

MORE THAN A RIVER:
USING NATURE FOR REFORM
IN THE PROGRESSIVE ERA

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ABSTRACT

The decades around the turn of the twentieth century were a time of vast social and economic change. Industrialization altered the ways people related to each other and to their social, political, and cultural institutions. Some perceived that the rise of cities, changing middle-class values, and changing work patterns created vexing social convulsions—disorder, inefficiency, and class struggle. The work of John Gneisenau Neihardt, William Ellsworth Smythe, and Francis Griffith Newlands revealed how progressives looked to nature as a tool of social reform. Each of these men understood the American environment in multiple contexts. Nostalgia and romanticized Missouri River history activated themes of empire, race, and manhood in Neihardt's work. He also voiced the concerns of river improvement advocates, who wanted more federal support for their cause. William Smythe became the chief propagandist for the western irrigation cause. He formulated resilient and emotionally powerful rhetoric that motivated irrigationists. Both the river improvement and irrigation causes, however, proved fractious and parochial. Newlands was a practical politician. In reclamation, he found a mechanism to bring irrigation and river control under coordinated government management for social order, business expansion, and reliable systems of investment and return. These social reform efforts, however, faltered and created new kinds of conflicts that justified and necessitated continued government intervention in society and business in the name of progress.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the School of Graduate Studies, have examined a dissertation titled “More than a River: Using Nature for Reform in the Progressive Era,” presented by Patrick Dismas Dobson, candidate for the Doctor of Philosophy degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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INTRODUCTION

“Others may praise what they like;
But I, from the banks of the running Missouri, praise
nothing in
art or aught else,
Till it has well inhaled the atmosphere of this river, also the
western prairie scent,
And exudes it all again.” –Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

In 1908, writer John Neihardt embarked on a journey down the Missouri River. A year later, he published a series of travel stories about his journey in *Putnam's*. In the articles, he portrayed himself as a modern American man who set out on the river to find more of himself. These stories appeared in his 1910 book, *The River and I*. The book helped the young writer as he pursued his career. But the book was much more than a recounting of a personal journey. *The River and I* delivered a full-throated articulation of Progressive perceptions of the river, history, and nature's utility for individual and social improvement. In the book's pages, Neihardt demonstrated his belief that contact with the river gave men new energy and renewed faith in the American experiment. He promoted river development while also venerating the river and its environs. Neihardt believed contact with nature served racial and social hierarchies. The river also provided a mechanism for national economic and

imperial expansion.¹ Americans hewed the nation from wilderness, he believed, and shaped social priorities in the West that influenced all of American life. As Americans faced the closing of the frontier, progressives and writers, such as Neihardt, Caspar Whitney, and Theodore Roosevelt, actively sought new ways to continue individual and national development. For them, contact with nature, competitive sports, and adventurism at home and abroad tested men's mettle. These activities remade men into good Americans who possessed good character and nationalistic vigor.²

Neihardt's *The River and I* reflected Americans' changing and multi-faceted attitudes toward the natural environment. In the decades around the turn of the twentieth century, American confidence in progress and faith in technology fueled a constellation of progressive ideas regarding nature and its uses. Activists, writers, and politicians advocated the benefits of human contact with and new uses of the natural environment. Agrarianist Liberty Hyde Bailey and educator Anna Botsford Comstock endorsed nature-study and back-to-nature movements for Americans mental, physical, and moral health. Progressive conservationist George Bird Grinnell helped establish and later headed the Audubon Society, which advocated nature education as a means of building good citizenship. From 1880 to 1911, Grinnell also edited the influential *Forest and Stream* magazine, an influential publication that promoted contact with nature and wildlife conservation. Writing stories for Grinnell's *Forest and Stream* in 1901, ethnologist and historian James Willard Schultz utilized the Missouri River in tales that bolstered ideas of nature as central to American history and

¹ John G. Neihardt, *Patterns and Coincidences: A Sequel to All is But a Beginning* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1979), 53-64; William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, Cronon, ed., (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 77-9.

² Julianne Lutz Warren, "Alienation or Intimacy?: The Roles of Science in the Cultural Narratives of Gifford Pinchot and John Burroughs," *American Transcendental Quarterly* 21 (December 2007): 254.

culture. Schultz' stories later appeared in book form. In *Floating on the Missouri*, he combined history, landscape, and Native American culture in framing his ideas of the physical environment's importance to modern cultural life.³

At the time, conservationists, social activists, and preservationists responded in different ways to a growing anxiety Americans felt as they watched bulldozer, shovel, and saw consume their natural resources and wild spaces.⁴ Conservationists such as head of the Forest Service Gifford Pinchot and Theodore Roosevelt believed the survival of American business and democracy depended on stopping the rampant exploitation of natural resources. Scientific management, bureaucratic organization, and expert planning, they believed, replaced old, wasteful practices with new economic and social efficiencies. With confidence in their technological prowess, conservationists set about restructuring the environment for economic benefit.⁵ Around the same time, the development of the industrial city and the closing of the frontier moved people such as John Muir to promote new appreciation of the nation's seemingly pristine spaces. With aesthetics and belief in succor and escape from the rigors of modern life that natural spaces gave people, Muir supported saving some resources and landscapes un- or only lightly touched, particularly in the West. The efforts on the part of

³ Kevin C. Armitage, *The Nature-Study Movement: The Forgotten Popularizer of America's Conservation Ethic* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 2, 21, 26-7; Mona Domosh, "Selling Civilization: Toward a Cultural Analysis of America's Economic Empire in the Late-Nineteenth and Early-Twentieth Centuries," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 29 (December 2004): 453-67, esp. 455; John Rieger, "Pathbreaking Conservationist: George Bird Grinnell (1849-1938)," *Forest History Today* (Spring/Fall 2005): 16-9; James Willard Schultz, *Floating on the Missouri* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1979), vii-xiv. See also, Carolyn Merchant, "George Bird Grinnell's Audubon Society: Bridging the Gender Divide in Conservation," *Environmental History* 15 (January 2010): 3-30.

⁴ Roderick Nash, ed., *The American Environment: Readings in the History of Conservation* (Reading, MA: Addison Wesley, 1968), 38.

⁵ Samuel P. Hays, *Response to Industrialism: 1885-1914* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957) 156-7; Harold K. Steen, *The Origins of the National Forests: A Centennial Symposium* (Durham, NC: Forest History Society, 1992), 2-14.

preservationists and conservationists streamlined American corporate and individual behavior in the environment.⁶

These reformers and many others believed nature offered solutions to the debilitating social challenges of the industrial age. I focus this work on John Gneisenau Neihardt, William Ellsworth Smythe, and Francis Griffith Newlands. Their work showed that nature promised differing levels of economic and social utility in the opening decades of the twentieth century. I argue that they interpreted nature as a capital and social resource useful in reform. My subjects believed that industrial life, urbanization, and mass immigration endangered Americans' belief in hard work, persistence, and independence. Often using similar rhetoric, they conveyed widely varying conceptions of how the natural environment countered such problems. They assumed contact with nature increased worker productivity and allowed middle-class Americans release from the pressures of industrial life. In various ways, they argued that nature stemmed industrialization's deleterious effects on middle-class Americans.⁷ Neihardt and Smythe believed contact with nature reinvigorated entrepreneurial spirit, taught lessons of hard work, and gave relief from the stresses of modern life. Through scientific management, Newlands maintained, the natural environment ensured long-term economic benefit for the nation.⁸

⁶ Char Miller, *Gifford Pinchot and the Making of Modern Environmentalism* (Washington: Island Press, 2001), 5-8; Michael B. Smith, "The Value of A Tree: Public Debates of John Muir and Gifford Pinchot," *The Historian* 60 (June 1998): 777-8; Robert W. Righter, *The Battle over Hetch-Hetchy: America's Most Controversial Dam and the Birth of Modern Environmentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press): 66-71. See also Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

⁷ Kevin C. Armitage, "Commercial Indians: Authenticity, Nature, and Industrial Capitalism in Advertising at the Turn of the Twentieth Century," *Michigan Historical Review* 29 (Fall 2003): 70-95, esp. 73, 82.

⁸ Samuel P. Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), 141-5; Hays, *Response to Industrialism*, 111.

Like many reformers looking to nature, these men's priorities and goals often contradicted, conflicted, or overlapped one another. Progressive ideas of the environment's importance and use ran such a gamut of ideas and actions that examination of other reformers would likely produce a different story. I do not attempt to tackle the entire history of western water development and its close connections with control of the nation's rivers in one volume. I also do not attempt to specify or itemize the practical results of Neihardt and Smythe's ideas or of Newlands' various legislative initiatives. Historians, particularly Donald C. Jackson, Donald J. Pisani, William D. Rowley, and Donald Worster, covered these aspects of the mixed and often negative environmental and social impacts of reclamation and multiple-use water development. I do, however, explore ideas behind water development and link ideas with action.

I explore Neihardt, Smythe, and Newlands' work in print media. They consciously positioned themselves in particular ways for the public and communicated their ideas via books, newspapers, and magazines. Neihardt peddled his work to magazines and publishers that sought larger audiences and bigger profits. Since nature writing, adventure tales, and stories of manly exploit frothed the pages of men's magazines, he wrote copy for audiences looking for those kinds of stories. He wrote gave his stories and books a sincerity that played well with his readers. He believed that people made honest livings in nature. A productive river mixed nature's might and human technological prowess in a perfect whole. To this end, he advocated that the federal government alter the river, modernize its commercial facilities, and expand entrepreneurial opportunity.⁹

⁹ John G. Neihardt, *The River and I* (New York: Macmillan, 1910), 296-301. Please note that Neihardt edited and altered the original text of the book in all editions of *The River and I* published in his lifetime. Macmillan published an edition of the book in 1927, and the University of Nebraska Press in 1968. Timothy G. Anderson added an insightful introduction to the 1997 University of Nebraska Press' publication of *The River and I*.

In magazines and books, William Smythe devoted himself almost wholly to selling irrigation as a cure for what ailed America. He envisioned in irrigation the long-elusive Jeffersonian, agrarian republic flowering in the desert. There, he argued, Americans had a moral obligation to take up where God left off. Irrigation made the desert wastes fertile and gave stressed middle-class urbanites respite from the grime and crime of the city. Farm life in desert spaces, he argued, offered physically and spiritually wholesome lifestyles. Fresh, dry air with plenty of sun invigorated tired souls and made people more amenable to democratic, cooperative communities. But only the federal government was big enough to plan, coordinate, and pay for the irrigation apparatuses needed for these larger and benevolent goals.¹⁰

Francis Newlands worked in law, money management, and politics. He targeted his remarks in Congress toward influential business and political figures. He also sought a broader American public through magazine and newspaper articles. Like Smythe, Newlands wanted to move water in the West. But he imagined irrigation as part of a larger, comprehensive federal water policy that settled people on orderly grids where they played their roles in an interlocking, corporatized economy. For him, rivers, lakes, and streams formed the basis for large-scale agriculture, transportation, and flood control. Reclamation connected farmers with processors, and processors with international markets. By the same token, industry moved goods on modern transportation routes. A riverboat and barges carried

Unless otherwise noted in parenthetical, I cite the University of Nebraska Press' 1992 reprint edition of *The River and I*. See also, Timothy G. Anderson, ed., *River and I*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).

¹⁰ William E. Smythe, *Conquest of Arid America* (New York: Macmillan, 1905), 65-89, 107, 122. Smythe devoted the major part of his life after 1890 to the irrigation cause. He changed each edition each edition of *Conquest of Arid America* (1900 with Macmillan, 1905 with Harper and Brothers, 1911 with Macmillan). Unless otherwise noted, I will show in parenthetical the edition to which I refer. See also the 1969 University of Washington publication of *The Conquest of Arid America* that Newlands biographer Lawrence B. Lee edited (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1969).

many tens of what one train could. Coordinating river commerce with rails and roads, he thought, presented the most effective and efficient way to connect national and world markets. With the finances and expertise of the federal government, bigger, more efficient economies of scale secured the food supply, effected social and economic efficiency, and create orderly environments for investment and profit.¹¹

I hope to show that reformers of the Progressive Era understood the environment in a series of shifting economic and social values. Rapid changes in social life, technology, and science gave nature new social meanings and functions. In chapter one, my treatment of John Neihardt and the Missouri River lays out important ways that Americans viewed the river and its uses for commerce at the turn of the early twentieth century. Neihardt's work reveals complicated attitudes toward the meaning of rivers and their social utility in a time of rapid social change. He communicated important ideas about managing the river for economic benefit in *The River and I*. In chapter two, I demonstrate that Neihardt spoke for river improvement activists who argued the federal government should concern itself with river transportation. The government, they said, neglected its duty toward the river and Missouri Valley residents. Government-subsidized railroads held monopolistic control over agricultural and industrial shipping. Viable river transportation, they asserted, gave farmers, industries, and distribution companies options that competed with railroads. They wanted government to alter the river—in a sense, standardize it—for new water transportation technologies. This revealed that they sought river improvement not for the yeoman farmer they so often spoke of, but for the large shipping concerns that could fill deep-draft barges. River improvement advocates united only in their belief that the federal government owed

¹¹ Francis G. Newlands, *The Public Papers of Francis G. Newlands*, Vol. 1, Arthur B. Darling, ed., (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1932), 56-84.

them river improvements for shipping and transport. They desired taxpayer support for their individual local projects. Riverside cities, farmers, and businessmen splintered along their own pecuniary interests. When it came to actual planning and river development, politicians resisted losing their ability to bring home pork projects to their constituencies.¹²

While river improvement advocates sought greater government funding for their particular interests, elected officials, town boosters, and developers across the West sought government support for irrigation. Chapter three argues that the western irrigation cause, like river improvement, wanted to spin money out of water.¹³ William E. Smythe was obsessed with irrigation. Some of his contemporaries, including prominent irrigation proponents Elwood Mead and Francis Newlands, considered him a careerist and dreamer. They saw his major work for the irrigation cause, *The Conquest of Arid America*, filled with exaggeration and bluster. These critics, however, were more than happy to have Smythe speak for them.¹⁴ Smythe argued that irrigation could fulfill a number of individual, national, and even divine goals. A benevolent American empire based on small government-irrigated communities remade white middle-class professionals into individual farmer/entrepreneurs. They would

¹² T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), 4-58; Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America: 1877-1920* (New York: Harper, 2009), 31-5, 40-1, 51-92; Ben Minteer, *Landscapes of Reform: Civic Pragmatism and Environmental Thought in America* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 4, 39; Armitage, *The Nature-Study Movement*, 2, 21, 26-7, quote 24; Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1966), 111.

¹³ Mark Fiege, *Irrigated Eden: The Making of an Agricultural Landscape in the American West* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), 177; Donald J. Pisani, "Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: Nationalizing the History of Water in the United States," *Environmental History* 5 (October 2000): 468-71; William D. Rowley, *The Bureau of Reclamation: Origins and Growth to 1945* Vol. 1 (Denver: Bureau of Reclamation, Dept. of the Interior, 2006), 77-9; Smythe, *Conquest of Arid America* (1905), 284-5; Richard White, *Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), 108-12.

¹⁴ Rowley, *Bureau of Reclamation*, 1, 79, 207; Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York: Oxford University, 1985), 118-24, 132; Patricia Nelson Limerick, *Desert Passages: Encounters with the American Deserts* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001), 79-81.

prize the benefits of hard work and self-sufficiency, he argued. Irrigation freed them from the whims of industrial demand, the evils of corporate largesse, and the degradations of urban living. Reclamation reformed the nation and affirmed individuality in a time of national transformation. This chapter also reveals that Smythe, despite grand pronouncements, made a living promoting the irrigation cause. When he put his notions into practice himself, however, his irrigation colonies failed. By the time they went end up, he had already made his profit and went off to the next wildly successful speech, financially rewarding book, and profitable but botched development.¹⁵

Francis Newlands brought progressive ideas of water and rivers full circle. Well-heeled and politically savvy, Newlands argued that bending western water into social and economic purposes demanded money and scientific management. Chapter four shows how Newlands used Smythe's rhetoric but took a clinical view of nature and the ways it produced wealth—for himself, his supporters, and, he maintained, the nation. Speaking in terms western irrigators, settlers, and politicians wanted to hear, he argued that a national approach to water created social harmony, increased agricultural production, and improved national clout in the global marketplace. Like Smythe, he maintained federal irrigation benefited the nation as a whole. He argued that the federal government had responsibility to increase economic opportunity in the West. The logical path for the nation led to reclamation and water development. As his career advanced, he gained political power and began the process of transforming western deserts into investment, growth, and reform tools.¹⁶

¹⁵ Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 5-11; John G. Neihardt, *The Song of Hugh Glass* (New York: Macmillan, 1919), v-xii; Neihardt, *River and I*, 142; William E. Smythe, *City Homes on Country Lanes: Philosophy and Practice of Home-in-a-Garden* (New York: Macmillan, 1921), 75-82; Smythe, *Constructive Democracy: The Economics of a Square Deal* (New York: Macmillan, 1905), 381; Smythe, *Conquest of Arid America* (1900), 42.

¹⁶ Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency*, 11-13; Smythe, *Conquest of Arid America* (1905), 5-23.

Newlands also demonstrates how the dream of watering fields in the desert acted in a much larger reorganization of water, business, and society. Newlands authored the National Reclamation Act of 1902—known as the Newlands Act. The legislation established a new federal bureaucracy, the Reclamation Service, to irrigate the West. Chapter five demonstrates that the Newlands Act gave western boosters economic development and Newlands a mechanism by which he could pull reclamation and river improvement together under centralized government planning and control. Reclamation administration included capturing water from the tiniest freshet to the largest river. Dams, levees, and river channels also benefited cities with flood control and navigation. Soil and forest conservation played into the water management scheme, which, itself, was part of supervising business and society. The parochial interests that vexed the irrigation and river improvement causes, however, prevented Newlands from ever getting the kind of government water management and coordination he sought.¹⁷

In chapter six, the conclusion, I use the Missouri River as an example of how nature/human relationships produce constant change and conflict. With dams, river channeling, and flood control structures, Americans redirected the river's energy into systems of social and commercial power. In shaping the river for particular ends, engineers, government bureaucrats, and social planners produced the outcomes they intended and many they did not. Technological advances generated and regenerated obsolescence. Science and business uncovered areas of underdevelopment and opportunities for new markets. The river challenged engineers, cities, and businesses. It disrupted commerce, despite human controls. It washed away engineers' and bureaucrats' best work and planning. In the manipulation of

¹⁷ Donald J. Pisani, "Forests and Reclamation, 1891-1911," *Forest & Conservation History* 37 (April 1993): 68-79, esp. 76; William D. Rowley, "Visions of a Watered West," *Agricultural History* 76 (Spring 2002): 142-153.

nature, however, Americans knew no failure, only prospects for greater applications of human creativity, technology, and science.¹⁸ Social conflicts showed weakness in and chances for social engineering. Americans could not leave the river alone. Their systems of economy, social organization, and government could not accommodate inaction. “In the constant drive to accumulate larger and larger quantities of social wealth under its control,” writes environmental philosopher, Neil Smith, “capital transforms the shape of the entire world. No God-given stone is left unturned, no original relation with nature unaltered, no living thing unaffected.”¹⁹ Neihardt, Smythe, and Newlands participated in this dynamic. They approved of it and supported it. For them all, utilizing nature for practical purposes subjugated and reformed the restless masses—whether or not urbanites decided to move out of cities onto grids of orderly, irrigated farms—and mainstreamed water and rivers into rational schemes of industrial production.

¹⁸ Neihardt, *Hugh Glass*, xiii-xviii; Harry Hartoonian, *History's Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Practice, and the Question of Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 111; David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. London: Blackwell, 1990), 16; Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (London: Blackwell, 1991), 27-40.

¹⁹ Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 6-7

CHAPTER 1

John Gneisenau Neihardt and the Missouri River

“Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members.” –Ralph Waldo Emerson¹

“I have come to look upon the Missouri as something more than a river,” John G. Neihardt wrote in his signature prose work, *The River and I*. Published in 1910, the book spoke to readers enamored of their nation’s history and environment. His themes concerned progress, national strength, and wistfulness for times past. At the time, it seemed that American industrial and national expansion knew no bounds, and Americans put their faith in technological progress to propel the nation to new heights. With the growth of cities, however, they looked with nostalgia to what they saw as simpler days when the natural environment played a greater role in American lives. “To me,” he wrote, the Missouri “is an epic. And it gave me my first big boy dreams.” Never in world history “has a river been the thoroughfare of a movement so tremendously epic in its human appeal, so vastly significant in its relation to the development of man.” The river’s sheer force and power, he wrote, showed men their size. The river possessed “massive shoulders.” His “big brother” stretched out strong and manly across the Plains. He wrote the Missouri possessed the strength of Titan. He called the river a “great dynamic force.”²

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 134.

² Neihardt, *River and I* (1910), 1-4; Neihardt, *River and I*, 1-4, 152-4.

The River and I expressed Neihardt's energy and optimism. In spring 1908, the twenty-seven-year-old set out on the Missouri River on a 2,000-mile journey from Fort Benton, Montana, to Sioux City, Iowa. As he shoved off, he dubbed his twenty-foot "canoe-boat" *Atom*, a name appropriate for a journey he intended "to strip one down to the lean essentials, press in upon one the glorious privilege of being one's self, unique in all the universe of innumerable unique things." But he did not want the river to peel away his preconceived notions of manhood and river history. Instead, he sought legitimacy for his views of nature and history. The boat's name suited the starting point of the trip, Fort Benton. Neihardt associated the town with its past importance to the steamboat trade that he considered seminal periods in American history.³ He idolized steamboat skippers who braved rapids, sandbars, and snags upstream from St. Louis and nearly 3,000 miles to Fort Benton, beyond which point the river grew too rough for steamers. He looked with nostalgia on ships that carried furs, gold, and freight—and settlers, princes, and miners—into central Montana from Kansas City.⁴ When Neihardt lived in Kansas City as a young boy in the 1880s, he met the men who worked in the last remnants of the steamboat era. At the time, a few river shipping companies still transported goods from the riverfront docks at Westport Landing to small towns downstream that possessed no rails or reliable roads. In elegiac style, he wrote

³ Helen Marjory Wheeler, "Neihardt and the Missouri River" (Master's Thesis, University of Missouri, 1943), 77; Vine Deloria Jr., "Neihardt and the Western Landscapes," in *A Sender of Words: Essays in Memory of John G. Neihardt*, Deloria, ed. (Salt Lake City: Howe Brothers, 1984), 87.

⁴ Hiram Martin Chittenden, *Early History of Steamboating on the Missouri River: Life and Adventures of Joseph La Barge* (New York: Francis P. Harper, 1903), xii-xiii, 71-140. The University of Minnesota republished Chittenden's book in 1962. I cite both editions here due to slight differences in the text. I note which edition in parenthetical.

that he remembered that the stevedores talked about the glory days of their trade and of “Fort Benton traffic as ‘the mountain trade.’”⁵

Neihardt published *The River and I* two years after he returned from his journey. He filled the book’s pages with idealized men, romanticized history, and sublime nature. During the fur trade, he thought, men acted like men and gained respect with fighting and survival skill. He portrayed the fur trappers and traders of the Upper-Missouri country as superhuman men who performed feats that matched the size and strength of the river. “In the history of the Missouri River there were hundreds of these heroes, these builders of the epic West. Some of them were violent at times; some were good men and some were bad. But they were masterful always. They met obstacles and overcame them. They struck their foes in front. They thirsted in deserts, hungered in the wilderness, froze in the blizzards, died with the plagues, and were massacred by the savages . . . And their pathway to defeat and victory was the Missouri River.” On the river he wrote, “Expanded by the bigness of the empty silent spaces about you . . . you love the great red straining Heart of Man more than you could ever love it at your desk.” Getting away from the confines of the city, work, and family, “What you seek is the end of the rainbow.” Such rewards existed, he assured his readers. “It is in the azure of distance; it is just behind the glow of sunset, and close to the dawn.” No matter how hard one strove to find the answers to life’s mysteries, “The glorious thing about it is that you know you will never find it until you reach that lone, ghostly land where the North Star sets.”⁶

⁵ Neihardt, *River and I* (1927), 29; Neihardt, *River and I*, 33, 60-8, 253; Robert Kelley Schneiders, *Unruly River: Two Centuries of Change along the Missouri River* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999), 81-4.

⁶ Neihardt, *River and I*, 27-9, 130-33.

In *The River and I*, Neihardt depicted himself as a man who flung himself headlong into manly confrontation with nature. In using himself as an example of a modern adventurer, he participated in a larger discussion about the effects of rapid social change on American men. Many Americans at the turn of the twentieth century worried about the social effects of industrialization and shifting gender roles. Unbridled laissez-faire capitalism and the difficulties of life in a competitive society created increasingly perplexing social convulsions.⁷ Efficiency and economies of scale set the stage for integrated corporatization and monopolization of markets. Middle-class entrepreneurs found themselves losing ground to consolidation and incorporation of business. Clergy, middle-class managers, and educated Americans, as well as wealthy elites felt social and institutional foundations shifting beneath them.⁸ Meanwhile, machines made agricultural work less labor intensive and the farm's fruits more abundant, driving farmers and agrarian laborers from the land. Industrialization coupled with rural/urban market integration promoted unplanned urban growth and mass immigration. Native-born landless laborers joined immigrant workers in the nation's urban factories, where scientific management of labor decreased the need for worker skill and sped up industrial production. In quickly developing urban environments, workers lived in squalid and dangerous conditions. Some believed women's suffrage movements and new opportunities for women in the workplace threatened male hegemony in social, political, and economic life. Organized labor and worker unrest eroded confidence in the corporate systems

⁷ Robert H. Wiebe, *The Segmented Society: An Introduction into the Meaning of America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 56-8. For a look into the ways Progressive Era writers created characters who fulfilled proper gender roles, see Mark A. Swiencicki, "Consuming Brotherhood: Men's Culture, Style and Recreation as Consumer Culture, 1880-1930," *Journal of Social History* 31 (Summer 1998): 773-808, esp. 781

⁸ John Whiteclay Chambers, *The Tyranny of Change: America in the Progressive Era, 1900-1920* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 140; William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), 41-54; Gabriel Kolko, *Triumph of Conservatism* (New York: Free Press, 1963), 1-10; David A. Smith, "Owen Wister's Paladin of the Plains: *The Virginian* as a Cultural Hero," *South Dakota History* 38 (Spring 2008): 70-7

that were building a managerial middle-class. While workers struck and farmers revolted, conformist men wondered about the meaning of their working lives.⁹

Discussions over the effects of industrialization on men rested on various assumptions of male positions in society. Rivers, in Neihardt's case, the Missouri River, showed that Americans held a number of ideological notions that activated their interpretations of rivers and the roles they served in reforming American society. At the turn of the century, social, economic, and cultural changes converged on gender understanding among the American middle-class men. Women gained increased power and freedoms in the workplace, home, and social life. Suffrage, increasing women's participation in social and political affairs made male thinkers, writers, and theorists uneasy, and they promoted various ways of reinforcing male gender roles. The increasing power of women did not necessarily result in what many historians of the Progressive Era identified as a "crisis of masculinity."¹⁰ Succeeding generations redefined manhood in ways that served particular needs. While men perceived masculinity as static, progressive thinkers and writers engaged in lively discussions about how to reaffirm manhood. This created an evolving social type that connected anatomy and male identity to hierarchies of authority and power, while gender—that is, being a true

⁹ Jennifer Alexander, "Efficiencies of Balance: Technical Efficiency, Popular Efficiency, and Arbitrary Standards in the Late Progressive Era USA," *Social Studies of Science* 38 (June 2008): 323-49; Stuart M. Blumin, "Driven to the City: Urbanization and Industrialization in the Nineteenth Century," *OAH Magazine of History* 20 (May 2006): 47-53; John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 116-28; Walter Licht, *Industrializing America: The Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1995), 130-65; Melissa Dabakis, "Douglas Tilden's Mechanics Fountain: Labor and the 'Crisis of Masculinity' in the 1890s," *American Quarterly* (June 1995): 204-235, esp. 206-16; Eileen Lorenzi McDonagh, "Representative Democracy and State Building in the Progressive Era," *American Political Science Review* 86 (December 1992): 938-50; David Ward, "The Progressives and the Urban Question: British and American Responses to the Inner City Slums, 1880-1920," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 9 (1984): 299-314. For a skillful analysis of how white, middle-class men viewed suffrage and expanding roles for women in the workplace, see Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Race and Gender in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 5-7, 158-60.

¹⁰ Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 6.

man or true woman—changed through a lively and philosophical process that leaders, writers, and politicians tailored to changing social conditions as Americans sailed into an uncertain future.¹¹

In this light, *The River and I* acted as more than a blustery personal travel narrative. Armed with a progressive's faith in the power of the pen, Neihardt constructed a didactic travelogue that disseminated his "tourist gaze" to fictive travelers. He sought to tell a tale of personal improvement that transmitted conventional philosophies about history, culture, and manhood.¹² With expansive language and a representation of himself as a tough individualist, he cast the river as a natural space relevant to the renewal of manliness and national identity. He portrayed himself in manly confrontation with a unique and American river in exciting, often hyperbolic terms. Describing the river and its landscapes in these ways, he molded particulars of the river environment to stories of heroic men he admired in American history. In crafting his tale, Neihardt built the authoritative voice of the tour guide who knew the river. This guide then escorted his readers through a place of history where men could still prove themselves in contact with nature. Along the way, he instructed men on the river's physical and aesthetic features, as well as its meanings.¹³ He intertwined the physical river as he perceived it, history as he interpreted it, and his experience as a moral story for the modern era. He positioned himself as an example of what contact with the river—and nature as a whole—could accomplish for American men.

¹¹ Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 5-7; Donald K. Meisenheimer, Jr., "Machining the Man: From Neurasthenia to Psychasthenia in Sf (sic) and the Genre Western," *Science Fiction Studies* 24 (November 1997): 442-6.

¹² Jordan Watkins, *American Wests: Three Nineteenth-Century Travel Writers and the Adaptation of a Region* (Master's Thesis, Claremont University, 2009): 9-12.

¹³ John Urry and Jonas Larson, *The Tourist Gaze 3.0* (London: Sage Publications, 2011), 1-6.

Neihardt's Life

John Gneisenau Neihardt's writing career spanned seven decades, and he implemented the Missouri River in his most important published works. He gained his fascination with the river during an upbringing and childhood in the Missouri valley and Great Plains from Illinois to Kansas and Nebraska. He was born in Sharpsburg, Illinois, on Christmas Day, 1881. A year later, his family moved into a sod house in western Kansas and then to Kansas City in 1887 when Neihardt was six. This began what he described in his autobiography *All is But a Beginning*, as the "Golden Age" of his youth. While he remembered this "age" as idyllic, the young Neihardt faced uncertainty during his time in Kansas City that most other people would perceive as hardship. His father bounced from job to job, finally landing a position as conductor with one of Kansas City's streetcar companies. The family moved the family around town several times, renting houses and apartments as need dictated. The Neihardts struggled financially and his mother took in sewing for extra money. As the family bounced around, Neihardt attended different schools, often changing schools during the school year.¹⁴

Regardless of—or perhaps due to—the adversity his family experienced, Neihardt found himself fascinated with the clamor of the city. He ran the city streets after school. The city sat on the south bank of the Missouri River on the eastern end of Kansas farmland and at the borderland between the western prairies and eastern hardwood forest. At the time, Kansas City was an emerging industrial, cosmopolitan town that owed its prosperity and growth to the fertile plains west of the Missouri. Downtown bustled with trade. Rails connected the city

¹⁴ John G. Neihardt, *All is But a Beginning: Youth Remembered, 1881-1901* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), 24.

to Chicago and markets in the East. Western cattlemen shipped their animals to Kansas City on trains and moved through the town's lively stockyards. The city's grain exchange sold Kansas and Oklahoma grain to buyers in national and international markets. The city's great mills and slaughterhouses processed the agricultural bounty of the lower Midwest. By the late 1880s Kansas City had expanded up from the Missouri River banks into the upland forests and onto the prairies beyond and offered all the amenities and distractions of modern city life.¹⁵

During this "Golden Age," Neihardt's father introduced him to nature in a way that the writer remembered and idealized the rest of his life. Whatever the location of the Neihardt home undeveloped land and forest stood nearby. On his days off from work, his father took him for long nature hikes, where Neihardt experienced the tender, contemplative side of his distressed and restless father's personality. Neihardt remembered his father walking with confidence in the woods and identifying plants, trees, and animals.¹⁶ "We climbed rail fences," Neihardt wrote, "splashed across creeks, and sat down at intervals to rest in the green glooms of leafy shade." Walking through the woods one day, the pair found "a hive of wild bees pouring like cold molasses down the side of a tree." On a whim, his father told him to stay put and left him to watch the bees in the seclusion of the forest. When his father returned with a wooden barrel, the two built a "smudgy fire" under the bees and

¹⁵ Neihardt, *All is But a Beginning*, 24-5; Roger Penn Cuff, "Neihardt's Epic of the West," *College English* 9 (November 1947): 69-72; K.C. Olson, "Development of the National Cattle Trade," *Rangelands* 23 (October 2001): 3-6; Griffith Morgan Hopkins, *Atlas of the Environs of Kansas City, in Jackson County, Missouri: From Official Records and Actual Surveys* (Philadelphia: G.M. Hopkins, 1886), 14 pages, Kansas City, Missouri, Public Library, Missouri Valley Room; Russell M. Prescott and John G. Neihardt, "Midwestern Writers: John G. Neihardt," *Prairie Schooner* 1 (July 1927): 217-9; Frank Driggs and Chuck Haddix, *Kansas City Jazz: From Ragtime to Bebop—A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 9-15.

¹⁶ Donald R. Hickey, Susan A Wunder, and John R. Wunder, *Nebraska Moments* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 257-8; Prescott and Neihardt, "Midwestern Writers," 218; John Thomas Richards, *Luminous Sanity: Literary Criticism Written by John G. Neihardt* (Cape Girardeau, MO: Concord Publishing, 1973), 14; Julius T. House, *John G. Neihardt: Man and Poet* (Wayne, NE: F.H. Jones and Son, 1920), 6.

ushered them carefully into the keg. His father carried the barrel back to the Neihardt's "back yard menagerie" under his arm with confidence. The bees joined raccoons, squirrels, pets, and other animals that the family kept behind their houses and apartments.¹⁷

Neihardt's father also took him for long jaunts along the city's waterfront. The first time Neihardt saw the Missouri River, it charged through the city during the spring flood in 1887. With his father at his side, he witnessed the river chew away buildings and carry them downstream like so many suitcases. Neihardt remembered, "This daredevil god-boy sauntered along with a town in its pocket and a steepled church under its arm for a moment's toy." The raging river inspired fear and fascination in the young boy. "There was a dreadful fascination about it—the fascination of all huge and irresistible things."¹⁸ As they stood before the torrent, his father held his son's hand and spoke of how a person could swim across the river. This startling episode displayed his father's strong paternal presence and fearlessness in the face of the destructive river. With a child's view of the world, Neihardt could not imagine a man swimming in the deluge. "Swim across! Why, it took a giant even to talk that way!" He "marvelled (sic) at the magnificence of being a full grown man, unafraid of big rivers." He wrote that his father seemed "as tall as Alexander—and quite as courageous. He seemed to fear it almost not at all. And I should have felt little surprise had he taken me in his arms and stepped easily over that mile or so of liquid madness."¹⁹

¹⁷ Neihardt, *All is But a Beginning*, 25, 43.

¹⁸ Neihardt, *All is But a Beginning*, 26-7, 40-1; Neihardt, *River and I*, 4; Prescott and Neihardt, "Midwestern Writers," 218; Nelson F. Adkins, "A Study of John G. Neihardt's 'Song of Three Friends,'" *American Speech* 3 (April 1928): 277; Blair Whitney, *John G. Neihardt* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1976), 83-5.

¹⁹ Neihardt, *All is But a Beginning*, 80-85; Lucille F. Aly, *John G. Neihardt*, Boise State University Western Writers Series, 25 (Boise: Boise State University Press, 1976), 5-6.

The event impressed Neihardt, and he believed that the episode affected his view of the river and its place in human society. The flood and his father's steadiness likely also influenced his perspective on his time in Kansas City and his effort to gain some meaning from the turmoil of his young life. "It was not without good reason," he wrote, "that a friendly critic commenting on *The River and I*, referred to 'that very natural love affair between Neihardt and the River.'"²⁰ In nature, his father revealed an inner complexity and distance that Neihardt never penetrated. He stated that his father "was a silent mystery, full of surprises. Anything might happen with him."²¹ And it did. After just a few years in Kansas City, his father suddenly left the family and sent them on a longer journey that formed Neihardt as a writer and thinker.²² The day at the river, however, seemed to obliterate his father's feckless disregard of his family. The river crashed, the boy cowered, and the father stood fast, an indefatigable paternal figure that haunted Neihardt throughout his writing career.

In 1892, his mother moved Neihardt and his siblings to Wayne, Nebraska, and took up residence in a small sod house with her parents.²³ That summer, at age eleven, he fell sick with a severe fever. During the illness, he experienced what he called recurring vision.²⁴ He felt that the illness released him from his body. He flew "face downwards, with arms and hands thrust forward like a diver's." Some strange power transported him high above the

²⁰ Neihardt, *River and I*, 4; Deloria, "Western Landscapes," 60-3; Helen Stauffer, "Neihardt's Journey on the Missouri," in *A Sender of Words*, 87-8; Aly, *John G. Neihardt*, 10.

²¹ Neihardt, *All is But a Beginning*, 25.

²² Frank Waters, "Neihardt and the Vision of Black Elk," in *A Sender of Words*, 15; Timothy G. Anderson, "Memorializing a Mountain Man: John G. Neihardt, Doane Robinson, and Jedediah Smith," *South Dakota History* 39 (Spring 2009): 1-26.

²³ Neihardt, *All is But a Beginning*, 37-43; Whitney, *Neihardt*, 16.

²⁴ Neihardt, *All is But a Beginning*, vii.

earth, and he experienced “a vastness—terribly empty—save for a few lost stars, too dim and wearily remote ever to be reached.” He traveled at “a speed so great that whatever lay beneath me—whether air or ether—turned hard and slick as glass.” He wanted to go home but “a great voice filled the hollow vastness and drove me on. There was something to leave behind, something yonder to be overtaken.”²⁵ After this Superman-like episode, Neihardt claimed spiritual experience followed, after which he became a seeker of transcendent truths. He believed the incident gave him a responsibility to show life’s deeper realities—whatever they may have been—to others around him. The river, he believed, best disclosed the link he felt between nature and human life. Through his career, he set the river and its valley at the center of his efforts to communicate this connection.²⁶

Neihardt worked ceaselessly with his creative and intellectual pursuits. At thirteen, while living in Wayne, he enrolled at Nebraska Normal College, an institution that trained teachers (and would later become Wayne State University). He read widely. Classical literature, particularly the *Aeneid* and *Iliad*, obsessed him. He found Greek and Roman heroes noble, and he made frequent connections between them and what he deemed honorable about the American frontiersmen. He finished his studies at fifteen in 1896. Without money to attend Nebraska State University (now the University of Nebraska) in Lincoln, he moved to Omaha, where he worked for the *Omaha Daily News* for about two months.²⁷ A short time later, he moved to Bancroft, located in eastern Nebraska about halfway between Omaha and South Sioux City. In 1903, he took over as editor of Bancroft’s weekly newspaper, *The Blade*. Though he quit the paper two years later, he continued to live

²⁵ Neihardt, *All is But a Beginning*, 48; Waters, “Neihardt and the Vision of Black Elk,” 14-7.

²⁶ Richards, *Luminous Sanity*, 1-2.

²⁷ Richards, *Luminous Sanity*, 3.

in Bancroft, about ten miles west of the Omaha and Winnebago Indian reservations, until 1920. He worked in a restaurant on the Omaha Indian Reservation, a job he quit after his former editor, a customer, insulted him tableside. He then went to work as a clerk with an Indian trader who did business with the Omahas. This experience influenced his literary work and, particularly, his greatest and most well-known book, *Black Elk Speaks*.²⁸

During his years in Bancroft, he began his literary career in earnest. In 1900 at age 19, he published his first book, *The Divine Enchantment*, poetic meditation on mystical religion, Eastern thought, and poetic philosophy. While working at *The Blade*, he gained a reputation publishing short stories and poems in a number of national magazines, including *American Magazine*, *The Smart Set*, and *Outing*. In 1907, his short stories appeared in book form in *The Lonesome Trail*. That same year, his first anthology of poetry, *A Bundle of Myrrh*, received positive reviews. The book caught the attention of sculptor and student of Auguste Rodin, Mona Mortensen. Daughter of president of the Missouri, Kansas, and Texas Railroad, she received private, formal education in art and literature. She began writing the young poet in 1907, a correspondence that resulted in a serious relationship. The two were married in 1908 and would remain together until Mona's death in 1958.²⁹

By the time *Outing Magazine* editor Caspar Whitney commissioned Neihardt to write about a trip down the Missouri River 1908, Neihardt was making his living as a working writer, journalist, and book reviewer. From 1909 until 1922, he worked as literary editor for the Minneapolis *Journal* reading upwards of ten books and writing at least five reviews a week. He also penned reviews for the *New York Review of Books* and other national

²⁸ Lucile F. Aly, "Trappers and Indians—Neihardt's Short Stories," in *A Sender of Words*, 74-6; Richards, *Luminous Sanity*, 5; Whitney, *Neihardt*, 19-62.

²⁹ Richards, *Luminous Sanity*, 7; Whitney, *Neihardt*, 80-5; Stauffer, "Neihardt's Journey on the Missouri," in *A Sender of Words*, 59-61. See also, Waters, "Neihardt and the Vision of Black Elk."

magazines, including *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper's*.³⁰ After he returned from his Missouri River journey, he began what he considered his masterwork, *A Cycle of the West*, a series of five epic poems that together formed a sweeping saga of western history from the 1820s to the end of the Indian Wars in 1890. Over the next thirty-five years, he published the *Cycle's* poems as he completed them. Each book earned solid reviews but brought limited financial success.³¹ The Poetry Society of America, based in New York City, granted *The Song of Three Friends*, the second volume of the *Cycle*, the prize for best book of poetry published in 1919. In 1921, the Nebraska legislature awarded him the office of Nebraska Poet Laureate for his literary achievements.³² During the 1930s, he worked as literary editor of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. He also sold poems and commentary to newspapers around the nation. With release of the completed *Cycle* in 1943, Neihardt gained a broader reading public that supported him financially through the 1940s.

Neihardt, The River and I, and Black Elk Speaks

By the end of the 1940s, Neihardt's career flagged and he took a position teaching poetry at the University of Missouri in Columbia in 1949. In the early 1960s, however, a confluence of social developments reignited Neihardt's literary career. In 1961, the University of Nebraska's Bison Books published a paperback edition of *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux*. In the late-1920s, Neihardt made the

³⁰ Dennis R. Hoilman, *Twentieth-Century American Western Writers, Third Series*, Richard H. Cracroft, ed. (Detroit: Gale, 2002), 219-228, esp. 220.

³¹ Helen Stauffer, "Two Authors And A Hero: Neihardt, Sandoz, and Crazy Horse," *Great Plains Quarterly* 1 (Winter 1981): 55-6.

³² Fred B. Millett, *Contemporary American Authors: A Critical Survey* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1943), 140, 510-12.

acquaintance of Lakota medicine man Nicholas Black Elk on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation while researching the Ghost Dance for *Cycle of the West*. After a long series of interviews, Neihardt wrote the book as Black Elk's personal recollection of his people's history from the Indian Wars to the massacre of Bigfoot's band of Lakotas at Wounded Knee in 1890. The New York publisher, William Morrow and Company, first released the book in 1932 to favorable reviews. Within two years, however, Morrow remaindered the first edition. For three decades, American literary scholars, ethnographers, and a small but devoted public kept the book on library shelves. During the 1960s, *Black Elk Speaks* found an enthusiastic audience of counterculture-influenced young Americans looking for alternatives to consumer and industrial culture. With this new attention, he promoted himself as a poet who interpreted religion, social relations, and aesthetics. Such self-definition gained him and his work further legitimacy with a younger generation of readers.³³

The popularity of *Black Elk Speaks* dovetailed with increasing academic and popular interest in Native American studies. After the Bison Books release, American Indian scholars and ethnographers used the book extensively in their work, considering it an authentic representation of Plains Indians life and religion.³⁴ Later, in the 1970s, academics, Native American authors, and media commentators questioned the authenticity of the text, the voice of its author, and the authority of Nicholas Black Elk as a representative of nineteenth century Plains Indians culture. Anthropologist Raymond DeMallie doubted the book's

³³ Lucille F. Aly, *John G. Neihardt: A Critical Biography* (Amsterdam: Rodolphi, 1977), 69; Aly, *Neihardt*, 20-22; Philip P. Arnold, "Black Elk and Book Culture," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 67 (March 1999): 86-111, esp. 90-5. Neihardt also promoted himself as a mystic and even dabbled in psychic phenomenon, exploring the possibilities of telekinesis and extra-sensory perception. See, John Thomas Richards, "SORRAT: A Brief Overview," *Journal of Spirituality and Paranormal Studies* 35 (October 2012): 212-16. See also, Stauffer, "Two Authors And A Hero": 54-66

³⁴ Hoilman, *Twentieth-Century American Western Writers*, 221; Michael E. Staub, "(Re)Collecting the Past: Writing Native American Speech," *American Quarterly* 43 (September 1991): 425-56.

validity as a transcript of conversations between Black Elk and Neihardt. Black Elk spoke only Lakota and Neihardt only English.³⁵ In comparing Neihardt's original notes with the published work, DeMallie showed that Neihardt left out important details and transliterated, even fabricated parts of Black Elk's story to advance the narrative. For instance, Neihardt intentionally ignored forty years of Black Elk's life from 1890 to 1930, a time during which Black Elk abandoned Native American religion and converted to Catholicism. Deletions of such important details, DeMallie argued, colored the meaning of Black Elk's narrative and obscured the medicine man's own messages.³⁶ *Black Elk Speaks* also generated ongoing interest as academics realigned their views of early-to mid-twentieth century Native American ethnographies. While Neihardt wrote the book as an expression of his reverence for Indians and their lives, scholars maintained that the book formed more an elegy for Native American life than a faithful ethnology of Indian ways. It resembled the melancholy efforts of photographer Edward S. Curtis, and painters Frederic Remington and Charles M. Russell to capture aspects of a noble civilization before it disappeared. Native American Studies scholar Thomas G. Cousser and philosopher of religion Clyde Holler suspected Neihardt's personal motivations and linked *Black Elk Speaks* with Neihardt's career aspirations. Cousser criticized Neihardt's interviewing method and lack of attention to his own cultural assumptions as he wrote the text.³⁷ Holler went further and argued that the message and voice of *Black Elk Speaks* was not that of the medicine man but of Neihardt

³⁵ Raymond J. DeMallie, "John Neihardt's Lakota Legacy," in *A Sender of Words*, 110-34; Jennifer Morrison Folkers, *Black Elk Speaks (and so does John Neihardt): An Intercultural Relationship* (Master's Thesis, College of St. Benedict/St. John's University, 1994), 3-6.

³⁶ DeMallie, "John G. Neihardt and Nicholas Black Elk," in *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux*, DeMallie, ed. (Albany, SUNY Press, 2008), 289-315, esp. 294-6; DeMallie, "Black Elk in the Twenty-First Century," *Ethnohistory* Volume 53, (June 2006): 595-601.

³⁷ Thomas G. Cousser, "Black Elk Speaks with Forked Tongue," in *Studies in Autobiography*, James Olney, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 84.

himself.³⁸ Cousser and other scholars also investigated what Black Elk's words gained or lost in the cross-cultural interchange between the two men.³⁹ Other critics contended that Neihardt's work with Black Elk embodied a larger literary trend in cultural imperialism of the 1930s in which white Americans dictated the terms of being Indian. Neihardt represented the dominant culture, they contended, and coopted Native American culture for public consumption.⁴⁰

Despite this, *Black Elk Speaks* remained academically and culturally significant into the 2000s. Native American scholar Carl Silvio maintained *Black Elk Speaks* reserved a place in the canon of American literature due to the ongoing attention the public and scholars gave it.⁴¹ DeMallie himself called the book a "masterpiece of translating Lakota culture, in its own context, into terms understandable by readers of any culture." Native American authors and commentators gave the work further traction among native audiences. Historian Vine Deloria Jr. wrote that, in his estimation, *Black Elk Speaks* was a masterpiece "of the literature on Indians, the standard by which other efforts to tell the Indian story is judged." Native American author N. Scott Momaday stated that Neihardt "made the gift of another man's voice, and he allows us to hear it distinctly, in the full realization of its meaning."⁴²

³⁸ Clyde Holler, "Lakota Religion and Tragedy: The Theology of 'Black Elk Speaks'" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 52 (March 1984): 19-45, esp. 20-1.

³⁹ Thomas G. Cousser, "Black Elk Speaks Again: Self-representation in Contemporary Native American Autobiography," *Auto-Biography Studies* (1991): 273-91.

⁴⁰ Sally McCluskey, "Black Elk speaks and so does John G. Neihardt," *Western American Literature* 6 (1972): 231; Folkers, *Black Elk Speaks*, 14-6; William Powers, "When Black Elk Speaks, Everybody Listens," *Social Text* 24 (1990): 43-56, esp. 54-6.

⁴¹ Carl Silvio, "*Black Elk Speaks* and Literary Disciplinary: A Case Study in Canonization," *College Literature* 26 (Spring 1999): 137-150, esp. 148-50.

⁴² Whitney, *Neihardt*, 3, 37-8.

From 1961 forward, Neihardt and his publishers made the most of *Black Elk Speaks*. The book focused attention on his more obscure works. *Black Elk Speaks*' popularity prompted the University of Nebraska Press' re-publication of *The River and I* in 1968. This brought Neihardt's earliest significant prose book back into the public eye.⁴³ Both books showed a writer looking at the past through the lenses of nostalgia and wonder, searching for simplistic answers to complex social problems. While Neihardt made a sincere effort to portray Black Elk truthfully, he never penetrated his own ideas of Native Americans' place in American history. He assumed that Native Americans were a gallant, noble people who possessed deep reverence for tradition and community.⁴⁴ In *The River and I*, he placed himself and the river into the larger scope of American history and values of hard work, perseverance, and determination. He depicted mountain men, fur traders, and steamboat captains as men who dominated the environment with ingenuity, persistence, and pluck. He held them up as examples of ambition and bravery, "the stern hard stuff with which you build and keep your empires." They met their foes face to face, and did not shrink from trials that men and nature threw in their paths. In opening the West to settlement and capitalist enterprise, he believed, fur trappers and rivermen demonstrated the superiority of their society, race, and their own worth.⁴⁵

The Missouri River, Manhood, and Empire

⁴³ Hoilman, *Twentieth-Century American Western Writers*, 219-21.

⁴⁴ Neihardt, *River and I*, 87; McCluskey, "Black Elk Speaks," 238-40.

⁴⁵ Adam Rome, "Nature Wars, Culture Wars: Immigration and Environmental Reform in the Progressive Era," *Environmental History* 13 (July 2008): 432-53, esp. 432-4; See also, Sally Gregory Kohlstedt, "Nature, Not Books: Scientists and the Origins of the Nature-Study Movement in the 1890s," *Isis* 96 (September 2005): 324-352.

Before 1908, Neihardt was just making a name for himself as a writer. *Outing Magazine* editor Caspar Whitney, a famed hunter, explorer and journalist who promoted outdoor activity for young men, commissioned Neihardt for stories that showcased the American environment and manly struggle in nature. Whitney owned *Outing* with a group of affluent hunters and outdoor enthusiasts. He knew Neihardt's previous work and keenness for the outdoors. Outing Publishing, the magazine's book imprint, published a book of Neihardt's poetry, *A Bundle of Myrrh*, to critical acclaim in 1907.⁴⁶ Neihardt possessed a growing reputation in several genres, including poetry and short stories. Whitney knew Neihardt's name in the pages of *Outing* would benefit the magazine.⁴⁷ At the time, Whitney was struggling to keep his publication afloat in the growing and increasingly competitive market in men's magazines that emphasized the outdoor life, athletics, and exercise.⁴⁸ From 1906 through 1908, his investors plowed money into the magazine. Whitney sank his savings, borrowed money, and proceeds from a pawned life insurance policy into the magazine's operations. These efforts failed, and Whitney sold *Outing* in late 1908. But he did not abandon Neihardt. He used his New York magazine connections on Neihardt's behalf. The eight Missouri River stories Neihardt penned for Whitney appeared in 1909 in *Putnam's*

⁴⁶ Anderson, ed., *River and I* (1997), viii.

⁴⁷ "This month in McClure's," *Arizona Republican* (Phoenix), February 26, 1908: 8; "June Edition, *The Smart Set*," *Shiner* (Texas) *Gazette*, May 30, 1907: 1; *American Magazine* advertisement, *Salt Lake Herald*, April 28, 1907: 5.

⁴⁸ E. Anthony Rotundo, "Body and Soul: Changing Ideals of American Middle-Class Manhood, 1770-1920," *Journal of Social History* 16 (Summer 1983): 23-38, esp. 28-9; Andrea L. Smalley, "'Our Lady Sportsmen': Gender Class, and Conservation in Sport Hunting Magazines, 1873-1920," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 4 (October 2005): 355-80, esp. 355-6.

Magazine, a periodical of the famed New York publishers, G.G. Putnam and Sons.⁴⁹ Putnam published the edited stories the following year in *The River and I*.

In the river journey stories *Putnam's* published and, later, in *The River and I*, Neihardt portrayed himself in an undertaking seemingly beyond his ability.⁵⁰ He intended to write about a ten-day trip to Sioux City. A two-hundred-mile-a-day race downstream, however, served the purposes of his stories less than the story of a man who struggled against a larger-than-life river. He detailed one adversity after another. Menacing clouds of mosquitoes and flies swarmed Neihardt's expedition. The river swept him into sudden thunderstorms, complete with lightning, hail, and blinding downpours. Rapids upset the *Atom* and threatened to end the trip. Wind shut him down and pushed him back upstream. Even in rest, he wrote, the river opposed him. His morale waned on long stretches in eastern Montana and the Dakotas when the river slowed and impeded his forward progress. Heat baked him. He suffered stinging sunburns and dehydration. Boredom took hold of him.⁵¹ In the end, he weathered all tribulations, and in doing so, proved his manhood, courage, and persistence.

