

# A Brief History of Kerr Dam and the Reservation<sup>1</sup>

*An essay by Thompson Smith based on the script for *The Place of the Falling Waters*, a documentary film by Roy Bigcrane and Thompson Smith<sup>2</sup>*

When Kerr Dam was constructed on the Flathead River in 1938, it brought sudden and dramatic change to a place not only of great natural beauty and power, but also of deep cultural importance to the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. The dam flooded the falls of the Flathead River, a sacred place known from time immemorial in the Kootenai language as '*a·knit ka'nuk*' — narrow pass between cliffs — and in the Salish language as '*stipmétkʷ*' — falling waters. The dam destroyed one kind of power in order to produce a very different kind — electricity for an industrial economy that was in many ways the antithesis of the tribal way of life. But in coming years, the tribes will have the opportunity to take direct control of the dam and its considerable revenue. And so the question now looms: can something that was part of the assault on traditional native cultures now serve the well-being of the tribal community?

Perhaps some answers may be found in the history of the dam and this place. The following essay on that history is a revised version of the script from the documentary film, *The Place of the Falling Waters*.

## Part I: The Road to the Dam

In the beginning, tribal elders tell us, Coyote prepared the world for the human beings who were yet to come. And from that time in the ancient past, beyond all memory and history, Indian people have inhabited the mountains and valleys of what is now western Montana.

The Pend d'Oreille, the Salish, and the Kootenai — each of these three tribes had its own homeland and its own distinctive culture. And for many thousands of years, the people lived well by their traditional ways.

In the tribal worldview, the natural world was more than a collection of "resources" to be used. Everything of the earth was alive with spiritual power, and the people lived upon the land with careful respect.

---

<sup>1</sup> Translators \* Joe Antiste quotes translated from Kootenai by Sophie Matt. \*\* Joe Eneas quotes translated from Salish by Dorothy Felsman. • Mary Smallsalmon quotes translated from Salish by Dolly Linsebigler. • Agnes Vanderburg quotes translated from Salish by Lucy Vanderburg. "Chief Koostahtah and other quotes translated from Kootenai by Francis Auld.

<sup>2</sup> SKC Media Center and Native Voices Public Television Workshop, 1990.

In the traditional way of life, tribal people moved with the cycles of nature, taking a varied and rich sustenance from the land. It was a bountiful homeland — from the profusion of bitterroot, camas, and berries, to the great numbers of deer, elk, bison, and other game and waterfowl, to the teeming abundance of fish in the rivers and streams.



*Figure 2.1. Fishing the Lower Flathead around the turn of the century.*

That natural bounty was conserved and nurtured over thousands of years by the tribal way of life, in which people lived within the limits of the environment — in part because they lived as tribes, sharing much and owning but little as individuals. Salish elder Agnes Vanderburg (1901-1989) remembered the strong ethic of sharing resources: "when they get meat, they pass it to every tipi, until everybody gets enough for the winter." Kootenai elder Tony Mathias (1922-1996) recalled, "Here [in Elmo-Dayton], it's the same way, down there a long time ago. When you go hunting, and get one, you feed people, you know. That's how come the people used to get something to eat every day. Never get hungry, because they help one another."

At the center of tribal culture was a profound respect for the plants and animals that sustained the people. And that respect, in turn, led the people to live in ways that sustained the plants and animals. As Salish/Nez Perce elder Larry Parker (1914-1995) stated,

*That's why, in the old days, we did have an awful lot of fishes in any kind of a fresh body of water, and the prairies and the woods and everywhere was full of game birds, and wild game animals. That was because we conserved them because we were trying to save them for the future.*

But through the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, non-Indian people gradually imposed a very different way of life upon the region. During a brief ninety-year span of time, this tribal world of hunters, gatherers, and fishers was displaced by an industrial market economy — a transformation that would ultimately lead to the construction of Kerr Dam on the Lower Flathead River. In many ways, the story of this dam is the story of conflict and exchange between deeply opposing ways of life.

\* \* \* \* \*

That ninety-year story can be traced to the Treaty of Hellgate of 1855. U.S. officials, led by Governor Isaac Stevens of Washington Territory, were seeking to confine Indian people throughout the region to reservations, and to take the rest of the land for white settlement. Under the terms of the treaty, tribal leaders ceded 22 million acres of what became western Montana to the United States. They also reserved from cession some of their aboriginal lands, including what is now called the Flathead Indian Reservation. On those unceded lands, the U.S. promised the Indians peace and sovereignty, and the perpetual right to live by their traditional ways. In succeeding years, however, the government did not abide by those promises of tribal self-determination. The Treaty of Hellgate of 1855 was a crucial step in the loss of tribal control in western Montana — and in this sense, it can be seen as the first step on the road to Kerr Dam.



Figure 2.2. River camp.

Nevertheless, for many years after the treaty, many of the Indian people continued to inhabit their ancestral lands outside the reservation. And for much of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, members of the tribes were able to live largely by their traditional ways. "I could remember them things," Tony Mathias said. "A lot of these old people... they'd go out, and in the summertime they'd get chokecherries, and serviceberries, bitterroot in the springtime, and... camas. That's all we used to live on."

The elders interviewed for *The Place of the Falling Waters* were born in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and they were raised in a culture that was still far removed from the wage labor and industrialism that would be brought to the Flathead Reservation by Kerr Dam during the 1930s. Their lives were shaped by their tribal connection to one another, and by a powerful spiritual connection to the land. The tribal community was still founded upon

traditional cultural values, such as the strict taboo against wasting animals. Salish elder Louise McDonald (1904-1994) emphatically stated that "the people don't waste the meat, them days. They clean the hide, they scrape the hide from the inside the meat. They dry that, they fix it — even the head." "Even the bones," echoed Pend d'Oreille elder John Peter Paul (1909-2001). "The women pound that. ...cook it. That's where they get this tallow, what they call it. They never waste anything, those days." "All the people really take care of their deer," continued Mrs. McDonald. "They take care of the bones good — tie it up and hang it up, whatever they not going to use. That's what they do," she said. "That's what I know."

That cultural and spiritual world survived into the lifetimes of those elders — indeed into the present day — in spite of a long and unrelenting history of loss. First came smallpox and other non-native diseases that spread from tribe to tribe across the Americas with utterly devastating consequences. Next came firearms, and then the fur trade, with impacts to native ecosystems and native cultures that we are only now beginning to understand more fully.



Figure 2.3 Spéλ'm (bitterroot) harvest. Sophie Moiese, a Salish elder.

And then came a more explicitly ideological assault on tribal cultures: the Jesuit missionary endeavor, which set root among the Salish people in the Bitterroot Valley in 1841. As John Peter Paul put it, "You know, before — before the priests they call Black Robes,'... ...they pray to the sun or things like that. That's all they lived by, long time ago." But the Jesuits weren't much interested in learning about the native spirituality they were so intent on eradicating. As the

Rev. Ignatius Dumbeck, S.J. (1893-1992), who served at the St. Ignatius Mission for decades, forthrightly stated, "Our effort was to instruct them in our faith. And so the Indian faith... we didn't make much effort to learn it. 'Cause we were trying to teach them... the gospel, and all of that, and our whole effort was in that... direction."

The Jesuits intended to convert Indian people not only to a different set of religious beliefs, but also to a profoundly different mode of subsistence. As Salish scholar Dr. Betty White (born 1954) recounted,

*Very shortly after the Jesuits arrived, they became convinced that the only way to convert the Salish was to get them from "wandering around," or "running around," or "chasing the buffalo," in the terms that the Jesuits use, and to have them settle in one spot so that they could teach them Catholicism; but also to...have their culture based on agriculture [and] replace the hunting way of life with an agricultural basis of life.*

Many members of the Salish, Pend d'Oreille, and Kootenai tribes resisted not only the Jesuits' demands that they abandon their traditional spiritual practices, but also their insistence that they abandon their tribal ways of hunting and gathering. While it was still feasible for Indian people to hunt, fish, and gather for their subsistence, neither missionaries nor government officials had much success in forcing them to abandon their traditional ways of life. As Larry Parker explained,

*The Indians had no occasion to be hungry at all times because the food was growing in such great quantities in the country. In the old days if an Indian was told, "You'd better start raising cattle and grow your own garden," it would be like telling you to dig a well when there's running mountain water on both sides of your house.*

Kootenai elder Joe Antiste (1894-1989) recalled the abundance of native foods as late as the turn of the century:

*The Indian people would go to Libby, around that area, and that's where they hunted a long time ago. They all had horses. They would stay there for about a month. Three family members would kill over*

*100 deer. They would return home with a lot of game that was dried.  
That's what the Indians lived on, meat!*

As Salish-Colville-Spokane elder Joe Eneas (1896-1997) remembered, "It was good a long time ago. When you come home, you have meat tied on — packed on your horse was deer, dry meat!"

