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The Water Rises: Franklin Roosevelt, Clarence Dill, and the Building of Grand Coulee Dam - Chapter 9 from "Clarence C. Dill: The Life of a Western Politician"

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CHAPTER NINE

THE WATER RISES

AFTER THE INAUGURATION of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the nation's capital entered a period of frenzy known as the Hundred Days. Dill's primary role in the New Deal came in regard to the Communications Act of 1934 and in the battle for Grand Coulee in 1933. In his battle for the great dam, Dill had to contend with those who were opposed to the dam, both in his own state and in Washington, D.C., with those who were zealous for the dam but knew little of how things were accomplished in the nation's capital, and with a president who had far greater concerns than Grand Coulee. In 1933 Clarence Dill helped out-flank the dam's opponents, guided its supporters toward what was possible, and was the leading member of Washington's congressional delegation in gaining FDR's approval of the great dam.

Dill's initial plan to secure the dam in March 1933 included incorporating it in an unemployment bill, but there were a number of possible ways to proceed.¹ However, he recognized the banking crisis paralyzed the nation and thus he exercised the virtue of patience in relation to Grand Coulee. This prudence and sense of priorities has been inaccurately cited as evidence the dam meant little to Dill.² He wanted the dam for many reasons: jobs, future development, long-term reclamation projects, and perhaps most importantly, as a lasting monument to his own political career. Dill was vain and proud; the dam would be a fitting monument to any western politician. It is also likely that he hoped to gain financially from the project; and there is some evidence he used unethical means to profit from Grand Coulee.³

On April 1 Dill wrote to James O'Sullivan congratulating him on his appointment as executive secretary of the Columbia Basin Commission (CBC). The CBC, a creation of the Washington state legislature, purposed to guide development of the Columbia Basin and negotiate with the federal government toward that end.⁴ Dill cautioned the energetic and headstrong O'Sullivan that the nation's agricultural surplus meant that Grand Coulee could never win approval as a land reclamation program.

Only pursuing Grand Coulee as a public power project offered any chance of success.⁵

In April Washington's congressional delegation remained uncertain as to how to gain approval for the dam. Dill and Representative Sam B. Hill favored procuring Reconstruction Finance Corporation funds, thus avoiding the need for congressional endorsement. Both Dill and Hill told Albert Goss, master of the Washington State Grange and CBC member, that pressing Columbia Basin development as a reclamation project was sheer folly. Goss agreed, having come to that conclusion himself sometime earlier.⁶ Dill and Hill also informed Goss the project would not become reality without the president's support. Goss stood amazed at the degree to which everything in the nation's capital awaited the president's personal approval:

I can confirm what they say with reference to the President's approval. He holds this Congress in the hollow of his hand and they will take no action whatsoever except upon his request. I never saw anything quite like it. Therefore, I feel that our whole effort must be made on concentrating upon the President.

The President is under the greatest pressure I have ever seen, and it is very difficult to get an appointment. There are so many very grievous problems pressing that all but the most important are being deferred until after Congress adjourns. Senator Dill feels confident however that he will be able to get an appointment soon, and I know of nothing to do except press for this appointment as soon as possible.⁷

So FDR's support for the dam was crucial, and Clarence Dill had the closest relationship with the president of anyone from Washington State.

Fortunately for the dam's supporters, FDR had long been interested in hydroelectric power development, rural electrification, and developing efficient agriculture.⁸ Indeed, as governor of New York, FDR had led that state's fight for public power. In the course of the battle, he had come to believe that a well developed public power system must become a reality to be a "yardstick" by which private power companies might be regulated.⁹ Moreover, the president saw much of the West as a vast wasteland that, given cheap electrical power, irrigation, and transportation, might be used as an experiment in social and economic planning. It was with these things in mind that FDR, as the Democratic Party's nominee for president in 1932, gave a speech in Portland in which he said "that the next great hydroelectric development to be undertaken by the Federal government must be that on the Columbia River."¹⁰ The president favored Columbia Basin development in some form; it was now up to Washington's congressional delegation and the CBC to move that interest from the abstract to the concrete.

Probably about April 14 Dill saw the president briefly to provide some information on the Grand Coulee project. The material Dill gave FDR estimated the cost of the project at \$450 million. Roosevelt said to Dill, "I didn't realize this dam was so big." The two men discussed the project for a while. Then the president said, "I've got to go to bed with this."¹¹

On April 17 Roosevelt's secretary called Dill and asked him to come to the White House to discuss the dam with the president. Albert Goss accompanied Dill; Sam Hill would have been there but traffic delayed him. Upon entering the president's office, Dill shook hands with Roosevelt and noticed his unusually friendly manner. The senator sensed bad news. The president began to extol the virtues of the project but then slipped into reiterating all the arguments against the dam. Dill decided to risk reminding the president of his many promises to build Grand Coulee. In his memoirs, this reminder becomes a verbal beating. Dill wrote, "I was like Joe Louis raining punch after punch on his opponent."¹² In reading Dill's memoirs, one cannot help but gain the impression that he embellished his argument with FDR. In a letter to Rufus Woods, Dill mentions his disagreement with FDR but makes much less of it than he did in his memoirs. Dill's account to Woods is probably fairly accurate; there was a brief disagreement, Dill probably worried he had gone too far, then, to Dill's relief, the president proposed a low dam that might cost only \$40 million.¹³

Albert Goss argued that a low dam would not control floods and would make the eventual cost of electricity too high.¹⁴ The president stated he knew very little about the project, but had the impression it was too large to finance under the present circumstances.¹⁵ Congress would never authorize the money. Goss suggested pursuing the RFC alternative, and FDR responded such a course might be wise. He agreed to assist in securing RFC funds in increments if the project could be approached in that way. The president's help was very much conditional. While Dill and Goss explored the RFC alternative, FDR wanted to see cost estimates of building the project in two phases—first a low dam, then a high. The president then mentioned his desire to do something for unemployment relief in the Pacific Northwest, remarking Grand Coulee might help in that regard. The meeting ended on that note. Dill left some information on Grand Coulee with the president. However, both men recognized FDR would commit to nothing until he had hard figures to study.¹⁶

Goss described Dill's response to the meeting as elation, but was himself a bit nonplussed at the president's reticence. Goss and Dill reacted differently to their meeting with the president because Dill had little

problem beginning Grand Coulee as a low dam. Thus, the meeting encouraged him because it demonstrated Roosevelt's sincerity about the low dam. Goss discovered Roosevelt's antipathy to the high dam only during the meeting. Dill apparently had not informed Goss of his previous conversation with Roosevelt, perhaps because he considered Goss's presence in Washington, D.C., as unnecessary and bothersome. The two men had little use for one another.