Neihardt's *The River and I* reflected a larger American reassessment of men's roles in a swiftly changing society. At the turn of the twentieth century, white middle-class men found themselves in the confluence of declining status and increased agitation on the part of women in temperance and suffrage movements. Reformers, clergy, and writers sought to reinforce traditional male gender roles as men found themselves facing new social

⁴⁹ Anderson, "Memorializing a Mountain Man," 1-26, see endnote 3; "Caspar Whitney Bankrupt," *New York Times*, September 15, 1910: 1.

⁵⁰ Neihardt, *River and I* (1997), viii.

⁵¹ Neihardt, *River and I*, 14-9.

circumstances.⁵² Some, such as Rev. William Crosswell Doane, social commentator and Episcopal bishop of Albany, New York, believed that American women's suffrage undermined religiously ordained roles for men and women. He wrote that suffragists formed a "class which includes members of both sexes, with whom one cannot deal without sacrificing self-respect or reverence, who revile all that one holds in holiest veneration, Holy Scripture, holy Matrimony, St. Paul, even our dear Lord Himself." Activist women and the men who supported them formed an unholy alliance against American morality. That men even joined women in iconoclastic women's rights campaigns, he believed, indicated how modern society corrupted the male gender and endangered white, Protestant male supremacy. Women taking greater roles in everyday life wrought "utter confusion in the minds of men between questions which involve eternal principles of right, truth, morality, righteousness, manhood, citizenship, statesmanship, and the law of God."⁵³

Unlike Doane, who connected manhood to God's intentions, Neihardt linked the ideal gendered male with the good, strong, virile manhood he believed necessary to America's future. In *The River and I*, Neihardt admired and even worshiped the men of the American frontier. They fought like men and acted like savages when their interests were at stake. Regardless of their amoral behavior, he admired them because they lived and died like heroes. Neihardt wrote that fur trader Alexander Harvey made "Aeneas look like a degenerate."⁵⁴ Charles Larpenteur, who had served as a factor and clerk in the Upper

⁵² Stephen H. Norwood, "The Student as Strikebreaker: College Youth and the Crisis of Masculinity in the Early Twentieth Century," *Journal of Social History* 28 (Winter 1994): 336-7.

⁵³ William Crosswell Doane, "Why Women Do Not Want the Ballot (1895)," *North American Review* 272 (September 1897), 49-52, esp. 49; Doane and Willard F. Mallalieu, "Politics and the Pulpit," *North American Review* 155, (July 1892), 41-52, esp. 42; See also, John P. Herron, *Science and the Social Good: Nature, Culture, and Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 21.

⁵⁴ Neihardt, *River and I*, 24.

Missouri fur trade, called Harvey, “wicked and troublesome.” Larpenteur reported that Harvey killed Indians for sport and out of anger shot at least one fur trader in the head.⁵⁵ His outrages were so egregious that Pierre Chouteau, Jr. fired him from Pierre Chouteau & Co. in the winter of 1840. On receiving the news, Harvey left Fort Union, on the border of present-day Montana and North Dakota, to confront Chouteau in St. Louis and get his job back. Unable to use a frozen river for transport, he walked the 2,500 miles to St. Louis in less than three months. Admiring Harvey’s determination, Choteau rehired him, and Harvey returned to Montana and resumed his work—and his moral outrages. In nineteenth century St. Louis, he was a “larger-than-life folk hero who personified the harshness of the fur trade.”⁵⁶ In Neihardt’s view, men—from Lewis and Clark to the last of the riverboat captains—set in motion processes through which the Republic grew economically and expanded territorially. American Fur Company founder John Jacob Astor, he wrote, built the empire in which the lesser traders operated. The men who survived and flourished in nature proved themselves as men and embodied the noble achievements of the American culture.⁵⁷ Fur trappers, rivermen, and nameless laborers confronted nature and made their livings from it. Their hard work, character, and determination, he wrote, opened new territory and pulled the nation westward. Their struggle revealed the attributes of an evolving democratic society where one either showed the vision and persistence to survive (and survive well) or not.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Charles Larpenteur, *Forty Years a Fur Trader on the Upper Missouri: The Personal Narrative of Charles Larpenteur, 1833-1872* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 167-71.

⁵⁶ William E. Lass, *Navigating the Missouri: Steamboating on Nature’s Highway, 1819-1935* (Norman, OK: Arthur H. Clark Co., 2008), 147-8; Charles M. Russell, *Backtrailing on the Old Frontier* (Great Falls: Cheely-Raban Syndicate, 1922), 16-9, 147-8.

⁵⁷ Neihardt, *Hugh Glass*, v-viii.

⁵⁸ White, *Organic Machine*, x.

At the time, Theodore Dreiser, Jack London, and Frank Norris wrote stories of men that either adapted to new situations and retained their manly respect or dribbled away, emasculated and worthy of approbation. The strong male character in a Jack London or Frank Norris story succeeded or failed depending on his ability to adapt, react, and think in times of stress—even take on, when necessary, female characteristics.⁵⁹ Neihardt’s characters, on the other hand, gained their right to superior places in social and gender hierarchies with mighty, even heroic struggle in nature. He celebrated explorers, fur trappers, and Indians who engaged in rugged and often bloody contact with their human, animal, and environmental opponents. They fought, killed, and traded according to a moral system based on raw strength and courage. “What *males* those cordelle men were—what *stayers!*” he wrote of the men who once hauled keelboats upstream. “Fed on wild, red meat, lean and round of waist, thick of chest, thewed for going on to the finish . . . They did it because they were that sort of men, and had to express themselves. Everything worth while is done that way.” Society still bred those men, he wrote. Modern American males need only find their “keelboats or their equivalent.”⁶⁰ That the river passed into commercial irrelevance by the turn of the twentieth century did not end its potential as a proving ground for manliness. One *New York Times* reviewer called *The River and I* “rough because the voyage that the author

⁵⁹ American literary realists portrayed notions of manliness in complicated, often contradictory ways. For an overview, see Bert Bender, “Frank Norris on the Evolution and Repression of the Sexual Instinct,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 54 (June 1999): 73-103; Christophe Den Tandt, “Amazons and Androgynes: Overcivilization and the Redefinition of Gender Roles at the Turn of the Century,” *American Literary History* 8 (Winter 1996): 639-664; John Dudley, “‘Subtle Brotherhood’ in Stephen Crane’s ‘Tales of Adventure’: Alienation, Anxiety, and the Rites of Manhood,” *American Literary Realism* 34 (Winter 2002): 95-118.

⁶⁰ Neihardt, *River and I* (1910), 1-3, 66-7

describes it rough, and it is meant for those to whom the light of a campfire is bliss, to whom to sleep rough means to sleep well.”⁶¹

This kind of manly message appealed to *Outing*'s male readers. As gender took on different meanings at the turn of the century, travel narratives appeared in book and magazine articles that editors and publishers targeted at separate male and female audiences. Gendered travel narratives in women's magazines and books supported changing roles for women in society, particularly with the rise of the prohibition movement, women's suffrage, and new opportunities for women in the workplace. Women's travel clubs throughout the United States encouraged reading stories that featured new, more independent American females who traipsed through foreign lands and mountains of the American West. Male authors positioned themselves and their stories in juxtaposition to threats to male power in politics, work, and family.⁶² While women's travel writing supported new forms of female power, travel writing for male audiences often reinforced American exceptionalism in a time of growing international trade and mass immigration. Strong men counteracted the detrimental influences of foreign immigration and defended home from deleterious effects of rampant materialism. Men's magazines like *Outing*, *Putnam's*, and *Forest and Stream* featured stories that bolstered ideas of male power in traditional leadership and breadwinning roles, or in their abilities to adapt to a changing world on their own terms. Women graced the pages of these magazines, but almost always in domestic roles in the camp, beside men on game hunting expeditions, and in support of men traveling in exotic environments and among strange, foreign peoples. Even if women took part in the hunt, their role was that of

⁶¹ Neihardt, *River and I*, 87-9; “The River and the Poet: Mr. Neihardt Describes a Journey of Several Thousand Miles Down the Missouri,” *New York Times*, May 14, 1911: BR297.

⁶² Elizabeth Long, “Literature as a Spur to Collective Action: The Diverse Perspectives of Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Reading Groups,” *Poetics Today* 25 (Summer 2004), 335-59.

companion to the paternal male. They kept house, softened the rough edges of outdoor life, and made camp less dreary.⁶³

Neihardt's Missouri River stories fit the market. Every episode in *The River and I* instructed his readers on the male code of honor, self-respect, and manly pursuit in nature. He set off with two companions, Bill and the Kid, who played very minor roles in the tale. They depended on an outboard motor for the trip to Sioux City. But the smoky motor failed them almost from the start and quit completely within a few days of their departure. For the next two months, they overcame difficult physical and mental obstacles with male strength, bullet, and knife. They fashioned oars from planks and in favorable conditions raised a sail made from a blanket. Neihardt and his companions depended on game for part of their diet. They hunted and finding no game, they held out and starved. Just when his companions gave up hope and lit out for the nearest town, Neihardt spied a deer at some distance. He shot straight, butchered with confidence, and demonstrated to his readers, and presumably his mates, his manliness. He also used the character of Bill as a foil that demonstrated the humiliation that emasculated, effeminate male faced in rough nature. Bill whined about heat and hunger. He couldn't sleep, complained of cold, and often did not pull his share of the load. When Bill decided to leave the expedition at Fort Union in western Montana, Neihardt wrote he was glad to be rid of "impedimentia" to his journey.⁶⁴

Neihardt also used masculinity in *The River and I* to express the imperial significance of the West and the river. Neihardt's Missouri heroes conquered the river and the people of

⁶³ Kristin Hoganson, *Consumers' Imperium: The Global Projection of American Domesticity, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 3-4 155-58; Smalley, "Our Lady Sportsmen," 367-8; See also, Ian Tyrrell, "American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History," *American Historical Review* 96 (October 1991): 1031-55.

⁶⁴ Neihardt, *River and I*, 114, 297-300.

the territory around it. He referred to the river as an “imperial road” upon which heroes travelled.⁶⁵ “Though it was not called such,” he wrote, “all the blank space of the map of the Missouri River country and even to the Pacific, was one vast empire—the empire of the American Fur Company.” Astor, Neihardt wrote, “spoke the words that filled the wilderness with deeds.” American Fur Company outposts “were the ganglia of that tremendous organism of which Astor was the brain.” Astor and other great entrepreneurs “flung the trappers, their subjects, into the wilderness.” Great men employed ordinary American men in positions from trading post factors to the “big men, bearded and powerful, pushing up stream with the cordelle on their shoulders” and the lowliest voyageur “chanting at the paddles.”⁶⁶ Easterners gambled fortunes in the gold and fur markets. The improvement of a great civilization demanded losers, those characters that nature, competitors, and Indians crushed, killed, or sent home.⁶⁷

Ideas of empire preoccupied many progressives at the turn of the century. Reformers sought to reaffirm manhood as an integral component of a new, uniquely American kind of overseas domain. Believing that military duty and war counteracted the softening of body and character that came with steady, routine work, Roosevelt engaged in military adventurism during the Spanish-American War. While the aging Roosevelt sought to reaffirm his own standing and reputation (he was forty-one at the beginning of the war), he

⁶⁵ Neihardt, *Hugh Glass*, vii.

⁶⁶ Neihardt, *River and I*, 32; Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1921), 143-4.

⁶⁷ Nicolaas Mink, “A Narrative for Nature's Nation: Constance Lindsay Skinner and the Making of Rivers of America,” *Environmental History* 11 (October 2006): 764-5.

also held himself up as an example for men in trying times.⁶⁸ At the same time, jingoists cheered as the nation's military forces smashed old-world, Spanish colonialism in Cuba and proceeded to uplift what they perceived as a benighted, child-like population. Advocates of scientific management celebrated the building of the Panama Canal—by a racially segregated labor force under Anglo-Saxon supervision—as a grand technological achievement. Progressive presidents from Roosevelt to Woodrow Wilson dispatched U.S. marines accompanied by experts in the manly science of economics to enforce financial discipline on debt-ridden dependencies. Half a world away, American officials in the Philippines aligned with local elites to prepare their little brown brothers for a democratic, capitalist future. Despite the rhetoric of American exceptionalism, the new imperial project extended beyond the continental United States the same empire that had extinguished or displaced America's indigenous people, enslaved people of color to grow cotton on an expanding frontier, and wrested one-half of Mexico's national domain by force.⁶⁹

Neihardt wrote of his manly fur trappers and his connections to them at a time when men like Roosevelt feared that routine work, petty consumerism, and increasing parity with women feminized American men, lowering their status and making them into milquetoast

⁶⁸ Kathleen Dalton, "Finding Theodore Roosevelt: A Personal and Political Story," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 6 (October 2007): 363-83, esp. 378-9; Dalton, *Theodore Roosevelt: A Strenuous Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 186; Lars Schoultz, "Blessings of Liberty: The United States and the Promotion of Democracy in Cuba," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 34 (May 2002): 397-425, esp. 399-403.

⁶⁹ Amy Greenberg, *A Wicked War: Polk, Clay, Lincoln, and the 1846 Invasion of Mexico* (New York: Knopf, 2012); Julie Greene, *The Canal Builders: Making America's Empire at the Panama Canal* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009), 7-10; Kristin Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 7-13; Paul Kramer, *The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, The United States, and the Philippines* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 1-6; Emily S. Rosenberg, *Financial Missionaries to the World: The Politics and Culture of Dollar Diplomacy, 1900-1930* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 2-12.

companions in the home.⁷⁰ Such a state of affairs dealt blows to the traditional family and set the stage for national decline. The Spanish-American War and overseas interventionism grew out of gender politics that stirred the United States in the Gilded Age. Militarism served as a way of asserting male power in a time of changing gender roles. With women gaining influence in American society through the vote and new roles in the home, men had to take more, be more, live larger—but, at the same time, understand their duties at home. “No country can long endure,” Roosevelt said to the Hamilton Club, “if its foundations are not laid deep in the material prosperity which comes from thrift, from business energy and enterprise, from hard, unsparing effort in the fields of industrial activity.”⁷¹ If due to age, business, or family circumstances, men could not bring American democracy to the people of Central and South American, as well as those of Asia and the Pacific, they could still do their part. They could meet their call with industrial and moral support for those fighting to expand American power overseas. In addition, he believed that men at home should assert their power in strenuous activity and contribution to ordered society.⁷²

Caspar Whitney, like Roosevelt, philosopher and psychologist William James, and Jack London extolled the virtues of the strong, white male engaged in strenuous activity.⁷³ An adventurer, Whitney wrote of rough encounters with nature, from snowshoeing in the Arctic to chopping through East Asian jungles. In one of most famous books, *The Flowing*

⁷⁰ William Cronon, “Revisiting the Vanishing Frontier: The Legacy of Frederick Jackson Turner,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 18 (April 1987): 159-66; T.R.C. Hutton, “Beating a Dead Horse: The Continuing Presence of Frederick Jackson Turner in Environmental and Western History,” *International Social Science Review* 77 (January 2002): 47-57.

⁷¹ Theodore Roosevelt, *The Strenuous Life: Essays and Addresses* (New York: The Century Co., 1900), 1

⁷² Amy S. Greenberg, “A Gray-Eyed Man: Character, Appearance, and Filibustering,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 20 (Winter 2000): 673-99; Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood*, 1-12; 34-44.

⁷³ Andrew J. Furer, “‘I Fear the War Business Is Getting Rather Tuckered’: The Uses of War in Stephen Crane’s ‘Active Service,’” *American Literary Realism* 33 (Fall 2000): 22.

Road, Whitney chronicled several trips he took from 1902 to 1910 in South America. These journeys took place mostly on rivers—notable among them were the tributaries and mainstems of the Amazon, Orinoco, and Rio Negro. The trips, he wrote in the foreword of *The Flowing Road*, were not for reporting on the natives or to hunt exotic animals. He undertook his travels “solely to satisfy the horizon hunger which incites me every now and then to go and ‘see things.’”⁷⁴ Similarly, he wrote in the foreword to *Jungle Trails and Jungle People*, his “underlying motive” for taking the trip was to show the “flight of a spirit that would be free from the crying newsboys and the pressure of conventions; in a word—the lust of adventure.” He traveled “at will, by my own exertions, and unchaperoned.” In *A Sporting Pilgrimage*, he offered average, domestic men an alternative to overseas travel. He went to England to experience the democratic “sportingness” of the British. His mission, he wrote, was to report on the British “traditions and systems” of sport to his American readers. That the British also possessed the world’s largest empire must have interested Whitney, since he believed Americans could learn something from them. He wrote, “The average Britisher is an athlete, the English nation an athletic one, and its subjects, both men and women, more universally and genuinely imbued with the spirit than those of any other race on earth.” Using himself and his observations for authority, Whitney sought to demonstrate the joys and physical exertions of organized sport or outdoor adventure. He reasoned that American men had been “too thoroughly occupied with building up a great nation” to pay much attention to

⁷⁴ Caspar Whitney, *The Flowing Road: Adventuring on the Great Rivers of South America* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1912), 3-9.

sport as a release from tedium and teacher of competitive values. "Sport" he wrote, "makes manly boys and gentle men; puts pluck in the heart and strength in the body."⁷⁵

Whitney served as a war correspondent for *Harper's* from 1890-99. He won wide acclaim in 1898 with his coverage of the Rough Riders' Santiago campaign in Cuba.⁷⁶

Whitney and Roosevelt became close personal acquaintances after the war. They shared a belief in the benefits of the "strenuous life" and its therapeutic effect on the American male creature. Strenuous living, they believed, gave middle-class men self-confidence, and physical and moral strength.⁷⁷ In this conception of male achievement, physical challenge strengthened the individual male and reaffirmed his place of leadership in modern society. While Roosevelt fought wars and safaried, Whitney chopped his way through jungles and advocated competitive sport. In the meantime, Neihardt set himself up as an example of a man who overcame challenges and delighted in his accomplishments on a uniquely American river. In showcasing his travails and successes, he positioned his tale within the "strenuous living" ideal that Roosevelt advocated.⁷⁸ As Neihardt's editor, Whitney influenced Neihardt's

⁷⁵ Kohlstedt, "Nature, Not Books," 324-352, esp. 330-4, 349-52; Caspar Whitney, *Jungle Trails and Jungle People: Travel, Adventure, and Observation in the Far East* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905), vii-ix, 309-10; Whitney, *A Sporting Pilgrimage: Riding to Hounds, Golf, Rowing, Football, Club and University Athletics: Studies in English Sport, Past and Present*. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1894), v-vi, 3-4.

⁷⁶ "Caspar Whitney, 64, Explorer, is Dead: Author and Editor Had Visited Many Far Places and Written of His Quest," *New York Times*, January 19, 1929: 11.

⁷⁷ Jane Kuenz, "The Cowboy Businessman and 'The Course of Empire': Owen Wister's *The Virginian*," *Cultural Critique* 8 (Spring 2001): 98-128; Sarah Jo Peterson, "Voting for Play: The Democratic Potential of Progressive Era Playgrounds," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 3 (April 2004): 145-75; Kevin C. Armitage, "Bird Day for Kids: Progressive Conservation in Theory and Practice," *Environmental History* 12 (July 2007): 528-51; Roderick Nash, "The American Cult of the Primitive," *American Quarterly* 18 (Autumn 1966): 517-37; Theodore Whaley Cart, "The Lacey Act: America's First Nationwide Wildlife Statute," *Forest History* 17 (October 1973): 4-13.

⁷⁸ Scholars have written extensively on the Progressive Era notion that men transformed themselves into more productive citizens through contact with the outdoors. See, Jonathan Berliner, "Jack London's Socialistic Social Darwinism," *American Literary Realism* 41 (Fall, 2008): 52-78; Jon T. Coleman, "Animal Last Stands: Empathy and Extinction in the American West," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 55 (Autumn 2005): 2-13; Clyde Ellis and Mabel F. Knight, "'More Real than the Indians Themselves': The Early Years of

work in *The River and I*. Neihardt offered travel on the river as an intense experience that freed the work- and city-bound from what he saw as routine and seemingly empty lives. As such, the river protected and invigorated American men. It encouraged the entrepreneurial spirit and adapted men to the new realities of an industrial economy, much in the way that Roosevelt, Whitney, and other reformers advocated intense experience and contact with nature as answers to problems that ailed the modern man.⁷⁹

Neihardt also participated in the racialist ideas behind the empire and manliness that Whitney and Roosevelt promoted. In *The River and I* Neihardt wrote that the men of the Anglo-Saxon race defeated and replaced the Indians in the Missouri Valley and on the Great Plains. His body of work rarely included mention of Mexican, African American, or Asian participation in American westward expansion. The late-nineteenth century influx of immigrants, regimentation of everyday living in an industrial society, and changing structure of home life left many white, middle-class men adrift. Neihardt wrote his tales for an audience of middle-class magazine buyers, and his tales tapped their desires for direction, adventure, and purpose. So while advocating independence, men such as Neihardt, Roosevelt, and Whitney also sought to show men their places. These writers drew close connections between male power and white racial superiority. Some middle-class men believed that immigrants and workers threatened Protestant religion and work ethics. Growing immigration introduced new, seemingly foreign, racial and ethnic influences to

the Indian Lore Movement in the United States,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 58 (Autumn 2008): 3-22, 92-9; Harvey, *Postmodernity*, 13; Douglas C. Sackman, “‘Nature’s Workshop’: The Work Environment and Workers’ Bodies in California’s Citrus Industry, 1900-1940,” *Environmental History* 5 (January 2000): 27-53; Michael B. Smith, “‘The Ego Ideal of the Good Camper’ and the Nature of Summer Camp,” *Environmental History* 11 (January 2006): 70-101.

⁷⁹ Richard Slotkin, “Nostalgia and Progress: Theodore Roosevelt’s Myth of the Frontier” *American Quarterly* 33 (Winter 1981): 608-37.

society that some believed threatened “race suicide,” in which racial interbreeding and changing community values undercut the fate of American men. Workers organized unions and fought to improve living and working conditions in American cities.⁸⁰ These urban dwellers formed the base of a growing economy and helped transform America into an urban, big-business dependent society. The strong and moral white Protestant male as an archetype deteriorated as priorities of middle-class men shifted from work and social duty to consumption and leisure.⁸¹ Consumer culture, while often out of reach of workers, attracted middle-class men who craved consumer items and the status associated with them. Among the middle class, conspicuous consumption replaced the civic standing that strong, competitive, smart, self-employed men once earned through self-employment and participation in community affairs.⁸²

By presenting and reaffirming American-ness in contrast to the world’s “others”—which necessarily included un-American or detrimental influences and priorities within—reformers such as Roosevelt sought to reaffirm male power. In a similar effort, Neihardt offered his readers “others” to highlight the decadence he detested in modern society. At one point, he sought food at a run-down riverside shack on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation. The house belonged to a firewater merchant who told Neihardt that law prohibited alcohol sales on the reservation. To circumvent the law, the merchant took his customers out on a boat and

⁸⁰ Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 5-15, 20-3; Daniel E. Bender, “Perils of Degeneration: Reform, the Savage Immigrant, and the Survival of the Unfit,” *Journal of Social History* 42 (Fall 2008), 5-29; Dalton, “Finding Theodore Roosevelt,” 400; Hays, *Response to Industrialism*, 227-35; Hays, “The Politics of Reform in Municipal Government in the Progressive Era,” *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 55 (October 1964): 157-169; Licht, *Industrializing America*, 194-6; Rotundo, “Body and Soul,” 23-38.

⁸¹ Hays, *Response to Industrialism*, 71-93; Herron, *Science and the Social Good*, 21; Licht, *Industrializing America*, 133-9; Roderick Nash, “The Strenuous Life of Bob Marshall,” *Forest History* 10 (October 1966): 18-25; Nash, *The American Environment*, 37.

⁸² Hoganson, *Consumers’ Imperium*, 102-3.

transacted business in midstream. Emphasizing the physical and moral degeneration he believed came from excessive drink and money-grubbing, Neihardt wrote that “the liquor merchant bore about him all the wretched marks of the stuff he sold.” Several days later, he approached a house in a Mandan village. A dozen dogs from the house, he wrote, “resented our intrusion with canine vituperation.” He thrust his head into “the log-cased entrance of the circular house of mud, and was greeted with a sound of scolding in the Mandan jargon, delivered by a squaw of at least eighty years. She arose from the fire that burned in the center of the great circular room, and approached me with an ‘I-want-your-scalp’ expression.” He also wrote that the average “civilized” person possessed no knowledge of river distance. When he came across “a Mandan buck and squaw” bathing in the river, he asked them the distance to Bismarck, North Dakota. They understood distances perfectly. Then, “they got out of the water and sat in the sand quite as nude and unashamed as our first parents before the apple ripened.”⁸³ He used the noble, proud, yet childlike Indian as a foil to the self-polluted sop and dilapidated old woman as part of a larger social commentary on race and manhood that runs through *The River and I*. Neihardt revered the brave, determined, and persistent while denigrating the cowardly, effeminate, and lazy. While he viewed natives as better than degenerate whites, he held them up as stereotypes, almost caricatures of the noble savage that white men of the frontier bested, removed, and replaced.

Theodore Roosevelt, Caspar Whitney, and Neihardt wrote in different ways about the benefits of rough contact with nature and martial undertaking to prove themselves as men and leaders. *The River and I* reflected this larger effort to redefine nature for social

⁸³ Neihardt, *River and I*, 291.

purposes.⁸⁴ Neihardt and Whitney joined a number of writers and reformers who glorified outdoor living. Americans had hewn the nation from wilderness, and, in the West, shaped new social priorities that influenced American life.⁸⁵ In 1890, the Director of the Census determined that a “frontier” line, as such, ceased to exist. Contact with wilderness, historian Frederick Jackson Turner believed, underpinned American democratic development.⁸⁶ The end of the frontier signaled the apparent success of nineteenth-century Euro-American expansionism. But like Frederick Jackson Turner and Theodore Roosevelt before him, Neihardt lamented the end of a frontier where men confronted the untamed natural environment.⁸⁷ Framing the river as a modern frontier, he presented a place in nature that activated Turnerian processes of individual and national development.⁸⁸ The river stripped him of the affectations of civilization. He rebuilt himself from the experience and knowledge he gained.⁸⁹ He blistered his hands, improvised in necessity, and strengthened his constitution. In the end, this river journey steadied him for the travails and accomplishments the future would throw his way. From his perspective, the river taught social lessons. It

⁸⁴ Adam Rome, “‘Political Hermaphrodites’: Gender and Environmental Reform in Progressive America,” *Environmental History* 11 (July 2006): 440-63.

⁸⁵ Turner, *Frontier*, 247-58.

⁸⁶ Turner, *Frontier*, 335-59; Cronon, “Revisiting the Vanishing Frontier,” 157-76.

⁸⁷ David W. Noble. *Death of a Nation: Culture and the End of Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 109-11.

⁸⁸ Frederick Jackson Turner, “The West and American Ideals,” *The Washington Historical Quarterly* 5 (October 1914): 243-57; Turner, “The Significance of the Section in American History,” *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 8 (March 1925): 255-80; Lori Holm Utecht, *Knowledge and Opinion: Essays and Literary Criticism of John G. Neihardt* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 23-4.

⁸⁹ Neihardt, *A Cycle of the West, Vol. I: The Mountain Men* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), vi-xiii; Holler, “Lakota Religion and Tragedy”: 33.

reinvigorated American morality and character with attributes of hard work and individual achievement.⁹⁰

Along with presenting the river as a proving ground for manhood, Neihardt presented the Missouri and its environs as unique—remaining frontiers where men met nature. “To me the Amazon is a basking alligator,” he wrote, “the Tiber is a dream of dead glory; the Rhine is a fantastic fairy-tale; the Nile a mummy, periodically resurrected; the Mississippi, a convenient geographical boundary line; the Hudson, an epicurean philosopher.” He never traveled those rivers, and had only ever seen the Hudson and the Mississippi. But this mattered little. He further emphasized this aspect of the tale when he wrote that the Missouri possessed “the strength of a god, the headlong temper of a comet; but along with these he has the glad, mad, irresponsible spirit of a boy.” He saw in the river “all the stern world-old struggle become materialized.” The Missouri represented “the earnest desire, the momentarily frustrate purpose, the beating at the bars, the breathless fighting of the half-whipped but never-to-be-conquered spirit.” It was the defeat of the great athlete, he wrote, and the joy of competition and achievement. “I have often swum in what seemed liquid madness to my boyhood. And we have become acquainted through battle. No friends like fair foes reconciled!” He saw in the river “all the unwearying urge of a purpose, the unswerving belief in the peace of a far away ocean.”⁹¹ Through the river, he opined, “I think God wished to teach the beauty of a virile soul fighting its way toward peace . . . and His Precept was the Missouri.”⁹²

⁹⁰ Utecht, ed., *Patterns and Coincidences*, 53-64; Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness,” 77-9.

⁹¹ Neihardt, *River and I*, 19.

⁹² Neihardt, *River and I*, 1-32; quote, 16.

Using their stories and books, Neihardt and Whitney promoted outdoor activity as a replacement for the old frontier and a fitting palliative for the ailments that plagued upper-class white males in the industrial age.⁹³ Neihardt's tale reflected the ideas of manhood Whitney and Roosevelt advocated. A "cult of masculinity," of which Roosevelt was emblematic, demanded that middle-class men and their sons prove their manhood with various feats of adventure, such as war, game hunting, and rugged sports. These were, according to historian Andrew J. Furer, "intense, violent experiences that provided feelings of power and mastery." To prove their manhood, college men with little experience on the factory floor went to work breaking strikes in industries as varied as city mass transit and railroads. School boys, young men, and able bodied career men undertook manly pursuits—competition, domination of nature, and mastery of self. For Whitney, intense, competitive sport offered young men a proving ground on which they tested their bravery and strength. Roosevelt advocated camping, hunting, and hiking.⁹⁴ It was no accident that Whitney asked Neihardt for adventure tales on an American river. The Missouri, while no longer a commercially important trade route, served larger purposes. Much of its length above the Sioux Cities, especially in the upper-river country, lay beyond ready access to towns, rails, and roads. The people who lived in that territory still lived in authentic, real, and honest ways that Neihardt (and, likely, Whitney) admired. When he left Fort Benton, he left the time clock, had only himself to please, and felt little obligation to the stultifying ways of life in a regimented society. Travelling this river, he sought to demonstrate that the frontier still

⁹³ Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 5-15, 77-8

⁹⁴ Daniel Justin Herman, "Hunting Democracy," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 55 (Autumn 2005), 22-33.

existed. Intrepid men only need seek life on the river to test themselves, prove their manhood, and recover their masculine strength.

CHAPTER 2

Neihardt and Missouri River Improvement

“The object of your mission is to explore the Missouri river, & such principal stream of it, as, by its course communication with the water of the Pacific ocean may offer the most direct & practicable water communication across this continent, for the purposes of commerce.” –Thomas Jefferson instruction to Meriwether Lewis, 1803¹

John Neihardt filled *The River and I* with passages that revealed his reverence for nature and the river. Neihardt wrote, “I have seen the solemn rearing of a mountain peak into the pale dawn that gave me a deep religious appreciation of my significance in the Grand Scheme.” The Missouri River was “the symbol of my own soul.” The Great Plains were “as a mystic scroll unrolled, scrawled with a cabalistic writ of infinite things.” In *The River and I* he penned that after he killed a deer and dressed it after a long day on the Missouri, he and his companions, Bill and the Kid, ate with “glorious appetites.” After campfire talk quieted, he wrote, “I lay on my back watching the gray smoke brush my stars that seemed so near. *My stars!* Soft and gentle and mystical!” He laid on the riverbank, “Drowsing and dreaming under the drifting smoke-wrack, I felt the sense of time and self drop away from me. No now, no to-morrow, no yesterday, no I! Only eternity, one vast whole—sun-shot, star-spent, love-filled, changeless. And in it all, one spot of consciousness more acute than other spots; and

¹ Anthony Brandt, ed., *The Journals of Lewis and Clark* (New York: National Geographic, 2002), 1.

that was the something that had eaten hugely.” In nature Neihardt found himself given over to “the inward-flung glory of it all; the swooning, half-voluptuous sense of awe and wonder, the rippling, shimmering, universal joy.” He was filled with “the glory of being.” Other people, he wrote felt “dwarfed in the presence of vast and awful things. I never felt bigger than when I first looked upon the ocean.” Rather than feeling small and insignificant when gazing upon a mountain, the mountain “makes me feel very, very tall.”²

Neihardt owed his expansive style to his reading of the English romantic poets Alfred Lord Tennyson, Percy Bysshe Shelly, and George Gordon Byron. He studied Thoreau and Whitman and, like them, revered nature that Americans had yet drastically altered. He showed in the pages of his travel narrative, however, that he possessed an Emersonian grasp of the many facets of the river and its history. Emerson wrote that nature’s beauty “must always seem unreal and mocking until the landscape has human figures, that are as good as itself.” He believed “the oak and the elm shall gladly serve us.” In the process of transforming nature through work, Americans became better people and built a more moral and visionary nation.³ For Neihardt, the river and its sublime beauty came alive with the presence of humanity.⁴ In the works he set in the Missouri Valley, he emphasized men laboring in the natural environment. The relationship between these men and the river fashioned American economy and culture. People working on the river remade themselves and transformed the nation into a greater, more powerful country. He maintained the river’s

² Neihardt, *River and I*, 8, 19, 156, 172-4.

³ Bruce Atkinson, ed., *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, (New York: Modern Library, 2009), 368. White, *Organic Machine*, 35.

⁴ Neihardt, *River and I*, 24-31, 174; Richards, *Luminous Sanity*, 101, Stauffer, “Neihardt’s Journey on the Missouri,” 63-4, 65; Whitney, *Neihardt*, 15-33, 99-102; White, *Organic Machine*, 35. See also, Henry David Thoreau, *Walking* (Seaside, OR: Watchmaker, 2010); Ralph Waldo Emerson, “*Nature*” and *Selected Essays* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 35-82; Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas: The Original Edition in Facsimile* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009).

function as a useful tool of commerce continued and would, with proper attention, offer modern men new opportunities to work in nature. Technology made the fur trappers and steamboat obsolete, he thought, but technology and government power would give the river new economic and social relevance.⁵

The River and I reflected the changing meaning of rivers—and the physical environment—in American life. To Neihardt, the Missouri’s economic value in the lives of Midwesterners changed with new technologies and ways of doing business. It remained, however, an enduring part of their culture and history.⁶ Neihardt and Missouri River improvement advocates sought development appropriate for their time. With seemingly throw-away passages, Neihardt wrote of the Missouri as a modern conduit for commerce. Though these episodes occupied only a fraction of his river tale, they provided a lens into the discourses concerning river navigation, commercial traffic, and the river’s larger purposes in the economy. As Neihardt restated arguments for river improvement, civic leaders and businessmen maintained that rationalization of the stream into nationwide schemes of industrial production created lasting economic opportunities for riverside cities, industries, and Midwestern agriculture. River management, they argued, represented good use of taxpayer funds. The long-term survival of local business, as well as the inclusion of riverside communities in the large economy, rested on turning the river to modern industrial uses.⁷

Bolstered with faith in science and technology, they argued that a tamed and managed

⁵ Neihardt, *River and I*, 24-31; Watkins, *American Wests*, 9-12. See also, Emerson, “*Nature*,” 45; Emerson, *Essential Writings*, 366.

⁶ T.S. McMillan, *The Meaning of Rivers: Flow and Reflection in American Literature* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011), 1-26, 157-66.

⁷ Linda C. Forbes, “Vision for Cultivating a Nation,” *Organization & Environment* 17 (June 2004): 226-31; Marguerite S. Shaffer, ““See America First”: Re-Envisioning Nation and Region through Western Tourism,” *Pacific Historical Review* 65 (November 1996): 559-581, esp. 560-2. See also, Theodore Roosevelt, *Theodore Roosevelt: An Autobiography* (New York: Macmillan, 1913), 426-7.

Missouri River bound underdeveloped communities' industrial potential into the nation's overall productive energies, benefiting both riverside communities and a nation that many believed had taken its place on the world stage.⁸

In his river narrative, Neihardt shaped the Missouri River as a natural space important to national culture and suitable for responsible, regulated modern navigation. At the time, a forty-year-old river improvement cause in the central Midwest gained momentum as an all-encompassing embrace of progress and belief in American technological might. Over the years the movement experienced successes and failures. It often fell out of favor, and a few dedicated businessmen and elected officials propounded the benefits of a remade, reformed, and standardized Missouri River. Any outward unity between civic leaders, river transportation companies, and business associations belied the chaos of conflicting pecuniary interests and development ideas that underlay the river movement. Neihardt expressed in succinct and direct terms the one thing that river advocates agreed upon: The federal government should fund river improvement. His clear, simple statements typified an overarching ideological approach that champions of the river transportation cause used as they lobbied governments and built constituencies across the Midwest and then the nation. Neihardt and river advocates, however, approached the river in different ways. Neihardt presented his readership with the river's beauty, its place in recreating manhood, and its role in the expansion of empire. He professed his faith in the ability of the government to make the river commercially relevant for the benefit of individual rectitude. River advocates presented their case to each other, legislators, and farmers' associations purely in terms of the

⁸ Samuel Gompers, "Conservation of Our Natural Resources," in *Conservation in the Progressive Era: Classic Texts*, William Cronon, ed., (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), 59-60; Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency*, 1-4. See also, Domosh, "Selling Civilization," 453-467.

river's economic value. As Neihardt demonstrated his statements about the river, he and river improvement activists implemented similar language and logic in pursuit of disparate interests. All understood a re-configured river as a national benefit and a modern country's duty to itself. River navigation campaigners closely equated the river with business profit and economic efficiency. They made their monetary arguments for river design on conjecture and pure speculation. They agreed that government needed to fund river improvement and use its agencies to do the work, but each wanted their own cut of the government pie with little or no government interference.⁹

The River and I in Context of River Improvement

Neihardt published *The River and I* as progressives engaged in a conversation about new roles for rivers in American economic and social life. To progressives such as Theodore Roosevelt, irrigation activist William E. Smythe, and Nevada politician Francis Newlands, the water and rivers offered vast potential for national expansion within the continental United States. In the 1880 and 1890s, Smythe argued that urban life stifled the middle-class professional, who he understood was the basis of the modern economy. He looked at the arid West and saw immense tracts of land waiting for the touch of water. There, he thought, Americans could build a new social order based on directing western rivers into reservoirs, canals, and ditches that held water on tap for human needs. He dreamed of new Edens—small, planned, and organized communities that recreated middle-class professionals into gentlemen farmers.¹⁰ Smythe's contemporary, Nevada politician Francis Newlands,

⁹ Neihardt, *River and I*, 250-9; Donald J. Pisani, "Water Planning in the Progressive Era: The Inland Waterways Commission Reconsidered," *Journal of Public Policy* 18 (October 2006): 389-418.

¹⁰ Smythe, *Conquest of Arid America* (1905), 30-51; Limerick, *Desert Passages*, 77-90.

envisioned reclamation as part of larger centralized, national project of national expansion. Government experts and bureaucracies planned the projects, moved the rivers, and stored the water. Bureaucrats parceled out the water based on schedules, estimations, and national economic needs. Water development in the West, he argued, increased agricultural production and benefited national and international commerce. Newly irrigated land gave urban dwellers the ability to pursue new lives as agrarians—not in small communities but on large, planned, and organized tracts that fed systems of investment and return. While Smythe and Newlands demanded that the government take control of western watercourses, Roosevelt, after he took the office of president in 1901, soon found that irrigation gave him an important, even new constituency in the West.¹¹

During the last two decades of the nineteenth century, Midwesterners sought improvement for navigation on the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. Their ideas contained faith in American mastery of the environment, systems of profit, and standardization of society and environment similar to the reclamation movement. From the 1830s to the 1870s, the Missouri River fueled American expansion in the river valley from St. Louis all the way into Montana. After the Civil War, as railroad tracks crossed the West, the United States cleared the Plains of the bison and drove Native Americans from immense tracts of land. Freed from geographical constraints, business and residential development spread up out of the river valley and onto the prairies. Abundant natural resources created economic and territorial expansion that brought many thousands of settlers to the Great Plains.¹² The river

¹¹ William D. Rowley, *Reclaiming the Arid West: The Career of Francis G. Newlands* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1996), 45-65; Francis G. Newlands, "The Use and Development of American Waterways," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* Vol. 31 (January 1908) 48-66.

¹² Roald D. Tweet, "Building a Mighty Fine Line: The Chicago and Rock Island Railroad," in *Grand Excursion on the Upper Mississippi: Places, Landscapes, and Regional Identity after 1854*, Curtis C. and Elizabeth M. Roseman, eds. (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004), 21-36.

declined in commercial importance as rails connected the country to the city. Towns, farms, and commerce followed rails, and rails connected the developing agricultural regions with distant markets. After the turn of the century, cars and trucks added transportation and distribution options independent of rivers.¹³ From the 1870s forward, river improvement advocates argued that Americans could remake their rivers into modern commercial resources. Their entreaties grew more persistent and louder as government-incentivized railroad companies drew traffic from rivers. On the Missouri, in particular, railroads made great gains while river traffic declined. Since river alteration and maintenance necessitated huge amounts of capital and labor, they maintained, modernization of American rivers required federal government funding, planning, and coordination. This modernization also demanded that river alterations, port facilities, and shipping companies integrate their operations with the nation's railroads and growing road network.¹⁴

Irrigation and river improvement advocates based some of their arguments for greater involvement of the federal government in water development on a belief that the federal government neglected the West. While Smythe and Newlands decried federal negligence in irrigation matters, organizations such as the Missouri River Improvement Association and Kansas City Commercial Club maintained that the federal government deserted development of Midwestern rivers. These arguments contradicted a history of government involvement in both western expansion and river improvement. The Homestead Act, the Desert Land Act of 1877, and incentives to railroad companies for the construction of transcontinental railroads encouraged Americans to move onto the Great Plains and intermountain West. The Timber

¹³ Melvin I. Urofsky, "Proposed Federal Incorporation in the Progressive Era," *American Journal of Legal History* 26 (April 1982): 160-83.

¹⁴ Lawrence M. Jones, "The Improvement of the Missouri River and Its Usefulness as a Traffic Route," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 31 (January 1908): 178-188.

Culture Act of 1873 gave prospective settlers tracts of land and encouraged them to plant trees in an effort to expand agriculture in the West. Through the Timber and Stone Act of 1878, the federal government sold western land it deemed unfit for farming to people seeking to trade in wood and mineral. The Desert Land Act of 1894, known as the Carey Act after its sponsor Wyoming Senator Joseph Carey, ceded tracts of public domain to the states to irrigate and sell to individuals.¹⁵ The government also had a long history on the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. River projects on the Missouri and Mississippi were staples of Midwestern and southern states' congressional pork barrel projects and spending. Beginning in the 1830s the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers operated steam-powered dredges and snag pullers on the Mississippi. It also built port facilities on the Mississippi from St. Louis to New Orleans. From the 1830s forward, Corps of Engineers also ran snag boats and dredges on the Missouri in an effort to make the unruly river safer and easier for steamboats to travel. For almost thirty years before the publication of *The River and I*, Congress put the Corps to work stabilizing banks, building levees, and dredging the river channel. The Corps worked in the Upper Missouri country throughout the fur and steamboat periods, clearing channels and removing river hazards. These operations proceeded up the Yellowstone in 1879 and included dynamiting rapids and bank stabilization.¹⁶

¹⁵ For deeper insight into the development of these congressional acts and their relationships to western settlement and irrigation, see Donald J. Pisani, *To Reclaim a Divided West: Water, Law, and Aridity, 1848-1902* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992) and Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and its Disappearing Water* (New York: Penguin, 1993). For a more complete view of state sponsored railroad building and relationships between the railroads and the state, see Richard White, *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011) and Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*.

¹⁶ Robert Kelley Schneiders, *Big Sky Rivers: The Yellowstone and Upper Missouri* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 225-8; Schneiders, *Unruly River*, 38-84. See also, Emory R. Johnson, "River and Harbor Bills," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 2 (May 1892): 50-80; Isaac Lippincott, "A History of River Improvement," *Journal of Political Economy* 22 (July 1914): 630-60; U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, *The History of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers* (Washington: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 1990), 41-52.

No amount of past federal government involvement with the Missouri River mattered to Neihardt as he framed his narrative. He mentioned federal efforts on the river only once in *The River and I* and in no relation to reforming the stream with permanent structures. In a brief passage Neihardt wrote with derision that the government “operates a snag-boat, the *Mandan*, at an expense ridiculously disproportionate to its usefulness. The *Mandan* is little more than an excursion boat maintained for a few who are paid for indulging in the excursions.” From his perspective, government was inept and out of touch. Outside of this perfunctory effort, he wrote, government provided few other opportunities for men to make a living on the river.¹⁷ As he waxed poetic about the river and its history, he went on to promote the river’s worth with the same argument that western irrigationists and Midwestern river improvement advocates implemented as they sought government support for their causes. While on the river, Neihardt spoke with the captain of one of the last three remaining steamboats operating on the Upper Missouri. “We agreed,” he wrote, “in regard to the Government's neglect of duty toward the country's most important natural thoroughfare, the Missouri River.”¹⁸

Neihardt’s lack of faith in the federal government contradicted his conviction that the nation should implement government to modernize the Missouri River. His view of a commercially functional river came out of an idealized interpretation of river history and romantic notions of work a modernized river might provide. He wrote glowing accounts of pioneering fur traders and rivermen of the steamboat era in *The River and I*. He believed they opened the West to settlement, capitalist enterprise, and, ultimately, to a new phase of

¹⁷ Neihardt, *River and I*, 289.

¹⁸ Neihardt, *River and I*, 290; Whitney, *Neihardt*, 80-81.

American development. With federal funding and organization, Neihardt believed, individuals could move processes of national growth forward on the Upper Missouri. At the mouth of the Yellowstone near the border of Montana and North Dakota, he met another steamboat skipper, Grant Marsh. He supplied materials for constructing the Crane Creek Diversion Dam on the Yellowstone sixty miles upstream from the Missouri. On their meeting, Neihardt volunteered as a deckhand on Grant's *Expansion* on a trip up the Yellowstone and back. He wrote that he "should prefer hod-carrying as a profession, for we had a heavy cargo, ranging from lumber and tiling to flour and beer." With no dock at the construction site, he and his deckmates transported the *Expansion's* freight up steep banks by hand in the heat of the day. They struggled but accomplished what Neihardt believed was a noble, manly task. His idea of heaven, he wrote, was "an improbable condition in which all men would be willing and able to work for nothing at all . . . Heaving coal, I built Utopias." Working for Marsh, he experienced the life of the rivermen he idolized and wrote effusively about. He venerated the strong-willed captain and saw him as a man with vision. The captain sat in the wheelhouse and managed men on the deck. Neihardt portrayed him as having the guts and wherewithal to weather all storms to wrest a living from the river. The time had come, Neihardt believed, for government to give opportunity to those like Marsh who possessed money to invest and skill to manage men for profit.¹⁹

Neihardt never explored the incongruity of government sponsorship of private enterprise. He also saw little irony in the fact that Marsh transported goods that would block the Yellowstone to commercial navigation. By holding Marsh up as an example of what people could do on the river, Neihardt expressed a growing demand among business people,

¹⁹ Neihardt, *River and I*, 249-52.

government officials, and politicians for federal government to make rivers into economic engines.²⁰ While Neihardt wished for good the old days as he traveled down the Missouri, commercial and political forces in the Missouri Valley did not want not to bring men like Marsh back to the river. They sought, instead, to remake the river into a deep-barge channel fitting for big, corporate commerce. For some thirty years before the publication of *The River and I*, chambers of commerce and industry associations lobbied Congress for river improvements that included permanent bank stabilization, the construction of a reliable river channel, and federally funded riverside facilities for handling grain, raw materials, and manufactured goods.²¹ Kansas City Commercial Chamber of Commerce (Kansas City Commercial Club before 1907) and the St. Louis Merchants Exchange asserted that the river's capacity for freight and grain transportation presented an inexhaustible source of commercial profit—if only the government did its duty and changed the river to fulfill the goals of business.²²

Using the same language of many river advocates across the Missouri Valley, Neihardt maintained that modern need for economic efficiency—the same force that made the steamboat obsolete—would bring the Missouri back to prominence in American life.²³ Since local, state, and private resources represented only limited capital and ability to regulate river alterations, river improvement advocates, such as Lawrence Jones of the Kansas City Commercial Club, understood that all river engineering fell under federal

²⁰ Schneiders, *Unruly River*, 60-2.

²¹ John Thorson, *River of Promise, River of Peril: The Politics of Managing the Missouri River* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press), 56-75.

²² Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce Minutes, 1856-1991, January 1-December 31, 1890, Western Historical Manuscripts Collection, University of Missouri-Kansas City: 2-30, Schneiders, *Unruly River*, 87.

²³ Neihardt, *River and I*, 299-300.

control.²⁴ Missouri River improvement advocates understood that their arguments carried more weight if they portrayed the Midwest as being at disadvantage to other parts of the country. Since the government neglected its duty toward river transportation, it had the obligation to get involved. River advocates also knew that their cause looked more appealing when they made the case that Missouri River alterations benefited interstate commerce and possessed positive implications for the national economy. River and harbor projects necessitated the mobilization of vast amounts of labor and money. As such, they argued for government intervention into the workings of the river based on federal responsibility for the regulation of interstate commerce.²⁵

Expanding trade on America's big interior rivers promised copious benefits for local, state, and national commerce. On the Mississippi and Ohio, state and local governments, industrial associations, and private business sought federal government help for private gain. Rationalizing rivers and deconstructing impediments to river commerce, they argued, increased local profits, as well as internal and international trade. Elected officials, too, saw new constituencies in people who sought federal support for river trade. Politicians understood that efficient rivers benefited local business, and they joined industry associations and civic leaders as they engaged in a conversation that centered on scientific river management and national benefit. At the same time, federal government bureaucrats and their agencies saw potential for increasing their reach and funding. They also gained public

²⁴ Jones, "The Improvement of the Missouri River," 183-88.

²⁵ Newton C. Blanchard, "River and Harbor Improvement," *North American Review* 158 (March 1894): 343-352.

support for the agencies and ideas by adding their expert opinions to the debate on the advantages of river alteration for increased trade.²⁶

The End of an Era

Neihardt's idealized, emotional conceptions of manly action and river history came into play when he thought of the river. He wrote that when he walked to the Kansas City riverfront with his father, "We watched the steamboats loading for what seemed to me far distant ports." The steamboats fascinated him, he opined, and he dreamed of distant ports, men sweating at the boilers, and stevedores hauling goods ashore. "A double stream of 'roosters' coming and going at a dog-trot rushed the freight aboard," he wrote, "and at the foot of the gang-plank the mate swore masterfully while the perspiration dripped from the point of his nose." The boats at Kansas City worked the leftovers of the trade, transporting goods to town railroads passed. These manly specimens formed an ideal of masculinity for him that he never disconnected from his interpretations of river history. He equated the stevedores of the Kansas City docks with the great fur traders and riverboat captains of the past. He wrote that when he conjured his historical imagination, he saw "steamboats grunting and snoring up stream!" He wanted those days, those feelings back, and nearly every page of the book drips with romanticized versions of his childhood memories. Once he arrived at Fort Benton to start the voyage that he recounted in *The River and I*, he wrote, the town's days as the head of navigation on the Upper Missouri were long past. "One glance at the empty levees told you of the town's dead glory. Not a steamboat's stacks, blackening in the

²⁶ Burton I. Kaufman, "Organization for Foreign Trade Expansion in the Mississippi Valley, 1900-1920," *Business History Review* 46 (Winter 1972): 444-65, esp. 445-7. For a classic text on the efforts of government agencies and conservationists to increase their reach and power, see Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency*.

gloom, broke the peaceful glitter of the river under the stars.” The scene saddened him, he wrote. “Steamboating on the upper river is only a memory.”²⁷

But the steamboat era had already passed when Neihardt first met the stevedores at the Kansas City docks. Steamboats fit a particular time, but as time went forward and transportation technologies advanced, their disadvantages led to their demise. Steamboats first plied the Missouri River in the mid-1830s. They opened the Upper Missouri country to national and international trade. They promoted settlement in the valley and trade centers, such as Kansas City, St. Joseph, and the Sioux Cities formed around river commerce.²⁸ Steamboat crews faced constant dangers. Fields of snags, shoals, and shifting river channels impeded a boat’s safe passage. The river often froze solid in the winter. The spring thaw loosed sheets of ice that ground boats to splinters at dock facilities. River traffic reached its highest level in 1844. The river flooded and disrupted commercial traffic in 1844, 1851, 1858, 1862, and 1868. In the spring and summer of 1844, the biggest flood since the arrival of European settlement of the Missouri Valley busted through the valley. The rising Missouri flowed from bluff to bluff and destroyed river towns, dock facilities, and farmlands.²⁹ Steamboats themselves added to the uncertainty of river transportation and shipping. Because steam engines relied on river water, silt filled boilers and clogged pipes. Boilers often exploded and always posed fire dangers to boats, passengers, and freight. These hazards

²⁷ Neihardt, *River and I*, 1-6.

²⁸ For greater insight into steamboat trade and its influence on Missouri Valley settlement, see Chittenden, *History of Early Steamboat Navigation* (1903). See also, Phil E. Chappel, “A History of the Missouri River,” *Transactions of the Kansas State Historical Society for 1905-1906* 9 (1906): 37-94; Bernard DeVoto, *Across the Wide Missouri* (New York: Mariner Books, 1998); Schneiders, *Unruly River*, 38-84; Stanley Vestal, *The Missouri River* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1945); W. Raymond Wood, “Mapping the Missouri River through the Great Plains, 1763-1895,” *Great Plains Quarterly* (January 1984): 29-42.

