

Coulee Dam

It cost the Department of the Interior \$266.66 to hire Woody Guthrie for a month in 1941. They originally had lured him to Colorado with the promise of more money for narrating a documentary that was being produced on building the Grand Coulee Dam. After seeing him and investigating his politics they settled on paying him for only the musical accompaniment. Still, it was a very good investment. In one month, pecking away at the typewriter in the Bonneville office in Portland, Oregon, he produced twenty-six songs, the Columbia River songs, including "Pasture of Plenty," "Hard Travelin'," "Jackhammer Blues," "Roll On, Columbia," and "The Biggest Thing That Man Has Ever Done (The Great Historical Bum)."

As I approached the Grand Coulee Dam driving Route 174 off Route 2 from Spokane I wondered where it was. The land, high desert, was mostly flat. I had expected high mountains and the Columbia River cascading through gorges. I should have realized the terrain was already revealed in the name: Coulee. No mountain gorges to dam the water but a novel engineering approach of using the coulees left by glacier and lava, furrowed moraines, gulches rather than gorges. Enough, however, for installing a majestic dam. Dig down. Pump up the water of the Columbia to gravity feed the arid land below. A dam that would eventually feed more than 300 miles of canals and 6,000 miles of irrigation, transforming desolate and dry acres into pastures of plenty. Turning half a state from desert into orchards.

I question whether you can ever truly harness nature, no more than you can harness any wild passion. But you sure can partner with it. You can work with it. An alliance. True for water, for fire. Blissfully true for lust, love, desire. Rarely true for anger, hate, prejudice.

*Green pastures of plenty from dry desert ground
From the Grand Coulee Dam where the waters run down
Every state in the Union us migrants have been
We'll work in this fight and we'll fight till we win*

*It's always we rambled, that river and I
All along your green valley, I will work till I die
My land I'll defend with my life if it be
Cause my pastures of plenty must always be free*

Plenty of work. Plenty of harvests. Plenty of satisfaction. Freedom. A chance to dream.

Although, given Hitler and Mussolini, the pastures of fertile plenty Woody foresaw had to wait until more immediate needs, namely a world war. Hitler and Mussolini's might had to be met by both the mettle of the allied soldiers and the might of US industry.

Electricity. That was the key. Electricity for the aluminum plants in Spokane and Tacoma. The electrical towers marching in parade across the countryside from dam to industry. Industries

to manufacture ships, planes, weaponry. Industry to win a war against fascism. There is a reason Woody pasted on his guitar a sticker with this message: *"This machine kills fascists."*

*Uncle Sam took up the challenge in the year of 'thirty-three,
For the farmer and the factory and all of you and me,
He said, "Roll along, Columbia, you can ramble to the sea,
But river, while you're rambling, you can do some work for me."*

*Now in Washington and Oregon you can hear the factories hum,
Making chrome and making manganese and light aluminum,
And there roars the flying fortress now to fight for Uncle Sam,
Spawned upon the King Columbia by the big Grand Coulee Dam.*

I shake my head at those nutty shows on TV about aliens from the stars and those UFO experts intimating how because of these aliens we puny and hapless humans were instructed and equipped to build the pyramids or place rocks in Chili for spacecraft runways. Why do these UFO experts think so little of human ingenuity? Why do they disparage human ability and capacity?

Come to the Grand Coulee Dam and see what we humans can build.

Come and see what we humans are capable of achieving.

Come and see the Grand Coulee Dam and see what we can do when we have a cause, a hope, a purpose, a commitment.

*I clumb the rocky canyon where the Columbia River rolls,
Seen the salmon leaping the rapids and the falls
The big Grand Coulee Dam in the state of Washington
Is just about the biggest thing that man has ever done.*

Just let it be for something good.

*I'd better quit my talking, 'cause I told you all I know,
But please remember, pardner, wherever you may go,
The people are building a peaceful world, and when the job is done
That'll be the biggest thing that man has ever done.*

The wisest among us learn to appreciate the little things of life, like a sunset, a fine bourbon with legs, a blessed sleep tender and touching with someone you love. Still, sometimes, just sometimes, we need cause for pride in something big, we hunger for something inspiring and majestic and grand.