Dill later suspected FDR had wanted to begin Grand Coulee as a low dam all along and thus had sought a working compromise at the April 17 meeting. This was probably true. Though FDR felt great pressure to cut government expenses in 1933, several factors compelled him to build the dam. First, he had repeated his promise to build Grand Coulee Dam on numerous occasions, and not just to Dill. Ceremonies at Muscle Shoals in February were just the most recent occasion upon which he had mentioned damming the Columbia at Grand Coulee. Second, the public power issue was directly tied to Grand Coulee and the president had campaigned as a public power man. Roosevelt's detailed vision for regional development of the United States was largely based on a systematic use of the nation's great waterways; public power formed the cornerstone of that usage.¹⁷ Third, the Pacific Northwest badly needed jobs; Grand Coulee would help a great deal. Finally, Dill's relationship with Roosevelt gave the senator access to the president and made FDR amenable to helping him.

After the meeting, Goss advised Governor Clarence Martin that telegrams supporting the project were a waste of time; he needed hard figures. In response to Goss's request, O'Sullivan wrote on April 20, "I have made tentative figures based on the knowledge of the cost, and believe we can put in the foundations of the dam and go as high as probably sixty feet above low water, for about sixty million...it is my opinion that we could put in the power plant also for this cost, and that we could utilize the turbines that would be required for the high dam."¹⁸ O'Sullivan further assured Goss that the CBC was not asking for federal government funds for power construction without having a market for the new power. The power would be sold, he asserted.¹⁹

O'Sullivan now made plans to travel to Washington, D.C., to present the Grand Coulee project to the president in detail. O'Sullivan, who possessed an encyclopedic knowledge of Grand Coulee, was the best man for this job. Moreover, everything seemed to hinge on the president's personal approval.²⁰

After a meeting with the president on May 2, Dill announced the government's tentative plan to develop the Columbia Basin. He explained the plan as it stood would not require congressional action and would cost

only about \$60 million, exactly O'Sullivan's figure on the cost of the low dam. The RFC and Washington State's unemployment relief fund were to supply the necessary financing. In addition, a power district would be formed in Washington to sell the power. The resulting contracts would then be used as a basis for the loan from the RFC.²¹

Most Washingtonians were euphoric at the news, but then Oregon punctured the mood. The Oregon congressional delegation, led by Senator Charles McNary, saw the president on May 4 in an effort to stop Grand Coulee and secure a Columbia River dam of their own. The Oregonians preferred developing the lower river rather than the upper. They reported to the media FDR's apparent support of their position. The Oregonians were under the impression there would only be one dam on the Columbia in the foreseeable future.²² Though McNary may have believed FDR agreed with him, the president had told him to see Dill.

Meanwhile, Dill, Goss, and O'Sullivan worked on the details of the Columbia Basin plan. It is important to note that at this time the project did not have the approval of the president. FDR had merely encouraged Dill and the CBC to work on the project, assuming it would be financed largely through the RFC. The Washingtonians were to bring him a proposal in line with a multistage development of Grand Coulee at substantially lower cost than originally projected. The key to developing Grand Coulee as an RFC project centered on the formation of a power district in Washington State that would contract for the sale of power and thus establish the necessary collateral for an RFC loan.²³

Hope for the president's approval of Grand Coulee Dam now rested on the financial attractiveness of the project and, some believed, Clarence Dill's influence with the president. O'Sullivan expressed the latter in a letter to his secretary: "Dill can get us the dam if he really wants to, because of his influence with the President....Dill can overthrow influence of McNary and Steiwer, Republicans, if he will strive hard enough. It is up to Dill, and if he feels that the people out there want this proposition bad enough, he will get us the dam."²⁴

O'Sullivan's estimate of Dill's power was too strong, just as his expectations of Wesley Jones had been too high. If FDR decided against the dam, as Hoover had, there was nothing Dill could do. However, the letter does accurately indicate that Dill was the lead man in the effort to gain the president's approval.

Interestingly, O'Sullivan did not at that time care who got the credit for the dam, as long as it was built: "I am not giving out any publicity letting Senator Dill do it. We cannot forewarn opposition of our moves

and the more Senator Dill 'fathers' the dam, the more certain we will get it. He is powerful with Roosevelt. I would give him the whole state if he puts it over, as I think he will and soon at that."²⁵ Dill believed he would as well, not so much because he was "powerful with Roosevelt," but because he knew the president wanted to build Grand Coulee. For his part, O'Sullivan continued to urge his colleagues in Washington State to create the power district that would handle Grand Coulee's electricity.²⁶ Though O'Sullivan was willing to give Dill credit for gaining Roosevelt's approval of the dam, at least in 1933, he did not particularly like Dill.

