



Columbia River: Headwaters to the Coast Tour

Modern Day Woody Guthrie Updates the Columbia River Songs By Peter DuBois

In 1941 Woody Guthrie a twenty-one year old folk singer was hired by the Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) to write songs promoting dam-building on the Columbia River. Woody's 26 songs written in just 30 days, wax poetical about harnessing the power of the Columbia River to give folks cheap electricity, provide water to turn brown deserts green, and create jobs for the common man. His classic *Roll On Columbia, Roll On* was honored as Washington's state folk song in 1987.

Almost 65 years later, I joined a group of 30 other teachers and educators from throughout the region on a twelve day journey funded by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the National Park Service called "Columbia River: Headwaters to the Coast Tour." The Columbia River Basin drains an area the size of Texas, flowing through seven states and two provinces as it courses 1,200 miles from the Canadian Rockies to the Pacific Ocean. Like a modern day Woody Guthrie, I traveled the working river to update some of Guthrie's lyrics and penned a few original songs that reflect issues in the Columbia Basin today.

The headwater of the Columbia River is Columbia Lake, a naturally formed Mediterranean blue lake. With little development, one can almost imagine what it was like in the early 1800's when explored by the great Canadian voyageur David Thompson, the first white person to travel the Columbia's entire length. Too gentle a gradient to harness for power, this breathtaking stretch of river flows freely between steep mountains and past wetlands which form habitat for migratory waterfowl and big game. A large scale development is planned for the banks of the lake, which would alter the natural area forever. It is perhaps a fitting but sad end to the story of the most dammed river system in the world; the Columbia and its tributaries are obstructed with over 450 dams.

Historically, the Columbia was a river of salmon. I used Woody's song *Ramblin' Blues* to honor the Native people who lived off runs of up to 10 million adult salmon. This centuries decline in wild salmon runs mirrors the plight of the Salmon Nations as they were moved onto reservations and sacred fishing grounds were flooded by reservoirs. Kettle Falls, the second largest gathering area for tribes after Celilo Falls, was washed away by Lake Roosevelt when the Grand Coulee Dam was built.

Woody writes that the Columbia River "gave men dreams to dream, of the day the Coulee Dam would cross that wild and wasted stream." What Woody did not foresee was the fact that the Coulee Dam would cut off one-third of the River's salmon spawning grounds and overnight make the mighty Canadian spring Chinook salmon extinct. The Chinook salmon called June Hogs weighed up to 100 pounds. The fish entered the Columbia River in the spring and packed



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on weight to fuel their 2,650-foot upriver climb to creeks in the Canadian Rockies. For four years following the construction of the dam, the heroic fish returned from the sea only to find an insurmountable concrete wall. Blocked from returning to their spawning grounds, the Canadian salmon were unable reproduce and died an ignoble death. The Coulee Dam's barrier also stopped the flow of 10 million tons of black gritty slag deposited from zinc and lead smelting in Trail, British Columbia, which now lies on the bottom of Lake Roosevelt.

Canada and the United States share the Columbia, and the Columbia River Treaty signed in 1964 resulted in dam building and the regulation of water for downriver flood control and power generation. British Columbia residents were promised lakes for recreation, but in reality the lakes are emptied in summer to generate electricity for American air conditioners, leaving the lakebeds dry and dusty. I added a new verse to *Roll, Columbia, Roll*: "Now those folks in Canada and the salmon in B.C. got left high and dry by that big Grand Coulee." Canadian residents are beginning to voice their concerns as they prepare for the treaty renewal process which can start as early as 2014.

After 500 miles, the river enters the United States and begins to work for Uncle Sam generating power, irrigation water and controlling floods. I re-worked the lyrics to *The Biggest Thing That Man Has Ever Done* to discuss the Manhattan Project and the River's role in the war effort: "Took water from the Columbia, the power from Coulee Dam, the brains of engineers, the hands of many a man, to run the B reactor to make plutonium...radioactive waste is the biggest thing that man has ever done." The Hanford Nuclear Site outside Richland, WA has 80 square miles of contaminated groundwater including radioactive waste, that may never be completely cleaned up. The polluted site does have a bright spot in The Hanford Reach National Monument. This free flowing section of the river (between dams) home to a healthy Chinook salmon spawning ground and native vegetation for elk, mule deer and coyotes.

the Snake River joins in downstream from Hanford,. Four lower Snake River dams constructed during the 1970's form a series of lakes that allow barges to navigate 465 miles to the United State's farthest inland port in Lewiston, Idaho. Woody describes in *Columbia Talkin' Blues*, "Gasoline going up, Wheat a coming down." Most container barge cargo has a low profit margin like recyclable paper and lentils and peas and it is becoming less cost-effective to ship these products from the Port of Portland. This could add to the argument to remove the lower Snake River dams which provide little flood control and hydropower for the sake of the long suffering wild salmon runs. My new verse for *Roll on Columbia* adds: "Now the river's not a river at all, it's slack water lakes formed by concrete walls. Young salmon once flushed to the ocean are stalled. Roll on Columbia Roll on."

Farmers also depend on the Columbia River. Irrigators in the Yakima Valley want to create a \$1.6 billion reservoir forming a massive new lake in the barren Black Rock Valley. By pumping water from the Columbia River, the project is designed to alleviate demands on the Yakima



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River which is almost sucked dry in summer months to irrigate fruit trees and other crops. Water rights in this parched area of the Northwest reflect Mark Twain's words: "Whiskey's for drinking, water's for fighting over." Washington Department of Ecology is currently reviewing the process of issuing Columbia River water rights some of which have been on file for ten years since there is not enough water to go around. Without more water, farmers and cities can't grow.

Woody's song *Pastures of Plenty* tells the tale of migrant workers. I have rewritten the song to reflect how the Columbia River Basin's water rights are oversubscribed and how worker exposure to pesticides is affecting farm worker's children. "Green pastures of plenty from dry desert ground have other hidden costs now we have found. We have sacrificed salmon and also our kids. Now the small family farm is next on the list."

Like a group of smolts washing out to sea, the group of educators reached the mouth of the Columbia River and prepared for the transition back to society after 2,500 miles and many tours. The long journey showed how intertwined the river is with man's needs – power, agriculture, flood plain development, transportation, trade, fishing, recreation and wilderness. To share these stories I will collaborate with Geoff Busch, science teacher at Vancouver Arts and Academics, to present a multimedia musical show called "The Woody Guthrie Columbia River Songs Revisited." For more information please contact Peter DuBois at 360.991.1761 or pdubois@pacifier.com