

A Symbol of Progress?:

Memories of Bighorn Canyon and Yellowtail Dam

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On the morning of March 15, 1963, Yellowtail Dam workers at the construction site gathered around the first bucket of concrete to pitch coins into the mixture. The ritual was well-known amongst dam workers and meant to bring good luck as construction entered its next phase. Henry Ruegamer, a long-time dam booster contributed a Montana centennial silver dollar. Dam surveyor, Jerry Warner recalled Morrison-Knudsen project manager, "Phil Soukop wrote 'em a check for \$10,000 or something...he was being a big spender."¹

The story of the Yellowtail Dam construction is full of individuals, corporations, and government bodies throwing money at this long-awaited project in hopes of bringing about a desired end. As early as 1949, the future mayor of Billings, Willard Fraser, argued, "from every angle of approach, Yellowtail Dam must be considered as a capital investment in the future of Montana and the nation. No really good business man will ever hesitate to invest capital when definite returns from that investment can be clearly foreseen."²

Yet from the dam's very inception in the early 20th century, Crow Indians, and Montana and Wyoming residents proposed disparate visions of what the Bighorn River should look like and what should be the fruit of the waters' labor as it tumbled through the canyon. For the Crow, the area represented the sacred site of their creation story. At the same time, many westerners saw little in the region's steep rocky cliffs and maintained the region was only good for one thing. Helen Peterson, editor of the *Hardin Tribune Herald* noted in 1956, "the Crow tribe's land involved in the dam and reservoir site has little value, it's true, for any other purpose than the

¹ Interview with Jerry Warner by Jonathan Hall, July 30, 2011, Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area Archives.

² "Committee reports on Yellowtail Project," *Hardin Tribune Herald*, May 12, 1949..

dam site, except in, possibly, some scenic value...the reservoir would destroy very little land, which is valuable for farming or any other purpose."³

Local communities and politicians from the area foresaw a dam as good investment. The dam, its boosters asserted, would also bring some 40,000 more acres under irrigation, generate hydroelectric power, and provide flood control. Salivating at the prospect of federal dollars and hundreds of workers inundating the area, towns like Lovell, Wyoming, as well as Billings and Hardin, Montana hoped government largesse would serve as a catalyst for regional prosperity. In 1955, the Billings Chamber of Commerce estimated that construction would require 19,600,000 man hours of labor and "start a chain reaction" where "every hour of work at the dam would require an hour of work away from the site." For those fearing out of control government spending, at the ceremonial opening of the dam construction six years later in 1961, Senator Mike Mansfield of Montana assured his audience that the Yellowtail project was a sound investment that would pay back the federal government through irrigation fees and hydroelectric power "with interest."⁴

Others saw the rise of recreation as key to the region's interests. Lon Garrison, regional director for the National Park Service asserted "you people are living on a bridge between Custer Battlefield, Yellowstone National Park and the Beartooth Highway." He predicted that the Big Horn Canyon National Recreation Area would attract more than 600,000 visitors every year by 1970. The Bureau of Reclamation commissioner, Floyd Dominy, later boasted in a televised news conference, "There will be a million visitors annually before long."⁵

³ "Editorial," *Hardin Tribune Herald*, June 14, 1956.

⁴ "Vast Manpower and Materials Would Go into Building of Yellowtail," *Hardin Tribune Herald*, August 4, 1955; "Future Benefits of Yellowtail, Irrigation, Increased Power Supplies Stressed by Speakers," *Hardin Tribune Herald*, October 26, 1961.

⁵ "Future Big Horn Playground Seen by Park Service Officials" *Hardin Tribune Herald*, August 27, 1964; "Tourist Boom Predicted for Yellowtail Dam Area," *Great Falls Tribune*, October 21, 1961.

The dollars thrown into the dam both figuratively and literally produced a variety of expectations for recreation, flood control and irrigation, as well as high hopes for good jobs and booming local economies. Workers still remember with pride their efforts in constructing the largest dam in the Missouri River basin and the economic windfall it brought to them and their communities between 1961 and 1967. At the same time, however, the rising lake forced the relocation of the town of Kane, Wyoming, and the abandonment of many local farms and also bitterly divided the Crow tribe. Others lamented the loss of a pristine river and the exhilarating three-day float trip it offered thrill-seekers. As the dam neared completion, Senior Project Engineer for the Bureau of Reclamation Roscoe Granger claimed, "'Building a dam is an awesome thing. We must think ahead -- maybe 100 years -- about the people who will be living below it." Half of that time has passed now, but many of the people whose lives crossed paths with the dam or who lived in its shadow still have forceful opinions and lingering memories as if the first blast of dynamite had gone off yesterday.⁶

"The most vigorous of outdoor vacationists": The River before the Dam

On the evenings of March 7 and 8, 1950, nearly 1500 people crowded into the Junior High School Gym in Hardin to watch *Montana and Wyoming's Lost Country*, a film that showcased the wonders of the Bighorn Canyon. The movie did not disappoint, wowing its audience with rare color footage of wildlife, signs of bygone human habitation (including the skeletal remains of a man ostensibly locked in mortal combat with a grizzly), and action-packed shots of two boats bursting through imposing rapids. The film and its stars, Bill Greene and Ward King Jr., travelled throughout eastern Montana and northern Wyoming in 1949 and 1950 presenting their movie to packed houses.⁷

⁶ "Dam near Completion; Work on Power Plants Continue," *Hardin Tribune Herald*, May 6, 1965.

⁷ "Canyon Pictures Point Out Interesting Facts," *Hardin Tribune Herald*, March 16, 1950.

Back in 1950, the Big Horn County Chamber of Commerce had sponsored the showings of *Montana and Wyoming's Lost Country* in Hardin at virtually the same time they lobbied relentlessly for a dam, and without a hint of irony they proclaimed, "We here in Big Horn County, as in many other communities, have overlooked things of grandeur and beauty, which lie in our own backyard," chamber officials said. "This is most certainly true of the Grand Canyon of the Big Horn." Yet few saw the paradox of simultaneously promoting the wonders of the canyon and pushing an agenda that would inundate them with the construction of the Yellowtail Dam. The mentality of the era suggested humans possessed the ingenuity to improve upon nature and reshape it for the benefit of humanity.⁸

Starting with Jim Bridger in 1825, many had embarked on trips down the river before Bill Greene, but Greene helped to herald the wonders of the canyon like no one else. *The Great Falls Tribune* mused, "Like calf roping or steer riding, taking boat trips through rugged and inaccessible river canyons is largely a western sport. Wyoming has an able practitioner of canyon running in the person of Bill Greene of Greybull." By 1950, Greene had made half a dozen trips down the river and publicized most of them. Wes Meeker remembered when he was about ten seeing early footage of one of Greene's treks in Lovell, "The biggest place in town where they could show a movie was the Mormon church on Main Street...I got a dime, had to sit on the floor, but man was I excited."⁹

While few floated the canyon with as much fanfare as Greene, many tackled the adventure in the years before Yellowtail Dam blanketed the rapids and hundreds of feet of

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ For a summary of prior journeys through the canyon, see "Big Horn Canyon Was Formidable Place for Explorers," Lovell Chronicle, June 18, 2009; "Bill Greene Completes 6th Big Horn Canyon Run," *Great Falls Tribune*, August 20, 1950; Interview with Wes Meeker, by Jonathan Hall, May 23, 2011, Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area Archives.

canyon walls. Almost all of those who floated remembered having the canyon to themselves except for the rattlesnakes. Jim Hamilton recalled during his 1960 trip the wonder of seeing a satellite in the night sky when they were still a very rare sight. Ringley noted, “that’s what was so memorable about it [the trip], you truly felt like you were alone out there...with no sign of anybody else having been there rather than the old boats and stuff from people long ago.”¹⁰

Signs of prior canyon inhabitants were sparse, but visible for those who looked around. Clive Dillon reported that on his 1957 trip he found the detritus of the Smithsonian archaeological digs in the mid-1950s. Many floaters recounted seeing abandoned mining equipment from the early part of the century as well as a wrecked bulldozer from a more recent failed endeavor by uranium hunters. The remnants of Doc Barry’s boats also still haunted his landing about fifty years after they had been used in an early futile venture to shuttle people through the canyon.¹¹

Yet it was the rattlesnakes that kept people hopping. Ralph Bond remembered of his 1955 excursion, “first night out, we didn’t know where we was [sic] going to camp. We ended up on just a sloping gravel bar with a cliff right behind it. First thing that happened we got out of the boat and came on some rattlesnakes and we had to sleep there that night. One of the guys, he wouldn’t sleep on the ground. He got on the boat and slept in the boat.”¹²

The river’s daunting reputation, no doubt, inspired some floaters and deterred others. While Ralph Bond and his companions encountered little trouble beyond the rattlesnakes, their coworkers at the Conoco refinery in Billings were checking the seniority lists at work “to see where the openings would be...Everybody said we were crazy.” The rapids near Black Canyon

¹⁰ Interview with Jim Hamilton and Tom Ringley, by Jonathan Hall and Shawn Bailey, July 28, 2011, Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area Archives.