Dill now discovered that if the project were to use RFC funds, Washington would have to come up with one-third of the total, or \$20 million. He informed the president that Washington State simply could not raise that much money. Apparently undisturbed, FDR promptly responded it might be possible to finance the project through the \$3.3 billion Public Works Administration package then working its way through Congress. After discussing the possibility of using PWA funds, Dill and FDR decided the senator had better make sure that PWA funds could be used for power projects. To this end, Dill went to see Democratic Senator Robert Wagner of New York, chairman of the Senate committee responsible for the National Industrial Recovery Act, which included the PWA. Wagner referred Dill to Senator Carl Hayden, Democrat of Arizona, chairman of the Senate portion of the conference committee handling the bill. Hayden objected to including a vague reference authorizing dams; he feared opposition from those who did not want any more reclamation dams. But when Dill explained that all he wanted was a power dam, Hayden agreed to insert the words "development of water power" into the paragraph describing acceptable projects for PWA funds. These four words would eventually provide FDR the legal basis for beginning Grand Coulee.²⁷

In mid-May, work on Grand Coulee proceeded on several fronts. Dill filed an application with the Federal Power Commission to build Grand Coulee Dam.²⁸ More importantly the Public Works bill passed Congress. The Columbia Basin Commission and the rest of the state of Washington, even many former Coulee opponents from Spokane, now waited to see what Dill and FDR could come up with. James E. Ford, managing secretary of the Spokane Chamber of Commerce, who was in Washington, D.C., advancing the cause of the dam, told the *Seattle P.I.*, "The fight for the Columbia Basin Project virtually has simmered down to a one man proposition. Senator C.C. Dill has undertaken the task of putting the project across they say and is doing excellent work."²⁹ Ford's pursuit of the dam in the nation's capital is indicative of how the project had won over many in

Spokane who had preferred the gravity plan.³⁰ Even Dill's longtime enemy William Cowles, publisher of the Spokane *Spokesman-Review*, now supported the dam.³¹

In late May, it appeared Grand Coulee had the president's confidential approval and would be built through Public Works Administration funds. But concern remained that FDR might change his mind. The CBC relied on Dill to avoid that pitfall.³² It was not long before O'Sullivan and the other dam supporters could relax a little, at least privately. In the last days of May, Roosevelt sent a confidential letter to Dill endorsing the project. Although the president had not provided public support, nevertheless, O'Sullivan was ecstatic and even had warm thoughts for Dill. O'Sullivan predicted that upon their return to Washington State, he and Dill would "show those guys up who are trying to block this project."³³

Those opposed to Grand Coulee were a strange mixture of Washington's private power interests and public power supporters from west of the Cascades. Ralph D. Nichols, a Seattle city councilman, and James D. Ross, head of Seattle City Light (a publicly owned utility), were both advocates of public power but opposed to Grand Coulee. Times were tough for both the city and the utility. The Depression had reached its nadir and budgets shrank with each passing month. They were both afraid the massive Grand Coulee project would either provide cheap power to private utilities or allow the federal government to directly compete with public utilities to sell electricity. Moreover, Seattle had its own plans for more power production on the Skagit River. To Ross and Nichols, Grand Coulee seemed ill timed at best and perhaps completely unnecessary.³⁴

Of course, private power interests opposed Grand Coulee in an effort to protect their investments and profit margins. Roosevelt and Dill had specifically in mind the idea that public power projects would provide a "yardstick" by which private power rates could be judged and possibly controlled. Private power advocates, often led by Spokane's Washington Water Power Company, argued that the Pacific Northwest already had an abundance of power, that Grand Coulee's power would be enormously expensive, and that the project's reclamation aspects would seriously undermine the administration's effort to take excess farm land out of production.³⁵ In the summer of 1933, several newspapers advanced the private power argument, and Pacific Power and Light Company President Paul McKee declared that Grand Coulee would only add to an existing power surplus.³⁶

In June the lower Columbia flooded in combination with a record high tide. River watchers feared the worst as warm weather threatened to melt snow, further swelling the turbulent river. The Willamette, too,

overflowed its banks and added to the Columbia's torrent. Still the dikes along the river appeared to be holding, though farmers patrolled them as if by doing so they could hold the river back. They could not. On June 14, dikes on the lower river's islands and banks crumbled away; the raging water swept crops and livestock into the sea. The weather bureau offered little hope for relief. The rampaging river did not peak until June 21, a full week later. It was not one of the Columbia's great floods, but it reminded Pacific Northwesterners of the awesome power of the great river.³⁷

Dill now faced a crisis of his own. Ralph Nichols, in a Spokane speech, accused the senator of pushing Grand Coulee for personal gain. Nichols said Dill owned large amounts of land in the Columbia Basin. Dill responded to the accusation:

Whether you said it, I do not know, and if you did say it, I have no knowledge of where you secured your information. I am sure you do not want to do me an injustice or tell anything that isn't true about me. For that reason I am writing you to say I do not own a foot of land in the Columbia Basin Project, that I haven't any real property in the world with the exception of my home in Spokane, some lots in Spokane and an interest in some property just south of Seattle. I never owned any Columbia Basin land but with one exception. A number of years ago someone induced me to buy a half interest in a 640 acre tract there with a view to raising wheat on it. We didn't raise wheat, we sold it, and I think I made a few hundred dollars out of the transaction.³⁸

Nichols wrote back to Dill apologizing for inaccurately claiming Dill had anything to do with land speculation in the Columbia Basin. He did not, however, correct his erroneous belief that the entire Grand Coulee project was the dream of avaricious land speculators. Later in July, Nichols also wrote a letter to former Governor Marion E. Hay, which was passed on to the CBC and read before that group. In the letter, Nichols apologized for inaccurately associating Dill's name with land speculation. However, shortly after his apology to Dill, Nichols wrote a letter to the widow of A. Scott Bullitt (Bullitt had died suddenly while serving as FDR's campaign manager in the Northwest) in which he again associated Dill with land speculators. J.D. Ross also repeated this charge and ordered aides to look into the land records of the Columbia Basin to find proof of a scandal. Dill had no part in land speculation. Of course charges that Grand Coulee's supporters were a pack of land speculators were added to the arsenal of weapons private power interests brought against the dam.³⁹

In mid-June, FDR informed Dill that Washington would have to come up with \$377,000 for preliminary engineering work if the project

were to go forward. If the state raised the engineering money—which Dill believed could be taken from the state's \$10 million relief fund—he felt certain FDR would “put his stamp of approval” on the project publicly. Grand Coulee plans at the time anticipated 30 percent of the project would be paid for with PWA funds, the rest would be borrowed from the PWA on a bond issued by the proposed Grand Coulee Power District. Contracts between Washington and the United States Bureau of Reclamation for the necessary engineering work were in preparation.⁴⁰