²⁹ *Transactions of the Kansas State Historical Society, 1907-1908* 10 George W. Martin, ed. (Topeka: Kansas State Printing Office, 1908), 533-63, esp. 550-4.

combined sunk 250 and 400 of the 1,000 steamboats that plied the river between 1830 and 1900. Insurance companies charged shipping companies exorbitant rates due to the perilous nature of river travel. Premiums alone added between six and ten percent to river transportation costs. Another intractable problem vexed boat captains. After 1850, steamboat shipping companies often confronted fuel shortages as bottomland forests disappeared into steamboat boilers. Woodcutters called woodhawks moved into adjoining forests and scrublands. The energy hungry steamboats and their wood suppliers so threatened Native American forest resources that the Teton Sioux prosecuted an ongoing war with steamboaters on the Upper Missouri from the mid-1860s through the early-1870s.³⁰ During this time, wrote Missouri River traveler James Willard Schultz, “Lone trappers and hunters— ‘woodhawks’—along the river, travelers on the Oregon Trail, and the trail between Fort Benton and the mines in the west were waylaid and murdered by scores and scores.”³¹

As early as the 1840s, the railroad attracted river valley citizens, businesses, and civic leaders that sought cheaper, safer, and more reliable transport than steamboats. By the 1850s, as rails spread over the eastern prairies, riverside cities clamored for their own railheads as an alternative to river transportation. By 1859, the Hannibal and St. Joseph Railroad reached the river at St. Joseph. Government-subsidization of transcontinental railroads exploded after the Civil War. This, combined with the laundry list of land settlement acts from the 1862 Homestead Act forward, increasingly oriented Missouri River cities’ commerce east and

³⁰ Hiram M. Chittenden, “Report on steamboat wrecks on the Missouri River”; Appendix, “A Report to the Chief of Engineers, Part 6,” in *Report of the Chief of Engineers, U.S. Army, for the Fiscal Year ended June 30, 1892* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1897), 20-4; Twyla Dell, “Flame, Furnace, Fuel: Creating Kansas City in the Nineteenth Century” (Antioch University: Ph.D. Disc, 1908), 120-124; Lass, *Navigating the Missouri*, 323-88; Schneiders, *Unruly River*, 54-5; Schneiders, *Big Sky Rivers*, 187-9.

³¹ Schultz, *Floating on the Missouri*, 7.

west.³² Once rails crossed the Missouri in the late 1860s, cities such as Kansas City and Omaha boomed with trade from agricultural regions in the West. Railroads increasingly tied trans-Missouri trade to eastern markets through St. Louis and Chicago. By 1880, railroads bound all major population centers from Kansas City to Bismarck, North Dakota, to Chicago. With the help of government subsidies and modern, large corporate organizations, railroads delivered goods to streamside cities at better rates than steamboats. In the five years between 1870 and 1875, railroad competition reduced Missouri River steamboat traffic to a few boats above Yankton, South Dakota. Intermittent steamboat service on the reaches below Yankton to Kansas City ceased after 1880. The steamboats Neihardt witnessed at Kansas City operating between Kansas City and St. Charles in eastern Missouri carried only a fraction of the passengers and freight they had just five or ten years previous. Very few steamboats navigated out of the city on a regular basis after the mid-1870s.³³

Neihardt's depiction of hugely productive Kansas City docks in *The River and I* came out of a cherished childhood memory he embellished for narrative purposes. What boats operated out of Kansas City when he was a child disappeared with only a few exceptions by 1890. A private capital company founded the Kansas City Line and operated three new steamboats on the river between Kansas City and St. Louis with the hope, said Captain C.S. Rogers, "that the importance of the Missouri River as a means of cheap transportation will

³² Christopher McGrory Klyza, "The United States Army, Natural Resources, and Political Development in the Nineteenth," *Polity* 35 (Autumn 2002), 1-28, esp. 10; Richard White, "Information, Markets, and Corruption: Transcontinental Railroads in the Gilded Age," *Journal of American History* 90 (June 2003): 19-43, esp. 22-4. See also, White, *Railroaded*, xxi-xxiv.

³³ Schneiders, *Unruly River*, 58; Carlos A. Schwantes, "The Steamboat and Stagecoach Era in Montana and the Northern West" *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 49 (Winter 1999): 2-15; Bert Schneiders, "The Myth of Environmental Management: The Corps, the Missouri River, and the Channelization Project," *Agricultural History* 70 (Spring 1996): 337-50, esp. 338-40; White, *Railroaded*, xxi-xxiv, 26-36, 162-78; See also, Carol V. Ruppe and Janet F. Barstad, *The International Handbook of Underwater Archeology*, (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 2002), 193-206; The latter text contains an excellent historical account of navigation on the Missouri River.

again be realized.”³⁴ The company sputtered along until just after the turn of the century and then disappeared. Small steamers operated on the upper river, ironically, transporting railroad freight between rail lines. Bridges and logistical efficiencies eliminated most of these boats by the turn of the century. By 1902, the *New York Times* printed a eulogy for the great river. “The career of the Missouri River,” the paper reported, “is at an end.” In 1903, historian and engineer Hiram Chittenden assessed the commercial significance of the river in his landmark work, *History of the Early Steamboat Trade on the Missouri River*. He wrote that the modern world had rendered the river obsolete, dirty, and dangerous. “The river today is little more than a vast sewer,” he wrote, “whose seething, eddying waters bear down the sand and clay and debris from the far upper country . . .” Railroads, states, and the federal government only took notice of the river, he wrote, when they had to build bridges over it. “From all points of view it now seems like one of those things in the economy of nature which could be dispensed with and the world be none the worse for its absence.”³⁵ Chittenden, like many others, did not understand that modern America would have been worse off for no other reason than people needed water and a place to throw their trash. If, however, people only counted the river’s usefulness in the number of freight tons it carried, then by the end of the century, industrial America had passed it by.

The Railroad Argument

³⁴ U.S. Department of Treasury, *Report on the Internal Commerce of the United States for the Year 1891: Commerce of the Great Lakes, the Mississippi River and Its Tributaries* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1892), 70-1.

³⁵ “To Abandon Missouri River (sic): The Great Stream Which Has Committed Extraordinary Antics and Was a Highway for Commerce No Longer Navigable—Artesian Wells May Have Sapped It,” *New York Times*, August, 17, 1902: 32; Chittenden, *History of Early Steamboat Navigation on the Missouri River* (1962), 445-8. See also, Lass, *Navigating the Missouri*.

While Neihardt wrote wistfully of the steamboat era and remembered his experience with Grant Marsh with great fondness, business associations, such as the Omaha Chamber of Commerce, Kansas City Commercial Club, and St. Louis Merchant Association, wanted nothing of the steamboat or of technologies that crafted transportation to existing river conditions. These river transportation advocates knew that the shallow-draft steamboat belonged to a bygone era. They saw, instead, deep-draft barges and stern-wheel towboats operating in America's harbors and on the Ohio and lower Mississippi. Such boats and barges connected lower-Midwestern farmers to Gulf Coast ports. Instead of using the river as it flowed, the Kansas City Commercial Club and St. Louis Merchant Association demanded in the 1880s that the federal government tailor the river channel to modern water transportation. Deep-draft barges, they argued, carried far more freight than steamboats and gave railroads ample competition. Steamboats carried a limited, albeit hefty amount of freight (about 350 tons on the largest steamboats). Each required a crew, and every steamboat's engines burned hundreds of cords of wood a day. A single deep-draft barge carried about 600 tons of freight, about the same amount as two steamboats or three average trains of the time. A stern-wheel steam towboat pushed packets of six or more individual barges on the lower Mississippi. A towboat demanded less energy and labor for the amount of freight it moved than a shallow-draft steamboat. With prudent investment of government money into a deep-barge shipping channel, river advocates argued, the Missouri offered the same potential to its cities, farmers, and shipping concerns.³⁶

³⁶ Emory R. Johnson, *Inland Waterways: Their Relation to Transportation* (New York: Kraus Reprint Company, 1970), 89; Schneiders, *Big Sky Rivers*, 233; Robert S. Taylor, "How to Improve the Mississippi," *North American Review* 138 (March 1884): 284-293, esp. 289-90.

In 1881, unusually warm weather in the Rockies melted the heavy snowpack. The river below the Yellowstone, however, remained frozen. The swollen river plowed through the eastern Montana and into North Dakota. As it surged toward the confluence of the Yellowstone, it stacked the ice in steep layers and it ground along the banks. High water and ice destroyed river port facilities from Pierre, North Dakota, downstream beyond Kansas City. The worst damage occurred in the stretches below Yankton. The flood inundated the Kansas City and Omaha stockyards, destroyed railroad tracks that connected riverside cities, and killed an untold number of people.³⁷ The disaster was a turning point in the history of Midwestern advocacy for federal government coordination of river design for deep-barge commerce. The flood reinforced, river historian Robert Kelley Schneiders wrote, “the public’s belief that the river no longer contributed to civilization. It not only jeopardized agriculture (the foundation of a supposedly healthy and wealthy society), but it also challenged notions of prosperity and material progress.”³⁸

In July 1881, river improvement advocates gathered at the Missouri River Improvement Congress at Council Bluffs, Iowa. While convention delegates watched the river wash through its floodplains, they resolved that the United States Congress should invest federal funds and expertise into river improvement.³⁹ A narrowed and deepened stream, they argued, suitable to modern deep-barge traffic, posed less risk to streamside cities than a rough, free-flowing river. Deep-river channels that stayed in one place over time made business more efficient and transportation equipment easier to standardize. The congress

³⁷ *Annual Report of the Chief of Engineers, United States Army to the Secretary of War for the year 1887* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1887), 2687; Schneiders, *Unruly River*, 68.

³⁸ Schneiders, *Unruly River*, 68-9.

³⁹ Schneiders, *Unruly River*, 70.

delegates maintained that bank reinforcement, levees, and channeling the river protected riverside communities from flood and opened the river for commerce.⁴⁰ As the convention's plea went to Congress, river states' congressional delegations worked hard to convince businessmen, farmers, and their fellow legislators that the Missouri was worth improving. At the convention, the Kansas City Commercial Club also organized riverside towns, business associations, and farmers in a concerted effort to pressure Congress to action. The resulting Missouri River Improvement Association gathered many disparate interests into one body.⁴¹

Even as the Missouri River Improvement Congress met and founded the Missouri River Improvement Association, the flood drew businesses and residents to their cause. These organizations' feverish work unifying and organizing valley residents, in turn, moved congressional delegations to take action. The 1882 rivers and harbors bill presented the earliest and most convenient opportunity for congressmen and senators to present their cases for increased government funding for river projects. Since 1846, Congress annually approved money for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to maintain harbors and ports and improve rivers that flowed into these harbors. Midwestern states traditionally amended the rivers and harbors bills with pork projects related to riverfront facilities, snag pulling, and minor channel work—none of which individual congressmen and senators coordinated with each other.⁴²

In the 1882 rivers and harbors bill, Congress spread even more pork to flood-prone Missouri River communities and allocated funds for U.S. Army Corps of Engineers surveys

⁴⁰ Committee on Missouri River Ecosystem Science, Water Science and Technology Board, Division on Earth and Life Studies, National Research Council, *The Missouri River Ecosystem: Exploring the Prospects for Recovery* (Washington: National Academy Press, 2002), 26.

⁴¹ "The Barge Project," *The County Paper* (Oregon, MO), July 8, 1881: 2.

⁴² "Our Neighbors," *Richmond (Missouri) Democrat*, May 12, 1881: 2; Schneiders, *Unruly River*, 60-68.

of the Missouri River for possible flood control and river channel improvements. In 1882, the Corps began construction on a nine-foot channel from the mouth of the river to Kansas City. Congressional support for the channel project lasted only two years. But this did not stop congressional delegations from bringing home federal money for river work. Through the turn of the century, hundreds of individual federal and state projects shored up banks from erosion, dredged away sandbars, and channelized the river. But these efforts altered the river only along short stretches and for specific purposes, such as levees along the Kansas City and Omaha waterfronts and dredging from the Mississippi upstream to St. Charles. Even then, the river as a living stream subject to various climatic conditions worked against any human-made alterations, washing them away or rendering them useless over time.⁴³ In 1884, Congress formed the Missouri River Commission after valley business associations called for investigation into channeling the river for modern barges and boats. They demanded that the government channel the river for navigation and remove river obstructions, including railroad bridges, snags, and sandbars. Since navigation required narrower and deeper river channels, they argued, flood control measures, such as levees and in-channel dikes complemented river channelization. A year later, the commission presented Congress with maps, recommendations for alterations, and financial rationalizations for channeling the river. The commission's work for the next eighteen years, however, accomplished only the continuation of individual projects tailored to the economic and political demands of congressional delegations and their constituents.⁴⁴

⁴³ Schneiders, *Unruly River*, 67; Thorson, *River of Promise*, 44; "The Missouri River: Proceedings of the river improvement convention at Kansas City," *Wichita Daily Eagle*, December 17, 1891: 2.

⁴⁴ See, United States War Department, *Report of the Missouri River Commission* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1886)

In *The River and I*, Neihardt opined that people who stood against improving the river for navigation were “either railroad men or persons entirely ignorant of the geography of the Northwest.”⁴⁵ This case for river improvement developed over the course of thirty years and fueled anger over government’s alleged lack of interest in the Missouri River. Rails connected riverside cities with the larger world of trade by the end of the 1870s. As railroads took more trade off the river, civic leaders who once fought hard for rail connections and cities that sold bonds to finance railway building into their towns began arguing that railroads charged higher rates than they would in the face of river competition. River improvement advocates had argued since the 1880s railroads supplied the only heavy freight transportation in the valley. Because of their hold on this commerce, railroad corporations operated at their leisure and without competition. Missouri River cities, industries, and farmers saw themselves as exploited and helpless.⁴⁶ Farmers’ associations and businessmen’s clubs looked at deep-barges and stern-wheel tow-boats connecting lower Mississippi agricultural and industrial commerce with Gulf Coast ports and wanted deep and reliable river channels for such transport. Viewing the river as useless for modern transportation until the government improved it for modern technologies signaled a shift in the way business, elected officials, and riverside residents understood the river. In the past, steamboat captains plied the river with skill and experience. Cities and business adapted to the river as it changed, meandered across its floodplains, and formed new channels. Modern transportation technology and ways of doing business, however, demanded a river standardized to its equipment and means of returning profit to investors.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Neihardt, *River and I*, 285-300.

⁴⁶ Schneiders, *Big Sky Rivers*, 247.

⁴⁷ Schneiders, *Unruly River*, 54-7; Thorson, *River of Promise*, 8-17.

The railroad argument for river modernization, however, was a straw man based on conjecture. Railroads competed among themselves for business, particularly when lines ran side-by-side or several railroads served the same cities. No one was completely sure that moving goods north and south when commerce traveled mostly east and west would make much difference. Regardless of the argument's validity, the case played well in the Missouri Valley in the 1880s when agrarian sentiment against railroads ran high.⁴⁸ The Missouri River Commission contended in 1885 that since railroads possessed a virtual monopoly in the valley, opening the river for shipping created another level of competition that would keep rail shipping costs in check.⁴⁹ Senator George Graham Vest of Missouri wrote in 1890 that only three steamboats moved freight on the Missouri between Kansas City and St. Louis. "So long as the river is kept in navigable condition," he argued, "that fact constitutes a check upon overcharges by the railroads." He wrote that even if railroads possessed advantages in speed and connection with domestic markets, the Missouri figured into a larger, international transportation system for the nation's industrial and agricultural might. In his view, river improvement increased business to such an extent that tax revenue justified the government's investment. Emory R. Johnson of the United States Industrial Commission wrote in 1892 that, "The best argument for the aid to river and harbor improvement at the expense of the United States government is that all great nations pursue such a policy."⁵⁰

River improvement advocates frequently attempted to enlighten the public on the river's wasted commercial development due to railroads. Richard H. Bacot voiced this

⁴⁸ "To Abandon Missouri River," 32; Schneiders, *Unruly River*, 91-110; Schneiders, *Big Sky Rivers*, 245-9.

⁴⁹ United States War Department, *Report of the Missouri River Commission* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1886).

⁵⁰ Johnson, "River and Harbor Bills," 53-4; 73-4. See also, Johnson, "Supplement: Inland Waterways," 1-164.

sentiment toward river improvement in popular magazine editorials and before Congress. Bacot, a former Confederate Army officer who joined the Army Corps of Engineers after the war, worked with Corps survey teams in the Upper Missouri River region in the 1880s. Taking up the inland river transportation cause, he wrote in 1890 that railroads with fixed routes retarded settlement and commerce on sparsely settled lands in the Upper Missouri country. A modified river opened the door for river navigation that competed with railroads and reached into lands underused for lack of access to markets. “Now that home markets have been supplied,” he wrote, “the surplus products of this vast region, so far from other markets, demand cheaper means of transportation, and water carriage is the only solution.” In the Corps of Engineers 1893 annual report to Congress he argued that, “There is enough water in the Missouri River, at its lowest stages if confined to proper width of channel, to give a navigable depth of twelve feet” from the Sioux Cities to the Mississippi. “If Congress can be prevailed upon to assure the rapid improvement of the Missouri River,” he wrote, “a period of unexampled prosperity will be opened to the vast country now subject to railroads . . . and the teeming soil of the prairies will yield a competence for those who can now barely afford the necessaries of life.”⁵¹ Economist Emory Johnson wrote that “The railroads, which, in order the better to control commerce, desire to prevent the improvement of inland waterways.”⁵² In 1893, Johnson voiced a well-regarded opinion that the federal government had, in part, financed railway construction to the detriment of other types of transportation. The placement of railroads, he wrote, made or broke communities. Those without railroad service languished while those that rails reached often possessed no other transportation

⁵¹ Richard H. Bacot, “The Missouri River: How it is Improved and Kept Navigable,” *Frank Leslie’s Popular Monthly* 2 (August 1890): 26-9; *Annual Report of the Chief of Engineers, United States Army, to the Secretary of War, for the Year 1893, Part VI* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1893), 3828-39.

⁵² Johnson, “River and Harbor Bills,” 50-80, esp. 50-1.

options. River transportation, he argued, gave railroads competition and granted widespread benefit to communities along river.⁵³

In 1886, the year before Neihardt first laid his eyes on the Missouri as it crashed through Kansas City, the Missouri River Improvement Association built unprecedented unity among state and local governments, business associations, and Mississippi River shipping companies that stood to benefit from a navigable Missouri. Congress responded to the association's entreaties and allocated \$375,000 for river improvement. Most of that money duplicated river projects of the recent past. At that time, the Corps of Engineers was still learning how to deal with the unruly Missouri. With stream-flow data dating only to 1874, when the Corps and Geological Survey began making such measurements, no one knew for sure how high, tall, or thick to build river structures that could withstand the unpredictable river's might. The Corps also did not know how to sustain a deep channel in low-flow conditions. The river also possessed hydrological aspects that the Corps learned about with experience and over time. The river carried hundreds of millions of tons of silt downstream a year. Local water tables and adjoining land changed the river from season to season.⁵⁴

Between 1890 and 1895, Congress paid \$2.6 million for river improvements. The Corps sunk innumerable timbers in perpendicular lines from the banks. These posts slowed the river to a point where it dropped its silt, accreting land behind them. The Corps built wing dikes to direct the flow of the river and narrow the channel. Hundreds of men stacked rock on the banks and weaved willow mats that kept the river from washing out dirt below revetment. This immense labor proceeded slowly and produced little success. With its seasonal rises and

⁵³ Johnson, "Supplement: Inland Waterways," 7-9.

⁵⁴ Schneiders, *Unruly River*, 78-84.

falls, the river wreaked havoc with Corps structures, causing double and triple work. For the \$2.6 million, the Corps finished isolated riverfront improvements at the Sioux Cities, Omaha, and Kansas City. The Corp built only forty-five miles of six-foot barge channel up the river from the Mississippi and in short reaches around Kansas City and Omaha at a cost of \$58,000 per mile.⁵⁵ Congress lost interest in funding what seemed an unending, unpromising, and expensive task. While many in the Valley favored river channelization, new port facilities, and levees, congressional delegations representing areas of the country outside the Missouri Valley lost their taste for an expensive and what many considered a needless works program.⁵⁶

Congress' apathy toward the Missouri River did not stop the Missouri River Improvement Association from demanding more funds for river alterations. The Kansas City Commercial Club, the St. Joseph (Missouri) Board of Trade, and the St. Louis Merchant Exchange argued for their interests in broad terms and maintained that a navigable Missouri River benefited the nation as a whole. Over time, factories, grain and meat processing, transportation, and distribution spread across the flat, easily developable river floodplain at the Sioux Cities, Omaha, Council Bluffs, St. Joseph, Kansas City, and St. Louis. Farm fields filled Midwestern river bottoms. As the railroads connected commerce to markets, cities such as Kansas City and Omaha further expanded commercial and residential infrastructure near the river. The Kansas City Commercial Club argued in 1894 that the city's businesses manufactured and processed products in the river bottoms for national and international trade.⁵⁷ Adding country-wide benefits to river improvement schemes, advocates thought,

⁵⁵ Schneiders, *Unruly River*, 82-4.

⁵⁶ Schneiders, *Unruly River*, 78-84.

⁵⁷ Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce Minutes, 15.

appealed to wider national audiences who footed the bill for river improvements. Few argued over the wisdom of building assets where the river often flooded. Federally funded levees, they believed, protected capital assets, prevented loss of life, and provided future business opportunity.⁵⁸

One did not have to be a “railroad man” of the ilk that Neihardt demeaned, however, to understand how little federal tax dollars bought in actual river improvement. After 1896, Missouri River improvements appropriations reached a standstill, and Congress gave the Corps only enough money for three snag pullers on the Missouri. Two operated on the lower river between Omaha and St. Louis. A third, the *Mandan* that Neihardt wrote so derisively about, cleared the upper river between Bismarck and Fort Benton, where, after 1896, the Corps reported that railroads carried all commerce in the region. Grant Marsh’s *Expansion* and the one other boat that Neihardt saw on the river transported goods for government work. Otherwise, all other river freighting had ceased. River improvement advocates, despite their impotence, continued their efforts toward government-funded river control.⁵⁹ The case for mitigating railroad rates lingered, as did the argument for flood control, particularly from Kansas City, Omaha, and the Sioux Cities. The river, however, flooded in 1903, bringing the

⁵⁸ Daniel McCool, *Command of the Waters: Iron Triangles, Federal Water Development, and Indian Water* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 1-6; Jeff McFadden, personal interview, Lexington, MO, June 26, 2005. McFadden is a Coast Guard certified boat captain who conducts tour cruises on the Missouri River and is an amateur historian of the river. He believes flood was the “only natural disaster man could avoid” by simply building on higher ground. He maintained that businessmen and corporate interests in urban areas in the Missouri Valley had always operated from the perspective that physical nature disturbed proper functioning of capital endeavor, rather than understanding that flood and drought are part of a healthy riverine system. “They never understand that they put their capital at risk building in the floodplain,” McFadden said in the interview. “At the same time, they never cease to believe the American taxpayer should protect their investments and reduce their risks.” See also, Schneiders, *Unruly River*, 252, 74-112. Especially insightful on the relationship between floodplain alterations, the perception of safety from flood, and increasing investment in areas at flood risk, see Henry C. Hart, *Dark Missouri* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1957), 144-55.

⁵⁹ “River Commerce Absorbed,” *New York Times*, Jul 28, 1896: 9; “River Congress Opens,” *Kansas City Star*, October 9, 1903: 2.

efforts of river-control advocates back to the attention of the public. The Corps of Engineers received funds in congressional rivers and harbors bills in 1904 and 1905 for surveys of the river for navigation and flood control. These included flood control levees, deepening the shipping channel to twelve feet from Kansas City to the Mississippi, and a complex of levees extending almost the entire length of the river. The river once again tipped the scales in favor of river advocates when it flooded in 1904 and 1905. In 1905, the agency returned to Congress with recommendations for flood control and navigation.⁶⁰

The year Neihardt wound his way downstream from Fort Benton, river transportation advocates predicted huge returns on government-funded and coordinated programs of river improvement. Washington University Professor of Economic Resources Isaac Lippincott argued in 1908 that, “A small investment in public dollars would give us a highway free to all having a carrying capacity of 600 single track railroads.” Lawrence Jones, president of the Kansas City-based Missouri Valley Improvement Association, also quoted the 600-single-track-railroad number in a 1908 article about the efficacy of Missouri River transport. This figure circulated widely among river improvement advocates and said a great deal about what the river control advocates wanted to convey to the public. One river with the economic power of hundreds of railroads connoted immense growth opportunities for the national economy. Economist Isaac Lippincott wrote that “If, by the expenditure of fifty millions annually on our waterways (some \$2 billion in 2013 dollars), we could save our citizens hundreds of millions in transportation charges, to say nothing of the great impulse it would

⁶⁰ Green, *Canal Builders*, 8-13; Schneiders, *Unruly River*, 88-90.

give to all our industries, it would not be a waste of money, it would not be an expense, but a magnificent investment.”⁶¹

The Missouri River in the United States Congress and Out Again

A modern, growing republic, Neihardt wrote, demanded the federal government turn the Missouri River into part of “a natural canal, extending from New Orleans in the South and Cincinnati in the East to the Rockies in the Northwest.” Such an endeavor, he opined, was “not to be neglected long by an intelligent Government.”⁶² Neihardt wrote in *The River and I* that the rivers of the American interior held vast potential. “As a slow freight thoroughfare,” he wrote, “this vast natural system of waterways is unequalled on the globe. Within another generation, doubtless, this all-but-forgotten fact will be generally rediscovered.” By the turn of the century, ideologies of progress, efficiency, and activist government imbued the river improvement idea with new kinds of nationalist and expansionist ideals. As Neihardt left Fort Benton, river improvement advocates already envisioned the Missouri River in international terms. In 1904, the United States took over construction of the Panama Canal. River transportation activists, local businessmen, and elected officials saw a close relationship between river improvements and the canal. Many suggested the two projects were linked to a larger program of refashioning all the nation’s rivers into systems of modern canals.⁶³ Optimistic boosters envisioned Midwestern

⁶¹ Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce Minutes, 15-8; Henry C. Hart, “Legislative Abdication in Regional Development,” *Journal of Politics* 13 (August 1951): 393-417; Jones, “The Improvement of the Missouri River,” 178-188; Lippincott, “A History of River Improvement,” 630-660; Schneiders, *Unruly River*, 23-59; Thorson, *River of Promise*, 8-55.

⁶² Neihardt, *River and I*, 299-300.

⁶³ Jones, “The Improvement of the Missouri River,” 178-188; Lippincott, “A History of River Improvement,” 630-660.

agricultural products flowing downstream to the Gulf of Mexico, out to both coasts, and into Latin America. As work on the canal proceeded, Progressive politicians visualized the Missouri as a part of a larger deep-barge shipping channel that flowed from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico, with the goal of linking the American interior with the canal.⁶⁴

When Neihardt advocated crafting the Missouri into a system of rivers for transportation in *The River and I*, riverside cities' business, civic, and elected officials already had expressed their desire that the government build a "natural canal" connecting rivers of the American interior.⁶⁵ In 1906, the Chicago Commercial Association advocated improvement of the Missouri River as part of a system of navigable waterways connecting the interior of the continent from the Rocky Mountains to as far east as Pittsburgh, and from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico. The Great Lakes-to-the-Gulf Waterway system the association envisioned served Chicago as the center of a water transportation network that served Great Lakes cities and ports, as well as cities, farms, and manufacturers through the Midwest to the Gulf of Mexico, the Panama Canal, and beyond. The system they advocated included all rivers of the Mississippi drainage; each developed as a regional unit for best benefit of moving American trade goods to international harbors. In particular, the association advocated building channels on Ohio, Mississippi, Illinois, and Missouri rivers deep enough for the deep-sea freighters of the time. Such channels, they imagined, stood fourteen feet deep and serviced all the major cities in the Mississippi Valley. A Mississippi River commission with governmental regulatory powers would regulate and coordinate river traffic with railroad and road transportation. For the association, the "slow freight thorough

⁶⁴ W.K. Cavanaugh, "Inland Waterways," *The Independent* 64 (May 1908): 1144; Jones, "The Improvement of the Missouri River, 178-88.

⁶⁵ Schneiders, *Unruly River*, 252.

fare” that Neihardt proposed connected agricultural regions to the world, afforded further growth to a developing manufacturing economy, and allowed Americans to inhabit lands that once had little commercial communication with the rest of the nation. “The Great Middle West,” the Chicago Commercial Association wrote, “has nothing more to ask of Nature to make it the industrial and commercial center of the civilized world. Its urgent appeal is to the government of the United States in developing these natural means of communication which will, of themselves, make this country, the richest, most prosperous and powerful nation on the globe.”⁶⁶

In 1907, Theodore Roosevelt established the Inland Waterways Commission to investigate potential for waterways development. The commission expressed Roosevelt’s conservationist drive. The co-chair of the seven-man commission, Francis Newlands, stated that Roosevelt expected the commission to produce “a full and comprehensive plan for the development and utilization of all the natural resources of the country relating to water. Its primary purpose was to facilitate water transportation, upon which the prosperity of the country so largely depends.” His remarks on the mission of the new group included all the priorities that river improvement advocates had developed over the previous forty years and that Neihardt wrote into *The River and I*. The government neglected river development, he wrote. Railroads dominated Midwestern transportation markets, overcharged customers, and inhibited commercial development in regions that lacked rails but possessed easy river access. The nation’s productive capacity outstripped railroads’ abilities to transport goods to market, restraining commerce. The nation stood at the dawn of a new era of international

⁶⁶ *From the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico: A Report of the Deep Waterway Committee of the Chicago Commercial Association* (Chicago: Chicago Commercial Association, 1906), 1-31; William A. Shelton, “The Lakes-to-the-Gulf Deep Waterway,” *Journal of Political Economy* 20 (June 1912): 541-573.

trade. Modern transportation on standardized rivers gave the nation's interior access to that trade. Newlands wrote that the commission viewed river development as a matter of interstate commerce. The federal government should develop American waterways for the general welfare.⁶⁷

A year later, as Neihardt floated through the Upper Missouri country, the Inland Waterways recommended legislation for a permanent committee or commission with the authority to coordinate the efforts of government agencies in river development and coordination of all internal and international trade.⁶⁸ Newlands wrote the legislation for the commission's permanent establishment and outlined the scope of its powers. Immediately on getting into committee, however, Senators tore it apart. The bill died a slow, painful, and, for Newlands, shameful death. Newlands saw the bill as a triumph for science, government management, and social reform. On the other hand, river improvement advocates, reclamationists, and congressional delegations understood that a permanent commission took their pork barrel water projects away.⁶⁹ Business associations resented the ham-handed way the commission sought to inject itself into state and local affairs. Government agencies resisted central control. River improvement associations, railroads, corporations, cities, construction companies, and potential government contractors all jockeyed for their particular interests.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Newlands, "Use and Development of American Waterways," 48-66; Newlands, "The Development of American Waterways," *North American Review* 187, (June 1908): 873-879.

⁶⁸ W. J. McGee, "Water as a Resource," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 33 (May 1909): 37-50.

⁶⁹ Donald J. Pisani, "Beyond the Hundredth Meridian," 466-482, esp. 472-3

⁷⁰ Ira G. Clark, *Water in New Mexico: A History of Its Management and Use* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987), 140; Donald J. Pisani, "A Conservation Myth: The Troubled Childhood of the Multiple-Use Idea," *Agricultural History* 76 (Spring 2002): 154-71; Pisani, "Water Planning in the Progressive Era," 389-418.

Newlands wrote the waterways legislation as an amendment to an appropriations bill for harbors and rivers. He, slogged it out in Congress and found himself at loggerheads with other senators who questioned the constitutionality of giving government such a wide reach. The amendment failed, and none of the mess got on the president. The Inland Waterways Commission demonstrated why third-party commissions worked so well for Roosevelt. On the one hand, he could float ambitious ideas that he liked—he created commissions on civil service reform, restoration of rural life, corporation reform, federal agency consolidation, waterways systems, and more. He appointed advocates and experts who wanted to pursue their particular interests. He sent them off to investigate, report their findings, and recommend legislation. If the recommendations turned into successful legislation, Roosevelt and commission members put feathers in their caps. If the committees produced problems, however, like the Inland Waterways Commission did, committee members and legislation sponsors took the heat—not Roosevelt himself.⁷¹

While Newlands' bill lingered in Congress, Neihardt published *The River and I* in a context of growing demand for river improvement. But this demand wasn't so much for a coordinated national program for waterways development as it was for increased government funding for status-quo pork-barrel, regional politics. The demise of the Inland Waterways Commission and Congress' lackadaisical view of Missouri River improvement left always in question what form a national water development policy would take, who would implement it, and to what purpose. The river improvement movement possessed impetus and energy. They had the technology, the faith of human might in controlling the river, and confidence in material and social progress. But they loved government money and independence from

⁷¹ Clark, *Water in New Mexico*, 139-41; Schneiders, *Unruly River*, 90-1.

government interference. In this, they gained a spokesperson in Neihardt who stated the overarching arguments but who would not harm their ability to continue taking home specialized projects that enriched businessmen and politicians. While Neihardt recorded a personal journey down a historic river, he used the narrative as a way to communicate river advocates' ideas about river improvement, plead the government neglect case, and argue against railroads. He based his entreaties for making the river useful again on a nostalgic and even euphoric recall of the old days when men heaved their livings out of the river with brute force. If his outlook tilted toward the optimistic when it came to altering the river for economic purposes, it reflected the efforts of river improvement advocates long at work on changing the Missouri River into an economic asset for the Midwest and the nation one little bit at a time.

CHAPTER 3

William Ellsworth Smythe and the Irrigated Paradise

“Thus saith the Lord, ‘make this valley full of ditches . . . ye shall not see wind, neither shall ye see rain; yet that valley shall be filled with water, that ye may drink, both ye and your cattle and your beasts.’” –Kings II, 3:16-7

“The true opportunity of the American people,” William Ellsworth Smythe wrote in *The Conquest of Arid America*, lies “in the vast unsettled regions of their own country.” Americans, he continued, “subjugated the Atlantic seaboard to the uses of modern life.” They then pushed their country into the verdant Midwest and South. As they moved into the Mississippi Valley, Americans “made virtually complete the conquest and occupation of eastern America.”¹ “Some one has said that God never made a world, that He started several,” Smythe wrote, “including the one on which we dwell, but that He depends on man, working in partnership with Him and in harmony with the laws of the universe, to bring the world to completion.”² As the nation expanded to the boundaries of the arid West, he argued, “the mighty forces which molded the prosperity of the past ceased to operate.” He maintained, however, that national expansion “is not done.”³

¹ William E. Smythe, “The Conquest of Arid America,” *Century Illustrated Magazine* (May 1895): 85.

² Smythe, *Conquest of Arid America* (1905), 327; Rowley, “Visions of a Watered West,” 144; Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 118-22.

³ Smythe, *Conquest of Arid America* (1905), xiii.

As a religious man, Smythe thought that nothing less than the preservation of democracy hinged upon Americans' work in the desert.⁴ The settlers of desert wastes were "the breed of men who make the Republic possible, who keep the lamp of faith burning through the night of corrupt commercialism, and who bear the Ark of the Covenant to the Promised Land." Irrigation, he thought, made deserts bloom and gave Americans new spaces and put them in contact with the land from which their democracy developed and grew. Western settlement represented a new phase in the preordained rise of the American people to new cultural and economic heights. A free society, Smythe thought, depended on individual land ownership and agricultural labor. The values of every nation, he wrote, "are chiefly influenced by the manner in which the soil is owned."⁵ Land in individual possession gave their owners freedom to use it "as they see fit, and to have the exclusive enjoyment of the fruits of their own labor." Individual land ownership preserved democratic ideals, he believed, since farmers depend on no one, but their communities depend on them. Federally directed water development and management, he argued, provided farms for 100 million people in the West. Irrigation created new patterns of settlement based on the small, intensely productive farm that "blesses its proprietor with industrial independence and crowns him with social equality. That is democracy."⁶

Smythe believed the touch of water to desert soil performed social miracles. He feared the city and its immigrants diminished the influence of the farm and rural values on

⁴ Smythe, *Conquest of Arid America* (1900), 4-6, 43-4, 298-301; Robert G. Athearn, *The Mythic West in Twentieth Century America* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), 31-33; Limerick, *Desert Passages*, 77; Richard White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 405.

⁵ Smythe, *Conquest of Arid America* (1900), 20-9, 42-9, 299; Smythe, *Conquest of Arid America* (1905), xiii; Neil Evernden, *The Natural Alien: Human Kind and the Environment* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), x, 48-52; Minter, *Landscapes of Reform*, 1-16; Pisani, "Reclamation and Social Engineering," 49.

⁶ Smythe, *Conquest of Arid America* (1900), xvi, 247, 299-300; Smythe, *Conquest of Arid America* (1905), xiii.

American social and economic life.⁷ City life drew Americans far from their agrarian origins. Overcrowded cities' vice, crime, and political corruption, Smythe believed, undermined personal morality and destabilized the traditional family. He understood that American industrial progress produced vast economic growth. At the same time, he thought unplanned urban growth generated social disorganization and concentrations of racial minorities that threatened a society based on Anglo-Saxon superiority. Smythe perceived that assembly-line labor produced lives of endless, soul-crushing monotony and degraded moral values. The city produced phalanxes of empty-headed workers and was a breeding ground for domestic violence, inebriation, and poverty, as well as socialism and anarchy. In such an environment, the values of hard work, self-sufficiency, and individual achievement withered and died. The city portended the end of the American democratic experiment.⁸

Smythe saw little contradiction in writing about the marvels of farm life from his position as a middle-class professional who possessed little appetite for farming. From 1890 forward, he lived in cities. He made his money as a writer, speaker, and developer. He remained, through it all, a powerful theorist for the irrigation cause. Few people in the new century romanticized the West's potential for social and economic expansion more than Smythe. Even fewer achieved his hyperbolic, rhetorical heights or activist energy. Fired with the vision of a new agrarian society, he deployed romantic, extravagant language and expert organizational skill in his effort to bring water to the desert. Where Neihardt opined about the beauty of the Missouri River and voiced the sentiment of powerful forces behind river improvement, Smythe spoke of the wonders of irrigation and stated the leading arguments of

⁷ Smythe, *Conquest of Arid America*, (1900), 49.

⁸ Smythe, *Conquest of Arid America*, (1900) 45-9, 301-9; Smythe, *A 20th Century Colony* (Chicago: 1895), 30; Blumin, "Driven to the City," 47-53.

the irrigation cause. Both men dreamed, romanticized, and drew on nostalgic, simplified versions of American history to communicate their stories. Politicians, corporate manufacturers, and land speculators all found potential benefits and profits in government-sponsored irrigation. They welcomed Smythe as an adroit and idealistic publicist for their movement.⁹ Neihardt saw *The River and I* as a step in his career as a writer. Smythe was a careerist promoter who believed his own bombast. In the early 1890s, he stood at the forefront of the irrigation cause. He established influential western irrigation congresses that brought together industry, politicians, and investors. Through his magazine, *Irrigation Age* Smythe wowed readers with a gospel of irrigation that added new layers of commercial promise on old myths of western expansion.¹⁰ With friends in Senator Francis Newlands of Nevada and Theodore Roosevelt, he influenced politicians, business people, and western farmers in the irrigation movement and set the stage for bureaucratic management of water in the West. Donald Worster called him “easily the most prominent ideologue for irrigation in the late nineteenth century.” He lost control of the irrigation movement to profit-minded and practical activists after 1895. He continued, however, to promote his high ideals for irrigationist vision. By then, it seems, he believed his own bombast. At the turn of the century, his books *The Conquest of Arid America* and *Constructive Democracy: The Economics of a Square Deal* spoke to a generation of western land developers, irrigators, and town boosters. He pushed forward into the new century, undeterred, with the indomitable spirit of a crusader.¹¹

⁹ Pisani, “Water Planning in the Progressive Era,” 389-94, Smythe, *Conquest of Arid America* (1969), 43, 82-3.

¹⁰ Hugh T. Lovin, “Dreamers, Schemers, and Doers of Idaho Irrigation,” *Agricultural History* 76 (Spring 2002): 233-4

¹¹ Charles Edward Banks, *The English Ancestry and Homes of the Pilgrim Fathers* (Bowie, Maryland: Heritage Books, 2002): 98-9; Rowley, *The Bureau of Reclamation*, 77-9; Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 35-40, 118.

Smythe's promotion of agricultural and rural life represented his rejection of cities as major features of American cultural and economic life. At the time, back-to-land activists, and country-life proponents, such as Theodore Roosevelt and Liberty Hyde Bailey, looked upon unplanned urban growth with apprehension. Along with small-rural colony activist Charles Weeks, and Wall Street lawyer, political philosopher, and author Bolton Hall, Smythe combined rational Jeffersonian benefits to national political life and economy with romantic notions of the moral good of rural life. These armchair agriculturalists based their theories on nostalgia-influenced notions of small-town, small-producer agriculture. They put their faith in the mythical Jeffersonian ideal. For them, farm life promised physical and mental health, happiness, and satisfaction in accomplishment. Renewal of American farm life formed a bulwark against the deleterious effects of urbanization on American social and political life. Rural life for middle-class professionals, they presumed, reinforced republican values and traditional families. In a time when many Americans left the farm for life in the city, they argued that farming fortified stable social, racial, and gender hierarchies they thought the city damaged.¹²

While Smythe envisioned smallholdings where people lived healthy, fulfilling, moral existences close to the land, more practical reformers understood the difficulty of farm labor and attempted to find ways to make agrarian life better. "The great rural interests are human interests," Roosevelt proclaimed in his autobiography, "and good crops are of little value to

¹² Eric Boime, "Beating Plowshares into Swords": The Colorado River Delta, the Yellow Peril, and the Movement for Federal Reclamation, 1901–1928," *Pacific Historical Review* 78 (February 2009): 27-53, esp. 35-7; David B. Danbom, "Romantic Agrarianism in Twentieth-Century America," *Agricultural History* 65 (Autumn 1991): 1-12; Lovin, "Dreamers, Schemers, and Doers," 232-243; Alan Michelson and Katherine Solomonson, "Remnants of a Failed Utopia: Reconstructing Runnymede's Agricultural Landscape," *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 6 (1997): 3-20, esp. 4-5;. See also, Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), and Lears, *No Place of Grace*.

the farmer unless they open the door to a good kind of life on the farm.” But unlike Smythe, Weeks, and Hall, Roosevelt understood that farmers lived difficult lives. Their incomes fluctuated widely. Children often worked and forewent school, or they gained rudimentary educations due to the demands of farm life. Roosevelt bemoaned the hard work that women undertook in both field and house. Roosevelt and Bailey saw greater migration out of agricultural reasons as cause for concern. As president, he established the Commission on Country Life in 1908. He and Gifford Pinchot sought market efficiencies that would make rural life more modern and farm labor easier. Liberty Hyde Bailey believed that state-sponsored extension services, new methods in horticulture and agronomy, and practical education revitalized the American farm. While Bailey actually attempted to live on a farm and Roosevelt understood the character of agrarian life, Smythe possessed little interest in the practicalities of husbandry. He never asked prospective farmers for their opinions but instead tried to sell policy makers, industrialists, and politicians on the irrigation wonder.¹³

With greater fervor and determination than these other men, Smythe promoted rationally planned irrigated communities in the West as outlets for restive urban populations. Bailey sought to ease farmers’ lives through education and practical help. Roosevelt understood that efficient and modern production improved farm life. Smythe, however, wanted activist government to reshape the American farm through land settlement policy and water development. Planned irrigation, efficient settlement, and modern equipment remade

¹³ Smythe, *Conquest of Arid America* (1900) xiii-xi, 298-309; Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 1-9, 133-66; Roosevelt, *Autobiography*, 452-5; Dennis Roth, “The Country Life Movement,” in *Federal Rural Development Policy in the Twentieth Century*, Dennis Roth, Anne B. W. Effland, and Douglas R. Bowers, eds., (Washington: Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2002), 1-6; Rowley, “Visions of a Watered West,” 144; Richard White, “Poor Men on Poor Lands: The Back-to-the-Land Movement of the Early Twentieth Century: A Case Study,” *Pacific Historical Review* 49 (February 1980): 105; Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 11-4, 169. See also, Liberty Hyde Bailey, *The Country Life Movement in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1911) and Paula Baker, *The Moral Frameworks of Public Life: Gender, Politics, and the State in Rural New York, 1870-1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

the farm into an endeavor for city-dwellers. He argued that if government brought urbanites together with capital and corporate organization, Americans could manufacture a new rural existence where people lived healthier, more moral, and more upstanding lives than in the city.¹⁴

While Smythe often spoke of city dwellers in broad terms, his particular interest lay with the bourgeois professionals who, he believed, city life most negatively affected. Like Roosevelt and Bailey, Smythe believed that national progress depended on the vitality of the middle class. But for Smythe, life in the country offered a full menu of options for the merchant's and professional's rejuvenation. "The decline of the small tradesman in great cities is a pitiful, even if familiar spectacle," he wrote. "His only recourse is to become an employee of a richer man or corporation . . . submissively doing the will of other men." While the middle class managers might live perfectly happy and satisfying lives, Smythe believed that they felt this way because urban life was too easy on them. Middle-class professionals, Smythe opined, "prepare to win what they conceive to be the easy rewards of professional careers as lawyers, doctors, teachers, musicians, and so on." Smythe dreamily believed that urban professionals stopped climbing the economic ladder out of sloth. He maintained that "it is much easier to find the way to the middle or the bottom of the list. The result is a surplus of professional people . . . especially in cities and towns of our older states." He called these middle-class men destined for mediocrity the "army of the half employed." The semi-prosperous professional existed in "the continental expanse of human life" between the very rich and poor classes.¹⁵ He based this view on his notion that city

¹⁴ Limerick, *Desert Passages*, 77.

¹⁵ Smythe, *Conquest of Arid America* (1900), 317; Roth, "The Country Life Movement," 1-6; White, "Poor Men on Poor Lands," 105-31, esp. 106-11.

dwellers found limited opportunities to own property. In the cities, “almost everybody lives in rented premises,” he wrote in his 1921 book, *City Homes on Country Lanes*. These landless people “pay tribute to a landlord.” Without recompense, renters increased the value of the landlord’s property. “City life, as now organized, holds out no hope in this respect . . . It is a condition that strikes at the roots of human freedom.”¹⁶

As a full-blown dreamer, Smythe did not follow consistent arguments but, instead, followed lines of argumentation that fit particular circumstances, audiences, and times. His stilted logic often swerved chaotically through his texts. He often disregarded history and, sometimes, even common sense as he pursued federally sponsored irrigation. But he gained audiences and legitimacy in public circles with themes of wholesome agrarian life, domination of nature, and American technological achievement. He believed, for instance, that “surplus” middle-class men and women throughout American history “turned to the soil and to the conquest of natural resources; and that, as a class, they have been absorbed and utilized in the developments of an outreaching civilization.” As the nation grew to the edge of the dry plains, however, such surplus people had nowhere to go, nowhere to find the challenges that made them whole, industrious, and moral people. With the theorist’s voice and mindset he wrote that in the West these “surplus men and money may be brought to surplus resources, and applied, under sound business principles, to the making of homes, industries, and institutions in consonance with the traditions of our race and the genius of our people.” This new class of independent agrarians, he proposed, slowed and even reversed trends toward increasingly concentrated accumulations of money and power. Small aggregations of residences within walking distance of intensely farmed irrigated fields

¹⁶ Smythe, *Conquest of Arid America* (1900), 252.

offered the middle class professional both an income from agriculture and a place to practice his profession.¹⁷ He asserted that vibrant communities needed lawyers, doctors, and accountants. These professionals could work their own land as gentlemen, part-time farmers. This new, planned small-scale capitalist and cooperative world, he believed, accelerated the nation's material and cultural progress. "I believe the world is going to be a better world in the next decade—the next generation—the next century—than ever before in the history of the race. And I believe the next passion of mankind will be the soil—that we shall 'take Occasion by the hand and make the bounds of freedom wider yet.'"¹⁸

Smythe ignored the routine, stultifying drudgery, and backbreaking labor associated with farm labor. He also disregarded the acquisitive nature of modern capitalism. Farmers wanted to make money like anyone else. But he had no need to apprehend this reality. He visualized, promoted, and supported an ideal of agrarian life—a cliché that possessed immense ideological power at the turn of the twentieth century. He hypothesized perfect farms on orderly irrigated grids and equated farm ownership with democracy. Arid America, he believed, provided a healthy environment with dry air and plenty of space, prospects for vigorous physical labor, and escape from the stresses of life in the city. He imagined that urban, middle-class men, given the chance, would clamor to recreate their lives as yeoman farmers at the front edge of the American empire.¹⁹

¹⁷ Smythe, *Conquest of Arid America*(1900), xiii-vi, 282-4, 290-309, 317; Smythe, *Constructive Democracy*, 257-60. Smythe, *City Homes on Country Lanes*, 17-20; See also, Elizabeth Ammons, "The Engineer as Cultural Hero and Willa Cather's First Novel, *Alexander's Bridge*," *American Quarterly* 38 (Winter 1986): 746-60.

¹⁸ Smythe, *Conquest of Arid America* (1900), 246-7; Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 10-5; Daniel E. Bender, *American Abyss: Savagery and Civilization in the Age of Industry* (Ithaca: Cornell university Press, 2009), 4, 69-72; Hays, *Response to Industrialism*, 25-6; Kevin P. Murphy, *Political Manhood: Red Bloods, Mollycoddles, and the Politics of Progressive Era Reform* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 1-10.

¹⁹ Smythe, *Conquest of Arid America* (1900) xiii-xi; Limerick, *Desert Passages*, 77-80.

William Smythe and the Calling

William Smythe became a farming enthusiast early on and despite his background. He was born in Worcester, Massachusetts, on Christmas Eve, 1861, from old-line New England stock.²⁰ His father manufactured shoes and circulated in Worcester's elite society. But the family's shoe business suffered severe setbacks when Smythe was in his early teens. The elder Smythe's financial problems deprived his son a privileged upbringing. William Smythe attended public schools, spending his free time reading biographies of what he considered great men. The life and work of Horace Greeley caught Smythe's attention when he was a teen. Smythe biographer George Wharton James wrote that Smythe "learned to love the smell of printers' ink," and apprenticed to the trade.²¹ Smythe started in the newspaper business, James opined, "crammed full of 'Old Horace,' his enthusiasm for agriculture, for the West, his broad humanitarianism, and (Smythe) was fired with Greeley's presentation of Fourierism, and the new institutions of benefit and blessings to be derived from the building up of colonies."²²

With starry-eyed optimism, Smythe published a small newspaper called *The Yankee* in his teens, in which he featured short stories and agricultural reports that amateurs like him authored. When he turned sixteen, Smythe's father asked him to prepare for college or take up a trade. Smythe opted for newspaper work, following, he believed, in Greeley's footsteps. He took a job at the *Southbridge Journal*, a newspaper in a Worcester district of the same

²⁰ Kirk A. Weiss, "Marshall V. Hartranft, William E. Smythe and The Founding of the Second Little Lands Colony in Tujunga, California," *Southern California Quarterly* 80 (Summer 1998): 173-182.

²¹ See, Harriet B. Smythe, "Biographical Sketch" *Irrigation Age* 14 (October 1899): 3-5; George W. James, *Heroes of California: The Story of the Founders of the Golden State as Narrated by Themselves or Gleaned from Other Sources* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1910), 461-81, Lawrence B. Lee, "Introduction to the 1969 Edition," in *Conquest of Arid America* (1969), xxix-xliii; Lee, "William E. Smythe and San Diego, 1901-1908," *Journal of San Diego History* 19 (January 1973): 10-24; Limerick, *Desert Passages*, 77-90.

²² James, *Heroes of California*, 468.

name. The *Journal* needed a writer and journalist. Since he proved to be a poor printer but talented writer, he shifted from the printer's to the journalist's trade. George Mason Whitaker owned half interest in the paper and served as its editor. Whitaker authored several books on the milk trade in Boston and Chicago and was later the editor of the *New England Farmer*, which, by one account, placed itself "in the very front rank of agricultural journalism." Under Whitaker's tutelage, Smythe linked together his interests in agriculture, the health of the American farm, and the promise of agrarian life.²³

When Smythe left the *Journal* in 1881, he was a journeyman newspaperman. He wrote for several New England newspapers and took the editorship of the *Medford Mercury* at the age of nineteen. At the *Mercury*, he reported on Massachusetts politics and often surprised elected officials who thought that someone of his journalistic caliber and reputation should be older. In his early twenties, he graduated to daily papers, including the august *Boston Herald*, and started his own book publishing business. When this enterprise failed in 1888, he went west to edit a town-site developer's newspaper, the *Kearney* (Nebraska) *Expositor*.²⁴ He was just the man for the job. He believed in Greeley's famous, if apocryphal command to "Go West, young man!" Since the *Expositor* promoted the owners' speculative enterprise, Smythe wrote lovingly and excitedly about life in the West.²⁵

²³ Charles Morris, *Men of the Century: An Historical Work Giving Portraits and Sketches of Eminent Citizens of the United States* (Philadelphia: L.R. Hamersly, 1896), 266; Harriet B. Smythe, "Biographical Sketch," 3-5; James, *Heroes of California*, 469-70.

²⁴ Limerick, *Desert Passages*, 78.

²⁵ Thomas Fuller, "'Go West, young man!'—An Elusive Slogan," *Indiana Magazine of History* 100 (September 2004): 231-242; Limerick, *Desert Passages*, 77-9. The idea of going west per Greeley's idealistic command obsessed Smythe. In the closing pages of *Constructive Democracy*, he wrote, "Go West, young man, and grow up with the strong breed who are breaking the silence of the wilderness and planting new institutions, after the fashion of their fathers." See, Smythe, *Conquest of Arid America*, (1900), 107; Smythe, *Constructive Democracy*, 342; William E. Smythe, "The Stepchild of the Republic," *North American Review* 163 (July 1896): 37-46, esp. 37.