¹¹ Interview with Clive Dillon, by Jonathan Hall, May 24, 2011, Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area Archives.

¹² Interview with Ralph Bond, by Jonathan Hall, July 30, 2011, Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area Archives.

proved particularly treacherous and unnerving especially for those who travelled in the muddy waters of the spring run-off. During Jack Pearson's trip in May of 1948 or 1949, their rubber boat capsized in the rapids and in addition to losing their pictures and much of their supplies they nearly lost a crew member as well. "When we came out of the water after we capsized, we counted and there were three of us, and we were pretty sure there were four of us on the trip at one time." They dragged the water for their friend and "we got hold of the legs of this guy and...got him over on shore, turned him on his stomach, and beat the hell out of him and the water came pouring out of him." Clive Dillon and his fellow explorers had used Bill Greene's film as a guide, so they knew when to expect the worst of the rapids on their trip in late March of 1957. Early on, they came to some "really bad rapids" but were able to navigate them successfully. To celebrate their victory, they mixed up a "Big Horn Canyon cocktail" of mountain water and grain alcohol. Their celebration proved premature as the next day they came to some imposing rapids that "looked like a long set of stairs." Dillon broke his paddle trying to push their craft away from the sheer rock walls. Soon, they found themselves in the grip of a giant whirlpool "we got started on the rip of it and around we went...around we went again only a little bit lower...this thing you could hear it sucking, and there was foam." The other guys who still had their oars "paddled like the devil." Finally, they were able to break free and get on down the river.¹³

Back in 1930, on his first trip through Bighorn Canyon, Bill Greene marveled at the "region of colossal grandeur and ruggedness, seldom seen by the most vigorous of outdoor vacationists." Thirty years later, on the eve of the Yellowtail Dam construction, Jim Hamilton echoed the sentiment. "It wasn't famous then...millions of people have seen the Bighorn

¹³ Interview with Ralph Bond, by Jonathan Hall, July 30, 2011, Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area Archives; Interview with Jack Pearson, by Jonathan Hall, May 24, 2011, Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area Archives; Interview with Clive Dillon, by Jonathan Hall, May 24, 2011, Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area Archives.

Canyon now from that lake...back then, not too many people had, but it took quite an effort to do it. You had to want to make the raft trip to see it.” If there has been another casualty in the completion of the dam beyond the lost scenery and the adrenal-filled rush of the white water, it was the solitude the canyon ~~the~~ provided. In the mid-1960s, the local communities and the National Park Service championed a “playground” with ease of access for boaters and fishermen. The *Hardin Tribune Herald*, while acknowledging some discontent about the loss of wilderness, claimed, “most people are looking forward eagerly to the day when they can see this canyon that was as remote as the moon to most Big Horn County residents.”¹⁴ While federal dollars bought access for new generation of vacationists, the rising water also brought a flood of changes to the area’s human inhabitants.

Commitment to Crow Sovereignty

On several occasions throughout the early-to-mid 1960s, Crow leader and former tribal chairman Robert Yellowtail arrived unexpectedly at the Bureau of Reclamation’s Yellowtail Dam site on the Bighorn River in Montana, and he usually turned up in a decidedly bad mood. Yellowtail, a vocal critic of the dam that still bears his name, attempted to force meetings with key officials from both the Bureau and from Morrison-Knudsen Construction Company, the general contractor on the site. Often, the Bureau dispatched its site photographer Dennis Sanders, himself a Crow member, to placate the tribal leader. On these occasions, the massive jobsite that Yellowtail visited hummed with dusty activity, as dozens of construction workers poured yard-after-yard of concrete in ten-minute intervals on top of ceremonial silver dollars and uncashable company checks. Yellowtail, however, was uninterested in the progressive

¹⁴ “Wyoming Adventurer Writes of Perilous Boat Trip Down Canyon of the Bighorn River,” *Billings Gazette*, August 23, 1931; Interview with Jim Hamilton and Tom Ringley, by Jonathan Hall and Shawn Bailey, July 28, 2011, Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area Archives; “Sheer Rock Walls, Fantastic Formations, To Greet Boaters in 60 Miles of Canyons,” *Hardin Tribune Herald*, August 18, 1966.

symbolism embedded in the dam's foundation. Instead, with these unannounced visits, he continued his lifelong efforts to both protect and project Crow tribal sovereignty against seemingly insurmountable governmental power. According to Sanders, Yellowtail used these visits to "elaborate why it [the dam] shouldn't be built."¹⁵ At the mouth of the Bighorn Canyon, and in the shadow of a potent symbol of federal authority, Robert Yellowtail pressed his fight to secure a prosperous and enduring future for the Crow Indians of Montana.

The history of the Crow tribe's central position in the controversial Yellowtail Dam project defies easy summation.¹⁶ It is a complicated story that involves hundreds of years of Crow tradition, interpretations of nineteenth century treaties between the Crow and the United States government, numerous court cases concerning Indian resource rights, vacillating federal Indian policies such as assimilation, self-determination, and termination, pressures from Montana elected officials, intertribal debates on the best use of communal land, and, perhaps most importantly, the sovereignty of the Crow Tribe. According to Robert Yellowtail, tribal sovereignty "is that supreme power of government claimed unto itself [sic] by every Nation...to do any and all things for the protection and preservation of itself without consulting anyone." For Yellowtail, this included defending the Crow Reservation from "the taking by power and force of [the federal] Government any private property for public use upon the offering to pay just compensation."¹⁷ The Yellowtail Dam controversy, in all its complexity, demonstrates the

¹⁵ Interview with Dennis Sanders by Jonathan Hall and Shawn Bailey, July 31, 2011, Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area Archives.

¹⁶ For a more complete academic treatment of the Crow involvement in the Yellowtail Dam controversy please see Megan Benson, "Damming the Bighorn: Indian Reserved Water Rights on the Crow Reservation, 1900-2000," Ph.D. dissertation in History, (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma, 2005), and her subsequent articles "The Fight for Crow Water: Part I, the Early Reservation Years through the Indian New Deal," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History*, Vol. 57, No. 4, (Winter, 2007), pp. 24-42, and "The Fight for Crow Water: Part II, Damming the Bighorn," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History*, Vol. 58, No. 4, (Spring, 2008), pp. 3-23.

¹⁷ Robert Yellowtail, "Has Indian Sovereignty Been Wiped Out," undated radio address, Little Bighorn College Archives, Eloise White Bear Pease Collection, (hereafter referred to as "Pease Collection"), Box 30a, Folder 5 "Radio Speeches—Robert Yellowtail."

commitment to sovereignty practiced by Crow leaders such as Robert Yellowtail during the middle of the twentieth century, as tribal officials protected Crow independence when possible, and negotiated with the federal government over the use of the Bighorn Canyon when necessary.