Opposition quickly arose to spending \$377,000 in state funds on Grand Coulee, as did opposition to placing “the entire burden” of the project on Washingtonians. But that opposition again came from private power interests and the uninformed: even under the plan outlined above, the state did not carry the “entire burden.”⁴¹

On June 16, Dill conferred with the president concerning Grand Coulee and informed him of the progress being made in the state's effort to raise the engineering money and create a power district. Dill also announced the FPC had decided to waive the sixty-day waiting period on the state's request to build the dam.⁴²

There were certain members of the CBC and other dam supporters who wanted the state to retain control of the project while borrowing federal money to pay for it. Albert Goss was one of those who preferred state control—even to the point of abandoning the project should the federal government take it over. However, Goss left the CBC in the middle of the battle and became federal Land Bank Commissioner. Though leaving the fight, Goss advised Rufus Woods to resist letting the federal government run the project.⁴³ O'Sullivan and Dill thought this attitude foolish and short-sighted. Woods, however, agreed with Goss.⁴⁴

Dill returned home in late June to conciliate the project's friends and face its critics:

I was amazed to learn that there are those who are trying to delay and prevent the building of this dam through insidious propaganda. They say we cannot sell the power. We need sell only 250,000 kilowatts.

Some say there is more power being produced now than we can sell. Of course there is, and why? Because of the profiteering prices charged by the power trust subsidiaries that are paying dividends on watered stocks. Bring down the prices of power to what Tacoma pays with municipal ownership and we will increase power used in Washington by one hundred percent.⁴⁵

The senator also explained the details of the Columbia Basin project as it then stood. He emphasized there was no plan to make Washingtonians

responsible for a huge bonded debt. Rather, the federal government would provide the state's share of the money, using future power revenues as collateral, while providing 30 percent of the necessary funds itself.⁴⁶

The editors of the *Spokesman-Review*, having taken the time to study the plan, liked it much better. But W.E. Southard and Rufus Woods still wanted Grand Coulee to be a state-controlled project and pressured O'Sullivan accordingly. The *Spokesman-Review* editorialists, however, would have no part of any plan, such as that of Southard and Woods, which placed the state's taxpayers on the line. The paper much preferred the plan Dill had explained to the press or outright federal building of the project such as was occurring in the Tennessee Valley.⁴⁷

After touring the flooded regions of the lower Columbia, Dill sat down with Governor Clarence Martin to map a strategy for procuring the \$377,000 needed for preliminary engineering work. Dill told the people of Washington that the president's final approval rested on securing the \$377,000 in engineering funds. After a meeting of the CBC, the governor, Senator Dill, and the State Emergency Unemployment Relief Commission, Dill announced that the necessary money would be forthcoming, taken from a \$10 million state bond issue. That accomplished, the CBC signed a contract with the United States Bureau of Reclamation to do the necessary engineering work. Dill now proceeded to secure a contract between the federal government and an as yet unnamed state agency to build the entire project. He informed Washingtonians that the president had given his verbal assurance and would make his formal approval soon.⁴⁸

Nevertheless, influential people in the state remained opposed to Grand Coulee. Ralph Nichols wrote a lengthy letter to Dill detailing his opposition to any Grand Coulee project that meant the state's taxpayers had to carry part of the financial burden. Dill must have laughed to himself, as Nichols's objections bore no relation to reality—the sale of Grand Coulee's power was the only collateral being offered the federal government.⁴⁹ J.D. Ross also remained firmly opposed to the dam.⁵⁰

Supporters of the project were ecstatic that work on Grand Coulee was actually going to begin. They decided to hold a groundbreaking ceremony at the site featuring all of the state's dignitaries. Dill turned the first shovel full of dirt to the applause of more than five thousand people and spoke briefly saying the credit for building Grand Coulee belonged to the people of Washington who elected him to the Senate and to those who had worked so long on the project. But Governor Martin, O'Sullivan, and Judge Charles Levy said of Dill, "He has been the force that has put it over when the time came for it to be put over."⁵¹ Even Rufus Woods, who had

opposed Dill in every election and called him a "near traitor" in 1918, said, "And now here I find myself following and supporting Senator Dill today, and ready to be a good bird-dog when he wants anything done. You've got to hand it to Dill, our Democratic senator."⁵² Again, the accolades for Dill were a bit too strong. He was not a "force" that put anything over on the president. He was a team player, a compromiser, as he had been his entire career. His access to the White House allowed him to keep Grand Coulee in front of a president already disposed to work with westerners and build the dam.

Governor Martin also correctly cited the cooperative spirit, the spirit that had built the West, as the key ingredient that had gotten the project under way: "...without a doubt the dam would now be built, because the President of the United States, Washington's Congressional delegation, the Columbia Basin Commission, and the Governor of Washington were all working together, harmoniously and determinedly to put it over. He praised the work of Senator Dill as indispensable to the success of the project."⁵³ Publicly, Dill was a hero, though privately, Nichols continued his campaign against the dam and Washington's senior senator.

Though groundbreaking ceremonies had taken place, the preliminary engineering contracts had been signed, and a good amount of backslapping had gone on, the project had not received the essential final approval from the president. Dill himself was "confident President Roosevelt will provide funds to entirely complete the Columbia Basin Project as rapidly as possible," and he was personally so dedicated to the project he would "resign from the Senate or do anything else possible to further this great project."⁵⁴ Dill returned to Washington, D.C., in late July to meet with federal officials concerning Grand Coulee. He met with Harold Ickes, secretary of the interior and head of the PWA, Colonel A.W. Waite of the PWA, Dr. Elwood Mead, head of the Bureau of Reclamation, and Daniel C. Roper, secretary of commerce. Later he met with Budget Director Lewis Douglas. Dill expected to meet with the president after all of the preliminary conferences were completed to seek final approval.⁵⁵