When he took over as editor of the *Expositor* in March 1889, severe drought had taken hold of Nebraska and grew worse in the following year.²⁶ The land development company that owned the *Expositor* folded in 1890, unable to lure potential settlers due to the drought. By this time, Smythe had earned a reputation in the state as an insightful editorialist and newspaperman. He assumed the editor's position at the daily *Omaha Weekly Bee*. Now completely focused on irrigation and with a platform for his beliefs, he promoted irrigation in the *Bee*'s pages with the fervor of a religious reformer.²⁷ He later wrote that the drought that strangled Nebraska in the 1890s was "a calamity so deep and widespread that it staggered even the optimism of the West." Farmers west of the Rockies, he argued, needed water to get anything from their lands. "The men of the semi-arid plains," however, "clung stubbornly to the belief that, in some mysterious manner, rainfall increased with railroad building, settlement, and cultivation of the land." Drought, he wrote, crushed these superstitions. "A psychological moment had come for the rise of a new cause which should take hold the popular heart and go on . . . until it became the greatest constructive moment of all time."²⁸ In his mind, "irrigation seemed the biggest thing in the world," Smythe wrote of his personal transformation. "It was not merely a matter of ditches and acres, but a philosophy, a religion, and a programme of practical magnitude of the work that had fallen to my hand and knew

²⁶ See, Gilbert C. Fite, "Great Plains Farming: A Century of Change and Adjustment," *Agricultural History* 51 (January 1977): 245-8; John Opie, "100 Years of Climate Risk Assessment on the High Plains: Which Farm Paradigm Does Irrigation Serve?" *Agricultural History* 63 (Spring 1989): 244-5.

²⁷ Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), 322, 357-8; Weiss, "Marshall V. Hartranft, William E. Smythe", 173-182, esp. 177.

²⁸ Smythe, *Constructive Democracy*, 335; Smythe, *Conquest of Arid America* (1900), 45-7, 117-8, 264-5; Martin E. Carlson, "William E. Smythe: Irrigation Crusader," *Journal of the West* 7 (January 1968): 41-7.

that I must cut loose from all other interests and endeavor to rouse the nation to a realizing sense of its duty and opportunity.”²⁹

The Irrigation Congresses

From his post at the *Bee*, he connected with a growing number of irrigation advocates in the West. Hoping to solidify them into a movement, he founded *The Irrigation Age: A Journal of Western America* in early 1891 as both a business venture and a means to promote irrigation, its prospects, and its promises to agribusinesses, developers, and land speculators.³⁰ Whether *Irrigation Age* writers promoted sugar beet farming in the Pecos Valley or diversified farms in New Mexico, they infused articles with optimism and reformist zeal. Smythe himself led the editorial page with great ideas about the workings of democracy and irrigation. Just the touch of water, Smythe opined, produced new western Edens. Man met nature through water and nature produced unending bounty for man. “The arid region will owe the variety and symmetry of its industrial life to the extraordinary generosity of nature,” Smythe proclaimed in 1894. “The application of man’s energy and faith alone is necessary to produce in the western half of the continent the most perfect civilization the world has ever seen.” But energy and faith was not enough. The individual settler no longer faced the hardships of aridity by himself, Smythe wrote, for now irrigation was “a problem of institutions and a civilization. It involves the destinies of the States, the future of National expansion, the outworking of the best possibilities of humanity itself.”³¹ One editorialist

²⁹ Smythe, *Conquest of Arid America*, (1905), 266-7.

³⁰ Rowley, *Bureau of Reclamation*, 207.

³¹ Unsigned, “Irrigation Becoming General,” *Irrigation Age* 9 (January 1896): 20-2; George R. Buckman, “Sugar Beets in the Pecos Valley,” *Irrigation Age* 9 (January 1896): 22-3; F.C. Barker, “The Diversified Farm:

wrote in an unsigned opinion piece that, “Irrigation is spreading through the United States like a prairie fire in a windstorm . . . Verily, the age of prayer for rain has been relegated to the dark past.”³²

Irrigation Age advertising is a fascinating study in turn-of-the century business-to-business marketing. Smythe targeted the magazine at farm implement manufacturers, land speculators, and home builders. Lofty rhetoric in his editorials said less to farmers than it did to prospective businessmen and investors who understood farms as revenue centers and profit as a fundamental social good. Smythe found no irony in selling ads to people who owned factories in cities and who made their money using the exact middle-class managers and urban labor Smythe himself felt sorry for or demeaned. The promises of irrigation Smythe spun in *Irrigation Age* meant more to bond brokers and investment bankers than to actual farmers.³³ There was money in irrigation and it took people like Smythe to pump it out. Irrigation equipment companies, land developers, and implement dealers purchased the advertising that made the magazine a successful business venture. *Irrigation Age* devoted pages to farm implement and heavy equipment manufacturers, seed brokers, and railroad companies with land to sell and seats to fill. The same mortgage and loan companies that owned property in American cities advertised in the magazine, as did chambers of commerce, town promoters, and leisure companies.³⁴

in Diversified Farming by Irrigation Lies the Salvation of Agriculture,” *Irrigation Age* 9 (January 1896): 27-30; “The Progress of Western America,” *Irrigation Age* 6 (January 1894): 2.

³² Untitled editorial, *Irrigation Age* 1 (1891): 76.

³³ Lovin, “Dreamers, Schemers, and Doers,” 233-4; Donald Worster, “Freedom and Want: The Western Paradox of Aridity,” *Halcyon* 14 (1992): 27-35.

³⁴ Smythe, *Conquest of Arid America*, (1900), 147; Pisani, *To Reclaim a Divided West*, 235; Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 118-20.

While seed and implement companies advertised in the magazine, the size and number of ads that targeted other businesses outsized, outnumbered, and outclassed those marketing to ordinary farmers. Companies that manufactured spiral riveted water pipes, new turbine water wheels, and hydraulic engines paid for the magazine's production. In the opening and closing pages of each edition of the magazine, the Santa Fe, Great Northern, and Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy railroads proclaimed the superiority of their routes and accommodations. Touring companies offered chartered train tours to mountain resorts. Land agents, survey companies, and property lawyers filled the advertising columns of *Irrigation Age*. Bond and stock brokers, banks, and investment companies pedaled their services to prospective investors. Certainly a farmer working his forty acres would need a Munson Typewriter. The Chicago, Illinois, company boasted in a July 1896 edition of *Irrigation Age* that it offered a "standard of excellence, controlled by no trust or combine." Their top-of-the line model, the ad stated, "contains more modern and important features than can be found in any other *one* typewriter."³⁵

Irrigation Age enjoyed wide circulation. Smythe assumed almost completely on his own the role of propagandist and leader of the irrigation cause.³⁶ Despite his agrarian ideals, Smythe provided little practical advice for his professional-class farmers. Magazine editorials and testimonials praised him for his work. Other magazine pieces expounded on what Smythe considered the missionary work of irrigation. His editorials called irrigation devotees, businessmen, and town boosters to political activism. He endorsed politicians and civic leaders who favored the irrigation cause. In his editorials and reports on the progress of

³⁵ See, *Irrigation Age* 1-12 (February 1, 1891-December 1, 1903), esp. vol. 6, 143.

³⁶ "Untitled Article 11," *Southern Cultivator and Industrial Journal* 53 (January 1895): 31; Lee, "Introduction to the 1969 Edition," in *Conquest of Arid America* (1969), xxxi; Pisani, "Forests and Reclamation," 71; Webb, *Great Plains*, 350-8; Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 119.

water projects, Smythe touched themes of western expansion, Jeffersonian democracy, and national renewal. His opinion pieces promoted state and national water policies that favored real estate developers, towns, and merchants.³⁷ Reports and commentaries highlighted profitable aspects of irrigation for entrepreneurs. The magazine's feature articles, news items, and editorials enlightened investors on the potential profits, bond and stock prospects, and potential land buys. When Smythe and his writers detailed the problems would-be farmers faced on irrigated lands, such as poor drainage or soil salinization, they promoted technological fixes, services, and machinery that increased irrigation companies' profits. Regular news articles were often little more than paid advertisements. Articles touted the work of excavating, drilling, and construction companies. Writers, scientists, and engineers filled *Irrigation Age* with stories of irrigation successes, technical articles about best practices for excavators, and research articles on soil, water, and climate.³⁸

Smythe also devoted his energies to promoting irrigation beyond the pages of *Irrigation Age*. Just months before he established the magazine, while still editor at the *Bee*, he attended a convention of Nebraska state politicians and businessmen, where they discussed water development and irrigation issues. The gathering so impressed Smythe that he leveraged his growing reputation in irrigation advocacy circles and organized a national congress for irrigation activists for the following year. At first, he used the *Bee* to promote the event. The more involved he became, the more he saw that irrigation needed an activist speaker and expert organizer. He resigned his position at the *Bee* within the year and took up the irrigation cause full time. The magazine brought in good income, and he devoted

³⁷ Untitled editorial, *Irrigation Age* 7 (July 1894), 234-7; Pisani, *To Reclaim a Divided West*, 236.

³⁸ "Table of Contents," *Irrigation Age* 1 (January 1891): vii; *Irrigation Age* 7 (July 1894): vii; *Irrigation Age* 9 (January 1896): vii; *Irrigation Age* 11 (January 1897): v; Lawrence B. Lee, "William Ellsworth Smythe and the Irrigation Movement: A Reconsideration," *Pacific Historical Review* 41 (August 1972): 289-311, esp. 77-9.

Irrigation Age editorial space to building excitement for the congress. With Utah Governor Arthur Lloyd Thomas and the Salt Lake City Chamber of Commerce behind him, he opened the first National Irrigation Congress in Salt Lake City on the weekend of September 15, 1891.³⁹

Smythe hoped to build the disparate and often competing irrigationists into an all-encompassing and solidified movement. The congress revealed, however, the difficulty he faced. Irrigationists shared a belief that irrigation made money, not much more. Each of the congress attendees possessed an idea for irrigation projects, and each wanted their own priorities met first. Despite having organized the congress, Smythe could not get his ideas for building practical, small, irrigated middle-class communities past the convention's agenda committee. Small farms interested them less than appealing to business associations, stock and land companies, and irrigation equipment suppliers. Smythe easily put his principles aside and worked to make conventioners feel good about being in the same rooms with one another.⁴⁰

Settlers and farmers did not attend the congress. Smythe did not mean it to appeal to them. They might have mucked up the drive for absolute agreement on government support for irrigation with practical questions about agricultural production in hostile environments. Besides most farmers were too busy to worry about pie-in-the-sky conventions.⁴¹ The congress attracted a diverse crowd of non-agrarians: state and local elected officials, federal government agency representatives, and lawyers, as well as journalists, irrigation company

³⁹ John R. Ganoë, "The Origin of a National Reclamation Policy," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 18 (June 1931): 38-9; William L. Hewitt, "The 'Cowboyification' of Wyoming Agriculture," *Agricultural History* 76 (Spring 2002): 481-494, esp. 485-6; Pisani, "Forests and Reclamation," 71-2.

⁴⁰ Lee, "William Ellsworth Smythe," 297-8.

⁴¹ Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 119.

officials, and business people. Some thought that states ought to pursue irrigation on their own, others that Washington ought to do it for the states. Either way, the delegates overwhelmingly agreed federal money, engineers, and experts eased the up-front costs for irrigation projects. In doing this, federal support stimulated business and profit. The carefully crafted *Memorial to the Congress of the United States from the National Irrigation Congress* stated that the convention represented “to a notable degree that large section of the Union to which the rainfall is inadequate for the purposes of agriculture.”⁴² Despite this democratic tone, the convention included profit-minded businessmen, members of chambers of commerce and commercial clubs, and railroad executives. They decided that “the General Government has nearly reached the limit of its capacity to provide homes for settlers on the public domain . . . The tracts now remaining are almost wholly such as can not be sold or otherwise disposed of under the liberal provisions of our land laws.” Since settlers, railroads, and land companies already possessed easily irrigated land, *Memorial’s* writers maintained, the remaining public domain in western states must “be fitted for cultivation by systems of canals, reservoirs, or artesian wells, involving expenditures well beyond the resources of individual settlers.” Congress attendees expected the federal government to provide new fields of opportunity for profit.⁴³

The *Memorial* demonstrated that the irrigationists’ free enterprise expansion dream hinged on federal government land, money, or bureaucratic power, or all three. The document also showed that the common farmer, the smallholder Smythe so often wrote about in glowing terms, worked in the irrigation scheme for the benefit of landowners,

⁴² *Memorial to the Congress of the United States from the National Irrigation Congress Held at Salt Lake City, September 15, 16, and 17, 1891* (Salt Lake City: Press of the Irrigation Age, 1892), 4.

⁴³ *Memorial to the Congress of the United States*, 4; Rowley, *Bureau of Reclamation*, 78; Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 119.

corporations, and banks. Even if the *Memorial* stated that irrigation facilitated settlement of the public domain, it also expressed government help to irrigation land already in private ownership.⁴⁴ Delegates argued that the settlers of the Plains states and the West bought public land on guarantee that their lands would bear crops. Farmers discovered they needed irrigation to make those lands productive. The delegates pledged “their unwavering support to the just demands of such settlers, that the General Government shall donate at least a portion of the funds received from the sale of such lands toward the procurement of the means necessary for their irrigation.” The congress favored cession of “all lands now a part of the public domain within such States and Territories, excepting mineral lands, for the purpose of developing irrigation, to render the lands now arid, fertile and capable of supporting a population.” The states, they argued, best used this bounty for their own benefit—for irrigation projects, procurements of water for privately owned land, or for land sales to fund irrigation projects.⁴⁵ Regardless of the actual prospects of development, the delegates assumed that irrigation increased states’ populations, businesses, and incomes through interstate trade. With generous federal land cessions, the states could fulfill their desires to attract settlers. The congress attendees spoke of federal assistance in terms of their rights rather than generous help from other Americans.⁴⁶

It also seems apparent that in the irrigationists’ effort toward ending their reliance on boom-and-bust industries like mining, grazing, and raw material extraction, they did not acknowledge or, perhaps, understand their own addiction to federal assistance. Smythe and the irrigationists no longer understood regionalism in terms of Northeast, Middle West, and

⁴⁴ Pisani, *To Reclaim a Divided West*, 230-40.

⁴⁵ *Memorial*, 3-4.

⁴⁶ Hewitt, “Cowboyification,” 468.

South. It was all east and west. The east had all the water it could use. The West needed generous federal support. Westerners overlooked government subsidization of their region with a series of land settlement acts, military outposts, and railroad incentive. Regardless of that kind of promotion, westerners felt the government neglected them. Free land and increased funding for water projects, irrigationists believed, attracted investors and made profits more certain.⁴⁷ The *Memorial*'s writers—which included Nevada Deputy Mining Surveyor C.W. Irish, Montana circuit court Judge Alexander Botkix, and General Land Office clerk Francis Bond—argued that irrigation of dry western lands necessitated federal government funding, support, and expertise for surveying, mapping prospective reservoir, canal, and dam sites. They also demanded federal guarantees on loans and bonds to build dams, irrigation works, and canals. They wrote that everyone won. “It is not to be assumed that because the reclamation of the arid region involves the expenditure of large sums of money it is therefore impracticable. On the contrary, it can be fully justified as a business enterprise.” New settlement in the West afforded advantages to farmers, business, and financial institutions. It represented national economic expansion. Congress attendees also believed that western states deserved all benefits that accrued to those in the east. Although the West already depended on the federal government for much of its infrastructure, the memorial writers believed their call for greater government assistance was “simply a call to justice.”⁴⁸

Smythe and the Carey Act

⁴⁷ Smythe, *Conquest of Arid America*, (1969), 19-29; Smythe, “Stepchild of the Republic,” 37-9.

⁴⁸ *Memorial*, 3-10, 15-26.

With the first congress, Smythe and other irrigation advocates established the logic and argumentation for the irrigation cause. Who could argue with giving opportunity to poor Americans, continuing national expansion, and fattening the economy? Hadn't the western states and territories been treated as the step-children of the Republic? According to the irrigation congress, what profited western states benefited every state and every American. The *Memorial* stated that the West was "stupendous public property . . . the heritage of the next generation of American citizens. To subdue it to the uses of civilization will be one of the mighty tasks of the twentieth century."⁴⁹ Touting settlement, an increased food supply, and more room for more people, wrote historian Hugh Lovin, irrigationists "proclaimed new magic-by-irrigation gospels during the 1890s."⁵⁰ With the rhetoric of national expansion, business opportunity, and interstate commerce on their lips, countless economic development promoters, businessmen, and academics lobbied the federal government to get into the irrigation business. Private industry and individual settlers couldn't do it, they just couldn't marshal the funding. The lands spread out too wide. The mountains reached too high. Changing the course of rivers proved too big a job, and water was too scarce. "The national government, the owner of these arid lands, is the only power competent to carry this mighty enterprise to a successful conclusion," future head of the Bureau of Reclamation Francis Newell wrote in his treatise, *Irrigation in the United States*.⁵¹

Many individual irrigation congress participants understood the vast wealth opportunities that federal subsidies for business represented. Few people exemplified this kind of acquisitiveness better than Franklin Wheeler Mondell and Joseph Maull Carey. Both

⁴⁹ Smythe, "The Stepchild of the Republic," 37.

⁵⁰ Lovin, "Dreamers, Schemers, and Doers," 233.

⁵¹ Frederick Haynes Newell, *Irrigation in the United States* (New York, Thomas Y. Crowell, 1906), 406-7.

men were well-heeled. Both were practiced, connected politicians. Each had deep economic and political interests in Wyoming. Mondell made good on investments in mining in the late 1880s and established the town of Newcastle near his northeast Wyoming coal mines. He served as Newcastle's mayor and then went to Congress as Wyoming's representative from 1895 to 1897.⁵² Carey worked for Ulysses S. Grant's presidential election in 1868, and Grant made Mondell United States attorney of Wyoming Territory in 1869. Carey was just 25. His political connections landed him in the Wyoming Territorial Supreme Court in 1872. During the 70s, he joined the Wyoming Livestock Association, the largest and most powerful business association in the territory, and became the group's president. In Cheyenne, Carey ensconced himself in Wyoming's power elite and counted himself comfortable with the railroad companies and cattle ranchers who dominated Wyoming politics.⁵³ In 1880, residents of Cheyenne, the seat of the Wyoming cattle and land baronies, elected him mayor in 1880 and 1884. In 1888, he established the J.M. Carey and Brothers Livestock Company near Cheyenne. Cattle and land companies, railroads, and irrigation interests backed him in his successful bid to represent Wyoming in the Senate in 1890 when Wyoming territory entered the Union. He lost his bid for reelection in 1895 but returned to his profitable ranching business and formidable business and political connections in the Livestock Association.⁵⁴

Unlike Smythe, Carey and Mondell did not disguise irrigation's pecuniary aspects in agrarian garments. Wyoming possessed little gold or silver. It was big, arid, and largely

⁵² Robert E. Bonner, "Elwood Mead, Buffalo Bill Cody, and the Carey Act in Wyoming," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 55 (Spring 2005): 36-51, esp. 42-4; Hewitt, "Cowboyification," 468; T.A. Larsen, *History of Wyoming* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990) 288-94.

⁵³ Hewitt, "Cowboyification," 487-92; Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 95-6.

⁵⁴ Bonner, "Elwood Mead," 482-4; Larsen, *History of Wyoming*, 321-332.

unsettled. The territory staked out its future in cattle and the railroads that transported the livestock to market. In Congress, Carey and Mondell represented the railroads and cattlemen who put them there. They knew that federal money or land could mean fantastic advantages to both industries, as well as an increased state population. By the 1890s, cattle ranchers that once resisted settlement on public grazing lands saw a number of advantages in irrigation, particularly after the hard winters and droughts of the late 1880s. Steady water made cows happy, and ranchers could, with a little water, grow tons of feed to make those cows fat.⁵⁵ Railroads, too, sought irrigation for the settlers it would bring West and the markets it could establish across the arid states. Wyoming state and territorial legislators, private companies, and land and cattle syndicate wanted federal money and assistance for irrigation but wanted water under state control. Cattlemen and railroad men understood the money they could make with cheap, federal water or the implementation of government scientists and funding (via free lands from the public domain) in state-controlled water projects. They called irrigation governance a states' rights issue, but it was all about the money. They didn't like the idea of the federal government regulating what the state did with irrigation. These men knew that state governance of irrigation gave them sway in determining where water projects went, who controlled them, and who would profit—and interventionist federal presence took their power away.⁵⁶

At first, Smythe showed little enthusiasm for federal land cessions to the states. Smythe believed he could convince states to create the agrarian conditions in which he believed lay new fields for competitive, middle class enterprise. But after the congress

⁵⁵ Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 109-10.

⁵⁶ Robert E. Bonner, "Buffalo Bill Cody and Wyoming Water Politics," *Western Historical Quarterly* 33 (Winter 2002): 439-40; Pisani, "Forests and Reclamation," 71.

agenda committee rejected those ideas, he went along with the crowd. With the irrigation congress' support, Republicans Carey and Mondell enlisted Wyoming state engineer and future director of the Bureau of Reclamation Elwood Mead to write what would become the influential Federal Desert Land Act of 1894, known as the Carey Act. Engineer, academic, and irrigation specialist Mead pioneered territorial ownership and management of water while he headed the Wyoming engineer's office.⁵⁷ Mead prized efficiency and understood rational management of natural resources as socially and economically profitable. He also comprehended the complexity of western politics and water law. As head of the engineer's office from 1888 until 1899, Mead strove for water management that attracted new settlement without limiting cattle grazing, rail transportation, and commercial development. As he wrote the Carey legislation, he sought to offer benefits to power elites and prospective settlers, as well as to medium and small stock and sheep grazers. Carey submitted the finished legislation to the Senate in the summer of 1892.⁵⁸

Mead, Carey, and Mondell attended Smythe's first irrigation congress and witnessed the various business and political interests competing for irrigation projects across the West. Some activists sought total state control of federal lands. Others from agricultural regions heavy with small farmers opposed state control without federal oversight. Carey's (Mead's) legislation gave states generous land cessions, provided some federal oversight of land, and increased state control of irrigation projects. It also provided states flexibility to craft water, irrigation, and land law according to their needs. Under the legislation's terms, each state

⁵⁷ Donald J. Pisani, "George Maxwell, the Railroads, and American Land Policy, 1899-1904," *Pacific Historical Review* 63 (May 1994): 182-4; Pisani, *To Reclaim a Divided West*, 144, 247; See also, Hugh T. Lovin, "The Carey Act in Idaho, 1895-1925: An Experiment in Free Enterprise Reclamation," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 78 (October 1987), 122-133 and Donald J. Pisani, "Enterprise and Equity: A Critique of Western Water Law in the Nineteenth Century," *Western Historical Quarterly* 18 (January 1987), 15-37.

⁵⁸ Hewitt, "Cowboyification," 487-92; Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 95-6.

west of Missouri could apply for one million acres from the public domain. The legislation gave the General Land Office—established under the Desert Land Act of 1877—oversight of state land sales to ensure states adhered to terms of the act. Once federal land transferred to a state, the state government contracted with private companies and entrepreneurs to build irrigation works, as well as supervised irrigation project construction and operation.⁵⁹ The states determined settlers' qualifications for land acquisition on the settler's experience, financial wherewithal, and family size. The states established the maximum price settlers paid for water and contracted with companies to build irrigation mechanisms—ditches, canals, and water diversions for individual farmers. After recovering their investments and fair profits, private companies controlling irrigation works would hand their operations to publicly owned and controlled operators.⁶⁰ Qualified settlers bought rights to 160 acres tracts at fifty cents an acre. These new landowners agreed to farm reclaimed land for ten years. After this time, farmers paid irrigation projects' full cost with state loans that carried generous interest and repayment terms. Private developers recovered a reasonable profit for their investment, and the farmer became part owner—with other farmers—of the irrigation works.⁶¹

Mead and Smythe considered each other friends. Mead wrote articles for *Irrigation Age*. As Smythe edited, he consulted with Mead on the magazines' articles and his opinion pieces. Regardless of their friendship, Mead, along with Carey and others, believed that

⁵⁹ Bonner, "Elwood Mead," 38.

⁶⁰ Bonner, "Elwood Mead," 36-51; Bonner, "Buffalo Bill Cody and Wyoming Water Politics," *Western Historical Quarterly* 33 (Winter 2002): 443; Jackson, "Engineering in the Progressive Era," 554-6; Toni Rae Linen Berger and Leah S. Glaser *Dams, Dynamos, and Development: The Bureau of Reclamation's Power Program and Electrification of the West* (Washington: Bureau of Reclamation, 2002), 18-20; Lovin, "Dreamers, Schemers, and Doers," 233-4; Webb, *Great Plains*, 356-8; Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 157-60.

⁶¹ Hugh T. Lovin, "LaSalle Street Capitalists, Charles Hammett, and Irrigated Farming at King Hill," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 98 (Winter 2006/2007): 29-31; Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 157.

Smythe's unrealistic devotion to the small, irrigated community could subvert the irrigation movement. Wyomingites considered Smythe an outsider, out of touch with the realities of raising stock and planting row crops in a hostile environment. His views offered little to practical politicians who needed support from railroads and cattlemen—people who lusted for ever larger pieces of the public domain. Mead himself thought that Smythe was more interested in promoting himself, his career, and *Irrigation Age's* financial success than building a solidified western irrigation movement. This was somewhat unfair. Smythe was a careerist who advocated irrigation for his own benefit. But he believed in the irrigation cause and wanted irrigationists united in a true crusade. At the same time, Smythe was unrealistic. Mead knew more about water politics and water law than Smythe and had good reason not to turn to Smythe. Regardless, Smythe resented Mead for not consulting him in writing the Carey legislation.⁶²

Wyoming demonstrated why Smythe proved himself a dreamer. While irrigation, its promises, and its ideals interested many, few found that others shared their fiscal or cultural priorities. Despite a shared interest in irrigation, Wyomingites split against themselves. The settlers in the Big Horn, Belle Fourche, and Powder River basins understood irrigation in terms of reliable water for crops. Due to Mead's involvement in writing the act, many small farmers in northern Wyoming supported the legislation. But they distrusted Carey, Mondell, and Wyoming governor, cattle rancher, and real estate mogul Francis E. Warren. Warren, however, drummed up support for the legislation among Wyoming cattlemen who hungered to produce more beeves. Mondell understood railroad interests, and Carey cattlemen. While railroaders wanted more settlers for the land they bought and produce they shipped, settlers

⁶² Pisani, *To Reclaim a Divided West*, 249-51.

despised railroads' control over transportation rates and charges. Cattlemen also suspected railroads that owned hundreds of thousands of government-granted acres across southern and central Wyoming. Some of those acres, particularly in the Laramie and Green River valleys, promised good grazing, and cattlemen wanted a lot of it for more cows. Railroad men, on the other hand, knew that everyone needed them to get almost anything to market efficiently. They determined where rails went, and that meant they also decided where settlers took up land and where businessmen built their towns.⁶³

Despite Mead's efforts to mediate among various interests in Wyoming, the Carey legislation did not satisfy people who held the federal government in greater esteem than their state government. Carey and Mondell's fellow Wyomingite, U.S. Representative Henry A. Coffeen, doubted the intent of the Carey bill.⁶⁴ Coffeen was a Democrat banker representing small farmers in Republican-controlled railroad-and-cattle country. On the one hand, he didn't want to see his debtors go broke and sought every advantage for them. On the other hand, he did possess a true interests in small-farm agriculture. He grew up in Illinois, the son of Midwestern settlers. He attended college in Ohio. He moved to Sheridan, Wyoming, in 1884 at the age of forty-three and helped write the Wyoming constitution in 1889. When he went to Washington in 1893, he brought with him a steep suspicion of the railroad and cattle interests that dominated Wyoming government. He also thought cattle, mining interest, and railroads overly influenced state governments throughout the West.⁶⁵ On these grounds, he opposed state-controlled water development. He argued, instead, that a

⁶³ T.A. Larson, *History of Wyoming* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 165-82, 244-53, 347-59.

⁶⁴ Bonner, "Elwood Mead," 36-51; Bonner, "Buffalo Bill Cody and Wyoming Water Politics," 443-5.

⁶⁵ Leonard Schlup, "I am Not a Cuckoo Democrat! The Congressional Career of Henry A. Coffeen," *Annals of Wyoming* 66 (1994): 30-47.

well-conceived national irrigation policy would serve farmers and keep irrigation matters out of the hands of big business. Carey's leadership of the Wyoming Stock Growers Association earned Coffeen's further approbation. He maintained that Carey only came to the irrigation cause after he sniffed money for his cattle and land business in it.⁶⁶ Coffeen also thought that irrigation was a federal responsibility. Cession of public domain to the states represented federal government's neglect of duty. Land cessions, he believed, also saddled the westerner unfairly with the cost of water development.⁶⁷

Coffeen was infuriated when, after two years of on-and-off debate, Carey's Senate supporters buried the cession legislation in an omnibus appropriations bill for 1894. In floor debate in the House, Coffeen claimed that Carey and his friends attached to "a general funding bill an innocent-looking little amendment, appropriating or donating to the States in the arid region of the West about 15,000,000 acres of the public lands . . . There may be vast syndicates of land speculators now as always watching with eagerness to get possession." He argued that the prospect of a few people owning "millions of acres of the people's inheritance, the requisite for their future homes—the public lands of the country" undermined small-farm independence and individual self-sufficiency. He objected to giving the western states public land based simply on promises that they would irrigate and settle that land. He argued that the legislation did not "provide any safeguards as to rates that shall be given to settlers." He also thought that giving free land to the states shifted the costs of irrigation to settlers. The money for irrigation, he thought, should come out of the national

⁶⁶ U.S. Congress. House. *The Irrigation Problem—Should the Arid Lands be Ceded to the States: Speech of Hon. Henry A. Coffeen (Wy)? Congressional Record*, 53-2; *Biographical Congressional Directory with an Outline History of the National Congress, 1774-1911* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1913), 558; See also, Pisani, *To Reclaim a Divided West*, 260-7.

⁶⁷ Hewitt, "Cowboyification," 485-6.

treasury. “Thus you in Congress,” he said, “would throw this vast expense upon the people of the West in the arid region necessary to prepare those lands for your own people to come and settle and live upon them.” Dubious of the effectiveness of Carey’s legislation, he asked, “Where and when have public lands ever been turned over to the States in hurried and loose methods without resulting in gigantic land frauds and plunder by land grabbers?”⁶⁸

Coffeen faced formidable opposition in the House from Representative Francis G. Newlands of Nevada. Newlands and Smythe had been friends since before the first irrigation congress. Newlands, a successful San Francisco attorney, took interest in irrigation when he moved to Nevada from California in 1889. He made his fortune managing the affairs of Comstock silver magnate William Sharon. The newly minted Nevadan thought irrigation might draw settlers to the state and widen its business base. But he faced difficulty getting anything out of Congress due to Nevada’s tiny population. Instead, he hitched his irrigationist ambitions to those of other western states. He and Smythe, then a growing voice in irrigation advocacy, understood each other. Like Smythe, he shared high expectations for irrigation. He saw irrigation programs as ways to resettle America’s restive urbanites, though Newlands understood farmers as more pedestrian than Smythe. Newlands, however, also found Smythe unrealistic and a better spokesperson than practical activist.⁶⁹

In the Carey Act debate, Newlands argued that transfer of federal lands to western states for purposes of irrigation and settlement made sense. Washington showed no interest in

⁶⁸ U.S. Congress. House. *The Irrigation Problem—Should the Arid Lands be Ceded to the States: Speech of Hon. Henry A. Coffeen (Wy)? Congressional Record*, 53-2 (August 15, 1894) 26 (Appendix): 1419-23; T.A. Larson, *History of Wyoming* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 165-82, 244-53, 347-59; Hewitt, “Cowboyification,” 485-6. See also, Pisani, “Forests and Reclamation.”

⁶⁹ William D. Rowley, “Francis G. Newlands, Water for the West, and Progressivism,” in *The Human Tradition in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, Ballard C. Campbell, ed. (Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 2000), 102-3; Rowley, *Reclaiming the Arid West*, 99, 113, 121-2.

irrigation and states needed it. The West, he said, suffered from too little water and an overabundance of dry land.⁷⁰ Using language right out of Smythe's playbook, he said, "Few who have not lived there (in the West) can realize how entirely dependent that region of the country is on artificial irrigation." States east of the Missouri, Newlands argued, "have been watered by rain from the heavens, but in that intermountain country agriculture cannot rely upon the chance supply of rain from the heavens."⁷¹ With limited agricultural opportunities, he maintained, inland western states could not draw new settlers, diversify their economies, or enlarge their tax bases. "In that intermountain region," he said, "agriculture cannot rely on chance supply (of precipitation) from the heavens." The snows of the Rockies stored the waters that "melt during the spring and summer and feed the streams which flow into the lakes and sinks of the desert." The first settlers who arrived in the West benefited from building their farms on rivers and streams, he argued. But irrigation of broader lands demanded federal or state planning and organization. "This work can therefore only be inaugurated by the use of capital, by aggregating men together in some organization, corporate or otherwise, by employing capital in building dams, constructing reservoirs and ditches to bring a large area of land under their control." With this in mind, he argued, "it is essential . . . that either the United States Government, as the proprietor of these lands, should seek their highest development by the construction of reservoirs and irrigation ditches, and then sell the completely irrigated land to the settler, or that the Government should transfer these lands to the various states constituting a part of that arid region, and

⁷⁰ Pisani, "Beyond the Hundredth Meridian," 472; Arthur B. Darling, ed., *Public Papers of Francis G. Newlands*, Vol. 1, 57.

⁷¹ *Admission of Utah* (H. R. 352), *Congressional Record* 53-2 (December 13, 1893), CR-1893-1213, 209-10. See Smythe's opinions about the West dependency on water and how he believed others who lived outside the region could understand the significance of water in Untitled editorial, *Irrigation Age* 2, 223 and Smythe, *Conquest of Arid America* (1905), 19-29

allow them to enter upon a comprehensive system of irrigation.”⁷²

Much of Newlands argument rested on ideas irrigationists bandied about for several years. The federal government, he believed, had shorted western states when it came to internal improvements. Many in the irrigation congresses and Smythe himself argued that the federal government and tyranny of the eastern states over water policy victimized the arid West. Now, instead of waiting on the federal governments, Newlands argued, the federal government should grant public domain to the states “that they should undertake the work of reclamation.”⁷³ Similarly, Representative William Jennings Bryan of Nebraska argued, “There are millions of acres which unless we can by some means bring water upon them lie there absolutely bare of vegetation.” If, at some future date, Bryan argued in his grandiloquent style, the work of irrigation demanded a larger corporate body for the work, either state associations or the federal government could move in that direction with Congress’ approval. In the meantime, Bryan orated, irrigating western states was “of great importance to the people of our country.” From cues he might have taken from Smythe, Bryan argued that people in crowded cities needed “some outlet, some means of making a living under more favorable conditions.” Irrigation “gives us the opportunity to spread our city population over our prairies—not as the people are spread out in cattle-grazing districts, but gathered together in villages where they can enjoy the advantages of both town and country life.”⁷⁴

⁷² *Admission of Utah* (H. R. 352), *Congressional Record* 53-2 (December 13, 1893), CR-1893-1213, 209-10; Untitled editorial, *Irrigation Age* 2, 223 and Smythe, *Conquest of Arid America* (1905), 19-29

⁷³ Darling, *Public Papers of Francis G. Newlands*, Vol. 1, 54-60; *Admission of Utah* (H. R. 352), *Congressional Record* 53-2 (December 13, 1893), CR-1893-1213, 209-10; Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 93-5, 113; Rowley, *Reclaiming the Arid West*, 5, 97-8, 121-2.

⁷⁴ *Sundry Appropriations Bill* (H. R. 5575), *Congressional Record* 53-2 (August 11, 1894): CR-1894-0811, 8419-20; 8426-8. See also, Smythe, *Conquest of Arid America* (1900), 19.

Grover Cleveland signed the Carey Act into law on August 18, 1894. Implementation of the final legislation encountered numerous obstacles. Carey and Mead wrote the legislation in 1892 when it looked like state governments possessed excitement for watering the desert and needed only additional federal incentives. As Smythe and Mead made final preparations for the third 1893 National Irrigation Congress slated for Denver in September, the economy crashed. The resulting economic turmoil clouded the convention and added to the apprehension Smythe felt about the direction American society was taking. In the wake of the 1893 crash, irrigation companies and their shareholders would only start financing proposed projects after states guaranteed to share the risk involved with water development. The economic difficulties put many of the western states in precarious financial positions and left them unable to back public bonds. When entrepreneurs and corporations built irrigation works, states rarely put inspectors in the field to oversee the distribution and sale of land.⁷⁵ As unemployment increased through the early months of 1894, Smythe argued his ideas about irrigation were more appropriate than ever. “Whether we have reached the crisis of our national and industrial woes, or whether even more dangerous than any yet encountered are still before us, no one can tell. But it seems plain that the world demands new field for the profitable employment of human energies, some field which not only absorbs labor, but rewards it, at least, with the means of making a living.”⁷⁶ Mead, Carey, Mondell and their supporters in Congress hoped free land would stimulate western state economies after the collapse. But the crash dried up much of the investment money that western states hoped

⁷⁵ Lovin, “Dreamers, Schemers, and Doers,” 236.

⁷⁶ Pisani, “Reclamation and Social Engineering,” 46-63; William E. Smythe, “The Republic of Irrigation,” *Irrigation Age* 6 (May 1894): 189-192.

would roll in with the guarantee of state bonds for irrigation projects. Settlers, too, came West in smaller numbers due to the nation's financial difficulties.⁷⁷

A host of other difficulties plagued implementation of the Carey Act. The legislation perpetuated consolidation of large tracts of western land in the hands of well-heeled cattlemen, railroads, and developers. States found that potential settlers wanted water on their land before they committed money or labor to improvements. Much of the land on the public domain needed dams for irrigation rather than mere stream diversions, and the costs of dam construction lay beyond most states' financial abilities.⁷⁸ Financial machinations on the part of state governments and corporations created litigation nightmares. Farmers also faced a number of hardships, including the tough work of clearing land, dealing with wind erosion, and living in difficult physical environments without knowing if irrigation ditches would ever reach their land. Farmers who bought land rights also believed federal involvement and state regulation would protect them from debt and speculation, when, in fact, the Carey Act contained no prohibition on speculation.⁷⁹ Without sufficient financial backing, many of the companies established to claim land, divert or store water, and irrigate land under the Carey Act went broke. The settlers that states banked on never showed up. Those that did lacked the financial wherewithal to weather the first, tough years on their new land. States also made no effort to control the shell corporations that cattle, railroad, and land companies established to sop up huge pieces of land near proposed irrigation sites. State officials often favored their

⁷⁷ Pisani, "Maxwell, the Railroads, and American Land Policy," 181, see footnote 10; *The New Encyclopedia of the American West*, s.v. "Carey Act (1894)," accessed September 09, 2013,

http://proxy.library.umkc.edu/login?qurl=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.credoreference.com/entry/americanwest/carey_act_1894.

⁷⁸ Pisani, *The Reclaim a Divided West*, 260-1.

⁷⁹ Bonner, "Elwood Mead," 41-5

friends and relatives with land grants and water rights. State inspectors interpreted the 160-acre per settler limitation to include each family member, often well into the extended family. Speculators suddenly sprung hosts of brothers, sisters, and cousins. The inspectors often failed to ferret out agents for land companies who paid for water and land rights under assumed names.⁸⁰ Financially stable corporations, such as Buffalo Bill Cody's Shoshone Land and Cattle Company and Carey's own J.M. Carey and Brothers Livestock Company, claimed essentially free land under the act and indulged in speculation—much in the way that Coffeen feared. Mondell himself, privy to the act's provisions ahead of time, filed for water rights on 155,000 acres north of the Bighorn River near present-day Cody, Wyoming.⁸¹

Just as Mead found in Wyoming, the competing western agricultural interests he thought he assuaged with the law continued fighting. Stockmen scrapped with sheep men. Land syndicates brawled with settlers. All of them suspected railroads of malfeasance and high shipping rates. Meanwhile, state politicians grouched about the lack of federal support for their states' irrigation efforts.⁸² Wyoming and Idaho exploited easy irrigation opportunities on the Snake and Big Horn rivers. Irrigating land distant from rivers demanded money and engineering expertise, dams, and pumps for running water uphill. Irrigation also required settlers, none of which materialized in significant amounts due to the economic downturn. Most states that received land under the Carey Act found little private investment for irrigation works. Thirty years after the passage of the Act, only nine states made formal applications for land under the law. Most irrigated marginal amounts of land. By 1925, western states irrigated 850,000 acres of land. Of that amount, Idaho irrigated almost 450,000

⁸⁰ Pisani, *To Reclaim a Divided West*, 260-2.

⁸¹ Lovin, "Dreamers, Schemers, and Doers," 236-8.

⁸² Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 157; Pisani, *To Reclaim a Divided West*, 265-72.

acres in of the Snake River basin around Twin Falls and American Falls. Wyoming irrigated 150,000 acres in the Bighorn Valley. Only these states applied for further cessions under the Act—Wyoming for another million acres and Oregon for two million.⁸³

The Carey Act produced few of the fantastic promises Smythe hoped. It did, however, create layers of corruption, and it enriched Mead, Carey, and Mondell fabulously.⁸⁴ Mondell took over as head of the General Land Office in 1895 while he served in the U.S. House of Representatives. During his time in Congress, he sat on several committees, the most important of which were the increasingly influential House Committee on Irrigation of the Arid Lands and the Committee on Public Lands.⁸⁵ As mentioned, Mondell filed for water rights on land north of the Bighorn River in the vicinity of Newcastle. With Buffalo Bill Cody and sheep man George Beck, he formed the Shoshone Land and Cattle Company and claimed water rights to 70,000 acres on the south side of the river. Shoshone hired State Engineer Mead as consultant for \$1,000 a year, a position and income he retained from 1894 to 1897. After passage of the Carey Act, Shoshone Land and Cattle established Cody, Wyoming. The company's efforts, however, resulted in the sale of few plots of land and even fewer successful farmers. By 1901, Shoshone's New York investors had lost \$130,000, but Beck and Cody came out unscathed. Cody ceded his water rights to the federal government in 1901 and opened the way for the construction of the Cody-Salisbury Irrigation Canal, a project the new Reclamation Bureau took under its wing with the passage of the National

⁸³ Paul W. Gates, "Homesteading in the High Plains," *Agricultural History* 51: 109-133, esp. 119-20; Rowley, *Bureau of Reclamation*, 54.

⁸⁴ Paul W. Gates, "The Intermountain West against Itself," *Arizona and the West* 27 (Autumn 1985): 205-236; Pisani, "Federal Reclamation and Water Rights," 542-3; Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 157.

⁸⁵ T.A. Larsen, *History of Wyoming* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990) 288-94; 321-332.

Irrigation Act—known as the Newlands Act after its sponsor—in 1903.⁸⁶ Wyomingites sent Mondell to Washington again in 1899, where he served in Congress until 1923. Carey’s J.M. Carey and Brothers Livestock Company soaked up profits as the Carey Act improved land prices across Wyoming. Carey himself went on to become governor of Wyoming in 1911. In 1916 he took the position of vice president of the Federal Land Bank, a federal agency that guaranteed credit to farmers and ranchers.⁸⁷

The Irrigated Paradise

In the early 1890s, Smythe built his career with *Irrigation Age* and the irrigation congresses. From the beginning, Smythe’s irrigation congresses represented mostly political and big-business interests of the inland west. Through the mid-1890s, Smythe looked on as the congresses, his magazine, and, finally, an act of Congress produced little benefit for actual farmers.⁸⁸ By 1895, irrigationists moved beyond him. He failed in his pursuit of creating a unified movement for irrigation, and he lost his hold on the irrigation congresses. His leadership of the cause, in fact, was illusory. He wrote good copy, organized well, and spoke with enthusiasm. But many of the most important irrigation advocates, among them Joseph Carey, Francis Mondell, Elwood Mead, and Francis Newlands, thought him too unrealistic, too much of what William D. Rowley called an “irrigation crank.”⁸⁹

But it didn’t matter what westerners, legislators, and government administrators thought of him. None of it dented his enthusiasm for finishing God’s work on earth and

⁸⁶ Hewitt, ““Cowboyificaiton,””44-6.

⁸⁷ T.A. Larsen, *History of Wyoming*, 288-94; 321-332.

⁸⁸ Pisani, “Forests and Reclamation,” 71; Rowley, *Bureau of Reclamation*, 78-9.

⁸⁹ Rowley, *Bureau of Reclamation*, 206-8.

making a dollar besides. In 1895, he resigned his post at *Irrigation Age*, sold the magazine, and moved to Pennsylvania. There, sitting in a comfortable house far from any farm, he refined the ideas he later expounded in *The Conquest of Arid America*. In many ways, being freed from the responsibility of wrangling a bunch of argumentative and greedy westerners was the best thing that happened to his career. He broadened his audience beyond die-hard western irrigationists to a larger public. His irrigation ideal was fully disconnected from any soil, farmer's hand, or water pump. His expansive language and high ideals, his use of nostalgia and promotion of idealist utopian schemes sold a lot of books. His articles moved magazines off racks. Well past the turn of the century, he penned articles for such national magazines as *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, and *Century*. He editorialized in the *Smart Set*, *North American Review*, and *Sunset*. In the meantime, he wrote *Conquest of Arid America*, a book that would appear in three major editions (1900, 1905, and 1911). In 1901, Smythe moved to San Diego, California, after an astonishing five-years of financial success. He promoted irrigation as a well-known editorialist and commentator. He spoke to large crowds at public gatherings, town councils, and commercial clubs. He was thirty nine years old. Trim, robust, and with a booming voice and refined presence, he devoted his energies to several projects, including promoting an irrigation company that developed land in the Imperial Valley and another in New Plymouth, Idaho. Within a year, he assumed the presidency of the San Francisco-based Water and Forest Association and toured the state extensively, preaching the irrigation miracle to large crowds. His successes and growing fame in California, as well as his reputation in national magazine circles gained him entrée into San Diego political circles and, in 1902, he made an unsuccessful run for Congress against the city's powerful Republican regime.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Lawrence B. Lee, "William E. Smythe and San Diego, 1901-1908," *Journal of San Diego History* 19 (Winter

At no point did Smythe's belief in irrigation flag. In 1901, Smythe celebrated Roosevelt's election with an article in *Out West* in which he took credit for the optimistic future of the irrigation in the West. "The President of the United States is for irrigation!" he declared. "But that is only half the glorious truth. He is for irrigation on lines of wisdom and everlasting justice." Roosevelt's first address to Congress contained a plea for a national irrigation policy. Smythe's acquaintance with the president, his friendship with Elwood Mead, and his continuing relationship with rising political star Nevada Representative Francis Newlands gave him reason to believe that his agitation made irrigation and western water development a national issue. In the article, he equated Roosevelt's appeal to Congress with Abraham Lincoln's accomplishments with the abolition of slavery. Smythe wrote that the president believed that due to the potential for increased interstate commerce, the federal government should devote money and expertise to the states for the purposes of irrigation. He argued that only the federal government working with the states could reform water and land settlement laws for the benefit of all the West. Smythe believe that with his congressional address Roosevelt signed "an Emancipation Proclamation which differs from Lincoln's chiefly in the fact that it liberates men of another race and color."⁹¹

Actually, supporting the profits of men who already benefited from government largess insulted the dignity of both Lincoln and former slaves. But Smythe never paid much attention to these kinds of things. While in San Diego, Smythe founded the Little Landers, a movement that put into practical working his ideas of middle-class agrarianism. In July 1908, with Marshall Valentine Hartranft, he founded a Little Lander colony in a Tujunga River

1973), 10-24; Lee, "William Ellsworth Smythe," 297-8.

⁹¹ Smythe, "The Twentieth Century West," *Out West: A Magazine of the Old Pacific and the New* (January 1902: 75; Rowley, "Visions of a Watered West," 143.

bottom fifteen miles south of San Diego and just two miles north of the Mexican border. They named the new endeavor San Ysidro after the Spanish saint of agriculture. Smythe convinced a group of San Diego businessmen and professionals to invest the money for the colony's establishment. Their initial land purchase encompassed 550 acres. After recovering their investment and a premium, the investors planned to turn over control of the colony to the settlers themselves. Hartranft took up residence in San Ysidro while Smythe recruited families. Each settler paid \$300 for title to one acre of irrigated land. Smythe envisioned them earning their livings on small plots they made productive with intense fertilization and garden-farming techniques. The colony implemented its collective buying power for buying supplies, tools, and construction materials in bulk. Common areas and a community hall facilitated social life. Within a year, three hundred people took up plots in the carefully planned settlement. They built houses and gardens, complete with community chicken coops and rabbit hutches. The community also operated a store where colonists sold each other everyday goods, vegetables, and meat.⁹²

Smythe had done his bit to set up the colony and was well away from the troubles that soon plagued San Ysidro. A fire burned 4,000 acres upland of the colony the first winter, leaving the colonists to deal with severe land erosion. Colonists who received choice bottomlands did much better at producing farm goods than those who lived on the development's rockier, less fertile uplands. This caused internal strife since each colonist paid the same price per pound for their goods, regardless of their contribution. Many of the San Ysidro settlers possessed little agricultural experience. Without Smythe and Hartranft's advice or support—Hartranft often promoted the colony elsewhere—many settlers suffered

⁹² Henry S. Anderson, "The Little Landers' Land Colonies: A Unique Agricultural Experiment in California," *Agricultural History*. 5 (October 1931), 139-150; Lee, "William E. Smythe and San Diego, 10-24.

from low yields and dismal produce. Colonists farming in the fertile bottomland soon found that they received better prices in the San Diego markets than at the San Ysidro store. Affordable fruit and vegetables disappeared from the community store, leaving the upland settlers resentful, disappointed, and restive. Town meetings at the community hall devolved into acrimonious fights. Colonists began abandoning their plots as early as 1910. Others limped along. Smythe ended his association with San Ysidro in 1914, likely to begin a new Little Lander colony in the Los Angeles area called Los Terrenitos (Little Lands). Settlers in the more fertile bottomland also suffered setbacks. A flood in 1916 seriously damaged their lands. The river washed away the pumping plant that the entire colony depended upon for irrigation. These stumbling blocks fractured the colony's precarious financial standing and essentially ended payments on the bonds that Smythe and Hartranft had sold for the colony's irrigation works. In addition, each settler bought their land on credit from the company corporation. When a settler paid off their plot, the corporation was supposed to clear a title for his land. Colonists went bankrupt and left the corporation unable to pay the initial investors. In this situation, the corporation skipped clearing titles for those who had done well and funneled the money to investors, needed repairs to the colony's remaining irrigation ditches, or the bonds for the irrigation pumping plant. Another flood in 1918 left the colony bereft, a complete failure. A journalist visiting San Ysidro in 1925 could find only four colonists, only one of whom lived on his original plot.⁹³

The Little Landers experiment demonstrated Smythe's inability to put traction on his farmer idyll. The failure of the colony also demonstrated how a man with powerful rhetorical

⁹³ Anderson, "The Little Landers' Land Colonies, 139-150, esp. 143-8; Lee, "William E. Smythe and San Diego, 10-24; Michelson and Solomonson, "Remnants of a Failed Utopia," 3-10; Pisani, "Reclamation and Social Engineering," 46-9; Weiss, "Marshall V. Hartranft, William E. Smythe," 173-182.

and writing skills could make a career expounding great ideals that did not work. While San Ysidro was just getting off the ground, Smythe established the national *Little Landers Magazine* that brought him fine financial returns, since most subscribers did not live in San Ysidro. In the meanwhile, the *Conquest of Arid America* continued to sell well. In 1905, he also published the sycophantic *Constructive Democracy: The Economics of a Square Deal*, in which he promoted Roosevelt's conservation, farm, and domestic agenda with the same kind of fervor and effusive language he used in endorsing irrigation. The book proved a financial success. Smythe went on to establish the Los Terrenitos Little Lander colony in 1914 and another near San Francisco in 1917. Both colonies failed within five years. And again, Smythe moved on. If the colonies didn't work, it wasn't for the failure of irrigation. Colonists didn't try hard enough. Nature threw curve balls. Engineers miscalculated in designs for irrigation ditches. Regardless of the failure of the irrigation colony idea, Smythe kept right on traveling and speaking about irrigation's magic. Despite his great agricultural ideals, he led business and urban development in San Diego as head of the city's Chamber of Commerce. Well into the late 1910s, Smythe worked as a consultant with Elwood Mead and Reclamation Bureau chief Francis Newell on various western irrigation projects built under the National Irrigation Act that his friend and irrigation compatriot, Francis Newlands, pushed through Congress in 1902.⁹⁴ In 1921, Smythe published *City Homes on Country Lanes*. "I am an optimist," he wrote. "Happy is the community where it is assumed by the right men and women—by those who deeply realize that the New Earth is to be a holy place,

⁹⁴ Weiss, "Marshall V. Hartranft, William E. Smythe," 173-182.

and that the opportunity to assist in its evolution, in a capacity however humble, is a call to holy service.”⁹⁵

With *Country Homes*, Smythe had penned another successful book that promoted the development of more San Ysidros. By the time Smythe died in New York in 1922 at the age of 61, the Newlands Act essentially had redefined the federal role in western water and affirmed water as a national rather than local or regional resource.⁹⁶ Smythe saw irrigation as a way to ease the burden of individuals, give relief to cities, and benefit the economy.⁹⁷ Other progressives, however, saw producing cheap food, and making federal lands and western water valuable as means of increasing prosperity. In a system where efficiency and bigness reigned supreme, the small farmer had little or no place.⁹⁸ Smythe himself held contradictory ideas that helped promote the irrigation movement but did little to achieve the small-producer ideal.⁹⁹ In *Conquest of Arid America*, he decried the passing of small-scale competitive capitalism and the rise of the corporation. At the same time, he believed the corporation had a place in the arid West. Corporations provided cheap transportation, manufacturing, and communication for his middle-class gentlemen farmers. He understood that monopoly represented “economic solidarity . . . Rightly conducted, it is a benevolent institution, since it means the highest standard of living at home and the largest trade abroad.” Modern communications, distribution, and transportation corporations provided the most cost-

⁹⁵ Smythe, *City Homes on Country Lanes*, 264.