The Bighorn River, and the striking canyon it helped cut through the mountains of present-day Montana and Wyoming, is a place of great spiritual significance for the Crow Indians. According to Crow oral tradition, and recounted in numerous print sources, the importance of the river stems from the rescue of a Crow boy from near-certain death, by seven big horn sheep led by Big Metal. The boy's step-father, overcome by evil spirits while on a hunting trip, pushed the young boy over the edge of the canyon and left him for dead. The boy, however, landed precariously on some cedar branches that grew from the canyon walls, and survived. Big Metal and the other sheep rescued the boy four days later, and Big Metal gave the boy his name and a message to take back to all the Crow people. According to tradition, Big Metal told his people that the river must always retain the name Bighorn. "Whatever you do, don't change its name," reported Big Metal upon his return, "It shall be known as the Bighorn River. If you ever change the name of the river, there will be no more Absaroka (Crow) tribe. The Absaroka will be no more."¹⁸ For many Crow people, therefore, the Bighorn River and Canyon was (and remains) more than a simple body of water, a picturesque high-walled chasm, or a potential hydroelectric dam site. The Bighorn River was a sacred place worthy of preservation.

¹⁸ National Park Service, "The Legend of Big Metal," in "How the Canyon got its Name," <http://www.nps.gov/bica/forteachers/upload/Level%20I%20History.pdf>, accessed October 10, 2011. Numerous other print versions exist for this Crow oral tradition, including Benson, "Damming the Bighorn," 109; Edwin Bearss, *Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area*, (Washington: U.S. Office of History and Historic Architecture, 1970); and Rick Graetz and Susie Graetz, *Crow Country: Montana's Crow Tribe of Indians*, (Billings: Northern Rockies Publishing Company, 2000).

Beyond the spiritual importance of the Bighorn River, many Crow leaders, including Robert Yellowtail, recognized the economic possibilities of the natural resources on the Crow Reservation, including the possibility of a hydroelectric dam at the mouth of the Bighorn Canyon. In 1917, while testifying before the Indian Affairs Committee in Washington, D.C. in an attempt to prevent the allotment of Crow land, Yellowtail posited that the monetary value of Crow Reservation was several billion dollars. He contended that the Crow controlled one of the largest coal deposits in the entire world, as well as “water power sites whose values are unpredictable at this moment—but safe to guess as into the hundreds of millions [of dollars].” Three years later, Yellowtail told the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs that hydroelectric dam sites “represents quite a tribal asset to us...and we do not want to lose that right.” The Crow Act of 1920, while allowing the allotment of some Crow lands, protected that right. Section Ten of the Crow Act stated “[t]hat any unallotted lands on the Crow Reservation chiefly valuable for the development of water power shall be reserved from allotment or other disposition hereunder, for the benefit of the Crow Tribe of Indians.”¹⁹ What constituted a “benefit” to the Crow Indians, however, became a contentious issue throughout the middle years of the twentieth century, as local boosters and the federal government pushed for the construction of a dam on the powerful Bighorn River, while Crow leaders responded in disparate ways to these threats to their tribal sovereignty.

The United States government announced formal plans to pursue a large, multi-purpose dam on the Crow Reservation, at the mouth of Bighorn Canyon, as part of the Pick-Sloan Plan of 1944. Cobbled together from both Bureau of Reclamation and Army Corps of Engineers’ proposals to tame and utilize the flood-prone Missouri River Basin, the Pick-Sloan plan

¹⁹ Robert Yellowtail, *Robert Summers Yellowtail, Sr., at Crow Fair, 1972*, (Albuquerque: Wowapi Press, 1973), quoted in Benson, “Damming the Bighorn,” 115-116; and United States Congress, “Crow Act of 1920,” June 4, 1920, http://www.indianlaw.mt.gov/content/fed_state/acts_of_congress/41_stat_751.pdf, accessed October 10, 2011.

originally called for the creation of 107 separate reservoirs, effecting twenty-three different Indian reservations. As historian Michael Lawson has pointed out, the reclamation efforts resulting from partial implementation of this plan “caused more damage to Indian land than any other public works project in America.” In the 1950s, the government interpreted the 1944 legislation in regards to the Crow, and concluded that the “United States has the authority to condemn tribal lands of the Crow Tribe for construction of the Yellowtail Dam” but that the government must “compensate the Crow Tribe for the water-power value of the tribal lands to be condemned.”²⁰ This last clause required additional interpretation and legal wrangling, as the federal government wanted to pay a flat fee for ownership of an unimproved dam site, and not for the potential value based on projected sales of hydroelectric power.

Between 1944 and 1958, however, tribal leaders from different factions of the Crow Tribe opposed the federal government’s ability to condemn tribal lands, debated what constituted fair compensation for the water–power rights to the Bighorn River, and above all attempted to protect the sovereignty of the Crow Tribe. The threat of condemnation, and the possibility of losing the site for little compensation, influenced all sides of the debate. William Wall Jr., elected tribal chairman in 1954, and his supporters, favored a plan to sell the Yellowtail dam site outright to the federal government for \$5 million, a figure derived from a 1950 appraisal authorized by the Crow Tribe. Wall stressed his commitment to Crow sovereignty in regard to land sales, while reproving federal threats of condemnation, but stressed the Crow’s willingness to negotiate in good faith with federal officials. According to the *Hardin Tribune-Herald*, Wall described the \$5 million offer as “equitable for both sides.” Robert Yellowtail, however,

²⁰ Michael Lawson, *Dammed Indians: The Pick-Sloan Plan and the Missouri River Sioux, 1944-1980*, (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982, 1994): xxix. Lawson’s book concentrates on the impact of the Pick-Sloan Plan dams in Sioux people in both North and South Dakota, on the Yankton, Crow Creek, Lower Brule, Cheyenne River, and Standing Rock Reservations; and United States Congress, “Flood Control Act of 1944,” <http://www.usbr.gov/power/legislation/flcetra.pdf>, 808, accessed October 11, 2011.

recognized enormous economic value of a large hydroelectric dam at the mouth of the Bighorn Canyon, and wanted a more advantageous deal. If such a dam proved unavoidable, Yellowtail (and his supporters) wanted the Crow Indians to retain control of the project. He proposed leasing the site to the United States government for fifty years, for an annual fee of \$1 million per year. After fifty years, ownership of the site and the dam would revert back to the Crow Tribe. Yellowtail's proposal, while deemed "ridiculous" by the Bureau of Reclamation, was not without precedent. In 1930, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservation in northwestern Montana, somewhat reluctantly, signed a lease with the Montana Power Company for the Kerr Dam site on the Flathead River. According to Yellowtail, Montana Power, and its affiliate Pacific Power and Electric, approached the Crow with a similar proposal for the Bighorn River, and offered to pay the tribe more than \$1.1 million in annual rent for the Yellowtail dam site. In January, 1956, the Crow Tribe held a series of close and contentious votes concerning the two plans. By a margin of eleven votes (out of 285 cast), and perhaps fearful over the looming threat of condemnation, Crow tribal members approved Wall's plan to sell the Yellowtail dam site for \$5 million.²¹

Montana's United States Senators, James Murray and Mike Mansfield, and Representative Lee Metcalf, were elated with the outcome of the vote, and pushed for Congress to buy the Yellowtail dam site for \$5 million. The three Democrats contended that "it was our judgment...that \$5,000,000 was a fair and equitable price to pay the Crow Indians. We are

²¹ Benson, "Damming the Bighorn," 118-126; "Crow Scalps Hang on Yellowtail Dam," *Yellowstone News*, May 18, 1961; "Controversy Again Stirred Over Yellowtail Dam Site," *Hardin Tribune-Herald*, January 19, 1956; William F. Arnold, "As Long as Water Falls: An Ethnohistorical Study in the Socioeconomic Underdevelopment and Cultural Identity of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes; Using the Events Leading up to Surrounding the Construction and Future Control of the Kerr Dam," unpublished Master's thesis in Anthropology, (Missoula: University of Montana, 2002): 69-73; and Robert Yellowtail, "Yellowtail Dam—What Price?," undated manuscript, "Pease Collection," Box 30b, Folder 7. Soon after this heated debate and vote, Robert Yellowtail leveled accusations of bribery against both the Bureau of Reclamation and the leadership of the Crow tribe, including William Wall Jr., although no definitive proof of such a claim has come to light. Please see Benson, "Damming the Bighorn," 127.