While Dill was in Washington, Congressman Charles Martin of Oregon caused a wave of concern to sweep Washington State when he claimed Bonneville Dam had been approved and thus Grand Coulee was "off the books." Martin asserted Bonneville would supply the region's power needs, leaving Grand Coulee as a reclamation project with no need of reclamation in sight. Moreover, consternation among Grand Coulee dam supporters increased when Harold Ickes appointed Marshall Dana, editor of the *Oregon Journal*, to be one of the regional advisors to the PWA with

authority over the Pacific Northwest. Martin's proclamation, combined with Dana's appointment, made it appear Oregon was besting Washington for federal projects.⁵⁶

News from Washington, D.C., made spirits sag even more. The PWA board, assigned to pass judgment on Grand Coulee, became concerned there would be no market for the dam's power. Dill suspected private power interests had prejudiced the board; he wired O'Sullivan in Spokane requesting rebuttal information as soon as possible.⁵⁷

Though Grand Coulee's enemies were legion, Dill had a few friends himself. The senator beseeched the president to encourage the Public Works board to give Grand Coulee immediate attention. The president agreed. In addition, O'Sullivan came through for Dill with data on the prospective market for the dam's power; then, as Roosevelt requested, Dill met with the PWA board on July 26.⁵⁸ The next day, Dill advised O'Sullivan the meetings had gone well and not to worry about Congressman Martin's "propaganda...the President is behind us now."⁵⁹

Though Dill did not have time to be concerned with Martin and McNary, the *Spokesman-Review* used its sharpest pen on them: "In future dealings with these Portland interests and their bragging Congressman, Senators Dill and Bone and Governor Martin will be justified in taking off gloves and speaking bluntly...the people must get behind Senator Dill and Governor Martin in their insistence that the Grand Coulee Dam be started as soon as plans are completed."⁶⁰

The *Spokesman-Review* need not have worried. Dill had managed things in Washington, D.C., nicely, in spite of the fact Harold Ickes had been opposed to the project, as had Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace.⁶¹ Wallace objected to Grand Coulee because of its long-term reclamation aspects. Nevertheless, after Dill met with the president on July 26, FDR instructed Ickes and the PWA Board to approve the project.⁶²

The *Spokesman-Review's* headline on July 28 ran, "Money Ordered Advanced After Dill Confers With President." The story went on to say in part: "This action was taken under specific instructions given by President Roosevelt after his conference yesterday with Senator Dill, which left the Board [headed by Ickes] no discretion but to follow orders."⁶³ After his meeting with the president, reporters asked Dill for a comment. He remarked he was "delighted," but "never had any doubt the project would be approved." He went on to say Grand Coulee was just the beginning of a vast development of the Pacific Northwest, the "President has big plans for this development." Meanwhile, newspapers that had claimed "Dill couldn't deliver" were being ridiculed by papers with more faith (a Rufus Woods editorial in the *Wenatchee Daily World* blasted the *Yakima Republic*).⁶⁴

Though Dill worked hard to see Grand Coulee built, and the newspapers were flattering, it is too much to say that he “delivered” or in some way convinced a reluctant FDR to approve Grand Coulee for the simple reason that FDR wanted to build Grand Coulee all along. Dill’s role was to present information, provided by O’Sullivan, to the various agencies, jump through the bureaucratic hoops, and keep an already supportive FDR informed. Convinced of FDR’s support, Dill was generally sanguine about the dam in the spring and summer of 1933. As he said, he never really doubted the dam’s approval. He would be equally confident, while others were frantic, about the high dam. In 1933 if the president wanted something done, it was usually done.⁶⁵

With the dam approved, Dill encouraged the Northern Pacific Railroad to build a spur line to the dam site so as to expedite construction.⁶⁶ Then a few days later, Dill headed west to Ohio to spend some time with his mother and then moved on to his home in Spokane. Upon returning to Washington State, Dill toured the countryside, explaining what Grand Coulee would mean to the Pacific Northwest and listening to pleas for help with smaller dam and reclamation projects. Some of these (i.e., the Roza project in Yakima and the Skagit project for Seattle) he had been working on for some time and would continue to pursue.⁶⁷

In mid-September, Dill returned to Washington, D.C., and met with the president to discuss Grand Coulee. The senator informed FDR that the state had taken steps to halt land speculation in the Columbia Basin. Roosevelt was very pleased, perhaps remembering such speculation deeply concerned Ickes. After the meeting, Dill assured reporters that funds for a town and a bridge at the dam site would soon be released. Two days later Ickes authorized the funds.⁶⁸

Back in Washington State, members of the CBC worried that “flank attacks” might derail Grand Coulee. Indeed, the Washington Water Power Company argued in October 1933 that Grand Coulee should not be the cause of its losing the Kettle Falls site, and that federal construction amounted to an unfair subsidy. Frank Post, president of WWP, called for the power sold from Grand Coulee to be priced at the true cost of production and requested that the agency selling the power be required to return equitable taxes to the state. If WWP retained its rights to Kettle Falls, the high dam at Grand Coulee could not be built because a high dam would flood the falls. Thus Grand Coulee’s power production would be held in check.⁶⁹ In light of such attacks, Ellsworth French urged Dill to push for authorization of five or six million dollars before Congress reconvened so as to put the dam on solid ground. This kind of concern plagued Grand Coulee until Congress formally approved the high dam in 1935.⁷⁰

Dill announced late in October that PWA hoped to make Grand Coulee an entirely federal project. The federal government possessed powers the CBC and Washington lacked. For example, it had superior powers of eminent domain. These powers enabled it to begin condemnation proceedings against lands to be used for dams and then begin construction without waiting for final adjudication of the suit.⁷¹ Yet there was serious opposition to making Grand Coulee a federal project. A.S. Goss and Rufus Woods remained staunchly opposed. They saw federal control as a disaster that would make Washington State subservient to the federal government. However, members of the CBC, including Woods, and Governor Martin eventually concluded that Grand Coulee could be built in no other way.⁷²