Dr. Betty White explained that the Jesuit program constituted a form of "cultural invasion":

*When you determine that your way is superior to another group of people, and you go in, no matter what way, whether it's as a missionary or as a soldier, and you decide that you're going to eradicate someone else's religion or someone else's culture because you deem that yours is superior and theirs is inferior, that's invasion.*

Over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, that invasion took many forms, and all of them — even the religious efforts of the Jesuits — were part of the road that led eventually to the construction of Kerr Dam. Tribal resistance took as many forms as the invasion itself, but during the 1880s, the balance of power shifted decisively in western Montana. The completion of the Northern Pacific Railroad in 1883 suddenly enabled the industrial development of the region. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, the lands, forests, and waters of Salish, Pend d'Oreille, and Kootenai aboriginal territory were exploited on a scale never seen before. Logs, crops, and livestock, and especially ore could now be seen and exploited as commodities, for the railroad provided a means to ship them to national and international markets. Non-Indian farmers, ranchers, and miners poured into the region.

As a result of this economic revolution, tribal people were faced with a newly restricted resource base. An increasing number of Indian families finally began to turn to agriculture and subsistence gardening to supplement — but not replace — their traditional ways of hunting, fishing, and gathering. Pend d'Oreille elder Mary Smallsalmon (1909-1995) remembered the garden her father raised and the mix of wild and domestic foods in the family diet:

*About the food, we had a garden, a big garden. My Dad planted a garden — potatoes, beans, corn, carrots, cantaloupe, watermelon, squash. All this was in my Dad's garden at Crow Creek, where we*

*had our house. We had a big garden I said us Indians, we were poor. But we were not really poor — we had gardens, we had deer meat, and we make deer dry meat. My father's mother, my brother Peter, they would make deer dry meat.*

During this same period, most tribal people who had continued to live on ancestral lands outside of the Flathead Reservation were now forced to move. The Hellgate Treaty of 1855 had left the Bitterroot Valley in an ambiguous status, and over the following 35 years, the majority of the Salish had fiercely but non-violently resisted intense pressures for them to leave their beloved homeland. In October 1891, however, the government finally forced the tribe to march north to the Jocko Valley in what has been called Montana's Trail of Tears.

Yet once the Salish had moved to the Flathead Indian Reservation, they began to rebuild a stable life for themselves, along with the Pend d'Oreille and Kootenai who were already there. Tribal people not only blended subsistence agriculture with hunting, fishing, and gathering, as we have seen, but they also maintained, and in some ways reinvigorated, the community support systems and extended family networks that lay at the heart of tribal life.

Native people, in short, were being forced to alter their lives, but they had not yet lost all control over the pace and direction of change. As former Salish Kootenai College instructor Ron Therriault (born 1931) observed,

*The tribal people that had taken to farming were doing pretty well for themselves. They had nice farms, they had good workable land, and they also had the promise of the irrigation system, and all of this lent to success as such — not a corporate-type success, but individually, a number of the tribal people were doing well.*



Figure 2.4. Kerr Dam.

At the same time, however, now that many of the Indian people were living in towns or on farms or ranches, the Catholic church was beginning to exert a much stronger influence. Enormous boarding schools were built around the town of St. Ignatius, and children were required to attend by the U.S. Indian agents, by the priests, and, increasingly, by the Indian parents themselves. The Rev. Ignatius Dumbeck explained the Jesuits insistence on having mostly boarding students:

*Well, see... most of our schools were boarding schools there were very few "day scholars," because one of the main things is that they must learn to talk the English language. And if they're living at home, why, they're talking Indian all the time.*

Rev. Dumbeck expressed regret that tribal people "quit talking Indian," even as he also bluntly described the Jesuit strategy (which he helped implement as a priest) of getting the older students to "help change the mentality of the [younger] students, their playmates" to get them "oriented...to the white man's ways."

In the increasingly complicated mix of ways of life and cultural worldviews on the Flathead Reservation, the experiences of elders in the boarding schools was mixed. Pend d'Oreille elder Margaret Finley (1926-2005) recalled, "I learned lots from them. I learned how to cook, I learned how to do things. ...in the white man's world." Yet others recalled the more painful aspects of the boarding school

environment, where children were punished for speaking their native languages. Larry Parker said,

*Well, that sure put a hardship on my schooling there, because I did not know a word of English. It would be just like you going to China or Russia or somewhere and attending school there, and not knowing your language at all. You'd be completely lost.*

Agnes Vanderburg remembered that "When we would get together and talk our language, we would have to stand in the corner. The Blackrobes would tell us, 'Do not talk your language.' Sometimes they would make us stand up together and they would spank us."

Mrs. Vanderburg then said that in her view, the now-deceased priests were "all down below now." She said it with a laugh and a twinkle in her eye, but for a deeply religious elder to speak this way of priests is an extraordinary reflection of the depth of pain caused by the Jesuits' actions. Mrs. Vanderburg blamed the dramatic decline of fluent speakers of Salish on the boarding school experience, saying, "That's why the ones who were growing up quit talking our language."

The turn of the century was a time of great pressures upon the people here. Epidemics of European diseases continued to sweep through the area, taking heavy tolls among tribal elders. People were harassed and even killed for hunting off the reservation, even though this right was guaranteed by treaty. Official government policies had already been in place for decades that literally outlawed the public practice of important cultural activities. In 1885, U.S. officials established the "Rules Governing the Court of Indian Offenses," enforced by a new penal system of Indian police and judges, that banned most aspects of traditional culture, including dances and feasts, traditional healing and medicine, gambling, burning grasslands and brush to manage the land, engaging in plural marriage or unmarried cohabitation, resisting the enrollment of children in the Jesuit boarding schools, or in other ways refusing to "abandon their heathenish rites and customs." Violators were often subjected to lengthy imprisonment.

At the same time, pressures were also mounting outside the reservation, where non-Indians were beginning to control increasing portions of Salish, Pend d'Oreille, and Kootenai aboriginal territories. In time, they began to eye lands within the Flathead Indian Reservation itself — despite the Hellgate Treaty's seemingly ironclad guarantee that in exchange for the cession of 22 million acres of their

aboriginal territories, the reservation would be set aside for the tribes' "exclusive use and benefit." As Ron Therriault explained,

*As time passed, the non-Indian even became aggressive over the existence of the reservation they would look up and say... "Look at all that wonderful farming land, and here's all these Indians up here, and they don't know what to do with it." And so there became a movement, an attitude of the settlers that "that was an awful waste of land, we should be getting that reservation. It should be opened for settlement, so some good use could be made of the land."*

The tool for accomplishing that objective was the General Allotment Act, passed by Congress in 1887 with the aim of forcing cultural change on Indian reservations by dismantling collective tribal ownership of land. The act called for Indian agents to draw up official "rolls" of tribal members, allot a certain number of acres to each single adult or head of a household, and then declare any remaining lands within the reservation "surplus" and open those lands to non-Indian settlers. In the history of Indian-white relations in the United States, no act by Congress had a more devastating impact on the well-being of Indian people.

While the General Allotment Act was passed in 1887, specific acts then had to be passed for each reservation. This was because each reservation was established by a specific treaty with specific language relating to the disposition of lands. For many years, it seemed the Flathead Indian Reservation would never be allotted. The treaty said that allotments of land would be designated only for those tribal members who requested to be allotted, and it was clear that an overwhelming majority of tribal members desired no such thing.



*Figure 2.5. A death feast or giveawaw on the Lower Flathead River's largest tributary, the Jocko River.*

But in 1904, Representative Joseph Dixon, a Missoula businessman who had been elected to Congress on the promise of making the "opening" of the Flathead Indian Reservation a top priority, found a legal loophole and got the Flathead Allotment Act passed. President Theodore Roosevelt signed the bill into law. On the Flathead Reservation, communal ownership of the land — the basis of the tribal economic, cultural, and social system — would be brought to an end. The government allotted individual tracts to individual tribal members, declared much of the remaining land "surplus," and threw those lands open to settlement by non-Indian homesteaders.

Referring to the division of land into square-mile sections, Kootenai elder Adeline Mathias (1910-2007) said, "They call it making checkers' — meaning that they started cutting the reservations."

Many Indian people were left in the dark about what was happening. Joe Antiste recalled that "The President said for the Indians to take eighty acres or forty acres for their own land. A letter came telling this to all the Indians. All the Indians went crazy. They didn't know what was going to happen to them. And me, I didn't know."