steadfast against a compromise of any nature.” Montana’s final Congressman, Representative Orvin Fjare, favored a much lower compensation for Crow, and proposed a payment of \$1.5 million. Both Houses of Congress passed legislation agreeing to the \$5 million sale price for the dam site, but President Dwight Eisenhower vetoed the measure in June, 1956. Eisenhower, like others within his government, wanted to pay compensation based on the unimproved value of the land. Two years later, the Crow Indians, facing a condemnation suit brought by the federal government and the possibility of losing the Yellowtail site for as little as \$15,000 to \$35,000, compromised and agreed to a payment of \$2.5 million for the site, with the Crow retaining an option to sue for additional compensation in the federal court system. In 1963, upon conclusion of the court case *Crow Tribe v. United States*, the federal courts awarded the Crow an additional \$2.5 million. According to historian Megan Benson, however, the Crow Indians never received this court-awarded compensation.²²

During the contentious debates over the construction of the Yellowtail Dam, Crow leaders emphasized a commitment to tribal sovereignty in their dealings with the United States government. For leaders like William Wall Jr., this involved a pragmatic sovereignty, recognizing a shifting political landscape in the 1950s and the very real threat of condemnation, and negotiating the best deal possible for the Crow people. For others, especially Robert Yellowtail, this meant identifying the enormous economic potential held on the Crow Reservation, and insisting on a leasing agreement that ensured the enduring tribal ownership of the Bighorn River and Canyon. It also meant never conceding defeat. Even after the issue seemed decided, through Crow tribal agreements, through Congressional legislation, and by the prosecution of lawsuits in the federal court system, Yellowtail continued to visit the Yellowtail

²² “Joint Committee May Act Next Week on Yellowtail Dam Site Question,” *Hardin Tribune-Herald*, May 17, 1956; Benson, “Damming the Bighorn,” 127-135; and “Says Crow Tribe Can Not Win in Yellowtail Condemnation,” *Hardin Tribune-Herald* January 24, 1957.

job site in an attempt to engage project leaders in debate. Even as the monumental dam near completion, Yellowtail publically expressed his commitment to Crow tribal sovereignty.

Razing Kane

With the coming of the Yellowtail Dam, the Crow were not the only ones who felt their autonomy and homeland were threatened. In 1949, Willard Fraser and other boosters from Billings travelled to Washington DC to lobby for funding for the dam. Crucial to Fraser's argument was "no farm family in Montana will be displaced by rising waters. Only a few rattlesnakes and western rodents will have to change their abode to escape the waters of the Big Horn River when the dam is constructed." While such a statement may have been true of Montana, it ignored the reality some seventy miles to the south in Kane, Wyoming.²³

Named for Riley Kane, foreman of Henry Lovell's ranch, the town sprung up in 1895 near the confluence of the Shoshone and Bighorn Rivers. With the arrival of the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad, it served as a center for shipping cattle and timber in the Basin. By the early 20th century, Kane was a thriving little town complete with a post office, two stores, two hotels (one of which mostly boarded school teachers who taught in Sunlight Ionia, and Kane) and a dozen families within the city limits. On Saturday nights, cowboys from local ranches came in for dances while locals offered up music from accordions, banjos, and harmonicas. Longtime, Kane resident Anna Brown recalled in 1965 that these dances frequently lasted all night with a short break for coffee and cake around midnight.²⁴

The rising water behind the dam forced 55 landowners out of their homes and off their farms. One longtime Kane resident, Minnie Gams, recalled that she had always lived with

²³ "Billings Man Appears before Senate Appropriations Committee Urging Placing Yellowtail Dam in Phase 'A'" *Hardin Tribune Herald*, June 9, 1949.

²⁴ Cleo Christiansen, *Sagebrush Settlements*, (Lovell, WY: Mountain State Printing Co., 1967); "Kane Country Exodus," *Billings Gazette*, April 11, 1965.

rumors of a dam, but by 1964, those rumors became tangible when the Bureau of Reclamation negotiated with landowners for more than 11,000 acres of farmland that the rising waters of the lake would soon consume. The Bureau of Reclamation bought out farmers and plowed under most of the vegetation, except for a few large trees that were spared as roosting spots for geese. Even the old “Indian tree,” a once towering cottonwood that had held the corpse of an Indian child when whites first inhabited the area, would not escape the flood waters. The Bureau also set fire to any structures that the owners chose not to relocate. Minnie recalled that it was not unusual to wake up at night to the smell of burning wood, an eerie reminder of Kane’s impending demise. One evening she saw the Shoshone Bridge set aflame. “Tires soaked with diesel fuel were tied across the top and the sides of the bridge...We stayed and watched until long after dark...as the bridge fell into the river, a great sadness descended over us for the good times in Kane that would never be again.”²⁵

As some wrestled with nostalgia, others struggled to receive what they believed to be a fair price for their property. At the time, Kane farmer Dale Adams resented the "high-handed dictatorial way in which the bureau is using every means to force the landowners into accepting their offer." He and others claimed the government offered \$190 per acre, not nearly enough to “touch what is being asked for comparable farm land in the area—or out of the area.” Even so, farmers felt they had little room to bargain. If they accepted a lowball offer, they could stay on to harvest crops and buy enough time to make arrangements for a fresh start elsewhere. If they risked obtaining a fair price in condemnation proceedings, they feared the government would force them to vacate their lands within 30 days after the case concluded.²⁶

²⁵ Kane Country’s Indian Tree,” *Billings Gazette*, April 4, 1965; Hermina Miller Gams “Minnie’s Many Memories,” (n. p., 1998), p. 85.

²⁶ “Kane Area Farmers Hit Land Valuation,” *Billings Gazette*, April 15, 1964;

Minnie Gams remembered when a Bureau of Reclamation representative approached her family as they harvested beans on October 4, 1964. She recounted the events of that day. When they couldn't agree on a price, the Bureau official warned, “I have no alternative but to condemn you.’ I was on the prod and said, ‘Okay, then, I'll be damned!’” According to Minnie, they later “split the difference,” but moving to Deaver the following year proved hectic and Minnie recalled a special fondness for songs like “Memories are Made of This” and “Just Looking for a Home” during this time of upheaval. Minnie expressed great anxiety that she and her family experienced when confronted with a move. “We were the last ones to leave the Kane area. John and I were both in our forties, had three married children, and three children still at home. We were too old to start over and too young to retire.” To them and many others around Kane a fresh start away from the only home they’d ever known seemed unfathomable.²⁷

Building Yellowtail

In 1965, the Morrison-Knudsen Company, a large construction company based in Boise, Idaho, released a film designed to introduce the world to the Bureau of Reclamation’s latest concrete marvel—the Yellowtail Dam on the Bighorn River in Montana. At times charming and campy, amusing and infuriating, *The Build-Up on the Bighorn* stressed the Yellowtail Dam’s prominent role in continuing the steady march of progress across the postwar American West, and offered a romantic portrayal of the blue collar workforce who ensured that progress. The film described Yellowtail as a monument of “concrete and enduring progress that will serve the country for years to come...a twentieth century footprint on the changing face of the West.” Morrison-Knudsen, the chief contractor on the Yellowtail project, likewise idealized the hundreds of laborers who blasted diversion tunnels, poured bucket-after-bucket of concrete, and installed 500-ton generators. The workers of Morrison-Knudsen, according to the film, were

²⁷ Gams, p. 86-88.

“men with big hats and big hands...men with brawn in their hands and savvy in their heads.” Most of all, these laborers were American heroes “who took the raw earth and did something with it.”²⁸ Reality only partially matched up with Morrison-Knudsen’s vision of the Yellowtail Dam and its labor force. While a review of the construction history of the Yellowtail confirms the dam as an impressive feat of engineering, and a contributor to the economic progress of the region, it also reveals the diverse opinions of the workforce towards the project. Not just “men with brawn in their hands and savvy in their heads,” the workers who built Yellowtail are also men (and women) with brawny opinions. Fifty years after the start of construction, many workers viewed their role in building the Yellowtail Dam as both a great job and a life-changing experience, while others bitterly recalled demanding bosses, difficult working conditions, and life-threatening work assignments.