⁹⁶ David E. Nye, “Technology, Nature, and American Origin Stories,” *Environmental History* 8, 11-13; Pisani, “Reclamation and Social Engineering,” 48-51, 62.

⁹⁷ Smythe, “The Stepchild of the Republic,” 35-6.

⁹⁸ See, Michelson and Solomonson, “Remnants of a Failed Utopia.”

⁹⁹ Pisani, “Reclamation and Social engineering,” 46-50.

effective and efficient means of connecting his small communities to markets.¹⁰⁰ In pursuing his small-farmer idyll, he failed to recognize the intractability of the corporate-business paradigm.¹⁰¹ The corporation sought the utmost efficiency in the delivery of services and in the accumulation of wealth and power. The irrigation cause might move forward under the guise of widening democratic land ownership. But the irrigation congresses and Smythe's own career demonstrated that the agrarian façade facilitated the machinations of corporate investors and politicians interested less in remaking the West than in opening the opportunity to pecuniary acquisitiveness and profit.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Smythe, *Conquest of Arid America*, (1900), 19-29; Smythe, *Constructive Democracy*, 186-93, 289-307; Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency*, 5-26.

¹⁰¹ Donald Worster, *Under Western Skies: Nature and History in the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 57, 79-108.

¹⁰² Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 118-25.

CHAPTER 4

Francis Griffith Newlands and the West

“And irrigation is a miracle!” –William E. Smythe, *Conquest of Arid America*¹

At the turn of the new century, Democratic Representative from Nevada Francis Griffiths Newlands stood at the front of the irrigation cause. The Carey Act produced little state-sponsored irrigation development. A rising chorus of western developers, landowners, and politicians criticized the act and demanded greater direct federal support for watering the arid West. Newlands grabbed the opportunity and promoted wider federal support for western water development. “We from the West object to the transfer of the arid lands to the States,” Newlands testified before the House Committee on Public Lands in 1901. The Carey Act demonstrated that “the arid region must be considered as a unit, regardless of state lines.” Nevada, a small state with little influence in Congress, had neither the finances nor the credit for building the irrigation projects that the Carey Act demanded in return for federal cession of millions of acres from the public domain. As a politician, Newlands understood that his career, reputation, and legacy rested on how much he could help the citizens of his state and increase the wealth of the Nevada economy. He also knew that gaining the support of the state’s mining, grazing, and railroad oligarchies took him a long way in political circles inside and outside the state. To achieve his goals, he developed a political strategy that linked the fortunes of his state to that of the entire West and the nation. Tearing a page from his

¹ Smythe, *Conquest of Arid America* (1905), 40.

friend Smythe's *Conquest of Arid America*, he said to his fellow representatives in 1901, "This country has today 70,000,000 people . . . Within one hundred years it will have 300,000,000 people. The pressure on the land will be great . . . Imagine the discontent and disturbance which will result from an improvident administration of these great areas (in the West) easily capable of supporting 100,000,000 people."²

Newlands like progressive reformers and conservationists Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot sought social efficiency, economic efficiency, and protections of wealth in a changing society through the management of the natural environment.³ While he started his political life as an irrigation proponent, his ideas grew into an all-encompassing embrace of arid lands reclamation as a national project. Newlands spoke for his fellow westerners who long agitated for federal government involvement in western regional water development. Western states, he argued, represented the future of the republic. Since he equated steady profits with social order, he believed that rationally organized expansion through reclamation in the West served the national interest. Water development expanded the western states' economies. The products of increased western agricultural production flowed into other states and the nation as a whole.⁴ Since the federal government regulated interstate commerce, he believed that the federal government alone had the responsibility to organize land, forests, and water in a comprehensive and rationally planned system of investment, labor, and settlement. He envisioned a socially controlled environment where every person worked out their destinies within a setting planned and ordered for greatest economic and

² Newlands, *Public Papers of Francis G. Newlands*, Vol. 2, 63; Pisani, "Beyond the Hundredth Meridian," 472-3.

³ Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency*, 11-21.

⁴ Rowley, *Reclaiming the Arid West*, 171-3.

social efficiency.⁵ In eastern states, he argued, settlement proceeded in organic processes based on the ready availability of water. Settlement of the arid West, on the other hand, would proceed on cogent arrangements of nature and human activity. With proper administration, he wrote in 1906, an American reclamation program for the West kept water “on tap, responsive to the demands of man . . . Our frontier towns will not be, as heretofore, accidental growths, devoid of comfort and attractiveness. Collectivism will be employed with great economic advantage in comprehensive plans covering town development, sanitation, and architecture, and ending in the individualized home near the outlying farm, associated with all the advantages of religious, educational, and social life.”⁶

Newlands was an unabashed careerist who made his money in the 1870s and 1880s when Americans had few government controls on business. The wealthier he became, the more protective he became of his riches and that of men like him. He heard agrarians’, urban activists’, and social reformers’ increasing calls for reform. The public’s tolerance of free-wheeling and uncontrolled accumulation of wealth, he felt, was nearing an end. He sought to head off reform detrimental to business with new regulatory schemes that protected business and benefited social order. Government regulation of business and industry, he believed, precluded government threats to large concentrations of wealth like his. When he set out on his political career in 1890, he recognized that social and economic order profited men like him better than ruinous competition and the kinds of social chaos that came in its wake. He maintained that if the men who made their fortunes under the laissez-faire economics of the Gilded Age wanted to keep their wealth and social position, they must accept new economic

⁵ Donald J. Pisani, “Reclamation and Social Engineering in the Progressive Era,” *Agricultural History* 57 (January 1983), 46-63.

⁶ Francis G. Newlands, “National Irrigation as a Social Problem,” *Pacific Monthly* 16 (September 1906): 296-97.

paradigms in which a strong, interventionist government worked with business for the social good.⁷

In this spirit, Newlands drafted a comprehensive reclamation bill in 1900 with the help of other progressive conservationists Elwood Mead, hydraulic engineer Frederick Newell, and California irrigationist and railroad public relations man George Maxwell. The bill represented their effort toward a new kind of social organization and their faith in Americans' ability to bend nature to human purposes. Newlands understood irrigation and the related management of water in terms of mastery of the physical environment through bureaucratic organization, application of science, and technological progress. Water from western streams did not just make the desert bloom. Americans needed to take hold of streams, direct them, and store them for the beneficial uses of agriculture and industry. Newlands, along with Mead and Newell, perceived western water development as the ultimate expression of what a modern democratic society could produce in science, technology, and planning of land, money, and people for the highest national economic benefit.⁸

When Newlands debated the merits of his reclamation bill on the floor of the House in 1901, he promoted irrigation's economic and social miracles with passion. He argued that federally sponsored reclamation expedited processes of planning, organization, and financial management needed for new western settlement. Left to private enterprise, such a national project might take many years to accomplish and would result in chaotic patchworks of settlement and disordered, redundant infrastructures that inhibited markets and access to

⁷ Rowley, *Reclaiming the Arid West*, 57.

⁸ Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency*, 4-6; Donald J. Pisani, "Reclamation and Social Engineering in the Progressive Era," *Agricultural History* 57 (January 1983), 46-63; Rowley, *Reclaiming the Arid West*, 172.

them. Federal water development, he asserted, fostered orderly schemes of production that increased investor confidence in agriculture. The use of taxpayer dollars for reclamation reduced risk to agribusiness and provided steady dividends. His reclamation legislation also separated what he considered an uninformed, gullible public from water policy. New government agencies, business associations, and irrigation districts established layers of bureaucracy between voters and business. This arrangement secured private-investor profits against the vagaries of electoral politics and sudden shifts in local, state, and national governments.⁹

Newlands' National Reclamation Act of 1902 helped shape the modern hydraulic West's agricultural and urban economies.¹⁰ Like his contemporary, William Smythe, he expressed Americans' ability to engineer society. Both men feared social disorder and economic inefficiency as threats to wealth and orderly business. They both envisioned a new society of compliant agrarians as wise use of water opened the West to restless city dwellers. Newlands, more than Smythe, believed wealth owed its power to society. Total diffusion of power was as much route to for Newlands chaos as absolute concentration of wealth. Some concentration of wealth, he believed, ensured domestic harmony. Smythe saw only his idealized version of irrigation and believed in its social good. Newlands displayed flexibility in his search for economic efficiencies in commerce and industry, as well in his quest for social stability. He loved the irrigation and reclamation causes for the kinds of stability, investment, and return it could provide modern Americans. Smythe often sat at a desk far from the land or stood at podiums theorizing about settling uneasy city dwellers in a

⁹ Newlands, *Public Papers of Francis G. Newlands*, Vol. 2, 56, 55-8; Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency*, 12-15; Rowley, *Bureau of Reclamation*, 94-6; Rowley, "Visions of a Watered West," 144-55.

¹⁰ Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency*, 1-4, 9-15.

flowering desert. Newlands also stayed away from agrarian life. He was, however, a practical politician who knew achieving his goals would take time. He compromised, gathered support, and worked his legislation through traditional politics. He frequently positioned himself above party ideologies and attempted to show how his legislative initiatives benefited both business and society. At all times, he connected the fate of the West not with Smythe's smallholder, gentleman farmer ideal but increased trade, national and international economies, and social order.¹¹

Newlands, Silver, and Federal Control of Western Water

Francis Griffith Newlands suffered a difficult upbringing and fought his way into wealth and power. He was born in Natchez, Mississippi, on August 28, 1848, the fourth of five siblings. His family experienced periods of financial and material security punctuated by adversity and uncertainty. His father, James was a physician trained in Edinburgh, Scotland. He emigrated to the United States with his wife Jessie in the early 1840s. The elder Newlands struggled with alcoholism. Despite well-meaning efforts at making a living, he, his wife, Jessie, and their children often fled his reputation as a drunk. Each time, he established himself as a skilled doctor in another town but then drank his standing and clientele away. When he died of drink in Quincy, Illinois, in 1852 he left his wife and children to fend for themselves. Francis Newlands was just four years old. His mother married a Quincy banker, Ebenezer Moore, in 1853. Moore set the family in comfortable circumstances until the Panic of 1857. The financial recession hit small banks like Moore's hard. Broke and in debt, Moore

¹¹ Rowley, *Reclaiming the Arid West*, 27-30; Donald J. Pisani, "Federal Reclamation and the American West in the Twentieth Century," *Agricultural History* 77 (Summer 2003): 397-8; Percy, "A History of the Ransdell-Humphreys Flood Control Act," 139-40; Rowley, "Visions of a Watered West," 142-4.

took a minor government job in Chicago, where the family lived for two years. In 1863, Moore used his contacts with Illinois Republicans in the Lincoln Administration to gain a Treasury Department clerkship in Washington, DC. With this job, Moore provided monetary ease and social stability for the family until he died of cholera in 1866.¹²

Having experienced both material comfort and insecurity, Newlands decided he would gain wealth and keep it. Just eighteen at Moore's death, he supported his mother and younger brother on the meager salary of a Washington, DC, postal clerk.¹³ Despite difficult circumstances at home, Newlands worked his way through school, attending night classes at Columbian University (later renamed George Washington University). He joined the District of Columbia bar in 1869 and worked as a trial attorney. With a promising legal career ahead of him, he considered his options and decided that he would take up his legal work in the West. He moved to San Francisco in 1871. At first, his law business struggled, and he took work defending petty criminals in the city's police court. Even when his poor clients could not pay him, he advocated for them with determination and grit. In short order, he built a favorable reputation as an astute lawyer. A San Francisco judge noticed the young lawyer's abilities and recommended Newlands to a wealthy friend. He parlayed this new opportunity and was soon litigating heftier civil cases for the more financially stable clientele, which removed him from his underpaid work for petty criminals. Despite his modest income, he circulated in wealthy San Francisco circles while also supporting his mother back in Washington. Social life and its accoutrements ate up his hard-earned money. To

¹² Albert W. Atwood, "The Romance of Senator Francis G. Newlands and Chevy Chase," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society* 66/68, (1966/1968): 294-300; Rowley, *Reclaiming the Arid West*, 8-21; Newlands, *Public Papers of Francis G. Newlands*, Vol. 1, 55-74.

¹³ Ballard C. Campbell, ed., *The Human Tradition in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* (Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 2000), 102

accommodate his social aspirations and family obligations, he worked longer hours and took on more clients.¹⁴ Regardless of his work load, the ever-ambitious Newlands fought to join the ranks of the richest and most well-heeled men in San Francisco society. He hobnobbed with men who made their fortunes in railroads, shipping concerns, and California gold and Nevada silver mining. He cultivated social connections and went to the right parties. Using his social connections, he gained increasingly wealthy clients. His mother moved to California at his behest in 1872. While she often complained that he saved no money despite the success of his law business, she enjoyed the new comforts and benefits of Newlands' social networks.¹⁵

Newlands career at this time demonstrated the way social connections promoted his pursuit of wealth and power. In early 1873 during his social circuits, Newlands met Clara Adelaide Sharon, daughter of Bank of California and Comstock Lode investor William Sharon. At the time, Sharon was one of the richest men in California. He had moved to the state during the 1849-1850 Gold Rush and made good money in Sacramento real estate. He moved to San Francisco in 1850, where he made lucrative investments in commercial and residential property.¹⁶ In 1863, Sharon moved to Virginia City, Nevada, to manage William Ralston's investments in the Comstock Lode. Despite the declining production of the lode's silver mines, Ralston's Bank of California loaned inordinate amounts of money to mining companies and their suppliers, as well as to Virginia City smelters and businessmen. Sharon personally guaranteed Ralston's shaky loans then improved mining methods and made brisk

¹⁴ Atwood, "The Romance of Senator Francis G. Newlands," 294-310

¹⁵ Rowley, *Reclaiming the Arid West*, 34.

¹⁶ Campbell, ed., *The Human Tradition*, 101-5; Newlands, *Public Papers of Francis G. Newlands*, Vol. 1, 2-3; Rowley, *Reclaiming the Arid West*, 8-21. Duane A. Smith, "Mother Lode for the West: California Mining Men and Methods," *California History* 77 (Winter 1998/1999): 49-173.

financial moves that paid off the bank's loans in just four months. Sharon earned \$750,000 for his effort.¹⁷ He and Ralston also bought low-cost stock in mining companies that, after Sharon's improvements, soared, making both men millions.¹⁸ By 1870, Sharon's portfolio included shipping companies, banks, mines and mining companies, and commercial real estate.¹⁹ By the time Newlands asked for Clara's hand in marriage in 1874, Sharon had secured a place in the rarified air of California's elect. Despite the connection between Newlands's ambitions and Clara's wealth, the couple enjoyed an affectionate relationship. As Clara's suitor, he appeared even more impeccable in society and sharper in court. He worked incessantly and often earned \$5,000 a month. He knew where the real money was, however, and spent his income on social commitments to the point that he teetered on the edge of financial and physical collapse. His suffering paid off when he married Clara in front of Sharon's imposing mansion on Sutter Street on November 19, 1874. The ceremony confirmed Sharon's acceptance of Newlands into the Sharon family and secured Newlands' position in the lofty San Francisco elite.²⁰

Even before the wedding, Sharon found in Newlands a calculating businessman, shrewd lawyer, and visionary executive. Sharon wanted an astute and judicious manager who could protect the Sharon conglomerate through boom and bust, controversy, and conflict. At this point in his career, Newlands saw Sharon's fortune as key to his own and worked doggedly to make Sharon's accounts grow. He was less a doctrinaire laissez-faire capitalist

¹⁷ Henry Clews, *Twenty-Eight Years on Wall Street* (New York: Irving Company, 1888), 466-9.

¹⁸ Atwood, "The Romance of Senator Francis G. Newlands," 295-6.

¹⁹ Grant H. Smith, *The History of the Comstock Lode, 1850-1920* (Reno: Nevada Bureau of Mines, 1943), 49-50.

²⁰ Malkey, *The Infamous King of the Comstock*, 98-201.

than a man who understood what was good for his career. Toppling rivals, fighting critics, and overcoming diversity tested his mettle, and he loved the challenge. Meticulous and cunning, he knew more than Sharon's rivals about market particulars, money and stock trends, and laws pertaining to finances and private property.²¹ The Coinage Act of 1873, the collapse of over-inflated railroad stock, and European depression put the United States almost solely on the gold standard, shrank the money supply, and contributed to a financial panic that brought the nation's economy to a standstill. As soon as Newlands felt banking going soft, he advised Sharon on shrewd gold market trades. He stood at Sharon's side as Sharon gambled with rail and banking stocks. As silver crashed, Newlands directed Sharon as he bought one mine after the other. With Newlands' guidance, Sharon manipulated the stock he owned in western Nevada silver mines, which still supplied Asian markets, and increased the market value of his own mines. Newlands helped Sharon gain wealth and power through the difficult years of the mid 1870s while other West Coast businessmen tumbled.²²

Under Newlands' management, Sharon's wealth increased handsomely through the 1870s. He counseled Sharon on risky transactions and maneuvered to get Sharon the best deals. In 1874, Sharon bought, on Newlands advice, shares in large railroad corporations that suffered losses in the 1873 financial collapse. Newlands sensed the depressed stock would bring hefty returns after the crisis swept away financially unstable competitors and the economy recovered.²³ The 1873 downturn devastated Ralston's Bank of California, and Ralston took to devious and clandestine accounting to keep his bank afloat. But cooking the

²¹ Pisani, *To Reclaim a Divided West*, 299-301; Rowley, *Reclaiming the Arid West*, 14-30.

²² Mary Ellen Glass, *Silver and Politics in Nevada, 1892-1902* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1969), 53-4.

²³ Glass, *Silver and Politics in Nevada, 1892-1902*, 53-4, 59-70.

books took Ralston only so far. In 1875, he watched his financial empire collapse within a few weeks, and he died that summer either by suicide or accident while boating in San Francisco Bay.²⁴ With Newlands' counsel, Sharon paid one million dollars for control of Ralston's prestigious Palace Hotel, his Bank of California assets, and his properties in California and Nevada. The purchase also gave him full control of San Francisco's water company, the Spring Valley Water Works Company. The purchase included Ralston's railroad and mining stock, government securities, and his interests in the Comstock Lode. Sharon gained full control of the Bank of California and backed its reopening with his own money. This move proved fortuitous. West Coast banks hungered for loans and securities to keep themselves flush. The Bland-Allison Act in 1878 directed the federal treasury to put limited amounts of silver into circulation. While the act was no boon—Nevada suffered a depression in the silver market from 1877 until into the 1900s—Newlands used the bump in silver prices to increase Sharon's control of western Nevada mines.²⁵ Among the many functions he performed in relation to the Sharon wealth, Newlands fortified Sharon's property holdings against taxes prescribed under the state's new constitution in 1879. He also extricated Sharon's brother James from a financial scandal related to the Justice Mining Company and protected Sharon's interest in the company at the same time. By 1880, Sharon was worth \$15 million, and Newlands stood at the center of Sharon's financial empire.²⁶

²⁴ "How William C. Ralston Died: The Tragic End of California's most Daring Financier Having Failed in His Efforts to Stave off Ruin," *New York Times*, 28 June 1895: 2.

²⁵ "Silver," *Sacramento Daily Record-Union*, December 11, 1890: 1; Atwood, "The Romance of Senator Francis G. Newlands," 294-300; James W. Hulce, *The Silver State: Nevada's Heritage Reinterpreted* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2004), 120-2; Rowley, *Reclaiming the Arid West*, 29. See also, Francis G. Newlands, "Address Before the Bankers' Association of San Francisco, Cal., July 25, 1892" in Newlands, *The Silver Struggle, 1890-1894* (Memphis: General Books, 2012), 138-47.

²⁶ Albert W. Atwood, *Francis G. Newlands: A Builder of a Nation* (Chevy Chase, MD: Chevy Chase Land Company, 1969), 29-33; Rowley, *Reclaiming the Arid West*, 14-21.

From his position at the head of the Sharon fortune, Newlands learned vital political lessons he used later in his own political career. In 1876, Sharon sought the Nevada Senate seat but lived full-time in San Francisco. His money and his reputation as a silver supporter, however, took him a long way with miners and Nevada bankers. In March 1875, after a political campaign to which Sharon devoted \$600,000, he went to Washington as Nevada's senator. Political and business critics accused him of buying the election, and he most certainly did. Sharon never spent money without the prospect of return. When he went to Washington to push federal coinage of silver, he left Newlands in control of the Sharon conglomerate. Newlands' able legal and financial skills kept the appearance if not the smell of corruption off Sharon. At the same time, he learned the dirtiness of Nevada politics and the perils of overt spending of personal fortunes to gain political office. By taking over Sharon's legal and financial dealings in full, Newlands provided Sharon political cover from criticism of his specious Nevada residency and rapacious stock speculations.²⁷ He also absorbed lessons from Sharon's tenure in office. Sharon suffered a setback, however, in May 1877 that would end his efficacy as a silver supporter in the Senate. When his wife of thirty-three years, Maria Malloy Sharon, died after a long illness, he returned to California, where he remained for most of his Senate term. His open and flagrant neglect of duty doomed him from ever seeking office again. Newlands, as an astute scholar of Sharon's actions, absorbed several lessons from Sharon's behavior. While money might buy an election once, there was no substitute from keeping in touch with ordinary citizens, small businessmen, and farmers, as well as making it known that one was hard at work for his constituency.²⁸

²⁷ Gilman M. Ostrander, *Nevada: The Great Rotten Borough, 1859-1864* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 35-39

²⁸ Michael J. Malkey, *The Infamous King of the Comstock: William Sharon and the Gilded Age in the West* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2006), 158-9; Rowley, *Reclaiming the Arid West*, 29-30.

When Newlands' wife Clara died in late-1882, he reacted by dedicating even greater energy and time to Sharon's affairs and his own growing law practice.²⁹ Sharon delivered Newlands new and priceless opportunities to showcase his legal and public relations skills in 1883. In 1879, Sharon's Belmont Hotel hired Sarah Althea Hill as a hostess. Shortly after Sharon met her at the hotel, she frequented his residence at the Palace Hotel. Their relationship became a public scandal, especially when the sixty-year-old Sharon took the twenty-seven-year-old Hill as a companion in 1880.³⁰ Hill understood in 1880 the scope of Sharon's wealth and she wanted a firm commitment from the robber baron. She and Sharon swore and signed a legal document attesting to their marriage. Although Hill and Sharon's relationship lasted less than a year, in 1883 Hill accused Sharon of adultery and sought formal divorce proceedings in California state court. Newlands joined former Nevada Senator William M. Stewart on Sharon's legal team. Sharon had a great deal at stake. Newlands welcomed the opportunity to protect the Sharon money from Hill and her crack team of lawyers. She demanded alimony in excess of \$6,500 a month plus a share of the Sharon wealth. Newlands was determined that she wasn't going to get even the smallest settlement. Sharon argued that he never married Hill in an open, officiated ceremony. This, he said, made her claims to financial redress invalid. Hill argued that even if the document she possessed did not pass legal muster, the couple shared a common-law marriage and that she deserved a portion of the Sharon fortune.³¹

By casting Sharon as a benevolent businessman and Hill as a decadent gold-digger,

²⁹ Malkey, *The Infamous King of the Comstock*, 154-60; Rowley, *Reclaiming the Arid West*, 34-43.

³⁰ Malkey, *The Infamous King of the Comstock*, 154-60.

³¹ William Henry Linow Barnes, *In the Superior Court of the City and County of San Francisco, State or California* (San Francisco: Barry, Baird & Co., c.1885)

Newlands kept newspaper readers interested and himself in reporters' stories. Western and national newspaper reporters covered every detail of the case. He contested the validity of Hill's claims, making numerous motions and appealing court decisions. As the Hill case devolved into a slugfest, Newlands kept himself above Sharon's deteriorating reputation. The proceedings revealed Sharon's avaricious pursuit of wealth but Newlands projected himself as a defender of hard-working people who deserved the fruits of their labors. The trials and motions thrilled readers with instances of marital infidelity—Sharon had gone through several relationships by the time Hill accused him of adultery. The story involved a wealthy man and a common, working woman. Newlands and the other Sharon lawyers litigated the case for over seven years. The divorce case wound up in the murder of a California Supreme court justice. Due to Newlands' legal maneuvering, Hill received no settlement, alimony, or other financial compensation. She fell into penury and mental illness. When Sharon died in 1885 of a sudden heart attack, Newlands became executor of his estate and would remain in some way involved in the Sharon money until 1890.³²

Newlands built Sharon's wealth and most of his own in an economy relatively free of government regulation. As early as the 1870s, however, he sensed Americans' increasing tolerance for unbridled, rapacious accumulation of riches and the social disruptions that came with them.³³ He took note as reform sentiment gripped the country. The Grange, Greenback-Labor Party, and the Farmer's alliances movements agitated against exploitative practices of railroads and utilities. Increasingly confrontational journalism and a restive public swayed elected officials against corporate monopolism and toward government regulation of

³² Rowley, *Reclaiming the Arid West*, 35. For an overview of the Sharon-Hill divorce and alimony case, see Brooks W. McCracken, "Althea and The Judges," *American Heritage Magazine* 18 (June 1967), 60-79.

³³ Atwood, "The Romance of Senator Francis G. Newlands," 294-310.

business.³⁴ Urban workers chafed under strict and arduous work routines in American factories where scientific management increased productivity and profit. Strikes produced periodic economic interruptions that tycoons and corporate managers crushed with hired thugs and strikebreakers. John Rockefeller's oil trusts, Andrew Carnegie's steel empire, and Gustavus Swift's meatpacking conglomerate seemed far from California and Nevada. An increasing number of urban intellectuals, reform agitators, and labor activists, however, gained national attention and public approval with arguments that the market economy need not result in monopolies and social division. Government could, if the people deemed necessary, break up corporations, determine how to disseminate their assets, and provide for the common good.³⁵ By the 1880s, dissatisfied California and Nevada farmers, miners, and small grazers agitated for rail, financial, and market reforms.³⁶

Newlands recognized that the industrial-era laissez-faire capitalism caused political unrest, and that the force of popular politics threatened property, business, and investment. In 1879, he demonstrated his plasticity when it came to protecting Sharon's fortune. California adopted a new constitution that put elective government in direct regulation of utilities. That year, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors cut the rates that Sharon's Spring Valley Water

³⁴ For an excellent analysis of the press' transformation in the last decades of the nineteenth century, see Randall S. Sumtper, "John G. Speed and the First Newspaper Content Analysis," *Journalism History* 27 (Summer 2001), 64-53.

³⁵ Steven J. Diner, *A Very Different Age: Americans of the Progressive Era* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), 14-29; Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., *Scale and Scope: The Dynamics of Industrial Capitalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 50-89; Richard Schneirov, "Thoughts on Periodizing the Gilded Age: Capital Accumulation, Society, and Politics, 1873-1898," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 5 (July 2006): 189-224.

³⁶ Worth Robert Miller "The Lost World of Gilded Age Politics," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 1 (January 2002): 49-67; Sven Beckert, "Democracy and Its Discontents: Contesting Suffrage Rights in Gilded Age New York," *Past and Present* 174 (February 2002): 116-157.

Works Company charged San Franciscans for water.³⁷ Newlands parlayed with city on the company's behalf. During these negotiations, he revealed that he was shifting away from defending wealth solely on the sanctity of private property. During conferences with the city, he maintained that the company and city gained from amicable and mutually beneficial working relationships. Newlands agreed that San Francisco possessed an interest in regulating the water company's rates. But the city, he maintained, depended on the company's smooth functioning. The company must meet bond payments, maintain infrastructure, and guarantee investor profits. He argued that the city's fair rates for San Franciscans must include reasonable profits for Spring Valley. The threat of sudden action unfavorable to the company, he argued, made Spring Valley less attractive to investors. Lack of investment interrupted the company's ability to maintain infrastructure and crippled its future development—both of which affected San Franciscans negatively.³⁸ He proposed the city and the company analyze Spring Valley's labor, and fixed and infrastructure investment costs. With this information, all parties could negotiate water rates in a rational manner. Such an arrangement gave the city a role in regulating the company. Stable utility bills gave San Franciscans the ability to plan their lives. Without abrupt downward changes in rates, the company avoided disruptions from competition, bankruptcy, or insufficient infrastructure investment. Steady income allowed the company to attract investors. He presented the supervisors detailed charts of company infrastructure, labor, and delivery costs. Ultimately, Newlands succeeded. The company and San Francisco agreed on rates that reflected the

³⁷ Atwood, "The Romance of Senator Francis G. Newlands," 294-5; Rowley, *Reclaiming the Arid West*, 30; Rowley, "Visions of a Watered West," 145.

³⁸ Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 168

company's costs, bond repayments, and a profit of nine percent.³⁹

The 1882 Board of Supervisors election changed the complexion of the board. Some newly elected board members campaigned against the company's monopoly on water services. They claimed that the city's booming population gave the company profits higher than nine percent—even after the city lowered rates in 1881. Once in office, the new supervisors brought Spring Valley to the table and demanded the company lower its profits to nine percent, regardless of the number of water users. The second Spring Valley fight showed Newlands developing new strategies to protect the company. He understood that the nation was changing and the cutthroat world of Sharon's Bank of California days in Nevada was a thing of the past. Rather than fight the merits of Spring Valley's position against the city based on private property, he sought to bring new constitutional interpretations of the rights and property and society to bear on the case.⁴⁰ If the city regulated Spring Valley rates, the company needed assurance that changes in the Board of Supervisors not interfere with the company's ability to do its work. Reliable, long-term rate schedules assured company investors, earned profit, and allowed the company to maintain infrastructure. If the water company could only seek relief in the courts, he maintained, then such an arrangement pitted the company against the city. In reality, he said, the company and city shared the same interests. The parties should, instead, work as partners. Elected officials should not direct a private company.⁴¹

He lost on the Court's previous 1877 decision in *Munn v. Illinois*, a case that

³⁹ Michael J. Malkey, *The Infamous King of the Comstock: William Sharon and the Gilded Age in the West* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2006), 158-9; Rowley, *Reclaiming the Arid West*, 29-30.

⁴⁰ Malkey, *The Infamous King*, 158-9; Rowley, *Reclaiming the Arid West*, 29.

⁴¹ U.S. Supreme Court, *Spring Valley Water Works v. Schottler, et al.* 110 U.S. 347, 4 S.Ct. 28 L.Ed.: 1-2; Rowley, *Reclaiming the Arid West*, 30-3, see also footnote 5 on 177; Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 160-9.

established state governments' right to regulate certain entities delivering public services within their boundaries, so long as state regulation did not represent restraint of interstate trade.⁴² But Newlands' arguments showed his flexibility in a nation moving from laissez-faire, no-holds-barred economic competition and individual gain. He believed the regulatory strokes of the Board of Supervisors represented political action rather than true regulatory functions. For this, only a third party, a regulatory agency with appointed members, could weigh evidence and make clear-headed decisions. The monopoly the company enjoyed with its state-chartered franchise delivered water most efficiently to San Francisco. It could, without significant controls, also do great damage to the city. It was in the best interests of the company and the city to find the balance between profit and delivery of services.⁴³

In the 1870s, Newlands built his salaries, bonuses, and investments into handsome wealth through aggressive investment, ruthless competition, and individual persistence. As his accounts swelled, however, he progressively equated social order with steady business growth. He was neither a staunch social Darwinist nor a rigid free-market believer. He assumed that the health and stability of wealth best benefited the general welfare and that the public owned the duty to maintain a good business environment. By the mid-1880s, he believed third-party regulation stood between the tendency of wealth to overuse its power for private gain and politicians under pressure from uninformed voters. In this, he joined such progressives as Theodore Roosevelt, New York Governor and U.S. Supreme Court Justice Charles Evans Hughes, and Louis Brandeis, each of whom sought to diminish the detrimental effects of laissez-faire capitalism while, at the same time, bolster its longevity. By 1890, he

⁴² U.S. Supreme Court, *Spring Valley Water Works v. Schottler, et al.*: 4.

⁴³ Rowley, *Reclaiming the Arid West*, 25-33. See also, Kolko, *Triumph of Conservatism*.

avored government regulation of industry and sought to place third-party commissions and regulatory agencies between government and business. Increasingly, he understood courts not as adversarial grounds where government and business argued the public good. Instead, he believed courts aided society when they promoted progressive use of government regulation for positive social results, which to Newlands meant the protection of moneyed interests from arbitrary government confiscation and angry voters. The order that resulted from such an arrangement benefited businesses, corporations, and shareholders with securer investments. Solid economic growth also guaranteed the public reliable delivery of goods and services.⁴⁴

Water as National Resource

In the 1880s, Newlands' investments paid him well. Financially comfortable, he moved to Carson City, Nevada, in 1888, and then to Reno in 1889 to start his political career. He immediately invested time and energy into Reno civic life.⁴⁵ Already well-known among Reno bankers and businessmen, he founded the Nevada Board of Trade in 1889. Under Newlands' direction, the Board of Trade advocated the breakup of large grazing tracts for small farms and water management for irrigation and mining. Grazers held large acreages in the Great Basin and the Sierra foothills, but their water demand cut into the supply miners needed for silver ore extraction. While water had long been a part of Nevada politics, Newlands now led an increasingly powerful coalition of businessmen who understood the

⁴⁴ Darling, *Public Papers of Francis G. Newlands*, Vol. I, 3; Donald J. Pisani, "Federal Reclamation and Water Rights in Nevada," *Agricultural History* 51 (July 1977): 542; Rowley, "Francis G. Newlands, Water for the West, and Progressivism," in *The Human Tradition*, Cambell, ed., 102-3.

⁴⁵ "National News," *Hawaiian Gazette*, November 19, 1889: 7; Rowley, "Visions of a Watered West," 142-5. See also, Berry, "Of Blood and Water," 79-111.

value of expanding the state's population with small-farm irrigation. Newlands and his compatriots believed irrigation diversified the Nevada economy and relieved Nevadans from the boom-and-bust nature of the cattle and mining industries. More farmers, they thought, meant expanded banking, commercial development, and, one day, heavy industry.⁴⁶

When Newlands moved to Reno in 1889, Nevada had little going for it besides mining. The state possessed, historian Donald Pisani wrote, “no spectacular scenery, save for Lake Tahoe; no large forests; a poor transportation network; and no commercial center to rival San Francisco, Denver, Salt Lake City, or Seattle. Worst of all, it had very little water.”⁴⁷ Nearly all the state's small streams flowed out of the state. The state's larger rivers—the Truckee, Carson, and Colorado—originated in other states. The Reese and Marys joined the Humboldt, which drained into the Great Basin and disappeared into the soil. Late-nineteenth century Nevada business also funneled raw materials and money out of the state for the benefit of individuals and wealth in other states. William Sharon, William Ralston, the San Francisco elite, and even Newlands himself made their fortunes on western Nevada silver and the assets it produced. California banks held the majority of Nevada investments. After 1875, wide fluctuations in the price of silver combined with Congress' reluctance to coin silver freely left Nevada mining too risky for many investors. Individual prospectors, small mining companies, and investors went elsewhere to seek their fortunes.⁴⁸ The state's population dropped from 62,266 to 47,335 between 1880 and 1890. By the time Newlands

⁴⁶ Pisani, *To Reclaim a Divided West*, 200-1; For the history of conflict in Nevada politics, see David Beesley, “The Opening of the Sierra Nevada and the Beginnings of Conservation in California, 1827-1900,” *California History* 75 (Winter 1996/1997): 322-337, esp. 325; Donald J. Pisani, “Federal Reclamation and Water Rights in Nevada,” *Agricultural History* 51 (July 1977): 540-558.

⁴⁷ Pisani, *To Reclaim a Divided West*, 186.

⁴⁸ Witters, “History of the Comstock Lode,” 388-90; “The Great Advocate of Silver and Irrigation,” *The San Francisco Morning Call*, May 28, 1893: 30.

arrived in the state, production in the Comstock Lode, the single largest silver resource in the United States, had been in decline for a decade. Meanwhile, cattlemen, farmers, and miners fought each other over water. Businessmen in Carson City, Virginia City, and Reno, on the other hand, thought good water management would make everyone happy. Newlands and these businessmen believed, along with the state's surveyor and federal government experts Frederick Newell and Elwood Mead, that with modern methods and management, Nevada rivers could water millions of acres.⁴⁹

At the head of the Board of Trade from 1892 to 1899, Newlands built a reputation as a solid Nevadan. He constructed a large home that many Renoites recognized as his commitment to the town and the state. As his standing in western Nevada grew, he worked on development efforts that would transform Reno from a rough-and-tumble collection of miners and railroaders into an upstanding town with parks, boulevards, and a public library.⁵⁰ He cultivated connections with established businessmen interested in the state's future growth. He participated in the Republican state convention in 1890, hoping to gain the party's nomination for House representative. After a spirited fight, however, he pulled out of the nomination process on the convention's third ballot to avoid a high-cost political endeavor reminiscent of Sharon's big-money campaign in 1876. He wanted his name and reputation to propel him past divisive party politics and solidify his reputation as an astute

⁴⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, *Tenth and Eleventh Census*, Nevada, pages 43 and 51 respectively; David Beesley, "The Opening of the Sierra Nevada and the Beginnings of Conservation in California, 1827-1900," *California History* 75 (Winter 1996/1997): 322-337, esp. 325; Donald J. Pisani, "Federal Reclamation and Water Rights in Nevada," *Agricultural History* 51 (July 1977): 540-558. Pisani, "Federal Reclamation and the American West in the Twentieth Century," *Agricultural History* 77 (Summer 2003): 391-419; Pisani, *To Reclaim a Divided West*, 200-2; George R. Witters, "History of the Comstock Lode: Virginia City, Storey County, Nevada," *Rocks and Minerals* 74 (November-December 1999): 380-90, esp. 388-90.

⁵⁰ Atwood, "The Romance of Senator Francis G. Newlands," 290-3, Rowley, *Reclaiming the Arid West*, 52-60.

businessman who cared about Nevada's future.⁵¹

While irrigation remained his top personal priority, he understood that silver still dominated the state's economy and that irrigation would not, by itself, win a political campaign. He traveled to all parts of Nevada as a Board of Trade representative and took part in populist, Democratic, and Republican rallies. He talked with political candidates, party operatives, and assayed the public's political sentiment. He shook the hands of farmers, ranchers, and shepherders. Already known as a silverite, he improved his silver credentials and joined national organizations that promoted the free silver and bimetallism, including the National Executive Silver Committee, the National Silver Convention, the American Bimetallic League, and the Silver League of Nevada. After 1890, he professed favor for whatever party promoted the best silver, irrigation, and industrial policies for the state. When he stood for Congress in 1892, he declared himself a Democrat, understanding that ordinary Nevadans favored the party's positions on agriculture, economic reform, and bimetallism.⁵² Since he enjoyed the backing of Nevada business, he believed Nevada Republicans would give him little trouble. But he took nothing for granted. Though Sharon lived almost exclusively in California when he was Nevada's Senator, Nevadans admired and liked him. Nevadans also elected lawyer and Republican William Stewart to the Senate for the second time in 1886. Regardless of Stewart and Sharon's memberships in the Republican Party, Newlands used his connections to both men in his campaign.⁵³

⁵¹ Rowley, *Reclaiming the Arid West*, 61-4.

⁵² Mary Ellen Glass, *Silver and Politics in Nevada, 1892-1902* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1969), 53-4, 59-70; Rowley, 61-5

⁵³ Hudson, "Strong Animal Passions" 66-7.

Newlands felt the fervor for irrigation that swept western states in 1880s and 1890s.⁵⁴ Many saw water as a way to increase settlement, increase state economies, and bring the dreams of land ownership to many Americans. As early as 1891, he bolstered his reputation as an irrigationist when he personally financed irrigation surveys and bought reservoir sites as insurance against land speculators that sought land in those same areas.⁵⁵ He knew that his stance on rational water management would bring him the approval of business, farmers, and grazers. Irrigation itself gave him greater political clout when he gained national attention on the issue. In 1889, the *Sacramento Daily Record-Union* called Newlands one of “fifteen of the leading men of the State.” At the time he was “taking a great interest in irrigation matters, and is doing much to solve the perplexing question.” With Newlands’ credibility and seemingly endless energy for the irrigation cause, the paper stated, “Good results are soon to follow.”⁵⁶ Newlands understood that the silver industry, which was still a large part of the state’s economy, thirsted for greater access to dependable water supplies and he linked the fortunes of silver mining to water development. He argued that if California changed its water law and allowed Nevada access to runoff from the Sierras, western Nevada mining interests could extract additional wealth from lower-grade ores.⁵⁷ The *Wichita Eagle* wrote in 1891 that through mining Nevada “developed a class of citizens, bold, enterprising and able, such as no locality of equal population ever approached.” With irrigation and these peoples’

⁵⁴ Rowley, “Visions of a Watered West,” 142-5. See also, Berry, “Of Blood and Water,” 79-111.

⁵⁵ While this move showed Nevadans he put action to his ideas, he would also later sell some sites at healthy profits to the federal government and land developers. See, Berry, “Of Blood and Water,” 90, footnote 90.

⁵⁶ “Nevada Board of Trade,” *Sacramento Daily Record-Union*, December 22, 1889, 4; Berry, “Of Blood and Water,” 89-91; Darling, *Public Papers of Francis G. Newlands*, Vol. I, 3; Pisani, “Federal Reclamation and Water Rights,” 542; Rowley, “Francis G. Newlands, Water for the West, and Progressivism,” Campbell, ed., 102-3

⁵⁷ William D. Rowley, “Farewell to the Rotten Borough: Francis G. Newlands in Nevada.” *Halcyon* 17 (1995), 109-25.

hard work, “the broad acres of the State are equal to the rapport of an unlimited population.” Lack of irrigation and good management of the state’s mining and forest and grassland resources had put the state into a dismal position. A little of that water could make mines productive again, as well as “grazing for thousands of cattle and stock.”⁵⁸

After Newlands took his House seat in 1893, he worked to gain the state credibility in Congress. Nevada, on top of its economic problems, had the smallest population and lowest per capita income of any state in the union.⁵⁹ As a freshman representative, he also knew that of the western states, his was among the driest. No state would benefit more from federal management of water resources development than Nevada.⁶⁰ But he faced the impossible task of getting anything for Nevada due to its feeble political standing in the House. To overcome these issues, he positioned himself and Nevada above regional politics when the Carey Act came up for debate. He cast himself as a man from a state that wanted nothing but the best for the nation. He argued that irrigation proceeded only with federal government support. Western water development gave the nation untold benefit. He stated before the House floor debated on the Carey legislation that “ever since her admission into the Union (1864) her people and her statesmen have held an advanced position in all matters relating to the prosperity and growth of the country . . . and without partisanship, sectionalism, or prejudice have stood by policies which had in view only the general interest.”⁶¹ While this lofty language may not have gone far with easterners, it communicated the right tone to other western House members that he was one of them.

⁵⁸ “Francis Griffith Newlands,” *Wichita Daily Eagle*, September 17, 1891: 2.

⁵⁹ Pisani, “Beyond the Hundredth Meridian,” 472-3.

⁶⁰ Campbell, ed., *The Human Tradition*, 102.

⁶¹ Representative Francis G. Newlands (NV), *Congressional Record* 53:2 (December 13, 1893): H210.

After passage of the Carey legislation, federal interest in irrigation flagged. In 1893, a run on gold and panic in financial markets brought the economy to a standstill. With banks collapsing, railroad overbuilding putting pressure on financial markets, and the public's confidence in the economy failing, Congress could scarcely afford to devote itself to something that easterners believed benefited a particular area of the country over the rest. Nevada took a heavy hit in the economic depression that struck in 1893 and lasted until 1897. Many Nevadans saw plain common sense in expanding the money supply with silver. And they were hungry for it. They supported silver specie in an 1894 state referendum that passed sixteen to one.⁶² Irrigation promised future returns. It took time to build projects, settle the land, and expand the state economy. Silver, on the other hand, provided overnight return if the government took a liberal approach to the metal in currency matters. Newlands' own Democratic Party championed the cause of silver almost exclusively in 1896 as common-man's relief from the woes of burdensome agricultural debt.⁶³ The free coinage of silver promised to make the metal more precious and ease the money supply, which, in turn, would relieve pressure on farmers and inspire mining companies and prospectors—and the financiers and bankers that could fund them—to seek out new Nevada Comstocks.⁶⁴

On the House floor, he backed off irrigation and sought relief for Nevadans in federal money policy. The silver question, however, never took Newlands' eye from irrigation and water policy. The defeat of silverites in the election of 1900 cleared the way for Newlands to pursue his biggest and most enduring priority—making the desert bloom, particularly the

⁶² Campbell, ed., *The Human Tradition*, 106-7.

⁶³ Worth Robert Miller, "The Lost World of Gilded Age Politics," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 1 (January 2002): 61.

⁶⁴ Jeannette P. Nichols, "Silver Diplomacy," *Political Science Quarterly* 48 (December 1933): 587-8; Albert W. Atwood, "The Romance of Senator Francis G. Newlands," 309.

Nevada desert.⁶⁵ Newlands assayed the political climate and determined that irrigation's time had come. Both major political parties formulated irrigation platforms for the 1900 elections that promised new life to the American farm. Newlands himself crafted the irrigation plank for the Democratic Party Platform Committee. Western state political parties also took up irrigation and demanded federal government intervention into water development.⁶⁶ With Republican William McKinley's election, it seemed as if everything pointed toward congressional support for a comprehensive approach toward western water development. McKinley favored western water development and saw it as a way to build and solidify a western constituency. Working with Frederick Haynes Newell and Elwood Mead, Newlands wrote reclamation legislation that proposed the creation of a new federal agency that oversaw water development under the Secretary of the Interior. If Congress passed the legislation, the federal government would gain broad powers to condemn land, dam western rivers, and build reclamation projects. He made the legislation more palatable to his fellow representatives with the stipulation that it build small farms. While this seemed like a purely local benefit, the rhetoric of the small farm and love of rural life attracted the both western and eastern congressional delegations to the irrigation cause. Under the legislation, settlers took possession of eighty acres of public domain. After ten years, a settler obtained title to his land and paid for the cost of irrigating it with low-cost federal loans and water sales. Their payments went into a revolving fund that financed further reclamation projects. While Newlands envisioned the reclamation project bringing public domain into ownership, the act also allowed the federal government to reclaim land in private hands. In these instances, the

⁶⁵ Campbell, ed., *The Human Tradition*, 107.

⁶⁶ Darling, *The Public Paper of Francis G. Newlands*, 66; John T. Gano, "The Origin of a National Reclamation Policy," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 18 (June 1931): 40-3.

government would deliver water only to individual owners in eighty-acre allotments, regardless of how much land they possessed.⁶⁷

When Newlands submitted the reclamation bill to the House in January 1901, he joined a number of western state representatives impatient with the Carey Act. Newlands argued that the act's failures did not point to problems with irrigation. It indicated a dearth of the funds states needed to get initial irrigation projects off the ground. It showed just how little the federal government cared about its little brothers in the West.⁶⁸ Depression and slow recovery through the mid-1890s discouraged settlers, corporate investors, and entrepreneurs. The law, he argued, demonstrated that irrigation lay beyond the individual states' abilities. "In the first place for the reason that many of the States are so impoverished that they would be unable to undertake any great work of this kind, and, in the second place, for the reason that they rarely exercise a trust of this kind providently. In fact, it may be said that they never exercise it providently."⁶⁹ The intermountain west possessed neither the population nor the money for large scale water development. Nevada and states like it were "in no condition to do this work even though the land should be ceded to the state." Newlands also blamed the Carey Act's failure on flawed federal government settlement policy. Settlers, he reasoned, bought public domain with hopes that the land would yield their livings. This obliged the government to provide financial help and expertise irrigating lands already in private hands.

⁶⁷ Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 160-3.

⁶⁸ Newlands, *Public Papers of Francis G. Newlands*, Vol. 1, 56; "Reclaiming the Lands: Report of the State Arid Land Commission on the Work Now in Progress Near Billings, Montana," *Irrigation Age* 12 (October 1897-September 1898): 130.

⁶⁹ *Hearings before the Committee on Irrigation of Public Lands of the House of Representatives Relating to the Reclamation of Arid Lands of the United States, January 28-February 9, 1901* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1901), 8; Hugh T. Lovin, "The Carey Act in Idaho," 132; Pisani, "Water Planning in the Progressive Era," 390-1; R. H. Whitbeck, "Irrigation in the United States," *Geographical Journal* 54 (October 1919): 223-4.

“The reclamation of arid lands in private ownership,” he wrote, “was economical necessity, and one justified by law.”⁷⁰ Speaking for all westerners, he stated, “We claim that the General Government could take hold and establish a perfect and harmonious development.”⁷¹ With this kind of government intervention, sparsely populated western states, particularly tiny Nevada, no longer carried the burden of expensive dams, canals, and irrigation facilities.⁷² “If the government will only make the public lands worth settlement,” he stated, “by conserving the waters that now go to waste Nevada will become a great state.”⁷³

Newlands added an interesting twist to the regulation of interstate commerce. His view of positive federal intervention reflected the kind of activist government that many progressives favored. Water development under federal aegis stimulated economic development, he argued, the products of which flowed into interstate commerce.⁷⁴ Many western irrigation advocates long argued that the federal government neglected its duty to create economic conditions that increased industrial and agricultural growth for the general welfare. Water, by its very nature, Newlands said, was an interstate resource.⁷⁵ It connected the West to all other states—through rivers, as well as lakes, aquifers, and springs. He

⁷⁰ Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency*, 11-13; Senator Francis G. Newlands. *Suggestions for Report of Senate Committee on Irrigation [Following Visits to Reclamation Projects]*. by Francis G. Newlands. Senate Committee on Irrigation. *Congressional Record* 61 (1909): 5, 8-10, 17-8.

⁷¹ U.S. Congress. House. Committee on Public Lands. *Hearings Relating to the Reclamation and Disposal of the Arid Public Lands of the West*. *Congressional Record* 56:2 (January 11, 18, 23, 30, 1901): H12-3, 31-3.

⁷² Pisani, “Beyond the Hundredth Meridian,” 471-3.

⁷³ U.S. Congress. House. Committee on Public Lands. *Hearings Relating to the Reclamation and Disposal of the Arid Public Lands*, H10, 31-3.

⁷⁴ Ganoë, “The Origin of a National Reclamation Policy,” 34-52; George F. Lynch, “Constitutional Law: Eminent Domain: Condemnation of Riparian Lands under the Commerce Power,” *Michigan Law Review* 55 (December 1956): 272-286; Pisani, “Reclamation and Social Engineering,” 46-56; Harry N. Scheiber, “Federalism and the American Economic Order, 1789-1910,” *Law and Society Review* 10 (Autumn 1975): 57-118.

⁷⁵ Newlands, *Public Papers of Francis G. Newlands* Vol. 1, 57, 233.

reasoned that the rivers watering the Great Plains originated in the Rockies. These rivers relied on forests' ability to collect moisture in the ground and give it off slowly over time. This connected forests with rivers, aquifers, and lakes. Government reclamation, he maintained, used those sources for increased farm production. These products flowed into the national economy. Yet, he stated, no state that needed irrigation could act on water outside its own jurisdiction, regardless of the benefits it might bring to the nation as a whole. The federal government put money into rivers and harbors in the east. History showed that the federal government financed the building of canals and roads, yet it was not willing to show the West the same kind of generosity. "The National Government," he asserted, "by reason of its national character, is alone capable of taking hold of this interstate question and solving it."⁷⁶

In agitating for greater government intervention into western water, Newlands revealed his bent for economic and social order. The reclamation project streamlined western water and agriculture, he proclaimed, into a national scheme of production. "There is hardly a State which is watered by a river that has not interstate complications. Take the State of Nevada, for instance. Three out of its four rivers have their source in California." California and Nevada had stakes in water flowing off the Sierras; they also provided goods for the national economy. Rivers and streams flowed across state lines. Larger river systems connected small-stream and tributary watersheds in many states. Water development for agriculture in one state necessarily affected other states, he argued. Because of the interstate nature of water, he argued, the interstate commerce clause of the Constitution drew the federal government into inter-and intrastate water development. Although two or more states

⁷⁶ Newlands, *Public Papers of Francis G. Newlands*, Vol. 2, 63

might share a stream, one state's interests often conflicted with another. Federal control of western water prevented such conflicts, he stated. Newlands also argued that Americans developed agriculture and transportation infrastructure in the past as a national cause. Invoking the Jeffersonian ideal of a nation of self-sufficient freeholders, he argued before the House Committee on Irrigation of Arid Lands that, "We want to promote a policy that will induce the settlement of the country of which I have been speaking (the arid West) . . . according to the character of the cultivation, the climate, and the soil." Keeping public lands in federal hands and parceling them out in eighty-acre allotments for small farms kept "monopolizers"—land syndicates, cattle ranchers, and land speculators—at bay.⁷⁷

A number of western representatives, irrigationists, and civic leaders maintained that reclaimed western land benefited the nation in more than economic growth. With the proper application of science and expertise in water engineering, they believed, western land served as an outlet for landless laborers piling up in America's growing cities. Newlands argued that creating new stretches of arable lands lowered the costs of agricultural produce and benefited an increasing population. Competition moved savings on to national markets. To achieve this kind of economic and social rationalization, he said, irrigation depended on reservoirs and water works to irrigate huge swaths of western land. Private enterprise could not muster the resources to undertake such large endeavors. "Under existing laws," Newlands stated in 1901, "it is utterly impossible to make reclamation, for the reason that any reclamation scheme involved a very large expenditure in the storage of water, a very large expenditure in the main canals, and a very large expenditure in the diverting ditches." In addition, while the federal government made newly arable lands available to farmers, it was "absolutely

⁷⁷ Committee on Arid Lands. Hearing Related to the Reclamation of the Arid Lands of the United States 56th Cong., 2nd sess., January 28-February 9, 1901, 9.

essential to obtain the control and ownership of large areas of land in order to make a storage and reclamation enterprise profitable or even compensatory of the expenditure made.”⁷⁸

The Reclamation Empire

As the bill wound through house committees, Newlands saw his decade-long agitation for irrigation gaining strength. Western state representatives who once feared growth of federal government power found small advances in irrigation across the West under the Carey Act frustrating. Without direct federal subsidies, some now maintained, their states could not prime the irrigation pump.⁷⁹ One of the most prominent voices in the West, Wyoming state engineer Elwood Mead, had advocated for turning over public domain to western states as incentive for irrigating arid land, and he wrote his ideas into the Carey Act.⁸⁰ By 1901, his attitude changed. He testified before the U.S. Industrial Commission in 1901 that only four states that applied to the federal government for withdrawals from public domain. Mead did not see the Carey Act as a failure. But it was a disappointment. Of the 100,000,000 acres Mead and other irrigationists believed reclaimable in the West, he said, four states reclaimed about 600,000 acres under the Carey legislation. Mead believed that such minimal progress demonstrated how little excitement western states and territories possessed for undertaking their own water projects. Mead stated to the Commission that, “the states are not capable, under present conditions, of securing full utilization of their resources.” Private investors avoided large investments in irrigation works that they may take

⁷⁸ *Hearings before the Committee on Irrigation of Public Lands*, 8; Newlands, *Papers of Francis Newlands*, Vol. 1, Darling, ed., 57.