The U.S. Indian Agents gave many people allotments on lands that were unfamiliar to them, and which were useless for farming or traditional modes of

subsistence. "In Pablo, about a mile and a half [from there], that's where my land is," Mr. Antiste said. "That's where they put me. I went over there — I looked at the land, and all there was, was rocks."

In April of 1910, the gates were opened and non-Indian settlers flooded onto the Flathead Indian Reservation at a staggering pace. "They didn't no more than open the reservation, and boy, you talk about the immigrants coming in," remembered Salish elder Bazile Peche (1903-1993). "Horse, horse and wagon, buggies, some pack horses." Salish-Nez Perce elder Charlie McDonald (1898-1995) recalled how

*You'd go out to Charlo, in that country on horseback. When you would be coming home late in the evening, hell, maybe the roads, the trail you took going out, when you're coming back, you couldn't go on it. There'd be a wire fence and a shack there — it would be a homesteader pulled in there to set up his homestead outfit.*

Both before and after the opening of the Reservation, tribal members and delegations of leaders traveled to Washington to protest the violation of the treaty, but their pleas were ignored. The Indian people of the Flathead Indian Reservation were unaccustomed to both market agriculture and private property, and they became easy targets for those non-Indians who had long coveted their land. As Ron Therriault observed,

*When you come to the concept of ownership of land, it was something new to the Indian. Whereas with the European, that ownership concept is well embedded in their society. So as they came in contact with the Indian, they were well practiced in the ways of getting land, claiming land, and holding it; and the Indian was not prepared for this.*



Figure 2.6. Kerr Dam worker.

Schemes quickly arose to take Indian land and make a profit in the process. William Smead, who had served as U.S. Indian Agent on the Flathead Indian Reservation from 1898 until his dismissal in 1904, used his inside knowledge to found the Flathead Land and Information Agency in Missoula, helping settlers gain title to prime tracts on the Reservation. Joe Antiste recalled how easily tribal people were preyed upon, and how abandoned they felt by their supposed governmental "guardians":

*The President, he knew good and well we got nothing, we got no plow or anything. We didn't have anything. He knows that we have lots of kids, and then the white people are coming. He says, "You sell your land, you sell your land." Eighty acres — just like that — no more land!*

The Flathead Allotment Act transformed the reservation, and the impacts were felt in every facet of tribal life and culture. As Larry Parker related, the explosion of farming, ranching, fences, and the delineation of private property within the reservation harmed the ability of people to gather their traditional foods:

*A lot of the lands where the wild food grew, you see those lands were sold to the whites by the government they homesteaded there. And of course, if Indians went up there, they'd say, "Could we pick some fruits which are on your land?" If the man was mean, he'd say, "You go to Hell! You get it elsewhere — this is private property!" But if the man was kind enough, he'd say, "Yeah, go ahead," and then they'd dig. [But] then, after a while, wherever the wild food grew,*

*then it was plowed up; then that would kill off those wild foods.  
There'd be none left.*

The sudden influx of non-Indians resulted in a profound marginalization of tribal people within their own reservation. Tony Incashola (born 1946), now Director of the Salish-Pend d'Oreille Culture Committee, recalled this sense of disempowerment:

*My grandparents, my parents always felt like they didn't belong in certain parts of town, when in reality this was their land. This was their home first, before anybody's. They are not the visitors; they are the residents of this area. But they were made to feel like visitors.*

Of all the assaults on tribal culture and tribal sovereignty that eventually led to the Montana Power Company's construction of Kerr Dam, none was more important than the allotment act. Joe Antiste summed up the law in simple but devastating terms: "That's government, that's its job — we got no more land."



Figure 2.7. Plasí Cocowee.

In the half-century after the Treaty of Hellgate of 1855, the people of the Pend d'Oreille, Salish, and Kootenai tribes had journeyed through worlds of change. The allotment act, combined with the other pressures we have seen, in many

ways subverted the promise of cultural coexistence held out by the treaty. Less than three decades later the invasion of the Flathead Indian Reservation would culminate in the construction of Kerr Dam. Yet as we will see in Part II, through all this, the people still maintained their ancient cultures, still survived — and still fought back.

### **Part II: The Road to the Dam**

In 1855, a treaty between tribal leaders and U.S. officials established the Flathead Indian Reservation in what is now the northwestern corner of the state of Montana. For the native people, the treaty represented a promise of peace, and a guarantee that they would be able to continue to live by their traditional tribal ways.

But throughout the nineteenth century, U.S. officials consistently sought to weaken the treaty, to avoid meeting its obligations, to undermine rather than defend the independence of the native peoples.

The tribal ways of life and the non-Indian cultures that were now being imposed upon the region differed in profound ways: their spiritual traditions, their economic systems, the ways these societies were organized, the ways they interacted with the environment, their forms of artistic expression, their ways of seeing and understanding the world. In virtually every way, these were profoundly differing ways of life. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a complicated history unfolded of conflict and exchange between these deeply opposing cultures. Through many twists and turns, it is a story we can follow to the construction of Kerr Dam on the Lower Flathead River in the 1930s.



Figure 2.8. *Plasi Cocowee*.

During the early decades after the Hellgate Treaty, the Pend d'Oreille, Salish, and Kootenai tribes did manage to exert a measure of control over the changes that were imposed upon their people and their lands.

But then, in the mid-1880s, railroads were completed that connected western Montana and its natural resources to the outside world. From that time on, it became much more difficult for tribal people to oppose the taking of their resources, to shape the kind of society that was emerging in Montana, to slow or stop the devastation of the environment. It was no coincidence that the forced removal of the Salish people from the Bitterroot Valley to the Flathead Reservation happened in the immediate aftermath of the completion of the Missoula & Bitterroot Valley Railroad, a spur line off of the Northern Pacific Railroad that ran through many Salish landholdings.

But even after the railroads were built, the Flathead Reservation remained, in at least some ways, a sanctuary for tribal people. The treaty had set aside the reservation for the tribes' "exclusive use and benefit." The only non-Indians who could live there legally were government employees, missionaries allowed on the reservation by the tribes and the government, licensed "Indian traders" operating stores at various places on the reservation, or non-Indians who were married to tribal members.

But all of that changed with the Flathead Allotment Act in 1904, which Congress passed despite overwhelming opposition from tribal members. Authored by Montana Representative Joseph Dixon, the act broke the back of the independent tribal economy. In 1971, the U.S. Court of Claims would belatedly declare that it constituted a fundamental "breach" of the Hellgate Treaty. Under the terms of the act, Congress ended communal ownership of land by "allotting" parcels of land to individual tribal members and thereby forcing them to become owners of private property. The act then declared unallotted land to be "surplus," and in 1910, threw many of those lands open to non-Indian homesteaders. Almost overnight, non-Indians outnumbered Indians within the reservation. More than that, non-Indians increasingly controlled the economic and political landscape. One revealing measure of the change could be seen in the stores on the reservation. Where many of the old licensed Indian traders had to learn Salish or Kootenai (or both) in order to conduct business, now tribal people had to learn English in order to function in the new economic, social, and cultural world. The balance of power, in language and in the economy, had flipped.

All of these changes were part of the larger transformations that would culminate in the construction of Kerr Dam a quarter century later. From the opening of the reservation in 1910 until the completion of the dam in 1939, the road was steep and fast.

\* \* \* \* \*

The allotment act might not have destroyed the tribal economic system by itself. But in 1908, Congressman Dixon pushed through yet another bill, which provided for the construction of a massive irrigation system on the reservation. The Flathead Indian Irrigation Project would bring water to about 150,000 acres of dry lands.

The government's official rationale was that the project would help Indians become farmers. But as former Tribal Council Member Teresa Wall-McDonald (born 1954) said,

*The irrigation project was originally designed to benefit Indians, and to serve Indian allotments, but when the reservation was opened, many non-Indians acquired the allotments; and so in the early years,*

*you had a Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA)-authorized project serving non-Indians on the reservation.*

In effect, the irrigation project only accelerated the allotment act's transfer of Indian lands into non-Indian ownership.