The Yellowtail Dam, by any measure, is an impressive feat of engineering. Local and governmental interests had long believed that an enormous hydroelectric dam was possible at the mouth of Bighorn Canyon. According to one observer, the Bighorn Canyon Power and Irrigation Company envisioned a 500-foot high dam on the Bighorn as early as 1913. Although it took much longer than many, including local boosters, Montana officials, and reclamation agents, wanted or expected, by 1966 the Bureau of Reclamation, and its contracted construction force, completed a 525-foot high thin-arched dam at the canyon mouth. Yellowtail Dam is nearly 1,500 feet in length across the top of the dam, where its width measures twenty-two feet. At the base of the dam, at its broadest point, Yellowtail is 145-feet thick. Such an enormous structure required a lot of concrete. In the five years the dam was under construction, workers

²⁸ *The Build-Up on the Bighorn*, VHS, (1965, Boise, ID: M-K Productions). For general history of the postwar American West, which will give much more information about the economic boom in the region during the period 1945-1970, please see two books by the historian Gerald Nash: *The American West Transformed: The Impact of the Second World War*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990) and *The Federal Landscape: An Economic History of the Twentieth-Century West*, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1999).

placed 1.5 million yards of concrete into the structure, which is approximately 3 million tons of material. Interestingly, Montana governor Tim Babcock's company won the contract to haul concrete to the site. During construction, Reclamation engineers thinned the dam's design considerable, which lightened both the workload of the construction crew and the dam itself by 218,000 cubic yards of concrete. Despite this respite, concrete laborers worked at a very brisk pace to keep up the demanding schedule set by both the Bureau and Morrison-Knudsen. As one observer remarked, "'The concrete was being placed at the rate of 120 cubic yards per hour around the clock, as temperatures continue to warm, and the construction of the dam proceeded on schedule.'" This concrete behemoth, now recognized as the 15th-tallest dam in the United States, controls an impressive reservoir, seventy-one miles long with a maximum holding capacity of 434 billion gallons of water.²⁹ The Yellowtail Dam and Bighorn reservoir promised a great deal of economic potential for the citizens of Montana.

Bureau of Reclamation engineers, as well as Montana politicians, envisioned the Yellowtail Dam, and the sizeable reservoir it created, as multi-purpose reclamation project that would benefit many different segments of society. Senator James Murray, writing to President Dwight Eisenhower, remarked: "Yellowtail Dam is the key to a great deal of potential, permanent economic expansion in southeastern Montana." Reclamation officials believed that water reserved by Yellowtail would allow the irrigation of 40,000 acres of farmland in the region, help command the flood-prone Missouri River Basin, control the high sediment levels in a notoriously muddy waterway, and provide recreation opportunities for boaters, fishermen, and

²⁹ "History of Steps Leading to Yellowtail Recited by Oldtimer," *Hardin Tribune-Herald*, August 7, 1958; "40 Years Old, Yellowtail Dam Still Hums," *Montana Standard*, February 17, 2008; Interview with Gene Edgar by Shawn Bailey, June 10, 2011, Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area Archives; Interview with Michael Sloan by Jonathan Hall and Shawn Bailey, June 10, 2011, Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area Archives; Bureau of Reclamation, "Annual Project History, Yellowtail Unit, Lower Bighorn Division, Missouri River Basin Project," Vol. II, (Fort Smith, MT: Yellowtail Project Office, September 1960-December 1961): 18; and "Their Pouring at Yellowtail: 120 Yards of Concrete per Hour being Dumped into Foundation of Dam," *Hardin Tribune-Herald*, March 21, 1963.

sightseers. Most importantly, the Yellowtail Dam would harness the enormous energy potential of the powerful Bighorn River, and help ensure the economic prosperity of the region. The dam's mechanism for generate electricity is relatively simple. Water from the Bighorn Reservoir flows down four concrete pipes called penstocks, each twelve-feet wide, and falls several hundred feet until hitting four, 17-ton stainless steel turbines. Water pressure forces these turbines to spin, and in turn, these turbines cause rotors embedded in the power plant's generators to turn, producing electricity. The Yellowtail Dam has four generator units, each weighing 500-tons. Combined, these generators have a maximum generating capacity of 250 megawatts, approximately enough electricity to power 250,000 houses in the region.³⁰ While easy to summarize, the multi-purpose potential of the Yellowtail Dam was not as easy to construct.

Such an ambitious reclamation project required careful planning, more than \$100 million in funding, and a sizeable workforce willing to accept the dangers of dam construction. According to Bureau of Reclamation records, preliminary construction on the dam began in 1946, well before the conclusion of any formal agreement with the Crow Indians, and continued until 1960. During this time, Reclamation spent more than \$5 million surveying, testing, and prepping the dam site for construction, and building site offices and workers' housing. On April 24, 1961, the Bureau awarded the main contract for the construction of the dam and power plant to a joint venture known as Yellowtail Constructors, which consisted of Morrison-Knudsen, The Kaiser Company, Perini Corporation, Walsh Construction Company, and F&S Contracting Company, and Morrison-Knudsen served as the general contractor for the site. Physical construction began sixteen days later. Less than two years after the start of construction, workers

³⁰ Bureau of Reclamation, "Annual Project History, Yellowtail Unit, Lower Bighorn Division, Missouri River Basin Project," Vol. I, (Fort Smith, MT: Yellowtail Project Office, January 1946-September 1960):2; "40 Years Old, Yellowtail Dam Still Hums," *Montana Standard*, February 17, 2008

rerouted the Bighorn River through a diversion tunnel for the first time, and work on the dam began in earnest. On March 15, 1963, workers poured the first bucket of concrete into Block 16 of the dam, a block soon reinforced with silver coins from many of the optimistic workers. For the next two years, workers steadily poured concrete into the dam's foundation, pausing, it seems, only to mark different milestones of the Yellowtail Dam's construction. On November 7, 1963, workers placed the 500,000th cubic yard of concrete, and on August 15th of the following year workers poured the 1-millionth bucket of concrete. On October 1, 1965, concrete laborers placed the final full bucket of concrete onto the dam's structure, although some minor work continued for another three weeks. With the concrete structure in place, the contractors moved to complete the infrastructure of the dam, especially the installment of the four 500-ton generating units. On December 22, 1966, the Bureau of Reclamation recognized the conclusion of their contract with Yellowtail Constructors.³¹ The Yellowtail Dam was complete.

Such a brief summation, limited mostly to facts and figures about an inert dam, ignores the very human element of the story of the building of the Yellowtail Dam. At the height of activity, the Yellowtail jobsite employed more than 700 workers. These people, as a collective, built one of the largest dams in the United States. As individuals, however, they remember that experience quite differently, and a brief sampling from dozens of oral history interviews reveals some of these disparate memories. For some, the opportunity to build such a monolith at the

³¹ Bureau of Reclamation, "Annual Project History, Yellowtail Unit, Lower Bighorn Division, Missouri River Basin Project," Vol. I, (Fort Smith, MT: Yellowtail Project Office, January 1946-September 1960): 11-26; Bureau of Reclamation, "Annual Project History, Yellowtail Unit, Lower Bighorn Division, Missouri River Basin Project," Vol. II, (Fort Smith, MT: Yellowtail Project Office, September 1960-December 1961): ii, 12; Bureau of Reclamation, "Annual Project History, Yellowtail Unit, Lower Bighorn Division, Missouri River Basin Project," Vol. IV, (Fort Smith, MT: Yellowtail Project Office, 1963): iii, 1, 3; Bureau of Reclamation, "Annual Project History, Yellowtail Unit, Lower Bighorn Division, Missouri River Basin Project," Vol. VI, (Fort Smith, MT: Yellowtail Project Office, 1965): ii, 3; Bureau of Reclamation, "Annual Project History, Yellowtail Unit, Lower Bighorn Division, Missouri River Basin Project," Vol. VII, (Fort Smith, MT: Yellowtail Project Office, 1966): ii; and Bureau of Reclamation, "Annual Project History, Yellowtail Unit, Lower Bighorn Division, Missouri River Basin Project," Vol. VIII, (Fort Smith, MT: Yellowtail Project Office, 1967): iii.

mouth of Bighorn Canyon was an exciting adventure—one that paid well, offered excitement, and influenced their lives for years to come. For others, the experience building the Yellowtail was a decidedly negative experience, one filled with back-straining labor, unyielding bosses, and life-threatening situations.