⁷⁹ Bonner, “Elwood Mead,” 43-6; Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 157.

⁸⁰ Hewitt, “Cowboyification,” 489.

years to recover. Individual farmers found no interest in desert land without the guarantee of water when they arrived. The costs of dams were also prohibitive. Accessing water in large rivers due to seasonal fluctuations created problems, as rivers ran low when water was most needed. With the exceptions of Wyoming and Idaho, he said, states' poor or inadequate state water and civil law prevented them from undertaking their own water development.⁸¹

The call for federalization of water indicated that private industry gained no profit without government help. After having watched many failed efforts at privately funded irrigation at some distance from rivers, irrigationists already understood that private industry could not surmount the expensive up-front investments for the dams, irrigation works, canals, ditches, and gates. If they did, very few or none were willing to wait for settlers who might or might not come. Then, if settlers came, the repayment of the initial costs, maintenance, and profit might take decades. Hundreds of entrepreneurial efforts produced very little irrigated land in relation to the land irrigation advocates wanted to reclaim. The Carey Act demonstrated that even free land from the federal government could not jump start irrigation enterprises due to lack of individual state financial wherewithal or lack of political will.⁸²

Mead's voice added to Newlands' credibility as he argued for his reclamation legislation. Newlands stated to the House Committee on Arid Lands that "Nevada has never been able to do anything under the Carey Act." Newlands argued the Carey legislation applied "to diversions of considerable size and to the distribution of water over considerable areas." Geographical constraints and small rivers limited Nevada's irrigation efforts, except in flatlands adjacent to the Humboldt River in the center of the state. It was true, he asserted,

⁸¹ U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Irrigation in the United States: Testimony of Elwood Mead, Irrigation Expert in Charge, Before the United States Industrial Commission, June 11 and 12, 1901* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1902), 29-31.

⁸² Pisani, *To Reclaim a Divided West*, 285-95.

that Wyomingites reclaimed easily irrigated flats and bottoms next to the Laramie, Big Horn, and North Platte rivers. Neither state possessed sufficient money, however, to reclaim land beyond river bottoms. Newlands argued both states needed expensive irrigation technologies and water from across state lines to reach their maximum potential. Wyoming Representative Frank Mondell backed Newlands before the committee. He believed that without steep aid from the sale of state bonds, which depended on the states' limited credit, private companies would not build past the lands from which they could make the most profit. "It accentuates the fact that conservation (of water) is a national work," Mondell said.⁸³ Irrigation, they argued, created new spaces for settlement. The crops from arid lands lowered food costs for a rapidly growing population. Western water, in its contributions to the Missouri and Mississippi rivers, transported those goods to the rest of the nation. For the national good, then, the federal government should build dams, improve rivers, and coordinate the uses of water for navigation, irrigation, and flood control. With its agencies, experts, and capital, Mondell stated, only the federal government could "undertake the truly national work of storing and controlling flood waters," diverting streams, and protecting the forests that stored so much water underground. Once accomplished, the desert would become a national asset and "the waste places glad."⁸⁴ This may have been so. But in Mondell and Newlands' minds, federal control of western water benefited local and state economies.

Through 1901, the bill progressed through the House and Senate debates.

Reclamation presented Congress with a huge national undertaking that many senators and

⁸³ U.S. Congress. House Committee on Arid Lands. Hearing Related to the Reclamation of the Arid Lands of the United States, 56th Cong., 2nd sess., January 28-February 9, 1901, 60-76, quotes, 66-7, Bonner, "Elwood Mead," 43-8.

⁸⁴ Representative Frank Mondell, "Statement to the House on H.R. 13189, River and Harbor Appropriations Bill," *Congressional Record* 56:2 Vol. 34; (777-804): H787-8.

representatives resisted. The Newlands bill struggled against opposition from House members from the Northeast and upper Midwest, who saw expansion of agriculture under federal programs in the West as injurious to farmers in their states. Competition from farmers who gained free or cheap land with the benefit of steady, reliable water seemed unfair to their farmers. Some easterners understood that increased commodity production would lower prices, strapping farmers who had planted and sown without government help. Expanding the federal government's power into control of western water—and ultimately of rivers—was not an easy process. The growth of federal size and power through water development met with resistance from western states' elected officials, farmers, and developers.⁸⁵ Politicians, farmers, and state officials wrangled over constitutionality of federal entrance into areas where it had never exercised control. The government, they argued, made a reach into the everyday lives of individuals in ways that violated private industry.⁸⁶ Private business, state legislatures, and individuals saw federal control of water as unfair competition with private enterprise.⁸⁷

Reclamation gained a boost in September of that year with the assassination of William McKinley. While McKinley supported reclamation, he never put the force behind his support that Theodore Roosevelt would. Roosevelt had already established his conservationist credentials in 1898, when, as governor of New York, he worked with Gifford Pinchot on problems associated with forest preserves in the Catskills and Adirondacks. A fiery reformer, he dove into conservation matters as soon as he took his seat in the Oval

⁸⁵ Pisani, "A Tale of Two Commissioners," 616.

⁸⁶ Alan S. Newell, "Did The Secretary Sell Us 'Blue Sky?': Inclusion of Warren Act Contractors in the North Platte River Project" and Pisani, "A Tale of Two Commissioners," in *Bureau of Reclamation: History Essays*, 336-7; 616-7.

⁸⁷ Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 156-68.

Office.⁸⁸ He resisted reclamation at first based on his uneasiness with overweening federal bureaucracies and possible constitutional challenges. He soon found that Republican obstruction of western initiatives, particularly in reclamation, hurt his party and his political future. Since the irrigation/reclamation offered the kinds of new social and economic efficiencies he sought as governor with forest preserves and land use, he understood that comprehensive national water policy bolstered his conservationist standing. He consulted with Pinchot and Newell over the worth of Newlands' bill, now named the National Reclamation Act. They agreed that the bill was solid and could do Roosevelt considerable political good. Roosevelt found several things he favored in the bill. It promised new markets for eastern industrial concerns and new business for railroads. It presented opportunities to redistribute landless urban workers and open new laboratories for model communities, such as those that Smythe proposed.⁸⁹

The bill gained support after Roosevelt's first address to Congress. In that speech, Roosevelt stated the depth of his conservationist program with regard to western waters. "Far-reaching interstate problems are involved," he stated, "and the resources of single states would often be inadequate. It is properly a national function, at least in some of its features. It is as right for the National Government to make the streams and rivers of the arid region by engineering works for water storage as to make the rivers and harbors of the humid region by engineering works of another kind." When the bill went for a vote in the House in May 1902, it passed with a solid majority. At the same time, however, the house vote revealed depths of contention and doubt over the bill—150 representatives didn't vote for or registered

⁸⁸ Sandy Marviny, "Theodore Roosevelt, Conservationist," *New York State Conservationist* 50 (June 1996): 15-22

⁸⁹ "The Arid Lands Bill," *San Francisco Morning Call*, January 30, 1902: 6; Pisani, "Reclamation and Social Engineering," 49-53.

themselves present. This is important. Many representatives from the Northeast did not vote for the measure. Nearly 80 percent of the West and South went for the bill, showing for the first time ideological alliances between the two regions. Many representatives from the Northeast didn't vote, in part because they liked individual water projects buried in rivers and harbors appropriations—the kind of pork that built local constituencies. Without support from other regions, those who voiced no votes faced retribution when time for those annual rivers and harbors appropriations came around. When the National Reclamation Act landed on his desk in June, 1902, Roosevelt signed it with Newlands, Mondell, future Reclamation Service director Frederick Newell, and Elwood Mead behind him.⁹⁰

The National Reclamation Act quickly became known as the Newlands Act. Three decades of agitation on the part of irrigationists brought the federal government into western water affairs.⁹¹ Newlands understood that comprehensive federal water policy represented an expansion of bureaucratic power that favored the strong over the weak and the big over the small.⁹² According to William Smythe, corporations and large companies had once created, “A new feudalism, if anything, more galling than the old . . . based on private or corporate control of water vital to the existence of men.” Under the Newlands Act, the federal government instead of private business would organize national expansion and western settlement, Smythe argued, in a coordinated, efficient, and nationally beneficial way that promoted settlement and preserved the liberties of the western settler.⁹³ Newlands went along with Smythe, aped his language, and use his underlying logic behind irrigation as he helped a

⁹⁰ Ganoë, “The Origin of a National Reclamation Policy,” 45-52.

⁹¹ Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 277.

⁹² Pisani, *Water and the American Government*, 20-31.

⁹³ Smythe, *Constructive Democracy*, 378; Smythe, *Conquest of Arid America* (1905), 144.

new kind of feudalism where the government held control of the waters. He understood more deeply than Smythe that federally supported reclamation offered protections of property and provided for the welfare of the average American without changing either the economic or social order.⁹⁴ In 1903, Newlands stated that the federal government “stood in the position of a protector, not of an enterprise intended for its profit, but a great scheme of internal improvement, intended to develop the arid West on broad and comprehensive lines, and in such a way to avert the evils of land monopoly and to promote division of the public domain into homes for the advancing army of settlers.”⁹⁵

Newlands’ reclamation scheme set the government up as the paternal force, the protector. But seen from any perspective other than from within the irrigation movement, the individual who settled reclaimed land looked like a colonial. Newlands’ reclamation scheme subjugated the individual to bureaucratic planning, organization, and control. Access to water influenced where people lived, what they grew, and what they did with their lives. Planners and surveyors staked out land that the government reclaimed. Engineers moved water. The American taxpayer funded the canals, ditches, and gates. The government gave individual farmers land. Farmers, if any came, lived an organized existence dependent on continued government funding, input, and control. They produced a living for themselves and profit for irrigation equipment manufacturers, farm implement dealers, and agribusiness corporations, as well as banks and investors. The products they grew fit into existing commodities market, not into new kinds of vegetables and fruits for American tables.⁹⁶ Back in 1896 the editors of

⁹⁴ Worsster, *Rivers of Empire*, 276-9.

⁹⁵ Newlands, *Papers of Francis Newlands*, Vol. 1, 77

⁹⁶ Worsster, *Rivers of Empire*, 115; Pisani, “Reclamation and Social Engineering, 46-63; Pisani, “Water Planning in the Progressive Era,” 390-1.

Irrigation Age wrote that, “The object of the irrigation movement is to build a new empire in the arid regions of the west.” Progress was the object, the editorial stated, and the national goal in the West was to build “a civilization where want and misery will be reduced to a minimum, energy and thrift be justly rewarded, and good fellowship abound.” Reclamation “stands today on the threshold of a tremendous forward movement and the responsibility for the proper control and direction of that movement rests upon the men of Western America.” The ground was there, and with only a little water, it could be made to carry more people, more agriculture, and new markets. Only with a comprehensive policy toward water development could the empire march forward, the magazine editor opined, doing its duty to conquer nature, feed people, and create social order. Newlands made the dream come true.⁹⁷

Newlands imagined fertile fields sprouting in organized grids along the irrigation ditches. Efficient, businesslike irrigation constructed those grids and turned them green. Their arrangement made agricultural enterprises amenable to the movement of money and investment. Reliable sources of water in dry environments meant lower risks to investors. Happy investors and steady returns turned into more banks willing to lend at lower rates, ending the agriculturalists’ perennial problem of access to credit. After all, if banks and investors in agricultural enterprise could count on steady movement of produce from irrigated farms, then other investors and lenders in everything from equipment manufacture to financial markets could sit comfortably on their investments’ reliable returns.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ “The Progress of Western America,” *Irrigation Age* 12 (October 1896-September 1897): 1-3; Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 115.

⁹⁸ Donald J. Pisani, “Federal Reclamation and the American West in the Twentieth Century,” *Agricultural History* 77 (Summer 2003): 391-419; Donald C. Jackson, “Engineering in the Progressive Era: A New Look at Frederick Haynes Newell and the U.S. Reclamation Service,” *Technology and Culture* 34 (July 1993): 539-574; Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 115.

Reclamation built a particular kind of America. Unlike Smythe, Newlands did not just assume that the American farm was male-oriented and white. He wanted to make sure that it stayed that way. The West, he thought, was the exclusive domain of the white race. Whites settled the country, produced a superior civilization, and expanded the country to occupy the continent. Race tolerance led to white racial degeneration. He favored limiting immigration to whites only and believed that the nation reached too far for racial equality that did not exist. African Americans, he believed, were an inferior race. “We have already drifted into a condition which seriously suggests the limitation of the political rights heretofore, perhaps mistakenly, granted them.” Only a “humane national policy” on the part of the central government “shall recognize that the blacks are a race of children, requiring guidance, industrial training, and the development of self-control, and other measures designed to reduce the danger of that race complication, formerly sectional, but now rapidly becoming national.” This reflected the discomfort of white elites with a growing population of African Americans across the nation, some of whom sought their fortunes in the mines and forests of the West.⁹⁹

Newlands also constructed his views from prevailing western prejudices against Asian immigrants. A clause in the Newlands Act prohibited the use of “mongolian labor” in reclamation project construction. He feared that companies the new Reclamation Service contracted for dam, ditch, and irrigation works construction would seek cheap sources of labor. To the East he saw three hundred million white Europeans. Immigrants among them,

⁹⁹ Francis G. Newlands, “A Western View of the Race Question,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 34 (September 1909): 49-51; Robert M. Folgeson, *Bourgeois Nightmares: Suburbia, 1870-1930* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 95-6. See also, Robert B. Campbell, “Newlands, Old Lands: Native American Labor, Agrarian Ideology, and the Progressive-Era State in the Making of the Newlands Reclamation Project, 1902–1926,” *Pacific Historical Review* 71 (May 2002): 203-238; Robert Wilson, “Landscapes of Promise and Betrayal: Reclamation, Homesteading, and Japanese American Incarceration,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 101 (March 2011): 424-444.

he believed, would change American culture in detrimental ways. To the West he perceived one billion “people of the yellow and brown races” that would quickly take over the West Coast and the intermountain west if allowed to immigrate freely. Prejudice also kept Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants from owning and working on reclamation project construction. For Newlands, racial toleration meant amalgamation and destruction of the strength and benevolence of the white race. To allow people of other races to claim newly irrigated land would cause nothing less than “race war and mutual destruction or the reduction of one race to servitude.” Newlands preferred to keep immigrants out of the West completely, if not for their sakes then for the sake of American principles. Admission of other races to the United States under conditions of servitude, similar to that which occurred in the building of western railroads, was “foreign to the spirit of our institutions, which demands equal rights to all within our jurisdiction.”¹⁰⁰

Newlands was not alone in his racial sentiment. A matrix of racial and social Darwinist ideas among elite, powerful, and upper middle-class Americans frame Newlands racist attitudes. He, like his acquaintance Roosevelt, as well as other irrigation advocates, such as Newell and Mead, often theorized about white racial superiority, its fragility, and what could be done to protect it. Racism, eugenics, and social Darwinism suffused much of the language and efforts of reform of the time. Black Americans were frequently left out of social reforms altogether. In its decision in *Plessey v. Ferguson*, the Supreme Court legitimized entire bodies of state and local segregation law throughout the South and permitted segregation law throughout the nation. In the West, open hatred of Native Americans was common. To Newlands, the West served as a bulwark against a creeping

¹⁰⁰ Newlands, *Public Papers of Francis G. Newlands*, Vol. 2, 297-91; Newlands, “A Western View of the Race Question,” 49-51.

yellow menace escaping colonial unrest and poor living conditions. Anti-Japanese sentiment ran particularly high in the early twentieth century in the wake of the Russo-Japanese War and imperial machinations into China. Theodore Roosevelt himself asked Japan to limit its own emigration to the United States in a “gentlemen’s agreement.” The West, if it was going to be a bastion of American growth and efficiency, was going to have to remain white.¹⁰¹

Water Reimagined

The leap into irrigation and water development in the West did not demand wholly new schemes of thought and logic or realignment of the nation’s overall views of society, nature, or race. Newlands’ quest for rational and orderly conquest gave investors ways of deciding the worth of any one irrigation project’s potential in terms of costs-benefit analysis. By the time Newlands entered Congress, a wealth of knowledge, language, and ideas about moving and manipulating water already existed. In bringing water to densely populated cities, Americans had developed advanced hydrological engineering and much of the technology needed to irrigate the West. Americans knew how to build dams and canals for river transportation. In the wake of industrialization, civil and structural engineers developed the means to alter, dam, and divert streams for city water systems, agriculture, and industrial use.¹⁰² The Newlands Act demanded reimagining of water that took it beyond the limitations

¹⁰¹ Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 197-206; Robert W. Dimand, “Economists and the Shadow of ‘The Other’ before 1914,” *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 64 (July 2005): 827-850; Howard R. Lamar, “Persistent Frontier: The West in the Twentieth Century,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 4 (January 1973): 19-21; Thomas C. Leonard, “Retrospectives: Eugenics and Economics in the Progressive Era,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 19 (Autumn, 2005): 207-224; Fred H. Matthews, “White Community and ‘Yellow Peril,’” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 50 (March 1964): 612-33, esp. 623-5; Theodore Roosevelt, “The Philippines and Our Asiatic Position,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 198, Present International Tensions (July 1938): 133-142, esp. 137-8; Roosevelt, “True Americanism,” *Advocate of Peace* 56 (March 1894): 58.

¹⁰² Pisani, “Beyond the Hundredth Meridian,” 466-70.

of a drainage, mountain brook, or river, into the realm of pure engineering and accounting. Streams, aquifers, rivers, snowpack, and forests all became water resources whose development depended on understanding in specific, scientific ways the worth of any one in relation to all others. Proper, efficient improvement of any one resource depended on development of others. Engineers, economists, government bureaucrats, and actuaries, Newlands thought, could calculate a whole system of water in terms of a highest benefit that included consideration of economic return, future use, and social order.¹⁰³

Reimagining water as a national resource demanded new ways of thinking about government, what it was for, and who it worked to benefit. Newlands approached water in the West as he would an investment portfolio. He considered the markets, revenue streams, and risk. He imagined, as every good money manager does, how best to avoid risk, make strategic investments, and lock in returns. The developing fields of forestry, geology, and geography revealed the unsustainability of resources use. Newlands understood that rational management of natural resources demanded organization of people, money, and bureaucratic power.¹⁰⁴ Newlands never considered the seeming contradiction between government-controlled resources and free-markets or individual enterprise. To him, an activist government created new fields of investment and limited competition. Comprehensive federal water policy also gave the government even ground from which to regulate transportation, flood control projects, and reservoir building. As a matter of the general welfare, coordinated control of rivers allowed planning, reduced business risk, and used the

¹⁰³ “Vexed Problems of Irrigation,” *The Salt Lake Tribune*, September 4, 1907, 1; Francis G. Newlands, “Irrigation in the West,” *New York Times*, Mar 2, 1902: 3; Rowley, *Reclaiming the Arid West*, 47; Pisani, “Beyond the Hundredth Meridian,” 466-70.

¹⁰⁴ Norris Hundley, “The Politics of Reclamation: California, the Federal Government, and the Origins of the Boulder Canyon Act: A Second Look,” *California Historical Quarterly* 52 (Winter 1973): 292-325, esp. 302-5.

federal treasury to benefit local economies, which, he argued profited the nation. Limiting and managing resources such as water presented new fields of entrepreneurial endeavor that put people to work and made money for investors.¹⁰⁵

Newlands often stated that water development on a national scale promised opportunities to the millions of Americans who might want to become self-sufficient farmers. He noted that “settlers upon the banks of these (western) rivers can, by inexpensive ditches and canals, divert the water over their lands, and thus establish a crude system of irrigation.”¹⁰⁶ This illustrated the contradictory nature of Newlands and his pursuit of water, reform, and social order. While he often spoke about individual success, he did not trust the individual. Agrarians’ orderly farms needed government administration, direction, and even control. At the same time, he had little faith in big government, but only big government could achieve the kinds of efficiency he wanted for western water. He wanted to break corporate monopolies in land and water ownership. He also put corporate systems at the heart of his desire for tidy systems of investment and return.¹⁰⁷ The quaint, rudimentary stream diversions belonged to the primitive farms of the past. A nation in the process of assembling rationalized systems of commerce, society, and environment depended on modern, big, and efficient reclamation. Little people—individual farmers—would not win Francis Newlands’ New West. He had little faith in them to take an industrialized and interconnected nation into the modern era. Corporations, wealthy land syndicates, and cattle ranchers could not alone build reservoirs and canals that watered the waste spaces. Water resources management and

¹⁰⁵ Williams, “The End of Modern History,” 275.

¹⁰⁶ *Admission of Utah* (H. R. 352), *Congressional Record* 53-2 (December 13, 1893), 209-10.

¹⁰⁷ Donald J. Pisani, “Water Planning in the Progressive Era,” 389-418, esp. 386-9.

development demanded massive amounts of money and scientific expertise.¹⁰⁸ Newlands wasn't willing to wait for people and business to figure out how to create agricultural Edens. He wanted a centralized, activist government, funded by the states in common, to use its resources for the benefit of the West, and particularly Nevada. The New West, the empire West, Newlands maintained, required communal effort in which new bureaucracies managed taxpayer investment for the best benefit of every American.¹⁰⁹

Newlands advocated irrigation and control of rivers at a politically advantageous time. The growth of cities, mass immigration, and alterations in work rhythms and priorities created an immense thirsted manufactured goods, food, and housing. Americans' attitudes toward natural resources from a consideration of immediate market value to a national, if not global concern for resources long-term availability, use, and value to future business.

"Newlands saw himself as the instrument of this improvement," geographer Michael Williams wrote, "and water was the key to a better future for Nevada as well as the entire West."¹¹⁰ The act itself did not transform the West immediately. It made little impact on any actual water development until the 1930s, when Franklin Roosevelt found ready work projects in reclamation and dam building.¹¹¹ With the passage of the National Reclamation Act, however, Newlands set out on a series of larger national projects in which comprehensive water management included river navigation, flood control, and electrical power generation.¹¹² After 1903, he understood that nationalization of the nation's water

¹⁰⁸ *Admission of Utah* (H. R. 352), Congressional Record 53-2 (December 13, 1893), 209-10.

¹⁰⁹ Rowley, "Visions of a Watered West, 144; Campbell, "Newlands, Old Lands," 204; Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 277, Worster, "New West, True West," 153.

¹¹⁰ Michael Williams, "The End of Modern History," *Geographical Review* 88 (April 1998): 275-300.

¹¹¹ Pisani, *To Reclaim a Divided West*, 322-4.

¹¹² Pisani, "Beyond the Hundredth Meridian," 466-70.

offered river development. Water from the West flowed into the Missouri and Mississippi, he noted. The Ohio connected these rivers to the East. The federal government—in consultation with business and with business priorities in mind—provided the money and expertise for such an enterprise. The government rationalized the nation’s rivers with rails and roads in a comprehensive shipping and transportation network that allowed the free flow of goods and services across the nation.¹¹³ Newlands and a number of progressive conservationists envisioned agricultural and industrial products flowing across the country in a system of rivers that stretched from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico and from the High Plains and Southwestern deserts to Pennsylvania. Rivers connected the American interior to the world. After the United States took over the Panama Canal project from the French in 1904, heavy shipping ports in San Francisco, Seattle, and Portland would soon be a half a world closer to New Orleans, Charleston, and New York. For Newlands, rivers became much more than regional and local resources, or even national resources. They meant an orderly, rational, and—Newlands thought—dependable future.

¹¹³ Rowley, “Visions of a Watered West,” 144-5

CHAPTER 5

Newlands: From Reclamation to Rivers

“Every stream should be used to the utmost.” –Theodore Roosevelt¹

“Now, I ask, what is a broad and comprehensive treatment of a river that is to be used in interstate or foreign commerce for navigation?” Senator Francis G. Newlands asked the Joint Subcommittee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce in November 1916. Newlands sought for over two decades to bring the federal government into irrigation in the West. Since the passage of the National Reclamation Act in 1902, Newlands continued expanding his program for the nation’s water. The act expanded the government’s power to control rivers, streams, and aquifers for reclamation. Newlands sought to amend the 1917 Rivers and Harbors Bill with legislation that created a comprehensive water planning commission to oversee uses of the nation’s water for reclamation, navigation, hydroelectric power, and flood control. He now argued that altering rivers for navigation necessarily made the federal government responsible for just about all other improvements connected downstream. Water—in streams, rivers, lakes, and aquifers—produced interstate trade that the federal government regulated. “The power of Congress extends to the regulation of the use and development of the waters for purposes subsidiary to navigation.” He pointed out that the government had a long history of accommodating and expanding interstate commerce on the nation’s sea ports and larger navigable rivers. The project now, he said, was a truly interstate

¹ Theodore Roosevelt, “Inland Waterways, *Science* 27 (March 13, 1908), 418.

system of waterways that linked the interior of the nation to both coasts and the world through the Panama Canal. Navigation formed just one part of an all-inclusive water development and national trade strategy.²

Newlands believed that application of technology, scientific expertise, and bureaucratic oversight could integrate all of the nation's water into systems of commercial expansion. Regardless of how much logical sense this made to him, he needed the support of his Midwestern and Southern colleagues to make any headway. With the exception of Newlands and Frank Brandegee from Connecticut, the subcommittee members represented the rural South and Midwest. These senators enjoyed the disconnected nature of river improvement schemes. They frequently slipped pork-barrel river projects into rivers and harbors appropriations bills, as well as an array of government funding measures. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers also benefited from uncoordinated water improvement. The agency built the port and river facilities in the senators' states. The Corps' engineers, civilian employees, and contractors designed and constructed levees. They erected flood control structures, such as wing dikes and jetties, on the nation's navigable rivers. They held banks in place with revetment and cypress timbers. The Corps even kept a snag-puller on the Upper Missouri for commerce that didn't exist. Newlands appealed to his colleagues with

² U.S. Congress. Senate. "Public Joint Resolution 25, Parts 1-10." *A Joint Resolution Creating a Joint Subcommittee from the Membership of the Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce and the House Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce to Investigate the Conditions Relating to Interstate and Foreign Commerce, and the Necessity of Further Legislation Relating Thereto and Defining the Powers and Duties of Such Subcommittee*, Joint Subcommittee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce, 64th Congress, 1st and 2nd sess, November 20, 23-5, 28-9 and December 1-2, 6-7, 9, 1916 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1917), 498-9; Senator Francis G. Newlands. Senate. *Federal Control of Water Power: Papers Submitted to the Committee on Commerce, Regulation and Control of Waters and Water Power in Navigable and Nonnavigable Streams of the United States, and the Rights of Riparian Owners*, Committee on Commerce. *Congressional Record* 62:3 (1912), 41; Rowley, *Bureau of Reclamation*, 47; Rowley, *Reclaiming the Arid West*, 158; For a brief history of federal government involvement in improving rivers as common highways, see Elizabeth Brand Monroe, *The Wheeling Bridge Case: Its Significance in American Law and Technology* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992), 7-10, 24-9; Charles K. McFarland, "The Federal Government and Water Power, 1901-1913: A Legislative Study in the Nascence of Regulation," *Land Economics* 42 (November 1966): 441-452.

progressive ideals of efficiency, opportunity, and justice. He argued that the federal government should streamline water development across the nation. Government-coordinated river control delivered business more reliable avenues for investment and profit, he maintained. Planned river improvement cost taxpayers less over time.³

Navigation, Newlands believed, represented the best strategy in gaining Midwestern and Southern support for his project. “Now what does a rational treatment of that river,” he asked, “so far as concerns its utilization for navigation involve?” He argued that flood prevention was integral to any plan involving scientific management of water. Floods destroyed property, threatened lives, and upset commerce. “Then during the summer and fall months, the waters having rushed down to the ocean and having been wasted, the river itself is reduced to an attenuated stream upon which boats can not float.” Engineers impounded water “during the period of flood, and from these reservoirs water are led over the Great Plains, the arid deserts and the semiarid plains, and used for the purposes of cultivation.” The Plains soils “absorb the water like a sponge and gradually give it out by process of a seepage to the tributary streams of the great rivers.” Water used in western cultivation, he claimed, returned to the rivers in the late summer and early fall shipping season. “In the more humid regions . . . the reservoir may be used for the storage of storm and thaw waters, which may be kept impounded . . . until time of low water, when the contents may be let out in such manner as to maintain navigation throughout the summer.” “So irrigation is a proper method of treating the river for navigation, for it is one method of impounding the flood waters of these

³ U.S. Congress. Senate. “Public Joint Resolution 25, Parts 1-10.”, 6-7;

tributary streams, preventing those flood waters from creating destruction below in the spring and preserving them for a beneficent purpose later on in the summer and fall months.”⁴

When Newlands talked of multi-purpose water development, he understood water as a pliable, national resource that did work. While Gifford Pinchot’s and Theodore Roosevelt’s views of natural resources included human, non-utilitarian aspects, Newlands sought pure domination of nature for economic gain and social control. He held no romantic notions about a river’s aesthetic value or of its ability to form males into men. He promoted water’s value in revitalizing agrarian life insofar as the rhetoric appealed to his audiences and helped him achieve his goals.⁵

John Wesley Powell, Reclamation, and the Multiple-Use Ideal

Newlands entire political career followed a trajectory that led to his amendment to the 1917 rivers and harbors appropriations bill, and there was nothing new about the ideas embodied in his legislation. While many westerners understood the National Reclamation Act as revolutionary, it did nothing to upend traditional perspectives on western development. The act solidified into law and government notions that irrigationists had developed since the Civil War. As Newlands began his quest for multi-purpose water development, he didn’t have to stretch far to add rivers to comprehensive, centralized water planning. Newlands, while an astute politician, rarely developed new and original ideas on his own. His approach to water management mirrored the ideas of those who came before him and of his contemporaries. At the heart of Newlands reclamation legislation lay two

⁴ U.S. Congress. Senate. “Public Joint Resolution 25, Parts 1-10.” 498-9.

⁵ Newlands, *Public Papers of Francis Newlands*, Vol. 2, 223-5; Michael Williams, “The End of Modern History?” *Geographical Review* 88 (April 1998): 275-300; Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 160-8;

important ideas: reservoirs for storing water and management of entire rivers as units. He did not create either of these ideas. Irrigationists, including Frederick Newell, William Smythe, and Elwood Mead, included reservoirs in most reclamation discussions. Nevada politicians who witnessed miners, farmers, and ranchers fight over the state's limited water advocated reservoirs as a means of storing water for irrigation as early as the 1870s.⁶ Stored water, they believed, could carry farmers through dry times, give ranchers the ability to grow their own feed, and allow miners to sluice and extract more silver and gold from their ores. Impounding water demanded knowledge of river drainages and basins, and how those impoundments affected downstream interests.⁷

Continuing an effort that westerners began before Newlands became the nation's leading irrigation and then river improvement advocate, Newlands sought to remove water from its streams, rivers, and aquifers, and spread them over the land to make it productive.⁸ As previously noted, Newlands' reclamation legislation put western water development solidly and almost exclusively in the hands of the federal government. After he won a significant political victory with the passage of the reclamation act, he continued to push for federal control of irrigation water and works throughout the West.⁹ In this way, Newlands sought to expand government management of the natural environment, vis-à-vis water and rivers, in an orderly fashion. From his support of the Carey Act, through the 1902 National Reclamation Act, and into the end of his career, he worked on a premise that the federal

⁶ Pisani, *To Reclaim a Divided West*, 200-2; George R. Witters, "History of the Comstock Lode: Virginia City, Storey County, Nevada," *Rocks and Minerals* 74 (November-December 1999): 380-90, esp. 388-90

⁷ Donald J. Pisani, *Water and American Government: The Reclamation Bureau, National Water Policy, and the West, 1902-1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 1-10.

⁸ Paul Hirt, Annie Gustafson, and Kelli L. Larson, "The Mirage in the Valley of the Sun," *Environmental History* 13 (July 2008): 489.

⁹ Darling, *Public Papers of Francis Newlands*, Vol. 2, 189-217,

government had a duty to expand opportunity in all its various meanings—by managing nature and business—and this meant redefinition of the government’s role in the everyday lives of Americans. Having moved to Nevada to become a gentleman politician, he had seen the frontier disappear in large part due to federal government largess. With federal subsidies, railroads had opened the American West and connected what had been essentially two widely disparate parts of one nation. The government had then surveyed and parceled out the public domain on generous terms. The Army had confined Indians to reservations and accelerated the processes of western settlement. The federal and state governments should continue recreating new frontiers for American capitalism and opportunities for profit. Technical expertise, a modicum of social management, and liberal doses of ideology and money promised endless opportunity in the desert. To achieve this, Americans first needed to reimagine water as a resource, a commodity like any other.¹⁰

Newlands arguments for federally controlled reclamation led inexorably downstream to federal control of rivers. In the arid west, streams had the most water in them when farmers’ demands were low. During the hot, dry summers, rivers and stream levels fell, sometimes almost to nothing, he showed congressmen and senators in detailed maps, hydrologists’ reports, and shipping company records.¹¹ Irrigation and its associated reservoirs, he argued, affected river navigation. Since farmers and shipping companies wanted water in times of scarcity, he proposed reservoirs that would feed irrigation works and free water to float boats. This meant that any irrigation scheme included dams, rivers, and coordination of water releases for agricultural and shipping interests. Water in a reservoir

¹⁰ Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency*, 263-6;

¹¹ Rowley, *Bureau of Reclamation*, 69-79.

provided reliable, even year-round sources of irrigation water, he argued, possibly creating farms more productive than those in the East. Reservoirs allowed land to be irrigated at great distance from it, affording the development of farms, as well as the towns, businesses, and infrastructure to support them. The West, through irrigation, would have the same advantages of the East and cease to be held back by climate and land.¹²

Newlands often uttered ideas of water management that John Wesley Powell had developed earlier and in a different context. Newlands used the body of environmental knowledge that Powell aggregated to marry reclamation and river improvement. While Newlands traveled Nevada and the West as a politician, his perspective differed from that of Powell, a scientist and polymath who surveyed much of the West in the late 1870s and who thought deeply about aridity, water, and settlement. On his explorations and mapping expeditions, he gained an understanding of the western environment not as a desert upon which Americans could cast a little water and grow crops but as complicated interrelationships between land and climate.¹³ He developed one of the most complete understandings of the region's ecologies of anyone of his time. Powell understood that water flowing in western streams represented a limited resource. Many of Newlands' own proposals for irrigation and reservoirs followed Powell's work. The reclamation act set up mechanisms with which the new Reclamation Service continued surveys of potential dam sites that Powell had suggested in a different context fifteen years before. Where Powell understood the limitations of the western environment, however, Newlands believed that desert, any desert, bloomed with the touch of water. He assumed that bureaucratic and

¹² Darling, *Papers of Francis Newlands*, Vol. 2, 65-8.

¹³ Worster, *A River Running West*, 360, 569.

engineering apparatuses could move water wherever and whenever Americans wanted to. His legislation put no limits on the lengths to which the Reclamation Service could go in procuring water for irrigation.¹⁴

Powell understood more deeply than most people in the nineteenth century the restrictions of aridity. Powell came to study the West through a difficult upbringing, a deep Christian belief, and his own thirst for learning. He was born to English immigrants in New York in 1834. His father, a fiery itinerant preacher, moved his family west across the state. After eight years of wandering through western New York, the family settled in Jackson, Ohio, then a hotbed of debate over slavery. Powell wound up the personal student of outspoken Jackson abolitionist George Crookham, a biblical scholar who disdained slavery with the vehemence of a zealot. He stood out in prejudiced southern Ohio. He ran an Underground Railroad station and openly abetted slaves escaping the peculiar institution. He educated the young Powell with several other students in a small schoolhouse he built himself. The schoolhouse, however, served as an outpost for book learning. Crookham took Powell fellow students outdoors more often than he kept them at their desks. Crookham often took students on field trips, where he taught them about nature and human history. They explored archeology with practical investigation of Hopewell burial mounds. They often overnights in the woods of the Ohio Valley, where Powell found a great love of the outdoors. His time with Crookham ended prematurely in the mid-1846, however, when pro-slavery activists burned down Crookham's schoolhouse.¹⁵

After the incident, the elder Powell moved his family to Wisconsin, where John

¹⁴ Pisani, *Reclaiming a Divided West*, 143-53; Newlands, *Public Papers of Francis G. Newlands*, Vol. 2, 198.

¹⁵ Wallace Stegner, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West* (New York: Penguin, 1992), 1-23; Rowley, *Bureau of Reclamation*, 49; Worster, *A River Running West*, 27-30.

Wesley and his younger brother cleared sixty acres of ground and farmed as their father preached. Through John Wesley's teens, his father increasingly insisted that he take up preaching. But the younger Powell showed more interest in the natural sciences. He learned Latin and read classical literature, poetry, and philosophy.¹⁶ During the 1850s, he taught at various high schools across the state and attended college at Wheaton in Illinois and Oberlin in Ohio. A restless student, he spent his summers collecting fossils. He walked across the state of Wisconsin, rafted down the Mississippi to the Gulf of Mexico, and floated the Ohio River from Pittsburg to Cairo, Illinois. During this time, he educated himself in the natural sciences. By 1858, he curated the conchology arm of the Illinois State Natural History Society and, in that capacity, made a complete study of native Illinois mollusks. In 1860, he took the position of superintendent of Hennepin, Illinois public schools. A unionist and abolitionist, he joined the Union Army at the start of the Civil War and quickly gained the rank of Second Lieutenant under the command of western explorer General John Fremont.¹⁷ Powell lost most of his arm leading a charge during the Battle of Shiloh in 1862. When he recovered from his injury, he returned to his post and served with distinction at Vicksburg, Nashville, and Atlanta. While in the trenches at Vicksburg, he collected and studied fossils that he sent back to the Illinois Natural History Society. As his enlistment came up for renewal, he asked his commander to be mustered out and he returned to civilian life in mid-1865.¹⁸

Powell became most well-known for his Colorado River explorations in 1867 and his

¹⁶ James G. Aton, *Powell: His Life and Legacy* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2010), 1-23.

¹⁷ U.S. Geological Survey, *John Wesley Powell: Soldier, Explorer, Scientist* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1969), 4-10.

¹⁸ Worster, *A River Running West*, 95-102.

trip down the Colorado through the Grand Canyon in 1869. During this time, he became intensely interested in Native American life and published definitive ethnologies and language studies that led him to the position of Director of the Bureau of Ethnology in 1877.¹⁹ With Smithsonian Institution support, in 1878 he mapped and surveyed the arid west, classified lands according to geographical features and rainfall. Powell's survey joined that of geologists and future director of the U.S. Geological Survey Clarence King's exploration of the fortieth parallel, Ferdinand Hayden's 1871 study of the Yellowstone country, and George Wheeler's mapping expedition of the arid West. Powell's 1879 *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region of the United States* was notable for the scope of his understanding of water, aridity, and agriculture. In the survey, he made recommendations for water management and even proposed legislation for western land settlement and water management.²⁰

Powell believed that manipulation of water in arid regions promised whole new fields of national expansion, individual opportunity, and a new, powerful economic order based on communal cooperation. In Powell's mind, individualism and cooperation conflicted little. He believed that a less competitive society prevented the suppression and objectification of the individual. People free to express themselves and make their livings as they pleased increased the need for democratic participation in processes that divided the nation's limited resources.²¹ While Smythe argued that democracy sprang from irrigation, he misunderstood the limitations of aridity and water in the West. Newlands, too, believed that science and

¹⁹ Jackson, "Engineering in the Progressive Era," 543-5.

²⁰ Donald Worster, *A River Running West: The Life of John Wesley Powell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001),

²¹ Worster, "Hydraulic Society in California," 507.

bureaucratic organization offered nearly unlimited economic potential.²² In contrast, Powell, for all his faith in the desert as a transformer of American life, argued in the *Report* that water limited development in the West. In the *Report* he recommended that congress assign surveyors, forestry and mine specialists, and agricultural experts to classify the lands. Land, he believed, possessed various uses according to their worth in mineral extraction, pasturage and farming, and timber. He found that in the “whole extent of these lands, but a very small fraction is immediately available for agriculture; in general, they require drainage or irrigation for their redemption.”²³ Powell’s *Report* also showed a restraint toward western agricultural potential that irrigationists of Smythe and Newland’s ilk never displayed. Having surveyed the West in a methodical and scientific way, he determined that Americans could develop water resources for irrigation, but ownership of the water should remain in the hands of the people working that land. He studied at the way the Mormons irrigated Deseret and suggested that small groups of nine or more settlers—but not hundreds or thousands—have the ability to organize an irrigation district. Within that district, they would adapt water and land use to their particular needs. He stated that each irrigated parcel should be no larger than eighty acres. He argued that these divisions stand within a larger allotment the settler homesteaded, but that eighty acres of irrigated land provided enough for producing crops for self-sufficiency and for market.²⁴

Powell’s fundamentalist Christian background and his expertise in several scientific

²² Smythe, *Conquest of Arid America* (1900), 43, 105-7; Newlands, *Public Papers of Francis Newlands*, Vol. 1, 69.

²³ J.W. Powell, *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region of the United States with a More Detailed Account of the Lands of Utah* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1879), vii; Donald Worster, *A River Running West: The Life of John Wesley Powell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 354-60.

²⁴ Powell, *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region*, 7-10, 42-3; Rowley, *Bureau of Reclamation*, 57.

fields influenced the way he perceived and interpreted the value of water in dry western environments. He insisted that God ordained Americans' reach into the desert. He believed in the Jeffersonian yeoman, Manifest Destiny, and water as a tool of social reform. He perceived that God provided Americans a special opportunity with the North American continent and that Americans had a duty to occupy all of it, humid and arid lands alike. Like Smythe, he grasped the power of irrigation in finishing God's incomplete work in the desert. He also saw, like Newlands, that irrigation provided means of order and profit. But both Smythe and Newlands perceived water as a marketable commodity that possessed real pecuniary value and speculative, investment value. Powell resisted, however, buying and selling water. He perceived water as a means of increasing democratic relationships between people and their communities. In his irrigation idea, water rights adhered to land next to where water flowed. Priority of use remained with those on the land, "not to the individual or company constructing the canals by which it is used." He believed "redemption" applied to both land and the farmer who worked it. Spreading water over dry land redeemed it from what he considered its hellish fate. At the same time, the man who spread that water redeemed himself. Redemption was a personal endeavor, one that put both physical and mental powers to work. The work of redeeming land emancipated the man because he took responsibility for the entire operation's success or failure. Government's job was to give the farmer land, time, and expertise. "A farmer settling on a small tract, to be redeemed by irrigation, should be given a reasonable length of time in which to secure his water right, that he may secure his water right by utilization."²⁵ Each farmer should secure his water right "by his own labor, either directly by constructing the waterways himself, or indirectly by

²⁵ Donald Worster, "Landscape with Hero: John Wesley Powell and the Colorado Plateau," *Southern California Quarterly* 79 (Spring 1997), 29-46, esp. 37-8.

cooperating with his neighbors in constructing systems of waterways. Without this provision there is little inducement for poor men to commence farming operations, and men of ready capital will only engage such enterprises.” A farmers bore the weight of his own mistakes and misjudgments.

He transferred liability to no shareholder but learned for himself what served him best. There would be no government to absorb the fate of a man who faltered.²⁶

The new breed of irrigationists, on the other hand, from Smythe to Newlands, George Maxwell, and Frederick Newell, understood water economic terms. Water increased the value of land. Its use increased production of agricultural commodities. Elwood Mead led the charge in Wyoming to disconnect water from land and make the rights to it a way to invest and profit. Water rights—the mechanisms by which one came to own water—became independent from the land. Water rights went to those who paid the highest prices or received the greatest economic return from its development and use. Government protected economic rights to water, and, as such, irrigationists wanted government in the business of managing risk, particularly for corporate investors. Like Powell, Newlands and Newell believed that rivers knew no boundaries and watersheds gave surveyors, bureaucrats, and farmers natural divisions for water management. But they defined these watersheds as part of larger river systems that with expertise, science, and government power, Americans could command to do their will.²⁷

Reclamationists also understood, as Powell did, that individual arid land settlers needed a great deal more land to make their livings than what lie within the government’s

²⁶ Powell, *Lands of the Arid Region*, 43.

²⁷ Rowley, *Reclaiming the Arid West*, 98; Rowley, *Bureau of Reclamation*, 65-6.

ability to give them legally—unless farmers received the water that could make smaller bits of land productive. Powell presented his *Report* to Congress just two years after the Desert Land Act expanded the terms of public domains land sales to 640 acres (four times that of the Homestead Act). The act’s advocates believed that settlers moving into the arid West needed more land to produce the same living as farmers in the more “humid” regions.²⁸ Powell argued in his *Report* that the existing land survey system ignored climatic conditions in the arid West and that almost no one could make a living on 640 acres. The grid-system for land survey dated to the Land Ordinance of 1785. Thomas Jefferson’s brilliant system of dividing up the public domain, he argued, fit the well-watered lands of the east. He asserted that Americans could not settle dry and heterogeneous western lands in the same way that people settled the east. Powell understood that most of the West provided, at best, pasturage and little more.²⁹ He argued that settlers required farms of 2,560 acres with water to irrigate at least twenty acres to achieve any kind of self-sufficiency. He recommended that each homesteader have eighty acres and that some of that land front a river or stream. The rest of the acreage—some far from a river—provided grazing land for cattle. Democratic access to water in this way would avoid situations in which “a division or farm could practically occupy all the country adjacent by owning the water necessary to its use.”³⁰

In the *Report*, Powell formulated a vision of western settlement that put farmers in charge of their land and their futures. In Powell’s scheme, government sold land settlers could irrigate without a great deal expensive equipment. The government also gave the

²⁸ Lisi Krall, “U.S. Land Policy and the Commodification of Arid Land, 1862-1920,” *Journal of Economic Issues* 35 (September 2001): 657-9; Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 156.

²⁹ Rowley, *Bureau of Reclamation*, 65; Worster, *A River Running West*, 357.

³⁰ Powell, *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region*, 7-10, 12-4, 19-22; Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*, 46-7.

willing settler access to experts and scientific advice. Through cooperative management, farmers would manipulate water within a stream's watershed in ways that best benefited themselves. Community members built their own schools, roads, churches, and other needs.³¹ Powell's vision limited the reach of government into the everyday lives of settlers. It didn't tell them where to live or how and what to farm. Settlers made these decisions on their own. Powell sought to prevent the intrusion of large corporations, speculators, and developers into the business of increasing western settlement and diversifying regional economies. At the same time, except for the initial use of government resources to survey and secure land, and to help farmers get started in their community project, Powell's plan kept control of planning and land out of the hands of government and its bureaucrats.³²

In 1879 and 1880, Congress dismissed Powell's ideas and the legislation he recommended immediately. Some critics argued the 2,560-acre homestead ran counter to the Jeffersonian ideal of small, self-sufficient farms. While Powell understood that, due to aridity, western farming would develop differently than agriculture east of the Missouri, congressmen were having none of it.³³ Other critics declared that his insistence that water adhere to land removed water rights from trade and reduced the developer's and speculator's profit potential. Without profit incentive, then, who would want to come west to make any money? Many favored the ideas of democracy and equity that Powell espoused. But almost no one liked Powell's democratic alternatives to settlement and commerce patterns that Congress established from the mid-1860s forward. Powell's suggestion that Congress consider a new way of surveying and classifying land inflamed western politicians and

³¹ Pisani, *To Reclaim a Divided West*, 144-5.

³² Krall, "U.S. Land Policy," 657-7; Worster, *A River Running West*, 354-60, 365-70.

³³ Worster, *A River Running West*, 354-60, 368.

corporate interests invested in the old land system that allowed people to aggregate lands for speculation.³⁴

Powell gained favorable reputation among irrigationists in the 1880s, despite the way that many congressmen derided his ideas. The irrigationists and Powell shared many priorities. He wanted irrigation. He wanted more Americans to move west. He wanted more land in agricultural production. He believed in government responsibility to open new settlement and business opportunities. Like Smythe, Powell envisioned that a central authority would set up communities but that these groups of settlers would exert their independence through cooperative democracy. He thought the federal government should prevent the power of overweening capital investment from spoiling the opportunity for people to carve out their own, independent futures. Government investment gave a man a “reasonable length of time” to set up and earn his own keep.³⁵ An enlightened government, he believed, encouraged communal control of resources and kept the big boys out. He understood, at the same time, that even within watersheds, settlers would have to build dams and irrigation works. He offered that the federal government undertake the expense and then allow farmers to pay back the costs over a long period.³⁶

Irrigationists used the language of democracy but misinterpreted or ignored that Powell desired, at base, that new agricultural and entrepreneurial frontiers operate in equitable and democratic ways. All the ideas in the 1879 *Report*, however, didn’t get Powell

³⁴ Powell, *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region*, vii-ix, 38, 40-43; Scott Kirsch, “John Wesley Powell and the Mapping of the Colorado Plateau, 1869-1879,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 92 (September 2002): 548-572; esp. 550-2; Donald Worster, “A Response to ‘John Wesley Powell and the Unmaking of the West,’” *Environmental History* 2 (April 1997): 216-219.

³⁵ Powell, *Lands of the Arid Region*, vii.

³⁶ Resiner, *Cadillac Desert*, 45-50.

in much trouble with irrigationists. They were too busy touting the miracles of irrigation to pay much attention to Powell's visions of a watered West. In the late 1880s, as irrigationists' faith in their cause rose to fever pitch, Powell, as director of the U.S. Geological Survey, commissioned formal surveys for potential irrigation possibilities. This was, in part, an effort to imprint irrigation fever with a mark of democratic development, and this was where he ran afoul of the irrigation cause. In 1888, he lobbied for and received a commission from Congress to study the West's irrigation potential. Western congressional delegations pinned their hopes for water on what he might find and expected good results. But Powell was a methodical scientist. He wanted complete maps, knowledge of the best reservoir sites for irrigation impoundments, and more exact information on the amount of water flowing in western rivers before he recommended Congress anything in the way of workable legislation. After a short time, he and his surveyors found that developers, speculators, or cattlemen already owned most potential reservoir sites and potentially irrigable land.³⁷

When he presented his findings to Congress in 1889, just as drought set in on the western plains and intermountain west, the results thrilled irrigationists little.³⁸ Americans, he wrote, could expect to reclaim only one to three percent of the intermountain West and only at great effort and expense. He maintained the alluvial soils of river bottoms promised best results. Farther from rivers, he cautioned, soils grew poor and the prospects for productive farming diminished. Farming at some distance from water sources, he wrote, demanded long canals that lost water to seep and evaporation.³⁹ Powell presented elected officials ideal sites

³⁷ Donald Worster, "A Response to 'John Wesley Powell and the Unmaking of the West,'" *Environmental History* 2 (April 1997), 216-219.

³⁸ Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency*, 6.

³⁹ Resiner, *Cadillac Desert*, 45-6.

for reservoirs based on his vision of separately and communally managed watersheds. He favored damming streams at their headwaters and at high altitude with small dams. Communities, then, could manage the stored water in democratic and locally beneficial ways. He dismissed large, high dams in which westerners invested their hopes. Powell saw huge reservoirs as financially unmanageable and inherently unstable, not to mention a detriment to democratic development. Western state representatives roundly repudiated him. Irrigationists wanted to believe with government money and engineering Americans could move water regardless of land, geology, topography, and even the amount of water itself. They sought sycophants and weavers of dreams like Smythe to help them in their cause.⁴⁰

In 1891, Smythe organized the first national irrigation congress. Conventioneers patted each other on the backs and agreed that irrigation was good business. On the second night of the congress, Smythe opened the congress and introduced Powell, who repeated his cautionary warning about irrigation's prospects. Unlike the congress attendees, Powell didn't fool himself about irrigation as an antidote to the city's problems. He understood that restless city dwellers worked out their own destinies within the work, social, and cultural paradigms operating in American cities. Farmers would be farmers. City people might take up farming, but farming represented seismic psychic changes that most urbanites would not make. The city and the farm worked together economically; they needed each other; each supported the other. But Powell understood that a communal, less competitive society depended on changing things little by little. Irrigationists convinced themselves that business, profit, and social reform went hand in hand. They believed that city people would stream out of what Smythe, Newlands, and others at the congress considered their dirty, vice-ridden cities into

⁴⁰ Jackson, "Engineering in the Progressive Era," 544; Worster, *A River Running West*, 479-82, 496-506.

the country if given the chance. As he spoke to the congress attendees that second night, he told them that the West didn't contain the endless amounts of water they all believed were there. In fact, he said, if they tapped all the water in springs, rivers, and streams, not enough water ran in the West to fulfill the irrigation dream.⁴¹

At the congress, Smythe called him a liar, and Powell defended himself. Congress attendees argued over letting Powell have his say. He told them what he reported in the report of his 1889 irrigation survey. He reiterated what he found as he spoke to individual irrigationists, western town boosters, and developers. At the congress, he told the conventioners that except in a handful of places in the arid region, private companies, land syndicates, and irrigation concerns already claimed all the water, even if they didn't use it. The West, he proposed, had achieved the limits of what Americans could reasonably reclaim even with extensive government support. Irrigation congress attendees ignored Powell. But they acted as if the scientist had not said one word and petitioned Congress with the detailed set of demands outlined in the previous chapter. After the congress, irrigationists went home and agitate for their cause as if the solution to aridity lay in government money and engineering. Smythe, Mondell, and Carey, along with Nevada Senator William Stewart—and a raft of western irrigation champions—sent Powell on his way as a sentimental old man who had done his duty for his country but whose usefulness had come to an end.⁴²

Newlands also didn't hear or want to hear what Powell said about the West. He shared Powell's beliefs about the perfection of nature, the American duty to spread westward, and the benefits of water management.⁴³ Even if these men formulated differing

⁴¹ Worster, *A River Running West*, 526-30

⁴² Worster, *A River Running West*, 529; Aton, *John Wesley Powell*, 53-4.