When the irrigation proposal was brought to the attention of tribal members, the reaction of many was at first positive. By 1908, large numbers of Indian people on the Flathead Reservation had been gardening for decades, supplementing traditional foods with vegetables, and other domestic foods raised in small plots. Many tribal gardeners built small-scale irrigation ditches to water those gardens. Now it seemed the government was simply offering to help these tribal gardens by providing more water. As Salish elder Agnes Vanderburg (1901-1989) remembered,

*In order to get the irrigation ditches, they told the Indians, "If we build the ditch, there will be a lot of water for your gardens. If you plant potatoes, you'll have water."*

*And the Indians thought, "Yes, that would be all right."*

In many places, the government built their new, much larger canals directly over the preexisting Indian ditches. But the officials never told tribal people that they would then be charged for the cost of building and maintaining the ditches, and for the cost of the whole project. "The white people built the ditches," Mrs. Vanderburg recalled, "but when they finished, then they said they needed to be paid." At that time, many Indian people lived almost entirely outside the cash economy, so they had virtually no money with which to pay the sudden charges levied by the government. Their only significant "asset" was their land, and agents now began foreclosing on tribal people who could not pay for the ditches that had been run through their lands. Teresa Wall-McDonald noted that the government "acquired allotments through foreclosure where tribal members owed the irrigation project for water [that had been] delivered [to their allotted lands]." In other cases, licensed Indian traders, who had traditionally granted tribal members credit at their stores, suddenly called in their debts and took Indian allotments as payment. As Ms. Wall-McDonald said, "[the] Beckwith [store in St. Ignatius] ended up acquiring many of the Indian allotments for an eighty dollar debt at the store."

There were many other ways in which tribal members lost control of their allotments. The total impact was staggering. Between 1910 and 1929, over 409,000 acres of Flathead Reservation lands — primarily the limited high quality agricultural lands — were put into white ownership. And during that same period, an additional 131,000 acres of Indian allotments were lost to non-Indian ownership.

Ms. Wall-McDonald recounted the apparent corruption that also surrounded the project:

*During the initial construction of the irrigation project, the materials used to build the ditches were purchased at Missoula Mercantile and Beckwith Mercantile in St. Ignatius. Joe Dixon, who produced the legislation to open the reservation, had an interest in the Missoula Mercantile. He also owned property on the reservation.*



Figure 2.9. L to R: Plasí Cocowee. Baptise Pierre (killed during construction of the dam), Eneas Inmee, Louie Ninepipe.

Agnes Vanderburg, reflecting on how the irrigation project and other schemes were sold to tribal people, said to her it seemed that "The white people just came here to lie."

Many traditional people shared Mrs. Vanderburg's anger over allotment, the irrigation project, and the non-Indian takeover of the reservation. As Mrs. Vanderburg remembered, Sam Resurrection, a Salish elder who often led protests against government policies, resorted to direct action in an attempt to stop the course of events:

*They did not like the water [i.e., the irrigation project]. One person tried to stop it. ...they would survey where the water would be going into the ditch. They would put a stake in the ground. This old person would take out the stakes and burn them. He thought that would stop them. So they didn't survey it, and they made the ditches anyway."*

Much of the Flathead Reservation is characterized by palouse prairie streams, which carry clear cold water from the Mission Mountains and other ranges through otherwise dry grasslands to the Flathead River. The irrigation project harnessed all or part of many of these natural stream flows, redirecting them with a network of dams and canals. The project profoundly changed natural water tables of the valley — in some places ruining preexisting Indian gardens, in other places , devastating fisheries, and nearly everywhere bringing a reduction in natural water flows. "Just like Mission Creek right here is a good example," recalled Salish-Nez Perce elder Charlie McDonald (1898-1995). "[W]hen I was a young feller here, all along up and down here there was swimming holes for any kid that wanted it. Now you'd have a hell of a time finding a swimming hole. And I used to catch a lot of nice big fish out of there."

As we saw above in Agnes Vanderburg 's account, the project was pitched to tribal people as helping their small agricultural operations. But in reality, because most Indian gardens were located near streams, as the project reduced the in-stream flows, it also ended up drying out many of the gardens. "I know before the canals were put in, God, you could put a garden out there — you didn't need to water," remembered Pend d'Oreille elder John Peter Paul (1909-2001 ). "But when they put the canals in, it kind of shut off."

In effect, if not in intention, the irrigation project, like the allotment act and the opening of the reservation to white settlement, was part of the destruction of the

reservation's tribal economic system. Until the early twentieth century here, Indian people had maintained complex networks of communal interdependence, a mix of subsistence gardening and ranching with traditional hunting, gathering, and fishing. Many elders recalled a time when their involvement with the cash economy — with the market system — was still very limited. Pend d'Oreille elder Mary Smallsalmon (1909-1995) recalled, "A long time ago when I was young — I was about seventeen years old — we did not go to a grocery store." And Agnes Vanderburg, who was born in 1901, remembered that it wasn't until she was "about six or seven... when my folks started buying stuff." And even then, Mrs. Vanderburg said, "they didn't buy a whole lot — they just buy what they really need, you know." She said that her family — one of the more traditional families on the reservation — continued to depend primarily on the foods taken directly from the land: "still we had our own food."

That tribal economy of gift-giving, of communal hunting and gathering, of yearly cycles of life centered around a rich spiritual calendar, continued to be practiced. But gradually, that system was being displaced as the dominant way of life by a very different order. As the traditional way of life was marginalized by the effects of allotment, irrigation, homesteading, and other factors, Indian people here were being forced into the cash economy. Except for the few with the means to conduct market farming or ranching, tribal members now had to get wage-earning jobs in order to survive.

But in part because of depressed economic conditions and in part because of racial discrimination and cultural barriers, it was difficult for tribal people to find work in this new and alien economic system. And as more young men left the area seeking work, the result was a further splintering of the once close-knit tribal community. "When I was young, I never stuck around on this reservation much," recalled Salish elder Bazile Peche (1903-1993). "I was looking for a job someplace. Go down to Yakima and around there, and the first job I ever hit was down there — I was picking hops. I tell you, you had to pick a lot of hops to make any money." Many tribal families traveled together for seasonal work picking berries and fruit, often in old tribal territories such as the Bitterroot Valley.

Those who stayed on the reservation during these years saw a depth and extent of poverty unknown in earlier times. Many elders relate stories of the extreme conditions of the decades after the opening of the reservation. Salish-Kootenai elder Agnes Kenmille (1916-2009) remembered a time when she was a little girl

and her mother was too ill even to cook for her children, and so Agnes tried to cook something. Mrs. Kenmille chuckled as she remembered throwing flour into a coffee can full of boiling water, stirring it up and adding a little salt. "Ahhh, it looked ugly," she laughed. But she suddenly turned serious as she said, "Well, it helped — I was starving." Salish-Nez Perce elder Larry Parker (1914-1995) related the conditions in his home:

*We were so dang poor at home that whenever my folks would hear that some farmer's cow died, when he was within the radius of a mile or two or three. ... Then my folks would go there and skin it, and they'd take that stinking meat back home, and they'd cure it, and it was edible to some degree. But in my case, I would never eat it — because I could still smell that smelly meat. Oof! It was awful for me.*

Mr. Parker recalled what he called the "forced hunger" of that time, saying, "You've probably heard of the gnawing pains of hunger. Well, that's how it feels. It hurts."

The erosion of the tribal economy, and dependency on the cash economy, had brought poverty to the Salish and Kootenai people; and this poverty, in turn, led them to dependency on the government dole. "Everybody started getting 'rations,' they call it," said John Peter Paul. In most cases, what little was provided to tribal people was the cast-offs of the dominant society, such as low-quality foods that over time contributed to the chronic health problems that began appearing in the tribal population during the twentieth century. Both Mr. Paul and Kootenai elder Joe Antiste (1894-1989) remembered the enormous slabs of salty bacon that were provided to tribal members in need. "They gave a slab of bacon about that big," said Mr. Antiste, with his hands held out at shoulder width. "Bacon, beans, all kinds of stuffs. They went after it — Chief Koostahtah never brought it. Somebody would go after it (for him). He can't eat that bacon, they couldn't eat it. Too much salt! They used it for fire, making firewood. Those Indians all used it."

Mr. Antiste's remarks suggest the indignity felt by many people in taking alms from the government. Out of a sense of tribal honor, chiefs would never go to the commissary.



Figure 2 10. Left sitting, Sakali Finley

Although non-Indian poverty was not generally as severe as that experienced by many tribal people, during the 1920s there was a severe and widespread depression settling across much of rural America, particularly in the West. By that time, many of the white farmers who had homesteaded on the Flathead Reservation were themselves facing economic ruin. And this meant financial problems for the Bureau of Indian Affairs' massive Flathead Irrigation Project. The farmers who were supposed to pay for the project were going broke. Teresa Wall-McDonald explained,

*In the original design of the irrigation project, the people who benefited from the project were supposed to pay for the debt of constructing the ditches to their land. In 1926 or 1928, there was a five-million dollar debt owing on the irrigation project. [Congressman] Louis Crampton's Interior Committee was reevaluating whether or not they wanted to invest any additional funds into the project.*



Figure 2.11 Kerr Dam workers. On left, Sakali Finley.