For many of the men and women who built the Yellowtail Dam, the experience of working on an enormous reclamation project on the Bighorn River was a rewarding experience. As with most jobs, an employee's satisfaction with their trade often started with a decent paycheck. According to several former dam workers, employment at Yellowtail paid very well, especially when compared with other local jobs in that region of Montana. Bill Brosz, who took a job with Morrison-Knudsen almost immediately after graduating from Billings West High School, started his brief stint as a dam worker making \$3.15 an hour, which he believed “was an absolutely killer rate.” He later earned more than \$5 working as a high-scaler on the jobsite. Likewise, Michael “Monk” Sloan earned a nearly 100-percent raise over his pay at a local sugar refinery. Sloan contended that “I felt I was blessed to be able to get hired...if I was a young guy now and they were building dams I would be right there working on them again...because it was such a great experience.” Brosz agreed with these sentiments, contending that when “I look back at it [now]...[and I think that] they ought to have more projects like that where they allow more completely inexperienced, untrained young kids out of high school, to put ‘em to work and teach them the value of a dollar.”³²

Not everyone agreed, however, with these positive assessments regarding the quality of job on the Yellowtail Dam construction site. Sloan reported that his brother was less than thrilled with life as a dam worker, and that he likened a job at Yellowtail to “working for the

³² Interview with Bill Brosz by Shawn Bailey, July 27, 2011, Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area Archives; and Interview with Michael Sloan by Jonathan Hall and Shawn Bailey, July 31, 2011, Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area Archives.

pharaohs building the pyramids.” For others, like Clive Dillon, a job on the dam site was the lowest rung on the region’s employment ladder. Dillon posited that “Yellowtail had a bad reputation...if you were booming around [looking for a job], it would be your last choice of a place to go. And it was my last choice, it was during the Eisenhower recession and boy things were tough in Lovell, Wyoming.”³³

Regardless of their opinion of the job, all workers shared a common concern for their health and safety on such an enormous construction site, and many experienced accidents and injuries. As Gene Edgar, who worked on the dam beginning with the excavation of the diversion tunnel, wryly explained: “All construction’s dangerous, no matter how you look at it.” Somewhat paradoxically, many interviewed workers reported that the Yellowtail jobsite was a relatively safe work environment, while recalling their serious injuries and near fatalities. Sloan described several instances of danger, including witnessing a man fall down an unsecured shaft but surviving, and how he lost a piece of finger in a serious jobsite mishap. Overall, according to Sloan, “[a] lot of people got their hands and legs...smashed” in accidents at Yellowtail. Brosz recounted some instances of dangerous conditions, including unsafe work transportation and slack-filled “cable guard rails,” “none of which would have passed OSHA standards by today’s criteria.” Edgar most likely had the closest call of the workers interviewed. While working as an oiler on a jobsite crane, the crane slipped out of gear, turned over several times, and nearly went over the edge of the canyon. According to Edgar, “If it had made one more turn I wouldn’t be here talking to you...it was a long ways down, more than 525-feet” to the floor of the Bighorn Canyon.³⁴

³³ Conversation with Michael Sloan, July 29, 2011, notes in possession of author; and Interview with Clive Dillon by Jonathan Hall, May 24, 2011, Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area Archives.

³⁴ Interview with Gene Edgar by Shawn Bailey, June 10, 2011, Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area Archives; Interview with Bill Brosz by Shawn Bailey, July 27, 2011, Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area Archives; and

Bureau of Reclamation statistics supported the idea that, while dangerous, the Yellowtail Dam site was a relatively safe work environment. 1964 was the peak of construction on the Yellowtail Dam, a year where workers logged almost 1.4 million man hours and placed 717,690 cubic-yards of concrete. That year, the combined contractors on the site reported only seven serious injuries and 145 days of lost time. The year before, on February 28, 1963, Traveler's Insurance Company presented site superintendent Phil Soukup a safety award in recognition of the stellar safety record on the Yellowtail site. The award stated: "Presented to Yellowtail Constructors, M-K Co., Inc., in recognition of outstanding achievement in prevention of employee accidents, Yellowtail dam, Hardin, Mont., 1961-1963."³⁵ In a sadly ironic twist of fate, the worst accident of the entire Yellowtail construction occurred one week later.

On March 6, 1963, four workers, Adam Hartung, Sidney Loyning, Frank Blanco, and Orville Hamman, were aboard a cable car, travelling high across the Bighorn River. According to the *Hardin Tribune-Herald*, "the cable car in which they were riding across the Big Horn canyon at [the] Yellowtail damsite went out of control, crashing against the east wall of the canyon and flung them to the rocks more than 100 feet below." When interviewed by the newspaper, J. Roscoe Granger, the chief construction engineer for the Bureau of Reclamation, described the fatalities as an "impossible accident," and claimed that the cable that broke was new and inspected daily. Not everyone agreed with this assessment. Charles Hartung, brother of one of the deceased, later recalled that "[a] week or two before it happened he [Adam Hartung] told me that he went to the foreman of the M-K construction company and told him that there was going to be an accident if they didn't repair and fix that cable way...he told them it was

Interview with Michael Sloan by Jonathan Hall and Shawn Bailey, July 31, 2011, Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area Archives.

³⁵ Bureau of Reclamation, "Annual Project History, Yellowtail Unit, Lower Bighorn Division, Missouri River Basin Project," Vol. V, (Fort Smith, MT: Yellowtail Project Office, 1964): 7; and "Contractor at Yellowtail Earns Safety Award," *Hardin-Tribune Herald*, February 28, 1963.

going to cut that cable in two...and he told me they wouldn't listen to him." According to Michael Sloan, site superintendent Phil Soukup did not want the construction on the dam to stop, even in light of such a horrific accident. Sloan recalled that Soukup ordered the area cleaned up and for work to continue, and remembered that Soukup "never did shut the job down...they just kept on going" with construction on the dam.³⁶

Raw statistics and propaganda films only tell part of the history of the building of the Yellowtail Dam. Certainly, facts and figures about dam height, tons of concrete poured, river flows, and electrical generating capacities give some sense of the enormous construction job required to build what is now the 15th tallest dam in the United States. And Morrison-Knudsen's film *Build-Up on the Bighorn* reveals some of the progressive rhetoric employed by many boosters of the region, as it romanticizes the workers that built the dam. What statistics and propaganda leave out, however, is the truly human side of the story. The workers who built the dam were much more than simplified notions of "men with brawn in their hands and savvy in their heads." They were individuals deeply impacted by their experiences, positive and negative, during the construction of the Yellowtail Dam. This influence is much harder to quantify than other evaluations of the dam's impact, such as annual electrical generation or yearly recreation area visitor statistics, but no less important. Truly one of the lasting legacies of the construction of Yellowtail is its fifty-year (and counting) influence on the men and women who built the dam.