In early November, the Columbia Basin Commission met with Senator Dill and Governor Martin and signed contracts with the federal government that made Grand Coulee Dam a completely federal project. The entire project would be financed through PWA with the United States Bureau of Reclamation in charge of construction. Moreover, the federal government intended to maintain ownership of the dam. Dill immediately called for a comprehensive authority along the lines of TVA to administer the Columbia River Basin. However, Ickes persuaded FDR that a regional authority for the Columbia River Valley was not necessary.⁷³

Though Dill lost that fight with Ickes, he won another one about the same time. A number of Washington's cities had proposed projects that depended on funding from Ickes's Public Works Administration. But Ickes hesitated to approve such projects for fear Washington was getting more than its share of the federal purse because of massive outlays for Grand Coulee. On November 16, 1933, Dill protested such treatment to FDR. The president directed Ickes to transfer the municipal projects in question to Harry Hopkins' Civil Works Administration. Dill's efforts meant that those smaller projects would be built and that 10,000 more men would get jobs in Washington State.⁷⁴

Clarence Dill kept his eye on Grand Coulee as the last year of his second term came to a close—as did some of the members of the CBC. James O'Sullivan and others pestered Dill with letters claiming the plans for the low dam were not adequate to allow the later superimposing of the high dam, even though the plans for the dam had just been changed to ensure that a high dam could be erected on the low dam at some future date. What O'Sullivan was really after, however, was initial construction of the high dam, or at least its foundation, rather than the low dam.⁷⁵ In January Dill responded to O'Sullivan's entreaties:

I do wish you would try to put a stop to this agitation about the foundation of the low dam not being satisfactory for superimposing the high dam. Dr. Mead stated when he was in Spokane that the plans are being changed to make the low dam entirely satisfactory. I have just talked with him and he tells me the entire plans are being revised on that basis. Neither he nor I can understand why this agitation should have been started again. It causes a lot of mail for me to answer and only tends to arouse dissatisfaction out there regarding the work we are doing.⁷⁶

O'Sullivan answered Dill with a letter in which he asked the senator if it were not possible to get more money for the dam to make the low dam more compatible with the high dam. O'Sullivan was no politician and Dill attempted to explain the realities of Washington, D.C., to him:

My reasons for being so insistent that we avoid too much public discussion about the high dam now is that another public works appropriation is coming up in Congress and I am anxious to avoid any possibility of a limitation against the Grand Coulee. If those who are opposed to it, could make it appear that this dam is to irrigate more land [the low dam was only a power dam] now or in the immediate future, they might use that as an excuse to prevent expenditure of even the \$63 million.

I am sure we can get satisfactory plans for the foundations of the low dam but we must build the power plant and the dam for \$60 million. It is unthinkable to reopen this question for more money at this time. Once we get the low dam actually started and have the foundation actually worked upon, you will find me just as aggressive for the high dam as you have ever been. I am simply trying to avoid pitfalls by keeping away from that discussion now and I must depend upon you and other friends of the project to help me. It is extremely important that we get the contract let early this summer so we can have a big force of men working when the President visits the dam site.⁷⁷

O'Sullivan paid no attention. His love for the high dam combined with his concern for the details of the project blinded him to the realities of politics. He responded to Dill's letter with assurances that he was not "striking for the high dam now," then proceeded to do just that. He had the support of another engineer who claimed the low dam, as planned, would not be adequate to serve as a base for the high dam. O'Sullivan advocated using the \$60 million to construct a firm base for the high dam, effectively abandoning Roosevelt's low dam idea.⁷⁸

Dill probably telephoned S.O. Harper, acting chief engineer of the project, because O'Sullivan soon received a letter from Harper explaining that the low dam was entirely adequate to serve as a base for the high dam.

Harper explained to O'Sullivan: "practically all the investment made at this time can be utilized to full advantage in the construction of the high dam."⁷⁹

In addition to Harper's letter, Dill wrote to O'Sullivan in another attempt to make him understand the political dynamics of the project. However, this time his frayed patience showed.

I have read the letters of Mr. Morse and Mr. Darland [associates of O'Sullivan], and all I can say is that we simply must not attempt to change the \$63 million allocation and we must build the dam to whatever height it is possible to build it with a power plant also for the \$63 million. If there isn't enough money to build it to a height of 1,085 feet [elevation], then build it to 1,060 feet; if not enough for that, then make it 1,040 feet, if not enough for that, make it 1,000 feet. In other words, we must have a dam and power plant for this money, and then get additional money for a higher dam at a later date.

We want to get just as much foundation for the high dam in as possible, but once the specifications are made up for this low dam, we must go through with it and then if there is some loss when the high dam is built, that must be absorbed in the future.⁸⁰

Dill had problems in the nation's capital as well. There were some minor hold-ups in calling for bids on the project, which required his time, but Mead and Ickes cooperated in solving the problems. However, O'Sullivan had become very agitated about the delays and sent a telegram to Dill advising he request the CBC to send a "resolution" to Ickes. Dill's calm response no doubt caused an increase in O'Sullivan's suspicions that Dill was "not on board for the high dam."⁸¹

O'Sullivan's long-term mistrust and dislike for Dill, exacerbated by their disagreement over the low dam specifications, now developed into hatred. In a letter to Ray Clark on July 5, 1934, O'Sullivan asserted there was a graft-laden effort to throw the main contract for construction of the dam to the Six Companies, one of the main contenders for the job of building Grand Coulee. Moreover, O'Sullivan associated his stand for the high dam with honesty, implying those favoring the project as approved by the government were grafters. O'Sullivan was also concerned the Spokane crowd would be "running the show" when the president visited later in the summer. O'Sullivan's letter to Clark reveals his state of mind:

My job here is a hot spot. Lots of gravy mixed up in the Six Company's bid. Politicians, grafters, etc., are trying to horn in on Mason [a company competing with Six Companies for the main contract]. The issue between the high dam and the low dam is acute. My stand for the high dam and for honest bids has made things pretty warm for me lately.