Even as pressure was increasing for the Flathead Indian Irrigation Project to address its financial problems, private interests were eyeing yet another reservation resource. The Montana Power Company and its corporate twin, the Anaconda Copper Mining Company, were evaluating the falls of the Flathead River, just below Flathead Lake, as a possible site for a hydroelectric facility. During the first half of the twentieth century, Anaconda dominated Montana's economy and its political system to a degree perhaps unmatched by any other corporation in any other state in American history. Butte had long since been established as "the richest hill on earth," and at nearby Anaconda, the tallest smokestack in the world turned the ore from Butte into copper and other pure metals. The two cities had already turned much of Montana into a vast hinterland feeding resources to their industrial operations. As early as the 1880s, Anaconda was consuming 40,000 board feet of timber per day from the forests of western Montana. The vast logging mill at Bonner, the hydroelectric facilities at Great Falls, countless farms and ranches, and many other aspects of Montana's economy were keyed around supplying Anaconda, Montana Power, and the burgeoning urban population of Butte.

Now, Anaconda's mining and smelting operations were demanding new sources of electric power. At the falls on the Lower Flathead River, an enormous and

dependable volume of clean water rushed through a narrow rock-walled canyon after issuing from Flathead Lake (the largest freshwater lake in the western United States) and a drainage system that included the western half of Glacier National Park. Engineers in both the public and private sectors had long seen this place as one of the most valuable potential dam sites in the entire state. Now Anaconda and Montana Power came together to form a jointly owned subsidiary called Rocky Mountain Power, which submitted an application to the Federal Power Commission to build a dam at the site.

For many tribal people, however, this was a place of power of an entirely different kind. For them it was a sacred place, a place to be respected, a place where human beings should be humbled rather than heedlessly exerting their ability to transform and destroy the natural world. At this place, the long history of conflict and exchange between two deeply differing cultures and ways of life came into sharp relief.

In interviews for *The Place of the Falling Waters*, tribal elders strike a delicate balance between communicating in a general way the deep cultural importance of this place, and honoring the need to keep their spiritual traditions private. Agnes Vanderburg said simply, "My husband [Jerome Vanderburg] was still young... it didn't fall into his head [occur to him] to go work up there. He kind of disliked the dam. That isn't the kind of work he did. He didn't want it." John Peter Paul said only, "They figured it was sacred — there, the fishing, all of that." Kootenai elder Tony Mathias (1922-1996) echoed Mr. Paul in stating the spiritual importance of the place, but leaving it at that: "Well, some of them didn't like it [the dam], because that was... where the spirits is at." Kootenai elder Alec Lefthand (1913-1996) said, "Before the dam was built... somehow the [Kootenai] people heard. ...that people wants to lease this place to build a dam. And. ...something told my people not to let it go, because it's very important to the Kootenais."

But the cultural and spiritual life of the people — strong even after eighty years of attacks — was of little concern to the government. Ignoring all questions of tribal culture and tribal sovereignty, the Bureau of Indian Affairs merely saw the dam as a way to clear the debt on the still uncompleted Flathead Indian Irrigation Project. As Teresa Wall-McDonald recounted,

*The funding of the completion of the irrigation project was Kerr Dam. Rocky Mountain Power or Montana Power came in and said*

*that if the local people would relinquish the damsite to them, that they would build a bigger dam, give the local residents a low-cost block of power — the residents could retail the electricity on the reservation, make a profit, and use that to pay back the government the [irrigation project's] five-million dollar debt.*

To the BIA, this seemed like a perfect solution at the perfect time. Under the terms that began to take shape during the late 1920s, none of the money from the dam would go to the tribes; rather, it would be divided between the power company, the BIA, and the irrigation project and its mostly non-Indian water users. BIA officials were not even planning to require the power company to pay the tribes for the land on which the dam would be built. As Ms. Wall-McDonald put it:

*In the beginning, when the Montana Power Company was pursuing the license, nobody protected the tribes' interests adequately. It was a tribal resource; it was tribal property: those were tribal waters that were reserved for the benefit of the tribe in the beginning of the reservation. The Bureau of Indian Affairs and congressional officials completely ignored that fact. Instead, they advocated the turnover of the damsite to the Montana Power Company. They did little of nothing to protect the tribes' interests. It was a shameful process.*

During this era, the tribes had no clear way to press their concerns to the federal government. The traditional chiefs were regarded with condescension and dismissal by officials in Washington. Meanwhile, competing groups laid claim to being the true tribal government. During the 1910s, the BIA had set up a "Flathead Business Council," comprised mostly of non-traditional tribal members who had no deep cultural objections to large-scale resource extraction on the reservation, such as the massive logging of old-growth timber that ravaged tribal lands through the 1920s. Another group formed a quasi-democratic "Flathead Tribal Council," which often was at odds with the business council but which was not clearly recognized by federal officials. When the Flathead Tribal Council tried to allocate funds for a lawyer to defend their rights regarding the Flathead River power site, the Secretary of the Interior exercised his power of approval over tribal expenditures and flatly blocked the appropriation.

Some tribal members took up their own means of resistance to the pending deal. Teresa Wall-McDonald told how "when Montana Power was doing core drillings

at the site, a group of tribal members on horseback with rifles went out there and chased the officials off the site and sat watch and guarded the site."



Figure 2.12. "Mucking" or clearing blast debris, Kerr Dam.

Word of the project quickly made its way to national Indian advocacy groups such as the American Indian Defense Association, led by the famed reformer John Collier, who in 1933 would become Franklin Roosevelt's Commissioner of Indian Affairs. Articles about the pending deal with Montana Power erupted on the pages of *The Nation* and other magazines, and the uproar forced the BIA to revise the terms of the deal. In the end, the Federal Power Commission required the power company to pay the tribes an annual rental fee of \$140,000 for the use of the damsite, with that fee to be renegotiated periodically. The company was also required to give job preference to tribal members during construction of the dam.

In May 1930, the BIA arranged for Montana Power officials to conduct public events on the reservation to try and garner support from tribal members for a project that few if any truly understood. Teresa Wall-McDonald told how "Some of the elders talk about a powwow where Rocky Mountain Power or Montana Power officials came in, and gave everybody money at the powwow if they were to sign a petition supporting the licensing of the dam to them." Kootenai elder

Adeline Mathias (1910-2007) vividly remembered the gathering and the actions of Montana Power President Frank M. Kerr (1869-1940):

*And Mr. Kerr bought all the groceries for the Indians that were camping out. He was so generous and nice because he wanted to build that dam. He even hand out cash to the chiefs! I seen that, and I knew that — for the chiefs to take care of their people with while they were camping out. That's how much he wanted the dam, the falls so he could build the dam. He was pretty loose with his money!*

Following the meeting in St. Ignatius, tribal members, Kerr, government officials, and other interested non-Indians traveled to the falls of the Flathead River. During research for *The Place of the Falling Waters*, newsreel footage was discovered of the government-scripted event at the falls. Remarkably, the soundtrack survived, and we can both see and hear the falls — and excerpts from some of the speeches. Mr. Kerr, reading from notes he held in his hat, told the assembled group, "It is a great pleasure for me to meet you and your people today in your homeland, at this place of falling waters, where water has fallen idly for ages — the gift of our great Creator."

Mr. Kerr, of course, had in mind putting the "idle" water to what he considered good use. But to many tribal people, the water was already serving a far greater purpose than what the non-Indians had in mind.

The company, as we will see in Part III, promised tribal members free electricity for allowing them to build the dam. Even that was a miserly payment for such a lucrative resource, but with the BIA arrayed on the side of Montana Power, there was little the chiefs could do except remind the white men of their moral obligation. The Kootenai Head Chief, Koostahtah (1891-1942), told the assembled crowd: "...this man [Kerr]... I know that today, he has a big name in this country. Today, I give him an even bigger name, this area. I know he has wealth. Today, I'm giving him even more wealth, this man."

Within the conventions of tribal gift-giving traditions, Chief Koostahtah was sending Kerr a clear message: we here today, the impoverished, are enriching the rich; you now owe us. The chief's very public statement of obligation, however, seems to have been lost on the non-Indian visitors. Mr. Kerr, almost comically echoing the broken promises of the past, told the Indian people, "I hope the work will be a success, and bring to your people many comforts — as

long as water falls." The newsreels trumpeted the meeting as a willing and enthusiastic agreement: "Big Chiefs Help Flathead Project / F.M. Kerr, General Manager of Montana Power Co., enlists co-operation of Koostahtah and Charlo."



Figure 2.13. Kerr Dam dedication. Second from left, Mathias; fourth from left, Chief Martin Charlo; fifth from left, Chief Koostahtah; sixth from left, Victor Vanderburg; seventh from left, Frank Kerr.