⁴³ Limerick, *Desert Passages*, 170-2.

goals for irrigation and settlement, they wanted the desert open to human habitation. These beliefs, however, existed in two different contexts. Powell understood nature's limitations. His proposals for western settlement, irrigation, dam building, and water management represented practical ways of dealing with the complex and hostile American environment. He dreamed of progress and pursued practical ways of putting people on the land. Powell knew that Americans could not make water where there was none, no matter how hard they tried. Newlands, on the other hand, understood water in an imaginary, theoretical way. He was career politician man who believed that water ran aplenty in the West, just in the wrong places. With planning and science, big dams and long canals, scientific experts and government bureaucracies, Americans could spread it across the desert wastes. Newlands argued that water, managed from the time it dropped from the sky to the time it entered the sea, represented a resource of almost unlimited value.⁴⁴

Powell's ideas that water remain a public resource that individuals developed in democratic processes with their neighbors represented a new way of understanding nature, economy, and democratic development. Newlands, however, sought to bring the federal hand of government into irrigation for social order and preservation of profit. While he argued with other irrigationists that water in the West gave urban dwellers relief from crowded cities, he promoted water management for private incentive in the capitalist marketplace. His reclamation legislation gave congressional committees and government agencies the power of determining water management for particular purposes. Business associations, lobbying groups, and manufacturers gained more say than local democracies about where water flowed and who benefited. Water became a national resource rather than a purely local or

⁴⁴ Carlson, "Irrigation Crusader," 41-7; Lee, "William Ellsworth Smythe," 289-311; Limerick, *Desert Passages*, 170-2; Pisani, "Federal Reclamation and the American West," 398.

regional one that states and the federal government used to achieve social order and profit.⁴⁵ Newlands sought to transform laissez-faire capitalism into a more investment-friendly and profit-sure economic order. He knew government rationalization of economy and society wouldn't result in more democracy but in hierarchies of managers, planners, workers, and investors. Bureaucracies determined where the water would flow, what it would grow, and who would benefit from it. In the end, the National Irrigation Act of 1902 would bring government into river engineering for much the same purposes.⁴⁶

Inland Waterways

Powell and the irrigationists all understood the necessity of storing water for reclamation. Powell envisioned small reservoirs at the head of rivers and streams under the control of the people who used them. William Smythe, Frederick Newell, and Elwood Mead, on the other hand, apprehended dams as big affairs that stopped up rivers and made big reservoirs. Size connoted efficiency, and the bigger the reservoir, the more efficiency it attained and more people it served. For Mead, Newell, and Newlands, reservoirs served a number of purposes—irrigation, electrical generation, flood control, and navigation. While each of these men sought centralization of water management, none of them lusted for it like Newlands. When Roosevelt established the Inland Waterways Commission in 1907, Newlands used his position on the commission to develop full-throated advocacy for multiple-purpose water management. Where once reclamation included river management for irrigation, Newlands saw reclamation as just one part of a larger set of goals for water

⁴⁵ Worster, "New West, True West," 153.

⁴⁶ Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 168.

management. Since the commission represented Roosevelt's progressive conservationist drive, Newlands found himself with the leeway and outlet for his desires to bring all water under government control. Elected officials on the commission included Ohio Representative Theodore E. Burton, who served as chair of the House Committee on Rivers and Harbors, Missouri Senator William Warner, and Alabama Senator John H. Bankhead. All three promoted river improvements for many years before their appointment to the commission. Another member, Nevada Senator Francis G. Newlands, author of the sweeping National Reclamation Act of 1902, long advocated connecting rivers, their sources, and their tributaries in one all-inclusive national policy. Non-elected members of the commission included future director of the Reclamation Service Frederick Haynes Newell, Forest Service director Gifford Pinchot, Geographical Survey geologist William J. McGee, and Herbert Knox Smith, of the Bureau of Corporations—an agency that later became the Federal Trade Commission.⁴⁷

Newlands knew the subjects of his legislative efforts often better than any of his fellow congressmen working on the same questions. Many times, he understood the issues and particulars even better than the experts he consulted as he fashioned legislation. And he undertook no legislative effort without possibility of gain. As a practical politician, he understood that he would have to compromise, insist, and cajole. No one ever defeated him. Any setback just set him off on new ways of achieving his goals. Historian Allan Nevins wrote that Newlands “was never superficial; he always labored upon his subject till he wrested from it a definite and valuable set of results.”⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Theodore Roosevelt, “Inland Waterways,” *Science* 27 (March 13, 1908): 417-421.

⁴⁸ Darling, *Public Papers of Francis G. Newlands*, Vol. 1, 5-7, 189-93; Allan Nevins, “The Public Papers of Francis G. Newlands,” *American Historical Review* 39 (January 1934), 546-7.

The Waterways commission presented Newlands with the opportunity to pursue his passion—rationalization and regulation of the nation’s water resources. He surrounded himself with a number of well-heeled and knowledgeable people who had experience with rivers, navigation, and western water policy.⁴⁹ All members of the commission carried impressive Progressive conservation credentials. Newlands himself was one of the most vocal and influential. As Vice Chairman of the commission, Newlands set out to plan and organize water as a tool of modern industry and agriculture. The future of the nation, he thought, rested on a comprehensive, coordinated transportation system that connected all parts of the nation by water, roads, and rails. Demonstrating his ability to concentrate on every aspect and detail of an issue, he dedicated himself to the work. Inaugurating a truly multipurpose approach to water, he gathered ideas on potential river improvements from state and local governments. With the committee’s budget, he commissioned surveys of reservoir sites, their potential for electrical generation, and the possibilities of their use in flood control. He assessed the most recent technological developments in stream control and navigation. He used census and commerce data. Newlands wrote that railroads dominated markets and prevented commercial development in some areas of the country. Railroads, he maintained, built the most extensive network of commerce anywhere in the world. In monopolizing the transportation of commodities, however, they had run river shipping companies out of business and limited transportation options for farmers and manufacturers. Railroads so dominated transportation market, Newlands argued, that they inhibited commercial development in regions that lacked rails, yet were accessible by river. At the same time, the nation’s manufacturing and agricultural capacity outstripped railroads’

⁴⁹ Newlands, “The Development of American Waterways,” 873.

abilities to transport goods to market, further constraining commerce. Newlands wrote that the commission viewed rivers and any commercial activity generated on or from them as matters of interstate commerce. The federal government should develop American waterways for the general welfare.⁵⁰

A year after its establishment, the commission submitted a report to the president that argued for a permanent committee or commission with the authority to coordinate the efforts of government agencies in river development, and the coordination of river, railroad, and Panama Canal traffic as an efficient, industrial system of commerce.⁵¹ “There is a just and reasonable demand on the part of the people for the improvement of navigation in our rivers in some way which will yield practical results.” The commission argued that the river offered economic efficiencies that the nation had not yet explored. Building river systems upon which Americans could coordinate trade necessitated, the commission recommended, “treating each waterway system as a unit” and “expert initiation of projects in accordance with commercial foresight and the needs of a growing country.”⁵² Such a commission would screen all water development projects from bridge building to municipal water intakes to reservoir building. This commission would oversee water quality, flood control, dams, power generation, irrigation and land reclamation, and navigation. It would supervise commercial shipping on water, rail, and through the canal to encourage the greatest development of free trade and enterprise. Representative Theodore Burton of Ohio wrote that, “In the principle of coordinating all uses of the waters and treating each waterway system as a unit; in the

⁵⁰ Newlands, “Use and Development of American Waterways,” 48-66; Newlands, “The Development of American Waterways,” *North American Review* 187, (June 1908): 873-879.

⁵¹ W. J. McGee, “Water as a Resource,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 33 (May 1909): 37-50.

⁵² “The Inland Waterways Commission,” *Science* 27 (June 26, 1908): 996-997.

principle of correlating water traffic with rail and other land traffic; in the principle of expert initiation of projects in accordance with commercial foresight and the needs of a growing country; and in the principle of cooperation between States and the Federal Government in the administration and use of waterways, etc.; the general plan proposed by the Commission is new, and at the same time sane and simple.”⁵³

In effect, the Inland Waterways Commission recommended its own permanent establishment with a wide scope of power—because it knew the facts and had the plan for waterways development.⁵⁴ For a man like Newlands, who made his top priorities efficiency and management, the commission’s recommendations seemed like grand ideas. Finally, the ideas he had worked on for two decades—from the time he moved to Nevada—would take fruit. He welcomed the opportunity to head a commission with so much power. He fell in love with the idea that one government agency that managed everything connected to water, including forests and land, using various government agencies from the Bureau of Soils to the Panama Canal Authority.⁵⁵

But when Newlands submitted legislation that centralized water affairs under the commission to Congress, the bill fell prey to politicians who loved the pork-barrel value of water projects. His fellow senators subjected him to withering criticism. Politicians from all parts of the country opposed extending the power of government into the affairs of state and local jurisdictions.⁵⁶ Business associations resented the intrusion of government into the

⁵³ “The Inland Waterways Commission” *Science* 27 (June 26, 1908): 996-997.

⁵⁴ For ways in which government and quasi-government entities establish their authority, see James L. Nolan, Jr., *The Therapeutic State: Justifying Government at the Century’s End* (New York: NYU Press, 1998), 22-45

⁵⁵ Clark, *Water in New Mexico*, 138-42.

⁵⁶ Donald J. Pisani, “Beyond the Hundredth Meridian,” 472-3

private economy, and, ultimately their ability to lobby for projects directly beneficial to their bottom lines. Congressmen and senators chafed at Roosevelt's penchant for fact-finding committees because they believed it diminished their effectiveness as elected representatives in the legislative process. In other words, a centralized, coordinated government waterways program got in the way of representatives ability to bring home pork.⁵⁷ At the same time, government agencies the commission wanted to manage operated as quasi-governmental organizations. Each agency, from the Corps of Engineers to the Bureau of Reclamation and General Land Office, had champions in Congress. Agency heads fought over territory and responsibility, each seeking the opportunity to broaden the scope and reach of their organizations. Newell's own Bureau of Reclamation resisted central coordination of its activities with other agencies. The Corps of Engineers, too, thought its business was best left to itself.⁵⁸ Even among its supporters, the commission's report stirred up trouble. The Great Lakes-to-the-Gulf Waterway Association, the Mississippi River Commission, and the Missouri River Improvement Association differed with each other on the importance of getting their share out of the government trough.⁵⁹ Lobby groups for hydroelectric companies sought permanent access to dam sites on federal land, a power that congressional representatives and agency officials resisted. Railroads, cities, construction companies, and potential government contractors all jockeyed for their particular interests. The legislation finally died in 1910, leaving Newlands to continue fighting for river regulation another day.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Clark, *Water in New Mexico*, 140; Pisani, "A Conservation Myth, 154-71; Pisani, "Water Planning in the Progressive Era," 389-418.

⁵⁸ Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 160-8.

⁵⁹ Schneiders, *Unruly River*, 90-1.

⁶⁰ Clark, *Water in New Mexico*, 139-41.

Newlands pursued his quest for river improvement in a systematic and consistent way. He developed arguments connecting reclamation, rivers, and trade that he used again and again. In 1908 he spoke before the Senate on an appropriations bill for the Department of Agriculture. At the time the senators combined water, rivers, and reclamation into a larger program of conservation that included forestry, soil conservation, and land management for grazing. Newlands and other senators argued that conservation included an all-encompassing view toward integrating the natural environment with commercial trade. Their debate reflected views many conservationists took about the worth of the natural environment to the national economy, how resources fit into schemes of agricultural and industrial production, and the ways that uses of the environment organized society.⁶¹ The government, Newlands stated, should integrate the nation's transportation systems—roads, rivers, and rails—with the new Panama Canal. “My individual view,” he said at the time, “is that within the next ten years the United States should expend at least \$500,000,000 in the improvement of its inland waterways; that we ought to enter upon this work contemporaneously in every section of the country; that we should enter upon the work of the rivers of the Pacific coast, upon the rivers of the Atlantic coast, upon the Gulf coast, and upon the coastal canals or sheltered waterways which will connect the rivers of the Gulf and Atlantic coast from Texas to Maine.” It was the will of the people, he said. He didn't doubt that Congress would respond to the will of the people.⁶²

As the irrigation congresses and debates over Missouri River navigation demonstrated, irrigationists and river navigation advocates equated their own desires for

⁶¹ McFarland, “The Federal Government and Water Power, 441-452; Donald J. Pisani, “State vs. Nation: Federal Reclamation and Water Rights in the Progressive Era,” *Pacific Historical Review* 51 (August, 1982). 265-282.

⁶² Paul S. Reinish, ed. *Readings on American Federal Government* (New York: Ginn and Company, 1909).

greater economic opportunity and growth with the will of the people. Taking a page from the body of progressive thought concerning the role of government in American life, Newlands and others argued for reclamation and river improvement in circular fashion. The Constitution's interstate commerce clause allowed the federal government to intervene when the commercial interests of individual states overlapped. The nature of interstate trade and new interpretations of the general welfare clause, people such as Newlands believed, showed that the federal government should stimulate commerce. Government then retained its responsibilities when this new, government-stimulated trade passed into interstate commerce.⁶³ Over the years, Newlands implemented this logic in debates over consolidation of government departments, railroad regulation, and national defense. For at least ten years, Newlands included his arguments for reclamation and river improvement in nearly every conservation issue that came before the Senate, as well as in discussions and legislation in everything from regulating railroads to western water law.⁶⁴

When he lost the fight for river regulation under the Inland Waterways Commission in 1910, he immediately got to work on more legislation. He suffered approbation from senators who argued that he sought water control as a way of gaining more for his state. They peppered him with criticisms, arguing that his attempt to take over control of the nation's rivers represented a sly move for more government funding of western water development.

⁶³ Katrina Brown, "Integrating Conservation and Development: A Case of Institutional Misfit," *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment* 1 (November 2003): 479-487; Frederick R. Lynch, "Social Theory and the Progressive Era," *Theory and Society* 4 (Summer 1977), 159-210; Robin West, "Progressive and Conservative Constitutionalism," *Michigan Law Review* 88 (February 1990): 641-721. For a detailed overview of the evolution of constitutional interpretation of the interstate commerce and general welfare clauses of the Constitution, see Harry N. Scheiber, "Federalism and the American Economic Order, 1789-1910," *Law and Society Review* 10 (Autumn 1975): 57-118.

⁶⁴ See *Appendix, Extension of Tenure of Government Control of Railroads, Hearings Before the Committee on Interstate Commerce, United States Senate* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1919), 489-501; Day Allen Willey, "What Conservation Means to the Nation's Progress and Prosperity," *Putnam's* 7 (December 1909): 259-70.

He had already accomplished these goals, however, with the passage of the 1902 reclamation legislation. He continued forward, regardless of the opposition, and added more arguments for coordinated river planning. “Centralization! Is that the right term?” he stated in 1909. “I should say ‘unionization.’ The exercise of the granted powers of the Constitution does not involve the centralization of power. It involves simply the unionization of power. It simply involves the unionizing of the forces of the entire people of the country in matters clearly entrusted to the states. This union is composed of forty-six states. We are all parts of this union.”⁶⁵

For Midwesterners and Southerners, Newlands argued in 1911, rivers represented new opportunities in national and international markets. Alteration of the Ohio, Missouri, and Mississippi promised huge returns for individual river users, local business, and state coffers. Newlands complemented his quest for support from the Midwest and South with swamp and wetland drainage. Reclamation of wetlands was as important to his quest for a national approach to water as western irrigation and control of the nation’s rivers. Swamp drainage, however, presented complex arrays of local and state efforts to gain federal money for drainage projects while also retaining authority independent from federal control. Drainage districts, state projects, and localized efforts to turn swamps and wetlands into arable land often conflicted and overlapped. As river projects provided rich opportunities for congressional delegations to bring home individual projects that targeted specific constituencies, drainage projects worked much the same way.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Newlands, *Public Papers of Francis G. Newlands*, Vol. 2, 209.

⁶⁶ Newlands, *Public Papers of Francis G. Newlands*, Vol. 1, 59; Representative Francis G. Newlands (NV), *Congressional Record* 56 No. 2 (January 9, 1901), H787-8. See also, Richard White, “The Nationalization of Nature,” *Journal of American History* 86 (December 1999): 976-986.

In 1911, Newlands faced new threats to his goal of regulating rivers. Senators knew that he would once again attempt to amend the rivers and harbors appropriations bill with another effort to establish a government agency that coordinated all river improvement projects. Merchant associations from North Dakota to Missouri desired river improvements. But these associations all lobbied for individual projects benefiting their own interests. Many of Newlands' fellow senators resisted giving up their power to bring home pork projects that played well in home constituencies at election time. Newlands fought his eastern, southern, and Midwestern colleagues who hesitated in the face of central government river improvement planning. Several senators argued that Newlands' ideas had merit and that all appropriations for navigable river projects, as well as forest, electrical generation, reclamation, and navigation projects, fell under allowable Senate debate. The larger debate centered on legislation for forest reserves and eastern navigable river projects. "It has been presented to me, Mr. President," he stated on the Senate floor, "that a successful attempt to amend this bill may involve renewed attacks upon it by the enemies of the measure when the bill goes into conference . . . there is a possibility that in that event the bill might fail of final consideration." Newlands regarded such a situation as a misfortune, he said further, "because this bill is an advance in the right direction." He argued that his amendment used proven constitutional governance of interstate commerce to regulate the flow of American rivers. In protecting forests, it protected watersheds from erosion. Water that forests stored, he argued, allowed more water for navigation, irrigation, and power generation. The coordination of all these uses also allowed the government under the Corps of Engineers to regulate floods and build flood control measures in efficient, planned ways.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Newlands, *Public Papers of Francis G. Newlands*, Vol. 2, 222-5.

Newlands presented the amendment, and the bill went to committee. When the Senate adjourned on March 4, he held no expectations that his amendment would make it out of committee, and it didn't. But Newlands demonstrated that in the face of all odds, he persisted. He believed the nation's economic system demanded efficiency. He also understood by 1911 that very few who lived in American cities desired to give up their lives in culturally and socially vibrant places and head out to lonely lives in the West. He did, however, have a polished political and economic philosophy that he worked out in detail and with great persistence. He believed that he had the nation's best benefit in mind as he strove for order in markets, social organization, and expansion of agriculture. He perceived that a growing nation needed cheap food and that commodities traded on open markets, working through intertwining channels of transportation, distribution, investment, and return brought greatest benefit to every citizen. He believed that economic efficiencies gained with continuing rationalization opened opportunities for more Americans in industrial, agricultural, and service industry workplaces. The common investor depended on returns from shipping companies, agribusiness, manufacturing, and public utilities. While he pursued such efficiencies, however, he continued to support a social order that put the rich at the top, insulated from drastic loss, and working, common Americans at the bottom—protected from chaos but always working in machinery they didn't design and over which they possessed little control.

The Unfinished Project

During his testimony before the Joint Subcommittee in 1916, Newlands demonstrated this penchant for conflating the will of the people with what he thought was good for them.

He argued that development in the West was good for the Midwest, South, and the nation as a whole. This justified greater federal control of the nation's water.⁶⁸ During the debate, Newlands argued that the great rivers of the Midwest—the Arkansas, Missouri, and the Platte—had their sources “in snows of the mountains.” Prevention of flood and reliability of navigation of the Missouri and the lower-Mississippi rivers depended on the wise storage of water flowing from the arid West. If the federal government could manage water from its sources to its users, for the benefit of its users, order and efficiency would replace waste and turmoil—particularly for business and government planning. The union benefited from better business opportunity. Western states grew with more settlement. Midwestern and Southern states found benefit in fewer floods and more involvement in shipping. “No one will deny the power of the Government over the question of interstate and foreign commerce,” he stated. “No one will deny the power of the Government to make a river navigable. If you do not deny that, then the Government can adopt any practicable means to make it navigable.” The federal government did not need to confine itself to channeling rivers for navigation. It had the power, he contended, to manage water before it even made its way into a river.⁶⁹

Newlands' redefinition of water as a national resource removed or abstracted water beyond the banks of a stream or depths of a lake. Conflating conservation of natural resources with development, he showed himself adept at seeking the most economically beneficial uses of water anywhere. Newlands himself developed the Hillsborough section of the San Francisco and the initial lots of Chevy Chase, Maryland—both well-watered retreats for the wealthy. The Spring Valley Water Works Company he once represented sparked a

⁶⁸ Schneiders, *Unruly River*, 89-91.

⁶⁹ U.S. Congress. Senate. “Public Joint Resolution 25, Parts 1-10.” 498-9. See also, Matthew T. Pearcy, “A History of the Ransdell-Humphreys Flood Control Act of 1917,” *Louisiana History: Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 41 (Spring 2000): 133-159, esp. 139.

divisive and ongoing debate over the fate of the Hetch-Hetchy Valley when San Francisco proposed damming the valley for the city's water supply. Newlands himself participated in the Senate hearings over the water project and sought to jigger testimony before the Senate toward Spring Valley's favor.⁷⁰ Like many conservationists, he demonstrated a theoretical, if not powerful, ideology of joining of commerce, markets, people, and nature into an efficient whole. He believed that government could assert god-like control of water separate from the terms on which nature operated. This thinking disregarded ecological, geological, and geographical variations within even one river system and interpreted the idea of river as all water running toward the sea. The West's problem, he believed, was lack of water, which made it a valuable commodity that gave agriculturalists the ability to produce valuable things. The more water, the better, and if he had to capture water outside the West for his arid country goals, then he would widen of the scope and abstraction of water.⁷¹ In Newlands' view, springs, small streams, and rocky, impassible rivers fed a navigable river like the Missouri. This expanded federal responsibility for the navigability of that river into the highest reaches of the Rocky Mountains, into the deepest aquifers, and even into the forests and grasslands that absorbed rainfall. He reasoned that interstate commerce connected all products derived from even isolated water development projects to all products of American commerce everywhere. Economic expansion benefited all Americans, and, in his mind, the federal government had responsibility to make opportunity universal as well.

Newlands and others did not mind the growth of corporations but wanted a subsequent expansion of government to regulate big business—for its own sake and for the

⁷⁰ Atwood, "The Romance of Senator Francis G. Newlands," 294-300; Righter, *Hetch-Hetchy*, 42, 70-8.

⁷¹ Norris Hundley, Jr., "Water and the West in Historical Imagination," *Western Historical Quarterly* 27 (Spring 1996): 5.

good of the economy. With proper government oversight, corporations could do the work of moving goods and making money better than conglomerations of semi-independent farming communities. As Smythe had written, “Instead of attempting to destroy monopoly where monopoly has come about in response to irresistible tendencies, it should be the policy of the Nation to facilitate the perfection of monopoly . . . Because it means the further elimination of waste and tends to create that condition of permanency which is in the highest degree favorable to the stability of investments.”⁷² Rather than erecting barriers to corporate control of resources and land, conservationists like Newlands agitated for more government involvement in the human and physical geographies of land use so that money could flow freely—often through the profit gathering mechanisms of big business. Powell’s idea to apportion water in a democratic, deliberative way was not necessarily inimical to rationalizing business and fitting nature into seamless schemes of investment, production, and profit, only a little messier and less profitable than Newlands and others liked.⁷³

This is not to say that Newlands and his contemporaries were evil, even if they were technocrats and plutocrats. Newlands, in particular, sought to modernize and rationalize western lands, farmers, and waters for what he perceived as the national benefit and social reform. A national and global orientation for water use expanded opportunities beyond individual watersheds to produce material and agricultural goods for a wider, increasingly corporate economy. Both Newlands and Powell had a deep faith that proper application of science, technology, and expertise would make the desert bloom. Both sought to manage it with efficiency. But Powell’s plans would create a vast array of water uses and a kind of

⁷² Smythe, *Constructive Democracy*, 82-3.

⁷³ Worster, *A River Running West*, 569; Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 277.

democratic chaos that Newlands, on the other hand, sought to simplify and integrate into constantly changing and overarching systems of production and capital gain.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency*, 101-3.

CHAPTER 6

Working Together and not Working Together

“Is river regulation and river navigation a failure elsewhere in the civilized world?” –Francis G. Newlands

“All you have to do to avoid flood is build where the river doesn’t flow. Once you’ve done that, there’s no such thing as a flood, just a river doing its job.” –Jeff McFadden¹

On a clear August evening, the Missouri River at Riverfront Park in Yankton, South Dakota, seems more lake than river. The heat of the day lifts from the air and evening cool sweeps in over the water. As the sun sets, the river turns pink and purple, its colors shifting with the moment. Shadows lengthen and anglers bring their boats into the ramp, putting up and organizing their gear as they wait for one another to hook their boats to trailers and drive off. When they are gone, a kind of silence sets on the river that mighty things should not have. Steep banks covered with grass and brush, cottonwood and willow roll into the water from the ground above. The wide waterway is absent of rocks, sand bars, and tree trunks. The water flows mirror smooth and blue as it slips past dark beards of rust on the abutments of the eighty-year-old Meridian Bridge that leads into the pretty town of Yankton.

But the water in the peaceful and seemingly enduring prospect from the park is anything but a lake. Human manipulations of the Missouri River and its basin only make it

¹ Newlands, *Public Papers of Francis G. Newlands*, Vol. 2, 295; Jeff McFadden, Personal interview. Lexington, MO, June 26, 2005.

seem so.² Since the passage of the Newlands Act, Americans have invested immense amounts of labor, intellect, money, and political capital to maintain the river's economic productivity and produce spaces like that of the park.³ Since the establishment of the Bureau of Reclamation, an increasing number of dams across the Missouri basin have regulated the flow of the river. The most obvious and impressive are the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' mainstem dams, whose construction began with the massive Fort Peck Dam in 1934 in Montana—a project that created a one hundred fifty-eight mile-long reservoir. Just four miles upstream from Yankton sits Gavins Point Dam, which the Corps of Engineers completed in 1958. With this, Fort Peck, and four more dams like it, all built between 1934 and 1966, as well as hundreds of Bureau of Reclamation dams on the Missouri's tributaries and their tributaries, the Corps and Bureau control, and, with the help of the geology, climate, and hydrology of the river basin, construct the illusory scene at Yankton.⁴ Over the span of seven decades, the river has constantly undermined the structures of an extensive and ongoing public works project. Despite its human control structures, the Missouri has flooded as often as it has trickled through its valley. People responded to natural processes that threatened to remove the Missouri from their grasp in a constant process of building and rebuilding.⁵

² Cronon, "The Problem with Wilderness," 69-90. "Wilderness," Cronon writes, "hides its unnaturalness behind a mask that is all the more beguiling because it seems so natural." The park and the bridge seems to exist in a natural setting that has always been. In fact, people have influenced and are influencing the entire setting, from the forests on hills to the stands of purple loosestrife (an invasive exotic) on the banks to the river channel itself.

³ For a discussion of the immense task of Missouri River management, see, Hart, *The Dark Missouri*, ix-i. See also, Committee on Missouri River Ecosystem Science, *The Missouri River Ecosystem*, 86-112.

⁴ John R. Ferrell, *Big Dam Era: A Legislative and Institutional History of the Pick-Sloan Missouri Basin Program* (Omaha: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 1993), 61-4.

⁵ Schneiders, *Unruly River*, 256.

The Missouri River and the park cloak human efforts to reorganize the environment, as well as the history of those efforts.⁶ The complex interplay of natural processes, ideologies, and human perceptions hide the consequences of environmental, social, and political change and power struggles over control of the river. The modern bureaucratic state, the combination of government and capital, attempted to reorder the Missouri River to extend its power and control. But in doing so, it engaged in constant negotiation with an active and living riverine system and the people the state sought to control.⁷ The very nature of government and industrial power, however, allowed and promoted its opposition. People, in mediating environmental change, recreated their lives in changed places. The river, by its own dynamism, produced new circumstances for human conflict and negotiation at every turn.⁸

This was not something that William Smythe or Francis Newlands thought much about. Water and rivers to them were resources for human use, like coal or diamonds. In their views, water was for human use. From it sprung values, the American ideal of opportunity, and the promise of independence. Beyond turning wheels and growing grapes, water development showed the strength of American institutions, the advancement of their technologies, and the power of money for social good. The use of water was nothing less than the creation or re-creation of society. Water combined with initiative, investment, and management provided the most for the greatest number for the longest term. People such as Francis Newlands and Frederick Newell imagined that water, once under the dam, in the

⁶ See, White, *Organic Machine*, 23-36, Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness*, 92-4, 120-2, 128-32, 223-33; McKibben, *The End of Nature* 3-8; Cronon, "The Problem with Wilderness," 69-90.

⁷ For a discussion of physical nature/human linkages with regard to rivers, see White, *Organic Machine*, ix-i, 4, 111-3.

⁸ White, *Organic Machine*, 59-63.

ditch, or flowing in a canal would fall under the peaceful administration of scientists and engineers. There would be disagreements, but, in the end, the whole of the water empire was one of smooth, efficient operation. “We shall have a system of navigable rivers, of coastal canals and sheltered waterways that will connect Maine with Texas and Texas with the Lakes,” Newlands wrote. It was important, he argued, and necessary for the expansion of the Republic. “All of these works, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, should be commenced and prosecuted contemporaneously, and pushed forward in a thoroughly businesslike manner and without unnecessary restrictions by a competent service, such as has given vitality and effectiveness to the Panama Canal and the Reclamation Service.”⁹

Smythe, Newlands, and other irrigation advocates believed that providence gave Americans a continent to conquer, and they had done well. The work, however, was not yet finished. The imperial effort now moved to the reformation of society, and filling the yet-open spaces of the West was the means to accomplish the task. It was progress, Smythe argued, toward human perfection. God depended on human beings “working in partnership with Him and in harmony with the laws of the universe, to bring the world to completion.” The land had tillable soil. It had water in its valleys and under the ground. Smythe believed people had to do God’s work. “Blending science and religion and the material with the spiritual,” he wrote, “their prayers are answered with the fullest measure of blessings.”¹⁰ As with many Progressive efforts, Smythe had an idea where progress led, but to what level of perfection for nature and society was not yet known. Progress itself only demanded improvement of current conditions. For Smythe, no less than for other Progressives, it was

⁹ Newlands, “The Development of American Waterways,” 875.

¹⁰ Smythe, *Conquest of Arid America* (1905), 327-31.

the moral duty of those who understood the grand workings of society to reform and improve those who were either not capable or not of the same mind—for whatever reason. Watering the deserts gave divine purpose to the empire and the irrigation cause. Since the definitions of improvement, progress, divine purpose, and even nature itself were open to interpretation, the outcomes for all could only be further deliberations.¹¹

Smythe's ideas dovetailed with Newlands', although Newlands' ideas have had a more visible impact on the modern West and, ultimately, the nation. With the passage of the National Irrigation Act in 1902 came a new bureaucracy to plan, build, and coordinate water development in the West. Regardless of the faults and failures of the Bureau of Reclamation, over the next eighty years the agency dotted the West with hundreds of dams and laced the land with irrigation canals. The Bureau's work ranged from small reservoirs for irrigation to giant water storage systems that allowed cities like Los Angeles and Las Vegas to exist as they do today. The faith that Newlands had in people to appropriate, manage, and direct water to use for social and economic purposes prevailed. Thousands of people—not the millions that Smythe had hoped for—would make their livings, fill their corporate coffers, and gather dividends from those irrigation works. Millions of westerners, however, would come to live in cities in the desert. Places like Salt Lake City and Denver became metropolises, while smaller cities, such as Bend, Oregon, and Yakima, Washington, grew from small settlements. Of the two men's visions, Smythe's fueled the American imagination and Newlands' fueled the actual changes in the land.

Newlands also argued for an inland waterways system that rationalized all forms of water everywhere over the entire nation. The need arose from the constant processes of

¹¹ Oelschaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness*, 97-132.

progress and efficiency. Railroads and roads had taken over as the nation's means to move goods and materials. Rivers fell into disuse with, he wrote, "competition of the railroads, underbidding the water carriers during the season and raising the rates when navigation ceased and the neglect of the Government in maintaining navigable streams, brought about the present condition; but I believe that the people, the railroads and the Government realize the mistake and that it can be remedied." Now, however, he called for the nation, vis-à-vis the government to integrate systems of water and ground transportation. Rivers would become useful again as adjuncts to the rail system. Then, due to the nature of changes within systems, rivers would become necessary to ground network. "The regulation of interstate commerce is one of the important functions of the Government and as the need of legislation increases better attention will be given to the whole subject."¹²

To Newlands, well-managed water expanded the opportunity to make money. In business, the large corporation, not the family farm, best made, managed, and distributed products most efficiently. Corporations of national scope had undertaken the building of rail networks. They operated efficient and rational systems of transportation and distribution of goods and materials. If government created the same kinds of opportunities on the river as it did overland, Newlands said, then "the vast increase of transportation business in the future will tend to the reduction of rates and the advantage of the people."¹³ This, then, fashioned an environment for development of national and international corporations that would move goods across the nation's water network. It also provided for the smooth and profitable operation of other businesses, small and large, industrial and service. Water in competition

¹² Newlands, "The Development of American Waterways," 873-879.

¹³ *Interstate and Foreign Transportation: Hearings before the Joint Subcommittee on Interest and Foreign Commerce, Sixty-Fourth Congress*, (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1917), 151.

with rail lowered shipping rates, he argued, made economic conditions fairer for working people and increased economic benefits to Americans in general. If anyone were afraid of what might sound like accumulation of wealth and power in the hands of a few, he argued that a strong federal government managing rivers and seeing to a vast transportation network reduced the power of corporations in government and political affairs by making them accountable to elective government.¹⁴ In addition, it took some of the speculation and risk out of making money, allowing corporations and smaller businesses to allocate money, time, and energy efficiently for the return to the greatest number of people.

John Neihardt, on the other hand, understood the Missouri River in a context that was larger, more all-encompassing, and enduring. He, too, wanted to bolster American traditions and values. Being a writer, he wrote about the things he wanted and in the ways he needed. But he was also a product of his time and his writing expressed not just what he was thinking, but the priorities of his culture and time. Published in 1910 when Neihardt was 29, *The River and I* arrived on bookshelves during a time when many felt that social upheaval came from the success of the American experiment. Contact with nature was a means of centering the modern man, giving him escape from the rigors and boredoms of urbanized life, and solving the social ills that had come with rapid change. His work showed how American perceptions of rivers were changing in the early 1900s. It is not surprising that Neihardt conceived of the river in seemingly contradictory terms. His work *The River and I* revealed the ways in which meanings of rivers and nature were malleable and useful for both industrial and social purposes.¹⁵

¹⁴ Francis G. Newlands, "Common Sense of the Railroad Question," *North American Review* 180 (April 1905): 583.

¹⁵ Deloria, "Western Landscapes," in *A Sender of Words*, 54.

The three men—Newlands, Neihardt, and Smythe—embodied distinct views of nature, its value, and its uses at the turn of the twentieth century. And those views mattered. They sought to continue and preserve a system of capital and power that rapid social change, industrialism, and urbanization seemed to threaten. The ways they dealt with and proposed to handle those changes had real outcomes. None of their ideas died and none of them completely succeeded, due in part to nature itself. A closer look at Neihardt's Missouri River reveals the ways in which the ideas of the dreamer, the schemer, and the romantic worked out in nature itself.

The Missouri River

The Missouri is a river of the American West. The nation's longest watercourse drains one-sixth of the continental United States, a 529,000-square-mile area west of the Mississippi River to the Continental Divide, and from north of the Canada/U.S. border to mid-Missouri. Along its 2,465 miles from the Rockies to the Mississippi, the river flows through hundreds of overlapping ecosystems—from the lofty peaks of the Rockies to prairies of the Great Plains and the karst limestone country of the Ozark Plateau. It also courses through arid and semi-arid to temperate climates at its end. It connects disparate human communities that make up not one distinct region, but an assortment of them. Significant precipitation falls regularly in the southeastern third of the basin, where nearly eighty percent of the basin's population lives in such cities as Omaha, Nebraska, the Sioux Cities, the Kansas Cities, Topeka, Kansas, and Columbia, Missouri.¹⁶ In the upper two thirds of the

¹⁶ Michael L. Lawson, *Dammed Indians: The Pick-Sloan Plan and the Missouri River Sioux, 1944-1980* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982), 3-44; Hart, *Dark Missouri*, 3-23, 41-76; Schneiders, *Unruly River*, 12-37; Thorson, *River of Promise*, 8-17, 18-55.

basin, settlement is sparse and rural but for the few urban and semi-rural areas that comprise government, transportation, and trade centers for the Great Plains.¹⁷ Most of this area has seen population declines since the 1920s, and the slow depopulation of the plains of the Dakotas, Kansas, eastern Colorado, Montana, and Nebraska are well known.¹⁸ Political scientist Henry C. Hart described the total complexity of the river in *The Dark Missouri* best when he wrote; “There is nothing picayune in the Missouri basin.”¹⁹

The West, environmental historian Donald Worster writes, is “first and most basically, a culture and society built on, and absolutely dependent upon, a sharply alienating and intensely managerial relationship with nature.”²⁰ The ideas of Newlands, Smythe, and Neihardt, no matter how much they overlapped, agreed, or contradicted each other, revealed how nature, West, and ideas of American-ness connected to each other in a vibrant whole. Newlands’ comprehensive plan for river development included all facets of water use—irrigation, navigation, and flood control, as well as forest, soil, and water development for cities.²¹ Smythe wanted water to recreate the American agrarian ideal with grids of irrigation works, all with small farms and farming communities next to them.²² Neihardt’s Missouri River trip was nothing if not contact with nature, and his Missouri Valley epics reinforced the notion of the West as a uniquely American place.

¹⁷ Hart, *Dark Missouri*, x.

¹⁸ For a discussion of Great Plains demographic changes particular to the Missouri River, see Ferrell, *Big Dam Era*, 1-3. See also, James E. Murray and Dewey Anderson, “The Force of Social Reorganization in Regional Development,” *Social Forces* 4 (May 1947): 368-69.

¹⁹ Hart, *Dark Missouri*, x.

²⁰ Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 5-7

²¹ Newlands, “The Development of American Waterways,” 873-5.

²² Smythe, *City Homes on Country Lanes*, 36-8, 87.

Rather than a dream, a scheme, or a romantic ideal, the West consisted of a number of cultural, economic, and social relationships that worked in a dynamic of historical and spatial change. Irrigation activists, conservationists, and state and federal governments abstracted water from the land at any given point and connect it to water everywhere else. That is, water represented physical and social power, and rivers were a transformative expression of that power. Capturing this energy for human purposes integrated water and rivers into a larger scheme of economic, cultural, and social production. On the Missouri, from 1881 to until the Gavins Point Dam closed in 1956, Americans harnessed labor, energy, and other parts of nature (rock and soil for concrete and earthen dam, petroleum for machines) to detach water from the earth in complex abstractions of capital production and management. In altering the Missouri, government and business not only abstracted water but used it to grow crops, provide drinking water and waste disposal, and increase profit and economic opportunity.²³ Government and corporate capitalism apprehended the river and its energies to generate electricity and protect downstream commercial and capital interests from flood and drought. In short, restructuring physical space moved the Missouri into the realm of capital gain much in the way earlier federal surveys of the public domain had moved land from frontier and public domain into ownership and production.²⁴ In turn, restructured space defined what kinds of actions were appropriate to the space (farming, electrical generation, navigation).²⁵

²³ Henry C. Hart, "Administration of the Missouri Valley Development" (Master's Thesis, Political Science Department, University of Wisconsin, 1947), 23-30.

²⁴ Worster, *Dust Bowl*, 6.

²⁵ Department of the Army, Corps of Engineers, Missouri River Division, Omaha, NE. *The Development and Control of the Missouri River: Information on development of projects for control of floods, improvement for navigation and related uses of the water resources of the Missouri River Basin* (Omaha: Office of the Division Engineer, Missouri River Division, December 1947). This booklet is most interesting when read next to Harvey, *Space of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography* (Malden, MA: Routledge, 2001), 52-4, 109-10, 121-7; and, Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 336, 365-7. Since the Missouri was a navigable river under federal law (U.S. Supreme Court, *Pollard vs. Hagen* 44 U.S. 212), its bed and banks to the high water marks were held by the

Historically, the river's status as a navigable river flowing through tribal land and federal lands, several states, and hundreds of cities and counties put it under federal jurisdiction. The Flood Control Act of 1936 stated that since:

destructive floods upon the rivers of the United States, upsetting orderly processes and causing loss of life and property, including the erosion of lands and impairing and obstructing navigation, highways, railroads, and other channels of commerce between the States, constitute a menace to national welfare; that it is the sense of Congress that flood control on navigational waters or their tributaries is a proper activity of the Federal Government in cooperation with States, their political sub-divisions and localities thereof; that investigations and improvements of rivers and other waterways, including watersheds thereof, for flood-control purposes are in the interest of the general welfare; that the Federal Government should improve or participate in the improvement of navigable waters or their tributaries including watersheds thereof, for flood-control purposes if the benefits to whomsoever they may accrue are in excess of the estimated costs, and if the lives and social security of people are otherwise adversely affected.

The Act also put the responsibility for investigations and improvements of rivers and other waterways for flood control and allied purposes under the War Department (the Army) and the Chief of Engineers.²⁶

Despite Newlands best efforts before his death in 1916, federal control of rivers fell and still exists under many roofs. The Bureau took up water and rivers in the western states, and the Corps of Engineers dredged America's harbors and maintained navigation on larger eastern and Midwestern rivers. Before the 1936 flood control legislation, the Corps of

states in the public trust and, as today, the public had right-of-way between the average high water marks on either bank. Since the water spread far across its floodplain, the public theoretically had access to floodplain that was sometimes a mile or more wide. Human alterations narrowed this space. On the downstream river, the average high water mark can be as narrow as 300 yards, such as between floodwalls at Kansas City. In this process, what was lost to the public, known as accreted land, went directly to adjacent landowners and was generally made "productive." In the lower river, the public has access to boat ramps, banks between levees, and in-channel sandbars, some islands, as well as state conservation areas, riverfront parks, and national wildlife refuges—government-approved, partitioned, and regulated space. Access on upstream reservoirs is narrowed to parks and recreation areas connected by reservoirs' flood pool levels exposed at low water. See also, Hart, *The Dark Missouri*, 136-144; Schneiders, *Unruly River*, 222-36.

²⁶ U.S. Congress, Flood Control Act of 1936, Section 1, 74th Cong. 2nd Sess. (CHS. 651, 688.) June 20, 22, 1936.

Engineers had no legal authority to manipulate rivers against flood. They could and did build levees and other flood control structures. But in-channel alterations had to pertain to navigation. After 1936, business interests, such as the Kansas City Chamber of Commerce, and lower-basin states urged Congress to move the federal government more deeply into the realm of protecting streamside business and infrastructure for the “general welfare.” After devastating floods rolled through the Missouri Valley in 1943, demands from commercial shippers, lower-valley industrialists, and agricultural interests in the upper valley —promoted by Corps promises of economic opportunity—moved Congress to consider a more massive plan to control the river.²⁷ Between 1929 and 1934 under authorization from the House or Representatives, the Corps had already accumulated information about the basin, stream flows, topographic and geological data, as well as possible dam sites. At the same time, the Bureau of Reclamation had surveyed the basin to assess the best possibilities for irrigation, stream diversion, and power generation. In the late 1930s and 1940s, the Corps and Bureau did additional planning, design, and land surveying to build the foundations for irrigation and flood control plans that Congress would combine into the Pick-Sloan Missouri Basin Plan. When the time was right—in this instance, after the 1943 Missouri River flood—the government agencies combined their data, reports, and expertise (gained in the economically successful Tennessee Valley Project), with business and political calls for river alterations. The heads of government agencies advocated for legislation authorizing the work they had already planned.²⁸ Paul Fickinger, a BIA district director who actively participated in dam site selection, said in a 1979 interview that, “As a matter of fact, the Pick-Sloan legislation

²⁷ Flood Control Act of 1936; Marvin Meade, *The Missouri Basin: Proposals for Development* (Lawrence, KS: Bureau of Government Research, University of Kansas, 1952), 9-10.

²⁸ Hart, *Dark Missouri*, 67-97.

was developed as a result of these studies of the Corps of Engineers on flood control and (electrical) power.”²⁹

The Flood Control Act of 1944 combined a Bureau of Reclamation irrigation plan and a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers flood and drought control plan in Pick-Sloan, named after U.S. Army Lieutenant General Lewis Pick and Bureau of Reclamation chief W.G Sloan. Overtly a brilliant plan to alter physical nature for public good, Pick-Sloan actually represented years of planning in response to decades-old calls to make the river more useful to agriculture and industry. It was also the result of a long-held understanding among federal officials that they could expand the size, scope, and power of their agencies through control of the river. When Congress combined Corps and Bureaus plans in 1944, the resulting legislation merely gave the agencies the means to build to expand economic growth in the valley and increase their own authority responsibilities. Business supplied the legislation’s most important support.³⁰

Scarcely had the mud dried after the 1943 flood when the Corps, backed by downstream business, presented their plan to alter the river with seven large dams on the main river, an extensive network of levees, and hundreds of miles of stabilized banks lining a

²⁹ Paul Fickinger, interview by John S. Painter, Cape Coral, FL, November 13, 1979, American Indian History Research Project (American Indian Research Project) tape 79.99 (AIRP 1843), transcript, South Dakota Oral History Center, University of South Dakota, Vermillion, SD, 28-9. Hereafter, “American Indian Research Project” will be noted as AIRP; except where appropriate citations differ, as above. Also, “South Dakota Oral History Center” will be noted as SDOHC.

³⁰ As an example, the Kansas City Commercial Club (which became the Kansas City Chamber of Commerce in 1896) had called for improvements to the Missouri for navigation as a means of breaking cartel-like railroad control of commodity distribution, particularly grain, since the 1880s. See in particular, Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce Minutes, 15-8. Later, particularly after Missouri River Floods in 1903, 1912, 1927, 1930, and 1943, the Chamber of Commerce called for or supported federal intervention in all aspects of river control—power generation, navigation, irrigation, and flood control. They came to demand these from the federal government, arguing that as federal navigable river, the Missouri was a federal government responsibility and it was the government’s duty to make the river capitably productive. For discussion of water policy, federal jurisdiction, and federal priorities regarding water policy see, Peter Rogers, *America’s Water: Federal Roles and Responsibilities* (Cambridge, Mass, and London: The MIT Press, 1993). Pertinent to managing water for economic goals, see 94-5, 117-10.

deep river channel. At the same time, the Bureau had the backing of agricultural interests in upstream states for massive irrigation projects that included one hundred smaller tributary dams. The public and their elected representatives, inundated in free-enterprise rhetoric, were ready to believe promises of great public good that would come with river alteration and management. In addition, industry and agribusiness interests, sometimes in direct competition with each other and having differing economic goals and conceptions of river use, had made river alterations a political hot-button issue. After the 1943 flood, a congressional politician's vote against Pick-Sloan would have been exceedingly dangerous.³¹

In many ways it resembled what Francis Newlands wanted to achieve for all the nation's rivers—a coordinated government effort to bend rivers to human purposes. Pick-Sloan brought together divergent interests' demands for increased business opportunity on the Missouri River. Pick-Sloan's planners and supporters promised massive irrigation to upstream agribusiness seeking to turn semi-arid land into farm fields. At the same time, they pledged flood and drought control and navigation (with modern, diesel-powered tow boats pushing barges) to downstream industry, which had developed the lower basin floodplains and demanded protection for their assets, as well as further growth opportunities. State and federal politicians bolstered their political capital with business constituencies by supporting Pick-Sloan's economic goals.³²

Pick-Sloan's supporters sought to advance economic progress, which they believed was the lifeblood of the nation. The renewal of this force depended on capturing and

³¹ Hart, *Dark Missouri*, 62-5, 77-135, 208-11.

³² Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 268. See also, Norris Hundley Jr., *Water and the West: The Colorado River Compact and the Politics of Water in the American West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), xiv. For a comprehensive discussion of how the Corps, Bureau of Reclamation, and other agencies understood Missouri River alteration as a way to increase the scope and reach of their powers, see Hart, *Dark Missouri*, 120-69, 197-229.

exploiting physical nature in new ways. “It is universally recognized,” said Montana Senator James E. Murray in support of greater funding for Pick-Sloan, “that the basic wealth of the United States comes from the ground. It consists of our vast expanses of rich agricultural land, our extensive forests, our mineral deposits, our great system of rivers and potential electric-power resources.” These assets, Murray said, formed the base of power from which the nation grew to dominate the industrial world. Other nations, Murray said, had once been world powers, presumably economic and military. But they had failed to develop and manage their natural resources for economic advancement. “Through their neglect,” Murray said, such nations “became impoverished and finally passed from the pages of history.”

According to Murray, the Great Depression had resulted from a failure to exploit the nation’s natural resources. The Tennessee Valley Project had revealed new energies in nature. Those energies had rescued the people in that river valley from “the fate of an eroded and abandoned territory.”³³ Technology and innovation had turned the tide. According to Murray, the Missouri’s unutilized power was there for the taking with enough political will, human intellectual energy, and labor—and government dollars. Americans had the responsibility to transfer the river’s energy to economic assets. River utilization ensured against future economic malaise and national weakness. To Murray, the state’s function was to expand opportunities for growth of private enterprise—the only cure for social illnesses stemming from economic stasis and failure to innovate that could strike the nation from the pages of

³³ James E. Murray, “Missouri Valley Authority: Unified Integrated Program for Development of the Missouri Valley,” *Speech on the Senate Floor, April 23, 1947* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1947), 3-16, quotes 3-4; Regional Committee for an MVA, *Conclusions from an Engineering Study of Missouri River Development, September 1, 1947-September 1, 1948* (Mitchell, SD: South Dakota MVA Committee, 1948), 3-13; Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 4, 231-43; Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 313-26.

history.³⁴ According to Murray, transforming the river's power into electricity, controlling flood, and providing for increased production of commodities would increase productivity in homes, factories, and offices. American greatness on the world stage, in fact, demanded it. Murray's speech echoed Newlands' ideas about capital growth and expansion of government and bureaucratic authority. This was not a new development on the Missouri River, where the Corps of Engineers had tried to maintain a river channel since the 1880s. The passage of Pick-Sloan merely increased the momentum in using the river to change life in and outside the valley. The means of this transfer would be expansion of opportunities for capital interests.³⁵

Newlands wanted government in American rivers for the ways that organization of rivers affected social order. But by the time Congress passed Pick-Sloan, some people saw a kind of ugliness in government expansion. *Saturday Evening Post* journalist Elmer Peterson glimpsed the connection between altering the Missouri and growth of government authority in the early 1950s. In his 1954 book, *Big Dam Foolishness*, he voiced the concerns of a small, determined group of conservative dissenters and social critics who maintained that control of nature meant control of people through the centralization of political, capital, and social power to make those changes.³⁶ "Just as big dams attempt to take God's physical

³⁴ Ferrell, *Big Dam Era*, 1-20, 39-68; Worster, *Dust Bowl*, 5-8. See also, Sarah R. Reidman, *Water for the People* (New York: Abelard-Schuman Limited, 1960). Although targeted to young adults, Riedman's book lays out in simple and succinct terms a utilitarian ideal of river use that reflects much of what Murray has imbedded in his speech: Nature is for human use. With investment of labor and energy, nature will amplify human productivity. Human prosperity depends on new ways of exploiting natural resources. Technology, science, and capitalist innovation vivify and revivify the capitalist economy. Riedman's text also replicates, in a different rhetorical and ideological context, the themes in this paper based on Worster's critique of capitalism in *Dust Bowl*.

³⁵ Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 68-70. See also Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 282-85.

³⁶ Elmer T. Peterson, *Big Dam Foolishness: The Problem of Modern Flood Control and Water Storage* (New York: Devin-Adair, 1954), v-iii, 19-28, 101-12.

world and remake it according to the unreasonable whims of man,” Peterson wrote, “they attempt, ultimately, to change man’s political world. They do this by their very nature.” Peterson’s passionate discussion of water resource management focused on how control of water led to coercive government. He maintained that “the economic-philosophic aspect of these big dams generally has been conveniently obscured behind the flying, dramatic spray that billows from the flumes or spillways in the slick dam propaganda movies.” Big business wanted government as its partner. Joining the interests of big business with big government was a process that was not only detrimental to American enterprise, innovation, and independence. It also centralized governmental power and economic control over Americans, endangering precious American liberties to determine the course of their own lives.³⁷

Peterson didn’t understand that for many years, people like Francis Newlands wanted government and big business on the same side. They agitated, lobbied, and legislated for it, all with the idea that government served the public best when it provided business new opportunities for profit. Pick-Sloan’s supporters also believed Americans would benefit from river alteration. Water resource development would allow people to build more factories, turn on more lights, and rely on a seeming endless supply of water. They also knew that Americans rarely questioned the necessity of turning on lights or the ways that capital may have used that electricity to accumulate power.³⁸ They only demanded the conveniences that came from electrical energy. Easy access to electricity and the flow of electricity itself gave no hint of the centralization of power of which Peterson spoke. Transforming a river’s energy

³⁷ Peterson, *Big Dam Foolishness*, 29-68, 101-12, 210-12, quotes, 101.