W.R. Jarrell, Secret Service Agent, Pacific Northwest, Seattle, Washington, seems to be the one who can tell the most about the President's trip. I wrote you about getting the different communities down there organized, and keeping Spokane from running the show. The same old game which was played for years is intended.⁸²

Two days later, O'Sullivan wrote to Rufus Woods, making more explicit his accusations. O'Sullivan claimed that Dill arranged for his long-time associate and Spokane attorney Frank Funkhouser to meet with Sam Mason, head of the Mason Company. Funkhouser suggested to Mason that he could act as Mason's attorney in securing the dam contract. Funkhouser wanted \$100,000 for this service. Mason wanted nothing to do with Funkhouser's scheme. O'Sullivan went on to claim that Dr. Elwood Mead, head of the Bureau of Reclamation, was trying to "throw the job" to the Six Companies. O'Sullivan also asserted that James E. McGovern, a member of the CBC from Spokane, was also attempting to unethically profit from Grand Coulee.⁸³

Most of the charges O'Sullivan made were untrue or completely unsubstantiated. However, Harold Ickes, whose reputation for honesty was well earned, ordered an investigation of the Grand Coulee project in the summer of 1934. Agents Oscar Brinkman, C.E. Grier, and Roy Young submitted reports. Mead, Mason, McGovern, and the Six Companies were cleared of any wrongdoing; but Frank Funkhouser, a longtime Dill associate and Spokane attorney was certainly guilty of unethical conduct in regard to Grand Coulee. Moreover, it would seem Dill was a party to Funkhouser's schemes.⁸⁴

According to the investigations, Funkhouser signed a contract with W.E. Southard, an Ephrata, Washington, attorney and the representative of a number of landowners in the Columbia Basin who hoped to sell their land to the federal government as part of the Grand Coulee development. The contract stated that Funkhouser was to receive 25 percent of Southard's 20 percent of the money obtained for the landowners. Why would Southard sign such a contract? Funkhouser had led him to believe that Dill could influence how much the government paid for Grand Coulee land. When it became apparent that government appraisers were not going to allow bloated land appraisals to stand, Southard wanted out of his contract with Funkhouser. However, Funkhouser had another scheme to profit from Grand Coulee.⁸⁵ O'Sullivan appears to have been right that Funkhouser approached Mason with the proposition that the attorney would use his influence with Dill to guide the contract for the dam to Mason for a fee of \$100,000. Mason would have nothing to do with Funkhouser. O'Sullivan's

assertion regarding Funkhouser's schemes comes from an architect named Hargrove who worked for Mason. Hargrove, however, refused to make his testimony public.⁸⁶

Nevertheless, the investigators concluded that Frank Funkhouser was engaged in unethical and probably illegal conduct, but gaining a conviction was unlikely. There was no evidence Dill was a party to Funkhouser's activities. Thus when Elwood Mead wrote a summary of the investigation to Ickes he could write that Dill was innocent of any wrongdoing.⁸⁷ However, historians are not limited to what can be proven in a court of law; what may be insufficient to send a man to prison, may well point to probabilities. Such is the case in regard to Clarence Dill and Grand Coulee.

It seems probable that the financial possibilities inherent in Grand Coulee development were too great a temptation for Dill to overcome. He and Funkhouser had been friends for years. Funkhouser used Dill's name repeatedly over a long period of time. Word of such activity could have easily returned to Dill. Therefore, it does not seem likely that Funkhouser could use Dill's name in his Grand Coulee schemes without the latter's permission. What does seem likely is that Dill and Funkhouser had an unwritten understanding that Dill would receive some of the money Funkhouser managed to make off the senator's name. Ironically, Dill had



Opening bids for Grand Coulee Dam construction at the Davenport Hotel, Spokane. Cheney Cowles Museum/Eastern Washington State Historical Society, Spokane, WA

little power to affect contracts or land sales. If the deals Funkhouser had tried to create had gone through, his clients would have been paying him for nothing.⁸⁸

So Dill probably engaged in unethical conduct in a failed attempt to make money. It would be easy, and simplistic, to cast the senator in a villain's role and make his accuser, O'Sullivan, something of hero. But history is not so simple. Though O'Sullivan had many positive qualities—perseverance, single-mindedness, and a willingness to sacrifice himself for the sake of the project—he was also overly suspicious of anyone who did not agree with him. For this reason Mead wrote Ickes: "Reading these reports shows the wisdom of the department in divorcing Mr. James O'Sullivan from all the operations at Grand Coulee. It is not that he is dishonest, but he is unbalanced and apparently thinks he is the only righteous man connected with this development."⁸⁹ O'Sullivan's motives were pure and his goal was the high dam, but his judgment concerning men and motives was weak. Dill occasionally allowed self-interest to overrule his better judgment, but he was a shrewd judge of political realities and men. O'Sullivan and Dill continued to clash over Grand Coulee.

In the summer of 1934, O'Sullivan turned to selling "the president for the high dam on his visit."⁹⁰ O'Sullivan's enemies, as he perceived them, were clearly Dill and McGovern, Spokane men who favored FDR's plan for the low dam to serve as a basis for the high dam:

There are an amazing number of rumors regarding what the president will do concerning the high dam. Some of these indicate that he is on the verge of authorizing the high dam. However, the activity of Senator Dill and J. E. McGovern in securing control of all invitations would indicate an effort to keep the President from learning of the need of the high dam. It is particularly important that President Roosevelt should understand that the power trust is still working hard to defeat the high dam and that he should personally direct the Federal Power Commission and the Bureau of Reclamation to protect the power and water rights necessary for the completed structure.⁹¹

O'Sullivan's errors and concerns in this letter reveal a startlingly misinformed and suspicious mind. He assumed the president was uninformed about the high dam when in fact both Dill and Goss had explained it to him, Dill on more than one occasion. He apparently had no understanding of how cost dictated a low dam, not private power interests. Moreover, he associated Dill with those interests and believed the senator had no desire to build the high dam. Finally, he saw malevolence in the state's senior senator organizing a presidential visit to his state.