The project was postponed during the severe financial downturn during the height of the Great Depression. When construction finally resumed in earnest in 1936, hundreds of Indian men did help build the dam, in spite of the sacred nature of the place. By that time, as we have seen, the independent tribal economy had been largely broken as a direct result of federal policies, including the Flathead Allotment Act and the various laws establishing the Flathead Indian

Irrigation Project. The traditional sources of food and support had been reduced, and many Indian people had become poor, and dependent on the cash economy and rations for survival. So for many people, the sudden chance to earn good wages loomed even larger than their cultural and spiritual objections to the dam. Salish-Colville-Spokane elder Joe Eneas (1896-1997) cheerfully recalled getting such high-paying work: "Maybe it was forty-five cents that we received per hour. [Laughs] It was good! Later they raised it to fifty cents. [Laughs] Fifty cents is what we were paid for one hour of work. It was good! [Laughs]"

Mary Smallsalmon brightly told of her brother, Pete Beaverhead, working at the dam: "My brother worked over there — makes good money that time... He bought a wagon with tires, team of horses, harness — good stuff."



Figure 2.14. Kerr Dam dedication. Left (upper) row, L to R: unknown, Šnayaqn Quequesah, Louie Combs (edge of face showing), Little Martin, uncertain, Baptiste Telpah (with headband), unknown, unknown, Pečum Finley (next to last in row, face visible), uncertain (white headdress).

Right (lower) row, L to R: Laʔkat (Agate Ogden Finley), unknown, unknown, Kootenai woman married to Salish man (her face is turned partly toward camera), unknown, Mary Ann Combs (with handkerchief on head at end of row).

For many of the Indian workers, it was their first experience in industrial labor. The company assigned most of them to manual jobs, while whites occupied most of the skilled positions. Unions were explicitly prevented from organizing at the work site, a provision agreed to and enforced by the tribes themselves. "Once in a while," said John Peter Paul, "they would do double shifts. The deal was... if your relief doesn't come, you got to stay there. Then if the other guy doesn't come, you still got to stay another eight hours. Of course, that paid pretty good."

Joe Eneas told of his job at the site:

*In the year of 1937, I went to work at the dam. The work I did was called "mucking" [i.e., cleaning] — that's what I did. And I don't know how long I did this. Right where they were going to build the dam, that's where I was cleaning. [Gestures] And the rocks from the cliff, that's what we were cleaning.*

Due in part to the absence of unions, there were few safety precautions, especially in the early stages of construction. And as tribal workers with hand tools and wheelbarrows continued to clear away the dam site beneath the towering walls of rock, it became clear to many that a serious accident could occur. Alec Lefthand said

*They know it was going have a big slide there, but they still send boys to go in there and work. And ...everything... just didn't run right, because white people didn't care about it, [because] it was run by Indians and... that's why a lot of 'em got killed there.*

In 1937, this carelessness led to the deaths of five tribal members. Two died in a rock slide in March, and three perished in a cave-in in September. Alec Lefthand spoke of the night before one of the accidents:

One old man told me when he got back to his camp — he told his old lady, "Something's going to happen tonight because that rock is moving — when I last looked at it before I left, it moved about a foot." And that night, that's when it happened.

Joe Eneas told of the same fateful night:

*I don't know what time of night it was — it had been raining, and they were working there. The cliff was high, and they were working below, and the rocks broke off. [Gestures] Some were killed. I don't remember how many were killed there.*

*I lived only because I was not there. I was not with them.*

Mr. Lefthand told of how the violation of the falls exacted a terrible price on the Kootenai people:

*And before I started working here, we lost Chief Mathias's son. About 100 yards from here [the site of the interview], that's where he was working and got killed on the landslide. Couple people got killed there, and a few others got caught in that slide... we lost them. That's what that "something" say, why they don't want to let this place go. It cost us the chief's son.*

*We lost the chief's son here.*

John Peter Paul related how, only after these accidents occurred, did the company seem to make some cold calculations that they should be more careful:

*They were a little careless. ...I think they were told if ten people got killed, they were going to lose their contract. Right now, nine got killed. They were pretty careful from there on. They had brought safety men. They wear [hard]hats. All they would do is go around.*

Eighty-four years after the signing of the Treaty of Hellgate — a treaty that guaranteed the sovereignty of the reservation and the independence of the people — the dam was completed. It stands today as the product and symbol of how the non-Indian way of life was imposed upon the Flathead Reservation, and of how Indian people have both resisted and participated in the transformation of this once sacred place.

The disruptions of World War II ensured that in the following decades, the pace of cultural change would only increase. Former Salish-Pend d'Oreille Culture Committee staff member Germaine White (born 1951) spoke of this sense of dislocation during those years:

*Culture and tradition changed so fast. What happened when your entire life-way changes, when you're no longer a hunter, when you're no longer a fisherman, when you don't camp and move around and visit with your people, and rely on trade, and rely on your traditional lifestyle? What happens to you when you get lost that way? People I think got lost.*

Yet it is also true that through all of this, the native people and the native ways of this region somehow survived. Salish-Pend d'Oreille Culture Committee Director Tony Incashola (born 1946) stated that "There's a whole generation, different generations of people, who in their own way had to fight, had to survive in order for me and the rest of the tribal people to be here." And former Kootenai Culture Committee staff member Francis Auld (born 1953) reminded us that "Them old people, they didn't give up. 'Cause if they would have gave up, we wouldn't be here."

In the 1980s, a new twist developed in the history of Kerr Dam and the Flathead Indian Reservation. After the license for the dam expired in 1980, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes challenged the Montana Power Company and won an agreement to take over Kerr Dam in the future. We will explore that issue in Part III, with the looming question: will Kerr Dam, under tribal control, bring empowerment to the Indian people and Indian cultures of the Flathead Reservation?

### **Part III: The Dam and the Future**

In 1938, a massive dam was completed on the lower Flathead River, near the very center of the Flathead Indian Reservation.

It was built by the Montana Power Company with the encouragement and approval of the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs. Montana Power would control the dam and its enormous revenues for the next fifty years, and it was named for the company president, Frank M. Kerr.

At the site of the dam, the company installed bronze plaques proclaiming the dam as a monument to "friendly cooperation" between Indians and whites. But today, some members of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes have a

different idea of what the dam has meant for the people. As former Salish Kootenai College instructor Ron Therriault (born 1931) put it, "the dam was a symbol... of the domination of tribal sovereignty."

And for some elders, the memory of how things were before the dam calls into question the supposed benefits of its construction. Salish-Colville-Spokane elder Joe Eneas (1896-1997) recalled how when he was a child, in the years before the reservation was opened to white settlement, he and his family would ride across the open, roadless, unfenced prairies of the Mission Valley to the falls of the Flathead River. They would stay there for a week or two, harvesting great numbers of bull trout during their spawning runs: "So the water used to go in a circle. [Gestures] There was kind of a hole there. That was a long time ago — that's where we used to go fishing. Yes, it was good."

The construction of Kerr Dam put an end to all of that. And in a larger sense, the dam was part of a far larger and longer story: an eighty-year assault on the traditional cultures and political sovereignty of the Pend d'Oreille, Salish, and Kootenai people that began with the Treaty of Hellgate in 1855. Under the terms of the treaty, the tribes ceded the vast majority of their aboriginal territories, and reserved from cession a relatively small piece of land — the Flathead Reservation — for their "exclusive use and benefit." But in the decades to come, the treaty's promise of sovereignty was broken repeatedly by policies implemented by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and by laws passed by Congress, including the Flathead Allotment Act and the Flathead Irrigation Act. The building of the dam at a place of sacred meaning to tribal people was only the culmination of that series of events.

In the years after the dam's completion, the pace of change and cultural loss only quickened on the Flathead Reservation. World War II, in particular, deeply affected the already fragmented communities, as Pend d'Oreille elder Margaret Finley (1926-2005) said:

*Since the time I was small and to the time... when they really took change was when we got in war with Japanese — Pearl Harbor. Right after that — everything changed very fast, very, very fast We don't go up dig bitterroot, go up the mountains and pick huckleberries, go camping — those [things] were just gone.*

*And after the war, [we] tried to gathering again, you know, gather back together and start back where we left off before the war — how we do things together, happiness, all that. [But] it all changed... everything changed. Lot of it [was] gone. But it used to be so nice.*

In the years after the building of Kerr Dam, nine more major dams would be built in the Flathead-Pend Oreille River system, and another nine major dams in the Columbia River downstream from the confluence with the Pend Oreille River. In the neighboring Snake River drainage system, sixteen major dams were erected after 1938. Many of these dams had devastating effects on tribes throughout the northwest, as ancient salmon runs, sacred places, village sites, and crucial habitat for plants and animals were obliterated. Among the most damaging was the Dalles Dam at Celilo Falls, completed in 1957, drowning one of the most important tribal fishing sites in the Northwest. A newsreel from that time showed a pre-dam image of tribal fishermen on traditional wooden platforms dissolving into a shot of the monumental cement form of the completed dam. The narrator gave bald expression to the ideology of the dam-builders: "Net' proceeds become 'net' profits — as once again red man bows to white man's march of progress. A river is harnessed," intoned the narrator, "and the old order passeth."

