Peak plus three big dams on the Payette River, the bureau’s Boise Project claims \$1.2 billion in annual yield from cattle and crops. Add \$13 million from hydroelectricity and \$30 million



A row of cast-iron valves shoot water through Arrowrock Dam.

U.S. BUREAU OF RECLAMATION

and crops. Add \$13 million from hydroelectricity and \$30 million from slackwater beaches and boating. Add \$170 million for allegedly sparing the valley damage from river erosion and floods.

But always there are mirages in deserts. The 58-page project history on the bureau's Boise website says nothing about mechanical failures, leaks, or government bailouts. No mention is made of hellish farm labor conditions on Heartbreak Row, the project's hard-luck nickname. No mention of the cost to the fish and the Earth. "We set out to tame the rivers," wrote Marc Reisner in *Cadillac Desert* (1986). "We set out to make the future of the American West secure; what we really did was make ourselves rich and our descendants insecure."

For richer or poorer, the lifeblood of the Boise Valley still freights a heavy tonnage of hope and fear and scientific conjecture. Our book of essays adds urban-suburban concerns. Chapters descend like a tour from the snow above Idaho City to Boise, Garden City, Eagle, Deer Flat, Caldwell, and the Dixie Drain near Parma. The hundred-mile journey showcases people at work to redeem some lost connection to flood lands. Each stop on the tour interprets a braid of the aquatic and artificial, each a social-political construct, each a pyramid to which all Boiseans contribute a stone.

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