In early August 1934, FDR visited Grand Coulee. The ceremony featured all of the standard trimmings and speeches. Clarence Dill and FDR were the men of the hour. In his speech, Dill mentioned how he had brought the dam to FDR's attention, how the president favored a low dam, and how the project came to life. Then Dill graciously, and appropriately, gave FDR the credit for building the dam.⁹² Indeed, throughout his long life, in both public and private, Clarence Dill would often give FDR the lion's share of the credit for Grand Coulee. In Dill's mind existed two versions of how Grand Coulee came about. In one, Dill was the man who won the dam from a reluctant president who owed him a favor. In the other, FDR's leadership and vision made Grand Coulee a reality.⁹³ Which story one got from Dill probably depended upon how the question was asked. That Dill could hold seemingly contradictory ideas about the origin of Grand Coulee Dam is not surprising, for he held a number of apparently conflicting ideas, values, and dreams.

Shortly after the celebration, O'Sullivan wrote this letter to Ray Clark:

I think you are right in saying that a showdown is very near at hand. The gang here have been framing me. McGovern, assisted by Funkhouser and Dill, grabbed control of the President's reception. This gang here secured the publicity from Washington D.C. stating that the commission was through and that I was offensive. They tried to keep any information about the high dam or reclamation from getting to the President. They have suppressed all publicity about the Soap Lake meeting, which was the biggest event of all. I showed the President all of the exhibits of Columbia Basin products and then introduced myself. He said, "You do not have to introduce yourself, O'Sullivan, I know all about you. You have done wonderful work for this project and you will have my support in carrying on your work." He said that loudly in the presence of Senators Bone and Dill and a number in the audience. Senator Ronald writes me that he has learned disquieting things in Olympia. The plan was to oust me at the next meeting of the commission.

The real issue is whether we are going to get the high dam or the low dam. I am in close touch with the secret service, and believe me, they have got McGovern, Dill, Funkhouser, and that gang tabbed....

McGovern, Dill and Funkhouser plan to shut me out entirely. I forced them to have the President's car stop at the exhibit at Soap Lake. All the boys cooperated fine in getting out banners, ribbons, etc. on the high dam. We actually sold Roosevelt on the high dam and on reclamation in spite of them....

The administration knows of the efforts of the gang to keep any information regarding reclamation and the high dam from him [Roosevelt]. I can say that I stand ace high with Ickes and the President.⁹⁴

It is ironic that O'Sullivan would claim to stand "ace high" with Ickes, who would have never built the dam had it been up to him.⁹⁵ This letter also mentions the complete fiction, so often repeated, that banners on the roadside combined with O'Sullivan's efforts on the day of the celebration, convinced FDR to build the high dam.⁹⁶ The truth is Clarence Dill and FDR always intended to build the high dam; only O'Sullivan's imagination concocted a different scenario. Moreover, if FDR had not been inclined to build the high dam, roadside banners would not have convinced him to build it. However, Ickes, who accompanied FDR on this trip, and had long held reservations about the whole project, admitted that the sheer grandeur of the landscape and potential of the project caused him to become a supporter of the high dam.⁹⁷

In the 1930s, there was no doubt as to who had led the Washington congressional delegation in gaining federal approval of the dam. Clarence Dill was a hero in the eyes of most people and easily the most popular political figure in the state. Even W.H. Cowles sought to make his peace with the senator. Hearing he was considering retirement in 1934, Cowles visited Dill in Washington, D.C., and expressed his intention to publicly support the Democrat's return to the Senate so that he could watch over the dam. Dill rejected Cowles's offer.⁹⁸

Though Dill was a hero in the thirties, history has not been kind to him in regard to his role in building Grand Coulee Dam. George Sundborg's *Hail Columbia* gives most of the credit to James O'Sullivan, from whose papers Sundborg's book is almost exclusively drawn. Sundborg's disparaging view of Dill is essentially O'Sullivan's.⁹⁹ Rumors of Dill's attempts to make money on Grand Coulee would not go away and they hurt him when writers like Sundborg assessed his work for the dam. Later accounts of how the dam gained approval unfortunately followed Sundborg's lead and de-emphasized Dill's role. The primary problem with works that focus on the lengthy local battle for Grand Coulee is that they do not explain adequately how this local campaign turned into a federal project. The obvious link between the local interests and the federal government—Washington's senior senator—was ethically distasteful both to the principles of the time and later historians. Correspondence between the dam's major backers contain references to Dill's unethical activities and also make clear political animosities. I suspect historians could not reconcile the rumors of Dill's avarice and his unpopularity amongst Grand Coulee supporters, with an important role in securing the dam. Unfortunately, the United States has had no shortage of politicians who have performed vital public service while attempting to enrich themselves. History is seldom clean and neat.¹⁰⁰

Clarence Dill was Washington State's key figure in the effort for Grand Coulee Dam in 1933 and 1934.¹⁰¹ Dill's access to the president allowed him to present FDR with information that helped maintain FDR's commitment to the project. But Dill would have had little with which to impress the president had it not been for the countless hours of work devoted to the project over the previous fifteen years. Even the fight between the pumpers and gravity plan supporters had not been entirely in vain, as it allowed a consensus to form for Grand Coulee, even in Spokane.

There were several men without whom the project would have been difficult to achieve; four were essential: James O'Sullivan—who sacrificed himself for years to see the dam built and who provided Dill with the facts he needed to convince FDR that the dam could be built at a reasonable cost; Rufus Woods—who consistently publicized and supported the great project to keep the dream alive; Clarence Dill—who possessed the political office and personal relationship necessary to bring the project to FDR's attention; and most importantly, Franklin Roosevelt, who had the vision and authority to order the dam built.¹⁰² The efforts of these men, and those of their supporting cast, contrast the myth of the West's individualist base to reality: despite their differences, these men cooperated to help build the West. Moreover, the building of Grand Coulee Dam is one of the key developments in the region's history: Grand Coulee and the dams that followed provide the power for the modern Pacific Northwest.



Grand Coulee Dam construction in the 1930s. *Cheney Cowles Museum/Eastern Washington State Historical Society, Spokane, WA*