For some elders, those dams destroyed something profound and important in the world, with serious consequences — not only in terms of the environment, but also in a spiritual sense. Not long before his passing, Kootenai elder Joe Antiste (1894-1989) forcefully expressed his sense of what had been damaged, and of the possible repercussions:

*Now, that's why I was thinking. Pretty soon, we'll all be gone. White man, he didn't know what he's doing. Make dam — dams all over. You know what's going to happen to us? Just once, it busted all dam — that dam, water coming out. Water kill us. Lightning come up there, that water get burned. That's what [is] going to happen to us! That's what I'm always thinking to myself. Getting bad! White people just getting too far.*

The construction of so many massive dams had indeed inflicted great harm to Indian cultures and to the plants and animals of the region. But in more recent decades, in what was a surprise to many non-Indians, many tribes began to pick themselves up and fight back, reasserting themselves as a presence in the

political landscape. On the Flathead Reservation, the tribal government began to develop a more powerful sense of its sovereignty during the 1970s, as the powers restored by the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 and subsequent laws began to be exercised more vigorously by tribal leaders. At the same time, many younger Indian people took a renewed interest in the traditional culture and way of life. By the time the license for Kerr Dam came up for renewal in 1980 before the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC), the governing council was ready to challenge the Montana Power Company for control of the damsite.

In 1984, a young member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes named Teresa Wall-McDonald (born 1954) was appointed to fill a vacancy on the tribal council, in part due to her experience researching the Kerr Dam issue for the tribal legal department. Ms. Wall-McDonald recalled her appointment:

*When I think back to that time in my life when I was on the tribal council, and we were negotiating with the Montana Power Company for control of the dam, the issue was like an obsession with me. It consumed my life. It was so very important to me to get control of the license, if not in this licensing period, then sometime in the future.*

At the same time, Ron Therriault was elected to the tribal council and then appointed tribal chairman. He described the reaction of many non-Indians — including many who had at times been allies of the tribes in the past — to the tribal bid to control the dam:

*We initially went for the license, and the response of the non-Indian was really unique. Because they had a fear. And the fear was that we would have the dam, the license, the money. And with the money comes that power. In the same way, that money could at least lead to ending the dependency on the United States. And somehow that just brought fear into the non-Indian people around the reservation.*

While the tribal council pursued legal and administrative strategies to gain control of the dam, tribal members and some non-Indian supporters organized protests and vigils to express support for the tribal effort. A large multi-day encampment was held at the damsite, and it was clear that the issue had struck a chord among the people. As Ms. Wall-McDonald recalled, "People were there guarding the site. It was a sign of unity for tribal members. It was an expression

of intent of the tribes' desires to control the license and to keep Montana Power Company off of it." A delegation of people from one of the Kootenai bands in British Columbia traveled down to the Flathead Reservation to show their support for their American relations. "Today, you young people should be talking for your rights!" exhorted one of their elders. "Stand up and speak for your rights! Fight for your rights!"

The activists of 1984 were inspired, in part, by those tribal elders who still held vivid memories of the promises made by the power company in 1930 — and then promptly broken. In surviving newsreels from 1930, the President of Montana Power Company, Frank M. Kerr (1869-1940), can be seen and heard presenting the project in grandiose terms, and offering the usual predictions of only beneficial consequences for Indian people:

*It has been decided that my people make this great development of your property, make use of this idle water for you, and all who may be able to use its power. If it shall fall upon me to carry on this work, I ask that you send your young men to help me, and that you come and set up your tipis, and visit us when you can.*

The reality was not so felicitous. In 1930, with the Bureau of Indian Affairs giving nothing but encouragement and support to Montana Power, tribal people simply did not have the political muscle to stop the dam. But at a time of great economic need — and with the subsistence tribal economy having been largely dismantled over the previous century — many tribal people did appreciate the opportunity for good-paying jobs at the dam.

In addition to the opportunity to earn decent wages, as many elders recalled, there was also Montana Power's promise to provide tribal people with free electricity. "We were supposed to get our lights free that time, when we all signed up," said Salish elder Agnes Kenmille (born 1916). Salish elder Agnes Vanderburg (1901-1989) also remembered the power company's big promise: "They lied about that also. They said you would have electricity, and it wasn't so."

In the 1930 newsreel, one can see, in the chiefs' statements to Mr. Kerr, acknowledgement of the promise of free electricity. A translator for the Salish chief, Martin Chariot (1856-1941), thanked Kerr for having "broughten light to us for posterity, for the future to come." And the Kootenai chief, Koostahtah

(1891-1942), publicly adopted Mr. Kerr into the Kootenai tribe — and bestowed upon him a Kootenai name, giving him a tanned hide with the name painted upon it. The newsreel recorded Chief Koostahtah's words in his language: "I'm giving him a name. His name shall be 'Light.'

Such a public adoption, and the high honor of being given a tribal name, was also a way of reminding the Montana Power executive of his obligation to the tribes. But it was an obligation that Mr. Kerr and the power company nevertheless quickly forgot. As Kootenai elder Joe Phillips (1936-1997) angrily pointed out, "We don't even own the dam. We can't even get power from it. We have to buy it just like everybody else. That free power... that our elders talk about, what happened to it? Who got the free power?"



Figure 2.15. Kerr Dam dedication. Second from left, Chief Martin Charlo. Third from left, Koostahtah.

Like many other tribal members, Mr. Phillips was also outraged by the Bureau of Indian Affairs' lack of help to the tribes in 1984 in trying to obtain the federal license to run the dam. "I always ask this question to myself, and I always say, where in the Sam Hill was the BIA? The BIA is a big joke as far as I'm concerned." As Teresa Wall-McDonald noted, "The Bureau of Indian Affairs did not provide any technical assistance or any sort of support for the tribes in

pursuing the license. They didn't react fast enough. It was like they were ten years too slow in preparation for the issue."

The BIA's malign neglect ended up having an unanticipated effect within the tribal government. At first, there were divisions with the council over what strategy the tribes should pursue. Some thought the tribes should aim only for as much money as they could get. As tribal Executive Secretary Fred Houle (1928-2004) put it:

*...a lot of the council felt that their obligation was to get the best deal for the tribes, the most monetary return for the tribes — whether it was through relicensing the dam to Montana Power or some other entity, or getting the license in their own name. The bottom line was, how much can we make off of it?*

Others, however, believed that as a matter of tribal sovereignty it was also important to secure control of the dam. Ron Therriault was a leader of that faction:

*One of the things that came out of the negotiations with Montana Power Company is that we had an element of people that were very unhappy, because what they wanted was money — cash — right now. And to me this is an indication of the lack of tribalism. And maybe it's an indication of the success of the bureau, and of the government, to assimilate people. But the whole concept that, "There's the money, I want it right now, I don't care about the generations to come" — that is totally against tribalism. Because what you always do, as a leader especially, is consider what's not only good right now, but what would be good for the future, for the future generations.*

With each act of abandonment and betrayal by the BIA, however, Mr. Therriault could see the tribal council becoming more resolved to pursue control of the dam, and to seize control of the issue:

*As the council becomes stronger, and as the people on the council become more capable, then what started to happen was that the BIA was told what they should do, rather than being asked what we*

*should do. And that changed the whole relationship between this tribal government and the Bureau of Indian Affairs.*

The tribes had to deal not only with a BIA that was utterly failing to protect their interests, but also with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC), which had neither much knowledge nor much interest in the particulars of tribal history and culture. And FERC would be making the final ruling on the issue. As Fred Houle stated,

*It was the realities of the case where FERC didn't want to turn over to an Indian tribe a valuable resource such as Kerr Dam. And I don't believe they understood that fully — that it was tribal property to begin with. They took it as just another relicensing issue.*

FERC processed the competing bids for the license through an administrative judge named Bruce Birchman. "I believe the judge knew we were in an extremely vulnerable position," said Teresa Wall-McDonald.

*He knew how weak our case was. We couldn't provide any evidence of being able to retail the power at that point in time. But I don't think that he understood the history, or how difficult it had been. Nor did he understand the bitterness (of) some of the tribal members.*

In the end, the final settlement did not give the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes what they wanted — immediate control of the dam. But they did get a rental fee for the damsite of \$9 million per year for thirty years, to be adjusted upward annually to account for inflation. And then, in the year 2015, the tribes would have the opportunity to take direct control of the dam itself.