"It Seems Pretty Nice Now": A Social History

In April 1962, as debate raged about a new tax levy to build a school for the children at Fort Smith and tensions rose between longtime Hardin residents and Fort Smith's newcomers, an

³⁶ "Four Die in Cable Car Accident at Dam," *Hardin Tribune Herald*, March 6, 1963; Interview with Charles Hartung by Shawn Bailey, July 30, 2011, Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area Archives; and Interview with Michael Sloan by Jonathan Hall and Shawn Bailey, July 31, 2011, Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area Archives.

old Hardin resident, named Dick Willet reflected on community tensions some 25 years before in, of all things, a softball game between Saint Xavier and Hardin. Players eyed their opponents wearily, viewed good-natured teasing suspiciously, and parsed the rule book to discuss differences of opinion on making the correct calls. Willet wrote, “it is refreshing to think back on those tense and exciting moments. I think that's the way it will be again. After the fine new dam is built and the stockman and farmers get accustomed to the changes it has wrought, they will agree, ‘well it was kind of rough at times, but it seems pretty nice now.’” To more than a few dam workers and their families, Hardin welcomed the prosperity the dam brought with it, but didn’t always accept the new neighbors that accompanied the change.³⁷

When dam construction began in earnest in 1961, Hardin had to make adjustments, not only for the influx of arrivals, but it also had to grapple with its own expectations. The *Hardin Tribune Herald*, made it clear they didn't want to be a boom town with its attendant problems. “Of course, we'd like to see a good normal growth of the community, but we don't relish the thought of boomtown conditions,” it told readers in 1955 and warned against landlords trying to gouge renters when the inevitable housing shortage occurred. It also championed steady responsible growth. “At the same time, it would be gratifying to see residents of our community prosper and expand in keeping with a healthy, permanent growth in the economy of the area.” By the time workers began filtering into the area in May 1961, the paper claimed to have a pulse on long-time residents’ feelings. “It’s as though the workers who are already here, and those who will soon arrive, are visitors whom we are glad to see...so we’ll treat them as house guests”³⁸

³⁷ “Letter to the Editor,” *Hardin Tribune Herald*, April 26, 1962.

³⁸ “No Boomtown Wanted,” *Hardin Tribune Herald*, July 14, 1955; “How Are We Doing?,” *Hardin Tribune Herald*, May 11, 1961.

While the public face of the town seemed eager to please, newcomers felt let down at first. Greg Bader, whose father Fred Bader worked as a senior field personnel executive for Morrison Knudsen, moved with his family from another dam project in northern Alabama. While Greg completed 8th grade in Gadsden, Alabama, his father travelled frequently to Montana and returned with stories of snow-capped mountains and beautiful ranches. Greg and his mother remained skeptical. “I remember as we were driving into town from the south, the first major advertising sign we saw on the road said, ‘Hardin grows on Elephant Brand Bighorn Fertilizer,’ and my mother started laughing hysterically...and my father...said...‘what’s wrong?’ She said, ‘this is just what I thought it was going to be...it’s not what you said at all.’”³⁹

In the summer of 1961, Fort Smith changed from a lonely frontier outpost to a bustling company town buzzing with activity. In little time, the town developed into a community complete with many of the amenities such as a store, post office, elementary school, infirmary, weekly church services, a brothel, and jail, in addition to countless warehouses and administrative buildings. Contractors graded roads and built houses, including 19 permanent homes intended to shelter Bureau of Reclamation employees. Ellen Markus Frederickson, daughter of Bureau engineer W. E. Markus remembered these houses as “quite nice” with a full basement, three bedrooms and two baths. In addition, 33 temporary homes and 42 sites for trailers were constructed that summer. That year, Yellowtail Constructors employed 260 workers and the Bureau about 100, the vast majority of whom still lived in Hardin at the time. The Baders, like many other families arriving for the Yellowtail project, spent their first months in Hardin before moving out to Fort Smith in the autumn of 1961. The town grew, yet its identity remained in flux. The *Hardin Tribune Herald* commented in the fall of 1961 about the

³⁹ Interview with Greg Bader by Jonathan Hall, September 14, 2011, Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area Archives.

constantly changing view in the area as construction progress and the shifting array of faces that peopled the community as “the trailers come and go...people whose share of the work of the building of the dam is completed, or who, perhaps, are seeking greener pastures, leave and new people arrive.” New residents also debated the proper name for their new home. Did they reside in Fort Smith or Yellowtail? “Most people, at least among the trailerites, seem to prefer the Yellowtail appellation,” claimed Jean Frisbie in her “Tales From Yellowtail” column in the *Hardin Tribune Herald*. Yet bureaucrats in Washington frequently addressed their correspondence to Fort Smith, causing much confusion as important mail, not to mention Christmas presents, wound up in Fort Smith, Arkansas.⁴⁰

When the community became more solidified, social stratification followed. Greg Bader observed, “There was a caste system out at Fort Smith. There were the workers that worked on the dam as ironworkers, cement pourers...they lived in two trailer courts.” Parkdale Trailer Court and Fort Smith Trailer Park housed a majority of the workers, while a Morrison-Knudsen trailer court on top of a hill east of Bureau housing served as a residence for the mid-level employees. Bureau housing adhered to a similar hierarchy with the permanent houses, “H” houses that were metal and movable, and a trailer area of their own, albeit in a more nicely manicured area. Rivalry between the Bureau and Morrison-Knudsen even trickled down to kids labeling their peers “M-K snots and Bureau rats,” depending on where their fathers worked.⁴¹

Aside from establishing a pecking order, one of the first challenges to life at Fort Smith proved to be the wind. The area was notorious for Chinooks that blasted through the canyon at more than 80 miles per hour. “The wind blew terrible,” Montana Watts remembered, “it picked

⁴⁰ Interview with Ellen Markus Frederickson by Jonathan Hall, July 27, 2011, Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area Archives; *Hardin Tribune Herald*, “Exodus from Hardin to Damsite Sees Many Families Arrive,” January 11, 1962; “Life in Trailer Court Presents Constantly Changing Picture,” *Hardin Tribune Herald*, November 2, 1961.

⁴¹ Interview with Greg Bader by Jonathan Hall, September 14, 2011, Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area Archives.

up a boat that was up there on one side of the river and took it across the river and set it on the other side.” For those unused to the gusts, nights could be an unnerving experience. “To this day, I think psychologically the worst experiences I ever had was living through those,” Greg Bader explained, “a lot of the times I would lie in bed all night with my thumbs stuck in my ears and not be able to sleep and wait until morning when I could finally get on the bus...and get into Hardin because by the time you got...not even to Saint Xavier the wind would stop like someone drew a line across the street.”⁴²

Jean Frisbie described the mud and snow that plastered buildings as the work “of some sculptor in terra cotta gone berserk.” In early November 1961, two trailers in the Morrison Knudsen trailer court tipped over after a night of howling winds. Mrs. Jack Armstrong abandoned her trailer after a futile attempt to brew coffee. She quickly discovered the only way to keep the pot upright was to hold onto it as the rest of the structure swayed and bounced. LaDonna Sherman remembered friends of her parents were caught in a precarious situation during one strong gust. A man was “sitting on the toilet at the time and his wife was in the trailer with him...[the man] hollers, ‘Lara, here we go!’ And over they went.” Construction crews’ improvised by bracing the trailers with heavy equipment, placing tires on the roof, or building sheds that served as windbreaks.⁴³

Other challenges of adjustment greeted newcomers when they felt some sense of estrangement from their new surroundings. Ellen Marcus Fredrickson remembered that the people of Hardin labeled children from Fort Smith as the “dam kids” who rode the “dam bus,”

⁴² Interview with Montana Watts by Shawn Bailey, June 9, 2011, Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area Archives; Bader Interview

⁴³ Modern Art Produced by Chinook Is Unpopular at Damsite,” *Hardin Tribune Herald*, November 30, 1961; “Narrow Escapes, Much Damage Result from Wind,” *Hardin Tribune Herald*, November 9, 1961; Interview with Dale and LaDonna Sherman, by Jonathan Hall, August 27, 2011, Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area Archives.

the school bus that shuttled kids the 45 or 50 miles to Hardin. Her younger sister Jean Marcus Kormylo remembered one high school teacher who made all of the kids from Fort Smith sit together in a row and he referred to them as “trailer trash.”⁴⁴

Evidence of Hardin’s perceptions of their new neighbors was reflected in both their expectations and their actions. An early article appearing in the *Hardin Tribune Herald* that introduced Yellowtail Constructors project manager Phil Soukup closed by going out of its way to cast dam workers in a favorable light. “The project manager said modern construction workers are professionals. For the most part, they are family men. M-K employees have made friends in other construction towns.” Even so, weary attitudes endured. Greg Bader recalled “it was never stated directly, but we were treated as foreigners who were there for the time being...however there was some hypocrisy as the town had some of the best economic times it ever had.” An event that crystallized this perception occurred with the brutal murder of eight year-old Stormy Timberman in November 1964. Greg Bader remembered, “the first thing that Big Horn County Sheriffs did was put up a roadblock between Fort Smith and Hardin...everybody assumed that whoever had done this must be from the dam.” But that wasn’t the case. A local boy, Robert Rollins was taken into custody and later convicted of murder. Bader noted the resentment that many dam workers felt, “that ticked a lot of people off, made a lot of people angry...that was I think a real symbol of the split between Fort Smith” and ~~the~~ Hardin.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Interview with Ellen Markus Fredrickson by Jonathan Hall, July 27, 2011, Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area Archives; Interview with Jean Marcus Kormylo by Jonathan Hall, August 9, 2011, Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area Archives.