³⁸ Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 70-4, 81, 107-10.

into light did not reveal itself to be intended or unintended “assertion of power by some people over others.”³⁹

By 1947, the Army Corps of Engineers could draw on a long-developed language regarding the Missouri flowing over its banks to write, “These floods destroy or prevent the planting of crops. They destroy livestock, farm equipment and homes. The financial effect of the farmer’s loss is felt by the surrounding trade area.”⁴⁰ Calling the Missouri Basin the nation’s “breadbasket,” the Corps wrote that:

Two basic problems, flood and drought, confront the seven million people who make their homes in the valley. These exert tremendous influence upon the economy of the region and indirectly upon the nation as a whole. In the lower basin the problem is generally too much water in destructive floods. . . In the arid and semi-arid basin untold millions of dollars of loss have resulted through the years because of crop failures due to insufficient game. The unruly Missouri and its tributary system hold the key to solution of many of these problems imposed by nature. . . Engineering skill has shown the way. Modern machines and men are at work on the most vital projects of the program to put the river to work for the valley and the nation.⁴¹

The undercurrent of the Corps’ report represents a belief that the environment should serve commercial and social needs, and increasingly business and government defined these needs. In this view, the river was a collection of natural forces humans could bridle with sufficient technology, will, and intellectual and financial capital. Economic advancement created livelihoods and prosperity for working people. Money for river alteration represented investment in the future—not only for the monetary gain that came from immediate control of the river, but also for national stability, prosperity, and progress. With the demise of the steamboat, the river ceased to contribute to widespread economic growth. The river’s erratically devastating powers threatened the health and safety of citizens, and to the order

³⁹ Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 20, 331

⁴⁰ Corps of Engineers, *Development and Control of the Missouri* (not paginated).

⁴¹ Corps of Engineers, *Development and Control of the Missouri*, quote from preface (not paginated).

and resource development Americans needed for commerce.⁴² The river had not changed, but the ways of making and moving money did. With the technology and will, Americans could make the river into source of future national strength and economic prosperity.

The demise of Newlands Inland Waterways Commission came, in part, from the conflicts between the Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Reclamation. The combination of the two agencies' powers in Pick-Sloan, ironically, arose out of the same kind of territorial disputes.⁴³ The Corps proved its ability to manage rivers with Tennessee Valley Project. The TVA transformed an entire river basin into a long string of water storage reservoirs for navigation and power generation. The Bureau had wide-ranging experience irrigating and storing water in the semi-arid West, where Bureau engineers, too, had proven their ability to generate electrical power. The two agencies clashed over plans for the Missouri River Valley, where irrigation, power generation, flood control, and navigation interests agitated for decades for increased government support. Lewis Pick wanted water to flow in a deep channel for commercial traffic. Glenn Sloan wanted to spread water over fields. But if Congress chose deep, flowing water, they it couldn't have as much irrigation as Missouri Valley representatives and business desired. If Congress chose irrigation, the Midwest would not have its deep-draft barges. In the wake of the devastating 1943 flood, both Corps and Bureau officials understood they could have water their ways. Pick and Sloan and their cadres pasted together the two plans at a two-day meeting at the Stevens Hotel in Omaha, Nebraska. What they presented to Congress later that year allowed lower states flood control and navigation and promised states north of Nebraska access to water for irrigation. The

⁴² Public Affairs Institute, *The Big Missouri: Hope of Our West* (Washington DC, Public Affairs Institute, June 1948), 54-57. See also, Worster, *Dust Bowl*, 6.

⁴³ Ferrell, *Big Dam Era*, 8-10; Hart, *Dark Missouri*, 120-135.

Pick-Sloan plan expanded the two agencies' powers and responsibilities. The legislation combined the Bureau's plans for one hundred intra-tributary river shed dams and the Corps plans for seven larger, mainstem river dams.⁴⁴

The conjoining of government and business benefited both government agencies jockeying for power and business that sought greater profits. As the Carey Act and previous irrigation schemes demonstrated, the upfront investment and risk of controlling the river had proven far too great for any one company or conglomeration of agricultural and industrial interests. In downstream industrial cities, cities and counties could build levees to protect their localities. But raising levees and narrowing the floodplain in one place increased the need for more and higher levees above and below. In a way that Newland might have favored, business interests and government agency heads argued that only the federal government could fund such a massive, all-in-one Missouri Basin project and coordinate efforts between localities. At stake, they argued, were human lives and hundreds of millions of dollars in industrial investment. Federally built dams and reservoirs throughout the Basin would ensure water for irrigation, downstream municipal water and wastewater treatment facilities, power plant intakes, and commercial navigation in flood *and* drought.⁴⁵ State and government officials, manufacturing and power industries, and cities far from the river wanted the benefits of river-wide alteration, and Indians, non-Indian farmers, and

⁴⁴ Lawson, *Dammed Indians*, 18-19; Woster, *Rivers of Empire*, 268. See also, Hundley, *Water and the West*, xiv. For a comprehensive discussion of how the Corps, Bureau of Reclamation, and other agencies understood Missouri River alteration as a way in increase the scope and reach of their powers, see Hart, *Dark Missouri*, 120-69, 197-229.

⁴⁵ Ferrell, *Big Dam Era*, 1-38.

townspeople along the river's banks would have to bear the burden of lost land, culture, and community to provide them.⁴⁶

Conflict over Orderly and Managed Nature

Newlands never thought about Indians, and Indian dissent were just one problem with coordinated, government control of the Missouri River.

Alteration of the Missouri necessitated removal of land from private ownership and tribal control. From the first land acquisitions at Fort Peck Indian Reservation for a reservoir in the early 1930s to the final acquisitions under Pick-Sloan for Big Bend Reservoir in the late 1950s, government agents used eminent domain to make way for lakes, and rights-of-way and easements for public access, electrical transmission lines, roads and highways, and government facilities.⁴⁷ Corps and Bureau officials specifically targeted reservations in the advance planning of what would become Pick-Sloan.⁴⁸ Each dam and its reservoir, wrote lawyer and former Wyoming State Engineer John Thorson, “had to spare the most populous non-Indian towns and cities along the Missouri River while still providing reservoir storage

⁴⁶ For a discussion of the multi-purpose, multi-use aspect of engineering the basin, see Hart, *Dark Missouri*, 137-69; Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 5-7. For discussion of Native Americans and water development, see Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 268, 297-8; Lawson, *Dammed Indians*, 45-67; McCool, *Command of the Waters*, 1-13; Donald J. Pisani, *Water, Land, and Law in the West: The Limits of Public Policy, 1850-1920* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996), 159-79.

⁴⁷ To glimpse the scope of what planners believed river alterations would accomplish and the intricacies of land takings, see *National Industrial Recovery Act*, Stat. 48 (1933); U.S. Congress, Senate, *A Bill to Improve the Navigability of the Missouri River; to provide for the Flood Control of the Mississippi River and the Missouri River; to Provide for the Reforestation and Use of Marginal Lands in the Missouri Valley; to Provide for the Restoration and Preservation of the Water Level in the Missouri Valley; to Provide for the Development of Electrical Power in the Missouri Valley; and for Other Purposes*. S. 1973, 73rd Cong., 2nd Sess., 1934; U.S. Congress, House, *A Bill to Authorize the Negotiation and Ratification of Separate Settlement Contracts with the Sioux Nations of the Cheyenne River Reservation, South Dakota, and the Standing Rock Reservation, North and South Dakota, for Indian Lands and Rights Acquired by the United States for the Oahe Dam and Reservoir, Missouri River Development, and for Related Purposes*, H.R. 3582, H.R. 5372, 81st Cong., 1st Session, 1949.

⁴⁸ Thorson, *River of Promise*, 63-75.

capacity to meet water demands of the interest groups.”⁴⁹ Indian reservations were easy targets. They muted political repercussions for state politicians and state congressional delegations. In taking Indian reservation land, the Corps and Bureau avoided buying high-cost and urban real estate, and kept land acquisition costs low. Reservations were less developed, which allowed the government and its contractors to build project-specific infrastructure for machinery, construction crews, and temporary housing quickly, easily, and at minimum cost. According to Michael Lawson, the federal agencies and contractors painted the various dam- and reservoir-building projects with a patina of public participation. “Federal, state, and local government agencies and national, regional, and local organizations,” he wrote, “held numerous ‘town hall meetings’ throughout the Dakotas to discuss water development issues for more than twenty years prior to enactment of the Pick-Sloan Plan, but tribal members were never invited to attend.”⁵⁰

Paul Fickinger further illustrated why federal officials left Indians out of river alteration planning. In surveying reservoir locations, he said, “It became pretty evident that the ‘best’ locations and I say best in quotes because it depends on what you’re looking at in terms of best that the better locations for the dams just happened to fall . . . on Indian reservations. Probably the reason some of the Indian reservations were selected is because it was the easiest way to accomplish it (Pick-Sloan).” To steer clear of public and congressional threats to its authority, the Corps, Bureau, private contractors, politicians, electrical power interests, and farming groups wanted to ensure Pick-Sloan plan implementation went as smoothly as possible. On Fort Berthold Reservation in North Dakota, “The dam was going to

⁴⁹ Schneiders, *Unruly River*, 177-78. See also, Ferrell, *Big Dam Era*, 39-68.

⁵⁰ Michael L. Lawson, “The Cheyenne River Sioux Tribal Equitable Compensation Act,” U.S. Senate, Committee On Indian Affairs, July 8, 1998 (Washington: Federal Document Clearing House, Inc.), not paginated.

be built,” Fickinger said. “The money was going to be spent. And it was going to be spent and the dam was going to be built with the least amount of contradiction to the political aspect of the thing.” Overall, Fickinger believed the federal government taking federal trust lands that reservations represented would not become an obstacle to Pick-Sloan. “Most politicians wouldn’t look too unkindly on utilizing Indian reservations for the basic dam and for the back-up waters,” he said. Taking lands belonging predominantly to whites, however, could result in “some very strong political reverberations.” Indian tribes would derive some benefit, Fickinger thought, but the detriments in terms of displacement, land takings, culture, and community would outweigh any advantage for native people. As it was, “there was quite an upheaval on some of the Indian reservations in terms of having to move Indian families out...and even Indian cemeteries, that sort of thing. But it was easier to do that, so far as Indian reservations were concerned, than it was to do it in the so-called...non-Indian areas.”⁵¹ In the end, Pick-Sloan affected twenty-three reservations in the Missouri Basin. Reservoirs and dam sites reduced five considerably in size: Fort Berthold, Standing Rock, Cheyenne River, Lower Brule, and Crow Creek. Four (Rosebud, Yankton, Santee and Omaha) incurred some land and river access losses and infrastructure damages. Fort Peck Reservation reductions occurred under previous legislation.⁵²

Some BIA officials knew river alterations would severely impact Indians. Others said they did not. Rex W. Quinn was the Fort Berthold Reservation superintendent in the mid-1940s and 1950s. He said in a 1979 interview that, “In 1947 the only thing we heard about the Pick-Sloan plan was what we read in the paper. I think we did get one or two

⁵¹ Paul Fickinger interview by John S. Painter, 19-21, 25.

⁵² Lawson, “The Cheyenne River Sioux Tribal Equitable Compensation Act”(not paginated).

informational bulletins on it.” He said he understood “everybody’s reluctance to fully apprise the Indians of what was coming. Starting with Fort Peck in the mid-1930s, those dams were located . . . so that the major reservoirs would be on Indian land. And of course anybody who really studies the political situation, there’s no way that the Indians at Fort Berthold could have any serious impact on the congressmen or senators in North Dakota.” At the Standing Rock, Crow Creek, and Lower Brule reservations,

The reservoir site is located so that it plugs up a good part of the reservation. And I think the Corps of Engineers and Bureau of Reclamation recognized that the Indians were politically weak, and it would be safer to inundate that much Indian land, whereas it would be a hell of a lot harder to inundate that much non-Indian owned land, white land. Particularly some of those rich bottom farms down there they (whites) owned. Those fellows raised particular hell when they found out that their land was going to be flooded.

Years later, Quinn went to Washington to find out “who was involved and why, how this got to the point where they were inundating reservations without us knowing about it . . . I never found any files.”⁵³

Whether or not Quinn and Fickinger were revealing everything they knew of about Pick-Sloan, BIA officials who knew of Pick-Sloan and were sympathetic to native concerns were at a disadvantage. Pick-Sloan drew together a laundry list of federal agencies that included not just the Corps and Bureau, but also the Bureau of Land Management, Soil Conservation Service, Forest Service, Rural Utilities Service, and various arms of the Department of Agriculture. From the beginning government officials relegated the BIA to implementing other agencies’ decisions and Interior Department directives rather than advocating for their constituents. Fickinger said that though upper-level BIA administrators

⁵³ Rex Quinn, interview by John S. Painter, Pampano Beach, FL, November 10, 1979, American Indian History Research Project (American Indian Research Project) tape 79.95 (AIRP 1840), transcript, SDOHC, University of South Dakota, Vermillion, SD, 4-5.

understood Pick-Sloan would be “detrimental to the welfare, the best interests of the Indian tribes,” they could not compete with the interests of other Department of Interior agencies, such as the U.S. Geological Survey and Bureau of Reclamation. These formed, according to Fickinger, “quite a potent group against the poor little ole Bureau of Indian Affairs sitting off here all by itself.” Moreover, Interior Secretary Harold Ickes strongly supported Pick-Sloan both as a way to increase his own political fortunes and to increase his department’s profile. “There was just so far the Bureau of Indian Affairs could go in voicing any objections to it with the Secretary,” Fickinger said. Indeed, even if the BIA had fought against construction of dams and reservoirs on Indian lands, the agency could not “materially change or affect the enactment of the Pick-Sloan plan.”⁵⁴

For Indians, the federal government had been a part of their lives in the Missouri Valley in the Dakotas since the early 1800s. In the latter part of the century, the government had worked to define reservation boundaries through treaties and enacted laws to keep Indians within them. It had also defined and controlled space within those boundaries by building roads and administrative centers, as well as providing services and determining the quality of them. The political fortunes of Indians shifted as the federal government, Congress, and state and federal courts created and re-created Indian policy to maintain control over native populations. Pick-Sloan introduced yet another wave of change. This time, the federal government stepped into a realm that Indians had meditated—individual relationships with the land and land-use independent of their federally built infrastructure on their treaty lands. Where once, Indians could shape their lives by how they used and valued

⁵⁴ Paul Fickinger interview, 17-9. This relationship was also at play in the Colorado River basin. See, Worster, *River of Empire*, 211. Richard LaRoche, interview by Gerald Wolff, Lower Brule, SD, August 25, 1971, AIRP tape 784, transcript, SDOHC, University of South Dakota, Vermillion, SD, 32.

their land, land use under Pick-Sloan came to be based on commodification of water and power. Indians now had to pay irrigation and drinking and industrial water fees, and buy electricity that was sold to a grid largely outside the valley, regardless of previous agreements or treaties.⁵⁵

For decades, Indians on reservations wanted electricity, water, and irrigation and had fought for rights to improve the Missouri for their own uses. During the Depression, the Lower Brule Reservation council developed a river alteration plan to preempt private development of water and power resources on the Missouri at the Big Bend in central South Dakota. There, the river ran twenty-two miles around a curve that bent back on itself. Lower Brule officials planned to build a canal through the mile-and-a-half neck of the bend and dam it to generate electricity and to provide water for livestock and irrigation.⁵⁶ The tribal government planned to hire engineers and construction companies that would employ native people in the project. With the power of the river, the tribe would generate electricity for the reservation, and sell excess water for irrigation to local farmers and electricity to the larger national electrical grid. Corps officials in the late 1930s, however, had already begun planning for commercial navigation with water storage-and-release from the Fort Peck Dam. The Corps also surveyed sites for other large upstream storage reservoirs. By the early 1940s the Corps, which held final approval over the project due to its jurisdiction over navigable rivers, turned down the Lower Brule government's project. Corps officials argued that diversion of water through the Indian project would hinder management of the river for navigation. Moreover, the agency was developing a unified basin development plan for

⁵⁵ Lawson, *Dammed Indians*, 160-177; Rex Quinn interview, 47-53; Richard LaRoche interview, 24-6.

⁵⁶ Schneiders, *Unruly River*, 158-60.

navigation and flood control. The Corps would not let Indians undermine their authority over the river.⁵⁷ An independent project would fragment the river into areas of jurisdiction that prevented coordinated planning for flood control and navigation downstream.⁵⁸

“It is ironic that a project conceived to prevent flood,” writes John Thorson in his political study of the history and management of the Missouri River, “actually ended up flooding Indian lands and displacing Indian families.”⁵⁹ Irony, however, implies that such flooding Indian land went contrary to what the government agencies intended. The Corps and Bureau of Reclamation planned on flooding Indian lands for what they conceived as a larger public good. Lands inundated behind Missouri River mainstem dams were the most fertile in the upper valley, and much of it belonged to Indians. American Indian Research Project Director and scholar Joseph Cash interviewed the seventy-one-year old Dan Clark in the Yankton jail in July 1968. Clark was an Ihanktowan Sioux living on the Crow Creek Reservation, where the Big Bend and Fort Randall dams had inundated some sixteen thousand acres of reservation land. “The Corps took all the best lands” from the Indians, Clark said.⁶⁰ On the Cheyenne River Reservation, the effect was much more prominent. The Cheyenne River and Stand Rock Reservations lost 160,000 acres under the 240-mile-long Lake Oahe. The reservoir stretches across central North and South Dakota. Most of the tribal populations on both reservations lived along the river in the bottomlands. The project displaced over one hundred eighty Cheyenne River families. The Corps forced about thirty

⁵⁷ McCool, *Command of the Waters*, 1-13, 66-111.

⁵⁸ Pisani, *Water, Land, and Law in the West*, 180-98.

⁵⁹ Thorson, *River of Promise*, 80.

⁶⁰ Dan Clark, interview by Joseph Cash, Yankton, SD, July 1968, AIRP tape 7, transcript, SDOHC, American Indian Studies Institute, University of South Dakota, Vermillion, SD, 6.

percent of the tribal population at the time to relocate. Native American homes in the bottomland gave their owners several natural advantages. Game, water, and wood fed families and warmed their homes at the cost of labor. The bottomlands also supported gardens. Indians grazed their livestock on deep, rich grasses and the animals took shelter from summer heat under the cottonwoods and ash. When the displaced Indians moved to the more marginal uplands, they found the ground less fertile, harder to graze, and difficult to farm. Within just a few years, corn production on Cheyenne River declined by seventy-five percent and other grain output was down ten percent.⁶¹

Descendants of white homesteaders also owned bottomlands. Their ancestors settled in the Missouri Valley next to the river in the 1880s. Some of their families bought land from Native American owners after the General Allotment Act of 1887 (Dawes Act) parceled reservation land to individual Indians. Relations were not always friendly between the native people and whites. Many whites, Dan Clark said, “were scared to death of the Indians.” Even so, mutual need, friendship, respect, and formed communities and relationships unique to the individuals and aggregations of people along the River. But in the 1940s and 1950s when the Corps moved Indians, townspeople, and farmers out of bottomlands on higher ground, Indians and their white neighbors, said Clark, “lost all of that.”⁶² Most Indians who lived in river bottoms and reservoir areas moved into government-planned towns and newly built housing. Meanwhile, the BIA, Corps, and Bureau consolidated local services Indians depended upon. Students who once attended small community schools, Indian schools, and rural one-room schoolhouses traveled to distant schools in other communities. The

⁶¹ Lawson, “The Cheyenne River Sioux Tribal Equitable Compensation Act” (not paginated).

⁶² Dan Clark interview, 6-7.

government also constructed new hospitals far from reservation communities. Sometimes, such as in the community of Fort Randall, existing school districts and private hospitals took over services. These institutions were often located in towns off the reservations. In these instances, education and health care were, as Clark said, “no longer local.”⁶³

National Good

Newlands, in his time, hated inefficiency. Dwight Eisenhower didn't like it much either. In the 1950s at the time of most intense dam construction, the federal government wanted to extricate itself from Indians and Indian affairs. Eisenhower appointed Douglas McKay to Secretary of the Interior, Orme Lewis to Assistant Secretary of the Interior, and Glenn to the post of BIA commissioner. These men, along with Utah Senator Arthur Watkins, continued a move started in the mid 1940 to terminate federal relations with Native Americans. With a mix of legislation and executive action, government and elected officials pursued termination policies to eliminate the BIA. McKay, Lewis, and Emmons did not consider a whole arm of government devoted to Native Americans efficient or, as a matter of ongoing debates in Washington over what to do with Indians, very politically popular. Congressional officials wanted tribes to eliminate federal relationships with Native American people. Such a move, they believed, saved the federal government both the burden of financing tribes and the headaches of controlling them. Some Indians understood the new policy of termination as a way to free themselves of government control. Emmons, McKay, and Watkins, however, envisioned ending government support of Indian life as a means of

⁶³ Clark interview, 6-7; Madeline Eagle Thunder, interview by Mary Pat Cuney (no location noted), January 9, 1981, AIRP tape 1131, transcript, SDOHC, American Indian Studies Institute, University of South Dakota, Vermillion, SD, 9-10.

forcing Native Americans to assimilate into the larger society.⁶⁴ Federal officials, however, also controlled the purse strings and showed reluctance to provide the social and educational support that would promote Indian independence. Many native people welcomed independence from federal control but were not ready for self-sufficiency. Federal and state officials did not want a new population of welfare recipients. Because of this, BIA officials sometimes negotiated fair, sometimes greater than market-value settlements for lands taken under Pick-Sloan. At the same time, Washington paid even less attention to Indian and tribal issues than before. Termination advocates gained even greater strength in Congress, and the Bureau lowered the amounts it was willing to pay. This put the BIA in the awkward position of advocating for their charges and seeking to save the taxpayer money. Land acquisitions went forward, but the hither-thither nature of government's delayed payments and frustrated tribal governments efforts to gain reasonable prices for individual Indian lands. Funds for Indian hospitals, school systems, and infrastructure building were part of the settlements Indians on Missouri River reservations hoped to secure as the waters rose. But BIA's declining fortunes and Congressional goals of disengaging the federal government from Indian affairs made movement toward equitable replacement of the services with funds, expertise, and infrastructure a difficult and lengthy process.⁶⁵

Land takings for dams and reservoirs demonstrated the extent and limit of power the Corps and Bureau had gained under Pick-Sloan. The Fifth Amendment to the Constitution guarantees due process and just compensation guaranteed for depriving people of property

⁶⁴ For an overview of termination policy, its origins, and affects, see Charles Wilkinson, *Blood Struggle: The Rise of Modern Indian Nations* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005); David E Wilkins, *American Indian Politics and the American Political System* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006).

⁶⁵ Lawson, *Dammed Indians*, 73-4.

for public good. When taking land for reservoirs and dams, government and private capital defined the terms of public good.⁶⁶ The Corps and Bureau, however, did not establish set compensations for taken land. They didn't have to. Congressionally approved budgets determined the broad outlines of what the Corps and Bureau could spend. Costs at or under those budgetary constraints would keep the agencies beyond political reproach. Government agents moved throughout the valley protecting taxpayer interest, sometimes withholding appraisal and market-price information, used ill-defined property boundaries and faulty maps, and treated native and white landowners differently.⁶⁷ The government agents also operated on grounds of questionable legality. The federal government held Indian lands in trust. Richard LaRoche, a member of the Lower Brule Sioux and a twenty-year member of the Lower Brule Tribal Council, questioned government condemnation of land. "The government cannot condemn property of a ward and buy it," he said. "Nobody can do that in the United States. That's against the law."⁶⁸ But it didn't matter. The Corps and Bureau built dams and filled reservoirs. The agencies hired land agents to get the land for those projects.

By taking control of the environment for an ill-defined public good, government agencies would achieve the long-sought goals of Indian assimilation. Government agencies knew that dealing with tribes and factions of tribes at different times reduced the impetus for native dissent. Rex Quinn said he thought the government and the BIA, as trustees, "took

⁶⁶ Kris Kristjanson, "TVA Land Acquisition Experience Applied to Dams in the Missouri Basin" (South Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station: South Dakota State College, Brookings, SD, August 1953): 5, 8, 25-47; Madeline Eagle Thunder interview, 11-15; Robert Philbrick, interview by Mary Pat Cuney, Crow Creek, SD, September 8, 1980, AIRP tape ILH 33, transcript, SDOHC, University of South Dakota, Vermillion, SD, 9-11, 9-11, 12-15.

⁶⁷ Lawson, *Dammed Indians*, 45-67; Harold L. LaRoche, interview by Mary Pat Cuney, Lower Brule, SD, September 12, 1980, AIRP tape ILH 32, transcript, SDOHC, University of South Dakota, Vermillion, SD, 13-15.

⁶⁸ Richard LaRoche, interview by Gerald Wolff, Chamberlain, SD, August 25, 1971, tape 784S, transcript, SDOHC, University of South Dakota, Vermillion, SD, 34-35.

advantage of Indian people. And they (the trustees) took advantage of the fact that they (Indians) were politically unable to defend themselves in the situation. They (the trustees) would rather be called derelict in their duties than to raise an issue which would put all those Indians on the rampage. And if they would have ever gotten together, they might have had some impact. But individually, tribe by tribe, the way the thing was done, Fort Berthold first, then Crow Creek, and Lower Brule, Cheyenne River and then Standing Rock. It was done in such a way, I think the planning was sort of like a political plan as well as an engineering plan.⁶⁹

The Cheyenne River Sioux bucked this trend with strong community and tribal organization—and their own lawyer. While the tribes on Cheyenne River could not stop the dams, their organization ensured that residents on land that was to become Lake Oahe north of Pierre, North Dakota, received fair-market value for property, moving expenses, and compensation for disruption of livelihoods. They also received substantial funds for intangible assets, such as fruits, berries, and herbs integral to native life. Such organization also guaranteed the tribe received moneys to rebuild infrastructure, and move schools.⁷⁰ But aside from Cheyenne River, other reservations suffered internecine struggle and conflicting goals and ambitions. The individual wants and desires of Indians of many tribal affiliations within a single reservation exacerbated the difficulty of dealing with the federal government. Cheyenne River was decidedly different from other tribes that did not organize to face the Corps and Bureau.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Rex Quinn interview, 5.

⁷⁰ Lawson, *Dammed Indians*, 28-30.

⁷¹ For more detailed analysis of Indian struggles over land acquisitions, see Missouri River Basin Investigations Project, “Damage to Indians of Five Reservations from Three Missouri River Reservoirs in North Dakota and South Dakota” (U.S. Department of Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Report 138, April 1954)

The Imperial Project

As the Missouri river improvement advocates, William Smythe, and Francis Newlands demonstrated, anyone wanting something for themselves could argue that their interests reflected larger public good. The “public” lived in the valley and the floodplain, and also far from it. Once Pick-Sloan gained momentum and passed Congress, no native effort would stop construction of the dams. Increasing opportunity for capital investment through the conversion of nature into capital assets benefited the national economy, which would then derive benefit to all aspects of society.⁷² And while Indians and farmers resisted government, and, by proxy, capital hegemony, the government through the Corps was “gonna make them accept it. They gonna give them land . . . money . . . the moving part. So, they had to take it.”⁷³ But most Indians on reservations were cash poor, and the prospects of having the money the Corps offered outweighed the length of time and energy it took to take land contests to court. Once Indians had signed on to per-capital payments for damages or rehabilitation programs that some tribal governments arranged, they agreed not to sue the federal government for further damages. To sue meant to do without the cash payments until the case could go to court.⁷⁴

⁷² Missouri Basin Interagency Committee, *The Missouri: Water, Land, and Development for the Nation* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1958); Report of the Missouri Basin Survey Commission, *Missouri: Land and Water* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1953); U.S. Senate, “Report on Missouri River with View to Flood Control from Sioux City, Iowa, the Mouth,” “Missouri Basin Plan for the Bureau of Reclamation,” “Review of Plans of Engineering Corps, Army and Reclamation Bureau, for Development of the Missouri River Basin,” Missouri River Basin Project authorization, Flood Control Act of 1944, 78th Cong., 2nd Sess., 58 Stat. 887, Public Law 78-534; May 13, 1944. (Senate Documents 191, 247, 475).

⁷³ Dan Clark interview, 6-7; Lawson, *Dammed Indians*, 76-79.

⁷⁴ Joe Fiddler, interview by John S. Painter (no location noted) May 27, 1977, AIRP tape 1773, transcript, SDOHC, University of South Dakota, Vermillion, SD, 56-62.

Government officials intended that organization of space through reservoir construction finally do what over fifty years of Indian policy in the Dakotas could not. What some BIA officials and Indians understood as community, federal functionaries perceived as disorganized and backward aggregations of houses, farms, villages, and towns. Indians were moved into newly built towns that represented new paradigms of normalization. Road and housing placement were integral to remaking Indian towns into efficient, productive American communities. For instance, Fort Berthold was among the first of four large reservations that lost substantial land to upper basin reservoirs that included those in South Dakota. The agency's superintendent Rex Quinn appealed to Washington officials in language he hoped would sway them to put more money into land-settlement payments. He wrote that relocation of people at the agency was "not simply the physical movement of a community from one location to another. It is an opportunity to rehabilitate Indian people with the assistance and guidance of the Indian service (BIA)." Quinn hoped that government policies were "to assist and activate a cultural change of a whole group of people from an old, well-established system to a broader American way of living and conduct." While some Indians were "well along the road," many "are not so advanced." Indians had "acquired a different way of social and economic behavior over a period of generations....It is different than the principles of acquisition which so strongly governs American culture." A more important difference, Quinn wrote, was "the concept of property ownership on the part of Indian people and its relationship to the way in which a person evaluates himself." On Fort Berthold, Quinn wrote, if adjustment to "American culture" involved mainstream formal education for children ages five to eighteen, then it was incumbent on the federal and state governments to expand extension services and opportunities for agricultural education. He

also wrote that the government needed to create a “conception of the acreage required for the minimal economic agricultural unit.”⁷⁵

Quinn’s concerns mattered little to government planners, politicians, and technocrats. Public benefit far beyond reservation boundaries dictated what went on within those boundaries. Life on reservations had centered on “choice valley lands and home sites” for livestock raisers, farmers, and those who gathered food from the river and its bottoms. People removed from those areas had to settle on land that was likely “inferior for ranching and living because they lack extensive wooded areas in protected valleys, generally have poorer quality of soils, and are less well watered than those in the taking areas.” These social and economic problems that arose from land takings “will extend beyond the individual and the immediate locality to the entire reservation.” No longer would livelihoods be made from game and flora, which had also sustained unique social and cultural practices. According to federal officials, “although intangible damages are not subject to accurate measurement, there doubtless are differences in the amount and severity of intangible damages because of disruption to the social, community, economic, and cultural life of Indian people.”⁷⁶ The uncertainty of the value or extent of these damages worked to favor government officials who wanted to keep the public from criticizing their actions and keep dam construction costs at a minimum.

As dam construction went forward in the 1940s and 1950s, government officials moved Indians into standardized housing, which was different and foreign to people who had built their own homes. New housing meant better conditions for families who once shared

⁷⁵ R.W. (Rex) Quinn, “Fort Berthold Indian Agency Report: Relocation Planning and Activities in 1951,” December 31, 1951, Merrill Q. Sharpe Papers, 37, 1-3, 7-12, 18-20. See also, McCool, *Command of the Waters*, 142-3.

⁷⁶ Missouri River Basin Investigations Project, “Damage to Indians of Five Reservations,” 3-5, 7-8, 82-5.

houses among their families or with others. It also meant access to electricity, clean water, and infrastructure for economic development. Indians realized some of these benefits. But often housing remained unsuited for habitation and utilities were lacking. On Standing Rock Reservation in South Dakota, nearly half the five hundred houses built between 1960 and 1970 were substandard. Other reservations fared worse. By the end of the 1960s, only a miniscule percentage of Cheyenne River housing was adequate. Of these houses, “Only 35 percent of homes had electricity, 23 percent had satisfactory toilets, and 16 percent had running water.”⁷⁷

Many Indians had believed new housing was an even trade for lost homes. But the newly constructed residences brought rents and fees that Indians were expected to pay from their monetary compensation for land takings and integration into the labor market. “The government,” Clark said, “collects that (rent).” Although Indians did not have to pay property taxes on tribal land, “the house belonged to the Corps and (was) managed by a private company.” “The water belongs to the Corps of Engineers,” Clark said. Not only was the water now owned by the Corps and parceled by private companies on a pay basis—many valley residents had drawn their own water from wells—but other costs that came with new infrastructure dug into family budgets. New housing was electrified and heated with natural gas and heating oil, all of which brought cost that was not associated with the previous practice of heating homes with wood. “Some people own that (electricity), you see. So they collect the electricity bill. So all of them gets away with the rent . . . and that land where they built.”⁷⁸ The ability to turn on lights, then, meant different things in different places. Standing

⁷⁷ Lawson, *Dammed Indians*, 175-6.

⁷⁸ Dan Clark interview, 18-9; Madeline Eagle Thunder interview, 13-15; Robert Philbrick interview, 7-9; Lawson, *Dammed Indians*, 184.

at a light switch, Americans understood the convenience of electricity. But they did not see in that light how the government abrogated treaty rights, removed people from their homes, or destabilized native culture and economy. People knew only that the lights went on, that they were convenient, and were necessary to live and make a living. They also took for granted water from the tap and increased production in the factories where they worked.

Some Indians benefited from the changes. Money gave them the opportunity to invest in new lands, start their own small farms and businesses, or livestock operations. Della Lytle worked at the Cross Roads Café in Ft. Thompson, SD. She was one a few natives from the Lower Brule Reservation who went into business. With her savings and settlement money from building Lake Francis Case, she bought the diner. She was successful, in part because she had worked at cafes in the past. In part because, she said, “It was just a challenge for me, really. You know, when you have no skill, you do what you can.” Lytle said she was fortunate the government had built new homes. “Am I thankful for it, I’ll tell you. Because I know a lot of other people who are just like me. They would never own a home if wouldn’t be for this way of getting one.”⁷⁹

In 1955, Madeline Eagle Thunder owned river bottomland near Ft. Thompson, South Dakota. Corps workers, she said, “put up a pole. Around it, it says that, ‘If this pole runs over (with the water filling Francis Case), you get payment . . . they put up three poles. One down to the river . . . one in the middle there. The last one right over here . . . We never got paid for it (the land the reservoir inundated).” Forced to move off her land, she insisted on keeping her house. She chose to move the house to a spot higher on her property. With the help of a hired hand, she built a new foundation on a higher elevation near an artesian spring. Later,

⁷⁹ Della Lytle interview, 1-13.

when she had arranged to move the house, a Corps official served her papers prohibiting her from moving her house there. He also stated that water from the spring belonged to the federal government because it was tributary to the river below. She and her neighbors would have to buy water from the public system instead of fetching it from the spring or the lake. After two years, she finally took her savings and bought a smaller house nearby. It was plumbed and on the community's water system. But from the time she moved in 1955 until her interview in 1981, she had not paid the Corps for water. "They don't tell me to pay for my water," she said. "I still don't pay for it . . . ain't gonna pay for nothing."⁸⁰

While the government sought power and control of Native Americans by changing the river and the places of social relations attached to it, Indians often demonstrated their personal power in their attitudes, how they used and lived in the newly constructed towns and houses, and the religious and cultural mediations of their altered circumstances. They also mediated their new spaces by creating social and economic relations the way Della Lytle did or maintained their independence in attitude and in small actions like those of Madeline Eagle Thunder.

Constant Attention

In March 1999, a group of Lakota Sioux from South Dakota reservations took over LaFramboise Island, a Corps of Engineers nature area near Pierre. The Terrestrial Wildlife Habitat Mitigation Act was slated to return 200,000 acres of excess land the Corps had taken in the 1950s to South Dakota and the Indians. For the Indians, there was a catch. Recreation areas developed on those lands would belong to South Dakota, not the reservations on which

⁸⁰ Madeline Eagle Thunder interview, 13-5.

they were to become located. Even after South Dakota Senator Tom Daschle amended the act to provide easements to the tribes to the water's edge, the Indians wanted more—control of the *river* according to the terms of the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868. Governor Bill Janklow, who wrote the bill with Daschle, refused to be bound by a treaty he did not sign. Daschle suffered even greater embarrassment when word made the press that the five Lakota Tribes that would receive the land had voted against accepting it unless terms of the agreement conformed to the 1868 treaty, which gave the Lakota full control of the stream. Tribal leaders insisted that the nature of their protest was not political or economic, but spiritual. Human rights observers and Quakers, Mennonites, and members of the United Brethren Church joined the Indians. They stayed for over a year.⁸¹

The federal government did not meet the protesters' terms to follow the Fort Laramie Treaty, which had given the Sioux a territory bounded by the Yellowstone in the West, the North Platte on the South, and the Missouri in the east. Two years after the protest began, a federal judge allowed transfer of the land to the tribes and the state, with the state retaining most of the property.⁸² The protest, however, demonstrated the resilience of disparate people who had come together across tribal and reservation boundaries to form a new community based on ethnicity. While the federal and state government used alteration of the river to influence and change Indian life (sometimes for the better), the altered Missouri became a place of social relationships with the river as their common ground.⁸³

⁸¹ Jerry Wilson, "Lakota Occupy Island," *The Progressive* 6, (June 1999): 14.

⁸² David Melmer, "Missouri River land issue goes to Appeals Court," *Indian Country Today*, March 25, 2002.

⁸³ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 149-160; Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6-7. My research at the SDOHC included twenty-seven oral histories. The statements of some Indians from the North and South Dakota reservations reinforce Tuan's notion that community often does not coalesce until significant pressure from outside leads people to find common interests upon which social relationships are built.

The South Dakota land transfer signaled yet another reorganization of the river. The capital ethos that imbued calls for river alterations is the same one that now calls for stark cost/benefit analysis of its returns. By the early 1980s, the government had abandoned many of the massive irrigation projects promised under Pick-Sloan, irrigating only a half million of the more than five million acres once planned. Ranching and grazing remained the major agricultural pursuits on the upper Great Plains, as they had since long before Pick-Sloan.⁸⁴ The river has not ceased to fluctuate since the dams closed, and though cities and farms are protected from moderate rises, the river has flooded as much with less water since Pick-Sloan narrowed the river channel and build levees in the floodplain. Upstream, the reservoirs rise and fall with the vagaries of precipitation in the Rockies and on the Plains. In 2005, reservoir levels were lower than any time since dams closed, forcing the federal government to subsidize extended intakes for drinking water and irrigation systems, electrical generation plants, and wastewater treatment facilities. Such reservoir fluctuations rises affect power generation, which remains the one significant revenue generator for the system.⁸⁵ Navigation on the lower river has never returned to the federal government what it cost to provide, as the Corps once promised. In 2004, commercial navigators ferried a half million tons of cargo on the river, far short of the twelve to twenty million the Corps once promised. The Missouri transported its greatest commercial tonnage in 1977, 3.1 million tons and has seen declines yearly since.⁸⁶ The river itself has been a demanding servant, making the monetary cost of constant dredging, bank stabilization, and channeling the center of constant dispute.

⁸⁴ Thorson, *River of Promise*, 78-80

⁸⁵ David Melmer, "Army Corps Land to be Returned," *Indian Country Today*, May 13, 2005. (<http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com>)

⁸⁶ Leslie Parker, "Weather Forces Early End to Navigation on River," *Columbia Missourian*, August 11, 2005, 1; Committee on Missouri River Ecosystem Science, *Missouri River Ecosystem*, 90-3.

With Pick-Sloan, government and business transformed the environment to gain political and economic power. In many ways, the project was a bold success. The Corps and Bureau are not only electrical-power agencies, but bureaucracies upon which communities across the nation depend for flood control, recreation at reservoirs, and water in drought—even if, by economic standards, irrigation and navigation had been busts. For Indians, the issue before Pick-Sloan was not lack of access to electricity but lack of financial wherewithal to pay for it. The situation that has not changed since despite Corps promises of free or low-cost power to reservations impacted by dam building.⁸⁷ The grand disappointments of Pick-Sloan have not negated other uses for the river that planners originally designed. The legacy of control and conflict remain.

What shines in this analysis is recreation and tourism. The importance that Neihardt put on contact with nature has undergone transformation. For him, men went to the river to prove themselves. The river played a role in manhood and industrial society. But, as Neihardt revealed, nature could also serve more internal, personal ends. Recreation, an outlet, and contact with nature as inspiration, succor, and connection with a larger whole, remain part and parcel of modern outdoor experience. These have become both important on the Missouri River and a source of considerable conflict. For instance, South Dakota state officials wanted access to the development potential of the one hundred twenty recreational areas, many of which including boat ramps, marina franchises, and campgrounds. Hunters' groups supported the land transfer to avoid heftier license fees tribes would levy for hunting on reservation property. Tribes wanted land because tourism, hunting, and gaming have

⁸⁷ Lawson, *Dammed Indians*, 185; See also, Corps of Engineers, *Development and Control of the Missouri*.

become major Indian revenue sources.⁸⁸ Meanwhile, states have envied the revenue that Indians have made in their lakeside casinos, from their hunting licenses, and recreation facilities. What remains the same, however, is that river managers captured physical nature for capital, political, and social power. That the terms or means of that gain has changed has not altered the underlying ethos.

The river remains a central issue in federal-Indian relations in the Dakotas. Compensation for land taking was never settled completely. Over the years, Indians have filed lawsuits and participated in protests to force the federal government to compensate them fairly for land taken for reservoirs. Some lawsuits continue some fifty years after Pick-Sloan was well underway. In early 2005, South Dakota Representative Stephanie Herseth filed a bill that would change trust fund compensation for the Crow Creek tribes under the Infrastructure Development Trust Fund Act from \$27.5 million to \$106 million, and for the Lower Brule from \$39 million to \$186 million.⁸⁹ Besides creating their own recreation and tourism revenues while seeking compensation, Indians have also begun to assert water rights that were either not used or abrogated through the workings of Pick-Sloan. Indians have also won compensation for lost burial grounds and sacred sites. The Corps must spend thousands annually for government-employed archeologists who research, uncover, and relocate known sites and burials. Each year, fluctuations in lake levels uncover more such sites.

In addition, Indians have been at the forefront of urging the Corps to reconsider the way it manages the river. Teaming with environmental groups and upper basin states, they

⁸⁸ Committee on Missouri River Ecosystem Science, *Missouri River Ecosystem*, 95; Richard LeRoche interview, 27. (<http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com>)

⁸⁹ David Melmer, "Compensation for Lower Brule and Crow Creek," *Indian Country Today*, February 7, 2005 (<http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/ictarchives/2005/02/09/compensation-for-lower-brule-and-crow-creek-94479>, accessed March 1, 2013).

have advocated for more seasonal fluctuations on the lower river. Such management would keep more consistent water levels in upper basin reservoirs for recreation and tourism, provide for the recovery of severely impacted species in the lower river, and still provide for navigation downstream. Such change, however, comes hard. Navigation and flood control interests fight such proposals. Most recently, the state of Missouri blocked a new scheme for river-flow management that it maintains would impact farmers and commercial shippers, most operating near St. Louis.⁹⁰

Newlands, Smythe, and Neihardt

Newlands wanted to rationalize land and water into a larger scheme of national industrial production and wealth accumulation. In many ways, this process has been successful. Government agencies regulate and control the flow of the Missouri River for all the reasons he wanted. The Bureau and Corps of Engineers operate the Missouri Basin like an organic machine. Its bits and parts have been assembled into a whole that produces various benefits and presents different and changing challenges. The machine itself is in a constant state of degradation and renewal. A dam gets old, a river bank washes away, and the riverbed itself gets deeper. The way money moves and accumulates changes a little. Factories close, municipal water systems get upgraded, and sewer systems change. Technologies change and promise new efficiencies, labor savings, and ways to make money. These then justify the expense and labor necessary to replace the aging technologies and worn out parts and pieces. All these cause problems and opportunities that demand constant rationalization. The alteration and constant rationalization of the river now justifies itself. People know the

⁹⁰ Committee on Missouri River Ecosystem Science, *Missouri River Ecosystem*, 86-96.

river by the work they are able to do with it and the labor they undertake to keep it under their control.

Regardless of Newlands' efforts to achieve the orderly management of rivers, the rivers and the people he sought to transform intervened. The river offered many other benefits for human beings besides just the utilitarian, as Neihardt had highlighted in *The River and I*. Smythe, too, had some inkling of the kinds of aesthetic and non-utilitarian benefits that human beings gained from the natural world. In many ways, the natural and human came together in ways that perhaps only Neihardt understood. It is still a player in American history and culture. Americans have attached themselves to the Missouri River with wires, so the democratic processes of river control control go farther than just to the people living next to it. In this way, many can lay claim to the Missouri River. As its power moves over wires and its water into municipal water systems, its identity becomes more and more diffuse but its presence becomes necessary. It's money. It's government. It's in hair driers, microwaves, and televisions. In all ways, it shows that human beings are dependent on nature and they are part of it, despite their cultural distance from it. On the Missouri and no less in the West, nature itself survives beneath the layers of bureaucratic and monetary gain taken from it.

Few water users in cities think of a river as a part of a larger natural system that includes other people and forms of life. Water sustains all life, acts as a solvent, and transfers heat and stores energy. People transport goods on rivers and depend on rivers to wash away their own waste and that of the industrial processes of modern life. Lawns, tulips, and glasses of water resemble little the river they come from. The water spigot does not illuminate a river's use as sewer, floater of boats, electrical power generation, or recreation. Nothing of

the river's history appears in a glass of water. Processing and delivering the river to the spigot demands the abstraction and nationalization of water that Newlands and Smythe sought. Government agencies, economists, engineers, and businesses manage the river by ciphers—economic development potential, dollars earned, and cubic feet per second. A dam on the river helps hide the environmental and human consequences of that dam and everything it took to build it in steady flow for water intakes, pipes, and filtering and delivery systems.⁹¹ In this way, the Missouri River became a vehicle or medium for social relations. It filled washtubs, drinking water systems, and utility and factory cooling systems, as well as toilets. It provided relaxation from the cares and worries of life so that workers, managers, and executives could maintain and increase their productivity, and, perhaps, also make their lives a little easier.

In many ways, the ideas of Francis Newlands, William Smythe, and John Neihardt connect directly to river flowing under the Meridian Bridge at the west end of Yankton's riverfront park that I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. In Gavins Point Dam and five others like it, ideas and concepts put to concrete, steel, and stone captured the power of the river for human use. The dams connect the river with Americans far distant from it through electrical power, irrigation, and flood control. No one actor was responsible for these spatial and environmental alterations or the ways individuals accommodated them. Rather, a dialectic or conversation of ideas about nature, its uses, and its physical power worked together to make them. None of this happened just in Smythe's books or in Neihardt's dreams or Newlands legislation. The river's modern transformation was not about maleness

⁹¹ Elmer P. Lotshaw and Powell Niland, *The Role of Water Resources in the Industrial Development of the St. Louis Region* (St. Louis: Washington University and Badgett Printing and Publishing, 1961); Jack R. Barnes, *Resources for Freedom*, Vol. 5 (Washington D.C: President's Material Policy Commission, 1952), 83.

or economic efficiency or proof of oneself. More than engineers, technicians, scientists, business groups, and government entities worked together to make the river as it flows today. Indians fought against the momentum of history and an imperial government. Ranchers wanted more cows. Farmers wanted more alfalfa. City residents wanted to flush their toilets. The modern river was born of all these things and differing instances of confrontation and agreement between values. The river itself is a constant conversation between the culture and itself. Every time someone touches it, it serves power. But it also puts that power into a dynamic of change that demands constant attention.⁹²

The prospect from Yankton's riverfront park includes Francis Newlands' raw utilitarian ideas, William Smythe's dreams of happy irrigators, and John Neihardt's aesthetic and nostalgic history. Social and political power, money, and intellect created and reorganized the river and its spaces of social relations. In turn, the river changed and constantly changes the circumstances of its control. Underneath the smooth surface of the water, in the layers of conflict, money and power, river use also changed relationships between people, and it continues to do so. People like Newlands and Smythe had understood the river as "a means to economic production" and reform. Neihardt imagined the river as a power in itself that, at the same time, should be bent to human purposes. Whether Americans leave the river to itself or bring it light switches, people far from the river, people in its valley, and tribes and individual Indians adapted and accommodated environmental alterations that then gave rise to fresh contests over the river.⁹³ It's a process that continues.

⁹² Schneiders, *Unruly River*, 1, 6-11. See also Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 5-71; Worster, *Dust Bowl*, 6-8; Harvey, *Spaces of Capital*, 53, 121-127, 315-340.

⁹³ Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 20, quote 331. See also, Lawson. *Dammed Indians*, 5.

AFTERWORD

Americans at the turn of the 20th century understood nature as a capital and social resource useful in reform. My work in *More than a River* shows what Americans thought nature could do for them socially, culturally, and economically. By this time, Americans turned from the work of pushing back the frontier of old and to managing nature for specific social and economic goals. Water and rivers, I believe, display in specific how Americans thought they could use scientific management of the environment to achieve social reform and economic efficiency.

Author and poet John Niehardt, irrigation propagandist William E. Smythe, and politician Francis G. Newlands were contemporaries who demonstrated American perceptions of the environment's utility in social affairs. My examination of the public statements and writings of reveals some important American conceptions of the environment as a tool of national expansion, revivification of manhood and gender hierarchies, and economic benefit. In powerful ways, these men communicated important ideas about the use and development of water and rivers that moved the public, Congress, and state legislatures to action. I focused on their public statements because each of these men carefully crafted their arguments and ideas to achieve specific ends. Their work conveyed ideas that caught Americans' attention and influenced public policy. These men as a whole revealed how abstract ideas turned into actions and that beliefs about and deeds in the natural environment produced social consequences.

The history of Missouri River alteration in the mid-20th century and found that the ideas of my three subjects produced actual outcomes. A single person, a company or

aggregation of institutions, or government agencies can build dams that link people together on an electrical grid, solidify social hierarchies, or cause plant and animal extinctions. In any of these cases and many more, ideas made into concrete, steel, and stone accomplish more than that for which their builder intended. We can see in dams, river channeling, and flood control structures that Americans redirected the river's energy into systems of social and commercial power. In shaping the river for particular ends, engineers, government bureaucrats, and social planners produced the outcomes they intended and many they did not. Technological advances generated and regenerated obsolescence. Science and business uncovered areas of underdevelopment and opportunities for new markets. The river challenged cities and businesses. It disrupted commerce, despite human controls. It washed away engineers' and bureaucrats' best work and planning. In the manipulation of nature, however, Americans knew no failure, only prospects for greater applications of human creativity, technology, and science.¹ Social conflicts showed weakness in and chances for social engineering. Americans could not leave the river alone. Their systems of economy, social organization, and government could not, and I believe, cannot accommodate inaction.

Neihardt, Smythe, and Newlands participated in this dynamic. They approved of it and supported it. For them all, utilizing nature for practical purposes subjugated and reformed the restless masses—whether or not urbanites decided to move out of cities onto grids of orderly, irrigated farms—and mainstreamed water, rivers, and people into rational schemes of industrial production. In their minds, they were building what they believed was a better world.

¹ Neihardt, *Hugh Glass*, xiii-xviii; Harry Hartoonian, *History's Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Practice, and the Question of Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 111; David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. London: Blackwell, 1990), 16; Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (London: Blackwell, 1991), 27-40.

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VITA

Patrick Dobson was born and raised in Kansas City, Missouri. He attended Catholic schools and graduated from Archbishop Edwin V. O'Hara High School in 1981. He traveled extensively in the United States, Canada, and Europe as he pursued undergraduate studies at the University of Missouri—Kansas City. He lived in Germany from 1985-1988, where he interned in a winery in Trier and then attended the viticulture school in Ruedesheim. Returning from Germany in 1988, he continued his undergraduate studies at UMKC and graduated with degrees in history and English in 1991. That year, he received a teaching assistantship in the University of Wyoming History Department and graduated with a Master's degree in 1993. Starting in May 1995, he wrote a weekly column for a local newspaper as he walked from his home in Kansas City to Helena, Montana. Once in Helena, he canoed back to Kansas City on the Missouri River. Shortly after his return in September, he began his work as a journalist. Over the course of ten years he won many local, regional, and national awards for investigative journalism and feature writing. As a journalist, he was often invited to make presentations on First Amendment issues and problems facing journalists at conferences, seminars, and workshops. He served for two years as president of the Kansas City chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists and as a member of the national SPJ board of directors from 1998-2000. He continued to freelance editorials, features, and investigative stories while editing books for Andrews McMeel Universal from 2000-2003.

He commenced interdisciplinary doctoral studies at UMKC in Fall 2004 after teaching journalism and newswriting for two years on an adjunct basis in the UMKC English

and Mass Communications departments. He was awarded the Preparing Future Faculty Fellowship and teaching assistantship in the history department from 2004 to 2007, principally teaching Western Civilization surveys. He worked in the university's Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching from 2005-2007. In 2007, he won the School of Arts and Sciences Dissertation Research Fellowship. During this phase of his graduate work, he made numerous academic conference presentations and participated in several university committees, most notably a provost search committee in 2005-2006.

In 2007, Dobson and his wife adopted their son, Nicholas. Dobson left his Ph.D. studies temporarily to accommodate his new family member. He went to work with Ironworkers Local Union #10, completing the apprenticeship schooling in 2012. In 2009, Dobson began teaching American History and Western Civilization surveys at Johnson County Community College. He resumed his Ph.D. studies in 2011, completing his degree requirements in November, 2013. Since 2009, Dobson has made frequent public and academic presentations on the Great Plains, the Missouri River, and American history at JCCC, as well as such institutions as the University of Kansas Hall Center for the Humanities (Nature and Culture Seminar), the Kansas City Public Library, and All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church in Kansas City. He served on the JCCC Adjunct Council in 2012.

During his Ph.D. studies, Dobson also freelanced stories and editorials for local and regional publications, and published a travel memoir, *Seldom Seen: A Journey into the Great Plains* (University of Nebraska Press, 2009). The book received critical acclaim. It won mention several literary award contests, including the Thorpe Menn Award for Literary Excellence (2010), the High Plains Book Award (2010), and the KU Hall Center for Humanities Byron Caldwell Smith Book Award (2011). His second travel memoir, *Medicine*

River Summer: A Journey on the Missouri River is slated for release by the University of Nebraska Press in Spring 2015. The press is now considering his dissertation for publication. He continues working as an associate adjunct professor in the JCCC History Department, freelance writer, and member of Ironworkers Local #10.