About a decade after FERC's Kerr Dam decision, Republicans in the Montana Legislature passed a law, signed by Republican Governor Marc Racicot, that deregulated the energy industry in the state. The result was that Montana Power Company executives quickly liquidated the entire holdings of the company, leaving shareholders with worthless paper, and leaving most consumers with much higher electricity rates. Kerr Dam ended up being owned by Pennsylvania Power and Light. But PPL still must abide by the terms of the license, and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes will still have the opportunity to assume ownership of the dam in 2015.

Like many tribal members, Joe Phillips had a mixed assessment of the outcome, but an appreciation for the difficult position in which the tribal council was placed:

*We can't say really today, did we do enough? Did we do the right thing? Did the council do the right thing? I know they did one thing — they went and put their best foot forward. They tried to negotiate in the best of faith. Today, as I look back at it, they were trying to negotiate with a man with a stacked deck...*

And Mr. Phillips was probably also not alone in expressing a burning commitment to ensuring that the government and the energy companies abide by every aspect of the deal:

*We are going to have to make sure that they live up to their obligations. They never lived up to the first one and if that's what you're going to get, then do the things that we didn't do, which is to send that sucker down the God-dang river in little pieces.*

Assuming the deal is kept this time, Kerr Dam will likely bring the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes a level of income — and a kind of power to determine their own destiny — that they have not had since the time of the Hellgate Treaty. Economists estimate that Kerr Dam produces about 55 million dollars per year for the baseload, firm power it generates (@ \$50/megawatt).

For the tribes, the dam could provide the kind of funding that enables a free re-imagining of the tribal future. On one level, the income could provide more support for various tribal programs, or for per-capita payments, or for reacquisition of land within the Flathead Reservation. But the level of revenue that Kerr Dam is likely to bring the tribes may permit consideration of issues on a much deeper level and over a much longer timeframe. After a century of cultural loss, the tribes may in a real sense have a new kind of power to choose their own way of life. The dam could conceivably enable a kind of cultural self-determination. And so the looming reacquisition of Kerr Dam provides an opportunity for tribal members to have an open discussion of the future in the broadest terms.

But the very history that led to the construction of Kerr Dam also produced a number of cultural and ideological rifts among the tribal membership. It left divisions among the people over what their future direction should be. The question now looms as to whether tribalism — tribal culture in more than just a superficial sense — can or should be revitalized as the actual living way of life of the people.

Many of the elders interviewed for *The Place of the Falling Waters* expressed a profound hope that the tribes would use the money for the revitalization of the traditional ways. As Kootenai elder Alec Lefthand (1913-1996) said, "We're trying to encourage the young people to come back to the old Indian ways of living. ...And that's how we should keep using our Kerr Dam money — to be more in the Indian ways, to use it in the Indian ways."

A countervailing perspective was provided by Fred Houle:

*Well, that's pretty much socialistic, and I don't think that either one of the tribes would go along with it. I think they [can] celebrate their traditional culture individually, which is fine. But I don't think you'll ever get them to the point where everything will be share and share alike. They're too capitalistic to do that. A strict tribal community was very socialistic, and I don't think we're headed in that direction.*

While Mr. Lefthand imagined many cultural purposes for which "our Kerr Dam money could be used," he worried that people with more power within the tribal government, like Mr. Houle, "don't look at it that way. They want to put their money in where they'll get their money back... to make money." Ron Therriault adamantly disagreed with Mr. Houle's sense that tribalism was a thing of the past: "...the concept of everybody together... [is] dead only in their minds. It's not dead in the minds of the youth."

A young tribal member in 1989, Vince Pablo (born 1970), seemed to validate Mr. Therriault's hope that older tribal values continued to guide the younger generations: "Myself, with the, with the sweats and the traditional doings that we have it kept me in line It kept me on a good road, where I'd learn and I respect what they do... with the sweathouse and with their creator."

Former Tribal Council Member Kevin Howlett (born 1951) questioned the degree to which the tribes had adopted the culture of the dominant society and hoped that a path could be found that would retain the tribes' cultural identity:

*How much should we develop? How much can the land stand? How much can the culture stand? ...we've got to go the way of the Indian We've got to go the way that preserves the integrity of what we are. We're not brown-skinned people who happen to live along Highway 93. We are the Salish and Kootenai people.*

Tony Incashola (born 1946), now Director of the Salish-Pend d'Oreille Culture Committee, expressed the concern of what would happen if the tribes do not take action on basic cultural issues: "If we ignore our culture, if we let other cultures dominate, then our culture will die. We'll fade away, and we will no longer be a people, an Indian people." And Francis Auld (born 1953), then with the Kootenai Culture Committee, echoed that concern:

*How many people thirty years old, Kootenai and Salish, can, can stand in a bunch together and converse in their language? How many Kootenai and Salish twenty-year-olds can stand together and say, "This is the way my ancestors conduct a certain ceremony?" How many Salish and Kootenai kids can you take and give them a drum and tell them to sing? There's not too many, and not enough... We have to wake up! We have to wake up and ...let it come to life again. Let it live again.*

Tribal control of Kerr Dam may be both a power and a burden, but it has given both young and old the chance to offer their dreams for the future. And many, as we saw above, hoped that the tribes would be bold enough to imagine and implement the restoration of tribal cultures. Salish elder Louise McDonald (1905-1994) was clear: "I'd like to see the old ways come back. Because nowadays it's going too far the other way... The old Indian ways [is] what we should do." She acknowledged, however, that it would be "pretty hard" to pull off. Francis Auld believed, however, that "We can do it. Language can be revived, culture can be practiced — not exactly the way it was done two, three hundred years ago, but I think it can be practiced, and it can be done so the heritage will continue."

And Agnes Vanderburg offered her vision and hope: "I strongly believe that this will happen, with my helping them. I think we will make it. I strongly believe this will be."

Whether for good or for bad, tribal control of Kerr Dam will bring great changes to the Flathead Reservation. Can the tribes use this resource in ways that will nurture the tribal cultures? Or will this money only lead the people to adopt more completely the values and way of life of the non-Indian society? Former Salish-Pend d'Oreille Culture Committee staff member Myrna Adams (born 1956) pointed out that the dam is a reality, and the question is not whether it will be used, but how: "There's nothing we can do — I think about taking away Kerr Dam or getting rid of it — [but] it's there, and it's going to be there a while. And we might as well make good use of it."

Francis Auld expressed confidence that it could be used to the benefit of the Kootenai, Pend d'Oreille, and Salish cultures: "It took money to destroy it, and it's probably going to take money to revive it again. And I think we're a smart enough tribe to do it — if we stay fair and just with the people."

Some people began envisioning specific uses for the income from the dam, and clearly many are already beginning to think in big terms, including Naida Lefthand (born 1947) of the Kootenai Culture Committee:

*mainly I'd like to see the tribes purchase as much of the land back, and gain control of it, and possibly go into aboriginal territory and start purchasing land. ...my dream is that someday, the Kootenais and the Flatheads will own all of western Montana.*

Ron Therriault felt that

*one of the major uses for that money should be for education. We have to teach our children to live in two worlds. That's a fine balance — but they've got to know who they are, and where they came from. That's the security of the people. But they also have to know how to live in this new world, and use the technology of the new world. That money could be used there.*

If the hopes of Ron Therriault and Naida Lefthand, of Tony Incashola and Francis Auld, of Agnes Vanderburg and Louise McDonald and Alec Lefthand

and so many other elders — if those hopes can be realized, then ironically, a dam that helped destroy tribal culture may in time be used to restore it.

Today, the Indian people of the Flathead Reservation are dreaming their future. They are dreaming a future they now have the power to create — if Kerr Dam can be used in this way. Until now, the dam has been a part of the loss of tribal sovereignty and culture. But depending on how it is used, it may now become a tool of regeneration and hope.

Ron Therriault expressed his dream that

*a hundred years from now, I'd like this reservation to look like it did a hundred years ago. I'd like it to be one place in this world that's still as pristine as possible. And altogether, it's the people and the state of mind of the people that we have to preserve. We have to preserve our natural existence.*

And Agnes Vanderburg told us her vision of the future: "I think that it will be good... I'm glad there are a lot of children...learning the Indian way I think many of them will go that way."

And finally, Francis Auld expressed the hope that

*A hundred years from now... somebody can go up to one of my grandkids, and say, "Who are you?"*

*And they can say, "This is who I am, Kootenai."*

*Or they can say, "This is who I am. Flathead. I am an Indian, a human being."*

*That's what I would like to see.*

*I'd like to see them say, "This is my Land."*

*...And another hundred years from there, there'll still be a person to say, "I am an Indian, a human being. This is my land, and these are my children."*