⁴⁵“Morrison Knudsen Men Lease Building, Office Personnel Arrive,” *Hardin Tribune Herald*, May 11, 1961; Interview with Greg Bader by Jonathan Hall, September 14, 2011, Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area Archives.

After enduring ridicule and indifference, Greg Bader came to appreciate the place where he spent the majority of his adolescent years. He was touched by a gesture from the school superintendent, H. R. Salyer, at his graduation in 1966. Bader remembered, “he got up and made a long statement about all of the contributions...that all of the people from Fort Smith and Yellowtail Dam had made to the progress of Hardin...then he went on and said ‘a lot of you don’t know this but...our last five valedictorians including Greg Bader here tonight have all come from Fort Smith. And I think that says a lot about the quality of the people that have been our neighbors for so long.’” He asked for a standing ovation. Bader remembered it as “sort of bittersweet for a lot of people everywhere because they knew that was probably the last year anybody from Fort Smith would be there” and “Ironically at the very end of this experience people were bonding together.” Just as the old-timer who wrote to the *Hardin Tribune-Herald* back in 1962 predicted, as the dam neared its completion everyone touched by the experience might have been relieved to say, “well it was kind of rough at times, but it seems pretty nice now.”⁴⁶

Fifty Years Later

What then was the return on the investment of more than \$100 million in federal money and the loose change that workers tossed into that first bucket of concrete? The dam has paid immense dividends in its generation of power and flood control. As of 2008, the Bureau of Reclamation estimates the dam has spared local communities \$113 million in flood damage.⁴⁷

For the Crow Indians, the sale of 5,678 acres of Bighorn Canyon land to the Bureau of Reclamation, and the subsequent building of the Yellowtail Dam, remains a contentious issue. Enrolled Crow tribal members received modest financial dividends from the disbursement of the

⁴⁶ Interview with Greg Bader by Jonathan Hall, September 14, 2011, Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area Archives.

⁴⁷ “Tight Security Limits Dam Visitors,” *Billings Gazette*, February 19, 2008.

\$2.5 million from the sale of the dam site. In 1958, each enrolled adult received \$600 and \$100 for each minor child in their household. More recently, the Crow Indians have secured a new source of income from the Yellowtail Dam. As part of the Crow Water Settlement Act of 2010, the Crow received exclusive rights to develop and sell hydroelectric power at the Yellowtail Afterbay Dam, located 2.2 miles downriver from the main structure. Crow Chairman Cedric Black Eagle, when asked about the entire Settlement Act, contended that “[w]ith the execution of the Crow Irrigation project contract today, we will begin to create jobs on the reservation this fall that will help put our people to work and get the Crow irrigation project into good repair for the first time in its history.” And after fifty years, at least one family member believes that Robert Yellowtail might have softened his stance against the dam that bears his name. Roberta Rose Yellowtail, one of Robert Yellowtail’s granddaughters, ruminated: “I kind of wonder...if Robbie would be okay with it [the dam] now. I kind of think he might be okay with it, but I don’t know.”⁴⁸

While visitation has never reached the 600,000 annual visitors that the National Park Service foresaw by 1970, let alone Floyd Dominy’s claim of a million visitors, hundreds of thousands do arrive every year to gawk at the lake from Devil’s Canyon overlook, fish below the afterbay dam, or spend an afternoon cruising the canyon’s expanses. Some still find the reservoir’s presence troubling for a variety of reasons. Some see it as a towering symbol of unfulfilled promises, while others lament all of the history drowned beneath the waters. One commenter on a recent article in the *Billings Gazette* noted, “A lot of natural and cultural history

⁴⁸ “Adult Competent Crow Indians to get Per Capita Payment in December,” *Hardin Tribune Herald*, November 28, 1958; “Crow Tribe gets \$74 Million in Water Settlement Funds,” *Billings Gazette*, September 13, 2011; and Interview with Roberta Rose Yellowtail by Jonathan Hall, July 30, 2011, Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area Archives.

was lost when the dam was built...Someday, the reservoir will silt-up and the dam will come down, and balance will be restored once again.” Others still object to it for aesthetic reasons, but for every champion of the wild ruggedness of the Big Horn River before the dam, there is another equally in awe of the lake. Ladonna Sherman still raves about the beauty of the lake her father helped construct. Dale Sherman said, “it’s an awesome trip...I think it’s an eighth or ninth wonder of the world, just mindboggling.” Even though no one figures to resolve this argument soon, the *Hardin Tribune Herald* may have succinctly characterized the debate on the eve of the playground’s opening in 1967, “Which was more beautiful? The question always starts an argument. One outdoorsman who has seen it many times answers with another question: ‘which would you rather look at, rocks or water?’”⁴⁹

Those who migrated to the area formed lasting memories and discovered a sense of belonging, even if they lived there for a short time. Ellen Marcus Fredrickson recollected the great diversity of children who rode the “dam bus” to Hardin in those years—not only Crow kids, but also the children of Mexican and Japanese immigrants. Greg Bader who travelled all over the country while his father worked for Morrison-Knudsen says, “If someone asked me where I’m from, I’d say Hardin, Montana...” After a long absence, Bader returned in 1991 to a visit a friend. On a trip to the cemetery to see the resting place of some old classmates, he reflected, “if there were anyplace that I would know or be comfortable in, it would be right here,

⁴⁹ The Welfare Westerner, “Comment on ‘Reclamation Area Celebrates Construction of Yellowtail Dam,’” *Billings Gazette*, http://billingsgazette.com/news/state-and-regional/montana/article_834f006d-f167-58ef-886c-23f672977267.html?mode=comments, date accessed October 14, 2011. Interview with Dale and LaDonna Sherman, by Jonathan Hall, August 27, 2011, Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area Archives; “Sheer Rock Walls, Fantastic Formations, To Greet Boaters in 60 Miles of Canyons,” *Hardin Tribune Herald*, August 18, 1966.

because I know almost every name on these tombstones and there's no other place in the United States, I can say that about...I feel a lot of very great affection for the town."⁵⁰

Decades of planning and scheming and politicking gave way to about six fleeting years of construction. As the project neared completion, some workers and their spouses held a square dance atop the dam. Howard Snively recalled many families had danced when they had the opportunity, but made it a point to have one last farewell hoedown. Mrs. Snively remembered, "we had lights and we had little cards... best dancers by a dam site." In the weeks and months ahead, the workers scattered—to the next dam site or back into the local job market—but in their wake they had left behind, arguably, the most enduring legacy, the dam itself and the memories that were erected alongside of it.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Interview with Ellen Markus Frederickson by Jonathan Hall, July 27, 2011, Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area Archives; Interview with Greg Bader by Jonathan Hall, September 14, 2011, Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area Archives.

⁵¹ Interview with Mr. and Mrs. Howard Snively by Jonathan Hall, July 30, 2011, Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area Archives.